

In Gaza, Hamas Beats and Tortures Those Who Protest Its Misrule

by Hugh Fitzgerald



In Gaza, it is not Israel, but Hamas that is the great oppressor of the local Arabs. That became clear in mid-March, with spontaneous protests against Hamas erupting all over Gaza.

The story is [here](#):

Hamas is facing the biggest demonstrations yet against its 12-year rule of the Gaza Strip, with hundreds of Palestinians taking to the streets in recent days to protest the dire living conditions in the blockaded territory.

With little tolerance for dissent, the Islamic militant group has responded with heavy-handed tactics. It has arrested dozens of protesters, beaten activists and violently suppressed attempts by local media to cover the unrest...

"There is no political agenda at all," said Amin Abed, 30, an organizer who has been forced into hiding. "We simply want to live in dignity," he said by telephone. "We just ask Hamas to ease the economic hardships and tax burdens."...

Unemployment is over 50 percent and much higher for young university graduates like Abed. Tap water is undrinkable, electricity is limited and travel abroad severely restricted. Hamas' cash-strapped government recently raised taxes on basic goods like bread, beans and cigarettes.

Protesters accuse Hamas of corruption and imposing the hefty taxes to enrich itself. They used social media to organize protests last week with the slogan "We want to live!"...

"These protests were the largest, the longest and the most violent in terms of Hamas' suppression," said Mkhaimar Abusada, political science professor at Gaza's al-Azhar University...

On Monday, Amnesty International reported that hundreds of protesters have been beaten, arbitrarily arrested, tortured and subjected to ill-treatment. Journalists and human rights workers, including a researcher for the London-based organization, were also roughed up, Amnesty said.

"The crackdown on freedom of expression and the use of torture in Gaza has reached alarming new levels," said Amnesty's Middle East deputy director Saleh Higazi...

Other amateur videos have shown protesters burning tires and hurling stones toward Hamas forces. Hamas gunmen can be seen jumping out of vehicles and beating people with clubs. Other videos show Hamas going door to door and carrying out mass arrests...

The Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists reported Monday that 42 Palestinian journalists "were targeted" by Hamas forces in the past five days. The abuses

included physical assaults, summons, threats, home arrests and seizure of equipment...

Abed, the protest leader, said Hamas has stormed his family's house and delivered an arrest warrant for him to his father.

"Hamas doesn't want us to scream. It wants us to die in silence," he said.

In Gaza, people are visibly fed up with those who have made their lives increasingly miserable. By this they do not mean Israel, but Hamas, which ever since it seized power in 2007, has pushed the Gazan Arabs into poverty, through its mismanagement of the economy, misallocation of resources to its leaders, and staggering corruption. While the Gazan Arabs suffer increasing poverty, and 70% of young Gazans are unemployed, the leaders in Hamas are thriving; some of its leaders have amassed millions and live in seaside villas; two men who have been leaders in Hamas, Khaled Meshaal and Mousa Abu Marzouk, have each managed to accumulate the astonishing sum of several billion dollars.

In March, this discontent with Hamas erupted in dozens of protests all over Gaza. The Gazans shouted out their fury over their economic situation, the higher prices on basic foodstuffs, the higher taxes, and the much higher levels of unemployment that they are forced to endure. They threw rocks at Hamas men, they set tires on fire in the streets. They were calling for their Hamas rulers to roll back increases in taxes and higher prices on goods, and to present a plan to end Gaza's sky-high unemployment.

Hamas responded with great violence, rounding up more than 1,000 protesters, beating and in some cases torturing them. One spokesman for Fatah, which as the military wing of the Palestinian Authority, is the enemy of Hamas, had both his arms and both his legs broken by Hamas fighters, in a warning to other Fatah men. Hamas has charged the Palestinian

Authority and Israel with collaborating to foment these protests; no evidence has been presented for this claim, and every report from Gaza makes clear that these protests have not been organized, but are spontaneous in nature: unplanned eruptions of anger at an unbearable economic situation. Israel has not had a presence in Gaza since 2005, and has done nothing, from outside, to foment Gazan discontent with Hamas which would likely only backfire, as a Zionist attempt to sow discord among Muslims. While both Israel and the Palestinian Authority would no doubt like to see Hamas's rule over Gaza come to an end, this uprising was not their doing.

Fatah simply doesn't have the presence in Gaza it once did. Hamas has threatened, imprisoned, expelled, or killed, many Fatah members in Gaza over the last dozen years. Until these latest protests began, it appeared to have an iron grip over the territory.

In the dozen years since Hamas seized control of Gaza, it has become increasingly dictatorial, and its members ever more greedy for power and money. In the past, when there were attempts at small-scale protests over economic issues, Hamas simply smashed the protests, beat and detained protesters with sufficient brutality to persuade others not to join in. But in 2019, the economic misery of the Gaza Arabs has become so overwhelming that, driven by desperation, they no longer feared being beaten; people came out to denounce Hamas, knowing full well that they would be put down by brute force. They had a simple slogan: "We want to live." They were prepared to be beaten and arrested, and more than a thousand of them were.

Seventeen journalists covering Gaza were also arrested since the protests began, and their equipment seized. Of the ten who were released as of this writing, four required hospitalization because of the severity of the beatings they had received. The U.N. envoy, Nickolay E. Mladenov, denounced Hamas for its use of violence against both protesters and

journalists.

Hamas may now try to start a real war with Israel, in order to distract the Gazan Arabs from protesting their economic lot under Hamas rule. That might have worked in the past, but after Hamas suffered five defeats in five wars, some quite brief, fought between Gaza and Israel, in 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014, a populace now enraged over a catastrophic economic situation might not be as willing as it once was to be distracted by a war with Israel. In fact, such a war would inevitably lead to a crushing defeat of Hamas, and provide more evidence of the terrorist group's incompetence in every respect, except that of terrorizing and subjugating its own people, the "Palestinians" in Gaza. Worse still, another conflict with Israel would make the economic situation even more dire for the Gazans in two ways. First, the Gazan Arabs would have to pay for much of the expensive war materiel used up by Hamas in this new conflict; rockets and missiles are not cheap. Second, punishing attacks on Gaza by Israel would destroy infrastructure that the Gazans would have to expensively replace.

Hamas may with its wonted brutality break the back of this protest, but as long as the economic situation remains dismal, there will be other attacks. There are two ways to improve economic conditions in Gaza. One is to convince the rulers of Gaza that putting money into futile war-making against Israel needs to end: no more rockets and missiles to be stockpiled, which are then shot out of the sky by Israel's defenses, no more expensive tunnels need be dug, only to be found and destroyed by Israeli sappers. Were the rulers of Gaza convinced of the pointlessness of their endless wars with the Jews, they could put the aid money given by donors, that is now being spent on preparing for war, instead on investing in small-scale manufacturing and farming in Gaza. Provided Gaza disarms, the Israelis would no doubt be willing to help with both undertakings.

The second way to improve the economy in Gaza is to stop the fantastic drain of corruption. The Gazans do not know the true magnitude of the problem. Mousa Abu Marzouk and Khaled Meshaal, two Hamas leaders, have each managed to make off with more than \$2.5 billion. That's at least \$5 billion that has been stolen from the Gazan Arabs by just two men. There ought to be some way to claw back those billions, either by actions of the donor countries who first provided the money, or by the "Palestinians" in Gaza, bringing suit in their own courts to recover the funds stolen from them. Neither Marzouk nor Meshaal will voluntarily comply with any finding against them, but they can be threatened by those fellow members of Hamas who are not corrupt, resent terribly those who are, and are prepared to use Hamas methods on corrupt Hamas leaders, by making them offers they can't refuse.

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