

Reforming the Palestinian Security Services

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Brief Analysis

Last week, during the visit of Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, President George W. Bush announced the need to "immediately begin to help rebuild a security force in Palestine that will fight terror, that will bring some stability to the region." He also stated that Central Intelligence Agency director George Tenet will be returning to the region "to help design the construction of a security force, a unified security force, that will be transparent, held accountable." Immediately after Bush's announcement, Sharon declared that he viewed security reform—that is, purging the Palestinian Security Services (PSS) of corruption and terrorism—as a precondition for a meaningful peace process, while, for his part, Bush did not create linkage between the two.

Whatever differences exist in terms of linkage between reform and diplomacy, the administration's initiative is positive and necessary. The task at hand, however, is monumental, and solutions will take time, effort, and diplomatic skill. Quick fixes imposed from outside are unlikely to succeed unless they are accompanied by a fundamental change in the Palestinian leadership's approach to terrorism, counterterrorism, and peacemaking, and also by effective treatment of the deeply rooted social and institutional ailments within the Palestinian Authority (PA).

What Went Wrong?

The PSS was created in 1994 as a 30,000-strong police force whose purpose was to preserve law and order in the Palestinian-controlled territories. Yet, this force quickly turned into a cumbersome, badly managed cluster of loosely connected armed groups that focused on competing with rather than complementing each other. Today, the PSS is composed of twelve different bodies, not including the other Fatah-affiliated armed groups: Tanzim and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. Operating under a "divide and conquer" strategy, PA chairman Yasir Arafat built the PSS in such a way that only he could arbitrate between its bodies, giving none of them enough power to threaten his regime. Each of these bodies has two branches that are independent of each other: one in the West Bank and the other in the Gaza Strip. The regional commanders work directly under Arafat without any intermediate coordination. This results in friction between West Bank commanders and their Gaza colleagues over funding, prestige, and political influence.

To make things worse, Arafat has allowed the Tanzim to develop as a parallel paramilitary force with so many weapons and so much power that no single PSS apparatus could stand against it. Tanzim members—many of whom also serve in the ranks of the PSS—often act as though they are above the law and therefore do not submit to the authority of the Palestinian police. Attempts by the police to arrest popular Tanzim activists or to confiscate their weapons have ended in civil disobedience and, at times, in violence.

From the outset, the PSS's reputation in the eyes of the Palestinian public has been poor due to the fact that the security bodies have been riddled with corruption. Due to the organization's fixed budget and inflated payroll, PSS members earn minimal wages (\$200 per month, on average). Hence, many of them are constantly looking to complement their salaries, often through bribery, theft, brutality, and collection of protection money. The behavior of the PSS has been a source of great frustration among the Palestinian public. Many view the security chiefs—who have benefited financially from the Oslo process and have often put their own personal interests before those of the

Palestinian people—as a problem rather than a solution. The PSS are perceived as bodyguards of the corrupt leaders rather than guardians of the people, and Arafat and his associates have done very little to change this perception.

The result has been the worst of both worlds—a set of security agencies that are neither effective in fighting terror (indeed, elements of the PSS have often participated in terrorism) nor have the support of the Palestinian public. Security forces that are neither feared (by the terrorists) nor loved (by the people) are doomed to irrelevance, or worse.

Fighting for Legitimacy

The outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada exposed the PSS to even harsher public criticism. The security bodies were blamed for abdicating their responsibility to contribute to the war effort. Many Palestinians expressed anger at the fact that their leadership had spent excessive funds on defense, denying them important social services, while the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) remained able to invade Palestinian cities with impunity, meeting no resistance from the PSS. The National Security Force—Arafat's largest security force, with three brigades in Gaza and eight battalions in the West Bank—bore the brunt of such criticism. This 14,000-strong force was equipped and trained to carry out conventional military operations at the platoon and company level, but its contribution to the intifada has been negligible.

To strengthen their legitimacy, many members of the PSS have become increasingly involved in the fighting. All of the apparatuses have either participated directly in terrorist acts or supported Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. In fact, some of the Brigades' senior activists also hold senior positions in the PSS. Among those taking part in such activities are Mahmud Damara, the commander of Force 17 in the West Bank, and Tawfik Tirawi, the chief of General Intelligence in the West Bank. Senior members of the Preventive Security Service and the Civil Police in Gaza have been involved in the production of mortars and rockets as well as in weapons smuggling. Moreover, the captain of the ship *Karine-A*, which attempted to smuggle fifty tons of weapons from Iran in January 2002, was a colonel in the PA's coast guard. Even those security personnel who have not been personally involved in terrorism have done nothing to combat it in their areas of responsibility.

The PSS's failure to fulfill their obligations under the 1995 Oslo II agreement—to combat terrorism and violence and prevent incitement to violence—has meant that Israel no longer views them as a peace partner. The IDF has targeted PSS installations in its retaliatory attacks against Palestinian terrorism, destroying almost every PSS headquarters, office, training base, and vehicle.

What Can Be Done?

The reform proposed by the United States and Israel includes several components, such as the placement of all the security services under a unified command, the collection of illegal weapons, the purging of corrupt and radical elements, and the increase of transparency and accountability.

To be sure, the fact that many of these ideas originate from Israel makes them immediately suspect in Palestinian eyes, regardless of the wisdom or logic of the proposals. But the problems facing the PSS are even more fundamental than the organizational changes advocated so far. No real improvement will occur without a strategic decision from the Palestinian leadership, broadcast and disseminated throughout Palestinian society, that diplomacy is the path to achieve national objectives and that security cooperation with Israel, however distasteful in the current context, is a necessary precondition for diplomatic progress. As long as the Palestinian mainstream adheres to the strategy of terror and armed struggle as the only means of achieving political goals, the PSS are unlikely to take the necessary steps to fight terrorism, and the measures they do undertake will only further alienate them from the wider population.

In the event of a strategic decision by the Palestinian leadership to renounce armed struggle and pursue solely

diplomatic means to achieve political goals, Israel will also have to play its part in the gradual reconstruction of the PSS. Its main responsibility will be to refrain from further attacks on PSS infrastructure and to allow the PSS to regroup and rebuild themselves. Without such actions on both sides, the international donor community will have no incentive to invest in the reconstruction of the PSS.

Finally, any reform that fails to address the role of the paramilitary Tanzim is sure to fail. No would-be state can permit the existence of an extralegal paramilitary force of the Tanzim's size and firepower. Coopting the Tanzim into the PSS—by incorporating some elements and weeding out those unwilling to commit to a diplomatic strategy—would be in the PA's best interests. Such assimilation will spare the PA the problems involved in a frontal effort to disband and disarm the organization in its entirety. More important, it will increase the prestige of the security services in the eyes of the public and allow the PSS to become a more effective tool in the hands of a reformed PA dedicated to the peaceful resolution of conflict.

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