

# Assessing Palestinian Security Reform

by [Mohammad Yaghi \(/experts/mohammad-yaghi\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Mohammad Yaghi \(/experts/mohammad-yaghi\)](#)

Mohammad Yaghi is a research fellow and program manager at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, specializing in social and Islamic movements and the Gulf states.



### Brief Analysis

**P**alestinian security reform was high on the agenda during Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's recent visit to Ramallah. A spike in armed clashes, crime, and demonstrations in the territories has highlighted the issue of law and order among the Palestinian people, who are increasingly concerned about their daily security. On June 14, Palestinian Authority (PA) prime minister Ahmed Qurei threatened to suspend the work of the cabinet "if the security forces fail to put an end to the trespasses and anarchy."

President Mahmoud Abbas's program of enforcing "one authority, one gun" consists of parallel efforts to combat lawlessness and unify the Palestinian factions. Although ongoing negotiations will determine the course of the latter objective, several important steps have already been taken toward the former, principally in the area of restructuring and reforming the security forces. Nevertheless, much remains to be done before the PA can instill law and order.

### Organizational and Personnel Changes

On April 14, Abbas ordered the merger of the Palestinian security forces. Whereas Yasser Arafat maintained thirteen independent, competitive security services, all answerable to him alone, Abbas consolidated those forces into three branches with a clear chain of command:

- The new National Security Forces merged the old National Security Forces of the West Bank and Gaza, the maritime police, military intelligence, the Special Forces, the Presidential Guard (Force 17), and the Immediate Intervention Force.
- The Interior Force now includes the Civil Police (the largest entity responsible for regular policing activities), the Preventive Security Force, and the Civil Defense (a small group charged with emergency rescue operations).
- General Intelligence merged its various branches, previously divided between the West Bank and Gaza.

Except for General Intelligence, which will report to Abbas directly, the commanders of the reorganized security forces will report to the interior minister, who is now the only security official capable of conducting negotiations with foreign security forces, including the Israelis. Another indication of the increasing authority of the interior ministry are the frequent media appearances by ministry spokesmen commenting on issues of public order, even as the security chiefs themselves maintain a low public profile.

Recognizing that reorganization alone would amount to little tangible change, Abbas also imposed a facelift on the

security services. On April 22, he ratified the retirement law, which requires security personnel to step down at the age of sixty. Because of this move, nearly 1,150 officers were retired, providing Abbas with a legal basis to sack some of the longest-standing, most corrupt commanders without having to confront them directly. Retiring such personnel often required more than a PA pension plan (which would pay them 70 percent of their previous salary). For example, security chief Mousa Arafat demanded that he be able to keep his official cars and guards, and that he be appointed minister without portfolio.

The retirement law also paved the way for several key appointments: Brig. Gen. Suleiman Heles became the new National Security Forces commander; Brig. Gen. Ala Husni Rabaia became the new commander of the Interior Force and its largest constituent force, the Civil Police, replacing his superior Brig. Gen. Mahmoud Asfour; Rashid Abu Shbak now heads all of Preventive Security, which he previously commanded only in Gaza; Tarek Rajab, previously deputy commander of General Intelligence, became head of the service, replacing Maj. Gen. Amin al-Hindi. The new security chiefs share much in common. All were deputies of their dismissed superiors, and, with the exception of Shbak, all served in some capacity with Palestine Liberation Organization forces in Lebanon. These similarities suggest that the new leaders are unlikely to behave in a significantly different manner, given their intimate associations with the old system.

#### Obstacles to the Rule of Law

Although the PA allocates \$504 million (or 24 percent of its budget) to its security forces, Palestinians have yet to see tangible improvements in their daily security. The structural reforms that Abbas has undertaken represent a significant first step. Yet, if the rule of law is to take hold in the territories, five key social, political, and economic sectors must be addressed:

**Alienated youths.** The Fatah Central Committee has long alienated Fatah's youngest generation by not including it in the political decisionmaking process. Therefore, any attempt at establishing law and order must include a strategy to reach out to this generation. Recognizing that a significant part of the current anarchy is caused by the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and its supporters, Abbas is trying to incorporate such elements into the security forces. In order to truly address the concerns of this generation, however, Abbas must also create political opportunities for them. This includes internal Fatah elections that can translate into leadership positions for alienated activists who are now expressing their frustration through violence.

**An economic nightmare.** Salaries for security personnel are not high enough to ensure that members will take on the dangerous task assigned to them by the PA. Currently, their wages are about \$11.40 per day, which is not even sufficient to sustain a family. Moreover, the dire economic situation in the territories (e.g., 32 percent unemployment, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics) increases the chance that many disaffected poor people will turn to violence and crime. A recent poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research indicated that poverty and unemployment topped the list of "major public concerns."

**Personnel qualifications.** Additional personnel reforms beyond the highest leadership levels are urgently needed. In particular, the existing force of 58,000 security personnel is well in excess of what is needed. The more acute problem is one of effectiveness rather than numbers. For example, in a recent recruitment drive, the interior ministry received nearly 60,000 applications for only 5,000 available positions that required no specific qualifications other than age. Adding unqualified personnel to an already underqualified group is no solution.

**Legal reform.** The PA requires a firmer legal basis if it is to monopolize the use of force. Currently, the Basic Law's language regarding the right of militias and military factions to possess arms is ambiguous. The cabinet and the legislature must work together to clarify this issue.

**Judicial reform.** Reforming the security forces can succeed only if accompanied by judicial reforms that fortify the

chain of justice. Issuing decrees and making arrests is insufficient; if Palestinians are to feel more secure, legitimate trials must be held by an independent judiciary issuing sentences that will actually be carried out.

## Conclusion

The current security reorganization is unlikely to result in serious change due to several structural, systemic, and policy factors. Simply changing the commanders of these organizations will not remove the personal interests and relationships their personnel have developed over the years. Although Abbas issued his unification orders more than two months ago, frequent clashes are still occurring between forces contending for territory and authority. U.S. security envoy Gen. William Ward has been instrumental in advising the Palestinian leadership on the structural aspects of security reform, most recently preparing a list of light arms and equipment needed by the security services. More focus on the areas addressed above could help integrate these initial reforms into a more comprehensive program aimed at achieving true law and order. Only a policy of security reform that focuses on political, social, economic, and legal aspects will enable Abbas to translate his stated commitment of creating “one authority, one gun” into reality.

Mohammad Yaghi, a Ramallah-based Palestinian political analyst, is executive director of the Palestinian Center for Mass Communication, a columnist for al-Ayyam, and a project manager for the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. ❖

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