

The waBenzi of the West Bank and Gaza

by Hugh Fitzgerald



In southern Africa, the black Africans have a sardonic name for their corrupt leaders. They call them the “waBenzi” – the “People of the Mercedes-Benz” –who drive their luxury vehicles up and down the handful of paved roads in the countries they rule over, the countries from whose treasuries they help themselves to the money they need to pay for their African palaces, their Riviera villas, and of course, for those Mercedes-Benzenes that give them their names.

But there is another tribe of the waBenzi who have outdone any African leader in the scale of their corruption. These are the leaders of Hamas and the Palestine Authority, and before them,

that past master of corruption, the PLO's head Yasser Arafat. At Arafat's death, he left a fortune estimated at between one and three billion dollars; the Israelis think he may have been down to his last billion but no one is sure, and no one knows what happened to any of it, save for that handful of Palestinians close to Arafat who managed to help themselves to whatever they could get their hands on. His long-time financial advisor, Mohamed Rashid, quit his employ in 2003, but has been a continuous source of information about various secret bank accounts held by Arafat. What is certain is that no matter what money may have been recovered, it is not going to the people but, rather, to the well-connected in the Palestinian hierarchy. The higher up you are, the more money you are allowed to steal.

Mahmoud Abbas has not been quite as successful in accumulating wealth as was Arafat, but give him time: he's only been in office, as head of the PLO, since 2004, and as head of the Palestine Authority since 2005. That has given him only 14 years to help himself to money, while Arafat was head of the PLO for several decades. With his two sons Tarek and Yasser, Mahmoud Abbas has managed to amass a business empire that, as of two years ago, was reported to be worth \$400 million; it must have gone up in value since. One wonders what would happen if the Palestinians were fully cognizant of how much money that was meant for them— aid money from the U.S., E.U., and Arab countries — has been siphoned off, first by Arafat and then by his successor Mahmoud Abbas.

Then there is Hamas, whose leaders deserve some kind of prize for the sheer size of their defalcations. Mousa Abu Marzouk, once the No. 2 in Hamas, and a fund-raiser, diverted to himself large amounts of what he raised; his personal fortune is said to be between two and three billion dollars. According to Col. (res.) Dr. Moshe Elad, a lecturer in the Middle East Department of the Western Galilee Academic College, [here is how](#) the Hamas bonanza happened:

“The vast majority of Hamas founders and leaders were refugees or second generation refugees, and some of them were the product of marriages between Egyptians and Palestinians. They had no money at all. When they and Hamas were just starting out, the organization (not in its own name) was nurtured by the Israeli military government, which fostered the Islamic associations working in the Gaza Strip as a counterweight to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Their phenomenal wealth started accumulating when they decided to disassociate themselves from Israel and search for alternative financing sources.”

“Elad explains that the money came from two directions: “Legacies from the deceased; money from charity funds; a donation called zaka, one of the six pillars of Islam; and donations from various countries. It started with Syria and Saudi Arabia, with Iran added later and becoming one of Hamas’s biggest supporters, and ended with Qatar, which has now taken Iran’s place.”

“Together with the donations from various countries, fundraisers began operating in the US to collect money for Hamas. Here, the Hamas leaders began to get their hands on some really big money. ‘One of those fundraisers was Dr. Musa Abu Marzook, the number 2 man in Hamas,’ Elad says. ‘At the beginning of the 1990s, he began a fundraising campaign in the US among wealthy Muslims, while at the same time founding several banking enterprises. He himself became a conglomerate of 10 financial enterprises giving loans and making financial investments. He’s an amazing financier.’”

“The US administration ordered Marzook’s arrest in 1995 on charges of supporting terrorism. After he spent two years in a US prison, it was decided to expel him without trial. He kept the money. ‘When he was expelled from the US in 1997, he was already worth several million dollars,’ Elad says, adding, ‘Somehow he evaded the clutches of the US Internal Revenue Service and was not charged with financing terrorism.

People in the know say he probably became connected to the administration and cooperated with it. There is no proof, but it's hard to think of any other reason why he escaped punishment for such serious offenses. In 2001, in the investigation of the September 11 events, it turned out that he had extensive financial connections with Al Qaeda, including the transfer of funds to the 21 Al Qaeda operatives accused of the attacks.'"

Today, Marzook is considered one of Hamas's wealthiest billionaires. 'Arab sources estimate his wealth at \$2-3 billion,' Elad says."

"Even better off is Khaled Meshaal, whose worth is estimated at between \$2.5 and \$5 billion dollars. "Estimates around the world are that Mashaal is currently worth \$2.6 billion, but the numbers mentioned by the Arab commentators (based on their many sources) are much higher, varying from \$2-5 billion invested in Egyptian and Persian Gulf banks, and some in real estate projects in the Persian Gulf countries," Elad adds."

"The next tycoon on the list is Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh. "He is a scion of a family from the Al-Shati refugee camp, and his capital is estimated at \$4 million," Elad says, adding, "He registered most of his assets in the Gaza Strip in the name of his son-in-law, Nabil, and in the name of a dozen of his sons and daughters and a few less well known Hamas leaders. They all have homes in good neighborhoods in the Gaza Strip, where the value of every home is at least \$1 million.'" [As of 2019, other sources give Haniyeh's net worth as \$10 million]

"Another wealthy Hamas official – Iman Haha – is not on the organization's highest levels, but he, too, (and other junior managers) is feeding from the trough. According to Elad, 'He was a poor rebellious kid from the al-Borg refugee camp, but he recently built a home in central Gaza worth at least \$1

million. He's responsible for coordination between overseas Hamas and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and he's not even a leading figure, but he's already among the millionaires.'"

"The Asharq Al-Awsat (Middle East) newspaper, one of the most prestigious in the Arab world, recently reported that at least 600 millionaires were living in the Gaza Strip – the same people sitting on the money pipelines there.

But it's not only their cut of the aid money that fills the pockets of Palestinian *waBenzi*.

No, it's not just aid money that they steal. The Palestinian *waBenzi* have a finger in every pie.

Hamas leaders control the tunnels from Gaza to Egypt (and to a lesser extent, from Gaza to Israel), and treat them as their private property, [charging exorbitantly for their use](#).

"Elad [the Israeli scholar who has studied the Hamas millionaires] describes how the system [of controlling tunnels] worked and to how much money (huge amounts) Hamas leaders were exposed: "Senior Hamas leaders charged a 25% 'tax' and \$2,000 on every disassembled vehicle coming through the tunnels. There are hundreds of smuggling tunnels from Egypt to Gaza, and these are the types of tunnel Israel has been less busy in destroying, because Egypt has destroyed many of them. From June 2007 until 2010, \$800 million in cash was transferred in tunnel deals (according to information from Hamas money traders). Hamas also taxes Gaza merchants on everything traded, from boxes of vegetables to luxury cars, and the leaders scoop the money into their pockets."

"Another source of wealth for Hamas leaders was taking over land. "They took over land mainly near the sea in good areas, such as the former Gush Katif, then sold it. In effect, they are the cat guarding the cream – the land – so they were able to take over land and loot it for themselves," Elad explains.

“In addition, there is a system in the Gaza Strip of fictitious recruitment of workers for Hamas for the purpose of obtaining pay slips from people overseas paying for it. “They get the payments from overseas according to the workers’ names. It has recently been discovered that there are hundreds of fictitious names of soldiers and officials supposedly in Hamas. Actually, the leaders and officials put the money in their own pockets,” Elad asserts.

“According to various sources, some of Mashaal’s money came from the “Syrian fund.” Elad explains: “According to these accusations, following an investigation by the US federal authorities, Mashaal was accused of embezzling the entire Syrian fund. There was a separate fund in Syria for Hamas; Mashaal controlled all the movements in the fund when he lived there. As soon as he left Damascus, he took the Syrian fund, which was worth several billion dollars, and distributed it to himself and others. It is believed that Hamas had \$1.5-2.5 billion in assets in Syria, which Mashaal took.”

“In summary, Elad says, “This is corruption at the highest level... What has united the Palestinian leaders all throughout the years is the saying, ‘We have to get rich quick.’ This is how the regime sees it. Their leaders have no shame. Shortly after they got power, they took control of fuel, communications, and any other profitable sectors in the country. There are get-rich-quick schemes and corruption in Western society, too, but there it’s done sophisticatedly with envelopes of money and complex structures of bribery and the like. Among the Palestinians, they tell you straight out, ‘I want to get rich.’”

These are the waBenzi of Palestine. There was Arafat, who died having helped himself to three billion dollars of PLO funds, most of which were never recovered. The Israelis believe that at his death he was down to his last billion, but don’t know

where the other two billion ended up. There was Arafat's financial adviser Mohammad Rashid, who has admitted to taking several hundred million dollars from Palestinian funds; there was Arafat's widow Suha, who lives in Paris and whom the Palestinian leadership prevented from making off with more than few tens of millions, far less than she had been expecting to grab at Arafat's death. After the Age of Arafat, the reigning crook was Mahmoud Abbas, who with his sons Tarek and Yasser amassed a \$400 million fortune. No doubt they are now busy adding to it from the \$100 million monthly that Arab states pledged this April to supply to the Palestine Authority, and even more from the \$480 pledged to the PA by Qatar in early May. Mahmoud Abbas will take his cut, as will his cronies at the Mikata in Ramalla. It will be fascinating to see just how much of that \$1.68 billion in new aid for the next year actually is received by its intended recipients, and how much Abbas, his sons, and a dozen of his closest collaborators manage to take as their cut from this latest Arab grants.

Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah, has also done well for himself, with a personal fortune of \$250 million dollars. Iran has had to cut its payments to Hezbollah, because of the effectiveness of the American sanctions regime, and the administration has now decided to go after financial supporters of Hezbollah outside of Lebanon, chiefly Hezbollah operatives involved in the cocaine trade in South America and Europe. So far Nasrallah has not been affected; the drug money has not yet been interrupted, much less ended; he's holding on tight to that quarter-of-a-million dollars he appropriated from Iranian aid and from drug-trade donations to Hezbollah.

And finally, the two Hamas leaders, Mousa Abu Marzook and Khaled Meshaal each of whom has a fortune of at least two billion dollars, with Arab sources suggesting that Meshaal alone may have taken up to \$5 billion.

Neither of them wishes to live in wretched Gaza, of course.

Marzook lives in New Cairo, Egypt and Meshaal lives in Doha, Qatar. They want to live well, which means far from the prying eyes of Gazans, who might become resentful, possibly even violent, at the sight of so much wealth in the hands of their former leaders.

The Palestinian waBenzi need to have their private worth constantly investigated, with amounts updated, and their wealth endlessly discussed in the Western media, ideally to be picked up by the Arab press. The donor nations, especially in Europe, deserve to know where so much of their aid money to the Palestinians has gone, from the days of Arafat until today. More than \$10 billion given as aid ended up in the private coffers of fewer than ten Palestinians: Arafat, Mohamad Rashid (who is in fact a Kurd), Mahmoud, Tarek, and Yasser Abbas, Hassan Nasrallah, Mousa Abu Marzouk, Khaled Meshaal. And let's not forget the lesser crooks, mere millionaires, such as the current Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, who appears to have about ten million dollars, or the 600 "Hamas millionaires" living in Gaza, whose money comes from the aid given by donor nations, and from the amounts they charge for use of their smuggling tunnels from Egypt into Gaza.

Perhaps this information will make European donors less enthusiastic about supplying aid to the "Palestinians," whether in Gaza or the West Bank. And certainly, if the "Palestinians" themselves were to grasp the full extent of what has been stolen from them, their resentment might turn them against those leaders, who listen only to the inner voice that tells them, as so many waBenzi before them have been told, *Enrichissez-vous!*

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