

A Civil War in Palestine?

By Grace Halsell

"Civil war is imminent in Palestinian society." So believes Hisham H. Ahmad, who grew up in a refugee camp, earned a Ph.D, is blind—and has written a perceptive book on *Hamas*, based on in-depth interviews he had with the leaders of the most popular of the Palestinian militant Islamic groups.

Both Arafat's secular Palestinian National Authority and Hamas are "attempting to consolidate power within Palestinian society," Ahmad said in a Jerusalem interview. Though there might appear to be some "subtle coordination" between them, "each has a different agenda, objective and different rules to play the game."

Hamas' operative principle, said Ahmad, is to keep up the pressure: "There has to be some type of dynamism. Otherwise, they would wither away. One day, there will be a Super Event that will gain a lot of support. We are on the verge of having a Super Event." He suggests the prelude already has occurred: "There was the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier, the violent bombing of a Tel Aviv bus. And there was the event in the Gaza Strip in which Palestinian police were firing on Palestinians. I don't say that Hamas plotted that event—in which some Hamas people were killed—but it was Hamas that was advantaged, it was in their favor. I venture to say they were pleased by the outburst of emotions and shootings, because this is how they can get support.

"All of these events are preparing Palestinians as well as world opinion that something bigger is happening. True the Israelis are slowing down the process by arrests of Hamas leaders, closing off some houses. But in the final analysis Hamas does have widespread support, especially in the Gaza Strip. They do have an agenda, they do have a strategy. And they know the tactics they are using."

Time itself, he believes, is with Hamas. Arafat's Palestinian National Authority "is by and large dependent on outside help, at least on the financial level. They have to get donations from other countries. Without that they can't survive. Hamas, on the other hand, views its strength as dependent on popular support. Popular support doesn't need to be imported from outside or donated from outside. Unless there truly is an earth-shattering process for helping the Palestinian Authority, Hamas is winning."

Ahmad predicts civil war based on several indicators: "There have been clashes between various Palestinian forces, in the occupied territories as well as outside—such as a big clash in Ein El-Hilweh," home to 60,000 Palestinians and the largest of the Lebanese refugee camps (where the anti-Arafat forces are encouraged and subsidized by Syria and possibly Iran). "There have been some clashes on campuses, at Bir Zeit for example. We are dealing with a society that is highly frustrated, especially in the Gaza Strip—where unemployment is quite high, inflation is quite

high—disenchantment with almost any alternative is quite high. In this volatile atmosphere, we have two forces at odds with each other, each trying to prove itself—inevitably they will clash. It only takes a spark. As in the Gaza shooting, it only took moments for the events to happen."

"If there is a civil war, the Israelis are the beneficiaries."

When Arafat arrived in Gaza, Ahmad said, his popularity was as high as 70 percent. But each time he appeases the Israelis, "his popularity decreases and Hamas' popularity increases. One can see an interesting correlation between Arafat's approach vis-à-vis the Israelis and the rise in Hamas' membership. Arafat's plight is exactly what Hamas wants. I feel very empathetic to Arafat's position, he is walking a very delicate line. Of course, if there is a civil war, the Israelis are the beneficiaries. Those limited guns the Palestinians have in Gaza would not be directed outwardly, they would be directed inwardly—and that scenario is most pleasing, for Israeli strategists."

Israel has put pressure on Washington to prevent money from any source in the U.S. getting to Hamas. This is ironic, said Ahmad, since Israel, in its determination to undermine the PLO, initially supported Hamas, financially as well as by other means. Being one of the first to build the movement, Israel now is "somewhat shocked by its effectiveness and efficiency." As for any outside money reaching Hamas, "I don't have any data. This is one of the toughest areas to research. And one has to research it secretly at the beginning. Otherwise one would get nowhere. I think they have some support among Iranian communities in the U.S. And it's not too difficult to bring money in. Ten thousand dollars might make a difference. That's very easily done."

Deportation a Turning Point

As for coordination with other Arab militant Islamist groups, "There might not be a fully unified agenda. But there is some type of coordination. I think these various sub-movements learn from each other. For example, with Hamas, a big turning point came when Israel deported over 400 Islamists to southern Lebanon. This is when they really got in touch with the outside world. And it is when the outside world got in touch with them, for several months. It was sufficient time to have visitors come from Algeria, Sudan, Iran. Not only to express solidarity—but also to train them in the use of arms. And of course to help them cope with difficult circumstances. After all, where would the Islamists get their weapons from? So there has to be some mechanism for them to get these, and the same thing applies to [the Islamic radicals in] Egypt."

Hamas, Ahmad continued, has an advantageous position over other Arab militant Islamic groups: "Here, you don't have a Palestinian state structure to keep them under control, as in Egypt or Algeria. So Hamas is really benefiting from the fluid political atmosphere and environment. In the case of Syria, Assad would keep them on a tight leash. He cracked down on the fundamentalists in the beginning of the '80s, with massive massacres. In the case of Palestinian society, that is more difficult to do because—as long as they engage in resistance activities against the Israelis—they will be popular with their own people. The Palestinian society will not tolerate having them bombarded or brutally attacked.

" Hamas has the means really to attract people. Islamic teachings are appealing in the midst of a frustrating environment. In Gaza, Hamas supporters are at least one-third of the population. Some say the fundamentalists would be even more popular, if they had charismatic leaders—say a Khomeini. Regimes such as Egypt cut down the leaders as soon as they appear. And in Gaza, the leader of a Jihad movement was assassinated. So now Hamas leaders will go deeper underground. We will see that the structure of Hamas, especially in Gaza, will be less visible than it used to be in the past.

" Even so, it is a force to be reckoned with, it is a force that will be there—whether we like it or not. And really to deal with it, one has to come up with a truly more effective strategy. Regrettably, no one has come up with that. Or, I am not aware of one. The main thing," Ahmad continued, " is that you have to transform Palestinian public opinion—which is being transformed by Hamas. So you have to undo that with something better. It is do-able. Hamas is not a monster that would be invincible. But to attack it militarily will not destroy it. Rather, I think a military assault might even strengthen Hamas because they are people who are willing to die.

" The more they are killed, the more you will have people who will want to die. It was Rabin who said, ' What can you do about someone who is willing to kill himself?' So unless someone supplies some other answers, Hamas will win."

Washington, D.C.-based writer Grace Halsell recently returned from Jerusalem and Cairo, where she interviewed leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. Her film