

How Israel builds its fifth column

Palestinian collaborators face mob justice, and fuel a culture of suspicion

By Catherine Taylor, Special to The Christian Science Monitor

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Hani knew it was wrong.

But the young Palestinian says he couldn't resist the woman who seduced him in a field near his house two years ago. And he never suspected what was to come.

In the middle of the tryst, the couple was ambushed by Israeli security agents who told Hani (not his real name) that his wife would be informed of the infidelity unless he cooperated. He says he now suspects he was set up, but he admits he was an easy target wanted for a raft of petty crimes and a wallet full of fake identity cards. Within days he had agreed to trade his freedom for life as a collaborator.

Across the West Bank and Gaza Strip many thousands of Palestinians like Hani have been successfully coopted as informers. Precise numbers of those on Israel's payroll are unknown but figures of up to 15,000 have been suggested by human rights groups.

Israel's use of informants has prevented numerous suicide bombings. Yet in addition to enhancing Israeli security, collaboration has also developed a culture of suspicion such that anyone who runs a successful business or has access to hard-to-get permits is often suspected.

In Hani's case, the motivation was fear, not greed. "I agreed to work with them in return for clemency," he says. "I agreed to help them solve cases involving theft and drug dealing."

Last year Hani says his Israeli supervisor contacted him and asked that he watch two men from his West Bank village — one a member of Hamas, and the other from Fatah. "I didn't want to do it but he said that he merely wanted to know their movements," Hani says. "I gave away extensive information about them. But fear came over me that they planned to do more than just monitor them. I saw on television how Israel was assassinating people and how they went after them methodically. I came to the conclusion I was helping this to happen and I ran away."

Hani's odd behavior was noted by Palestinian police, who arrested him. He says it was a relief to escape "this deep hole I had gotten myself into. I confessed everything. I spoke faster than my interrogator could write."

A crucial role

Since the 1993 Oslo Accords, that transferred chunks of the Occupied Territories to Palestinian Authority control, the recruitment of collaborators has become a crucial plank of Israel's security apparatus. The role begins simply — passing details of a neighbor's car number plate or place of work. As collaborators are drawn more deeply into the system they may be asked to infiltrate the highest levels of militant and political groups or set up targets for arrest and assassination. Israel has stepped up its policy of targeted assassination during this intifada, typically using collaborators to arrange the hit, as they did with Hani.

"Where would Israel be without collaborators?" asks Moshe Kuperburg, a former agent with Shin Bet, Israel's internal security service, who recruited and ran a network of informers in the West Bank before retiring in 1999. "It's simple. We'd be up [a] creek."

Incursion as recruitment drive

Saleh Abdul Jawwad, head of the political science department at Bir Zeit University near Ramallah, believes collaborator recruitment was one aim of Israel's recent offensive in the West Bank. Hundreds of Palestinian men were rounded up. The declared goal was to root

out the militants among them, but Mr. Jawwad says during interrogation many were offered opportunities to collaborate.

"In most countries you are detained or imprisoned because you do something wrong, or plan to," he says. "Here almost the entire adult male population has been through this experience. I see it as a kind of refinery for producing collaborators."

Hani's story is backed up by research from human rights organizations including Israeli human rights group B'tselem and Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group (PHRMG).

Both have recorded testimonies from those with criminal records detailing how they were offered freedom in exchange for information. Others were shown photographs of female relatives undressing in fashion store changing rooms, and told the images would be circulated unless they agreed to collaborate. "There are many taboos in Palestinian society that create opportunities to pressure people into collaboration," says Jawwad.

'Sophisticated methods'

Mr. Kuperburg, a wiry, energetic man with a wide smile and ready charm, says his methods were more sophisticated, centered on disillusioning young militants against the organizations they joined by pointing out inconsistencies in the extremist rhetoric, or the failure of the groups to achieve the Palestinian state they claimed to be fighting for.

Others were convinced by Kuperburg they could better help their people by working for Israel because of access to credentials that allowed freedom of movement through the occupied territories.

"[Successful recruitment] is about confidence building," Kuperburg says. "The collaborator must understand why they are working with us. We are professional and they collaborate because we tell them the truth. If I want an 18-year-old to collaborate, he must believe we have common understanding. I will tell him that I also want to prevent bloodshed. With time, he will see that I am honest."

If all fails, there is always money: "I make sure they know we are generous," he says.

Kuperburg, a secular Jew who speaks fluent Arabic and was trained to impersonate a Palestinian using the undercover name "Musa," often targeted junior members of militant organizations. "Someone who is a good student, a moderate, we will leave him alone," he says. "But if he is radical, we can tell him he is living in a dream. Sometimes even if he does not become a collaborator the conversation can prevent a future attack."

Collaboration 101

The process can take as little as an hour, or many months of work. Kuperburg who says he counts Palestinians among his friends and endorses a two-state solution to the conflict teaches the new recruit how to avoid detection.

Tell no one, he cautions, not even your mother, and spend the money you receive frugally to avoid suspicion. Kuperburg also promises protection inside Israel if the collaborator is discovered.

Kuperburg says Shin Bet runs entire neighborhoods of former collaborators who have been assigned new identities. "We also send some overseas," he adds. But this protection is typically reserved for high-ranking informers. Disgruntled collaborators who worked on the lower rung of the system claim Israel should do more to protect them. Some are preparing a legal case against the Jewish state.

The Palestinian Authority has been strongly criticized for the way it deals with the issue. Human rights groups are concerned that those labeled collaborators are denied fair trials. Military courts are convened quickly, and justice dispensed just as fast.

"There are many questions concerning the degree to which the State Security Courts respect the right to a fair trial, and it is doubtful that justice will truly prevail," the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights in Gaza (PHRMG) says in its latest report on the subject, published in February. "Suspected collaborators should be held accountable for their actions," says Raji Sourani, director of the PHRMG. "But they should receive fair trials, not state security trials. I am against any form of military court."

Revenge, swift and imprecise

But the problem is not limited to sham trials. During the first intifada, which began in 1987, about 1,000 Palestinians died in fighting with Israeli soldiers and settlers. Research by PHRMG suggests a similar number were killed by their own people under suspicion of collaboration but just 45 percent of those killed were rightfully accused.

Many suspected collaborators are simply gunned down in the street by vigilante groups. The PA turns a blind eye. The label is sometimes used as an excuse for extra-judicial killing designed to settle old scores.

The tactics contravene agreements signed by the PA. Oslo II, for example, states, "Palestinians who have maintained contact with the Israeli authorities will not be subjected to acts of harassment, violence, retribution, or prosecution."

Yet it goes on. Last month, three men were shot in the center of Ramallah by masked attackers. The families of those killed this way are afraid to speak out. "The families of suspected or alleged collaborators suffer from social ostracism sometimes with serious economic consequences," says the PHRMG report. "Neighbors and relatives no longer come to visit. Children are isolated at school and their trauma affects their school performance. Young men and women cannot marry since no family wants to be related to a collaborator's family."

Hani, now in jail, may have escaped alive from his life as a collaborator, but he says his deeds have ruined his future. "I can't look at my wife in the eye," he says. "If I ever get out of jail I will leave immediately without seeing anyone. My life here has come to an end."

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