

# Prioritizing the West Bank Amid Escalation and Deterioration

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

## Israel's most significant military operation in the territory since the second intifada highlights the growing danger of a new front opening alongside the Gaza war.

The operation begun on August 27 by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in the northern West Bank is another milestone in Israel's struggle against Palestinian terrorism from that territory. Aimed at eradicating the local terrorist infrastructure, the operation is the largest since Defensive Shield in 2002 and involves three brigades working in several locations simultaneously. According to figures from the Israel Security Agency (ISA), 1,245 attacks emanated from the northern half of the West Bank over the past year, 255 of them categorized as "significant." There were also 435 attacks against IDF targets. Since October 7, twenty-four Israelis have been killed in such attacks.

Most recently, the failed Tel Aviv suicide bombing on August 18 was carried out by a Palestinian from this area (specifically Nablus). Hamas, whose last "successful" suicide attack inside Israel was a Jerusalem bus bombing in April 2016, claimed responsibility for the Tel Aviv attack and declared its intention to renew suicide bombings in Israel.

Even before the current IDF operation, Israel was constantly working to crush the West Bank terrorist infrastructure, focusing in recent years on the more challenging northern half. Over time, these efforts left their mark, making it difficult for Hamas to attack inside Israel.

Gradually, however, this difficulty has led Hamas and other terrorist organizations to focus more on attacks inside the West Bank. Thus, starting in 2021, various terrorist "battalions" were formed in the territory, mainly in the northern refugee camps. The weak Palestinian Authority rarely entered these areas, nor did Israel due to agreements

with the PA. These battalions focused on attacking both IDF personnel operating in the West Bank and Israeli settlers, later expanding the violence to communities on the Israeli side of the West Bank security barrier, such as Emek Hefer and Gilboa.

According to ISA estimates, about fifteen battalions from Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other Palestinian factions are currently operating in the West Bank. Each has dozens of fighters as well as commanders, financiers, and sabotage experts, resulting in attacks that are increasingly sophisticated and daring. The Gaza war has inspired these battalions, which have begun to “Gazify” the West Bank by manufacturing improvised explosive devices (IEDs), digging tunnels, and attempting to produce rockets.

This terrorist infrastructure grew with the backing and support of Hamas figures in Gaza and abroad, who believed that investing in them would yield a return when the “great war” broke out in Gaza and the various fronts united against Israel. Saleh al-Arouri, who was killed by an Israeli airstrike near Beirut in January, was the Hamas figure responsible for encouraging terrorism in the West Bank and preparing the area as a future battlefield. Hamas finance official Zaher Jabarin, who lives in Turkey but is close to Iran and Hezbollah, has replaced Arouri.

Since October 7, Israel has been responding to all manifestations of terrorism in the West Bank, using methods that have not been employed since the second intifada in the early 2000s. In addition to dozens of aerial strikes, the IDF has carried out extensive arrest operations, detaining more than 4,000 suspects so far. It has also confiscated large quantities of weaponry, including IEDs and raw materials, along with large sums of money, estimated in the millions of dollars.

The deteriorating security situation is fed by conditions in the Palestinian arena. The West Bank has been undergoing a slow and gradual **process of disintegration (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/west-bank-economics-are-key-stabilizing-palestinian-authority-or-forcing-its>)** for a long time. The weakening of the PA and the **loss of public support (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-if-gazas-day-after-converges-day-after-abbas>)** for President Mahmoud Abbas and his political path have strengthened opposition elements led by Hamas as well as the “resistance” agenda it represents. On social media, Hamas is frequently perceived as restoring Palestinian honor and representing the interests of the Palestinian public.

## **A Playground for the “Axis of Resistance”**

**T**he intensifying friction with Israel—which includes frequent IDF raids in Area A, the portion of the West Bank administered exclusively by the PA—exact a heavy price. A large number of Palestinians (634) have been killed in the West Bank since the Gaza war began; this, combined with frequent waves of arrests, has left many residents feeling a loss of personal security.

The West Bank economy, which is inherently weak, is on the verge of crisis. Israel’s restrictions on the PA since the Gaza war began—particularly its withholding of the Gaza portion of the tax revenues it normally transfers to the PA and the revocation of 160,000 permits to work in Israel—have made it difficult for the PA to provide services to the population and harmed the standard of living.

Moreover, the PA for a long time has been paying partial salaries to officials—including security personnel, who are now less willing to prevent terrorism and less motivated to maintain stability. Signs of disintegration are also evident in the ruling Fatah Party, as its activists join with Hamas operatives and take part in terrorist “battalion” activities against Israel.

As for the wider Palestinian public, the terrible scenes of war in Gaza, the large number of fatalities and people arrested in Israeli military operations in the West Bank, and the violence by Jewish extremists have deepened the public’s sense of distress. The deteriorating economic situation (including a high unemployment rate, especially in

the northern West Bank) encourages anarchy and facilitates recruitment to terrorist organizations.

Yet despite numerous triggers over the past year, the general public in the West Bank has not engaged in wide popular protest. In recent months there has been a decline in the scope of incidents involving stone throwing, Molotov cocktails, demonstrations, and riots. Nevertheless, Hamas is still perceived as restoring Palestinian honor by fighting Israel and is therefore popular with the public, particularly young people. Refugee camp residents and university students are more willing to join the group, including as terrorist operatives. Furthermore, when Palestinians are asked to assist Hamas with logistical support, such as hiding wanted persons, transferring messages, and donating money, many find it hard to resist, and this support is an important factor in the resurgence of terrorism.

Hamas efforts to set the West Bank ablaze have long been backed by Iran and Hezbollah. In recent years, the territory has become the de facto playground of the “axis of resistance,” which is flooding local communities with weapons, money, and terrorist know-how. Today, many IEDs manufactured in the northern West Bank contain large quantities of explosives, which are smuggled from Iran to Syria and from there through the border with Jordan. Besides destabilizing the West Bank, this flow of arms and funds also undermines the Hashemite Kingdom’s national security.

Israel has been working to locate weapons-manufacturing workshops and prevent arms from entering the West Bank from outside, especially Jordan, or through theft from Israeli army bases. So far, however, these efforts have not been very successful. Israel’s main concern is the possibility that more dangerous weapons like advanced IEDs, mines, and rockets will be smuggled into the area, which would improve the quality of attacks, exact a high price in blood, and create an even more challenging security situation.

## Recommendations

**R**ecent years, particularly the period since October 7, have seen an increase in West Bank terrorism, mainly in the northern part of the territory. This spike has been encouraged by Hamas and backed by Iran and Hezbollah, which have exploited the PA’s lack of governance. This has been accompanied by a flood of weapons (especially high-quality IEDs), intensified fighting against the IDF, and an attempt to renew suicide bombings inside Israel.

In parallel to winning the war in Gaza and establishing a stable postwar situation, Israel will need to work intensively to eradicate terrorism in the West Bank and prevent it from spilling over into Israel. That is why it launched its latest military operation: to prevent the West Bank from becoming another front in the war.

For this reason, it is also important to address the porousness of the West Bank security barrier. Even today under wartime conditions, tens of thousands of Palestinians enter Israel illegally on a near-daily basis. According to Israeli authorities, the most recent daily count was around 40,000, though the figure was even higher a few months ago. These individuals are generally workers trying to find employment; they tend to leave and return daily, though some stay in Israel for as long as a week at a time. Inevitably, some terrorist operatives slip through as well. Given that most of the gaps through which they infiltrate are in the so-called Jerusalem Envelope, efforts to complete the security barrier need to be prioritized in these areas, both through accelerated construction and by moving troops there from other locations. The police should also improve their handling of employers and others who facilitate the illegal entry of Palestinians.

At the same time, Israel needs to address the weapons and funds coming from Iran and Hezbollah, which will require cooperation with Jordan and the PA. Preventing smuggling along the border with Jordan requires international cooperation, led by the United States. Israel must invest more in sealing that border. This means assisting the Jordanians in various areas—which is contingent on the state of their bilateral relations—and investing in additional troops and construction of a border fence along a frontier that is mostly open at present. Moreover, the Jordanians

should be asked to do more about criminal smuggling networks, many of which also enable arms smuggling.

However, as in Gaza, the solutions to terrorism are not only military. There must be a systemic response that **strengthens the PA (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/reforming-palestinian-authority-roadmap-change>)** and enables it to function while weakening the power of West Bank terrorists. It is important to remove incentives for West Bank residents to engage in terrorism by permitting them to work in Israel.

Implementing this measure would be politically difficult given the heightened Israeli fears of terrorist infiltration post-October 7. Yet the fact that tens of thousands of Palestinian workers have already been streaming into Israel illegally throughout the war suggests that there is some room for debate and policy shifts on this issue. So far, most West Bank residents have avoided rising up because they still have something to lose, including the hope of returning to their jobs in Israel or otherwise seeking better prospects once the war is over. The problem is that these restraining factors are steadily diminishing because of Israel's wartime policies in the territory.

In addition, Israel must refrain from withholding tax revenues from the PA as long as it can ensure that they will not be used to fund prisoners and families of "martyrs." It is also important to encourage regional economic investment in the West Bank by countries like the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

Action must be taken to reduce Jewish extremist violence against Palestinians as well, including arrests and sanctions. While Palestinian violence undoubtedly sows fear among Israeli settlers, it also gives extreme right-wing elements an excuse to act in ways that intensify the conflict, and it is backed by some in Israel's government. There is an urgent need to increase police enforcement against Israeli rioters and terrorists—an effort that has been faltering under National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir. It is also important to expand welfare and education activities for the so-called "Hilltop Youth," a group of young extremists who lay claim to the entirety of "Eretz Yisrael" (the Land of Israel) through various acts of violence.

Finally, improving the situation in the West Bank should be a higher priority for Israel as a means to prevent future escalation, terrorism, and anarchy. At the same time, Israel must stop viewing the PA only as part of the problem—if officials want to prevent a quick slide into a one-state situation, the PA needs to be part of the solution too.

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