

Inside the covert world of Gaza's rocket factories

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GAZA CITY -- The young man in a brown plaid shirt commanded attention when he appeared from the elevator wielding four mobile phones, two armed guards, and a scowl.

He shook hands with men who were drawn to him in the featureless office before moving to a chair near the window which he glanced at suspiciously as he sat. He acknowledged me, the foreigner woman, with a detached pious greeting.

Abu Abir is a militant of some repute in Gaza. As a consequence he is known too to Israel and not in a way that makes him relaxing company to keep. Even without a security detail toting assault rifles he exudes the chilling pride of being a marked man. He would be the one to take us into the covert world of Gaza's rocket-making industry.

There was idle chatter in Arabic and several interruptions from those phones, each call a reason for Abu Abir to tighten his eyes in frustration. "Soon," he eventually announced, letting a mobile cascade from his hand to the table. We will go soon.

The country's worst zip code

The homemade rocket, simple in its construction, has changed the dynamic of warfare between Israel and militant groups like Hamas. Israel boasts one of the most sophisticated and technologically-advanced armies in the world. Yet its tanks and fighter jets and costly munitions have so far proven powerless to stop the crude arsenal of Gaza's militants.

It is difficult to estimate the number of rockets that have been launched from Gaza into Israel in the five years I have reported from the Middle East, or to qualify their impact. The tally is easily in the thousands and a barrage is often answered by Israel in a number of ways: Air strikes, army incursions employing tanks and artillery, sealed borders, tight restrictions on who can and cannot leave Gaza. Hundreds of Palestinians, mostly militants but some civilians, have died. The rocket has relegated Gaza to the status of pariah state and as a result heaped misery on 1.5 million Palestinians stuck there under sanctions and out of breath.

Most of the thousands of rockets fired have landed in open fields on the other side around Israel's border with Gaza. Yet they also often crash into homes, schools, cars, shopping malls, and bus stops. Unguided and deadly, rockets have wreaked an undeniable psychological toll on Israeli border towns like Sderot. Israelis, including the elderly and children, have been killed and wounded and the damage cannot be measured by statistics alone. Day after day lives there are steered by warning sirens and concrete shelters. Kids tend to not play outside. A third of the town suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. People we have met say leaving Sderot is not an option because they cannot sell their homes. It is the country's worst zip code and a Gaza militant's unfortunate bulls-eye.

Back in the office in Gaza, Abu Abir's rise from the chair initiated a scramble and after some muttering I was handed a plastic shopping bag with some clothing inside.

"You must wear this, Miss Janis," whispered my colleague Ismail in his precise English. I peered inside and pulled out a long polyester coat and headscarf. Ismail explained, so politely, that the knee-length black shirt and scarf I normally wear to conservative Gaza did not satisfy the standards of Islamic modesty upheld by my host.

The change was not a request but a requirement for the assignment to continue.

We drove in our own car with our driver and followed Abu Abir's 4X4 with darkened windows to a residential neighbourhood. We pulled over and stepped out into the sun which was high in a cloudless sky. It already felt mildly disarming to be cloaked in a stranger's jilbab and headcovering with armed militants in broad daylight.

Then came the blindfolds.

What was explained as a measure of security was not a complete surprise to me and was almost logical in a warped way. Rocket-making operations in Gaza are the frequent targets of Israeli air strikes. Militant groups are extremely secretive about their locations and for our contact it was crucial that our destination remain unknown. That said, it also felt like part of a theatrical script.

'Guided by unknown hands'

Still, enough foreign journalists have been kidnapped in Gaza to stoke the obvious concern that comes with being blindfolded and shuttled away. That we also had to surrender the batteries from our mobile phones compounded the lingering sense of discomfort. (As part of our risk assessment, we knew this group to respect the safety of journalists and their past dealings with the press were without incident.)

A wide strip of black cloth was placed over my eyes from behind and fastened tightly. I was guided by unknown hands into the back of Abu Abir's vehicle. The rest of our crew were loaded in what I am assuming was a similar fashion. As we began to drive I powered up my small video camera and subtly lifted it to capture a few blind shots of the journey. I quickly felt the weight of a disapproving hand pushing the camera down to my lap. The images later showed Abu Abir reaching from the front seat toward the lens. "No picture," he scolded. They were the first words he said to me. The video goes to black.

After driving in silence for what seemed like twenty minutes we slowed and heard new voices acknowledging orders to open a gate. The vehicle pulled in and stopped. We waited like this a while longer, still oblivious to our surroundings. Then, the door beside me creaked open and when the black cloth was pulled away my eyes readjusted to absorb where I was: A tiny courtyard with a parking pad cut off from view by walls crawling with bougainvillea. A few turkeys waddled by and a baby cried at the neighbouring house. Kids played in streets I could not see. A warm breeze rattled the vines.

It was strangely calming and would prove a contrast to what lay beyond the doorless entry of a nearby building. Our destination.

There are rocket "factories" and storage facilities tucked in alleys and warrens across the Gaza Strip, one of the most densely populated places in the world. They are not full-scale warehouses with production lines but otherwise empty rooms or garages that blend anonymously into the concrete block buildings ubiquitous to Gaza's drained landscape.

Inside this storage hold, the walls and windows had been decorated for our visit with the group's black flags emblazoned with emblems and Arabic script. The Al-Nasser Brigades are an armed wing of the Popular Resistance Committees, indoctrinated by generations of Gaza's Islamic resistance, and these days loyal to Hamas.

The room bristled with rockets in varying sizes and stages of readiness that three faceless men in balaclavas quietly choreographed in a showcase of firepower. There was even a spotlight to afford better lighting for the camera. Large red warheads filled with explosives were screwed into place atop black metal tubes and hoisted onto their launching stands.

Each rocket was labeled by hand with white paint to identify its brandname and strength: According to the group, the al-Nasr 2 reaches a distance of four kilometres. The slightly better al-Nasr 3 rocket can go nearly three times as far. It is the

al-Nasr 4 -- at a daunting two-plus metres in length -- that is the triumph of their development efforts.

'Necessity is the mother of invention'

The rocket has a range of 20 kilometers, proven last May when one of them careened into a shopping mall in the Israeli city of Ashkelon. It happened to coincide with a visit to Israel by US president George W. Bush.

The handlers often did not know what to show next. They were instructed to hold drum-like roadside bombs stuffed with ball bearings and shrapnel as Abu Abir explained how they worked with the presentation skills of a trade show salesman. He moved his hands and flicked his fingers outward as if to underscore how the blast might tear through a person's abdomen. The assistants posed with rockets and other wares in what appeared a slightly scrambled but partly rehearsed media drill. I stood there in my costume. Abu Abir then paused and assessed the display and said, "We show you this to send a message to the Israelis that we are getting stronger."

The group says it can produce an al-Nasr rocket for about \$400.00 US. Israel's usual retaliation, the Apache gunship-mounted Hellfire II missile, costs approximately US\$68,000.00 (according to Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia).

Abu Abir insisted all of the potent materials they use are found in Gaza and that contrary to what is widely believed nothing is smuggled from 'outside' through the network of tunnels under Gaza's border with Egypt. On this point he was emphatic.

"Necessity is the mother of invention," Abu Abir explained. "We risk whatever we have to create some sort of balance of fear between them and us."

The making of a rocket appears disturbingly simple in its methodology and requirements. The only visible infrastructure as far as equipment goes is a modified Bunsen burner rigged to a propane tank to cook the chemicals. It means a rocket factory can be anywhere and everywhere. It can be loaded into a car or a taxi and easily relocated. It could even be carried on a donkey cart or a shoulder to a backroom or garden shed down the street.

People in this line of work are not really specialized either. They are drawn from the ranks of the faithful and exemplify Gaza's militant culture which is to say nearly anybody can be one. The masked apprentices conducting the demonstration for us were a grade school teacher, an engineering student, and an auto mechanic.

"Yes, it's dangerous," conceded one of them, "but we are willing to do anything."

To do so is to tempt death. Factories are magnets for Israeli air strikes. The chemical sustenance of a rocket is also extremely volatile and prone to explosion if mishandled. The smallest mistake could mean severe burns, lost fingers, or worse as the victim of what is commonly known here as a "work accident."

The gas canister was cranked into service and soon a vibrant blue flame grew from the metal burner with a hiss. Plastic bags of chemical powders, including potassium nitrate (a common fertilizer), were tipped into a cauldron and faceless men used large wooden spatulas to stir.

'We produce rockets everyday'

"Slowly, slowly," said a voice. With deep rotations and a dramatic flair the men repeatedly folded the mixture as it formed an egg shell-coloured paste that our cameraman said smelled of sulfur.

When it was deemed ready the pot was lifted and carried gingerly to a metal casing that had been welded together and stood upright on its end. The men poured. The rocket fuel could have been cake mix. Some of it slopped down the sides of the pipe. An oiled wooden stick was used as a ramrod to pack it before it was left to cool.

The assembly that follows apparently includes wires and fuses and eventually the rocket's warhead that is filled with TNT. The entire process is alarmingly quick.

"We produce rockets everyday," said Abu Abir, though he refused to reveal numbers. Dozens? Hundreds? He would concede only that they could "cause the Zionists big damage" with what lurked in its storage holds across Gaza.

"In the past, the materials we used didn't have a long life and they would begin to break down," he explained. "Now everything is from here and produced here with Islamic hands."

With Egypt as a mediator, Israel and Hamas brokered an understanding mid-June that delivered a long-awaited reprieve. Some call it a ceasefire; others see it cynically as a lull for each warring party to re-arm and recharge for calm's eventual collapse.

With the promise of restraint it was the expectation of Hamas and its militant allies that Israel would ease the blockade of Gaza. Egypt too has kept its Rafah border mostly closed to fall in line with the prevailing world view of Hamas and its fiefdom.

Shipments of food, fuel, and other "humanitarian supplies" have been delivered into Gaza through the cargo terminal that Israel keeps open. Other goods that have become harder to find in Gaza like construction materials or car parts or chocolate are smuggled through the tunnels from Egypt.

The crossings did not open to the extent or with the frequency that Hamas and the majority Palestinians in Gaza believed was due. Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and his government in the West Bank have proven ineffective in swaying the opinion of Israel and Egypt that access to Gaza should be controlled for security reasons.

'Now we have a missile'

Over the past few months of relative quiet rockets have been fired from Gaza into Israel as a sporadic reminder of the threat and possible test of the truce. Our Gaza colleagues offered a different take: that those rogue firings were less about the resistance than the burgeoning underground economy. When a rocket is fired, Israel closes the cargo crossing which pushes up demand for smuggled supplies and therefore smuggling profits. Gaza has been known to work in curious ways.

The ceasefire became further strained recently when the Israeli army edged into Gaza territory to destroy a tunnel it said might be used to snatch Israeli soldiers. The perceived breach triggered a furious reaction from Hamas and the familiar barrages of dozens of rockets a day aimed at Sderot soon followed.

Israel shut the border crossings to everything including foreign journalists. The Israeli government claims barring journalists is a measure of security given the volatility bubbling in Gaza's dunes. This, to most news organizations, is an unusual policy as even during violence in the past the door to reporting on it has rarely, if ever, been so firmly closed. One high-ranking Israeli official was quoted as saying he wasn't "shedding tears" over journalists' frustration and added he did not believe much of the coverage of Gaza had been fair anyway. A letter of protest was sent to Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert on behalf of world news agencies, including CTV.

When I asked Abu Abir about the sanctity of the ceasefire he said the group would abide by it as long as Israel did. I was impatient to finish the visit which at times smacked of performance art.

"We cannot sit on our hands and do nothing while the occupation is preparing for war," said Abu Abir, whose men added the expected bluster about "turning Israel's heaven to hell" and warned they are also trained to capture soldiers.

"The Israelis have given us motivation to strengthen ourselves," he said, smoothing the front of his brown plaid shirt. He almost smiled.

"We started the intifada with a rock. Now we have a missile."

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