

# Palestinian Fragmentation: Case Study of Jenin and Nablus

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## Brief Analysis

One of the most serious implications of four years of incessant violence and terrorism is the fragmentation of Palestinian society. Notwithstanding the debate over the impact of the Israeli presence in the territories, Palestinian quality of life cannot improve without radical reform in the structure of the Palestinian Authority (PA), its leadership, and its methods of governance. Indeed, PA Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei cited chaos as the reason for his recent resignation (which he subsequently rescinded). Similarly, on July 21, PA minister in charge of municipal governance Saeb Erekat, stated, "If we can't restore public order and law . . . this will bring the greatest damage to the Palestinian people and their cause. . . . It's the whole social fabric that is collapsing now." According to a June 2004 poll conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre, 88.6 percent of Palestinians believe that their government is corrupt, with most respondents stating that this corruption is widespread.

West Bank cities differ from one another in their extent of governmental corruption and its effect on their municipal institutions. Nablus and Jenin serve as particularly instructive examples of this phenomenon.

### Nablus: A City of Chaos

With a population of 120,000—second only to Hebron in the West Bank—Nablus has deteriorated over the past four years into the city of *fawda* (chaos). This "capital of terror" has also produced dozens of suicide bombers since the start of the intifada, posing a unique security challenge for the Israeli Defense Forces.

Although only a few dozen Fatah militant activists are currently operating in Nablus, they have gradually become a well-funded, dominant force in the city. When they conduct attacks against fellow Palestinians, they are called the Fatah Tanzim; when they attack Israelis, they are called the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. These violent activists demand protection money from Nablus shop owners, a fee they can readily extract since the rate of thefts and rapes has risen dramatically. These phenomena are a function of the utter absence of law enforcement in the city, which has in turn given a boost to the local leaders of terrorist organizations. In 2003 alone, thirty-three residents were killed and more than 200 shops were set on fire as a result of internal Palestinian struggles. In recent months, the Fatah Tanzim have been responsible for approximately twenty murders in Nablus, and dozens of shooting incidents have been reported. In addition, Hizballah, with Iranian financial backing, has decided to become a player in the West Bank. The organization has transferred substantial funds and know-how to local terrorists, primarily to the Fatah Tanzim.

During Mahmoud Abbas's brief term as prime minister in mid-2003, Nablus police forces became much more visible on the city streets. Their activity centered on checking vehicles for stolen ammunition, returning stolen cars, and controlling city transportation. Once Abbas resigned, however, anarchy resumed. Criminals-turned-terrorists now rule the streets. They often fight among each other, leaving innocent Palestinians to pay the price. As with the Fatah Tanzim, this price includes large protection fees and even murder for those who show loyalty to one group instead of another.

In light of these developments, there is little chance that the city's moderate leadership, represented by Mayor Ghassan Shaka'a, will be able to achieve stability. Lack of leadership in the PA in general, and particularly in Nablus, has created general despair. In addition, constant friction has emerged between militant Fatah Tanzim activists in Kasba (the city's central district) and those from the city's refugee camps, especially Balata. This rivalry has translated into violent activity against Palestinian civilians. Moreover, supporters of Mahmud Alul, the PA governor of Nablus and surrounding environs, have frequently attacked Mayor Shaka'a, who initially tried to run the city despite the problems. Shaka'a's rivals blame him for opposing Yasir Arafat and view him as traitor. The mayor himself was saved from an attempted murder in November 2003; his brother was killed in that attack, likely by members of the Fatah Tanzim. Currently, Governor Alul, being a strong ally of Arafat, is affiliated with the violent Fatah Tanzim activists who rule the streets with force. Consequently, Mayor Shaka'a has lowered his level of activity and involvement and is now looking for physical and monetary assistance from external Arab groups in order to restore his lost position and influence.

#### Jenin: Distribution of Power

Currently, Zacharia Zubeidi—whose background is in car theft, not municipal governance—is the primary strongman in Jenin. He leads the local branch of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, and many residents of the city view him as their true leader. Zubeidi has been personally involved in a number of terrorist attacks, resulting in a total of nine Israeli deaths. He is an outspoken figure who gives many interviews in the local and international media. He also frequently acts as an arbitrator in local disputes. Indeed, Jenin abounds with rivalries, the most notable of which is a historic clash between two Fatah Tanzim branches operating in the city's eastern neighborhoods and outlying refugee camps, respectively. These power struggles tend to revolve around money, power, and respect rather than ideological differences.

The fact that Zubeidi is on Israel's list of wanted terrorists has no bearing on the positive perception that local Palestinians have of him as a successful mediator. This is likely because most Palestinians view their official government leaders as irrelevant. According to the aforementioned June 2004 poll, 65.8 percent of Palestinians believe that Prime Minister Qurei has failed in his job of running the PA. Many nongovernmental groups are viewed differently, however. Hamas, for example, has gained considerable power because the majority of Palestinians regard it as a clean movement run by uncorrupt leaders.

The residents of Jenin area have two representatives on the Palestinian Legislative Council. When the PA leaders in Ramallah wish to pass on a directive to Jenin, they do so through these two individuals. The representatives have little influence in the urban portions of Jenin, however, hailing as they do from the city's rural areas. Moreover, they face constant opposition from Jenin's true source of power: the inhabitants of the refugee camps headed by Zubeidi. Residents of these camps demand direct contact with PA leaders, particularly with regard to financial aid. They do not want any such money to go through the two council representatives, who are perceived as corrupt.

As part of the power struggle that Arafat is currently facing, he sought to bolster his authority in Jenin this week by naming a Fatah Tanzim activist, Qaddura Musa, to the post of governor, which has been vacant for a year. The previous governor had been forced out by local activists who viewed him as corrupt. Given his background as an Arafat loyalist, Musa is unlikely to lead any significant reforms.

#### Conclusion

Internal fights between the different groups vying for power and influence in the West Bank eclipse any short-term hopes for a brighter future for the Palestinians, given the negative impact that such strife has on the government's ability to establish stability. Although Jenin and Nablus are extreme examples of lawlessness in comparison to other West Bank cities, they are typical examples of corruption. In any case, the PA is not confronting either challenge. In

fact, most of the Palestinian leaders who are affiliated with the Fatah movement ignore the imminent threat that militant Fatah Tanzim activists pose to the stability of their regime. Young Fatah Tanzim members are being actively recruited into the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, which is itself controlled by Iran and Hizballah. These activists have attained near-total control over the streets of most Palestinian cities and, in so doing, have become better positioned to both increase their domestic power and launch terrorist attacks against Israel.

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