

## Force-17:

### The Renewal of Old Competition Motivates Violence

Apr 5, 2001



Brief Analysis

**D**uring the recent intifada, certain Palestinian security forces have been intensively involved in violent attacks on Israeli military and civilian targets. Most prominently involved have been the personal security guards of Yasir Arafat, popularly known as Force-17 and officially called Amn al-Ri'asah (Presidential Security). On March 30, Israeli forces bombarded from the air two of the headquarters of this force in Ramallah and Gaza, in the first serious Israeli retaliation under the new Sharon government. Then in early April, Israeli forces arrested several members of this force inside Area A, the area that is under full control of the Palestinian Authority (PA).

**Force-17's Origins** Force-17 was an important Palestinian armed group from the early 1970s through 1993. The force, commanded by Abu Tayyib, served not only as security guards for Fatah leaders including Arafat, but was also Arafat's personal intelligence and counter-terrorist service, mainly against internal rivals and other Palestinian commanders and factions. There are a lot of anecdotes and myths about the origin of the group's name. One of the more famous theories has been the fact that during the 1970s its headquarters was located at 17 Faqahani Street in Beirut, where in those days the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had a major presence.

Force-17 was important in internal Palestinian politics, but it remained marginal in the PLO's armed struggle against Israel. That struggle was controlled by the apparatus of Khalil al-Wazir ("Abu Jihad"), until he was killed in Tunisia in April 1988. Abu Jihad commanded Fatah's Black September in the early 1970s and then the so-called "Western Sector" forces. In the mid-1980s, Force-17 took responsibility for terrorist operations in Israel that never occurred, under the name of Al-Wathiqun bi-Amri Allah (Confidants of Allah's orders). These claims were an attempt by Abu Tayyib to make Force-17 appear more important by publicizing a fake group that contributed nothing to the Palestinian armed struggle. Just as it had played no role in the terror against Israel launched from abroad, Force-17 had no part in the first Palestinian intifada (1987-93) and the armed struggle against Israel in the occupied territories. Indeed, the group had no supporters or ties in the occupied territories.

When Arafat was faced with constant rivalry between Force-17 and Abu Jihad's forces (both of which he controlled), he did nothing to restrain the tension; indeed, he encouraged it. His method for maximizing his power was to keep the "boys in the playground" too busy in their intrigues to endanger his position. He enjoyed being called "the old man" (Al-khetyar) by his colleagues and PLO officials.

**Amn al-Ri'asah** Although Force-17 was officially dismantled with the establishment of the PA, the vast majority of the approximately 3,000 members and officers of the current Amn al-Ri'asah belonged to Force-17, and so the name "Force-17" is commonly used for this group. As Gal Luft described in his *The Palestinian Security Services: Between Police and Army* (Policy Focus Number 36, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy), Amn al-Ri'asah is a high-quality security force commanded by Faisal Abu Sharah, an old deputy of Abu Tayyib. As originally defined in the Oslo accords, the force was supposed to deal primarily with the protection of Chairman Arafat as well as other political personalities and important installations. But in addition, it handles counter-terrorism and is responsible for arresting opposition activists and people suspected of collaborating with Israel. Two subsidiary bodies of the

force are the Intelligence Unit – whose main mission is gathering information about the activities of opposition movements and other domestic threats – and the Presidential Guard, Arafat's most loyal and trusted inner circle. This latter unit provides the tight security around the chairman, preventing any assassination attempts.

Force-17's involvement in terrorist activity started in 1998, against Palestinians accused of collaborating with Israel (mainly by selling or mediating in the sale of lands to Israelis in the area of Ramallah and Jerusalem). In at least one case, Israel proved that a land dealer – Mahmoud Ali Jumhour – was kidnapped en route from Jerusalem to Ramallah, where he was interrogated and killed by officers of Force-17. According to information in the Israeli press, members of the force were also involved in threats on the lives of 100 other Palestinian land dealers who appeared on a list prepared by the PA.

But Force-17's main involvement in terrorism has been during the current intifada. Israel holds it responsible for numerous terror attacks against Israeli soldiers and civilians. In February 2001, a group from Force-17, led by Mas'oud Ayad, who is affiliated with the Lebanese Hizballah, attacked the Israeli settlement of Netzarim with mortars. Israeli forces killed Ayad a few days later.

A significant element about Force-17 is the fact that its officers came from Tunisia in 1994, and lack local ties in the West Bank and Gaza. This is in sharp contrast to the other PA security forces (which are composed of local activists who led the previous intifada), the Western Sector forces (which has close ties with locals in the West Bank and Gaza), and the popular armed militia of Fatah's Tanzim (which is composed entirely of locals who are well rooted in Palestinian society in the West Bank and Gaza). Force-17 may be concerned about its standing in the rivalry among Palestinian security forces, which might explain its desire to take such a prominent role in the present Palestinian violence. In other words, behind the scenes of the current violent conflict with Israel, there is also a great deal of Palestinian internal rivalry and competition.

**Conclusion** In light of the intense rivalries among Palestinian security forces there is the question of Arafat's personal involvement in and control over the present violence. Actually, his modus operandi of the past thirty years has been to make use of such rivalries to reinforce his position as the only leader accepted by all of Palestinian society. Furthermore, these rivalries allow Arafat to publicly deny involvement in terrorism. In short, the chairman is using his favorite method to exercise control over the struggle against Israel. The leading role of Force-17, the closest and most loyal force to Arafat, in the violence is evidence that nothing changed in the transfer of leadership from the PLO to the PA: same old tactics, rivalries, and competitions. The real change could come about only in the post-Arafat era, where the local elements from the West Bank and Gaza may become more prominent than "returnees," such as the individuals who dominate Force-17.

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