

PA Reform Is Key to West Bank Stability—and Possible Rule in Gaza

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Jan 17, 2025

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Brief Analysis

Although the Palestinian Authority’s increased governance activities may not indicate deep change, they could help stabilize the security situation in the West Bank and, perhaps, pave the way for PA rule in postwar Gaza.

For the first time in years, the Palestinian Authority has been stepping up its activities in various areas of governance. This includes increasing its counterterrorism operations in the West Bank, appointing a temporary replacement for President Mahmoud Abbas in the event he is incapacitated, and signaling willingness to reform the mechanism for payments to prisoners.

This unusual surge in activity appears to be aimed primarily at demonstrating the PA’s governance and enforcement capabilities against opposition forces challenging its authority. This is particularly important at a time when Hamas is already challenging the PA in the West Bank and could do so even more energetically once Israel releases Hamas prisoners as part of the new deal to free hostages in Gaza. Their release could strengthen Hamas politically and militarily, reinvigorating the idea of victory through “resistance.” The PA’s current activity also serves as a message to Israel and the incoming U.S. administration that it can address internal challenges in the West Bank, implement necessary reforms, and be an alternative to Hamas in Gaza on the “day after” the war.

At this stage, the scope and effectiveness of the PA’s measures in the West Bank remain unclear, partly because it is making greater efforts in some areas, particularly security initiatives, and less on political and social issues. Given the PA’s poor functionality and low public standing, these measures are unlikely to represent a profound change, nor are they expected to transform the PA—certainly not during Abbas’s tenure.

Nevertheless, given the complex situation Israel faces and the challenges it will likely encounter in the near future, it would do well to continue supporting the PA, particularly in security and governance, to maintain a stable security

situation in the face of terrorist entities in the West Bank that are continually enhancing their military capabilities. Moreover, some fifteen months after the October 7 attack, Israel is still struggling to identify a viable alternative to Hamas in Gaza, and the PA seems to have emerged as the least bad of all the bad options.

PA Security Operations in the Northern West Bank

Over the past month, PA security forces have been carrying out intensive operations for the first time in a decade, acting with determination to eliminate pockets of terrorism and lawlessness in the Jenin area, particularly the Jenin refugee camp. Dubbed “Homeland Defense,” the operation began on December 14 and has targeted the terrorist groups (“battalions”) that emerged in the northern West Bank (Jenin, Tulkarem, and Nablus) in recent years and began spreading to other areas, like Ramallah.

These groups—which often clash with Israeli forces—are funded by Iran and also receive support from established organizations, particularly Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). They also oppose the PA and undermine its authority. In recent months, an increasing number of images and videos have been circulating online showing armed militants conducting marches and parades in various West Bank locations. At these events, they express support for Hamas and opposition to the PA, accusing it of collaborating with Israel.

As part of its efforts in Jenin and beyond to prevent terrorism and chaos, the PA has deployed special forces (e.g., Units 9 and 101) and utilized advanced measures against wanted individuals, such as firing rocket-propelled grenades at their residences. Security forces have arrested 700 Palestinians, seized and destroyed dozens of booby-trapped vehicles, and uncovered significant quantities of weapons and ammunition. These actions foiled planned attacks on Israeli targets.

The PA security apparatus is also cracking down on those expressing support for Hamas or PIJ or promoting protests against the PA. The measures taken include economic penalties, border crossing restrictions, and arrests. The PA plans to continue these measures, as decided in a recent meeting chaired by General Intelligence chief Maj. Gen. Majid Faraj.

Despite the PA’s operation in Jenin, Palestinian terrorism in the West Bank continues to exact a bloody price. The weeks since December 14 have seen eight terrorist attacks categorized as “significant” by the Israel Security Agency (killing four Israelis), along with forty-five other attacks. In all of them, the perpetrators came from the northern West Bank. Israel also thwarted ninety attack plots and arrested 140 Palestinians for involvement in terrorism. Although PA security forces have shown a willingness to eradicate such activity, their operational capabilities are limited, and they must make profound changes and obtain external assistance in training, intelligence, and equipment.

Fattouh as Abbas’s Temporary Replacement

In the political realm, there appears to be a change, though some perceive it as superficial. For over a decade, the eighty-nine-year-old Abbas has faced external and internal pressure to appoint a successor who could lead the Palestinians after his departure. The primary concern is that his absence could spark a power struggle among competing candidates for the presidency. The war in Gaza has added urgency to these discussions as Arab states and Washington explore alternatives to Hamas rule, including proposals to reinvigorate and reorganize the PA.

Abbas avoided appointing a successor, possibly because he lacked a preferred candidate or feared that a nominee might act against him during his lifetime. Nevertheless, in a surprising move, he recently announced that if he is incapacitated, Rawhi Fattouh will become president for ninety days until general elections can be held.

Fattouh is not a candidate for PA chairman in future elections. After Yasser Arafat’s death in November 2004, he served as interim chairman until Abbas was elected in January 2005. Today, he is considered close to Abbas and aligned with the president’s political positions, but his role would be a temporary one. His appointment is

apparently intended to address external pressures and ensure immediate stability post-Abbas.

Reforming the Prisoner Payment System

For many years, Israeli and international officials have pressured Abbas to reform the policy of paying Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails and the families of Palestinians killed by Israel. The current system is based on the length of the prisoner's sentence, essentially rewarding individuals who kill more Israelis with higher payments. The United States, European countries, and Israel have asked the PA to adopt a system based on social welfare criteria instead, but Abbas has resisted such changes, likely because the prisoners have symbolic significance in Palestinian society.

Recently, a PA legal representative [indicated \(https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-836878\)](https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-836878) that current discussions on this issue may lead to a shift in this longstanding policy. In addition to addressing a key point of contention between the PA, Israel, and the United States, implementing such a shift could fulfill the requirements of the 2018 Taylor Force Act, which prohibits U.S. aid to the PA as long as it continues its current prisoner payment policy.

Conclusion

The fragile security situation has underscored to President Abbas that he cannot remain passive and must address the centers of terrorism and chaos in the West Bank to avoid losing control. Additionally, a hostage-prisoner exchange between Israel and Hamas and the attendant release of Palestinian prisoners could strengthen Hamas's military, political, and public standing in the West Bank. Furthermore, regional and international developments in recent months—particularly the weakening of Iran's Shia axis, the fall of the Syrian regime, and the election of Donald Trump—have shown Abbas that continued inaction might deprive him of not only a Palestinian state, but also a meaningful legacy.

Accordingly, while Abbas boycotted Trump during his first term, he is now signaling a willingness to cooperate with Washington and is taking steps to demonstrate his control over the West Bank. These actions might also demonstrate the PA's ability to govern postwar Gaza if given the opportunity. While the current security operations and political changes may not represent a deep transformation—certainly not one that will alter the military, political, and social system under Abbas's leadership—they underscore the importance of continued U.S. and Israeli support for the PA in various areas, particularly security. Specifically, this support should include:

- maintaining cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian security officials to enhance coordination and trust;
- providing training, professional guidance, and equipment to PA security forces to address terrorist hubs in the West Bank fueled by Iranian funding and weaponry;
- pressuring the PA to expedite reform of the prisoner payment system;
- transferring funds owed to the PA under the 1994 Paris Protocol to enable security personnel to receive their salaries;
- developing a comprehensive plan involving Saudi Arabia, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates to invest in areas reclaimed by PA security forces and cleared of most terrorist groups.

Finally, it is important to encourage the PA to implement profound changes in a number of areas—security, political, economic, and social—to strengthen its status and foster stability in the West Bank, and to prevent Fatah from being weakened as Hamas grows stronger after the hostage deal. In the longer term, it is important to bolster the PA so that it can serve as an alternative to Hamas in Gaza—which is not the optimal scenario, but better than all the other options currently available.

Neomi Neumann is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute and former head of the research unit at the Israel Security Agency. ❖

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