

Gaza's deadly guardians

A radical Islamist state has emerged from the smoking ruins of Gaza, threatening a new war with nearby Israel. Marie Colvin ventures into the lair of the Hamas extremists imposing their hardline doctrine on Palestinians trapped there. Photograph by Seamus Murphy

Hamas wants you to believe it has created a benevolent sanctuary where once chaos reigned. At the beginning of the journey into Gaza it's easy to believe that things are better.

There is no longer a Palestinian immigration desk after the long walk from the air-conditioned Erez terminal on the Israeli side, past concrete blast walls, and down a dusty track in the furnace heat. But further down the road, Hamas gunmen have taken over the checkpoints. They are polite and well turned out in blue camouflage trousers, clean black T-shirts, shiny black boots.

Once hostile, they now smile at returning foreigners who fled after the kidnapping of Alan Johnston, the BBC reporter, and the savage bloodletting between the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) forces and Hamas in June that left the fundamentalist party in absolute power.

So does everyone else in Gaza. It's like hearing the first songbird of spring. The welcome starts in the taxi. "Gaza is safe now. We have security, praise be to God," says Munir, my driver for years, who always in the past shook his head and moaned about how terrible everything was.

It's the same at the Al Deira hotel, mostly empty, where once aid workers, diplomats, journalists and sophisticated Gazans mixed on the terrace overlooking the Mediterranean. "Everything is safe now. You are welcome," says Amir at the front desk.

For the first time on a trip to Gaza, I was stopped going the wrong way down a one-way street, by one of the young Hamas volunteers in yellow vests now standing up to drivers in a culture that considers a red light to be a mere suggestion to slow down.

The rubbish still smells, but now it is piled neatly in the streets. Families stroll late at night. Gone is the gunfire that used to punctuate days and nights and often escalated into street battles that left innocents dead on the pavements.

Then you start talking to people – in private.

Young men show you bruised limbs and welts on their feet; every girl wears a hijab head covering and, for the first time, women wear niqab – Saudi-style face coverings that reveal only the eyes. And people whisper.

Welcome to Hamastan.

Ahmed Al-Naba'at, 24, sits in his courtyard in an oversized Barcelona shirt. He looks too young to be the father of the three young children who toddle barefoot round the tiny dirt courtyard.

His feet still hurt. Hamas came for him at 2am.

About 30 armed men, their faces masked but wearing the black uniforms and badges of the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigade, the military wing of Hamas, had surrounded the house. They covered his eyes and took him away in a car.

"They took me somewhere, I don't know, a room," Naba'at says. He has high cheekbones and the near-black skin of his Sudanese ancestry. "They were screaming and beating me, punching me, slapping me on the face," he says. "Then they tied my legs together and started falaka" – a traditional Arabic torture where the soles of the feet are beaten with sticks. "I relaxed."

He sees the surprise in my face. "I thought they were going to kill me," he explains.

"When I realised it's just falaka, I thought, okay, it's just torture."

Qassam dumped him near his home, hours later. It took him half an hour to walk what usually takes two minutes. "You were lucky," interjects his unsympathetic father, who is sitting against a courtyard wall. "Most of the people they beat, they throw them unconscious in the street and they are not found until the morning."

His crime? Earlier that night at a party for a friend's wedding, Naba'at had danced and played a song popular in Gaza – an over-romanticised ballad to Samih al-Madhoun, a Fatah commander executed by Hamas during the fighting. Hamas cameramen had filmed as Madhoun was dragged down the street amid spitting crowds, shot in the stomach, beaten and shot some more. It was shown on Hamas television that night.

The overblown ballad of his death – "Your blood is not for free Samih/You left behind an earthquake/We will not forget you Samih" – is such a Gazan hit that many young people have it on their mobile phones. Hamas, predictably, is furious. Three of Al-Naba'at's friends who had danced at the wedding were also beaten.

Al-Naba'at, who left school at 14 and worked as a farm labourer and painter, has little recourse. He is too afraid to sleep at home any more. His father is clearly exasperated – like many of the older generation, he thinks his sons should shut up. He points to another son, 17-year-old Mustafa. Hamas came after him when he burnt a Hamas flag: they arrested his father and twin brother until he gave himself up.

Hamas is not just going after the poor. Azil Akhras is a sophisticated 24-year-old woman with heavily kohled eyes, thick, flowing black hair and rouged lips, comfortable in her jeans and tight red shirt. Life used to be shopping, going out – maybe to Roots, a popular Gaza nightclub even though it now serves only soft drinks – and going to the beach. Her life changed dramatically three months ago when Hamas took over Gaza.

“Now, I cover my head when I go in a car. Hamas is at the checkpoints. Last week, they stopped a girl who was not covered and they beat her brother when he tried to protect her.”

She and her sister must be careful; they are alone. Their father, a former government health minister, has fled Gaza to escape Hamas. He has holed up in Ramallah, the West Bank capital, and is unable to return.

It's not just shopping trips she misses. A university graduate, Akhras had wanted to sit her master's degree; she wanted to travel. “I had an idea, I wanted to be famous in history. Maybe a journalist,” she says. “Now, there's no chance, I can't even go outside.” She resents Hamas's repression. “If I decide to cover [my head], it will be for my God, not some Qassam soldier.”

Gazans are living in a climate of fear. The place is eerily serene, not only because of the presence of disciplined Hamas security forces on the streets but, as in all successful police states, because everyone has started policing themselves, afraid of the consequences of stepping over a line not defined in formal law.

Hamas took power after five days of vicious, internecine fighting with the security forces of the PNA, who mostly belong to the rival Fatah organisation co-founded by Yasser Arafat, the late president.

Tension had escalated into clashes between the secular Fatah, who governed for a decade and whose members stack the civil service and security forces, and Hamas, after the religious party won national elections in March 2006.

The differences were exacerbated by Gaza's isolation. The international community cut funds to the Palestinian government after the Hamas election victory. Israel blocked the millions in tax revenue it was supposed to pass on for imports, and closed the borders intermittently. The economy went into freefall.

A national unity government formed in February failed to end the confrontation. But the speed of the coup in Gaza was shocking.

Hamas fielded only about 7,000 members of the Executive Force, its police force, which was backed by the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigade, the military wing of the party, against the 70,000-strong government forces loyal to Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president.

There are many reasons for the swift collapse: the government security forces hadn't been paid for 18 months and were demoralised by the corruption of their own leaders. Their commanders fled, and many foot soldiers found that their guns were locked in storage. Hamas was better armed, better trained, and fought with the single-mindedness of those with a cause.

It was the worst ever clash among Palestinians: 110 died, and the population is still shocked by the brother-on-brother nature of the battle. Today there is a deadlock, and essentially two Palestinian governments. Abbas fired the Hamas-led coalition government and named a new emergency cabinet, but its powers run only in the West Bank. Hamas ministers refused to step down.

By Palestinian law, the government must be renewed by the parliament, but Hamas dominates the legislature and, anyway, it lacks a quorum: about one-third of its members are in Israeli jails for belonging to Hamas.

The evidence of the ferocity of the fighting can be seen across Gaza City. The headquarters of the Preventive Security Service, the PNA's main security force, was the last stronghold. Now occupied by the Executive Force, there are gaping holes in the walls from bullets and rockets.

Abbas's presidential house is guarded by Hamas police who brew tea under new posters of Hamas members killed in the fighting. They shake their heads at the marble floors and luxurious furnishings, contrasting it with the home of Ismail Haniya, the Hamas prime minister, who lives in the al-Shati refugee camp.

At the Muntada, the Palestinian version of the White House, Hamas fighters stroll the corridors, and dust gathers on Abbas's rosewood desk, where Arafat once sat.

Hamas is extending its control. Nobody is safe if the example of Ashraf Juma, one of their more articulate opponents, is anything to go by. Juma is a senior member of Fatah, who refused to leave his home or office in Rafah, Gaza's southernmost city on Egypt's border. He is one of the most popular politicians in Gaza: when Hamas won the election, sweeping Gaza, he was one of the few elected from the Fatah list.

He was leader of the al-Aqsa hawks during the first intifada (uprising), and hands out money from his own pocket to the needy of both Fatah and Hamas (these days it's from his brother's, a wealthy businessman). His latest project is to find £5,000 for school uniforms for poor children.

None of it was any protection from Hamas. It began on the internet. Juma was criticised on the official Hamas website for supposedly sending Abbas the names of people whose salaries should be cut because they were Hamas members.

Then critical leaflets were distributed in the local mosque. “Someone called from Hamas and said, ‘Leave your office. This is

a preparation for an attack on you,' ” he says, sitting at home in a white short-sleeved shirt, dark trousers and sandals.

The next day, as he and his office staff finished evening prayers, blue police cars pulled up, disgorging men in the uniform of the Executive Force. They also wore black masks.

As he opened the door, he saw his secretary, Osama, trying to fend them off with a table. The gunmen began screaming and shot Osama in the thigh. They started beating him in the hallway before running off. “You were my sons. I served you,” he shouted after them.

Juma shakes his balding head, and describes how the situation turned almost farcical. As word spread that he had been attacked, hundreds of people poured into Shifa hospital and packed the emergency room and courtyard.

“There were so many people, the doctors couldn’t work properly. Look, they put stitches in wrong,” he says, ducking his head to show newly healed scars. The crowds carried him out of the hospital before the doctors had finished, afraid that Hamas would return, and grabbed Osama from the operating room before his broken hand and gunshot wound were treated.

They almost killed their hero. Juma fell unconscious, Osama writhed in pain. Hundreds poured into the streets, denouncing the Executive Force. A doctor finally came and treated both of them at home.

It was a night of terror for many. Ismael, 29, an English teacher for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, sits in the front room of the house he had just painted for a marriage that now will never happen.

“My last hours before they came were happy,” recalls Ismael, who doesn’t want his last name used because Hamas threatened to kill him if he told the story.

“I had just gotten engaged and I spent from 7.30pm to 11pm talking with my friends about what we would do for the celebrations,” he says.

Suddenly, his house was surrounded by armed men in black with Qassam Brigade emblems. “One tried to hit me with a stick, and I said, ‘What are you doing? I have done nothing.’ ”

They took him first to the Sayed Sayel Executive Force post. “They put me against a wall and started shouting, ‘Have you been to a demonstration?’ he says. “They became hysterical, shouting, ‘You have been making riots here,’ beating me with sticks, metal bars, stones.”

His ordeal had just begun. “They said, ‘What about the orphans?’ ” Ismael supports two orphans, Allah, who is nine and needs an eye operation, and Dina, who is 11, while trying to get them medical help through an American charity. Hamas said he should have no contact with foreigners.

They beat Ismael for an hour and a half, moving him at one point during the night to Idara Madaneh, the civil administration building in Jabaliya camp. He was blindfolded, but two young teenagers who had been taken in ran to him, screaming “Teacher! Teacher!”, probably recognising him from school.

“Then Hamas started beating me on the arm I was using to try to protect the children,” he says.

He was finally released at 4am with a warning not to talk, and not to go to a hospital. A doctor friend came round and treated him secretly.

Photographs from the June beating show welts on his back, ferocious bruises on his left arm, and a swollen right arm and elbow. He won’t show me his legs out of modesty, but says they were black, and his knees are still not right.

But that was not the worst. His fiancée’s family heard of the incident and believed he was a political activist against Hamas, which would endanger her future. Her father revoked his permission to marry and he has not spoken to his fiancée, a fellow teacher, since then. “My sister tells me she is crying and crying,” Ismael says. Can’t they marry when things calm down? “No chance. This is our tradition.” For the first time in a long story, he brushes away a tear.

“Most of the educated people here feel they are living in a country that doesn’t belong to them,” he says when he recovers.

Hamas is not triumphalist in its takeover, as was the first prophet of militant Islam, Ayatollah Khomeini, who immediately set himself up against the West and all who didn’t want to follow his unforgiving brand of Islam.

But then he had oil, 50m people, an army, air force and navy, and control of his own borders. Hamas is isolated and depends on international aid, with little but farming, fishing and a hostile neighbour that controls its borders, sea and skies.

This heavily armed statelet is squeezed between Israel’s southern border and Egypt’s northern border, separated by a chunk of Israel from the West Bank, the bigger, richer other half of the Palestinian “state”.

The West Bank is still occupied by Israeli soldiers and Jewish settlers: they withdrew from Gaza two years ago, but still control the borders and ban all air and sea traffic, except for tiny wooden fishing boats allowed to go out six miles.

Since the Hamas takeover in June, Israel has not opened the main crossing points for even a day, and the economy has collapsed. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) estimates unemployment at 80% among the 1.4m inhabitants. There are no exports; a trickle of food bought by private Palestinian merchants from their Israeli counterparts is allowed across at the tiny Sufa crossing. It must be one of the strangest commercial dealings in the world. The Israeli army moves in pallets from about 100 trucks a day, shooting at anyone who approaches before they withdraw behind the fence; then there is a bizarre Mad Max-style race by forklifts to get the merchandise left in the no-man’s-land.

In three months, an estimated 70,000 jobs have been lost in the construction industry alone. UNRWA has had to stop £47m in projects funded by donors – apartments for those whose homes were destroyed by Israeli fire, oxidation projects for Gaza’s overflowing sewage-treatment plants. Everyone is desperate. “This place is a powder keg waiting to explode,” said

John Ging, UNRWA's Gaza director.

Instead of the open defiance of Khomeini's Iran, Hamas has developed a parallel system: show a reasonable face to the world in the hope of ending Gaza's isolation, while enforcing the unforgiving law of the state of Hamastan at home.

Ismail Haniya, the silver-haired Hamas prime minister, could be a poster boy for moderate Islam. When I see him, he is sitting with Arab journalists, and gently lecturing them like the professor he once was. Aware he stands little chance with the West, he is seeking Arab support.

He tells them that negotiations are possible under certain conditions with Mahmoud Abbas, who is welcome to come back to Gaza. No women will be forced to wear the hijab – that is a personal choice. Well, of course there can be no negotiations with Israel, although that could happen if they recognise Palestinian rights.

There is duplicity even in the detail, however: Haniya may say that women are free not to cover their heads, but before I go to his office an aide calls to tell me to be sure to wear a headscarf.

And recognising Palestinian rights is Hamas-speak for "We want all of the land of mandate Palestine, from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River," a maximalist position that ignores the fact that most Palestinians have moved on from 1948 to accept the existence of Israel, and would settle for a two-state solution. Negotiations are moribund, but Fatah-led governments have signed agreements with Israel recognising the reality that two states is the only solution.

Haniya may be the smooth-talking Hamas frontman but he lacks real power. A former professor of religion, he was a compromise choice fielded by Khaled Mesha'al, the exiled Hamas leader based in Damascus. "When we were negotiating, whenever a difficult point came up, Haniya had to leave the room to call Mesha'al," one of Abbas's top lieutenants said.

The real power lies with Mahmoud Zahar, who is in the strange position of being a foreign minister who can't travel from Gaza (Israel has closed the borders even to government officials).

A militant once expelled by Israel, he was expected to be prime minister after the Hamas victory, but Mesha'al apparently considered him too radical, and more of a threat than Haniya.

Sitting on a couch in the foreign ministry damaged in an Israeli bombing, he is scathing about Abbas. "[He] committed big crimes against the law, against human interest." Zahar is dressed in a light-grey safari suit, his beard neatly trimmed, his shoes polished. He exudes confidence and scorns any need for Hamas to reach out for a compromise. "Abbas is acting as an agent of America and Israel."

The power that stretches beyond his title peeps out. "We have information that Fatah are organising themselves into cells," he says. "We will find them and we will crush them."

There is no sense of urgency in finding a solution to the desperate need of the average Gazan with a large family and no work.

"We are not in a hurry. Palestinians are used to being under siege. I believe sooner or later the West will change its mind," he says calmly.

Again, during the interview, his power beyond that of the average diplomat is revealed when he takes a phone call about the siege of the powerful Dagmouh clan, the kidnapers of Alan Johnston, the BBC journalist. Earlier in the week the clan killed two Hamas policemen.

"Tell them that by 10pm we will go in if they have not agreed. We will enter their houses one by one."

Across town that very siege is under way. Hamas has again surrounded the Dagmouh neighbourhood as they did to get Johnston back. They have cut off the water and electricity.

Few in Gaza have any sympathy for the Dagmouhs. One of the leaders of the clan and Johnston's main kidnapper, Mumtaz Dagmouh spouts extremist Al-Qaeda rhetoric, but his so-called Army of Islam has about 20 members and is better known for theft, gun smuggling and kidnapping. Fatah let Gaza's powerful families run wild, sometimes using them against Hamas.

Hamas has taken them on. Breaking the Dagmouhs is crucial to consolidating power.

The discipline of Hamas on the front line of the siege of the concrete-block houses in the neighbourhood is in contrast to Fatah's members who won't talk until they get word from a commander over the walkie-talkie. Once allowed to talk, Abu Yehia, the local commander, doesn't have much to say. "We are imposing law and order. This is our duty. Islam tells us that."

Hamas is demanding that the Dagmouhs surrender the guilty members of the family, and give back stolen weapons.

That night, the family does surrender, led by Mumtaz Dagmouh. He is double the size of the average Gazan, tall, broad-shouldered, with a shaggy dark beard and wild hair. He and his entourage screech their pick-up trucks into the Preventive Security compound, jump out waving guns and, seeing me, starts waving his M16, shouting: "Get this journalist out of here!" With both sides jostling and shoving, for moments it seems there will be a shoot-out.

Dagmouh finally hands over bags of guns, then marches with his bodyguard into the darkened police headquarters and starts pounding on the commander's door, shouting: "I gave you my weapons, let me in there."

The M16 is in the air again, 50 men all shoving with guns and elbows, and shouting.

Eventually, he calms down and half an hour later is talking to Abu Dahab, the Hamas commander.

Dagmouh tells me, "We've just had an English guest staying with us for a while," referring to Alan Johnston, the kidnapped journalist. I asked him why he kidnaps, and if his activities other than kidnapping will be affected under Hamas. He shrugs: "Business is business," he says.

Now that Hamas has solidified power, they are putting in place their system of keeping it. One part of this is a new "ladies unit", reminiscent of the one in Iran where fierce, make-up-free women drag other women out of cars and away for re-education. Ominously, Hamas have failed so far to set up a court system, so cases are being heard by an Islamic judge.

The one thriving industry is the arms industry. I visit a Qassam area leader in Yibne camp in southern Gaza who has been "cooking" for three days – making the explosive mixture that goes in the rockets they fire into Israel.

He takes me to one of the many armouries they have and shows me the extraordinary range of weapons they manufacture locally, mostly in underground factories. What they can't make, they smuggle through tunnels from Egypt.

The armoury is in a small, concrete block house, indistinguishable from its neighbours in the squalid maze of the camp. The home-made weapons I see include foot-wide land mines, tank-busting missiles, guns, rocket-propelled grenades, all stored amid the clutter of a bedroom with flowers on the shelf above the bed and a teddy bear lying belly-up on the floor.

He is nervous while we are there – the Israelis target such places if they get information from collaborators, but he opens up when we go to another house for tea, although he won't give his name. He is unconcerned about his outside image, and this is the true voice of Hamas.

"Of course we will create an Islamic state. This is called for in the Holy Koran," he says. What would that mean, I ask him.

Well, for one, sharia law. "For a murder, death, not this life sentence there is now. A thief should have his hand cut off. An adulteress must be stoned," he says, in a chillingly nonchalant voice.

"There is no possibility of recognising Israel," he says. "All the land is ours. We are taught this by our leaders and they will never compromise."

His certitude comes from how Hamas recruits. It gets them young; my informant started at 14. Only when he proved himself "mentally and spiritually" was he allowed to join Qassam and receive military training.

And not all girls are like Azil Akhras. Gehad Nehan, 19, is studying law at the Hamas-dominated Islamic University in Gaza. She wears glasses, a hijab, and is covered in a navy-blue robe down to her thick black shoes. "Hamas has taken over the police stations and now the life is good."

She insists women are equal, but as she talks, a different reality is revealed. At the university, she says, "the boys say woman is weak, her work must be in the home. I say this is wrong".

Even getting to study was a struggle. "My father hits me and he punishes me and says I should not go to the university. It's difficult."

But despite having described Hamastan as virtually a perfect state, she has the yearning of all here to leave. "I want to travel all over the world and see people and how they live."

Those who have already travelled are the most angry at Hamas.

One restaurant owner begins by extolling Hamas for improving security. He sits at a banquette in his eatery in a yellow polo shirt. Christmas streamers still hang from the ceiling, and Whitney Houston is on the soundtrack.

"And they cancelled all family connections," he adds. "Before, if someone was connected to the government, they could eat and just not pay."

"But they are not the future for the Palestinian people," he insists. "We need a government that can deal with the international community." Despite growing dissatisfaction such as his, there is little sign that the green flags of Hamastan will be coming down any time soon.

The battle for Gaza

Hamas may have been outnumbered and outgunned, but its religious fervour and capacity for extreme brutality overwhelmed its bloated rival, Fatah. By Philip Jacobson

The morning of Sunday, June 10, a blast from a volley of rocket-propelled grenades rattled the windows of Salah Rajoub's apartment near the seafront in Gaza City. Peering cautiously into the street below, he watched a dozen black-clad Hamas gunmen advance on a building held by the Fatah militia. He initially assumed that this latest round of fighting would follow a familiar pattern: negotiations producing a shaky truce (the ninth by his reckoning) that would hold only until either side was ready to resume hostilities.

Rajoub, an accountant, had taken advantage of a recent lull to stock up on flour, tinned food, bottled water, batteries and candles.

'I switched on the television,' he recalls, 'and there was an official from Fatah talking about the abduction of one of its military people at a Hamas roadblock not far from where I live. He said the kidnappers had taken him up to the

18th floor of the al-Ghafari tower, which can be seen from almost everywhere in Gaza, tied his hands behind his back with his belt and threw him off. Then someone called to say they knew this poor guy, who was called Mohammed Sweirki and belonged to the Presidential Guard. He had been shot in the legs before being killed.

'I thought, my God, this could be Baghdad, and it struck me that we were heading for civil war between the Palestinians.'

How right Rajoub was became clear the following day, Monday, June 11, when attacks on the Gaza residences of both Mahmoud Abbas, the Fatah-backed President of the Palestinian Authority, and the Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniya touched off a deadly new cycle of revenge and retaliation. The Gaza Strip, the sliver of land beside the Mediterranean where about 1.4m Palestinians live in permanent refugee camps, has always been considered more lawless than the West Bank just 50 miles away. Now, in the summer heat, the savagery that lurked just below the surface erupted into the worst factional blood-letting Gaza had ever experienced.

The penalty for being singled out as partisan could be an instant kneecapping; fighters taken prisoner could expect torture, and sometimes summary execution. An acquaintance of Rajoub's from the town of Beit Hanoun was visiting a relative at the local hospital when armed men in masks burst into the ward where a senior Fatah militant, Louai el-Masri, was being treated after an earlier clash. 'A doctor there told him that Hamas gunmen had shot el-Masri dead in his bed, then killed his brother as he was being operated on for bullet wounds, and also their father, who was in a waiting room.'

Beit Hanoun was not the only hospital to become a war zone: at the bigger Shifa complex in Gaza City, where patients reported that the corpses of four men were lying in the emergency room, Hamas militants set up firing positions on the roof. By Tuesday, any hope that negotiations might secure even a temporary ceasefire had vanished as exultant Hamas units, whose fighting skills were honed in clashes with Israeli troops in the warrens of Gaza's refugee camps, raised their bright-green battle flags over a succession of captured positions.

Rumours began circulating that every Hamas squad was equipped with a laptop containing the names of Fatah officials in Gaza allegedly responsible for the torture and murder of Islamic militants. It was said that those identified with a red star were marked down for immediate execution: a blue star meant kneecapping; brown signified a beating. True or not, the effect was to send a number of senior Fatah commanders scurrying for the Egyptian border.

The seeds of the communal conflict that engulfed Gaza were sown by the power struggle that followed the shock defeat of the largely secular Fatah party by Hamas in parliamentary elections held last year. Unlike previous elections in which Fatah, for years the dominant force in Palestinian politics, had methodically rigged the poll, this was certified as free and fair by international observers, and an avowedly Islamic government was triumphantly installed.

'People were not prepared to put up any longer with the corruption and arrogance of the men who had surrounded Yasser Arafat for years,' Rajoub explains. 'Things got worse after the Old Man died and Hamas gained support, even among those like myself, who were worried by its fundamentalist agenda.'

Unsurprisingly, Israel was horrified by the emergence of a Palestinian government representing an organisation whose suicide bombers had killed and maimed many Israeli civilians and which remained committed to the destruction of the Jewish state. So too was the Bush administration, and with Britain and other EU members falling into line, desperately needed economic aid from the West was cut off.

The objective was to pressurise Hamas into renouncing violence and recognising Israel's right to exist, but the boycott was devastating, plunging Gaza deeper into deprivation. Against a background of growing unrest, the political tensions between Hamas and Fatah boiled over.

In December, three boys from the family of a high-ranking Fatah intelligence officer, Baha Balousheh, died when their car was ambushed on the way to school in Gaza City. Balousheh, who was not in the car, was a known advocate

of cracking down hard on militant groups. He was close to Mohammed Dahlan, the reviled Fatah strongman who headed the Palestinian National Authority's security apparatus and was responsible for the jailing and torture of many Hamas activists, some of whom were executed.

By the evening of Wednesday June 13, the conflict had turned decisively in Hamas' favour, with its fighters controlling all key junctions. An indication of the careful planning behind the Islamist offensive came with the destruction of a Fatah security stronghold in the town of Khan Younis. A 220-yard tunnel had been laboriously excavated beneath it and packed with explosives.

But while a hoarse-voiced Hamas spokesman was proclaiming to the media that victory was in sight, life for ordinary Palestinians had taken another turn for the worse as the United Nations halted food distributions to some 700,000 people following the death of two of its staff caught in crossfire. For Shelley Smith, a 42-year-old from America, the following day, Thursday 14 June, was 'the worst by far' as Hamas began mopping up the last pockets of resistance. A volunteer worker with a Palestinian refugee organisation, she described how a young neighbour, Waseem Arafat, had visited a friend in the hospital at Beit Hanoun. 'When he came out, a gunman shot him four times in the head.'

After Arafat's body was brought home in a taxi, Smith said, the young men who had gathered to pay their respects swore to avenge his death. His father calmed them down. 'He told them it wouldn't do any good for more to get injured or killed, so they should pray for his son and then help to bury him.'

As Fatah resistance continued to crumble that evening, a senior commander, Samih al-Madhoun, met a particularly brutal end. He had boasted on Fatah's radio station that he would 'kill all Hamas, civilians or not, and burn their homes'. Cornered in the headquarters of the Preventive Security force, bleeding from a bullet wound to the stomach, al-Madhoun was dragged out into the street by a mob. Begging for his life, he was beaten and stabbed before being shot at point-blank range. The al-Aqsa TV channel showed the execution in full. An eyewitness reported that Hamas had handed out sweets at the scene, something that normally happened after Israelis were killed in a suicide bombing.

The same evening, glumly monitoring events from his quarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah, President Mahmoud Abbas signed a decree dismissing the Hamas-led government and declaring a state of emergency. The measures were promptly rejected by the prime minister Ismail Haniya, effectively splitting the Palestinian state into two warring parts.

When Salah Rajoub finally ventured out onto the street the following morning, he found Hamas in full control. His favourite coffee house had already reopened and he joined friends to catch up on the gossip. The main topic of conversation was the

swift collapse of Fatah's superior forces: 'The feeling was that many had signed on as soldiers simply to feed their families, while the Hamas militia were fighting for their faith.'

The emergence of 'Hamastan' can only deepen the rift with the Palestinian Authority, whose rule is now restricted to the West Bank. It could also have far-reaching implications for Israel. Israeli sources insist that Iran is strengthening its links with Hamas, and hint that the group has been receiving funding from Teheran (no evidence has been made public). The possibility of Iranian missiles finding their way into Gaza through the porous southern border with Egypt cannot be dismissed.

While re-occupation of the Gaza Strip, from which Israel unilaterally withdrew two years ago, has been ruled out by senior government figures, the Israeli response to the regular Qassam rocket attacks on civilian targets is likely to become more punishing.

Back in Gaza City, Salah Rajoub is happy enough to testify that the streets have become much safer under Hamas. 'When you see shoppers out late at night and old fellows sucking on their hookahs in the cafes, it's obvious that people are feeling more secure,' he observes. Yet what lies ahead for Rajoub and his friends is anyone's guess. 'Nobody has forgotten how Islamic mobs trashed premises where alcohol was sold and burnt down our only cinema for showing films the imams considered immoral,' he points out. Reports say that Hamas has already begun ordering dress shops to remove female mannequins and advertisements for 'immodest' lingerie from their windows, while hotels have been instructed to refuse rooms to unmarried couples, or face the consequences.

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