Tribalism and Military Elites in Palestine

introduction

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In Palestine, it is irrelevant, to a great extent, to talk about military elites because there is no army and there is no army tradition. There are security service departments, but most of them are intended to serve Israeli security rather than Palestinian security.

Influential families are hardly there in the leadership of the security service. Members of security service generally come from those who served in Fatah organization in Jordan and Lebanon at the time of the liberation approach of Yasser Arafat, or served terms in Israeli jails. At least, the leaders of security service come from these two origins. Members of influential families haven't joined Palestinian resistance and very few of them have an experience in Israeli jails.

The Israelis and the Americans have been interested in recruiting Palestinians who have experience in the resistance in Palestinian security branches such as the intelligence and preventive security so as to keep them away from what they call terrorist organizations. More than 80,000 Palestinians have joined these services and are mostly paid by the donating countries led by the United States. However, the Americans and the Israelis have always thought that the leadership should remain into the hands of individuals from influential families because they are thought to be friendly. That is why big families have a share in the political leadership that has a grip on the security leaders.

What is of relevance here is the study of whom we might call security elites are employed by political elites including Israel as a foreign party. From here the role of influential families could be discussed.

Concept Definition

What is meant here by military elites is the leaders of security services in Palestine who are supposed to care for civil security on one hand, and on the security of Israel on the other.

Methodology

The research concentrates on how Palestinian security services have been formed and how its members have been recruited. Most probably this has nothing to do with tribal military leadership. That is why field research including interviews and employment tracing is being conducted. It is hard to find written literature on the topic. The details of the subject matter, that is recruitment in the security service, are still labeled as confidential.

Hypothesis

The prime hypothesis of this research is that Palestine has no military institutions, and that security elites are actually instruments of political leadership. Influential families have an impact on these elites through politics and the accords with Israel.

Elements of the study

Since the scope of this research is very limited, the elements of the study are limited too. The following few topics are discussed:

1- the poor lead the resistance.
2- Al-Jihad Al moqaddas
3- The different eras of semi military features
4- the formation of Palestinian security service.
5- The relationship of the security service with the political leadership.
6- The presence of influential families in the political leadership.
7- The impact of influential families on security elites.

Generally, this study doesn't rest on solid grounds because of the absence of strictly military traditions in Palestine. And so many of the arguments depend on the evaluation and discretion of the writer.

Background

This research paper discusses the tribal characteristics of military elites in Palestine, or, to be specific, the tribal characteristics that over-shadow the security service in Palestine. Palestine as it is known at modern times never had a regular army, but has had resistance movements fighting against occupation, and security service departments that have been the outcome of security arrangements between the Israelis and the Palestinian Authority.

Palestine has never been an independent state, and, historically, it is part of Greater Syria that witnessed assorted historical conditions. Greater Syria was divided by Western colonialism immediately after World War I into four segments: Smaller Syria which is Syria of today, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. The Syrians didn't recognize the partition and announced their own independent kingdom in 1919. (Arab Studies Society, 43) This new kingdom founded an army which was headed by a Yousef al_Admeh who belonged to one of the Damascan (from Damascus) influential families.

(Mahafda, 89) The appointment of this general as an army leader was up to the adhered to norms at that time which meant that influential families only hold key and prominent posts in the state.

However, the French didn't like the idea of a unified Syrian state and waged a military attack against the new born unrecognized state in 1920. they destroyed the Syrian army, and kicked King Faysal out of Syria. (Mahafda, 106) He left to Iraq where the British announced him king of Iraq.

Palestine was given boundary definition, and the British started Zionizing the country (turning it to the Zionist movement). (Saleh, 36) During the British Mandate, a kind of Palestinian armed resistance developed, and an armed struggle against the British and the in-coming Jews started to rise. (Abu Basseer, 89) Palestinians understood that the British had their own plans to hand the country to the Jews and drive the inhabitants out.

The poor lead the resistance

During the British mandate, one can talk about resistance but not about an army. This Palestinian resistance was led and supported by people who come from small un-influential families who felt commitment to their own country. Resistance people generally were peasants who owned very small areas of land or were working in big farms owned by land-lords or feudalists. (Alqam, 74)

The Palestinian resistance movement during the British mandate never had a unified leadership on the national level or professional training or support from any foreign government. There were many local leaders who were enthusiastic about liberating the country from the British and saving it from the Zionist take-over. These leaders had a personal courage to do something against that owes, and had some thrust on friends and companions; but professionally, they were incapable and lacked the experience and the training. (Alloush, 142-143)

Rich influential families never participated in this resistance, and I hardly can figure out one name of these families that carried a gun and accepted the life of a resisting or revolting person. These families stayed away from the resistance, and even failed to provide the resisting people with any financial assistance. However, there is so much evidence that some Palestinian notables conspired against the Palestinian resistance and collaborated with the British.

The roots of the Palestinian resistance could be traced roughly to the efforts of a clergy man called Izzideen Al-Qassam who came from Syria. Al-Qassam participated in the Syrian resistance against the French in 1920/1921. some of his comrades were captured by the French and he could flee to Palestine where he started a kind of un-professional or primitive organization to fight the British. He established few fighting cells in Palestine and ordered a kind of military confrontation against the British in 1935. Al-Qassam was killed together with two of his colleagues, and his death instigated a kind of gun owning fever in Palestine. People thought that military confrontation against the British was the only possible method to save the country from becoming Israel. (kassem, pp 12-32)

During his life, Al-Qassam made several attempts to gain the cooperation and the support of the traditional leadership, but with no avail. Hajj Amin Al-Husseini and his unofficial council members refused to extend a hand to Al-Qassam and his cell members.

The Palestinian resistance that erupted on may 23, 1936 coincided with a general strike that started on April 19, 1936. the Palestinian people went into a general strike in protest of the British policy in Palestine which favored the Jews at the expense of the Palestinian national interests. (Kitten, pp 39-41) The strike started with a popular reaction, but was led later by Palestinian notables who come from influential families. These notables accepted the task of supervising the daily activities of the strike because it wasn't costly in terms of British revenge. (Zuaiter, p 99) It was a peaceful strike and the British didn't take harsh measures against the leaders.

In may 1936, the British arrested some strike leaders from the cities of Nablus and Tulkarm, an action that caused so much popular anger. Due to that, some Tulkarm revolutionary figures decided to carry guns and confront the British. (Al-Hoot, p 349) This was the beginning of the Palestinian resistance that lasted for three years. It was ironic that these leaders who were supported by the resistance decided to end the strike without consulting with any of the revolutionary figures. Palestinian leaders coordinated with Arab tribal leaders such as the Hashemites and the Saudis and brought the strike to an end upon British vague promises to establish justice in Palestine. (Al-Mawsooaa. P. 628) That weakened the resistance to a great extent because the general public who had faith in the political leaders thought that a solution for their political problems was forthcoming. The resistance found itself stripped from the popular support that was necessary for logistic needs.

Al-Jihad Almoqaddas

Al-Jihad Almoqaddas is the title of the then new born Palestinian army that was supposed to fight the Zionists and insure the independence of Palestine. This army was initiated by the Arab league that was established in 1945. The seven independent Arab states at that time decided that saving Palestine from the Zionist invasion was the responsibility of all the Arabs, and decided to extend every possible help to the Palestinians so as to insure the independence of their country. (Society of Palestinian Studies, p. 94)

The Palestinians felt optimistic about the enthusiasm of the Arabs to insure the independence of Palestine, and started organizing Al-Jihad Almoqaddas army. The most noticeable in the formation of the army was that Abdul Kadder Al-husseuni, a close relative of Hajj Amin Al-husseini, was appointed the leader of the army. (Alloush, p. 160) Hajj Amin al-Husseini was the leader of the Palestinians, and Al-Husseini family was the most influential family in Palestine.

In terms of military qualifications, Abdul Kadder Al-Husseini was not the most qualified person; on the contrary, there were so many Palestinians who had the experience in military resistance against the British and the Zionists. However, these Palestinians didn't have the tribal qualifications, because they came from decent and poor families.

Around 8,000 Palestinians joined Al-Jihad Almoqaddas army, but were ill trained, ill organized and poorly equipped. The army was easily defeated in the war of 1948 by the Israeli army. Its leader was killed and its ranks dismantled.

The Jordanian and the Egyptian Eras

After the creation of Israel, Gaza Strip went under the rule of Egypt, and the West Bank became part of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Under Egypt, the Palestinians had no chance to join the Egyptian Military, and were just encouraged by the Egyptians to carry out guerrilla actions against the Israelis. The Palestinians of Gaza carried out some sporadic attacks in the fifties of the last century against Israeli targets, but they didn't have well organized resistance or a semi-military organization.

Within the Hashemite Kingdom, the Palestinians had the right to join the Jordanian army. So many Palestinians became military officers, but they were subject to the Hashemite standards of military organization which was characterized by loyalty to the royal family. Personal loyalty was crucial in the Jordanian military organization, and that is why the king always depended on tribal organization as a main source of military leadership.

The Era of the PLO

The PLO was established by the Arab Summit of 1964 so as to represent the Palestinians. It didn't represent a state, or claimed to be a representative government in exile. Its main task, according to the Palestinian Pan Arab Charter, was to liberate Palestine and have the Palestinian refugees back to their homes and properties. (the Palestinian National Charter) To achieve such a task, the PLO formed the army of Palestinian Liberation.

The Palestinian Liberation Army was supposed to be a regular army that would prepare for the liberation of the lost land. A call was sent to the Palestinian everywhere so as voluntarily join the Army, and few military brigades were founded. These brigades flourished in states that were calling for the liberation of Palestine such as Syria and Iraq, but Jordan refused to host these brigades or allow for military recruitment. Only Jordan welcomed some of these brigades when the PLO decided to go for peace talks with Israel.

The Palestinian Liberation Army was an army of volunteers that never emerged into a real regular army. Voluntary armies are generally the haven of poverty stricken poor people who can hardly find jobs. That is why influential Palestinian families failed to join this army. It is true that the head of the PLO, Ahmed Shukeiri, belonged to an influential family, but he never tried to make the PLO a place of traditional family influences, and most probably he would have failed if he had to try. Influential families would like to be on the top of the leadership, but they don't like to be on the front line facing the enemy.

The Palestinian Liberation Army participated in the 1967 war between the Arabs and the Israelis on the front of Gaza. But it started to lose its importance afterwards due to the rise of the Palestinian armed resistance led by Fatah organization. Arab regular armies temporarily lost their respect and confidence due to the defeat of 1967, and that paved the way for the popular support for the armed resistance.

The Palestinian Liberation Army is still their as the army of the PLO, but it is idle, and has nothing to do outside its military camps in Jordan. Lately, the Palestinian Authority and Israel have been thinking of using this army in the West Bank and Gaza so as to fight the Palestinian resistance. It is said that this army is totally obedient to military orders, and it might be ready to act ruthlessly against Hamas and other Palestinian resisting groups. But apparently, the US decided to finance training centers for young Palestinians in Jordan because of a better chance to educate them on fighting their fellow countrymen.

The Era of Palestinian Resistance

The Era of the Palestinian Resistance overlaps with the era of the PLO because the resistance that appeared strongly after the war of 1967 between the Arabs and the Israelis took over the PLO. The traditional leadership of the PLO was defeated in 1967 together with the leaderships of Egypt, Syria and Jordan, and its statue started to dwindle. All Arabs including the Palestinians were extremely disappointed, and thought that the leaderships are responsible for the military defeat.

Defeated Arab leaders stayed in their palaces unharmed, but the Palestinian leadership was facing the challenge of the rising popular resistance led by the movement of Palestinian National Liberation (Fatah).
Fatah was founded in 1965 by Yasser Arafat and his colleagues, and started a decent military resistance against Israel. However, its influence and popular support increased dramatically after the defeat of 1967 because it appeared to be promising, and its actions were very appealing for ordinary people. Fatah appeared to be the movement of the people who were very eager to join the organization and fight the Israelis. That is why the leadership of the PLO lost the justification of staying atop and resigned.

The new leader ship of the people originated mostly from refugee camps or from farming backgrounds. Those enthusiastic people who founded the resistance and became the leaders of the PLO were not interested at the time in social and political status, but in liberating the homeland. Arafat himself is a descendant of a small and decent Gazan family, and his founding colleagues come also from unheralded families. They didn't have a traditional influential tribal origins. Besides, it is very hard to find people from wealthy influential families or tribes who would instigate a revolution or a resistance. History shows that revolutionary leaders come out usually from middle and poor classes.

Very few people from the influential families joined the Palestinian resistance, and the overwhelming majority of the activists in the resistance and in the PLO came from the grassroots or poor and middle class families. The influential families didn't try to join the resistance, although some of its members joined the PLO, and remained mostly friendly to Arab regimes particularly to the Jordanian regime which is a true reflection of tribal spirit in the Arab countries. Most Palestinian influential families including those of Gaza strip remained close to the Jordanian regime, and some of their figures had strong relations with the Palace.

There is so much logic in the behavior of the influential families because they had no interest in resistance. Logically and historically, resistance is in contradiction with ambitious stable social status. And it was logical that influential families, in general, hesitated so much in recognizing the PLO as the only legitimate representative of the Palestinians.

During the era of active Palestinian resistance, very few people from the influential families were arrested and imprisoned by the Israelis. Palestinian resistance records show that people of tribal influence have no place in the history of imprisonment and detention. Very few people from the influential families were jailed but not in the name of their families but in their own individual names.

The 1982 show

Influential family figures started to appear on the PLO theatre after 1982 when Israel drove the PLO leadership out of Lebanon. The Israelis waged a war against the PLO in 1982 aiming at destroying its infrastructure and getting it out of Lebanon. The PLO Leadership left Lebanon to have its headquarters in Tunisia which was the haven of the Arab League, and most PLO institutions came into a halt. It appeared at the time that Arafat, the head of the PLO, decided to go ahead toward finding a peaceful solution with Israel. He visited the Arab boycotted Egypt in 1983 and met with the Egyptian president, and held the Palestinian national Council meeting in Jordan in 1984. These two steps were very indicative of the a new developing PLO policy toward Israel and the US.

According to an interview with a notable from Nablus on 13/January/2008, With the new development, influential families started to have increasing contacts with the PLO leadership, and some of their figures became unofficial liaison officers between the PLO leadership and the Israeli leadership. But at this time the PLO started to drift away from the armed resistance. He himself, as he told me became a semi unofficial liaison officer.

In 1985, Arafat made the anti-terrorism declaration in which he renounced terrorism as an unacceptable method to regain Palestinian rights, and ordered his Fatah members to stop attacking Israeli targets. So many Fatah people disregarded his orders, but it was understood that the PLO doesn't adopt the armed struggle anymore. The influential family figures found it a very pleasant announcement that frees them completely from any hint of Israeli accusation of making contacts with a terrorist organization.

It is clear that Palestinian influential family figures were not interested in sacrificing for the liberation of their country, and decided to deal with PLO and compete for participating in its leadership only after the abandonment of the armed struggle. They were not interested in joining the resistance, or fighting the Israelis by any means.

The Era of the Palestinian Authority

The Era of the Palestinian Authority started in 1993 when the Oslo accords between the Palestinian Authority and Israel were signed. This era is characterized security wise with security cooperation between the long time fighting enemies. (article 13, 14 of Oslo Accords) The PLO pledged to fight the terrorists and to make sure that Palestinians do not carry any military attacks against the Israelis; while the Israelis recognized the PLO as a representative of the Palestinian people. (exchanged letters between Arafat an the then Israeli Prime Minister Rabin on 9/September/1993). So, what was required is the establishment of Palestinian security service that would observe the Israeli security interests, but not an army. Militarily speaking, the Palestinians were not allowed to establish an army, but only security departments that watch the activities of the Palestinians. In other words, the Palestinians were supposed to work as security agents for Israel.

Since the national security of the Palestinians wasn't the prime concern of the Israelis and the Americans who started to measure all Palestinian actions according to the security interests of the Israelis, the Palestinian Authority had to make sure that all recruits in the Palestinian security service agree to the Oslo accords and ready to implement its tenets. (Abu Amre, pp 18-19) So here, one isn't talking about a Palestinian national army, but about a special security service that serves special interests.

Members of the Palestinian security service are predominantly Fatah people (the Palestinian organization that supports the Palestinian Authority), and very few of them are affiliates of other organizations. Fatah people hold the high ranks in the security service, and act almost independently from the political ranks of the Palestinian government. Leaders of this security service have their direct contacts and coordination with the Israeli security service.

It is true that the Palestinians employed in the different security departments are around 80,000 people, but we cannot describe them as an army. These people are equipped with personal guns that are licensed by the Israelis, and do not have any kind of heavy equipment. Sometimes they receive help from the Israelis particularly when they find it difficult to imprison Palestinians. In other words, the Palestinian security service isn't an army, and depends mainly upon people supporting the accords with Israel.

Influential Palestinian families don't have a share in the Palestinian security service, and they haven't been trying to penetrate it or hold the key posts.

Although influential families have a long history in cooperating with the authorities that reigned over Palestine, they don't like to be involved directly in actions that severely undermine their reputation. Membership in the Palestinian security service isn't a respectable job, and families would rather stay away.

Palestinian families aren't far away from the security service although they are not competing for a direct role. Most Palestinian influential families that have strong ties with the political level have an influence on the security service and make sure that their interests are well served. In other words, they use the security departments so as to enhance their economic and political interests.

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