

Inside the Fatah Tanzim:

A Primer

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Brief Analysis

As violence continues to flare in parts of Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, attention is increasingly focused on the Palestinian group responsible for much of the rioting and confrontation--the Fatah Tanzim. Just yesterday, the leader of the Tanzim, Marwan Barghouthi, ridiculed the ceasefire reached in Paris as useless. That the agreement was so short-lived highlights the growing importance of this quasi-civilian strike force.

Background Tanzim--Arabic for organization--is the armed wing of Fatah, the largest faction of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and the one that Palestinian Authority (PA) Rais Yasir Arafat himself leads. The Fatah movement has tens of thousands of members in the PA; during recent local Fatah elections, for example, over 6000 persons participated in Nablus alone. Estimates vary as to how many of these Fatah members are active in the Tanzim, from several hundred to a few thousand, but most of the fighters are believed to be either university students or recent graduates. Others serve in the Palestinian security services. Members of the Tanzim receive military training in summer camps so widespread that the organizations leadership claims to have provided thousands of youths with training courses.

No statistics are available regarding the type and quantity of weapons possessed by the organization, but its members are believed to be well armed with automatic weapons, obtained from the Palestinian police, or purchased from Israelis or cross-border smugglers. IDF spokespersons maintain that the militia has been stockpiling expensive hi-tech German MP-5 submachine guns via Jordan and Egypt. It is also unclear how much the fighters are paid--or even how they are mobilized or demobilized. Annual funding for the Tanzim which, according to the Israeli daily Yediot Ahronot, stands at \$2.4 million, is widely believed to come directly from Arafat.

Mission Shortly after the PA was established in 1994, Arafat's need for a non-PA militia quickly became apparent. In November that year, a showdown between PA security forces and Hamas in Gaza left 13 civilians dead. To a large extent, Arafat has relied on the Tanzim to prevent this type of internecine clash from happening again. At the same time, by taking part in demonstrations and protests against the Israelis, the organization acts as a popular counterweight to the Islamists. In this sense, the Tanzim is the ideological heir to the Fatah Hawks--Arafat's armed enforcers during the later days of the Intifada--which was dismantled through a security agreement with Israel in

1995-1996.

Since the mid-1990s, the Tanzim has been a constant presence on the PA political scene. To date, it has played a significant military role in three clashes with the Israelis; the current riots (known as the Jerusalem or al-Aqsa Intifada), the Nakba riots of May 2000, and the Tunnel crisis of September 1996. In 1996, Tanzim members were at the forefront of the demonstrations, and are said to have participated along with Palestinian policemen in shootouts with the IDF. During the last round of fighting, in May 2000, "most of those who opened fire" on the Israelis, according to a leading official of the organization, were Tanzim.

Leadership and Ideology Leaders of the Tanzim are Palestinian insiders, from the Intifada generation, many of whom spent years in Israeli prisons. Notably, this leadership--indeed almost the entirety of this generation--has by and large been excluded from the top level of Fatah administration, the Revolutionary Committee. The one major exception to this trend is Marwan Barghouti, the secretary general of Fatah in the West Bank and the acknowledged head of the Tanzim. Born in 1959, Barghouti served as student council president at Bir Zeit University for four years and spent seven years in jail prior to being deported from the West Bank by Israeli authorities in 1987. In 1989, he was elected to the Fatah Revolutionary Council and is its youngest member. Barghouti returned to the West Bank in 1994 and was elected to the Palestinian legislature as representative from Ramallah in 1996.

As part of Fatah, the Tanzim adheres to the Palestinian nationalist ideology of the larger movement, holding its founder Arafat in great esteem and believing him to embody the Palestinian struggle. At the same time, however, the organization maintains no compromise positions on the peace process, particularly on the issues of Jerusalem and right of return. While the Tanzim is a source of support for Arafat, it is also another element of Palestinian society pressuring against concessions. Barghouti and the Tanzim have also been among the leading proponents of a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood. And only three days ago, Barghouti publicly advised Arafat not meet with Barak in Paris or Egypt.

Last month, Barghouti described the role of the Tanzim during his meetings with the regional organizational committees. According to the Palestinian daily Al-Hayat al-Jadida, he said: "If an [acceptable] agreement with the Israelis is reached, the movement would be responsible for building the state; should it fail, it would shoulder the responsibility for confrontation. Keeping the forces ready for clashes is a major concern of the Tanzim." In March, Barghouti prophetically justified the stoning of the French prime minister Lionel Jospin by Bir Zeit students by saying it was necessary "to avoid internal fighting [in the Tanzim]...We need to save [our] energy for confrontations with Israel which will be imminent later this year."

Arafat and Fatah Although Arafat finances the Tanzim, has the allegiance of its members, and regularly employs its services, the relationship between Arafat and the organization is quite complex. A primary duty of the Tanzim is to control the opposition to Arafat in the PA. In the process, though, the organization has grown in power and stature, creating problems for elements within the official PA security apparatus.

In 1998, for example, in a power-play, units of the PA Military Intelligence raided the Tanzim offices in Ramallah. In the ensuing demonstration protesting the break-in, Military Intelligence forces shot at Fatah and Tanzim members, killing one boy, Wissam Tarifi. The Tanzim responded by demanding the resignation of Military Intelligence head Musa Arafat, a nephew of the Rais.

Tanzim head Barghouti has been extremely critical of the corruption in the PA executive authority (notwithstanding evidence that Fatah itself has been implicated in the corruption). In June 1998, for example, Barghouti publicly criticized Arafat's decision to re-appoint six ministers linked by a Palestinian Legislative Council report about PA corruption to the reshuffled cabinet. He has also been critical of the ongoing abuses of power in the PA security apparatus. In interviews earlier this year, Barghouti attributed a decline in the popularity of Fatah--

recent defeats in student council elections, etc.--to the poor performance of the PA and particularly the security apparatus. In addition to criticizing the security apparatus, this critique could be understood as veiled criticism of Arafat.

The growing prestige of Barghouthi and the Tanzim at the expense of PA security apparatus and outsider Fatah influence has at times compelled Arafat to try to weaken the growing power of the organization by encouraging rivalries. Still, the value of the Tanzim to Arafat outweighs the difficulties it poses.

Conclusions Indeed, the world of the Tanzim is murky and confusing. Like other aspects of PA politics, organizational decisions are often based on personal rivalries and differences. In the absence of official policies, the key question is to what extent Arafat controls this organization. After nearly a week of riots, some observers have suggested that Arafat has lost control of the street and is now riding the back of a tiger. The dominant assessment, however, is that the Tanzim remains under Arafat's authority, and will ultimately comply with his dictates.

Both Israelis and Palestinians seem to agree that Arafat is the key. Earlier this week, Israeli Deputy Chief of Staff Moshe Yaalon said, "The moment he [Arafat] orders the Tanzim to stop the riots, they will do just that." Likewise, West Bank Tanzim official Ghassan al Sheik said this week that Arafat is "the commander and chief" of the organization and that its forces act only upon his orders. Some months earlier, during a July interview, Marwan Barghouthi himself confirmed that Arafat gave the order to the Tanzim to end the May shootout with the IDF. Perhaps the question more important than whether Arafat has the ability to rein in the Tanzim is whether he has the will to do so.

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