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Palestine

The Tantheem Wildcard

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Sundown Saturday, October 7th. Doha neighbourhood, just south of Bethlehem. Drove of people have been making their way up this dilapidated hillside to pay their respects to the family of Mustapha Fararjeh. Fararjeh, 22, was killed two days earlier, assassinated by an Israeli dum-dum bullet that exploded in his chest on the neighbouring hillside of Beit Jala. Some say he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Others account that he was throwing rocks at settlers' cars using the main North-South by-pass road that passes via a tunnel, literally beneath Beit Jala. Dead now, his family receives the convoys of many of the 30,000 well-wishers who participated in his funeral procession the day before.

A group of 25 masked men march into the funeral tent. Some are dressed in army fatigues, while others wear vests with military accoutrements. Most brandish M16 automatic rifles while some carry less traditional sawed-off automatic weapons. They pay their respects to the family and make a short but fiery speech about how the martyr's blood has not been spilled in vain, and whose death shall be revenged.

This is the Tantheem, the Fateh based paramilitary group whose Arabic name means "the Organization". Much of the recent gun battles the '67 Occupied Territories have witnessed and which the international media has been keen to report (as though there were a semblance of equal forces squaring off) has been attributed to them. Israel has repeatedly laid blame on the Tantheem for the "cycle of violence" and called upon the Palestinian Authority to disarm them. Yet these demands are little more than bluff: Israel knows as well as the PA that this is impossible as they compose the rank and file of Arafat's only constituency. Furthermore, it could also be claimed that Israel is indirectly responsible for the creation of the Tantheem given their insistence upon a "strong police force", to use the Oslo agreement's phrasing.

Who are the Tantheem

The presence of the Tantheem on the Palestinian scene is quite recent, dating back only to the 1995 arrival of the Palestinian Authority in the Occupied Territories. It was then that the establishment of the Palestinian Authority came hand in hand with the establishment of an elaborate security and intelligence network - a precondition Israel made in the Oslo Accords. During an August 30th 1993 Knesset speech, Yitzhak Rabin called upon the creation of "a reality whereby internal Palestinian security will be in the Palestinians' hands". "They will rule by their own methods, freeing, and this is most important, the Israeli army soldiers from having to do what they will do." (Haaretz, Yediot Aharonot 7 September 1993.)

Had Rabin lived longer, he would have been proud of his own forethought when it was fully actualised. The Palestinian Authority gladly collected the Intifada-tested ranks of the West Bank and Gaza Fateh movement into its myriad security services. In fact, PA security services comprised 70% of the public sector jobs. Needless to say, as journalist Graham Usher put it "the PA does not need a 30,000 strong police force to facilitate the economic, social and political development of its 2.6 million people. A police force of this size is only needed to keep the lid on the people in the absence of such development."

The security services themselves were dominated by Arafat-loyal strongmen, among whose infamous names include Jibril Rajoub (head of Preventative Security, West Bank), Mohammed Dahlan (Preventative Security, Gaza), Toufic Tirawi (Intelligence, West Bank), Amin El Hindi (Intelligence, Gaza), Musa Arafat (Military Intelligence) Haj Ismail (West Bank Chief of Police) and Ghazi Jabali (Gaza Police). Furthermore, their horizontal positioning vis a vis one

another endorsed a system of perpetual elbowing between the factions for influence, power and territory, which occasionally erupted into violence.

The role of the security services involved several tasks, most important of which was the maintaining of the political (largely Islamic) opposition in check. But their work also involved following up on known Israeli collaborators, monitoring the black market arms trade and keeping tabs on criminal activity. The Fateh cadre newly inducted into PA security services were prime candidates for accomplishing this task, given their knowledge and experience of the local scene, not to mention Fateh's particular liking for liquidating collaborators during the Intifada. Occasionally however, the nature of their work, together with the lack of serious accountability within the Fateh family, led to many of their personnel becoming involved in the arms and stolen-car trade themselves.

Things began to dramatically degenerate with the slow but visible decline of the peace process, beginning during the tenure of Netanyahu. Fateh cadres found it increasingly difficult to defend themselves against popular accusations that the Palestinian Authority was performing poorly at the negotiations table, and at the same time was becoming perceived as corrupt abusers of power on the street. Furthermore, the national conscience of many Fateh cadres was becoming infused with a sense that there was something drastically wrong with the political trajectory of the Palestinian Authority. During the Jebel Abu Gheneim /Har Homa settlement crisis in March 1997, an emergency session of Fateh's Higher Committee was held in the Bethlehem village of Beit Sahour. Fateh General Secretary in the West Bank, Marwan Barghouti, commented after the meeting that "Many Palestinians - including from inside Fatah - are questioning whether we made the right choice of peace with Israel....At the Beit Sahour conference, some Fateh cadres called for a return to the armed struggle. This was not the majority view - but there were voices, and we cannot ignore them."

But this was not the extent of Fateh's consternation. Barghouti himself was calling for drastic changes in Palestinian Authority tactics as early as this same crisis: "We are demanding that the PLO cease all negotiations with Israel. We are also calling for an end to all security cooperation between Israel and the PA. We cannot and will not defend Israel's security unconditionally."

This was the nest within which the Tantheem was born. The Tantheem became the populist front of the Fateh rank and file, many of whom constituted the PA security services, but also many of whom had budding concerns that the PA strategy impeded rather than progressed Palestinian national interests. By projecting a radical image as the defenders of national rights, and armed with the guns that they had at their disposal (largely 'illegal' (M16s) rather than legal (Kalashnikovs)), the Tantheem was able to strike a wedge between the popular perception as Fateh being indivisible from the Palestinian Authority. Along the way they were able to resuscitate to certain degrees, popular faith in their loyalty to the Palestinian cause as opposed to the defenders of the Palestinian Authority corruption. Their participation in demonstrations - be it during local non-violent events, or more recently as active participants in armed clashes with Israel - has gained a cautious respect from the Palestinian masses. Still however looming in the back of popular consciousness was the understanding that Fateh was also responsible for the tragedy of Oslo. In this sense, the demonstrations raging throughout the Occupied Territories are Fateh's redemptory trial by fire, in an attempt to realign themselves in the camp of the Palestinian masses. In this, the PA structure has little to say (or do), except to tag along behind the Tantheem and the Palestinian street, trying to avoid accusations of culpability for the 'disturbances' from the American and Israeli establishments.

The Leader of the Pack

The Tantheem is officially lead by Marwan Barghouti, though it is well know that the fractious nature of the security services is also reflected in its own organisation. All of the PA strongmen have their own following within the Tantheem seeing as they see it within their interests to appear populist as well. Yet the overwhelming majority of the

Tantheem cadre fall behind Barghouti himself, or local Intifada-born heroes within areas where Fateh has been historically strong: Ramallah (al Ama'ri Refugee Camp, and Old Ramallah), Nablus (Balata Camp and the Casabeh/Old city) and Gaza. The important distinction to be made here is that the Fateh rank and file prefer to give their allegiance to local, well-known leaders from the Occupied Territories, as opposed to those who returned with the PA. It is also important to note that because of the loosely knit nature of the Tantheem, it is not as though they can be turned on or off as Israel implies when it demands the Palestinian Authority "stop the Tantheem." One leader in Ramallah might call for a calming of the situation, while another in Gaza might call for its escalation.

The current explosion of violence across the Occupied Territories brought the Tantheem to across road. When Marwan Barghouti confirmed in 1997 that there was "not a majority" of "voices" within Fateh who called for armed struggle, he was speaking in an age when wide swathes of the Palestinian people were beginning to awaken to the inability of Oslo to address their justified historical rights. Three and a half years later, that popular consciousness has solidified and brought with it the imperative of finding alternatives. The Tantheem is part of that alternative, and it is extremely significant that it emerges from perhaps the last but significant remaining constituency within Palestinian society that defended the peace process. The popular outrage sparked by Sharon's visit to al Aqsa forced reactions from all Palestinian factions. The PA was forced to choose to quell demonstrations as Israel demanded (thereby solidifying popular perception as Israeli collaborators) or to at least pretend to support it and stand behind the Palestinian masses. The Tantheem, ripe for resistance from their own humiliation as the former defenders of the 'Peace Process', discovered themselves as the lynchpin which took legitimisation from the PA and gave it to the street.

This more than anything explains why the demonstrations have continued to for so long. The PA lacks the power to squelch demonstrations particularly because their own constituency (Fateh and the Tantheem) has taken that power away from them. As soon as the Palestinian delegation went to the Sharem al Shiekh Summit to work out a cease-fire deal, Fateh signed its name to a joint communiqué of National and Islamic forces protesting Palestinian participation. Furthermore, once the summit ended, Fateh's Higher Revolutionary Council met in Ramallah for a debriefing of the Sharem conclusions. Barghouti reportedly left the meeting early and in provocative fashion, beneath the gaze of PA-loyal Fateh leaders. "From the very beginning the [Sharem] Summit should have discussed not just the withdrawal of tanks but the real reasons behind the Intifada - that being the Israeli occupation", Barghouti was quoted as saying.

Without hesitation, Barghouti has been at the forefront giving interviews as the self-appointed spokesperson of the Intifada. He has called for the escalation of the Al Aqsa Intifada, advocating the observation of a general strike (which is in effect on a half-day basis), a boycotting of Israeli products, an end to joint Israeli-Palestinian patrols, popular participation in solidarity demonstrations and a blocking of settler by-pass roads. His ascension to the forefront reflects his own acumen in reading the Palestinian political map in the Occupied Territories. One such realisation is that in the light of final status negotiations, the Palestinian people will not accept a return to the humiliating cycle of negotiations before the Al Aqsa Intifada broke out. A second (perhaps no less important) realisation is that Barghouti recognizes the vacuum of power that exists in the succession of the aging Arafat, now a ripe 72. The Barghouti family (which comprises several thousand members) derives from the peasant-based villages of Ramallah, lacks an aristocratic air, and has deep roots in Palestinian national resistance. His lineage, together with his fire-brand rhetoric during the latest events positions him well as a Palestinian leader, especially when compared with the coterie of Arafat sycophants despised even amongst Fateh.

More than anything the emergence of the Tantheem during the al Aqsa Intifada is an indication of a trend of internal questioning within Fateh. What once was the PA's subcontracted strong arm, has now evolved into a wild card that threatens Israel, the PA and indeed the unity of Fateh. Barghouti knows that when he calls for a boycott of Israeli products, it has been the PA who has been the foremost importer of such products through its private monopolies. Israeli political commentators have recognised such splits, and bicker about whether the situation is part of a larger Arafatist plan, or whether Arafat is in powerless opposition. In many senses, whether Arafat supports or opposes the

radicalisation of the Tantheem is irrelevant: for him or anyone else to attempt its subduing would mean political suicide.

One Final Remark

On October 13th, Israeli helicopters bombed five Palestinian cities after two undercover Israeli soldiers were lynched in Ramallah. The military manoeuvre was largely symbolic knocking-out token Palestinian Authority targets: PA police stations, communications towers and the Gaza port. One of the targets however was the Tantheem office in Beit Lahiya in Gaza. The bombs were supposed to be a clear message to the Tantheem that Israel is prepared to use any force necessary to liquidate armed resistance to their hegemony. It was also meant to convey that Israel found it very threatening that the Tantheem was swerving from the PA's tack. Indeed, Minister of Internal Security Shlomo Ben Ami was quoted in an interview as saying, "If he [Barghouti] acts independently, we have the means to confront him."

The PA, as the embodiment of Israel's long-sought autonomy plan for the Occupied Territories, is being forced to change its entire national agenda so that it be in line with the Palestinian street, or to loose all legitimacy. If Israel were to completely 'lose' the PA, and particularly Arafat (whose power, symbolism and pliancy have been indispensable assets for Israel throughout the past 7 years) it would be very difficult for Israel to find another 'partner in peace'. In the mean time, the remaining competing strongmen within the PA are not likely to resign power so easily. In this sense, the basis for converging interests between PA elites and the Israeli government draws closer. And indeed, throughout the latest Intifada, top PA security personnel (particularly Mohammed Dahlan) have repeatedly met with their Israeli counterparts (as the Sharem declaration stipulates), within the presence of CIA representatives who have actually moved onto the street as "observers". One must wonder what they talk about.

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