

THE "COUP" IN GAZA

From September 2006 to June 2007, I had an office in Gaza and was witness to some of the events that led to Hamas' takeover of Gaza. Did Hamas stage a coup, a planned overthrow of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza? The answer is definitely no. What then did happen? My first experience of the conflict between Fatah and Hamas in Gaza occurred the first day that I arrived in Gaza City by taxi from the Erez border crossing, I needed to use an ATM to get shekels, and the driver took me to a bank next to the central park. But people were running away from the area and at the bank the men waiting to use the ATM were flat against the wall. Bullets were flying a little farther down the street. I ran from the taxi to the ATM, where the men politely put me at the front of the line, as they always do for women,. I took the shekels, and ran back to the taxi, looking down the street to see where the bullets were coming from that I should dodge.

Some months later, the next events that I personally was aware of in the tragic series occurred when the Hamas minister of the Interior, Siam Siyad, wanted a video tape showing who had killed a Palestinian Authority soldier and wounded two others. It had been in the possession of Jad, who was killed, and then in the possession of Major Baha Balouja of Fatah, who refused to give it up. Subsequently, Major Baha was threatened, and a few days later his two young sons were killed when gunmen opened fire on the car with dark windows in which the children were being driven to school.

I went with a Fatah friend to offer condolences to Major Baha, and while we were there, a man came from Prime Minister Haniyeh, who was waiting at the Rafah border to return from Egypt, and said that the Prime Minister wanted to come to offer his condolences and wanted to know if that would be alright. Major Baha said "yes." In other words, Prime Minister Haniyeh knew nothing about who killed the two little boys and wished to express his sorrow at the tragedy. A few days later, however, he may have heard indications that Hamas members were involved, for on television he said that if "we," i.e. Hamas, have done anything wrong, we will pay "diwa," (blood money, a traditional Palestinian way of resolving such an issue)..

However, that night when Haniyeh was entering Gaza after being held at the border for eight hours while Egypt decided what to do about the millions of dollars he was bringing with him, there was an assassination attempt on his life by some men who guarded the border, Mohammed Dahlan's men. Haniyeh was not hit by the bullets shot from the roof of the border crossing terminal, but his son and Ahmed Yusef, who were

next to him, were wounded. Haniyeh did not dwell extensively on the attempt, saying merely on television that he was willing to be a martyr. President Mahmoud Abbas, I am sure, was not aware of the attempted assassination of Haniyeh any more than Haniyeh was aware of who killed the two boys. Indeed, after the Fatah and Hamas men began attacking each other in the city every day, the two leaders both called for peace and an end of the fighting several times, and after a joint call for peace, the fighting would stop for a day or two, but then it would resume.

A number of times I had to wait in my office/apartment until the shooting moved away from my area, then hurry down to the street to go to the nearby bakery and vegetable stores to stock up on food for a few days. Usually an armed man on the corner—I never knew whether he would be Hamas or Fatah—would look up and down the street for me and then wave me across. Both sides were courteous and helpful to the old, American woman.

At one point, while the bullets were volleying back and forth down the main streets in Gaza City and elsewhere, the US or more precisely, I'm sure, Gen. Keith Dayton, tried to intervene on behalf of Fatah, by sending in a truckload or more of weapons. Hamas learned of the shipment, however, seized it and used it.

But it is important to note that the anger of the Hamas men on the street was not directed against the Palestinian Authority nor President Abbas but rather against the Fatah leader who had arrested—and tortured—Hamas men during the second intifada: Mohammed Dahlan. One night I heard from my office window someone reciting through a very loud speaker what sounded like a poem. But in the middle of it I heard “Mohammed Dahlan, Israeli, Americaniya” In other words, Dahlan because of his previous actions was considered to be an Israeli and an American—not a Palestinian nationalist. One wonders what would have happened if Dahlan had not been the Head of Security for the P.A.; would the conflict in Gaza have happened?

The people of Gaza and all the other political parties were very angry at Fatah and Hamas for fighting and disrupting the lives of all the people. However, I must emphasize again that it was not the leaders—Abbas and Haniyeh—who were responsible. Indeed, one day the Gaza director of the Friendship and Peace Society, who is neither Fatah nor Hamas, and I organized a children's demonstration against the fighting. Forty children in white shirts and white caps with signs saying in Arabic: “Peace Fatah and Hamas”;

“Stop the Fighting”; and a quotation from the Koran—“If Muslim kills Muslim of set intent, he has eternal punishment.” When the bus full of children drove up to Haniyeh’s office, his office director welcomed us and thanked us, saying he agreed with us. And when the bus drove up to Abbas’ office, his office manager welcomed us and thanked us, saying he agreed with us. Then we went to the central park to join the other political parties and civil societies who were protesting the fighting.

Since the leaders were unable to prevent the fighting on the street and gunmen were shooting down the boulevards and from the tops of tall buildings, it was a relief for the people of Gaza when one party won, the fighting stopped and people could resume their lives without fear of becoming a civilian casualty.

Was there a “coup” in Gaza? I don’t think that is the proper word for what happened. There were some people on both sides who wanted to overthrow some individuals on the other side. Mohammed Dahlan was hated by Hamas, though he was not present in Gaza then, and there was an attempt on the life of Haniyeh by Dahlan’s men. However, I think one might call what happened more a vendetta than a coup. And I think everyone should emphasize that the leaders—Haniyeh and Abbas—were not responsible for the fighting and indeed tried to stop it several times.

In other words, it would be appropriate for Abbas and Haniyeh to continue their peacemaking roles. Abbas could emphasize to the world, especially to Gen. Keith Dayton, that Hamas is not a “terrorist” organization, it should not be on the “terrorist” list, and its members should not be in prison for belonging to Hamas. Moreover, Abbas could encourage the EU and US to talk to Hamas, which is currently being unjustly boycotted just as the PLO was boycotted from 1987-1991, during which time Arafat was calling for peace just as Hamas is calling for the two state solution now. And Haniyeh could reciprocate by becoming part of the peace-loving unity government and by calling for elections so that the Palestinian people can exercise their right to freely choose a new government.

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