

# **Chaos in the Palestinian Authority: From Counter-Terrorism to Reconstruction**

Orit Perlov and Udi Dekel | No. 1643 | September 18, 2022

**Recent months have seen a steep rise in the use of live fire in the Palestinian cities in the West Bank against IDF forces, as well as in the number of shooting incidents and other attacks. Behind the shootings are primarily young Palestinians, including Fatah operatives, and this phenomenon reflects the chaos within the Palestinian Authority. The Israeli security response, which focuses on counter-terrorism and widespread arrests of suspects, generates a self-sustaining cycle of escalation and heightens the motivation among young Palestinians to enlist in the fight against the Israeli security forces. The danger is that as a result of the chaos, the PA will cease to function as a responsible, stable, and effective entity that encourages calm and is an authoritative address for communication with Israel. To curb this trend and give the PA an opportunity (perhaps its last) to regain control of the northern West Bank and stop the deterioration, reconstruction measures should be pursued vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority, and external collaboration and support should be recruited for the effort, primarily from Jordan and the Gulf states.**

Recent months have seen a steep rise in the use of live fire in the Palestinian cities against IDF forces, as well as in the number of shooting incidents and attacks against both IDF positions and soldiers and civilian traffic on roads in the West Bank. Israeli Security Agency (ISA) Director Ronen Bar stated at a conference on September 11, 2022 at Reichman University that over 130 shooting attacks have occurred in the region so far this year – a sharp increase from 98 incidents in 2021 and 19 in 2020. According to Bar, "this is just one expression of the lack of governance, the extent of weapons in the area, and the lack of effectiveness in the work of the Palestinian security apparatuses." He added that due to the rising violence, the Israeli security

forces conduct arrests and counter-terrorism every night, with the toll reflected in the number of Palestinian casualties (81 deaths since the beginning of 2022) and further harm to the standing of the Palestinian security apparatuses.

For its part, Israel continues to adhere to the operational action plan of the ongoing campaign against terrorism – Operation Break the Wave – which focuses on forces entering Palestinian urban areas in order to dismantle terrorist infrastructure and arrest terrorists. Since the beginning of the year, about 2,000 terrorism suspects have been arrested and over 240 significant planned attacks – shootings, suicide attacks, explosive attacks, and kidnappings – have been thwarted.

The escalation reflects trends and phenomena, some of them particular to the current time:

- a. **An expanded pool of participants:** Dozens and even hundreds of armed Palestinians participate in the shooting attacks in Palestinian villages and cities, including security personnel serving in the Palestinian security apparatuses and Fatah operatives. Moreover, the organization itself backs the incidents and sponsors the perpetrators. This is a new trend, marked by the enlistment of the younger generation, which is undergoing a process of radicalization and joining terrorist groups in the framework of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. (The number of those killed who were affiliated with the al-Aqsa Brigades is the highest compared with other organizations.) The implication of this trend is the expansion of the circles of resistance beyond Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The intensity of the phenomenon is seen in part in the sons of Palestinian security officers participating in "violent resistance."
- b. **The ineffectiveness of the Palestinian security apparatuses:** Another process that has gained momentum shows the Palestinian security apparatuses standing on the sidelines. They have stopped operating against terrorist infrastructure and violence in the northern West Bank, as well as in the Hebron region. A serious concern in the Israeli security establishment is that additional

Palestinian cities will in effect fall into the full control of armed groups, as is occurring in Jenin and Nablus.

- c. **Reduced security coordination:** In the past, Israeli security officials awarded relatively high marks to the Palestinian security apparatuses for their efforts to thwart terrorism (up to 30 percent of all attacks thwarted). Recently, however there has been less security coordination, both quantitative and qualitative, including participation by members of the Palestinian security apparatuses in disrupting IDF activities, to the point of firing at IDF forces. The only area in which the Palestinian security apparatuses still demonstrate activism is in the struggle against opponents of the Palestinian Authority and political arrests.
- d. **The Israeli benefits policy:** This policy cultivates the Palestinian elite and neglects the Palestinian "margins." Israel provides benefits to the elite and the PA apparatuses, in part by providing VIP cards, work permits in Israel for associates, and access to medical care. But the extremism and terrorism originate in the refugee camps, home to "terrorism hothouses," and aside from countermeasures and arrests, there are no reconstruction and development plans for these areas with regard to the economy, employment, and education.
- e. **"The day after Abbas" is already here:** The escalation bespeaks the lack of governance and the weakening of Mahmoud Abbas's standing in the Palestinian street. A succession struggle is in effect underway, and there is widespread resentment against Abbas's preference and designation of Hussein al-Sheikh as successor. All the candidates for the position of Palestinian Authority chairman belong to the old guard, but they lack public legitimacy and support and do not have the ability to enforce their rule or impose law and order. In effect, the situation is a down payment on the chaos that is expected on "the day after Abbas."
- f. **The political stalemate:** Radical young people are taking initiative and the PA apparatuses are ineffective, in part due to the ongoing political stalemate between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government. At the UN General Assembly meeting in September

2021, Abbas delivered an ultimatum whereby if the political process is not renewed within a year, he intends to withdraw the PLO's recognition of Israel – until Israel for its part recognizes a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders – and to disavow the agreements signed between the PLO and Israel, including the security coordination. Abbas reiterated these threats several times over the past year, and it seems he intends to carry them out at the upcoming UN General Assembly later this month. In addition, Abbas is again trying to advance international recognition of a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders. Thus, the current escalation within Palestinian Authority territory actually helps Abbas focus international attention on the Palestinian issue prior to the General Assembly.

Following the security escalation, US administration and Egyptian government figures have conveyed messages of warning to the Israeli government. Officials in Washington and Cairo have expressed concern about the situation spiraling out of control; they contend the IDF's increased activity within the Palestinian Authority humiliates the PA and further undermines its already weak image among the Palestinian public. The Egyptian figures have also warned that ongoing escalation would confront Israel with a large-scale violent outbreak and anarchy in the territories.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The Israeli security response focuses on counter-terrorism and widespread arrests of suspects almost every night, especially in the northern West Bank. Ironically, however, it encourages additional waves of terror and violence and increases the motivation of young Palestinians to enlist in the fight against the Israeli security forces. Most of these young people did not experience the second intifada and are motivated not only by hatred of Israel and resistance to the occupation, but also by revulsion toward the Palestinian Authority and its leader, Mahmoud Abbas.

Israel continues to increase the number of work permits for Palestinian workers in Israel, as a policy that is meant to bring calm, stabilize the situation, and prevent unrest and disturbances in the Palestinian street. However, the possibility of working in Israel encourages illegal infiltration into Israel by Palestinians without work permits, including those trying to launch terrorist attacks. Despite the increased IDF effort to close the seam line, many holes remain in the security barrier, and the infiltration into Israel last week by the armed terrorist from Nablus and his capture in Jaffa emphasize the need to seal the barrier hermetically.

Furthermore, in recent years Israel has focused on encouraging economic initiatives and creating conditions for reconstructing infrastructure in the Gaza Strip and improving the condition of the population there, while neglecting and weakening the Palestinian Authority. Israel is hard to block the cycle of violence, and against the backdrop of the deterioration within PA territory, there is increased danger of reaching the break-even point – with chaos dominating, and the PA itself unable to function as a responsible, stable, and effective entity that contributes to calm and is the authoritative address for communication with Israel.

Therefore, Israel should advance and enlist partners in reconstruction measures specifically vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority within its territory in the West Bank as part of an initiative with two components:

- a. Transfer full control over the entire northern West Bank area to the Palestinian Authority, in return for its commitment to prevent terrorism and eliminate terrorist infrastructure alongside the imposition of law and order. This area is a homogenous Palestinian area without Israeli settlements, and consequently sees a low level of friction between the Palestinian population and Israelis. Control should be transferred to the Palestinian Authority gradually, with performance benchmarks for assessing the resolve and effectiveness of the PA and its security apparatuses. Jordan and the United States security coordinator – USSC – should participate in determining the benchmarks, and part of the transfer process should include increasing the capabilities of the PA security

apparatuses along with monitoring their fulfillment of the criteria that have been agreed upon.

- b. Focus on obtaining resources to reconstruct the "Palestinian periphery," where hotbeds of terrorism and promoters of chaos are growing. This should be done by enlisting Jordan and the Gulf countries to invest in building training and employment centers for young Palestinians, as well as establishing professional and technological colleges under the auspices and in the framework of the Palestinian Authority. Such programs that are focused on young Palestinians will offer them alternatives to terrorism and violence, and will strengthen the standing and performance of the PA.

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Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen