

# Limiting Incursions in Area A: The Next Step for Israeli-Palestinian Security Coordination

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Brief Analysis

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**Ongoing bilateral security discussions aim to decrease controversial Israeli operations in parts of the West Bank, and their chances for success largely depend on avoiding the political obstacles associated with a formal agreement.**

According to media reports, Palestinian and Israeli security officials are inching toward new security understandings that would limit Israel Defense Forces (IDF) operations in portions of "Area A" in the West Bank. The discussions are significant not only because they shed light on one of the few remaining spheres of active bilateral cooperation, but also because they indicate a new approach that holds promise in the absence of official political negotiations.

## BACKGROUND

The 1995 Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip (commonly known as Oslo II) divided the West Bank into three areas. Area C, which constitutes around 60 percent of the territory, was to remain under full Israeli civil and military control. In Area B -- which covers approximately 20 percent of the West Bank and is composed largely of Palestinian-populated rural areas -- civil affairs and public order were to be under the Palestinian Authority's control while Israel maintained overriding security responsibility. The remaining 20 percent was designated as Area A, comprising Palestinian cities and placed under the PA's civil and security control. The Oslo Accords also stipulated mechanisms for security cooperation, including high-level bilateral committees and joint patrols.

These arrangements remained in effect until the breakout of the second intifada in 2000, when Palestinian and Israeli security forces ceased cooperation and regularly clashed. During Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, the IDF entered almost all of Area A. It has since largely redeployed outside the area, but it continues to conduct frequent

operations into Palestinian cities, often referred to as "incursions." Palestinians regard these operations as an unwarranted breach of the Oslo Accords, while Israel maintains that they have specific, pressing, and sensitive security objectives.

## **REVIVAL OF SECURITY COOPERATION**

**A**s the second intifada wound down, the PA embarked on rebuilding and reforming its security agencies. These efforts picked up steam when Prime Minister Salam Fayyad took office in 2007 after the violent Hamas takeover of Gaza. A central tenet of the new PA security sector was to deepen and professionalize cooperation with the IDF. To bolster this process, Washington established the Office of the U.S. Security Coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority. In addition to helping with the training of new Palestinian forces, the USSC facilitated the resumption of their cooperation with Israel. Initially skeptical, the IDF later embraced the cooperation and now regularly acknowledges its utility.

While the reimposition of law and order that resulted from security reform was popular among the Palestinian public, the cooperative aspect was less so. Security personnel were accused of acting as collaborators and subcontractors for Israel, and images of Palestinian officers standing down as Israeli forces entered their cities were one of the most visible symbols of this powerlessness.

Yet even as political meetings came to an almost complete halt after the collapse of direct negotiations in 2014, security cooperation was intensified because it served both parties' interests. Israel has since been able to reduce its activities in the West Bank as the PA increased its own -- during a cabinet briefing on April 6, IDF Central Command chief Maj. Gen. Roni Numa reportedly noted that Palestinian forces are now handling around 35 percent of security cases there, up from 15 percent a few months prior. Israel also has more incentive to limit its on-the-ground reaction to various problems (e.g., ongoing diplomatic tensions and the current wave of stabbings), as well as to support measures that facilitate Palestinian economic projects, increase the number of Palestinian workers in Israel, and broaden the sphere of operations for Palestinian forces. For its part, the PA has no interest in allowing the security situation to deteriorate, since widespread instability could threaten its very survival.

Despite these considerations, the Palestine Liberation Organization's Central Council decided in March 2015 that security cooperation should be severed due to growing public opposition. While the PA has not implemented this decision, it faces tremendous political pressure to do so. In particular, President Mahmoud Abbas and his security chiefs have long identified incursions as one of the key factors eroding their forces' domestic credibility. The current proposal for limiting this practice originated within the Israeli security establishment, initially focusing on a potential pilot phase in Ramallah and Jericho that would gradually extend to the rest of Area A. The scope of the proposed measures has evolved as the talks continue, but the parties must contend with a number of challenges before the understandings can become policy.

## **THE NEXUS OF POLITICS AND SECURITY**

**T**he proposal to progressively limit Israeli operations is rooted in the IDF's professional assessment that Palestinian forces can dependably undertake full responsibility in some parts of Area A -- though Israeli security officials maintain that the PA is not yet capable of controlling the entire area. The decision is also motivated by the IDF's understanding that their Palestinian counterparts need some sign of progress in order to bolster their domestic standing and counter their critics. Implementing the proposed measures would address one of the main issues eroding Palestinian public support for security cooperation.

Despite originating from the professional security echelon, the ongoing talks could not have been initiated without the blessing of the political leadership, including the Israeli prime minister and defense minister. Likewise on the Palestinian side, while talks are conducted by security officials, they could not have proceeded without the blessing

of President Abbas. Yet formalizing the proposed measures in a negotiated agreement would raise political challenges.

In Israel, for example, some members of the current governing coalition would likely argue that such an agreement "outsources Israel's security" (as Minister Naftali Bennett recently charged) or makes "concessions" without a quid pro quo. On the Palestinian side, the PA's political weakness makes it vulnerable to domestic accusations of excessive concessions to Israel. Additionally, Palestinians are gearing up for the post-Abbas era, with potential presidential aspirants likely trying to prove their hardline credentials. In this charged environment, Palestinian officials would be loath to formally accept any arrangements that do not mandate full implementation of the Area A security regime spelled out in the Oslo Accords, since anything short of that would be seen as accepting the IDF's right to operate there. The challenge, then, is how to insulate security issues from political considerations as much as possible.

## **COORDINATION, NOT NEGOTIATIONS**

**S**o far, the parties have maneuvered these challenges by limiting the talks to interactions between security officials over technical issues that fall under their operational mandate. Instead of a traditional negotiation, they are approaching the talks as "coordination." Under this heading, security officials can finalize modalities for limiting IDF operations in some parts of Area A and start implementing them by presenting them as operational decisions akin to other choices made in the normal course of security cooperation.

Meanwhile, political leaders can maintain their rhetorical positions even as security discussions proceed. Israeli politicians can accurately state that the IDF maintains freedom of action throughout Area A so long as negotiators do not formally agree otherwise, and they can continue to make a slew of diplomatic demands from the PA. Likewise, Palestinian officials can accurately claim that they still reject any Israeli action in Area A and keep making their own diplomatic demands.

Ultimately, then, the outcome of this process rests on the extent to which it can be kept in the security realm: the less political demands are inserted into the process, the more likely it is to succeed. Requiring a formal agreement would encourage both sides to overload the negotiators with political demands that would preclude actual implementation. In contrast, approaching the issue as a set of coordinated operational understandings would allow them to maintain their current posture of technical cooperation, fending off any accusations of excessive concessions by accurately pointing out that no formal concessions have been made.

Despite the best efforts to keep security away from politics, however, Palestinian and Israeli political leaders will continue to face domestic pressure to use the current talks as a means of extracting diplomatic concessions. To help buffer the process from these political winds, the United States could assume a greater role in moving the discussions forward. The USSC has already been active in facilitating the process by virtue of his extensive relations with the Palestinian and Israeli security establishments and the trust he enjoys therein, but strengthening his unique role could greatly increase the prospects for success. In addition to the USSC's efforts on the ground, Washington may need to urge both sides to continue buffering the security talks from political interference. Yet the specific content of the talks -- including the pace and initial scope of the proposed arrangements -- should be left to the parties.

## **CONCLUSION**

**E**stablishing a process whereby the IDF limits its operations in Area A and the PA maintains security there could empower the Palestinian security forces domestically while meeting Israel's security needs. This could in turn enable further coordinated steps in the West Bank in the future. While such steps cannot bring about a two-state solution on their own, they can bring the parties closer to that goal.

*Ghaith al-Omari, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, previously served in various advisory positions with the Palestinian Authority.* ❖

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