

An International Force in the West Bank and Gaza Strip:

The Security Aspects

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Brief Analysis

On Tuesday, former president Bill Clinton joined others in advocating a U.S.-led international force in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Several frameworks for such an intervention have been proposed, ranging from monitoring missions to full-fledged international trusteeship over the territories. Underlying these ideas is a lack of confidence in both sides, the Israelis and the Palestinians, along with a perception that the latter are unable or unwilling to stop terror. Although the appeal of external intervention may be strong, an analysis of the relevant security repercussions suggests that such intervention would not only be hazardous, but would also likely do more harm than good in the fight against terrorism.

The Complexity of the Mission

Any international mission in the West Bank and Gaza would face an extremely complex reality on the ground. Over 3 million Palestinians live in the territories, often in extremely dense population areas. Each of the primary settings in the territories—urban centers, refugee camps, and rural areas—have different cultural, religious, historical, and familial characteristics. These differences are especially great between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which were ruled by different Arab countries before 1967. This complexity is compounded by the wide variety of political factions extant in the territories, both Islamist and nationalist, most of which are heavily involved in terrorist activity, including suicide bombings. Each of the factions has a distinct agenda, and their interests often conflict. On the popular level, opinion polls show that Palestinian public support for suicide bombings is well above 80 percent. Consequently, the terrorist apparatuses are heavily interwoven with the civilian population, often enjoying civilian support. Finally, over 140 Jewish settlements are scattered throughout the territories in highly hostile surroundings, at times embedded in Palestinian urban areas.

In light of these complexities, what is needed to rein in terrorism in the West Bank and Gaza? Two past attempts to counter terror—occurring in 1996–1998 and 2002—may provide context.

The Need for a Strategic Palestinian Decision

In February and March of 1996, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, both of which opposed the peace process led at the time by the Palestinian Authority (PA), carried out a then-unprecedented series of suicide attacks, killing sixty-seven Israelis in ten days. Consequently, an international summit was convened in Sharm al-Shaykh, Egypt. The result of the summit was the formation of a coalition against terrorism, committed to intelligence and security cooperation and including all relevant parties: Israel, the PA, Egypt, Jordan, and the United States. From October 1996, when the cooperation agreements came into full effect, until the end of 1998, forty-nine Israelis were killed by Palestinian terrorism. This relatively smaller number of casualties was due mainly to the PA's commitment to fight terrorism decisively—a commitment made possible by the fact that Palestinian society perceived it as serving their own interests. Thus, the PA could afford to pay the political price of fighting the Islamist opposition and cooperating closely with the Israeli security forces.

The Palestinian security apparatuses are still capable of such cooperation, even after the April 2002 "Defensive Shield" operation by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The factors most critical to successful counterterrorism—quality intelligence and a deep understanding of the theater of operations—were not fundamentally damaged by that operation. However, if the Palestinians were to make another strategic decision to fight terrorism, the need for an international force would be seriously diminished. Although an international force could be given a reduced set of responsibilities (e.g., monitoring and verifying implementation of agreements), a real Palestinian commitment would be far more effective in fighting terror itself.

Considering the current situation, the chances of a strategic Palestinian decision to fight terrorism are slim. In this regard, the international community, along with Israel, could play an important role outside that of creating and maintaining an international force—in promoting an atmosphere conducive to such a Palestinian decision.

In the Absence of a Palestinian Decision

The Palestinians view the possibility of internationalizing the conflict as a significant political achievement of the current wave of violence, and indeed Palestinians have an interest in promoting such a mission. However, there is an important qualitative difference between accepting an international force on the one hand, and committing to fight terrorism alongside that force (with all the requisite political costs) on the other. Were such a commitment to be made by a Palestinian leader in the current environment, it could be construed as a betrayal of the Palestinian struggle and a threat to Palestinian national unity.

In the absence of real Palestinian cooperation, an international force would face hostile groups that are fundamentally opposed to any political arrangement and that would most likely continue their attacks. In fact, there would be an incentive for Palestinians to use the international presence to prevent Israeli action, while continuing to pursue terrorism for the achievement of further political gain. The force would then face the option of doing nothing—thereby becoming as irrelevant as UNIFIL is in southern Lebanon—or taking swift action and becoming a prime target itself. The result would likely be heavy casualties to the international force, reminiscent of Beirut in 1983, where hundreds of Americans were killed in a Hizballah terror attack; what is politically sustainable for the IDF in defending its own home front may not be sustainable for foreign forces. But even if the international community were willing to absorb these kinds of casualties, would the international force be effective in performing its task?

Operation Defensive Shield, and the ongoing smaller-scale operations since, have had a short-term yet significant effect in preventing terror attacks. But an international force, even if it were highly motivated, would find it extremely difficult to carry out effective operations without the appropriate intelligence infrastructure and experience. The crux of the problem is that while an international force would likely prevent the IDF from carrying out any major counterterrorism operations, small, low-signature terrorist cells intermingled with the general Palestinian population could easily continue to operate. Notwithstanding its good intentions, an international force would therefore, in effect, provide cover for terrorism instead of preventing it.

Conclusion

Security is primarily dependent on a strategic Palestinian decision to act decisively against terrorism. If the Palestinian leadership is willing to take the necessary decision, an international force would be largely superfluous. In the absence of such a decision, an international force would actually have a detrimental effect on security, hindering Israeli counterterrorism efforts but not preventing terrorism itself.

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