

# The Palestinian Security Services: Between Police and Army

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## Brief Analysis

On November 5, 1998, Gal Luft, a lieutenant colonel in the reserves of the Israel Defense Forces and a research associate of The Washington Institute, addressed the Institute's Special Policy Forum on the findings of his new Policy Focus Research Memorandum, [The Palestinian Security Services: Between Police and Army.](#) [\(templateC04.php?CID=108\)](#) The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

The Palestinian Security Services (PSS) were born out of the Oslo Agreement and have managed, within less than five years, to evolve into a serious armed establishment that cannot be ignored.

The PSS is more than an ordinary police force. It is a multifaceted security apparatus comprising twelve different branches with functions similar to those of a regular army, a police force, military police units, intelligence services, and a coastal guard. As a result of difficulty in defining the exact responsibilities of the various branches, their respective jurisdictions often overlap, leading in turn to confusion, misunderstandings, and even street clashes. Rather than resolving this problem, Palestinian Authority (PA) Chairman Yasir Arafat, the commander-in-chief of all the security forces, has practiced a strategy of "divide and rule," creating situations in which the commanders of the various PSS forces are often at odds with each other. That makes him the only arbiter among the different forces.

In light of Arafat's deteriorating health, there has been much talk about his succession. It is almost certain that the roles of the security chiefs of the different services will be crucial to the decision of who is going to replace Arafat. Three security chiefs are particularly likely to play an important role: Jibril Rajoub, commander of the Preventive Security Force in the West Bank; Muhammad Dahlan, commander of the Preventive Security Force in Gaza and a rising star in the PA; and Amin al-Hindi, the commander of General Intelligence (Mukhabbarat al-Amma).

Why the Size of the PSS Matters. There is a sharp discrepancy between the number of Palestinians believed to be serving in the PSS and the number affirmed by the PA. The PA has thus far forwarded Israel a list of 18,600 names -- a number that stands in sharp contrast to the 30,000 that the Oslo II agreement allows the PA to employ, and in even sharper contrast to the 40,000-plus forces that the PSS is actually believed to employ. If the latter estimate is true, the PA is the most heavily policed territory in the world, with a ratio of one policeman for every 50 residents (the ratio in the United States is 1:400). Under the Wye Accords, the PA has agreed to provide Israel with the names of another 10,400 PSS officers, bringing the total number of names to 30,000. Whether the size of the PSS actually changes is another matter; the PA may reclassify the job titles of 10,000 current PSS employees while keeping them in essentially the same job.

Israel's repeated demand that the PA reduce the size of its security forces may seem paradoxical, as Israel simultaneously demands that the PA crack down on terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Yet, the PSS's failure to stop Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists is not due to a lack of personnel but to a lack of political will.

> Initially, Israeli authorities were not concerned about the excessive numbers of PSS personnel because the PSS

was seen as a tool to enhance Israel's security. Israeli attitudes about the PSS then changed after the riots of September 1996, which took place in the aftermath of the opening of the Hasmonean tunnel in Jerusalem. This event was a watershed in the security relations between Israel and the PA. The riots showed that the PSS can be a real threat to Israel. The PSS was able to achieve not only a political victory but even a military victory: more casualties were inflicted on the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) by the PSS than vice versa, and the IDF officers killed or wounded were of higher rank. Ever since the September riots, the Israeli attitude has been that the PSS is vital for combating terrorism, but if it is too strong, it is a threat. For this reason, the Israelis are now concerned with the issue of size reduction.

Another discrepancy between the Oslo Accords and the current reality is the numbers and types of weapons used by the Palestinian Police. It is believed that the PSS has stockpiled not only many more firearms than allowed under the Oslo Accords, but it has also acquired a number of anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles -- weapons not permitted in the accords.

> A reduction in the size of the PSS will not impede its ability to implement the Wye River Agreement. The PSS has the technical ability to crack down on the Hamas and other groups. The problem is that PSS offices will find it difficult to accept the need to repress their own people, especially as many Palestinian policemen are quartered with the local population. It is almost certain that some branches will be more actively involved than others in the crackdown on terrorist groups.

Future Clashes? Despite recent progress in the peace process, the possibility of a future clash between the IDF and the PSS still exists. Both sides have been preparing for the possibility of war, especially since Binyamin Netanyahu took power as Israel's prime minister. Exchanges of fire between the two take place several times a week but do not receive a great amount of publicity.

The PSS is fully aware that it does not need to be a modern army to pose a threat to the IDF. From its own experience and after closely watching events on the Israeli-Lebanese border, the PSS knows that Israelis are extremely sensitive to casualties and the increased threat to personal security.

> In a future clash, the PSS is likely to use accurate fire aimed at striking as many uniformed Israeli personnel as possible. To that end, the PSS has already been training hundreds of snipers. Furthermore, the PSS will try to hit Israeli state-of-the-art weapons systems such as tanks and helicopters, in part for the psychological boost that a demonstration of Israeli vulnerability would provide to Palestinian public opinion. In the event of a prolonged conflict, the PSS would probably adopt Lebanese guerrilla characteristics, leading to a "Lebanonization" of the territories.

The IDF does not want to reenter the urban areas under full Palestinian control (Zone A), except in the most extreme circumstances. The IDF knows that urban warfare would be extremely difficult. For that reason, it would be militarily advantageous for the PSS to lure the IDF as close as possible to Palestinian cities in Zone A. Furthermore, the PSS will try to expose the civilian population to Israeli fire to increase the toll of civilian casualties, on the grounds that the more civilians would be hurt, the more publicity and support the PSS would enjoy. There are unconfirmed reports of a new unit of highly trained Palestinian plain-clothes fighters whose assignment in the event of a clash would be to inflame the population to back up the PSS and open fire on Israeli soldiers.

Conclusion. The PSS is a very complex body that is very different from what the architects of the Oslo Accords originally had in mind. It is a hybrid between a police and an army -- an army not capable of posing an existential threat to Israel, yet powerful enough to cause great military and moral damage to the IDF, should a confrontation occur.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Assaf Moghadam.

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