

# How Pentagon Bureaucracy Could Undermine West Bank Security

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Articles & Testimony

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**The proposal to downgrade the U.S. Security Coordinator from a three-star general to a colonel could decimate a crucial mission, especially amid the recent uptick in Israeli-Palestinian tensions.**

**S**ince its establishment in 2005, the office of the U.S. Security Coordinator (USSC) in Jerusalem has been one of the rare successes of U.S. Israel-Palestine policy. The USSC helped rebuild and reform the Palestinian security sector after the Second Intifada and elevated Israeli-Palestinian security coordination to unprecedented levels, enabling the two sides to defuse tensions in the West Bank when violence has soared and creating conditions conducive to improvements on the ground in the West Bank. Part of this success can be directly attributed to the fact that the mission has been led by a succession of three-star U.S. generals, who have had the seniority to allow them access to civilian and military officials in Washington, Jerusalem, and Ramallah. Rather than undermining the mission by downgrading the rank of its head from a three-star general to a colonel as the Pentagon is now [reportedly \(https://www.axios.com/2022/06/01/pentagon-security-coordinator-rank-palestinians\)](https://www.axios.com/2022/06/01/pentagon-security-coordinator-rank-palestinians) considering, the United States and its partners should examine how to strengthen it.

## Background: The USSC and Why the U.S. Is Poised to Downgrade It

**T**he USSC was established in 2005 by the State Department as part of the [Roadmap for Peace \(https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ei/rls/22520.htm\)](https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ei/rls/22520.htm). It is a joint team representing, in addition to the United States, seven

other NATO countries (the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, Italy, Turkey, Poland, and Bulgaria), yet its core is made up of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) staff. The three-star general in charge reports to both the Secretary of State and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The USSC coordinates with Israel and the Palestinian Authority to deepen security coordination between the two sides, improve the capacity of the Palestinian security services, and advise the PA on security sector reform. The USSC has been unique in two important ways: the senior rank of its leadership and its headquarters in Jerusalem, enabling, as its [charter \(https://www.state.gov/about-us-united-states-security-coordinator-for-israel-and-the-palestinian-authority/\)](https://www.state.gov/about-us-united-states-security-coordinator-for-israel-and-the-palestinian-authority/) describes, “persistent presence [that] provides a positive and visible sign of the U.S. commitment to an enduring partnership with both Israel and the Palestinian people.”

However, due to a bureaucratic mandate, the United States is about to send exactly the opposite signal. In 2017, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the federal law that authorizes DoD spending and is the congressional voice in DoD policy, contained a provision to [reduce \(https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FY17%20NDAA%20Bill%20Summary.pdf\)](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FY17%20NDAA%20Bill%20Summary.pdf) the number of general and flag officers (GFOs) by [111 \(https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R44389.pdf\)](https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R44389.pdf) (primarily four- and three-star but also two-star and one-star generals). The Pentagon now plans to implement this provision, lowering the ranks of senior officers around the world including that of the Jerusalem USSC GFO. Granted, U.S. foreign policy and defense priorities are elsewhere and the number of senior generals has increased disproportionately relative to the U.S. military as a whole and, given budget constraints, there is a need to balance out the officer corps. Yet, including the USSC in this plan is ill-timed. First, there is an uptick in terrorism and violence again in the West Bank, after years of relative quiet. Moreover, following tensions in Jerusalem during Ramadan and Passover as well as the Flag March during Jerusalem Day, relations between the PA and Israel are tense, and the PA has (once again) [threatened \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/palestinian-authority-awaits-bidens-visit-region\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/palestinian-authority-awaits-bidens-visit-region) to revoke recognition of Israel and stop civilian and security coordination with their Israeli counterparts. Finally, U.S.-PA relations have soured after, in lieu of reopening the closed consulate, the Biden administration last week [upgraded \(https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-709002\)](https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-709002) and renamed the Palestinian Affairs Unit to the U.S. Office of Palestinian Affairs in Jerusalem. To address these tensions, the United States [dispatched \(https://www.jpost.com/international/article-709162\)](https://www.jpost.com/international/article-709162) senior diplomats including newly confirmed Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf to Jerusalem and Ramallah to [deepen \(https://www.state.gov/assistant-secretary-leafs-travel-to-israel-and-the-west-bank/\)](https://www.state.gov/assistant-secretary-leafs-travel-to-israel-and-the-west-bank/) “bilateral U.S. cooperation with both Israel and the Palestinian Authority [and] Israeli-Palestinian relations.” Downgrading the USSC mission now goes against U.S. stated objectives and risks destroying the many achievements it has accomplished in the last 18 years.

## Symbolic Yet Essential

**H**aving a GFO lead the mission sends a symbolic message that the United States is genuinely committed to Palestinian Security Forces (PASF) reform and to security coordination. In a region where symbolism is highly important, where U.S. partners are anxious about being left behind, this should not be underestimated—nor should the negative symbolism of downgrading the mission. This is particularly true today when the PA is frustrated about what it sees as insufficient U.S. support, especially after failure of the U.S. to deliver on promises such as reopening the American consulate in Jerusalem.

Beyond symbolism, while parts of the USSC’s mandates resemble a “train and equip” mission that can be managed by a lower-rank officer, its core aspects demand engagement by a high-level officer.

In normal times, the “coordination” aspect of the USSC’s mission seems superfluous. Palestinian and Israeli security officials cooperate on all levels, from daily coordination by junior officers to regular engagement between the

highest levels of Palestinian and Israeli security leaders, mostly without any visible American involvement (notwithstanding important U.S. “tending” to ties).

## Facilitating Security Coordination

Indeed, security coordination has become so routinized that it is easy to forget that in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, routine can very quickly and violently be interrupted. It is in such times of crisis that the USSC’s coordination role becomes critical. In the most extreme case—the 2017 Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif crisis when the PA officially suspended security coordination—the USSC was the only channel through which the two sides could coordinate and prevent a bad situation from spinning completely out of control. But even in lesser crises, such as the events surrounding Jenin in recent weeks, the USSC provides a steady, dispassionate, and more objective voice, helping tensions cool down.

Beyond crisis response, building and improving the PASF requires coordination with Israel, including, for example, when it comes to transferring weapons and certain types of equipment to the PASF. While these weapons transfers do not necessarily represent a security threat to Israel, the political atmosphere and lack of trust could make Israeli officials hesitant about them. In such cases, the USSC has often effectively played the role of intermediary or foil.

## Enhancing the PASF

This is particularly relevant today as the PASF has reached a stage where it needs to be enlarged and upgraded to adapt it to current security needs. For example, as a result of increased terrorism emerging from the Jenin refugee camp, Israeli defense officials are suggesting to expand the PASF from nine brigades to ten, and drawing the staff for the tenth brigade from the Jenin refugee camp and its surroundings, an impoverished area with a religious character, high unemployment, and a governance vacuum. A new brigade would recruit a substantial number of people (350-600), providing them with employment and social structure. Subordinate to the PA, the brigade would restore law and order to the Jenin area and support the heightened security needs throughout the West Bank, which have evolved substantially due to a growing population and the emergence of new types of threats since the PASF were rebuilt in 2005. Building a brigade, including staffing, equipping, and training (most likely in Jordan), requires restoring the USSC’s muscle and funding to previous levels. Undermining the mission by downgrading the USSC is definitely not conducive to this goal.

## Maintaining American Leadership

In addition to being able to mediate and defuse tensions between Israelis and Palestinians effectively, the USSC needs to be of sufficient seniority to be able to establish relations and, if need be, assertively engage Palestinian and Israeli security leaders and their civilian superiors. Put bluntly, an American colonel would not be able to effectively engage either an Israeli or a Palestinian general, let alone relevant ministers. Only an American general can.

Similarly, reforming the Palestinian security sector is a complex task, which requires constant engagement with high-level Palestinian security and civilian officials. At a structural level, reforming the PASF requires placing it under the civilian control of the Ministry of Interior. Furthermore, there is a need to create a legal framework that governs the doctrine, operations, chain of command, and links between the different security bodies. Moreover, while some PASF positions have been unstaffed for years, others have been led by the same individuals for over 15 years in violation of legal provisions, leading to inefficiencies and frustration among the forces. In addition, the PASF is losing credibility and public confidence and needs a serious push to better provide security and safety to the Palestinians in the West Bank and invest in regaining public trust. These, and similar structural changes, necessitate regular peer-level engagement with the Palestinian president, prime minister, interior minister, and security chiefs, and the ability to push back against the PA’s reluctance to reform. Even relatively simple tasks, such as creating

effective coordination between various PASF branches, require engagement with high-level Palestinian officials given the very centralized and territorial nature of the PA's bureaucracy. A lower-ranking officer would not have the gravitas to effectively conduct such engagements. Indeed, in these matters even a three-star general needs to be able to demonstrate support from Washington. Downgrading the USSC will send the exact opposite message.

This points to another reason to maintain the current rank of the coordinator: a successful USSC also needs to be able to navigate Washington. A three-star general would be more effective in securing political and financial support from Congress, while simultaneously navigating different interests and dynamics in the administration. Most important, perhaps, is the ability to get the attention and support of principals, particularly the Secretary of State and the National Security Advisor.

Finally, the U.S. Coordinator is the highest-ranking official among the representatives of the eight countries making up the USSC, followed by Canada and the United Kingdom, who both have brigadier generals (one-star) as their most senior officers to the mission. This multinational composition, under U.S. leadership, plays to the strengths of each of the partners. Lowering the rank of the coordinator to a colonel, below that of partner countries, would either officially mark the end of U.S. leadership of the USSC or, even worse, push other countries, all concerned about the war in Ukraine and constrained budgetarily, to lower the ranks of their officers, effectively killing the mission.

## Conclusion

**T**he USSC is perhaps the most successful U.S. initiative in the Israeli-Palestinian context. Without much fanfare, it has played a central role in rebuilding Israeli-Palestinian relations after the Second Intifada, reducing violence in a sustained manner, and creating a reasonably professional, capable security sector that can be the nucleus for building a future Palestinian state. Instead of downgrading the USSC, the Biden administration should be looking for ways to strengthen it, particularly in terms of demonstrating support from Washington for its mission.

The decision by the Biden administration to de-prioritize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is understandable—even wise—given the political realities in Israel and among the Palestinians. But doing away with a U.S. initiative that has successfully contributed to maintaining stability and, in doing so, has prevented escalation that would have otherwise drawn the United States back into the conflict is—to say the least—ill-advised and self-defeating.

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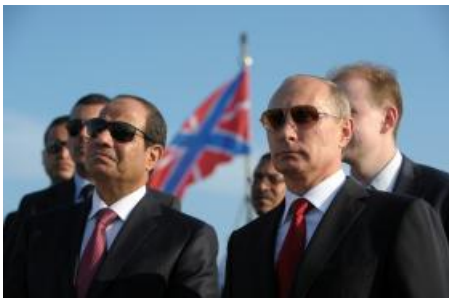
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