Securing the Peace

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Articles & Testimony

Far from being an intractable impediment, the security issue could help set the foundations of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

On the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meetings in New York this fall, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was asked about his commitment to a two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To both Donald Trump and several U.S. media outlets, Netanyahu gave essentially the same answer. “My view of a potential agreement is that the Palestinians have all the powers to govern themselves, but none of the powers to threaten us,” Netanyahu told NPR. “The key power that must . . . not be in their hands is the question of security. In the tiny area west of the Jordan River up to the Mediterranean . . . Israel must retain the overriding security responsibility.”

Conspicuous by their absence were issues the Israeli premier had previously touted as obstacles to peace, such as Palestinian non-recognition of Israel as a Jewish state, incitement, salary payments to prisoners and “martyr” families, possible settlement withdrawals, and the future of Jerusalem. In their stead he spoke of a single concern: security west of the Jordan River.

Security, to be sure, has been a major element in previous Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, with emphasis on maintaining an Israeli military presence in the Jordan Valley border region and other strategic outposts in the West Bank. The fear, going back decades, was an invasion from the east, across the Jordan River—a scenario that became much less acute after the 2003 fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. In more recent times, the Arab Spring uprisings raised concerns of instability and terror seeping into the West Bank.

There have been multiple plans put forward to allay this particular Israeli anxiety, with the most recent ones being by a U.S. mission, led by General John Allen, as well as by a retired group of Israeli security officers called Commanders for Israel’s Security. While the Netanyahu government has been less than impressed with these efforts,

border security—including a continued Israel Defense Forces (IDF) presence in the Jordan Valley—should be a resolvable problem. The worst that can be said of the matter is that it doesn't rise to the level of intractability of other final status issues like, say, Palestinian sovereignty in Jerusalem or the evacuation of Israeli settlers from Hebron.

Indeed, the long-held Israeli demand for a demilitarized Palestinian state—highlighted repeatedly by Netanyahu this fall—is a misnomer in two senses. First, the Palestinians have effectively conceded the argument, based on statements and leaks from past negotiating rounds; under any scenario, a future Palestinian state will not have an army, that is, a military equipped with heavy offensive weapons, armor, air power and the like. Second, and in contrast to the first point, demilitarized does not mean lacking a security force.

Recent statements made by Netanyahu and several of his senior ministers, comparing a future Palestinian state to Costa Rica (famous for having no military at all) are wide of the mark. "Different people mean different things when they say 'states,'" Netanyahu told CNN, alluding to other state models and the need for demilitarization. "So rather than talk about labels, I'd like to talk about substance."

Yet substantively, for over two decades a significant Palestinian security force—today numbering nearly 30,000 men-under-arms—has been operating west of the Jordan River; substantively, too, Israel has already ceded security control over large pockets of the West Bank to the Palestinian Authority (PA). Over the past decade, these Palestinian Authority Security Forces, trained by the United States and other international partners, have worked in close cooperation with the IDF to maintain stability. These forces are, in many respects, the most positive aspect of the entire peace process enterprise. Far from being the impediment, security could help set the foundation of an Israeli-Palestinian peace.

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From the very first agreements signed as part of the Oslo Accords, the PA, envisioned as a temporary self-rule entity, was afforded a security force. By May 1994, jottings on maps became reality when Yasser Arafat and elements of the old Palestine Liberation Army returned to the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank to take up governing powers from vacating Israeli forces. The terminology used initially was a "strong police force" to provide "public order and internal security" for the Palestinian population—and they were allowed guns. But the larger objective was made clear by then-Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin when he infamously quipped, "The Palestinian Police will fight Hamas [i.e. terrorism] without B'Tselem, without the High Court, and without Mothers Against Silence"—that is, more effectively without the restraints placed on Israel by its human rights NGOs and judicial system.

As Arafat and the PA were given more territory to control, and more authority, the Palestinian Authority Security Force (PASF) grew exponentially: from the initial four branches to 12 by 2000; in 2004 the number was 15 by one count, and at a later point it had grown to an unwieldy 17. By the late 1990s, there was an officer-to-resident ratio of 1:50 in PA-controlled areas, making the small proto-state one of the most heavily policed territories in the world.

Despite the numbers, Arafat's PASF in the 1990s didn't in fact do what it was supposed to do: not only to crack down on Hamas and other rejectionist terror groups, but also to establish, writ large, a monopoly on the means of violence in the Palestinian Territories. As the late Middle East scholar Barry Rubin described it, Arafat "alternatively arrested, intimidated, complimented and freed Hamas leaders. He also let them maintain their institutions and even military networks." The waves of suicide bombings inside Israel during this period were a testament, like nothing else, to the PA's abject failure on this front. Disarmament of terror groups and outside militias (including ones from Arafat's own Fatah party), as called for repeatedly in the Israeli-Palestinian agreements, was never carried out. Even Palestinian officials lamented the fact that the PA, far from being a model state, came to resemble Somalia, Afghanistan, or "the American West 200 years ago."

Almost as concerning, serious incidents of PASF-on-IDF violence also took place during the Oslo years, beginning as

early as 1994. The opening of a tourist tunnel in September 1996 near Jerusalem's Western Wall/al-Haram al-Sharif complex unleashed the most serious escalation. The Hasmonean Tunnel riots, as the incident came to be known, marked the first time that PASF security personnel used live fire against Israeli troops on a wide scale. The unrest lasted for three days, claiming the lives of 69 Palestinians and 14 Israeli soldiers (including seven senior officers). It would of course be a dress rehearsal for what took place four years later with the outbreak of the Second Intifada (2000-05).

Arafat, it became apparent, never truly relinquished the military option with respect to Israel. PASF personnel and Fatah militiamen (the line between the two was increasingly blurred) became directly involved in the years of unrelenting terror. In response, Israel launched Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, retaking most West Bank cities that had been turned over to the PA. For all intents, the PASF ceased to function, decimated by Israeli countermeasures and internal anarchy and chaos. In November 2004 Arafat died, paving the way for Mahmoud Abbas to assume the PA presidency. By that time Israel had already redeployed back outside most Palestinian-controlled areas, or "Area A" of the West Bank as they were termed by the Oslo Accords. The following year, in September 2005, then-Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon withdrew all Israeli settlers and forces from Gaza.

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The specter of Israel's disengagement from Gaza haunts the peace process like nothing else before or since. Sharon, after all, demolished settlements and drew Israel back to the internationally recognized 1967 lines. After two years, however, Hamas violently overthrew the PA inside Gaza, the repercussions of which are still being felt more than a decade—and three wars—later. "We left Gaza and what happened?" Netanyahu recently posited. "This tiny thumb . . . became a position of radical Islam supported by Iran, they fired 4,000 missiles on us, not only on Beersheba and Ashdod—on Tel Aviv, Jerusalem. . . . Why is that? Because we're not there."

This position is shared, and promulgated, not only by Netanyahu and other right-wing Israeli politicians; it's also a commonly held belief by much of the Israeli public. Unilaterally withdrawing from territory, as much of the world demands (that is, ending the occupation) was tried, and all it did was pave the way for a belligerent "Hamastan" on Israel's southern edge. As an indictment of the PA's ability to hold territory (absent the IDF) it is, for many, almost unimpeachable. The lesson remains, as Netanyahu went on to add, that Israel needs "to be there all the time—that's why the West Bank [today] is not Gaza."

Without absolving the PA of its own responsibility for the Gazan fiasco, the context within which the disengagement happened should also matter: When it was carried out, perhaps more than simply how, is a crucial point often missing from the conversation.

The Second Intifada, as mentioned, decimated the PASF as well as the PA more broadly. Disarmed, and with their infrastructure and equipment smashed, the PASF in many areas was an institutional shell. Armed gunmen from the various factions roamed the streets, taking the law unto themselves and often running localized protection rackets. Opinion polling on the eve of the Gaza disengagement in 2005 showed that the Palestinian public placed greater trust in the armed wings of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad than in the various PASF services. These militant groups, hardened after years fighting the IDF during the Second Intifada, were growing in strength. Indeed, even prior to the disengagement, the head of Israel's military intelligence already assessed that Hamas had established a "'parallel authority' to the PA in Gaza."

Fatah, on the other hand, was beset by internal rivalries, turf battles, and petty politics. Increasingly Fatah cadres couldn't even protect themselves, let alone police territory. Mere days before the last Israeli left the coastal enclave, 100 heavily armed men stormed the Gazan home of Musa Arafat, cousin of the late President and a senior PA security chief in his own right. After an attack that lasted half an hour, Arafat was dragged into the street and

executed in the first light of dawn. The offices of a rival PASF service were located nearby, yet none of its personnel deigned to intervene. Musa Arafat's murder wasn't an outlier, but just one example of the lack of cohesion and solidarity within Fatah/PA ranks. It would prove to be extremely costly.

In June 2007, after two years of internecine armed clashes between Fatah and Hamas, especially inside Gaza, matters came to a head. In a mere six days, an estimated force of several thousand Hamas personnel in the territory routed a much larger PASF/Fatah opponent with a combined strength of 20,000 fighters. "Combined," however, was merely a theoretical concept: In truth, these forces were fragmented, largely leaderless, and lacking in organization, arms, and morale. As the local Fatah strongman Mohammed Dahlan (who was abroad during the putsch) lamented after the fact, "It would be very easy for a few people who have a goal to succeed over a large army that does not have a goal and does not have proper weaponry." The fall of Gaza, in short, may not have been a death foretold, but it arguably should have been.

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Fast forward almost a decade. It's a bleak winter day outside of Bethlehem in early 2016, and Lt. Col. Yair Pinto, an IDF battalion commander responsible for this sector of the southern West Bank, is driving with me in a lone jeep through various Palestinian villages. He gestures at a highway overpass ahead used by local teenagers to hurl rocks at Israeli cars below. "The expectation is that the Palestinian Authority's security forces will take care of it," Pinto, a veteran of the Second Intifada, said when I queried him on what countermeasures were in place. "I don't feel there isn't someone to trust on the other side."

The loss of Gaza and the division of the Palestinian Territories was a wakeup call for the PA leadership. Hamas was a clear, present, and genuine threat to Fatah dominance. The double game of the Arafat era and the collapse of the Second Intifada had culminated in the nadir of Gaza. Change was now of paramount importance, beginning with the PASF and what Palestinians referred to as the "security chaos" in their midst. Mahmoud Abbas, along with his Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, embarked on a reform program that would, at long last, attempt to implement the elusive maxim of "one gun, one law, one authority"—even if only in the West Bank.

The efforts of the past ten years have created a reality west of the Jordan River that is starkly different from the years preceding them. PASF battalions, with close U.S. support and Israeli approval, have been reconstituted, retrained, and redeployed back into Palestinian population centers. (It's true now, just as it was in the past and will be in future, that Israel doesn't want to meet the high cost—militarily, politically, financially—of having its own soldiers policing Palestinians daily.) Unlike the Arafat era, the reform effort was sincere, consolidating a heretofore sprawling and ill-disciplined apparatus into eight clearly delineated services: Civil Police, National Security Force, Presidential Guard, General Intelligence, Preventive Security, Military Intelligence, District Coordination Office, and Civil Defense.

These forces, beginning shortly after the Gaza coup, embarked on three interrelated lines of operations: first, a law and order campaign to get the armed militias off the streets and restore a sense of personal safety to civilians; second, an anti-Hamas counter-terror campaign targeting the PA's central enemy; and third (related to the first two), intimate security coordination with Israel. While not perfect or complete in any sense, the PA has made massive strides in all three areas.

By most accounts armed men who previously roamed freely in the center of Palestinian cities disappeared, crime fell, and business confidence returned. Even the onetime scourge of the Fatah militias—the Tanzim and its terrorist offshoot, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades—has, through a mix of persuasion and coercion, lain dormant, confined to small fiefdoms in various refugee camps and inner cities. Hamas in the West Bank is a shadow of its former self militarily and institutionally, harried constantly by the PASF (as well as Israeli forces). The shift on the part of the PA is palpable operationally but also conceptually. "Before the 'state of divide' [in June 2007, the PA was] aware of

Hamas's weapons but wasn't strict," Akram Rajoub, the governor of Nablus, told me in 2016. "Hamas weapons were a political tool used viciously against Fatah. . . . We can see the difference in how they were dealt with before and after the coup."

In both campaigns, the PASF operates under a security coordination framework with Israel that holds within it several components: dialogue and intelligence sharing; counterterrorism; deconfliction during IDF raids into Area A; riot control; safe return of Israeli citizens; and civil defense (namely, joint firefighting and emergency first response). Abbas has on several occasions termed this policy "sacred," buttressing his wider strategic decision, contra Arafat, of non-violence.

Israeli and Palestinian officers communicate and meet regularly, sharing intelligence on common threats—primarily Hamas—that could, as one senior PA security official told me, "impact the stable security situation on both sides." The PASF is known to have assisted Israel during many of the high-profile terrorist manhunts of recent years. During the haba (eruption) of "lone wolf" terror attacks in 2015-16, the PASF worked to interdict attackers—predominantly young Palestinians—ahead of time. By the end of 2016, according to one count, the PASF were responsible for a third of all terror suspect arrests.

Israel, however, maintains considerable freedom of action to launch arrest raids and security operations inside Palestinian cities. This is coordinated in advance through an official deconfliction mechanism with the PASF that overall works extremely well, containing the risk of armed clashes between the two sides. "Once we needed a division to enter Jenin," Israel's then-Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon stated in late 2015. "Two days ago, we did it with a small force."

On the popular side, the PA deploys its extensive riot control units to forestall large-scale demonstrations from escalating in the sensitive seam zones between Israeli and Palestinian control (highways, checkpoints and settlements), including stopping armed protestors from reaching the front lines. The PA has also refrained from mobilizing its people to take to the streets for years.

Finally, the PASF now safely returns Israeli Jewish citizens who stray into Palestinian villages and cities. An estimated 300 Israelis were returned in this manner in 2016, according to Israeli authorities; the Palestinians tout more than 500 Israelis in 2017 alone. One of the more recent examples took place in February 2018, when two uniformed IDF personnel drove into Jenin in midday in a clearly marked military jeep. PASF officers were quickly deployed to the scene, firing into the air and physically pushing back hundreds of rioting locals. Save for a few minor injuries, the Israeli soldiers were removed unscathed. Each of these incidents holds the potential to turn deadly—and in the past often did. The October 2000 lynching of two IDF reservists in Ramallah, detained in a PA police station at the start of the Second Intifada, is still seared into the Israeli consciousness.

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Similar to the battalion commander quoted above, Israeli security officials up to the highest levels are aware of these vast changes. Without overstating Palestinian capabilities, the PA over the past decade has been remarkably successful in achieving, as one such official put it to me, "systemic order and stability in the West Bank." The PASF as an institution, in contrast to earlier periods, has retained its cohesion and professionalism, weathering untold Israeli-Palestinian security and diplomatic crises. Orders emanating from the Muqata presidential compound in Ramallah to the various security chiefs, and on down to the field level, are indeed followed.

In their more self-aware moments, Israeli politicians, too, acknowledge the value of security coordination—yet too often minimize or distort the Palestinian role. "How come you don't see that much terrorism in the West Bank? First of all, we have security coordination with the [PA]. That's good," Netanyahu told NPR. Yet he went on to add that the "bulk of the security operations is done by us," claiming that Israel was forced to "send our soldiers there" and "take

the risk" because the PA was unwilling to do so. The PA "want us to take care of their security and then they attack us internationally," Netanyahu said.

Leaving aside the many other facets of the security relationship, enumerated above, that aid stability in the West Bank, the Palestinians in fact consistently ask to do more. Nothing creates friction between Israel and the Palestinian population quite like IDF arrest operations into Area A; they are the main source of illegitimacy for the PASF in the eyes of their own public. Already tarred with being "subcontractors for the occupation" and "dogs of the Jews," the PASF then have to look on from the sidelines as the IDF regularly takes matters into its own hands—sometimes with reason, owing to the complexity of certain operations and the sensitivity of certain intelligence, but other times, according to one former Israeli security official, due to inertia and habit.

"Give me responsibility. Try me for a week," Abbas said during an interview with Israeli television in 2016. "If I don't meet my responsibilities then come back. . . . You want me to be your employee, your agent. I don't accept this. I want to do this myself."

In point of fact, the PA over the past decade has quietly returned to many of the Oslo-era police hubs in outlying villages ("Area B," under PA civil control but overall Israeli security control). More tellingly, in the past few years PA police stations have opened up in several Palestinian neighborhoods near and in East Jerusalem—that is, under full Israeli control and, in the case of the Jerusalem municipality, sovereignty. The purpose of these moves was practical, since such "no-man's-lands" between Israeli and PA control have become havens for criminal activity. But there was also, to be sure, a political dimension: It allows the PA to be seen as "delivering" better daily security to its people.

Since at least 2015, PA security officials and senior IDF officers are known to have been in negotiations to increase the PASF's authority and capacity in the West Bank, including the provision of more advanced equipment. The Israeli security establishment is believed to be more amenable to such moves precisely because they understand both the practical value of having a strong Palestinian partner—"the more the Palestinian security forces do, the less we have to," a senior IDF officer once put it—and its worth as a political symbol.

Calculated leaks to the press, usually Israeli, have often scuttled these and more far-reaching plans, such as discussions on minimizing Israeli raids into Area A. As a source close to Israeli Education Minister Naftali Bennett stated, "The transfer of security authority over Areas A and B amounts to outsourcing the security of Israeli citizens to the [PA]. . . . Only the IDF will defend Israeli citizens."

For this reason, Abbas's imploration for Israel to "try him" has, to date, never truly been put to the test, despite the near unanimous praise for the PASF's work and the ongoing security coordination. The question is whether this state of affairs, with us for the past decade, is sustainable given Netanyahu's declared commitment that security west of the Jordan River will forever and completely be in Israeli hands (never mind that in practice, as we've seen, this has been caveated greatly).

After all, the Palestinians don't just do all of this as a favor to Israel; far from it. They view the PASF and coordination with Israel as means to an end: the end being statehood. "We fought for many decades in a different way; and now we are fighting for peace," Palestinian intelligence chief Majid Faraj told Defense News in 2016. "So I will continue fighting to keep this bridge against radicalization and violence that should lead us to our independence."

Security—and with that Palestinian control over more territory, more Palestinian lives, and less IDF encroachment—is inherently tied to the issue of Palestinian statehood. The tension therefore is not, as Netanyahu would have it, of security holding back the political ("basically all the powers of sovereignty . . . but not the ones of security"), but rather the political potentially undermining security.

Without a genuine diplomatic horizon toward a two-state solution, the very real gains of the past decade may be for naught. Instead of using the security rationale as an alibi for the lack of progress, Israel would do well to test Abbas.

The IDF, of course, isn't leaving the West Bank tomorrow, and a formula for ensuring Israel's overall security can be found—especially continued coordination with a strong, professional, and cohesive PASF. The basic wager of the peace process remains in place: land for peace, security for statehood. Different people may "mean different things when they say 'states,'" as Netanyahu posited, but it's highly unlikely that his definition of "security" is quite so fluid.

Neri Zilber is a journalist based in Tel Aviv and an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute, where he coauthored the study State with No Army, Army with No State: Evolution of the Palestinian Authority Security Forces 1994-2018 **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/state-with-no-army-army-with-no-state)** . *This article was originally published* ***on the American Interest website (https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/11/16/securing-the-peace/)*** . ❖

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