

Gaza's armed groups gear up for next fight with Israel

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MEE meets fighters training for the next conflict as unending siege reinforces continued armed resistance



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Friday 20 March 2015 23:04 GMT

Last update:

Tuesday 24 March 2015 0:21 GMT

GAZA STRIP - On an unusually hot afternoon in early February, the sun beat down as pickup trucks full of armed fighters pulled up to Gaza City's al-Azhar Square, where a small group of journalists had assembled to hear a joint speech about the latest challenge facing armed groups in the narrow coastal enclave. Dozens of masked men carrying Kalashnikovs poured out of the truck beds and gathered in front of the microphone as reporters fought their way to the front.

Spokespersons from the armed wings of the four largest political parties in the besieged Gaza Strip - Hamas's al-Qassam Brigades, Islamic Jihad's Saraya al-Quds, Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine's Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades - stood together with their weapons raised.

Abu Hathifa, a spokesperson for the coalition of fighters, [read off a statement denouncing](#) an Egyptian court's recent classification of the al-Qassam Brigades as a terrorist organisation. "This decision is a gift to Israel and benefits the Palestinian people's enemies," Hathifa, a spokesperson for the al-Qassam Brigades, told the crowd. "The resistance and al-Qassam are focusing on their work and struggle against the Zionist enemy."

"Whoever accepts and supports the Palestinian resistance will be immortalised in history and the next generation will remember their noble position," Hatifha concluded.

During the blazing hot summer months of July and August, Israel launched Operation Protective Edge - its third major military offensive in Gaza since the bloody Operation Cast Lead (December 2008- January 2009). Israeli armed forces attacked Palestinians across the narrow coastal enclave from land, air and sea. Palestinian armed groups fired rockets into southern and central Israel and launched cross-border

raids against Israeli military positions near the boundary line between Gaza and Negev (Naqab) region of Israel.

The latest war, however, was the costliest yet. By the time Israel and Palestinian resistance factions reached a ceasefire in late August, unprecedented destruction had been inflicted across the strip. Home to 1.8 million Palestinians and one of the most densely populated places on earth, the Gaza Strip also witnessed the demolition of homes, mosques, schools and other civilian infrastructure.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [estimates](#) that 2,257 Palestinians were killed, [including at least 1,563 civilians](#). Some 100,000 people are still displaced; they are now living in schools, temporary shelters or with host families across Gaza, which has been under tight Israeli siege since 2007. Israel, on the other hand, suffered 71 fatalities - 66 soldiers and five civilians.

Most recently, on 20 December, the Israeli army [bombed a Hamas military site](#) in Khan Younis after a Palestinian rocket landed in an empty field in southern Israel earlier that day. There were no reported casualties.

Wearing a red-and-white checkered *kufiyyeh*, a spokesperson for the al-Nasser Salah al-Din (The Victory of Salah al-Din) Brigades took a seat at a beachside café in Gaza City. Going by the military *nom de guerre* Abu Sayyaf, the thin and thickly bearded fighter lit a Marlboro Red and sipped a black coffee as he assessed the brigades' losses during the 51-day exchange with Israel.

Al-Nasser Salah al-Din Brigades are the armed wing of the Gaza-based Popular Resistance Committees and have an estimated 3,000 fighters. Saraya al-Quds, on the other hand, commands an estimated 5,000 fighters and al-Qassam boasts of 10,000.

Enjoying limited support from both Iran and the Lebanese organisation Hezbollah, the al-Nasser Salah al-Din Brigades has been one of the most active groups carrying out bombing attacks and firing rockets into Israel since the Second Palestinian Intifada (2000-2005). The Brigades has also built and used tunnels from Gaza into Israel and the Egyptian Sinai, and [takes credit for assassinating](#) Fatah politician Mousa Arafat, the cousin of late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, "because he killed people, ordered assaults on fighters and he had a big file of corruption".

'Lessons learned'

Abu Sayyaf, a 34-year-old carpenter by day and father of two infants, used to be a high-ranking member of Hamas's al-Qassam Brigades before cofounding the independent al-Nasser Salah al-Din Brigades eight years ago. Today he is a member of the group's central decision-making committee. "During the last war Israel struck all of our weapons manufacturing factories in Gaza," he told Middle East Eye, "but we have already rebuilt everything and are back to building rockets and manufacturing [other] weapons. In terms of fighting, we learned many new lessons during the last war."

"We learned how to fight differently," he said, claiming that armed groups lost fewer fighters in the 2014 war than the two previous Israeli military offensives in Gaza.

“With that said, we suffered human losses, but not [significant] monetary loss. When someone goes to war, they know that they are going to die; they go to fight while knowing that they are losing. It is an exception if he comes back alive.”

According to Abu Sayyaf, armed groups learned that tunnels “are the most effective way” of fighting Israel. “And we have learned how to build more effective rockets that reach further distances. We can hit Haifa,” he said, referring to a city on central Israel’s coastline. “We were the ones launching offensives many times during this war and we will continue to do this in the future. We cannot just wait for Israel to attack us.”

When asked whether he saw armed struggle as being at odds with the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority’s recent UN statehood bid and its recent application to the International Criminal Court, Abu Sayyaf argued that armed resistance should complement diplomacy. “We are not against diplomacy and negotiations - we are a military arm that fights and resists the occupation. But Abu Mazen (PA President Mahmoud Abbas) shouldn’t go to negotiate without mentioning us as a legitimate resistance force in Gaza. We know that what is taken from us by force can only be regained by force.”

With that said, would the Popular Resistance Committee accept a two-state solution if it were offered to them tomorrow? “Never,” Abu Sayyaf responded quickly. “We cannot accept that. We support negotiations only if they do not translate into us compromising our rights.”

The following morning, a private car carried Abu Sayyaf through Gaza City and eventually arrived at an olive orchard. Eight masked men, members of al-Nasser Salah al-Din Brigades, put down their rifles and Kalashnikovs and prayed amid the olive trees. “We don’t have much time,” Abu Sayyaf said, pointing to the Israeli drones buzzing in the sky above.

The fighters practiced a variety of military formations, creeping through the field with weapons ready and raised. Others showed samples of the al-Nasser Salah al-Din’s rocket arsenal. “This one can hit Haifa or Jerusalem,” Abu Sayyaf said, putting his hand atop one of the explosives. Glancing back at the Israeli drones overhead, he said, “We’ve only got about two minutes to get out of here. It’s too dangerous.”

‘Expecting another war’

Although various Islamist fighters, from groups affiliated with Hamas to those affiliated with Islamic Jihad, enjoy the broadest local support, they by no means have a monopoly on armed activity in Gaza. In the West Bank, the secular Fatah movement controls the Palestinian Authority, but its Gaza-based military wing, the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, participates in armed activities and fought with other factions during the last three wars in 2008-09, November 2012 and the summer of 2014.

Among the secular groups is the National Resistance Brigades, the armed wing of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). Formed after breaking away from the PFLP in 1969, it has been active in armed struggle against Israel’s

occupation of the Palestinian territories since its inception. The last war was no exception.

A taxi weaved through favela-like slums in eastern Gaza City, entered an industrial area and pulled into a field behind a steel factory. Wearing red headbands on their heads and Kalashnikovs strapped over their shoulders, a dozen men in military attire prepared for drills.

Abu Khaled, leader of the National Resistance Brigades, spoke to Middle East Eye as his troops carried out military exercises behind him. “We are also expecting another war soon,” he said.

“The Israeli occupation military lost the last war,” he claimed, explaining that Israel was “unable to successfully enter Gaza on foot and, as an organised military, couldn’t beat small militias - they lost terribly.”

“We learned a lot from the last three wars,” Abu Khaled continued. “Israel destroyed everything in the last war. The resistance lost many high-ranking leaders, yet the blood of these martyrs is what keeps us going. We are back to training and have completely rebuilt our bases.” The leader also said that Israel’s targeting of civilian infrastructure created the conditions for the National Resistance Brigades to recruit new fighters. “It’s not the resistance that is suffering; it’s the people of Gaza who know real suffering.”

When asked about the Palestinian Authority’s diplomatic flurry to gain international recognition of a Palestinian state in occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the besieged Gaza Strip, Abu Khaled crouched on his haunches in the field and paused before answering. He calmly raised an accusative index finger as he echoed Abu Sayyaf’s comments from the day before.

“Mahmoud Abbas is supposed to represent us as our president, yet we will never give up fighting and armed resistance. We accept the preliminary offer of getting back the territories occupied [by Israel] in 1967, but we cannot put down our weapons until we get back what was taken from us in 1948,” he said, referring to present-day Israel.

Behind him, his men took a break and sat cross-legged on the earth in a circle. One of the fighters hung his Kalashnikov on the branch of an olive tree as they conversed in low voices. “Politics do not succeed without guns behind them,” Abu Khaled said. “Going to the ICC and the UN are good because they expose Israel’s aggression and crimes to the world, but it isn’t enough.”

New challenges

Despite the armed groups’ claims to success, conditions could hardly be worse in Gaza. With Israel’s suffocating siege still intact, a [mere five percent of the \\$5.4bn pledged](#) for Gaza’s reconstruction has been delivered. In addition to the problems caused by minimal construction supplies being allowed into the blockaded strip, the humanitarian crisis was further exacerbated by UN-administered housing repairs being halted in late January when UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestine refugees,

[announced that only \\$135mn of \\$720mn](#) for refugees' home repairs had been distributed.

Alongside the failure of the international community to make good on its promises to rebuild Gaza, the eight-year Israeli-Egyptian siege has created a fertile socio-political landscape for more conflict. Sharif Nashashibi, a London-based journalist and analyst of Arab political affairs, explained that as long as the blockade remains in place, "there will be resistance".

The ongoing blockade limits Gaza's access to building supplies, medicine, food and other necessities, Nashashibi explained. "If Gazans were allowed to live a decent and independent life, why would they risk that? As long as there is occupation and siege - and as long as the world doesn't put pressure on Israel - of course there is going to be resistance, in whatever form it takes. It's very logical: without occupation and siege, there is no need for resistance. Anyone given their dignity and freedom has no need to fight."

[Dr Benedetta Berti](#), a security analyst and research fellow at the Tel Aviv-based Institute for National Security Studies, argues that armed groups' ability to challenge Israel is now contingent on the policies of the US-backed Egyptian government of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

"Egypt is a big part of the puzzle," Berti told Middle East Eye. Since the summer war, Egypt has kept closed the Rafah crossing - the sole route to the rest of the world for most Gazans - and [razed Egyptian communities on the other side of the border](#) in order to establish a "buffer zone" between Gaza and the Sinai.

Pointing to Egypt's destruction of tunnels into Gaza, Berti noted that armed groups have had to focus their efforts on domestic production of weapons and smuggling arms into the strip by sea. "Overall the post-war recovery for most armed factions would be inevitably affected by Egypt's policies, and the al-Qassam Brigades have also lost significant revenues since the crackdown on tunnels," she said.

"Of course, this is not only making it harder to rearm, but it is also making the economic-humanitarian situation impossible, which I would argue overall increases the chances of violent escalations," Berti concluded.

Egyptian [courts' recent rulings](#) that both Hamas and its armed wing are "terrorist organisations" have only intensified the challenges armed groups in Gaza are presently enduring.

Meanwhile, Abu Khader Khatib, a 50-year-old strawberry farmer in Beit Lahia, an agricultural town in northern Gaza, said he is capable of living side-by-side with Israelis. "I am old enough to understand that it's possible. We are tired of fighting," he told MEE. Pointing to his 11-year-old son Mohammed, he continued: "But how can anyone expect him not to want to fight. Since he was born, he has not seen anything other than death. That's his life."

Along with any other child in Gaza aged six years or older, Mohammed has already survived three wars in his short time on earth.

Back in the beachside cafe, Abu Sayyaf of the al-Nasser Salah al-Din Brigades sent a message to “every free person” in the world: “We don’t fight because we love death. No one loves death. We fight because our land is occupied.” To Israel, he added: “We are here waiting - in the tunnels and on the borders. Come.”

<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/gaza-s-armed-groups-gear-next-fight-israel-1864374554>