

Hamas to Show an Improved Hand

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Organization Aims to Capitalize On Intelligence Gains From Gaza Takeover

CAM SIMPSON in Jerusalem and NEIL KING JR. in Washington

When the Islamist group Hamas conquered the Gaza Strip in June it seized an intelligence-and-military infrastructure created with U.S. help by the security chiefs of the Palestinian territory's former ruler.

According to current and former Israeli intelligence officials, former U.S. intelligence personnel and Palestinian officials, Hamas has increased its inventory of arms since the takeover of Gaza and picked up technical expertise -- such as espionage techniques -- that could assist the group in its fight against Israel or Washington's Palestinian allies, the Fatah movement founded by Yasser Arafat.

Hamas leaders say they acquired thousands of paper files, computer records, videos, photographs and audio recordings containing valuable and potentially embarrassing intelligence information gathered by Fatah. For more than a decade, Fatah operated a vast intelligence network in Gaza established under the tutelage of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The exact nature of the threat posed by the intelligence grab in Gaza -- including any damage to U.S. intelligence operations in the Palestinian territories and the broader Middle East -- is difficult to ascertain. U.S. and Israeli officials generally tried to play down any losses, saying any intelligence damage is likely minimal.

But a number of former U.S. intelligence officials, including some who have worked closely with the Palestinians, said there was ample reason to worry that Hamas has acquired access to important spying technology as well as intelligence information that could be helpful to Hamas in countering Israeli and U.S. efforts against the group.

"People are worried, and reasonably so, about what kind of intelligence losses we may have suffered," said one former U.S. intelligence official with extensive experience in Gaza.

A U.S. government official said he doubted serious secrets were compromised in the Gaza takeover. Other officials said they had no reason to believe that U.S. spying operations elsewhere in the Arab world had been compromised.

Close ties between Hamas and the governments of Iran and Syria also mean that intelligence-and-spying techniques could be shared with the main Middle East rivals of the Bush administration. As the White House prepares to lead an international effort to bolster Fatah's security apparatus in the West Bank, the losses in Gaza

stand as an example of how efforts to help Fatah can backfire.

The compromised intelligence Hamas says it now has ranges widely. The group alleges it has videos used in a sexual-blackmail operation run by Washington's allies inside Fatah's security apparatus. But the group also says it has uncovered detailed evidence of Fatah-controlled spying operations carried out in Arab and Muslim countries for the benefit of the U.S. and other foreign governments. Hamas also alleges that Fatah intelligence operatives cooperated with Israeli intelligence officials to target Islamist leaders for assassination.

"What we have is good enough for us to completely reveal the practices [of Fatah-controlled security services], both locally and throughout the region," said Khalil al Hayya, a senior Hamas official in Gaza, who has assumed a leading role on the intelligence issue for the Islamist group.

Michael Scheuer, a former top CIA counterterrorism analyst who left the agency in 2004, said the U.S. had provided the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority with "substantial help" in training as well as computers, other equipment and analytical tools. Other former intelligence officials confirmed that the U.S. gave Fatah-controlled services sophisticated intelligence-gathering equipment, including eavesdropping technology, though these officials wouldn't provide more precise details about the technology.

This kind of technology, along with the knowledge it yields, is broadly known in intelligence circles as "Sigint," which is shorthand for "signals intelligence." It can include eavesdropping equipment, devices used for intercepting radio, microwave and telephone communications and telemetry technology that allows the user to pinpoint the location of someone holding a communication device, such as a cellphone.

"The United States invested a lot of effort in setting up this system in Gaza -- construction, equipment, training... filings, the logistics, the transportation. It was a big operation, and it's now in the hands of the other side," said Efraim Halevy, who formerly headed both the Mossad, which is Israel's foreign-intelligence agency, and Israel's National Security Council. Mr. Halevy said, however, that he didn't want to overemphasize the value of Hamas's potential intelligence gains.

Avi Dichter, Israel's public-security minister and the former head of Shin Bet, the domestic intelligence-and-counterterrorism agency, also said he didn't want to overemphasize the potential benefits to Hamas. But he confirmed that the Islamist group seized Sigint technology and expertise during its Gaza sweep. He declined to provide specifics, but said it had been provided by the Americans, the British and the French.

Mr. Dichter, who left the Shin Bet when his five-year term as its chief ended in 2005, also said the potential damage goes beyond Hamas's ability to turn the technology

against its enemies. Now, he said, the militants could gain an understanding of how such technology is used against them, allowing them to adopt more sophisticated counter measures.

"It's not only the tools. It's also the philosophy that's behind them," he said.

Hamas leaders are being vague about the equipment and technological know-how they captured. Mr. Hayya said some important former Fatah operatives in Gaza, all of whom were granted amnesty after Hamas took over, were now cooperating with the group on intelligence matters.

Easier to assess is the threat posed by the military hardware Hamas picked up after the takeover. The militant group seized an arsenal of arms and munitions captured from U.S.-backed security forces loyal to Fatah and its leader, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

Mr. Dichter said Hamas gained roughly the same number of weapons during a few days that it would have taken the group nearly a year to amass from smuggling operations.

Hamas says it is using the armaments to build a popular army in Gaza. Israeli intelligence and security officials estimate the Islamist group has some 13,000 armed men in Gaza.

As for Fatah's secrets, Hamas leaders say they grabbed intelligence stashes from three locations: the headquarters in Gaza City of the Preventive Security Force; the Palestinian Authority intelligence headquarters, which were housed in a Gaza City office known as "Il Safina," or "the ship"; and a nearby satellite-intelligence office dubbed, "Il Mashtal," or "the nursery."

As Hamas fighters moved in during their June sweep across Gaza, Fatah officials burned some papers and stripped data from computers. But the Hamas conquest was so quick that significant caches remained for the taking, according to the militant group.

All three sites were long under the sway of Fatah strongman Mohammed Dahlan, who first became an important CIA ally in Gaza in 1996. At the time, then-CIA director George Tenet began working openly with Mr. Dahlan and other Palestinian officials to build up security services aimed at combating the rise of Hamas and like-minded extremist groups that rejected the Oslo peace accords.

Through a spokesman, Mr. Tenet declined to comment on the CIA-Fatah cooperation, his relationship with Mr. Dahlan or Hamas's gains. Mr. Dahlan on Thursday formally resigned his Palestinian Authority post. Mr. Dahlan hasn't commented publicly since resigning and he couldn't be located for comment. Associates in the West Bank said he was abroad.

Mr. Hayya, the senior Hamas leader, said hundreds of the group's Hamas's operatives have been culling through and analyzing the intelligence troves since their seizure, with specialists in security, forensic accounting and administration conducting detailed assessments. Significant portions of these assessments are close to completion, Mr. Hayya said.

Some of the most potentially explosive claims from Hamas center on the alleged activities beyond the Gaza Strip of Palestinian agents loyal to Fatah. Mr. Hayya alleged the CIA utilized Palestinian agents for covert intelligence operations in other Middle Eastern countries. Hamas, he said, now possesses a roadmap detailing the names and actions of "those men whom thought were going to continue to be their hand across the region."

Some former U.S. intelligence officials who worked closely with the Palestinian Authority confirmed that such overseas spying arrangements beyond Gaza existed with the Palestinians in the past and said they likely continued, bolstering the credibility of Hamas's claims.

Whitley Bruner, a longtime CIA officer in the Middle East, recalled that "some of our first really good information on [Osama] bin Laden in Sudan" in the early 1990s "came from Palestinian sources." Before leaving the agency in 1997, Mr. Bruner participated in many of the first cooperative sessions organized by Mr. Tenet between the CIA and the Palestinians.

"It's not unlikely that continued to do things for the U.S. well beyond the territories," Mr. Bruner said. "Palestinians are embedded all over the place, so they have access to things that the U.S. doesn't."

Others are more circumspect. Bruce Reidel, who worked for nearly 30 years as a U.S. Middle East specialist, both as a CIA intelligence officer and as an adviser to Presidents Clinton and Bush, said there is sure to be "quite a treasure trove of materials that would document relationship with the CIA." Mr. Reidel said during his time in government, which ended in 2005, "the Palestinians were always trying to prove that they had unique access and information," but he said he was skeptical of Hamas's claims that such operations ventured far beyond Gaza and the West Bank.

Mr. Hayya alleges that while many officials from Arab and Muslim nations knew Mr. Dahlan was cooperating with U.S. intelligence agencies inside the Palestinian territories, many of those same leaders "are going to be amazed and surprised when they discover had actually worked against them for the Americans." He wouldn't directly answer a question about which nations were allegedly being spied on, but he said Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates had the most to be concerned about from potential disclosures.

Jabril Rajoub, a Fatah rival to Mr. Dahlan who was long his West Bank counterpart and most recently served as Mr. Abbas's national security adviser, said he was

aware of the alleged outlines of these operations, though he said he was unaware of their details. He called the Gaza-based network a "for-hire" intelligence operation, adding that it was active around the Middle East and provided information to the Americans, the British and others.

Mr. Hayya also said there is a substantial amount of evidence detailing cooperation between Fatah and Israel. There is evidence several militant leaders were targeted as a result of such cooperation, he alleged. This includes circumstantial evidence that he was personally targeted in an Israeli assassination attempt after he was fingered by Fatah intelligence officers as a top security threat.

After taking over Gaza, Mr. Hayya said Hamas recovered notes from a meeting of senior Palestinian Authority intelligence officials in which they discussed Mr. Hayya's value to the Islamist group. On May 20, less than a week after the meeting, an Israeli missile was fired into his home, killing eight people. Mr. Hayya was en route at the time, but says the strike came about five minutes after his 35-year-old cousin, Ibrahim, entered the home. The Hamas leader said he and his cousin look very similar.

"They thought it was me," he said.

A spokeswoman for the Shin Bet declined to comment.

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