



What Will Happen If the Palestinians Really End Security Cooperation?

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On the night of July 24, 2014, anywhere between 10,000 and 25,000 Palestinians squared off against Israeli security forces at the Qalandiya checkpoint between Ramallah and Jerusalem. It was the largest demonstration the West Bank had seen for at least a decade. In running battles that lasted several hours, protestors shot fireworks and hurled stones at the Israeli forces, and there were even reports of gunfire—a rarity since the days of the second intifada. Israeli army and Border Police officers responded with force, leaving two Palestinians dead and some 300 injured.

Coming as it did at the height of last summer's Gaza war, there were well-founded fears that the demonstration could trigger a general uprising in the West Bank. Yet follow-up demonstrations failed to attract similar numbers; no new intifada materialized; and, even compared to Jerusalem, the West Bank has remained relatively stable.

The question is, why was the Qalandiya demonstration so large, attracting not just the usual teenage demographic of Palestinian protestors, but women, children, and the elderly? And more importantly, why was it a one-off event?

The answers to these questions have everything to do with the current state of the most positive and successful aspect of Israeli-Palestinian relations: Security coordination. This is, in fact, the one thing that has managed to keep the West Bank under control, and prevent events like Qalandiya from setting off a chain reaction that could end in a third intifada.

And yet, with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' recent decision to join the International Criminal Court—with the stated intention of pursuing war crimes charges against Israeli officials and soldiers—even this relationship is now in peril. In a November 30 interview with an Egyptian daily, Abbas stated that the ICC gambit was only "the first step" in applying pressure on Israel. "This step won't do much good," he went on to admit, "but we have two other steps." The first would be "ending all security coordination" between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA). "There will be no ties, no security, and no talks with anyone." After that, he continued, the only step left to take would be to dissolve the PA and hand the proverbial keys back to Israel.

Abbas has already made good on his ICC threat. If he continues on the path he describes, his next move will be to end the security relationship with Israel. But unlike flourishing a pen on live television and signing international treaties, which takes little effort, severing security ties with Israel entails monumental risks on the ground for the Palestinians. It is not mere symbolism. That one night in Qalandiya provides a glimpse of just how dangerous and self-defeating such a move would be. More importantly, it could be a harbinger of how and why the era that began with the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 might be coming to an end.

The imposing headquarters of the PA's Preventive Security agency is perched on a hill high above Ramallah, adjacent to a dusty industrial zone which, incongruously, also holds a small amusement park and Ferris wheel. As its name suggests, Preventive Security is the Palestinian intelligence arm tasked with upholding internal stability. It is essentially the PA's version of the FBI or, as the organization is sometimes called, "the Hamas hunters."

One rainy morning last November, I met with a senior official from the organization. Tellingly, the headquarters is heavily fortified. I traveled through one checkpoint, then a high gated wall, and then another final ring of thick stone. The official, who requested to remain anonymous so he could speak freely, met me in his large office at the end of a long hallway filled with chain-smoking men in plainclothes sporting mustaches. These are the individuals who keep the West Bank in line. The official's office was sparsely decorated except for pictures of Abbas, former President Yasser Arafat, and Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock. An M-16 assault rifle was casually placed on a coat stand in the corner.

The various organs which make up the PA's nascent (and U.S.-trained) security forces, including Preventive Security, are responsible for areas of the West Bank under full Palestinian control. They have numerous responsibilities: Upholding law and order, crime prevention, intelligence-gathering, counter-terror, and riot control, among others. But for many Palestinians, the one thing that receives the most attention is the PA security forces' coordination with Israel. Average Palestinians often condemn the security forces as "subcontractors" for the Israeli occupation. In turn, Israeli officials are well aware of the tightrope that the PA needs to walk in order to maintain the security relationship while protecting its own legitimacy, and rarely discuss the issue in detail.

Because of this, I expected the senior official to politely decline a response when I raised the topic. Instead, he spoke openly about the longstanding security relationship between Israel and the PA "that continues and is ongoing." He added, even more candidly, "From a security perspective there is not much difference of opinion with the Israelis....We share the same interests." Operationally, he said, coordination between Israel and the PA hinges on "daily and weekly contacts, and meetings on all levels"—from lieutenants in the field to service chiefs like him—regarding "security hazards and changes which threaten the stable security situation on both sides."

These shared interests and security hazards entail many things, but none are as important as the threat of a Hamas takeover of the West Bank. "Just as we liberated Gaza...just as we established a victorious army in it," Hamas founder Mahmoud al-Zahar declared in December, "we will make the same effort in the West Bank as we prepare to extend our presence to all of Palestine," i.e., to the entirety of pre-1967 Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned of precisely this when he publicly blasted the PA's recent moves at the United Nations, saying, "Abbas thinks that by taking unilateral steps he threatens us; he doesn't understand that their result will be Hamas taking over the West Bank."

After an extensive Hamas terror network in the West Bank was uncovered by Israeli intelligence last August, press reports suggested that nearly one hundred operatives were preparing a "coup" against the PA. It's telling that Abbas himself heavily endorsed the notion of Hamas nefariousness, reportedly accusing the militant group of plotting to target him directly.

The struggle against Hamas in the West Bank is a model of security coordination between Israel and the PA. For example, PA intelligence provided crucial information to Israel during the manhunt for the Hamas cell that abducted and murdered three Israeli teenagers last summer. PA security forces also arrest suspected militants themselves (and have done so with increasing vigor over the last six months), or stand down when Israeli forces raid Palestinian population centers during their own operations.

It's not a surprise, then, that Hamas has singled out this policy for particular excoriation. When Abbas called security coordination with Israel "holy" during a conference last June in Saudi Arabia, one Hamas spokesman responded by stating, "Aiding the occupation and coordinating security with it in chasing down the resistance is a crime that is punishable by law." More recently, after the death of Ziad Abu Ein, a PA minister, during clashes with Israeli forces in December, another Hamas official called continued security coordination a "betrayal of the blood of the [Palestinian] martyrs."

There are, aside from hunting militants, additional facets to the Israeli-Palestinian security relationship that receive less attention. Palestinian security forces have, on countless occasions, ensured the well-being of Israeli citizens who wander (often by mistake) into Palestinian-controlled areas of the West Bank. The relationship also involves coordinating the movement of Palestinian forces through Israeli-controlled areas and, as is often the case, the movement of visiting dignitaries from Israeli to Palestinian territory (and vice versa).

Even less well-known, however, is how such examples of tangible bilateral coordination are buttressed by a larger spirit of cooperation in maintaining a "stable security situation" within the PA.

For the PA leadership, this has manifested itself in a decision to actively undermine, if not forcibly stop, demonstrations from erupting in the West Bank and potentially spilling over into Israeli settlements and military positions. The most recent and significant exception to this policy, however, was the aforementioned riot at the Qalandiya checkpoint. This, of course, raises the question of why it was allowed to happen at all.

The direct impetus for the demonstration was undoubtedly the ongoing Gaza war—then not even a month old—as well as the Muslim holiday of Ramadan. July 24 was Laylat al-Qadr, the "Night of Destiny," a festival which traditionally takes place towards the end of the month-long holiday. "All the demonstrations during the war were very well controlled," the Preventive Security official told me when I asked about the Qalandiya episode. "But it was the peak of the war and Israeli violence, and the pictures on television were the most intense."

The demonstration that night, however, was decidedly not a spontaneous outpouring of anger, nor was it a Hamas event: It was, in fact, organized by Fatah, the Palestinian faction that rules the PA, and authorized by President Abbas himself. As the official explained to me, there were two guiding considerations. "One," he said, "we wanted people to 'vent out.' And two, we wanted to direct people's anger against Israel, and not the PA." For Fatah and the PA, organizing a demonstration was a way to be seen as "supporting the people" while "maintaining a sense of control."

This "sense of control" was severely tested that night, as the event snowballed out of control. Senior PA officials, including Fatah Central Committee members, joined the rally just south of Ramallah, at the entrance to the al-Am'ari refugee camp (where Abbas's son Tareq is reportedly the head of the camp's Youth Commission). Afterwards, protestors began marching down the narrow, potholed Jerusalem (Al Quds) Road, the main thoroughfare connecting Ramallah to Jerusalem. "We are going to Jerusalem, there are millions of martyrs!" some in the crowd chanted, as more people from neighboring cities and towns joined the marchers. "With the soul and with the blood, we will sacrifice for you, oh Gaza!" others chanted, as thousands of Palestinian flags—not the flags of specific factions—were hoisted aloft. It was a rare and purposeful outpouring of national unity, as West Bankers coalesced behind their Gazan cousins.

In live video images and after-action photographs, the march from the Amari camp down the Jerusalem Road had a carnival atmosphere, a sea of people of all ages walking in the street, chanting, and holding aloft flags and placards, while passing cars honked their horns in solidarity. As mentioned above, Israeli estimates put the number of demonstrators at 10,000. Palestinian estimates vary, but the most credible figures put the number at 25,000. Either figure easily makes the Qalandiya demonstration the largest for at least a decade.

The carnival atmosphere degenerated into a full-scale riot, however, as the protestors neared the Qalandiya checkpoint. An unending stream of fireworks, shot horizontally at Israeli forces, shattered the murky darkness of the Jerusalem Road. Rocks followed as well, as did, according to Israeli reports, live fire from within the crowd, perpetrated by members of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, an armed wing of Fatah that has been mostly dormant since the end of the second intifada.

A floodlight from the Qalandiya checkpoint's watchtower, which sits atop a section of the separation barrier best known for its elaborate graffiti murals of Yasser Arafat and jailed Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti, shone down on the thousands of protestors. Israeli army and Border Police forces held the line, firing tear gas, stun grenades, and rubber bullets at the demonstrators. Live rounds may also have been used, although this could not be independently verified. After several long hours of running clashes and chaos, however, the demonstration subsided.

Due to the ongoing war, the events of that night received little media attention. Reports indicate that, with most of the foreign press in Gaza or southern Israel, only one foreign journalist—an American photographer—was on the ground at Qalandiya. For observers of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, though, the West Bank appeared to be primed for an explosion of its own. But while subsequent days brought several follow-up demonstrations, none came anywhere close to the scale of Qalandiya. West Bank instability, and with it dire predictions of a looming third intifada, remained the "dog that didn't bark."

The reason for this was the PA's leadership. It not only allowed Qalandiya to happen, it actively organized and encouraged it. And after it was over, the reverse was true. This is likely because the PA itself was shocked by the intensity of the Qalandiya clashes. Since that night, it seems to have decided that any outward manifestations of dissent will be curtailed; not only those organized by Hamas, but also those organized by other Islamists, students, labor unions, and even Fatah itself. Over the past several months, all of these various groups have been subject to investigation, intimidation, and, in many cases, arrest.

Demonstrations inside the PA, the Preventive Security official explained to me, "have to comply with the law and the conditions of the security services." Given that Abbas has ruled by presidential decree since his term officially expired six years ago, his writ is the law, and the Palestinian security services take direct orders from the president's office. If Abbas does not want another Qalandiya, it won't happen. And it is telling that the

official couched security coordination with Israel in these terms: "Our president has given solid instructions for this relationship."

This sentiment was echoed by Mahmoud al-Habash, the PA's Religious Affairs Minister and a close Abbas confidant, following the death of Ziad Abu Ein. As al-Habash put it, "When it becomes against our interests, and at our head the president, we will stop it." Abbas, in short, decides whether the West Bank will remain stable or not.

Abbas has raised the specter of severing security cooperation several times, mainly as a way of pressuring Israel. The security coordination will end, he often implies, if there is no progress toward Palestinian statehood. More recently, Nabil Shaath, a senior Fatah official, made the same threat in regard to customs revenues—which Israel collects on behalf of the PA, but froze after it joined the ICC—demanding that the money be immediately transferred.

Yet, as demonstrated above, the term "security coordination" is a nebulous, catch-all term. There are, in theory, various levers the PA could pull or not pull, as is often the case with stopping long-standing cooperative relationships. Security ties can be partially, temporarily, or completely severed, depending on the whims of Abbas and the PA. The events at Qalandiya last summer are a cautionary tale of what such moves, unfolding over two phases, might look like.

The first phase would likely entail an end to intelligence-sharing and coordination with Israeli security operations. This phase would be directed at the Israeli security establishment, which has been clinical in its assessment of the value of the PA—unlike many Israeli politicians, who tend to be driven by political expediency and passions. It's been Israel's security professionals who have historically urged the government to maintain the regular transfer of customs revenues to the PA in order to pay the salaries of its officials (including security forces) and maintain stability in the West Bank.

In order to halt intelligence-sharing and coordination, an order would come down from Abbas to, say, an interlocutor in Preventive Security, saying: No more communication with your Israeli counterparts, no more dialogue regarding "shared interests." Such silence from the Palestinian side would inevitably ring alarm bells in Israel, which is likely the point. The Palestinians' hope would be that the Israeli security establishment once again champions their cause in government deliberations.

On the ground, however, the Israeli army would respond quite differently. In all likelihood, Israel would feel the need to take more assertive action inside Palestinian-controlled territory in order to make up for the absence of PA security forces. After all, with the Palestinians unresponsive, someone would need to act against suspected militants. Increased raids would likely trigger not only a popular backlash among ordinary Palestinians, but direct friction between Israeli and Palestinian security forces (due to the lack of coordination). The likelihood of Palestinian security forces firing on Israelis, as they did during the second intifada, is remote; but the potential for miscalculation on both sides would greatly increase.

Once the Palestinian leadership publicly undermines the "holiness" of security cooperation as a matter of policy, they may feel compelled to move to the second phase, which would target public opinion on both sides. For the Palestinian public, increased Israeli raids would necessitate a move similar to the Qalandiya demonstration, in which the people are allowed to "vent out"—not at the PA, of course, but at Israel. With the PA riot police pulled from the streets of the West Bank, anything becomes possible: Marches on checkpoints, marches on settlements, instability, escalation, chaos. The Israeli public would undoubtedly take notice, and

realize how fragile the situation in the West Bank actually is. For the Palestinian leadership, shattering the myth of a sustainable, indefinite status quo might be worth the gamble.

It is not a coincidence that the Palestinian leadership, including Abbas, keeps linking security cooperation to the overall existence of the PA. "The end of security cooperation," the Palestinian ambassador to Egypt recently observed, "equals the collapse of the PA." He is almost certainly right. It might even be the plan.

As self-defeating—if not suicidal—as this might seem, it is now a realistic possibility given the rhetoric emanating from Ramallah. The constant refrain heard from Palestinian officials over the past year has been that the "paradigm of Oslo" has come to an end; that the twenty-year experiment in autonomous self-rule and U.S.-brokered peace talks has to evolve into something—anything—else. Along the way, an intermediate step might very well entail ending security cooperation—the most positive element of the Oslo "paradigm."

Oslo's death has been predicted on countless occasions; yet ought of the limelight, both before and after the second intifada, security coordination soldiered on. The new political dynamics at play now seriously threaten what have been perhaps the most durable aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. Those who take pleasure in lambasting the "Oslo paradigm" and burying it prematurely may soon find themselves longing for one of its lasting legacies.

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