

Evolution of the Palestinian Authority Security Forces

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The PASF have become a dependable peace partner, but can they maintain stability amid U.S. aid cuts and imminent political storms?

On March 28, The Washington Institute held a Policy Forum with Neri Zilber and Ghaith al-Omari, coauthors of the new study [State with No Army, Army with No State: Evolution of the Palestinian Authority Security Forces, 1994-2018](#). Zilber, an adjunct fellow with the Institute, is a journalist and analyst on peace process issues. Omari is a senior fellow at the Institute and former advisor to the Palestinian negotiating team during the 1999-2001 permanent-status talks. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Security is a fundamental prerequisite for any economic or diplomatic progress between Israelis and Palestinians, yet not much is known about the Palestinian Authority security forces (PASF) and their coordination with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The Washington Institute's new [State with No Army](#) study was intended to remedy this knowledge gap.

The PASF comprise eight services and nearly 30,000 armed personnel, with responsibility for upholding law and order in PA-controlled areas of the West Bank. In operational terms, their three main functions are taking armed gunmen off the streets, running a strict anti-Hamas campaign, and engaging in security coordination with Israel.

This coordination has five main components:

- **Dialogue and intelligence sharing.** Occurring from the strategic to the operational level, such engagement is aimed at avoiding security hazards and flagging changes that affect stability.
- **Counterterrorism efforts.** These activities primarily target Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, with intelligence flowing in both directions. In fall 2015, this category was broadened to include lone-wolf Palestinian attackers, predominantly younger suspects.
- **Deconfliction during IDF raids into Area A.** Israel maintains freedom of operation to enter Palestinian-controlled portions of the West Bank (i.e., Area A) and arrest terrorist suspects. This is often done via an official coordination mechanism between the IDF and PASF.
- **The safe return of Israelis.** Israeli civilians stray into PA-controlled areas at times, often by accident. In 2017, over 500 such individuals were found and returned safely. IDF personnel have been rescued from similar circumstances—most recently, when two soldiers in uniform strayed into Jenin earlier this year, they were returned safely through direct intervention by the PASF, who prevented a Palestinian mob from harming them.
- **Riot control.** The PASF have worked to contain large demonstrations before they coalesce, escalate, and reach the seam zones between Israeli and Palestinian control (e.g., highways, settlements, and checkpoints). Palestinian forces have riot-control units that they deploy as needed; more important, the PA is no longer mobilizing its own personnel to take to the streets.

The PASF have become a more cohesive, effective, and professional entity than ever before. Yet they face many challenges within the Palestinian political structure, and the reforms begun under former prime minister Salam Fayyad have eroded. This raises the question: is the PASF's success sustainable? Last July, amid tensions that followed the installment of Israeli metal detectors on the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif, security coordination temporarily broke down.

Moreover, Palestinian officials have made clear that the coordination is not a favor to Israel, the United States, and Europe, but rather a means to the end of removing the occupation and achieving statehood. This generalized goal is very difficult to defend in Palestinian society, especially absent a credible political horizon. And the PA does not help the cause when it periodically threatens to sever coordination in order to pressure Israel—in fact, such actions further delegitimize the PASF by making them seem like subcontractors of the occupation.

Israeli security professionals are aware of this tension and therefore do not discuss the issue too openly. Acknowledging the PASF's importance as both an institution and a vehicle for coordination, the IDF and Shin Bet are committed to bolstering the standing of Palestinian forces—not only to augment their reputation as guarantors of the people's security, but also to give them greater authority and capacity. Multiple talks have been held in recent years on these very issues, including easier access for PASF units, increased capabilities, and better equipment.

Unfortunately, such initiatives usually run up against the Israeli right's refusal to be seen as ceding additional West Bank land. All IDF or Shin Bet proposals that pair coordination with concessions tend to die within the Israeli cabinet. If coordination is to remain effective, it must be insulated from such politicization.

The U.S. political scene often presents similar hurdles. The notion that Washington can cut funding to the PA without affecting the security forces is largely a fiction. The recently passed Taylor Force Act, which punishes the PA for making payments to the families of prisoners and so-called "martyrs," may make sense from a certain point of view, but it will likely undermine the PASF's credibility. When America cuts aid to all organs except the security forces, how can PASF officials credibly claim that they are fighting for the Palestinian people rather than Washington?

Aid cuts also limit Washington's ability to engage with Palestinians and could spell the end of American leverage over the PASF. The United States deserves credit for shepherding the development of Palestinian forces and sending a three-star general to help train them and facilitate coordination. Yet without broader political support from Washington, the coordinator and his dedicated professional staff may be drastically limited in what they can achieve.

The timing of the cuts poses difficulties as well. In May, Palestinian forces will have to keep the peace amid several challenging events, including the U.S. embassy move to Jerusalem, the seventieth anniversary of Israel's independence, the associated Nakba (Catastrophe) Day, and the beginning of Ramadan. It is unclear whether the PASF will be able to maintain cohesion and effectiveness under such pressures. They have managed to withstand many shocks in the past, and President Mahmoud Abbas has repeatedly chosen stability and nonviolence over escalation during the past twelve years. Yet his growing political weakness, unpopularity, and dearth of options have created a dangerous mix that could affect his calculus at a time of crisis, especially given the spike in U.S. pressure.

In this context, it is important to consider the PASF's role in Abbas's eventual succession. The Palestinian political system is becoming more authoritarian, and the security forces have morphed into a tool at the president's disposal. When the time comes to replace him, the PASF will have several options, such as staying in the barracks and supporting the political process or becoming contenders themselves by fulfilling their own ambitions. Most likely, though, they will become kingmakers by supporting certain candidates.

For now, the PASF remain a rare and largely unheralded success story for Israeli-Palestinian relations and American diplomacy. They have proven to be a sustainable and effective force, so it would be a huge loss if they were to collapse under growing tensions. Washington would therefore be wise to focus on ways of strengthening them in the immediate term.

This summary was prepared by Lia Weiner.