

Preserving Israeli-Palestinian Security Cooperation

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Brief Analysis

As bilateral security cooperation comes under increasing pressure, a new PA police initiative shows why it needs to be protected and prioritized going forward.

Amid the major developments coming out of the Middle East, an April 8 news item about the opening of Palestinian Authority police stations in West Bank towns near Jerusalem went relatively unnoticed. This development is a far cry from the headline-grabbing high diplomacy and acrimony that usually characterize news about the Israeli-Palestinian situation. Yet it exemplifies one of the few realistic avenues for maintaining stability and even achieving a measure of progress in the short term.

For the Palestinian residents of these areas, the move provides a long-absent measure of law and order. Al-Ram and other towns near Jerusalem have been a safe haven for common criminals -- PA security forces have been unable to police these areas, and Israeli forces have overwhelmingly emphasized fighting terrorism rather than policing, so bad actors have exploited the resultant vacuum. At times, targeted PA operations against crime were effective, but the lack of a permanent presence made it difficult to build on these gains. In fact, this is a problem in most West Bank areas where the PA is not allowed to maintain a permanent police presence, creating a law-and-order gap that has harmed the PA's public standing.

In addition to giving the PA a badly needed measure of credibility among the populace, establishing police stations in such areas can help it counter the widespread criticism that security cooperation with Israel is tantamount to collaboration. As the mayor of al-Ram pointed out on Wednesday, PA leaders can now claim that their policies are producing small but tangible steps toward Palestinian independence.

This development could not have been imaginable without ongoing Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation. Under former prime minister Salam Fayyad, the PA security forces were restructured with indispensable support from the

United States Security Coordinator (USSC) and Jordan. Since then, security cooperation with Israel has reached unprecedented depth, breadth, consistency, and professionalism.

The Israel Defense Forces were initially skeptical of these efforts given their experience in the second intifada, but they are now fully engaged with the reconstituted PA forces. This shift resulted from a painstaking USSC-fostered process whereby initial cooperation was limited to small but achievable successes, which in turn were used to expand cooperation. Today, contacts between security officials occur daily, and Israel has at times allowed Palestinian personnel to operate in areas where they have no established presence. The success of two such operations last year near al-Ram likely influenced the Israeli decision to allow a more permanent PA security presence there.

Interestingly, this step did not come as a result of formal, high-level negotiations or open political deliberations. In fact, had it been subject to negotiations, it might have never materialized given the mutual pattern of maximalist posturing seen in other formal talks. Instead, the decision was announced by Maj. Gen. Roni Numa, head of IDF Central Command. While moving forward on a wider scale with such measures requires a political decision, their actual success depends on the extent to which implementation is delegated to the professional security level and buffered from political micromanagement.

Yet the ability to expand this police initiative faces serious political challenges. In response to growing tensions with Israel and public dissatisfaction with security cooperation, the Palestine Liberation Organization recently decided to cut off security cooperation with Israel. Although President Mahmoud Abbas froze the implementation of this decision by referring it to committee, the pressure to implement it is bound to increase. Similarly, Israeli responses to diplomatic tensions -- such as withholding Palestinian tax revenues -- could indirectly influence the PA's ability to continue effective security measures.

Despite these obstacles, security cooperation and the positive dynamics it creates are one of the few hopeful spots in an otherwise grim arena. Expanding the latest police initiative to other parts of the West Bank could give Palestinians a badly needed sense of progress without endangering Israel's security. While such progress is no substitute for a political peace process, it can help fill the vacuum in the meantime and even increase the chances of relaunching peace talks by cementing trust between the two sides.

As such, Washington should prioritize efforts to protect and support security cooperation, and clearly convey this sense of priority to Palestinian and Israeli leaders. This means encouraging both parties to empower their security officials so that they can undertake more such police measures, while at the same time warning them against any measures that endanger security cooperation. On the ground, the USSC is an important asset that needs to be preserved and, where needed, strengthened. This would allow the coordinator's office to continue providing invaluable support for the development of the PA security sector and Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation.

Ghaith al-Omari is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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