

The IDF and PA Prepare for Disturbances

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Brief Analysis

As the UN prepares for consideration of the Palestinian bid for statehood, both Israel and the PA are bracing for demonstrations and other disturbances in the West Bank.

The UN is expected to take up the issue of Palestinian statehood later this week, and Palestinian demonstrations with some minor violence have already begun. How the issue is dealt with at the UN could affect the intensity of the reaction on the West Bank, but both parties have made serious preparations for controlling disturbances. Israel has planned for major protests and trained, equipped, and readied its regular military units, reserve forces, and police accordingly, while the Palestinian Authority (PA) has directed its security forces to prevent violence. Nevertheless, the highly charged atmosphere surrounding the UN deliberations, the potential scope of associated demonstrations, and the complexity of the situation on the ground could still lead to casualty-producing incidents despite the best efforts of both sides.

The Range of Threats

As the UN vote approaches, the West Bank represents the most complex threat for Israeli security forces. The combination of heightened emotion, longstanding flashpoints, intermixed populations, provocative actions by Israeli settlers, and possible troublemaking by Hamas and other radical Palestinian groups creates potential fuel for large-scale demonstrations and violent incidents. Several scenarios are possible, including mass demonstrations within Palestinian cities, marches on Israeli checkpoints and settlements, and demonstrations at various points along the Israeli security barrier. Even events that begin peacefully could degenerate into violence. Examples of potential low-level violence include rock throwing, use of Molotov cocktails and slingshots, and physical assault on Israeli personnel. Spontaneous attacks such as shootings and knifings by individuals or small groups are possible as well. In addition, radical Palestinian elements could incite violence or employ lethal weapons either as part of a

demonstration or through planned efforts to provoke serious clashes with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The possibility of Israeli settlers attacking Palestinian targets is another major concern for both sides.

Israeli forces have already highlighted a few of the most likely trouble spots; these include the Qalandiya checkpoint north of Jerusalem, Hebron, the Gush Etzion settlement bloc, and Rachel's Tomb on the northern edge of Bethlehem. If demonstrations take place deep within PA-controlled areas and away from Israeli settlers and security forces, there is less likelihood of serious problems.

Some demonstrations and disturbances have already taken place in advance of the UN deliberations. A demonstration in Ramallah on Wednesday, though largely peaceful, was marred by low-level violence that included stone-throwing by Palestinian youths at IDF troops who responded with tear gas and arrests, two attacks on Israeli civilian cars, and a clash between Palestinians and Israeli settlers that was broken up by the IDF. Palestinian security forces dispersed a stone-throwing crowd in Hebron.

Israeli Preparations

Israeli security forces have taken significant steps toward dealing with the above threats. IDF preparations include:

- training the regular and reserve units that will be deployed in the event of protests or riots;
- developing settlement defense plans and training/equipping settlers to respond to threats;
- equipping IDF units with personal protective gear and nonlethal weapons (e.g., tear gas, rubber bullets, water cannons, and other crowd-dispersal means); increasing the readiness of forces by deploying additional infantry battalions to the West Bank, mobilizing additional reserve units and preparing others for potential mobilization in the coming days, raising the alert level for forces in the West Bank, and ordering senior officers to potential flashpoints as a means of preventing unwarranted escalation; and
- conducting exercises, seminars, and area-familiarization efforts for all levels of command to prepare for a wide range of scenarios.

Israeli police preparations reportedly include:

- acquiring riot-control equipment (e.g., new nonlethal gear) and training personnel to use it;
- increasing the number of riot-trained police by 50 percent (from 5,000 to 7,500);
- increasing the number of police in the Jerusalem area; and
- conducting exercises, seminars, and area familiarization for commanders and personnel.

Israeli security forces have also placed emphasis on conducting a joint effort among their organizations in response to the threat, including joint exercises, preparation for close coordination of operations, and establishing clear areas of operations. A major objective of the preparations appears to be keeping Palestinian fatalities to the absolute minimum.

Palestinian Preparations

There is major concern within the PA that even relatively peaceful demonstrations could spiral into violent confrontation with Israeli soldiers and settlers -- something both the PA leadership and the Palestinian security forces operating in the West Bank hope to avoid. To that end, security personnel are under orders to keep protests nonviolent and prevent demonstrators from contact with Israelis; the PA has reportedly told them that even rock-throwing at Israelis should not be tolerated.

In addition, the PA has designated protest areas primarily around central Palestinian cities and away from settlements and checkpoints in order to prevent clashes with Israeli civilians or soldiers. The security forces have

also reportedly been instructed to deploy plainclothes personnel in areas where clashes have historically taken place, but where Palestinian officers have not previously been permitted to operate, such as Qalandiya, Hebron, and Rachel's Tomb. These forces have permission to disperse anyone who attempts violent actions.

Most observers predict that Palestinian security personnel will comply with these orders to prevent escalation, at least initially. How they will respond if violence intensifies is less certain, however. Despite fears of escalation, the security forces do not appear to have a mandate to crack down forcefully on protestors determined to foment confrontation with Israelis. At most, these personnel try to prevent movement outside designated demonstration areas, and they are under orders not to use violent preventive measures such as gunfire or rubber bullets against protestors who attempt to engage directly with settlers or IDF checkpoint forces. At best, their close coordination with the IDF will include warning them of any such developments.

Hamas and other radical groups could be spoilers in this situation, but Hamas's leaders appear to have instructed members to stay away from protests for the time being. Still, fear lingers that if demonstrations escalate, Hamas could change course and stir up further violence, undermining any political gains for Abbas and the PA and shattering the West Bank's relative stability.

Implications

Both Israel and the PA have a major stake in ensuring that any demonstrations are peaceful or, at worst, limited to low-level violence. The riskiest situations will be those in which demonstrators approach checkpoints or settlements or otherwise confront Israelis. In such cases, much will depend on the emotional state of the protestors, the performance of the PA security forces, and the discipline and skill of Israeli military and police personnel. The presence of radical elements among the Palestinian and settler populations also increases the chance of deliberate provocations. For this reason, the IDF plans to post senior officers at potential points of friction.

As far as Palestinian leaders in the West Bank are concerned, any upsurge in violence between Israelis and Palestinians would diminish the PA's authority by exposing its lack of effective governance and control. Both Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayad have made numerous statements in recent months rejecting the notion that a UN vote would lead to such violence. Nevertheless, if serious violence does occur, either spontaneous or planned, isolating and containing it will be a major challenge.

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