

# Youth Frustrations, PA Legitimacy Crisis Are Amplifying West Bank Violence

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**The PA's weakening grip over its territory, coupled with the rise of a young generation frustrated with their political leaders, has helped accelerate the vicious cycle of Palestinian attacks and IDF crackdowns.**

**V**iolence is on the rise again in the West Bank, and the main internal reasons for the surge seem to lie in two notable social and political trends that intersected over the past year. First, more young Palestinians have become frustrated and disillusioned with their local situation. Second, the Palestinian Authority's long-running [crisis of legitimacy \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/prevent-pa-unraveling-address-internal-reform\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/prevent-pa-unraveling-address-internal-reform) has increasingly prevented it from imposing control in key areas. The result has been more motivation and opportunities for violence.

## Youth Frustrations

**A**bout a third of the Palestinian population in the West Bank is between the ages of 15 and 29. Their generation grew up after the second intifada, which means most of them did not experience Israel's heavy security response against that uprising—a factor that tends to deter older Palestinians from participating in armed resistance. Moreover, due to the long-stalled peace process and high levels of domestic corruption, this generation lacks a visible political horizon and profoundly distrusts the established leadership.

Younger Palestinians also suffer from higher [unemployment \(https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=4397\)](https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=4397), especially among the educated. Those who do find work must often settle for unskilled jobs and low wages, especially compared to unskilled laborers who work in Israel.

Deep political alienation has become the norm as well, with many youths concluding that the PA leadership is not dedicated to bettering their personal and economic circumstances. For example, 84.9% of West Bank respondents in

a [July 2022 study \(http://www.jmcc.org/documents/Jmcc99En6.pdf\)](http://www.jmcc.org/documents/Jmcc99En6.pdf) stated their belief that Palestinian youths still have substantial political aspirations. Yet corruption, nepotism, and [centralized leadership structures \(https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13698249.2022.2015194\)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13698249.2022.2015194) have left this age group with little opportunity to reach the upper echelons of factions affiliated with the Palestine Liberation Organization, much less attain positions of authority. Consequently, 66.2% of West Bank respondents agreed with the contention that youth membership in such factions has experienced a “major retreat.”

This estrangement has both strategic and operational implications. Strategically, the ideas promoted under the leadership of President Mahmoud Abbas—a two-state solution, nonviolent resistance, diplomacy, and security coordination with Israel—have become anathema to most young Palestinians. According to a [June 2022 survey \(https://pcpsr.org/en/node/912\)](https://pcpsr.org/en/node/912), the majority of youths now support a return to armed confrontation and intifada. Such trends are partly attributable to the fact that younger Palestinians are highly exposed to social media platforms where incitement to violence is rife.

Operationally, more young Palestinians appear to be engaging in [lone-wolf operations \(https://www.npr.org/2023/01/28/1152308932/two-men-wounded-attack-jerusalem\)](https://www.npr.org/2023/01/28/1152308932/two-men-wounded-attack-jerusalem) or forming/joining new armed factions. In the aforementioned June survey, 69% of respondents between ages 18 and 22 agreed with the statement “attacks inside Israel carried out by Palestinians unaffiliated with known armed groups contribute to the national interest of ending the occupation”—the “known groups” being Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and Fatah militias.

## Legitimacy Crisis

The PA is at its weakest point in two decades, with a [recent poll \(https://pcpsr.org/en/node/926\)](https://pcpsr.org/en/node/926) indicating that 81% of Palestinians view it as corrupt while 75% demand Abbas’s resignation. This public estrangement is reducing the PA’s grip over parts of the territory under its formal control (i.e., Area A of the West Bank). In Jenin, Nablus, and portions of Hebron, it is no longer able to maintain public order or even provide basic services in some cases. Fatah’s nemeses, Hamas and PIJ, have exploited this lawlessness to expand beyond Gaza, while Fatah’s own armed wings, the Tanzim and al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, have ramped up their activities as well.

This situation has created ideal conditions for chaos and violence—especially in refugee camps, which are overflowing with [illegal weapons \(https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-723903\)](https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-723903) and frustrated, unemployed young men, often school dropouts. Multiple new armed factions (e.g., the Lion’s Den) have emerged in Nablus, Jenin, Tulkarem, and camps inside Ramallah. These factions have been responsible for much of the rise in violence against Israeli citizens and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). They also openly oppose the PA and confront its security forces—last September, for instance, fierce clashes broke out between protesters in Nablus and the Palestinian Authority Security Forces (PASF) when the latter attempted [to arrest \(https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/20/palestinian-man-killed-in-ongoing-clashes-with-pa-in-nablus\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/20/palestinian-man-killed-in-ongoing-clashes-with-pa-in-nablus) a popular local militant wanted by Israel. Since then, the PASF have avoided that area and other militant hubs such as the Jenin camp.

These groups enjoy substantial popular support because many Palestinians no longer trust the PA to protect them against Israeli military raids and Jewish settler violence. In turn, the IDF has intensified its operations following attacks by these factions, creating a vicious cycle in which more and more Palestinians rally behind the militants. Similar to the youth sentiments cited above, 65% of all West Bank respondents in a [recent poll \(https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/924\)](https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/924) were in favor of forming more armed factions.

Thwarting attacks by the new factions has become more difficult at times due to the lack of clear hierarchy among them. Generally, their targets have been limited to IDF personnel and Israeli settlers in the West Bank, though Israel

claimed last September that it **had foiled (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2022/09/a-newly-established-militant-organization-in-the-west-bank-claims-several-attacks.php>)** a Lion's Den plan to attack Tel Aviv. Anger at Hamas and Fatah's failure to reconcile and work together on improving conditions for Palestinians has driven the new factions to dissociate from them— though the degree to which they are actually independent from these established organizations has yet to be determined.

As for individual members, interviews conducted by the author revealed that the new factions consist mostly of young men age 17 to 25, though several are in their mid-thirties. Like many of their fellow Palestinians, these operatives have become disenchanted with the PA and perceive it as Israel's corrupt accomplice. Some are former members of Fatah; others are former PASF personnel or have close family in that force. Their goals range from protecting Palestinians to gaining recognition, exacting revenge against the PA and Israel, and/or scoring side payments from the armed groups that deploy them. Many young Palestinians see these militants as role models, often using pictures of those killed as **decoration**

**(<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/04/world/middleeast/west-bank-lions-den.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>)**.

All of these characteristics—a largely young membership, a proven ability to mobilize via social media, and a high-profile message of Palestinian unity, armed resistance, and defiance toward the current Palestinian leadership— have made these factions politically difficult for the PA and its security forces to curb without risking wider violence. In fact, some senior PA officials have **glorified (<https://www.algemeiner.com/2023/03/08/do-israeli-arrest-raids-in-the-west-bank-violate-international-law/>)** the actions of these groups on several occasions.

## Policy Implications

**B**ecause further deterioration in the West Bank will only create more opportunities for violence, the United States, Israel, and the PA have a strong mutual interest in restoring governability and stability. One crucial step is to increase the PASF's capacity, which could enable the PA to improve its efforts on multiple fronts—enforcing rule of law, seizing illegal weapons, raising the costs of forming/joining armed factions, confronting militants and criminal gangs, countering Hamas and PIJ cells, and engaging in productive talks with Israel. Effective governance could also help reduce public support for armed factions.

Currently, the U.S. security coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority, Lt. Gen. Michael Fenzel, is leading efforts to help the PA restore control over the northern West Bank. Specifically, he has encouraged more active American involvement in security coordination between Jerusalem and Ramallah, as well as joint U.S.-Jordanian training of PASF personnel (to be conducted inside the kingdom) and U.S. supervision over these forces after their deployment. Importantly, Fenzel's plan addresses ways to reduce friction between Palestinians, the IDF, and Israeli settlers by deploying PASF units to Area A and significantly reducing IDF activity in that area.

The recent U.S.-led **security summit (<https://www.state.gov/aqaba-joint-communique/>)** in Aqaba, Jordan, was an important step toward improving trust in this regard, with Israel and the PA agreeing to halt unilateral moves for the next four to six months. A follow-up meeting is scheduled to be held in Sharm al-Sheikh, Egypt, on March 17. Yet both sides will have difficulty fulfilling pledges made at such gatherings—Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu's position has been weakened **by the far-right partners (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-expands-settlements-smotrich-increases-his-authority>)** in his political coalition, while Abbas is facing deep legitimacy challenges and **succession questions (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/palestinian-politics-after-abbas-sudden-succession-essay-series>)**.

The current situation also illustrates the limits of the “economic peace” framework, which is not a viable long-term measure for addressing Palestinian national aspirations or preventing violence. Therefore, the United States should

supplement economic opportunities by identifying ways to renew the political process between Israel and the PA. Wider regional and international cooperation is also needed to develop the Palestinian economy, improve quality of life in the West Bank, ensure that Palestinians have better access to basic services, and boost the PA's legitimacy. In particular, greater focus is needed on public health, education, female empowerment, vocational programs, and employment opportunities within the West Bank, especially for younger generations.

Indeed, the large population of young Palestinians should be the principal driver of the West Bank's economy and future economic policies. These individuals need more employment opportunities inside the West Bank, so they do not feel compelled to seek jobs in Israel or engage in illicit activity against the PA. In the longer term, the PA will need to inject young blood into the system and pursue internal reforms that seriously address corruption, lack of democracy, and low approval rates.

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