

Danger from Hamas

by Michael Curtis



On August 30, 2017 UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres visited the Gaza Strip and expressed the need for humanitarian aid to the area. He did not point out that about three quarters of the Gaza population is dependent on international aid, and that UNRWA classifies that proportion of that population as “refugees,” 70 years after Arab armies invaded the newly created State of Israel and caused the refugee problem.

Appropriately, Gutteras met with Israeli and Palestinian leaders to urge resumption of peace talks, but it was meaningful he did not meet with officials of the Hamas organization in Gaza. He must have been aware of the difficulty of the resumption for at least two reasons. One was that he was aware of the unending belligerence of Hamas after his visit to a tunnel it had dug into Israel. Hamas has been using humanitarian aid to build the tunnels that it regards as a strategic weapon for fighting and defeating

Israel, to liberate al-Aqsa and the holy places.

The other factor were statements made by Yahya Sinwar, the hardline terrorist, who was elected in February 2017 as head of the Hamas organization in Gaza, and Ismail Haniyeh chosen on May 6, 2017 as the new head of the Hamas political bureau, in essence the head of the whole organization.

Haniyeh has been an extreme proponent of jihad and terrorism, of the need to liberate all of "Palestine," and of refusal to recognize the State of Israel. He views jihad as a religious duty and armed resistance as a Palestinian right. Palestine will be liberated from "the river to the sea." He explained that tunnels were a strategic weapon, and that Hamas had constructed twice as many tunnels as there were in Vietnam.

Haniyeh's animosity is not confined to Israel; he expresses opposition to America's "policy of oppression." In response to the killing of Osama bin Laden "a Muslim Mujahid," he hoped that Allah would declare war on the U.S.

The 55 year old Sinwar had been a prisoner for more than two decades in an Israeli prison for organizing the kidnapping and killing of two Israeli soldiers. He was one of the 1047 Palestinian prisoners released by Israel in 2011 in exchange for Gilad Schalit the Israeli soldier kidnapped in 2006. In 2015 Sinwar was added to the U.S. terrorism blacklist.

Sinwar who lives in Gaza replaced Ismail Haniyeh who lives in exile in Qatar, in the rather confusing organizational structure of Hamas which has four constituencies: activists in Gaza, those in the West Bank, those in exile, and those imprisoned by Israel. Each unit chooses its own local leaders as well as delegates to the Hamas Shura Council. Founded in 1987, as an Islamic offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, during the first Intifada, Hamas had a dual purpose: social welfare and armed struggle against Israel.

A third function was added when the group in 2006 gained

representation in the Palestinian Legislative Council, and then after considerable friction with Fatah, took control and governed the Gaza Strip in 2007. But there has always been a struggle between the armed and the political wings of the group, and between those who live in Gaza and those who do not.

From the start, Hamas has been involved in countless terrorist attacks on Israel, and in three wars with Israel, the latest in July 2014 when it lost 2189 people. The Hamas military wing was put on the EU terrorist blacklist in December 2001; the political wing was blacklisted in 2003. After a lower European court in December 2016 annulled this on procedural grounds the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg ruled in July 2017 that Hamas should remain on the terrorism blacklist. Other countries, including Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council have also called it a terrorist group.

Sinwar has a reputation as a tough individual, advocating action. He ordered the execution of a political rival. His first job on joining Hamas was to help found a security organization whose goal was to identify Palestinian collaborators working for Israel. At a press conference on August 28, 2017 Sinwar spoke of his policy and made strong statements, some of which were a challenge to the Gulf states and the U.S.. He said he was not interested in war with Israel and did not want a war, but Hamas was building its power, did not fear war, and was fully ready for it. He still advocates kidnapping of Israelis as a bargaining chip for Palestinian Prisoners. He demands Israel free 54 Palestinian prisoners released in the Schalit swap who were rearrested by Israel.

Sinwar boasted that relations with Iran were excellent, and that Iran was the largest supporter, financially and militarily, of the armed wing of Hamas, the Izz el-Deen al-Qassam Brigades. Their aid helped in the making and supply of missiles, rebuilding of tunnels destroyed by Israel, and the training of scuba divers. The paradox is that Shia Iran is

sponsor of Hamas which is part of the Sunni Muslim brotherhood. This is easier now that the Sunni countries, Saudi Arabia and Egypt are hostile to Iran.

For some years relations with Iran had cooled because Hamas did not support Syrian President Assad, and Iran reduced its aid. But Iran changed its position.

Sinwar said relations Egypt have improved drastically, and the two sides have begun to create a buffer zone along their southern Rafah border on tighten security. Egypt has been increasing the power supply to Gaza. Ironically this arrangement has been helped by Mohammed Dahlan, former Fatah leader in Gaza.

Relations between Hamas and Fatah are in flux. PA President Abbas stopped paying Gaza energy bills. In an unusual move, Abbas has been using Turkish President Erdogan as an intermediary, proposing Fatah-Hamas unity and a national unity government. Abbas formulated a 7 point plan, paying Gaza employees of the PA, allowing electricity and medicine to go to Gaza, and suggesting new elections. Whatever the outcome neither group has suggested a peace arrangement with Israel.

Curiously. Hamas on May 1, 2017 issued a political document which purports to be more politically flexible. It does express support for a Palestinian a state in temporary borders in pre-1967 lines with Jerusalem as its capital. But the armed struggle to destroy Israel continues; it argues that the establishment of Israel is entirely illegitimate and that Zionism is an enemy of humanity. It does however say that the struggle against the Jews is not because they are Jewish, but because they are Zionists.

If UN Secretary-General Guterres believes this, he might also consider buying a bridge in Brooklyn that is for sale.