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Gazans shocked at how many neighbors, coworkers, officials are 'spying' for Israel

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Gaza City, Gaza

To citizens of Gaza, the Hamas government's campaign to uncover and uproot the network of collaborators with Israel has been shockingly effective.

It began with a warning: the execution of two convicted collaborators in May. Then Hamas government officials, who were convinced that a wide network of spies was undermining their government, made an unprecedented offer: a two-month amnesty campaign. Collaborators could turn themselves in and be forgiven, their identities kept secret.

When the offer expired this summer, the arrests began. Armed with the information they'd gleaned from those who'd given themselves up, security forces arrested hundreds more.

Gazans were astounded not only by the number of arrests, but by who was arrested. Prominent figures in society, including many doctors, were reportedly among those caught in the sweep. As the hunt for spies continues, Gazans say the revelation of the network's reach is eroding trust between neighbors, coworkers — even family members. It's tearing at the fabric of a close-knit society, where families, friends and neighbors often depend on each other.

It has a really bad impact on society, says Alaa Fouad, an anesthesiologist at Shifa Hospital in Gaza City. "People start to be afraid of each other. We don't talk openly with each other, and we suspect each other."

Intelligence source: Hundreds arrested in crackdown

The Interior Ministry will not say how many people have been arrested in the campaign. But a source in the intelligence service says the number was in the high hundreds. Ihab Al Ghusain, spokesman for the Interior Ministry, said the "repentance campaign," as it is called in Gaza, was highly effective. Just how effective will become clearer when the trials begin, likely starting next year.

"What we can say is that the national campaign for fighting collaboration was successful, because it is a new way of dealing with this," says Mr. Ghusain.

Ghusain says the government has also worked to address the reasons these individuals became collaborators. Many of those who turned themselves in "Ghusain won't say how many did" were low-level collaborators who had been blackmailed by Israeli intelligence, he says. Some did it for money; others needed permission to leave Gaza for medical treatment or study. The government says it will provide them with financial assistance, or other alternatives for medical treatment or study, like going to Egyptian hospitals instead of into Israel.

But the information they gave up allowed the authorities to apprehend many who were much more deeply involved. One man had been working for the Israelis for 15 years, says Ghusain "and was turned in by his wife.

The source in the intelligence service said in an interview that the operation yielded other fruits as well: the security apparatus discovered that Israel was placing tracking and recording devices on the cars allowed in to Gaza for sale since the relaxation of Israel's blockade of the coastal territory. They also discovered such devices elsewhere, he says.

Gazans support crackdown, but surprised at its results

The campaign to root out spies for Israel has near unanimous support in Gaza. Nearly everyone agrees that collaboration is a serious problem and the spies should be found and brought to justice (the death penalty is widely supported for collaborators). And few are surprised that poor Gazans who need medical treatment outside the enclave would provide information in return for permission to travel.

What has shocked people, and caused worry, was the arrests of doctors, engineers, and even members of the Hamas government, who are reported to be collaborators.

"I don't trust anyone anymore," says Ihab El Helu, a nut seller in Gaza City's market. "After this campaign we discovered some of the most respected people in society were collaborating with Israel. So who can we trust anymore? If the elite and intellectuals are involved, who else? Who is not involved?"

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How Israel's easing of Gaza blockade has hurt Gaza business
Concerns about due process, treatment of detainees

Rumors and panic reached a fever pitch over the summer when the government began arresting people while shrouding the campaign in secrecy. Because officials wouldn't say why anyone was arrested, people arrested for other crimes were sometimes falsely branded collaborators, a charge that carries a high price in Gazan society.

Issam Younis, director of Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, says government officials were inept at managing the crisis of public opinion, contributing to the rumors and fear that peaked several months ago. He downplays the social effects of the campaign, saying that distrust has subsided and is not epidemic. But he does have other concerns, including due process and humane treatment of detainees.

Many of those accused of collaborating are tortured, and Mr. Younis says confessions extracted by coercion or torture are common. Additionally, collaborators are tried in military, rather than civilian courts, which Younis says deprives them of rights. And the Hamas government's execution of collaborators is done technically outside the law, since the law requires a death sentence be authorized by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. That hasn't been obtained because of the split between Hamas and Fatah.

Because of the secrecy surrounding the campaign, it is also unclear whether the government is using it to punish political enemies. Younis says he has not heard complaints of this, though the intelligence source said many of those arrested belonged to Fatah.

A father pressured by Israel over his ill daughter

One of those is Emad Tanani, who has been detained in the Central Rehabilitation and Reform Center, Gaza City's main prison, for 17 months while awaiting a decision on his case. Although he was arrested before the current campaign began, he said in an interview at the prison that his sympathy for Fatah likely played a part. He lives with 35 other men accused or convicted of collaboration in a cell smaller than a tennis court.

Mr. Tanani says he is innocent. Two years ago, his young daughter was gravely ill and needed medical treatment that was not available in Gaza. When he tried to take her to Israel, Israeli intelligence agents told him he must agree to work with them in order to allow his daughter to cross.

"What could I do?" he asks. He told the agents that he agreed, and took his daughter for treatment. But he never gave the Israelis any information, he says. He told a friend about the incident, and his friend turned him in as a collaborator. "I don't trust anyone now in Gaza," he says. "Anyone. There is no trust in our society anymore."

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