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An eye for an eye in Gaza: dialogue with palestinian fighters

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On January 26, 2006, Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president and leader of Fatah, told a press conference at the World Economic Forum in Davos that talks with Hamas, the ruling party, on the formation of a national unity government ought to conclude within three weeks.

He reiterated his call for presidential and parliamentary elections if the talks failed.

Hamas has refused to endorse another election. It suspended unity government talks on the same day as Abbas's address in Davos after more than a dozen people were killed in Palestinian factional fighting.

Since mid-December, more than 40 Palestinians have been killed and scores injured in what has been described as a power struggle between supporters of Hamas and those of Fatah. The fighting has also encompassed clan feuds and vigilante groups.

Laila El-Haddad spoke to four of those involved in the fighting, asking why they had participated and what they thought the future may hold.

My head is full of slogans and propaganda. It is the end of a very long day. But what scared me the most about it was not the guns and the tough-talking, or even the very real prospect of getting caught up in a sudden flare up of the fighting, but rather that I have reached a point where I can understand how and why a Palestinian civil war is possible. And why it is nearly impossible to extract a nation from its grips once its people are deeply and loyally entrenched.

It is a monster that feeds on itself, and on the equally believable narratives by which both sides live and die. Judging from the participants, no one and everyone is to blame.

As I walk into the Gaza City offices of the Hamas Executive Force, I am greeted by Islam Shahwan, its exuberant and mild-mannered spokesman. He enthusiastically briefs me on a recent operation - cracking a bizarre local drug ring that had been operating out of a cemetery in the southern Gaza town of Khan Younis - before introducing me to Isam Aqaylan.

Aqaylan, 22, is a stocky young man with a baby face. By day, he is a student of geography in the Islamic University of Gaza. By night, he is a foot soldier in the Executive Force.

He was stationed near Shifa Hospital in Gaza City when clashes erupted between members of Fatah and the Executive Force a few days after Abbas called for new elections in a speech last month.

How does a 'clash' actually start? How did this one start?

"We were stationed near the hospital to protect the staff there, and to prevent crimes, and the doctors there attest to this. There was a group of Fatah loyalists - members of the mukhabarat [intelligence service] moving in an ambulance, trying to track the movements of the members of the

Executive Force. "We stopped them once then let them go. When they didn't leave, we stopped them again, but to avoid trouble we proceeded to call the head of their unit in the area. We then co-ordinated with the mukhabarat themselves so they would come and get them.

"Suddenly, as if from nowhere, we came under direct fire." There was no pretext for it - and the shots were obviously fired with the intention to injure or kill us. In fact, several of us were injured, and one - Ismail Abu Khair - was killed with an RPG [rocket-propelled grenade].

"Members of the mukhabarat took position on the rooftops surrounding the hospital and fired at him. His body was torn into pieces. After this, we were very careful."

Shahwan interrupts to hand me an official press release his office has put out on the incident.

But why were you personally involved in the clashes?

"I was there doing my job, which is to provide security for the people of Gaza and safeguard them, as a member of the Executive Force. I never targeted anyone." Generally what happens is that we would be stationed somewhere to protect ordinary people, and then we would get fired at out of nowhere, and word spreads around that we are targeting them [Fatah]. It's all obscure talk meant to distort the truth.

"And then - only after we were targeted - did we begin firing back," Aqaylan says, picking up where he left off about the incident at Shifa Hospital.

"We never fired without justification. Many times we were fired at and didn't fire back because there were civilians around." There is a clear plan in place to distort the truth and the credibility of this government.

"Heavy-grade advanced weaponry was being used by the other side - weapons we'd never seen on the Palestinian front before. And they were being used to attack the Executive Force, not to protect the people. One has to wonder where the funding for these weapons came from."

What about reports that mortars were fired at Fatah strongholds in Gaza, and specifically the claim that Fatah households are being targeted and sometimes surrounded?

"We condemn the use of mortars and anything that leads to this chaos - it's clearly an independent entity with a score to settle who's doing this." We have no enemies. We were created to help and support the police force, to provide security and safety for the society, and to co-ordinate and complement the Presidential Guard. But this has all been reflected very badly, especially since some people are organising this chaos. "That last comment is a reference to the method of "organised anarchy" that is said to have been employed by Yasser Arafat and handed down to Mohammad Dahalan, a Fatah security chief.

Aqaylan then excuses himself for prayers as Abu al-Bara', 25, another member of the Executive Force, steps into his place and continues where his colleague left off.

"One day we were at a traffic light during a funeral procession for president Abbas's Force 17. They were hurling insults and provocations at us and spitting and cursing, but we restrained ourselves and withdrew." They then began shooting at us - and we filmed them doing this. So some of them began shooting back. And that's how it goes.

"At the hospital, we were fired at inside the hospital intentionally." Some people put out false

rumours that we fired at a Fatah funeral procession first, when really it was one of our houses that was fired at first. Despite the fact that there exists a group who is intent on collapsing us, as Hamas, and as the Executive Force, we've survived. **"But by firing back, don't you simply engage the other side and begin another cycle of violence?"** We were given orders to withdraw from areas where there are active clashes.

"But Fatah's black militias are above the law - they don't care about orders or about the safety of civilians."

Just to give me an idea of how murky the actual course of events leading up to a clash can be, Abur al-Bara' shares an anecdote with me.

"Usually what happens is something like this." Someone sent by Fatah would drive around in a car. This person would shoot at the Executive Force in a drive-by shooting. His car would then head towards security buildings, like the police headquarters for example.

"The police would then respond by shooting at the Executive Force, thinking it was us. And then the Executive Force would respond by shooting back at them - there's no time to think in such situations, only to defend yourself." And no one knows who started it.

"We've started an investigation into this matter and found that these individuals have been sent by certain people in Fatah - to do their bidding and get us entangled in the fighting." People once had hope in the Executive Force. They supported us and believed in what we were doing, but now our image has been destroyed - intentionally.

"We have always been very careful when we fire - we never fire directly at anyone." Another such incident occurred when we passed by some armed men of unknown allegiance. They began to fire at us directly, and asked us to find them an official convoy to take them to safety.

"Those whom we have caught say they were promised jobs and higher ranks if they targeted Hamas members; and all of these acts are carried out with the complicity of higher-level Fatah members. No matter what, they shouldn't promise them such things." It's all in the context of obfuscating the truth.

"Their ultimate goal is to create enough chaos so as to overthrow the government in any way possible; they even tried to target and shoot at government members." It is our duty to respond to transgression.

"There is one thing that is certain - there is a politicised group that has a personal benefit from all this."

Ahmed Madhoon (aka Abu Nabil), 22, member of Fatah 'death squads'

To describe Ahmed Madhoon as paranoid is an understatement. The self-described insomniac does not go a minute without looking over his shoulder or peering out his windows to check for potential assassins of the local variety - and then cursing Hamas under his breath.

A junior-ranking member of Mohammad Dahalan's so-called death squads, Madhoon, who refers to himself as Abu Nabil, begins by warning me that he is wanted by Hamas. He also tells me that he was once shot in front of his wife by masked gunmen in a "failed assassination attempt". Since then, he has taught her how to use a semi-automatic weapon.

With that introduction, he gives his version of some of the events described by Aqaylan and Abu al-

Bara'.

"Recently the Executive Force took the Shifa Hospital as a base for themselves. They took safety there just as they do in mosques, because it's a civilian area. They justify this cowardice by saying that they are protecting people. But it's just a cover." They shot at least 15 people that day and the clashes only increased.

"Generally, they would shoot at anyone from the security forces. They even shot at a sick intelligence officer." No one can shoot at a hospital. They were wanted by the public so they hid inside, not outside. **"So why did you take part in the hostilities? Why not just stay away to prevent clashes?"** I took part because of my work and my allegiance to Fatah. They consider everyone who's not with them, against them, and an infidel. "He says this contemptuously, periodically darting to and from his living room windows to peer between the blinds." You can never be too careful. They might be waiting for me now.

"Anyway, my job is to protect the security agencies. So you must be wondering: how do things get so bad if we're both just doing our jobs, right?" Well, in Gazan culture we have what's called 'tar' - tit-for-tat. Feuds and retaliation. It's become an issue of who's stronger, who can outlast the other - a show of force, if you will. And everyone wants payback.

"It goes from retaliation to pre-emption. We begin shooting first so we won't be shot at to start with." In 70 per cent of the cases, Hamas tells its cadres if they kill someone from Fatah, then they are on a jihadist mission. They woo them with money. 400 have been killed so far in internal clashes and Fatah has yet to respond and unleash its true power. The groups working independently with individual loyalties don't count. "Groups working independently" is a reference to clan fighting. "We receive orders for self-defence. We shoot to defend ourselves." He dismisses allegations that mysterious third parties are fuelling tensions. "I blame Hamas generally, not just their Executive Force. They are crazy terrorists ... Hamas should use both carrots and sticks. Right now, they rely solely on sticks. **"Who exactly is fighting on the Fatah side?"** Some of them are Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, some members of the security forces, but more often than not, they are one and the same."

What about allegations that the US is providing you with weapons?

"We get our weapons strictly from the PLO." We should be clear about one thing: this is a purely a Hamas offensive. For Fatah it's simply retaliation and self-defence.

Ahmed interrupts our conversation to take a "very important" call.

"You're in luck," he says. "I just spoke to the most important member of the death squads - one who happened to play a very significant role in the clashes that took place last week. And you're about to meet him."

Sameeh al-Madhoon, preventive security forces; northern regional commander, al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.

I am driven to Sameeh al-Madhoon's home in northern Gaza in a newly imported white Toyota - the kind you often see in a hundred pieces after an Israeli assassination. We stop halfway there to pick up an additional bodyguard.

Ahmed describes the elder Madhoon as the "orchestrator" of the clashes in December, a ringmaster of sorts.

The man I meet in the heart of the Jabaliya refugee camp, allegedly one of the most wanted by Hamas, has a stature strikingly at odds with his larger-than-life public image. With drawn sombre eyes and a shapely trim beard, al-Madhoon greets us wearing a tracksuit and slippers, and initially we mistake him for a member of his household.

His living room is a showcase of low-grade weaponry - everything from a rocket-propelled grenade launcher to a basic Kalashnikov and, the pride of his collection, an M-16. They are all weapons he treats and talks of with the gusto of a proud father, insisting that they were bought with his own savings, not "tainted American money".

"Look, we didn't start this thing with Hamas," he begins abruptly. "It's escalated since elections last January." "We accepted the situation and then, as part of the presidential Force 17, waited for our salaries to arrive so life can go on as normal. We could have taken over the ministries by force but we didn't. And slowly, Hamas began to drown in its own mistakes - and resorted to things like murdering and kidnapping Fatah officials.

"Hamas men, members of the Izz-e-Din al-Qassam Brigades, fired at me without precedent. It all started after the Israeli disengagement." Abo Fadi [Mohammad Dahalan] gave us Jeeps as a small token of his appreciation, a reward for all of our efforts. Now that's not too much is it? Is it, men?" He looks around the room for confirmation. He receives quick and enthusiastic nods of approval. "So anyway, Hamas began to view these Jeeps with contempt, as vehicles of murder - which they were transformed into because of their provocations. I taught some of the Fatah shabab [youths] how to fire weapons. I mean, just basic training - again, nothing over the edge, right men?"

"I taught them how to fire weapons and Hamas saw this as us training what have come to be known as 'death squads'. No such group exists, as we all know."

He says this steely-eyed, and the denial is contrary to claims by the young Madhoon.

"They tried to assassinate me, I even overheard them on this walkie-talkie of theirs, which I confiscated during an interrogation of one of their members."

He opens a small wooden drawer near his bed. It is packed full of amphetamines, sleeping pills, hand grenades, and a large black walkie-talkie.

"There are still negotiations over the hand grenades. If they return ours, we'll return theirs."

He clicks on the walkie-talkie to prove his claim and, through some static, we overhear what appears to be Hamas operatives giving each other warnings and locations of approaching Israeli unmanned drones monitoring them overhead.

"So that's when my problem with Hamas started. The next day we shot two members of the Qassam Brigades in retaliation, and things began to escalate. Members of the Qassam Brigades surrounded my house." "After the elections, Hamas went out in a rally in Jabaliya and a broadcast car stopped in front of my house and said, 'Here we are in front of the house of the despicable Sameeh Madhoon'.

"Then they shot at a Fatah car." "The next day, with no shame whatsoever, they shot at a Fatah rally and even hurt some children. They didn't let us express our opinion in the rally. I personally would feel stupid shooting at a rally where people are expressing their political opinions, wouldn't you? But that's Hamas for you.

"I'm just wondering ...

He breaks mid-sentence to puff at his bedside sheesha and then asks rhetorically:

“Where Hamas is leading us?” I am ready to bring to account anyone who violated Hamas. The question is, are they willing to do the same?

“Look: if they fire at one of us, we’ll shoot one of them. If they stop, we stop. It’s that simple. If Hamas has a problem with Fatah, then let Haniya and Abbas go box it out somewhere, but don’t get the street involved.” We are waiting to see what Hamas’s next move is - if things go smoothly, we’ll be quiet. But if they are not quiet, then we won’t be quiet.

“The whole situation has been reduced to one of family feuds and retaliations, and it’s a losing game.” If they say it’s not us and we say it’s not us, then we should work together on finding who it actually is. He says this last statement in a tone that is at once conciliatory and sarcastic. Then he declares: “As the commander of the northern legion of al-Aqsa Martyrs, I tell you, it is not us who started it, and I deny third-party involvement in the matter.” “Our actions are purely defensive, not offensive. We are also pragmatists - we know they are stronger than us and so are not so stupid as to make the first move. **Who do you ultimately get your orders from?**” There is a joint committee that gives us our orders. **And Dahalan?** Look - everyone in the brigades and the security forces receives orders, and we follow those orders. That’s all I’m going to say. **What are those orders?** If you are shot, shoot back. If someone from Fatah is abducted, then abduct someone from Hamas. And if they withdraw, we withdraw. **And your weapons? You must have heard recent reports about the US funding Fatah and providing them with training and weapons?** I refuse weapons from the US. Our weapons have been purchased at our own expense.

“Every action has been started by Hamas. Our kidnapping is a response to their kidnapping. They burnt a shop of my brother’s, so I burnt their brother’s place. An eye for an eye.”

Are we headed towards civil war?

“I blame any renewed escalation on Hamas. But as for civil war, we will be careful to ensure that it doesn’t get to this.” We call for unity firstly and lastly, but I will say this much: our patience is running out, and if Hamas calls us out to the streets for fighting once again, we will gladly oblige - and this time, it won’t be defensively and we won’t hold anything back. We cannot stay on the defence forever.

“Everyone, including me, has a certain threshold. And once that threshold is passed, I can’t guarantee anything.” Right now, it’s in the hands of the political leadership.

“Hamas is creating provocations. Fatah is really innocent in all of this. Hamas is the one who is trying to instil hate in people for Fatah. Hamas says that fissures are not between two truths, but between a truth and a non-truth - that’s how they deal with us. And that is the essence of the problem - they do not consider us to be legitimate.”

P.S.

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