

The Twilight of Palestinian “Armed Struggle”?

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Articles & Testimony

Militant groups are under growing pressure, and large-scale armed struggle seems far-fetched, yet it remains unclear if Palestinians are finally ready to give up their old battle cry.

“**A** rmed Struggle” was the main pillar, the tallest banner, the essence of the ethos of the Palestinian national movement since the last years of the 19th century. The conviction that the Zionist movement can be confronted only on the battlefield gave rise over the decades to many Palestinian military groupings. It became the ultimate narrative of the organizations which emerged in the late 1950s with the establishment of Fatah and the creation in the 1960s by the Arab League of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Yasser Arafat, who captured the leadership of the PLO, summarized this approach saying that “freedom and justice come from the barrel of the gun.” This slogan was nurtured by all Palestinian factions across the political spectrum through massive indoctrination campaigns, recruitment of youth in their early teens to take part in paramilitary summer camps, and creation of patronage systems and funding networks that allowed tens of thousands of young Palestinians to be equipped with weapons and the promise that they will become glorified martyrs in the event of death.

The Past and Present of “Armed Struggle”

M any analysts expected the Oslo Accords of 1993 to represent a turning point by the PLO away from “Armed Struggle” towards a search for gradual peaceful reconciliation with Israel. Those hopes were dashed in less than two years when Arafat secretly sanctioned the Hamas suicide bombers campaign. Indeed, the rhetoric of the PLO became more ambiguous, veiled and less defiant. But cadres in the Tanzim (a Fatah militia) were quietly provided with weapons, and Arafat kept indicating to his followers that the Oslo process was merely a truce, a temporary armistice until “millions of martyrs will march on Jerusalem.”

In 2000, Arafat unleashed the murderous Second Intifada. Contrary to the wishes of many, Oslo did not constitute a

turning point, only a diplomatic breakthrough into a continuing bloody deadlock. In late 1995, Prime Minister Rabin himself was contemplating a re-assessment of Oslo. He planned a stern “bend or break” message for Arafat in their next meeting scheduled for January 1996, though he was tragically assassinated before the meeting took place.

To his credit, Mahmoud Abbas was the first high-ranking Palestinian leader who had the courage to question, during the Second Intifada of 2000-2005, the wisdom of adhering to “Armed Struggle,” calling to replace it with diplomatic and legal warfare against Israel. Abbas failed to convince many within his own Fatah movement. He faced great difficulty in influencing the other Palestinian armed organizations to change course even after he assumed the leadership from Arafat in 2005. Thus, numerous members of the Palestinian Authority’s security organs under his command remained involved in terrorist activities, disobeying his explicit orders.

The absolute primacy of “Armed Struggle” in Palestinian discourse has discouraged any serious attempt to discuss or plan for a future Palestinian state. Palestinian political literature is devoid of any substantial debate over what kind of a state they aspire to create. What would be its economic, foreign and social policies?

One significant exception was a seminar held by Hamas in Gaza—under the auspices of the late Yahya Sinwar—prior to October 7, 2023. The main focus of what was described as a brainstorming session was the question of how to deal with the Jews in the land to be liberated. A broad consensus between the participants was reached that most Israeli Jews should be eradicated or expelled while those contributing to Israel’s success in high tech and other critical domains would be forced to serve the new Palestinian authorities.

Yet, the ongoing aftershocks from the ongoing war in Gaza are posing questions among Palestinians concerning the viability of “Armed Struggle.” So far this trend is reflected mainly in stormy exchanges on social media platforms and internal controversies within Hamas. There is mounting criticism leveled at the late Mohamad Deif and Yahya Sinwar for embarking upon an uncoordinated offensive that is resulting in a “Second Nakba”—a repeat of the defeat and mass displacement caused by launching the war in 1948.

To be sure, “Armed Struggle” is still being preached daily to the Palestinian communities by Iran and Iranian proxies, and at least half the Palestinian public—according to various polls—believe it remains indispensable. But doubts are being heard. We may be reaching a point where the Palestinians will feel compelled to make a choice between the road which led to past failures and an attempt to chart a new route. It will certainly require time and is bound to cause fractures and divisions, perhaps even a violent split, among the Palestinians.

Currently, a handful of Palestinian intellectuals suggest that “Armed Struggle” should be discarded because of the consequences of the ongoing war. The main criticism of Hamas is over timing and planning. The Hamas leadership in Gaza recklessly launched the “Al-Aqsa Flood” attack, acting independently without securing in advance coordinated offensives from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and other parts of the Tehran-sponsored “Axis of Resistance,” and with no direct involvement of Iran itself early on. They argue that a multi-front surprise attack could have produced a different result.

This claim may sound sensible but is unrealistic. Iran, Hizbullah and Bashar al-Asad were not ready on October 7, 2023 to launch an all-out campaign. Even more important is the fact that this line of thinking subordinates Palestinian “Armed Struggle” to the strategy imposed by non-Palestinian partners. Arafat emphasized from his first day in politics that the Arabs have betrayed the Palestinians, and that Palestinian “Armed Struggle” should be based exclusively on the principle of independence of Palestinian decision-making.

The Regional Outlook for “Armed Struggle”

At present, adherence to the primacy of “Armed Struggle” faces a long list of impediments brought about by the war that Hamas launched on October 7, 2023. Together they form an unfriendly regional environment for Palestinian armed groups. Their forces are decreasing, their geographic spread is shrinking, their arsenal is

degraded, tolerance by Arab governments is receding and a constant threat of IDF operations against their commanders and bases has become an integral part of the equation.

In the Gaza Strip, the military wing of Hamas—the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades—has been severely decimated. About 20,000 of its fighters were killed, including almost all of the first and second echelon commanders, most of its tunnel network demolished or cemented, most of its large arsenal of rockets and anti-tank weapons destroyed. Hamas is currently under attack by five IDF divisional task forces and has growing difficulties improvising a chain of command and imposing discipline on the rest of its combatants.

Hamas has indicated a willingness to give up administration of Gaza and hand it over to a committee of technocrats linked to the Palestinian Authority. Hamas negotiators have conveyed to US envoys that they are ready for a five-to-ten-year armistice with Israel. Furthermore, some senior leaders have privately hinted at the possibility that Hamas may agree to the deportation of its commanders and an unspecified number of lower ranking operatives. Growing international pressure is gradually being applied to accept disarmament. President Abbas has proposed storing Hamas's heavy weapons under supervision of his officials. Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Egypt have made it clear that Hamas has to be disarmed before reconstruction funds can flow into Gaza. In short, whatever would be the arrangements to conclude the Gaza war, Hamas can no longer pose a military threat to Israel.

In the West Bank, the IDF has conducted a less publicized series of operations against the Kataib (battalions), which Hamas and Islamic Jihad established in the northern refugee camps and some neighboring villages with Iranian funding and weapons smuggling across the Jordan River. Most Kataib gunmen have been arrested or surrendered to the Palestinian Authority or were killed during Israeli incursions. Others went into hiding. The fortified strongholds established in refugee camps in Jenin and Nablus have been demolished. Hamas appears unable to re-establish its underground network in the area and has so far failed to mobilize for clashes with the IDF in the southern West Bank, including the city of Hebron, generally regarded as supportive of Hamas.

As for the 35,000-strong Palestinian Authority security organs in the West Bank, they have undergone in recent weeks what amounts to a purge of most senior officers, veterans of Arafat's day, together with retiring others and recruiting new young members. This comes in the wake of the failure of the two top elite battalions, the 9th and 101st, to restore law and order in the northern refugee camps.

In Lebanon, President Joseph Aoun and the new government have successfully applied pressure on Hamas to stop lobbing rockets into Israel and have arrested some of its operatives. Hamas's local allies in Lebanon, the Jama'a al-Islamiya, face pressure to both withdraw from cooperation with Hamas and disarm its own military wing, the "Fajr Forces." The veteran leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood in Lebanon is also pressing for the removal of Sheikh Taqush as leader of the movement in view of his close cooperation with Hamas.

Above all, Hamas as well as other Palestinian armed factions are facing the demand of the Lebanese authorities for disarmament in the twelve Palestinian refugee camps. President Abbas has accepted this demand on behalf of Fatah and the PLO, and he may prove able to convince those bands loyal to him to disband. On the other hand, Hizbullah may urge Hamas to refuse to disarm, seeing it as a prelude to the effort to complete the disarmament of Hizbullah itself, even after they have surrendered most of their positions south of the Litani River. There are a few thousand armed Palestinian personnel in the refugee camps, and the plan is to start the process in the camps of the capital Beirut and then move north and east and finally attempt to reach a deal for disarmament of the strongest Palestinian camp, Ein al-Hilweh near Sidon, largely controlled by Hamas. Several bases of minor Palestinian armed groups outside the camps have already been taken over by the Lebanese army.

In Syria, the post-Asad regime under President al-Shara'a has been taking actions to put an end to Palestinian military activity, arresting some elderly commanders and even reportedly dismissing two long-time Palestinian

leaders of the regime militia, Hayat Tahrir al-Shams, in Idlib province.

The Gulf states, Egypt, and Jordan do not allow a Palestinian military presence. Turkey and Qatar allow Hamas to keep headquarters, directing operations from afar, but so far do not allow the stationing of military units.

In Iraq, the Popular Mobilization Forces, part of the Iranian proxy network, express great sympathy for Hamas and “Armed Struggle” in general, but so far no Hamas military presence has been detected there.

The bottom line is that Palestinian armed groups are under growing pressure both inside and outside the territories. In the foreseeable future a revival of armed struggle on a substantial scale—as opposed to sporadic terrorist actions—seems impossible. The big question is whether or not Palestinians will be prepared to bid farewell to their old battle cry.

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