Overview

The Israeli most recent security force activity in Jenin at the beginning of July 2023 was a major operation conducted to prevent the continuation of the anti-Israel terrorism which began in March-April 2022, when Jenin and its refugee camp became a focus for terrorist attacks carried out in Judea, Samaria and even inside Israel. Following the most recent activity, senior officials in Israel expressed concern about the PA's instability and on July 9, 2023, Israel's Political-Security Cabinet decided to take action to prevent the collapse of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Despite the PA's weakness, Israel considers it as principally responsible for combatting the terrorist groups in northern Samaria. The Israeli security forces therefore lowered their level of activity in the area to allow the PA and its security forces to restore governance, and especially security control, over the area.

About two weeks after the operation, as part of the efforts to restore governance PA chairman Mahmoud Abbas paid an official, media-covered visit to the city and its refugee camp, the first in 12 years. While there he delivered a speech threatening those who would try to harm the PA’s rule and Palestinian unity. The visit took place at a time when the PA leadership was facing claims and criticism and trying to restore its image in the PA territories. Its main objective was to prove the PA was capable of controlling the city and managing its reconstruction (with the help of foreign donations). It was also intended to show Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) that it was still the legitimate presence in control of the territory.

In the meantime, the PA’s security forces were deployed to the area and began detaining wanted, armed Palestinians. The forces were condemned by various parties, mainly Hamas and the PIJ, whose operatives were the ones being detained. On July 17, 2023, armed Jenin Battalion operatives held a protest demonstration, calling on the PA to immediately stop the detentions. In response, additional security forces were deployed to the city.
One of the most critical tests currently facing the PA is restoring its governance to the Jenin region. For the time being, the security forces operate in the city, but the real test will be when they try to enter the refugee camp to disarm terrorist operatives. The Jenin refugee camp is considered one of the most fortified locations in Judea and Samaria, with stockpiles of weapons and explosives and where dozens of armed operatives freely roam the streets. Part of the PA's urgency to restore control comes from the fear that Hamas will take control of the territory, because during a long period when Hamas did not claim responsibility for attacks in Judea and Samaria, its military-terrorist wing now formally does claim responsibility for them.

The recently-formed groups of armed operatives in northern Samaria, and especially in Jenin and its refugee camp, are a significant challenge to the PA. For the most part they are not affiliated with any specific organization and include former Fatah and al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades (AAMB) operatives previously affiliated with Fatah, and operate under a single umbrella framework which unites the organizations. That may make it difficult for the PA forces to operate, and in addition, there is concern that armed terrorist operatives, mainly from Hamas, will try to incite violence against the PA's activities.

The attacks originating in the Jenin refugee camp are a source of inspiration and imitation, and therefore the PA cannot confine its activities to the Jenin area but will have to take similar action in other terrorist centers. According to reports, security force operatives were also deployed in Nablus, Tulkarm, Hebron and Ramallah, but the extent of their activities has not been made clear.

Additional Information

Since the IDF most recent activity at the beginning of July 2023, the Israeli security forces have lowered their level of engagement in Jenin and its refugee camp and allow the Palestinian leadership, and especially its security forces, to restore governance and security control. So far, that was manifested by Mahmoud Abbas' well-publicized visit to Jenin, the first in 12 years, and the detentions of operatives begun by the PA security forces immediately after the visit.

Mahmoud Abbas visits Jenin as part of restoring PA governance

On July 12, 2023, about two weeks after the IDF activity in Jenin, Mahmoud Abbas arrived in a [Jordanian] helicopter for a short and well-publicized visit to Jenin and its refugee camp, accompanied by several senior PA officials. He was received by PA Prime Minister Muhammad
Shtayyeh, Akram al-Rajoub, the governor of the Jenin district, the heads of the security forces and senior members of the Fatah movement. The objective of the visit was to prove to the Palestinian public that the PA was capable of controlling the city and its reconstruction (with the help of foreign donations). It was also intended to show Hamas and the PIJ that it was still the legitimate presence controlling the territory.

According to the Lebanese daily newspaper al-Akhbar, the visit was the first phase of the plan to regain control of Jenin (al-Akhbar, July 16, 2023). Painstaking preparations were made for the visit: thousands of Palestinian security personnel were deployed throughout the city and its refugee camp in numbers not seen in Jenin for many years. Forces were sent to the area, mobile barriers were set up and drivers were stopped for inspection and questioning (Palestinian General Intelligence Telegram channel, July 11, 2023).


While in Jenin, Mahmoud Abbas visited the refugee camp cemetery, where he laid a wreath in memory of those killed in the recent events, then continued to the refugee camp where he gave a speech to an assembly of local residents. He emphasized the issue of unity ("One authority, one country with one law and one weapon"). At the same time, he called the Jenin refugee camp "a symbol of heroism, struggle and firm stance." Before he left he visited Jenin's general security headquarters, where he was briefed on its operations (Wafa, July 12, 2023).
The visit was mocked, mainly by Hamas-affiliated media outlets. They claimed it had lasted less than an hour, during which Mahmoud Abbas refused to meet with local figures and activists, or even tour the camp itself, even though it was his first visit in many years (Shehab Twitter account, July 12, 2023).

**Detentions**

Immediately after the visit the PA security forces began detaining Hamas and PIJ operatives in the Jenin region, but not in the refugee camp. The camp is a hothouse of terrorist activity and entering will be their real test. Fatah sources reported the security forces intended to expand their activities and confront the Jenin Battalion operatives in the near future. The sources added that the PA security force leadership asked its operatives in Jenin to collect information on armed operatives and conflicts between "resistance operatives" [terrorists] and other groups, thereby finding excuses to detain them (Lebanese daily Al-Akhbar, July 19, 2023).
According Hamas and PIJ sources, the PA security forces have recently increased the "political detentions" of their operatives, including released prisoners, operatives wanted by Israel and activists in student councils at the various universities (Independent website in Arabic, July 13, 2023). Palestinian academics noted that the PA forces targeted the student councils and their heads. Lawyers for Justice, and organization based in Ramallah, claimed that since the beginning of 2023 there had been "300 political arrests, 80 in June alone, carried out illegally and without warrants" (aljazeera.net, July 15, 2023). The Ma'ata Palestinian information center also claimed that during June, the PA security forces detained 411 students ("carried out violations"), in particular Hamas Islamic Bloc activists. It was also reported that the PA security forces increased pressure on Balata Battalion operatives in Nablus to turn themselves in, and threatened that otherwise the camp would be invaded by Israeli forces who would "eliminate" them (Palinfo, July 10, 2023).

**Reactions to PA security force activities**

The security force detentions provoked a wave of angry reactions. Eight Palestinian organizations, among them Hamas, PIJ, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Palestinian National Initiative, the Popular Front – General Headquarters (PFLP-GH), the Palestinian People's Party, the Organization of the Pioneers of the War of Liberation, and the Palestinian Democratic Union issued a joint statement of their opposition to detentions in general and the detention of senior officials, activists and released prisoners in

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1 The Palestinian information Center Ma'ata was founded in 2022 and according to the Center and its website, it specializes in monitoring and documenting all aspects of the Palestinian issue, especially in Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem. The center issues periodic reports about the Palestinian situation and focuses on Israel's activities. It has a general database of the history of the Palestinian issue for use by experts, researchers and media outlets, and also follows the activities of the "resistance" and the "Israeli occupation" (Ma'ata Center website, July 17, 2023).
particular. They claimed it was a serious violation of the law and behavior contrary to the national consensus. They demanded that the PA leadership and its security forces immediately stop the detentions and release all the political detainees (al-Araby al-Jadeed, July 11, 2023).

The PA media reported demonstrations in the Jenin refugee camp and the village of Jaba. A Jenin Battalion commander spoke at a demonstration in the Jenin refugee camp and demanded the immediate release of all detainees. He declared that despite the PA's activities, they would continue aiming their guns at Israel. According to reports, after the demonstrations large numbers of PA security forces were dispatched to prevent anarchy and loss of control (Daffa_media Telegram channel [the PIJ Telegram channel in Judea and Samaria] July 17, 2023).

Jenin Battalion sources claimed that in a message they issued as part of contacts and agreements in preparation for Mahmoud Abbas' visit, they had received a promise from "sources in the security forces" and in the Jenin refugee camp that Battalion detainees Murad Malisha and Muhammad Brahma would be released immediately after the visit if it took place without disturbances (Jenin Battalion Telegram channel, July 17, 2023).

Demonstration in the Jenin refugee camp. Right: Senior Fatah official Jamal Khawil calls for the immediate release of all the political and wanted prisoner detainees (QudsN Twitter account, July 17, 2023). Left: Senior PIJ figure Khaled Abu Zina (Daffa_media Telegram channel [the PIJ Telegram channel in Judea and Samaria] July 17, 2023).


Hamas strongly condemned the PA security services' political arrests, especially at a time when the Palestinians were engaged in confronting Israel, calling it cowardice and deserving of condemnation, and claiming it threatened societal peace and opened the door to civil strife (fitna), the last thing the Palestinians currently needed. Hamas called on the PA to stop security coordination with Israel and political detentions, and to immediately release all detainees (Hamas website, July 11, 2023). Husam Badran, a member of Hamas' political bureau, said that political detentions had recently increased and included many instances of torture and interrogation based on political activity. He said that the security services had to stop the arrests and release all political detainees, so that Hamas and the other organizations in Gaza could work to make Mahmoud Abbas' initiative succeed (independentarabia website, July 13, 2023).
Ziyad al-Nakhalah, PIJ secretary general, issued a statement threatening that they would not attend the summit meeting of the [Palestinian] organizations' secretaries general in Cairo until their operatives had been released from PA prisons (Filastin al-Yawm, July 23, 2023). Khaled al-Batash, a member of the PIJ's political bureau, said that due to the PA's continued detentions of "resistance fighters," the organization was reconsidering its attendance at the meeting expected to take place in Cairo at the end of July (Filastin al-Yawm, July 22, 2023). He claimed the detentions were a deviation from the national consensus and demanded the immediate release of all the operatives detained by the security forces (Islamic Jihad website, July 10, 2023). PIJ spokesman Tareq Salami condemned the detentions, which included several released prisoners. He claimed they deviated from the national consensus and demanded the immediate release of all those detained by the PA security forces (PIJ website, July 10, 2023).

Stéphane Dujarric, spokesman for the UN secretary general, said they were aware of the increase in the number of detentions carried out by the PA and were concerned people were being detained because they "had taken advantage of their freedom of expression" (al-Quds al-Arabi, July 19, 2023).

PA and Fatah reactions to the detentions

Sources in the PA and Fatah rushed to deny that the arrests had been political, claiming they were carried out for criminal offenses. Talal Dweikat, spokesman for the PA security forces, claimed the reports were untrue and no one had been arrested for political affiliation (Wafa, July 13, 2023). Lawyers for Justice said in response that his claims were out of line and expressed disregard for freedom and human rights (Lawyers for Justice Facebook page, July 14, 2023).

Akram al-Rajoub, governor of the Jenin District, gave a series of interviews where he rejected the Jenin Battalion claim regarding the detentions. He said the detentions in Jaba, for example, were not connected to a "resistance" political or security matter but rather to the arson attack on the police station in Jaba. He added that the leaders of the struggle did not seek to harm the "Palestinian National Authority," and no one had the right to sabotage or destroy PA institutions. As to what the Jenin Battalion had written about coordination with those responsible for Mahmoud Abbas' visit to Jenin and the Jenin refugee camp, al-Rajoub claimed that he had no idea, but did not believe it because Mahmoud Abbas did not need
permission or mediation or negotiations to visit [any location in the PA territories] (Sada

In another interview, asked if he had a problem with the presence of armed operatives in the
Jenin refugee camp, al-Aroub said that as long as they did not hold displays of force in the
streets and did not damage property or institutions, he had no problem. However, they were
forbidden to run amok, drive stolen vehicles or display their weapons in the street (Facebook
page of Muhammad al-Atrash, who interviewed him, July 18, 2023).