

# The Palestinian Authority is falling apart.

Is Israel paying enough attention?

By **RAPHAEL BENAROYA** November 23, 2022

The beautiful beaches of Israel's Mediterranean and the bustling streets of Tel Aviv belie the dark clouds of a brewing storm just a few miles away in the Palestinian territories.

Terrorism and hostilities there have risen sharply over the past year. Palestinians have killed 24 Israeli citizens and soldiers so far in 2022. In response, Israeli security forces have conducted operations in the West Bank that have killed more than 100 Palestinians, including five women and 24 minors.

In the city of Nablus, the Israeli military recently raided a newly formed militant Palestinian group called the Lion's Den, which has claimed credit for several recent attacks that killed Israeli soldiers. The raid resulted in 26 Lion's Den members wounded and five dead, including one of the group's leaders.

Last month, during my latest visit to Israel, an Israeli military unit intercepted a group of Palestinians crossing illegally into Israel, and an Israeli commander was killed in the clash. Israeli security forces also thwarted several other hostile Palestinian acts in mixed Arab-Jewish cities inside Israel.

Interestingly, the consensus of local security analysts was that most of the recent clashes in Israel and the West Bank were grassroots actions led by young Palestinians, not organized events led by known Islamist organizations. Nevertheless, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad are sure to benefit from the sharp rise of tensions and overt hostilities. As a result, it seems likely that both Israel and the Palestinian Authority may soon find it difficult to control future escalations of violence.

Two underlying conditions have led to the current situation. First, the PA has lost control over large sections of the Palestinian territories, and the PA's leadership, headed by Mohammad Abbas, has lost credibility with many Palestinians, especially younger generations. Second, with Israel heading into a fifth national election in less than four years, political leaders were preoccupied with garnering votes and left Israel's security forces to deal with the most recent Palestinian conflict by themselves.

To elaborate on these points more specifically:

- Abbas and the PA have failed to establish law and order in, and essentially lost control over, large population centers in the West Bank, including Jenin, Nablus, and Hebron.

- There are indications that elements of the PA security forces are fomenting hostility toward their leaders and lack motivation to perform their jobs.
- The Fatah movement has split into three factions, only one of which is fully controlled by Abbas.
- Hamas and the Islamic Jihad oppose Abbas; they want to usurp the PA's influence throughout the West Bank and East Jerusalem.
- PA government institutions are dysfunctional, the PA parliament is ineffective, the PA's budget does not adequately address the needs of Palestinians, and corruption within the PA is rampant.
- The weakness of the PA and the uncertainty of its future leadership (Abbas is 87 years old) present an opportunity for extreme Islamist elements. No Palestinian leadership vacuum will last long. Accordingly, Israel better pay attention not just to its security forces, which are already fully engaged, but also to its political arm.
- Israel has often relied on its security forces to defend itself, but the military is just one of four pillars that support national security, along with a healthy economy, effective foreign relations, and the quality of national institutions. Addressing the risk posed by Palestinian unrest requires all four pillars.

Weakness in the quality of political institutions in particular is bound to risk cracking Israel's national security structure.

- Benjamin Netanyahu and other political leaders were absorbed in a bitter contentious process prior to the election and he now tries to pull together a governing coalition. Israel's security forces have been bearing the burden of handling the Palestinian hostilities.
- Naturally, military leaders tend to view force as an appropriate and viable solution. But when force is applied to suppress hostilities, the reaction tends to be increased violence...which spurs an even stronger application of force...which leads to a vicious cycle of deadly conflict escalation.

The stakes for both Israel and the PA are high — and growing. Israel can neither allow nor afford another Gaza to its east. No country can maintain peace when hostile actors, under dysfunctional governance, foment violence a stone's throw from that country's largest cities.

So what is Israel to do?

Israel must augment the use of force with long-term, political, strategic thinking. To address Palestinian unrest, Israel's civilian political echelon must play a key role in developing and directing priorities, resources, and strategy for national security, working closely with the country's security arm. When the political echelon is distracted, or missing from the table entirely, no quality bilateral discussion occurs, no civilian wisdom is applied, and security is potentially compromised.

We should all hope that the just-concluded Israeli election produces a stable, strong, and functional government that lasts years (not the recent average of seven months).

That Israeli government should engage in the current Palestinian conflict with greater foresight — to enable the PA to establish credible leadership, effective Palestinian social and economic institutions, and the PA's own strong internal security force.

Shoring up the leadership, effective governance, and security power of one of Israel's chief adversaries may seem counterintuitive — but that's what Israel's newly elected government should do, sooner rather than later.

Doing so will improve the security of both Israelis and the Palestinian people.

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