



Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation: what next?

by Julia Lisiecka

Until recently, Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation was seen as a unique 'success story' of the Middle East Peace Process. However, recent developments seem to be challenging this narrative; only last month, demonstrations attracted thousands of Palestinian protesters who demanded the suspension of cooperation with Israel. Shortly before this, Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas threatened to end Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation in response to a new Knesset law which retroactively legalised some 4,000 Israeli settler houses built on private Palestinian land. Consequently, one of the cornerstones of the Oslo Accords now appears to be under real threat.

Effective cooperation - what for?

Cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians in security terms has hitherto been robust in the West Bank (Hamas put an end to it in Gaza in 2007) and dates back to the 1993 Oslo Accords. These stipulated the creation of 'a strong police force' which would guarantee public order and internal security for Palestinians, while the Israeli state was to be responsible for countering external threats and ensuring the overall security of Israelis. Today, with over 44% of public sector employees in the PA working in the security sector (over 80,000 people), it remains a major provider of income to the Palestinian population. It also accounts for the lion's share of the PA's annual budget, with 30-45% allocated to this sector.

Israeli army officials estimate that the Palestinian security forces are responsible for thwarting 30-40%

of attacks conducted in the West Bank. According to Majid Faraj, the head of the Palestinian intelligence service, during a four-month period of increased violence between October 2015 and January 2016 alone, the Palestinian security apparatus prevented around 200 violent attacks on Israelis and arrested over 100 Palestinians on suspicion of planning such acts.

However, the statistics, while encouraging for the Israelis, have been met with little enthusiasm by the Palestinian public, which feels no tangible effects of the cooperation for its own security. Between 2010 and 2014, reported criminal offences across the Palestinian territories increased by almost 33%. This includes offences by Israeli settlers, to which the Israeli police force often turns a blind eye. According to Israeli human rights organisation Yesh Din, 85% of investigations into ideologically motivated offences against Palestinians are eventually closed due to police failures.

Yet higher crime rates and overlooked settler violence alone do not account for the mistrust of Palestinians. The PA security apparatus does not always abide by its legal obligations and sometimes uses the machinery to fight its own political battles. A recent account by the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor recorded 2,363 incidents of arbitrary detentions and summons orders in the West Bank, while other organisations have reported incidents of torture and ill-treatment (although predominantly by police in Gaza), breaches on freedom of assembly and speech, confiscations and illegal security vetting. Distrust is

reinforced by corruption and a general lack of transparency in recruitment processes. According to a 2014 survey, 81% of Palestinians believe the PA and its officials are corrupt.

Aware of the growing risk of collapse, Israeli and Palestinian security officers started a new round of secret talks last year aimed at adjusting the security arrangements in place. Palestinian representatives conditioned further cooperation on reinstating their prerogatives in line with the Oslo Accords. Although stipulated in the agreement, the Palestinian security forces have little *de facto* control over Area A (where full civil and security control is supposed to be in the hands of the PA), and have to accept numerous breaches by the Israelis, which regularly enter these areas in search of terror suspects. Israelis, while keen on continuation, proposed a phased approach in which the new agreement would first be tried in Ramallah and Jericho, and would allow the Israeli army to enter Area A if it deems there is a security emergency. Such proposals are received hesitantly by Palestinians who fear this would legitimise Israeli breaches of the agreements.

Old and new threats

As one of the remaining visible elements of the Oslo Accords, Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation is under threat from both sides. A majority of Palestinians increasingly view the cooperation as something negative: two thirds (64%) would like the PA to end it, even if Israel would subsequently respond by preventing Palestinian police access to Area B, which under the Oslo Accords falls under dual administration. Hamas became the most vocal critic of the coordination, accusing the PA of implementing an appeasement policy towards the Israelis and exploiting the coordination to eliminate political rivals. In response, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) decided in March 2015 to halt the security coordination (but did not act on this decision). In an attempt to strengthen the reconciliation process with Gaza-ruling Hamas, and to retain public support, Fatah (the leading PLO faction in power in the West Bank) continues to criticise Israeli incursions into Palestinian-policed territories, and has distanced itself from joint efforts.

Security cooperation is increasingly likened to collaborating with the enemy: reports by some media outlets of Israeli arrests of members of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other Palestinian factions, allegedly with the quiet approval of the Palestinian police, are reinforcing the feeling that the security services act in the name of partisan interests of the faction in power. Others suggest the existence of a 'revolving door' policy whereby Israeli and Palestinian security

services interchangeably arrest people soon after they are released from the other authority's prison. It is also alleged that the Palestinian security forces have on occasion received lists of people who should be arrested, something which then occurs without independent investigation.

Fears are also mounting among the Israeli public. Since October 2015, at least six lone-wolf attacks conducted by Palestinian security officers on Israeli soldiers have been recorded. Most of the assailants are members of the intelligence services or police, and have included a close relative of the chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat and a personal bodyguard of the Palestinian attorney general. On 31 October 2016, Israeli security forces shot and killed Muhammed Turkman after he wounded three Israeli soldiers with a gun at a Ramallah checkpoint. The house of Turkman, who was a police officer, had reportedly been raided by PA preventative security forces hours before the attack. This new and rising trend reminds the Israeli public of its experience of two intifadas, when members of the security forces played an active part in the fighting. Each attack revives the public debate about the risks of arming Palestinian forces, and enables hard-liners to justify the continued presence of the Israeli army in the West Bank.

What is at stake?

The consequences of a potential collapse of these joint efforts cannot be underestimated. President Abbas has emphasised on a number of occasions that in the absence of security coordination, armed militias are likely to threaten the daily life of both Palestinians and Israelis. Given the tense political atmosphere, the situation could soon slide into another wave of violence. The termination of the cooperation, which serves as the prime argument for a capable independent Palestinian state, would undermine the two-state solution as a viable option for the resolution of the conflict, while playing into the hands of the extremist camps on both sides.

In Israel, security officers have in recent years urged the government to take more concrete steps towards talks with Palestinians; following the 2014 war in Gaza, for example, 106 former security officials issued a letter calling on the Prime Minister to engage in the Arab Peace Initiative. Moreover, the heads of Palestinian security forces already play key roles in negotiations handling many sensitive portfolios. The presence of security actors on both sides, if based on strong public support, could potentially ensure a more pragmatic approach at the negotiation table.

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