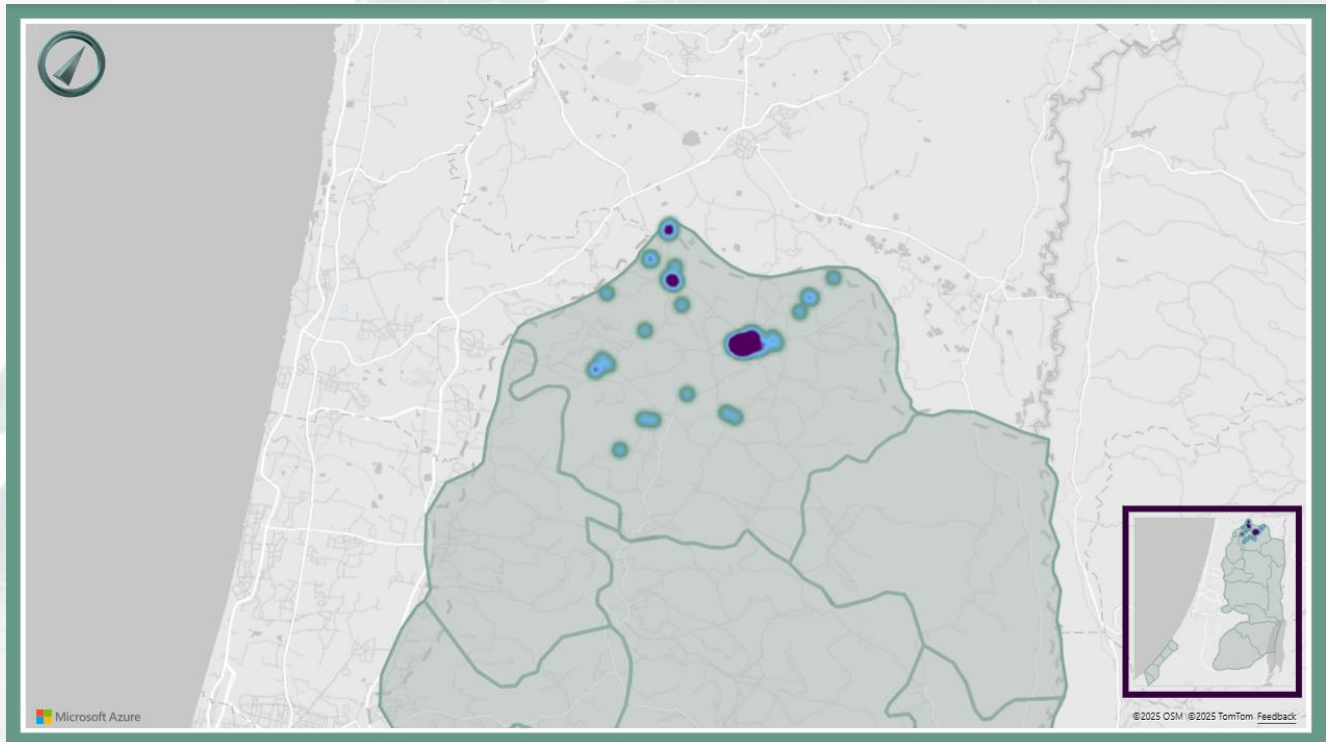




Reviewing Operation ‘Protect the Homeland’ in Jenin

January 14, 2025



Heatmap of incidents relating to the PA's operations in Jenin since December 14, based on SARI Global's database.

Introduction

Since December 14, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has initiated a rare and significant security operation in Jenin, ‘*Protect the Homeland*’, targeting rival Non-State Armed Actors (NSAAs), including factions linked to Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). This development marks a pivotal moment for the PA as it navigates a challenging and volatile landscape.

The operation underscores the PA's growing concerns about consolidating authority in the face of internal and external pressures. This is a particularly precarious period for the PA, as perceptions of "collaboration" with Israel compound its waning popularity. Among its ranks, questions of loyalty have surfaced, heightening the risks of operational missteps. A single tactical incident, such as a death in detention, could ignite widespread backlash, amplifying tensions across the region.

Even in the absence of such an incident, rival Palestinian factions have and likely will continue to exploit the situation, fueling instability through attacks against Israeli targets. These attacks, in turn, provoke Israeli security operations, further compounding the region's fragility. The unfolding events in Jenin are emblematic of the broader struggle for authority and legitimacy within the West Bank, with significant implications for regional stability.



Overview, Reactions, and Implications

Overview of the Operation

On 14 December 2024, the PA initiated “Protect the Homeland” to counter what it described as “outlaws,” a term deliberately vague to avoid explicitly naming the targeted groups. Reports indicate the operation focused on cells affiliated with the PIJ, specifically the Jenin Battalion, Hamas, and factions linked to the al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades (AMB), despite the latter’s historic ties to Fatah.

By 09 January 2025, the PA announced the conclusion of the operation’s first phase, citing the arrest of 247 individuals, the destruction of numerous explosives (including car bombs and hundreds of improvised explosive devices), and significant disruption of militant operations. However, the operation resulted in the deaths of six members of the Palestinian Armed Forces (PAF), including a member of the Presidential Guard. Despite this declaration, clashes have persisted, signalling the enduring volatility of the situation.

Reactions from Militant Groups

Hamas and the PIJ have both condemned the operation, describing it as a direct assault on intra-Palestinian unity. The PIJ’s Jenin Battalion explicitly rejected disarmament and blamed PA President Mahmoud Abbas for the failure of prior reconciliation efforts. The group also claimed that the majority of those arrested were civilians rather than militants. Similarly, joint statements from AMB and Hamas’s military wing accused the PA of targeting infrastructure and killing innocent civilians.

Hamas has characterized the operation as a “dangerous escalation” and aligned it with Israeli efforts to suppress Palestinian resistance. This narrative has been bolstered by accusations of PA collaboration with Israel, further eroding the PA’s public credibility.

Strategic and Political Implications

The operation reflects the PA’s urgent need to address its waning control in parts of the northern West Bank, a decline exacerbated by growing militant activity, Iranian financial and logistical support to these groups, and recurrent Israeli military incursions. The PA’s actions appear motivated by a combination of internal pressures and international expectations, particularly from the United States and other backers, to demonstrate its capacity to maintain order.

However, the operation risks further destabilizing the PA’s governance. The arrest of journalists, critics, and civilians has drawn public ire, and accusations of human rights violations may spark broader unrest. Historical incidents, such as the death of activist Nizar Banat in 2021, illustrate how such actions can catalyse widespread dissent.

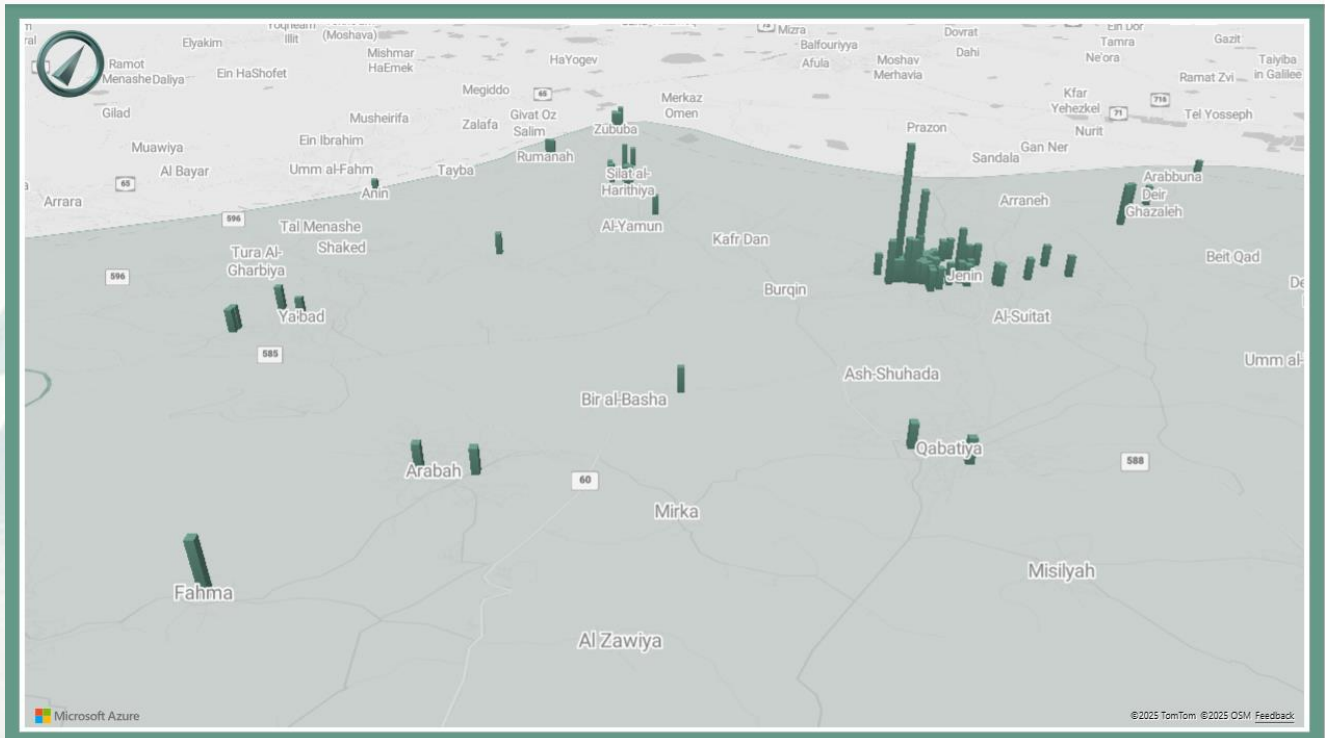
Additionally, tensions between Hamas and Fatah complicate the PA’s position. Reports of negotiations over shared governance in Gaza have likely been undermined by the operation, with Hamas using the situation to rally support and challenge the PA’s legitimacy.



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Geographical Spread of Armed Clashes

While cantered in Jenin, the operation’s effects have extended to other parts of the northern Occupied West Bank. Clashes have been reported in Tulkarm (including Bala and Attil) and Nablus (notably in Balata Camp), highlighting the operation’s potential to escalate regionally. These confrontations involve ambush tactics by the PA and retaliatory actions by armed groups, further straining local stability. Southern regions of the West Bank remain comparatively unaffected, likely due to the PA’s stronger influence among local clans in these areas.



Distribution of incidents relating to the PA’s operations in Jenin since December 14, based on SARI Global’s database.

Challenges from Within

The PA faces internal obstacles, including questions over the loyalty of its security forces. Reports indicate instances of discontent within the ranks, and the reliance on elite units, such as the Presidential Guard, reflects concerns over defections or divided allegiances. Moreover, Israel’s slow approval of international efforts to arm PA forces adds logistical challenges to its ability to effectively counter militant threats.

Potential Popular Backlash

Public perception of the operation as aligned with Israeli objectives poses a significant risk to the PA. While some segments of the population may fear a descent into chaos akin to the Gaza Strip, others view the PA’s actions as a betrayal of Palestinian resistance. Limited protests in Jenin and critical statements from student organizations highlight the potential for unrest. A single high-profile incident of police brutality or the death of a civilian in detention could ignite broader protests, as seen in past instances.



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Connections to the Gaza Conflict

The West Bank operation is intertwined with broader dynamics in Gaza. Hamas and PIJ may use the situation to destabilize the West Bank, particularly if no reconciliation agreement with Fatah is reached. Conversely, the PA's actions in Jenin could be part of a strategy to demonstrate its ability to govern effectively in anticipation of future political negotiations over Gaza.

Conclusion

The Palestinian Authority's "Protect the Homeland" operation against rival armed groups represents a pivotal and high-stakes initiative aimed at curbing rising militancy in the West Bank amidst mounting international scrutiny. While the operation seeks to assert control, its heavy-handed tactics risk alienating the Palestinian populace, potentially igniting widespread backlash and further undermining the PA's already tenuous legitimacy. Retaliatory actions by the targeted groups could exacerbate violence, not only against the PA but also Israel, amplifying regional instability. The outcomes of this operation will be critical in shaping local unrest, militant activities, and the broader dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with far-reaching implications for the PA's stability and regional peace.

The deteriorating security environment poses challenges to access and the safety of personnel. Road closures, checkpoints, and the risk of being caught in crossfire or targeted by armed groups may hinder the delivery of aid. Humanitarian actors may need to strengthen risk management frameworks, enhance coordination with local stakeholders, and prioritize flexible and adaptive approaches to ensure the continuity of critical services amidst the unfolding crisis.



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