



# The Security Forces Operating in Palestine

## An Overview



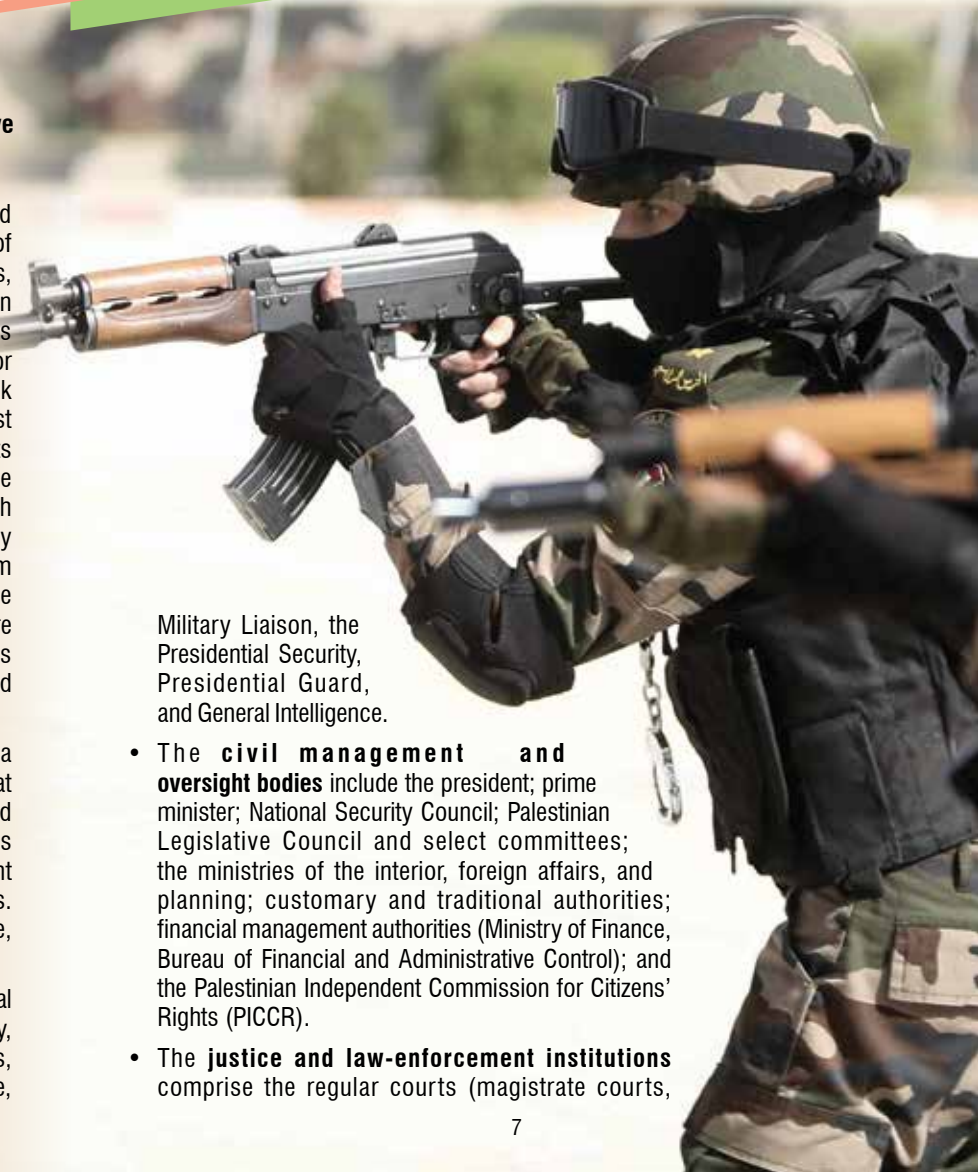
Photo by Fadi Arouri.

By the TWIP Collective

Security has been a cornerstone of the Oslo Accords, and the reform of the security sector a major preoccupation of internationally sponsored diplomatic initiatives, all peace plans, and the ongoing public discourse of the past approximately ten years. But the term carries different meanings for the various actors in the scenario. Palestinians view the security sector as a main element in the process of state-building and seek a full-fledged functional system that can protect them against Israeli incursion and form the basis of sovereignty. Israel wants a Palestinian security sector that is strong enough to carry out the policing required in order to secure Israel's safety, but weak enough not to pose any threat through resistance. The United States, many European countries, and some Arab states want to revive a system along the lines of the Oslo Agreements. Some countries view the security sector as an aspect of good governance and therefore emphasize that the sector needs to function according to the principles of transparency and accountability to the elected executive and legislative authorities.

The term security sector can be interpreted in both a narrow and a broad sense. The narrow definition denotes state organizations that are authorized to use force. The UNDP, on the other hand, suggested in its Human Development Report of 2002, a definition that includes civil-management oversight bodies, justice and law-enforcement institutions, non-statutory security forces, and civil-society groups. In the context of an incomplete state-formation process in Palestine, a broad definition is more useful:

- The **organizations that are authorized to use force** are the Internal Security Forces that comprise the Civil Police, Preventive Security, Civil Defense, Executive Force, and the National Security Forces, which include the Naval Police, Military Police, Military Intelligence,



Military Liaison, the Presidential Security, Presidential Guard, and General Intelligence.

- The **civil management and oversight bodies** include the president; prime minister; National Security Council; Palestinian Legislative Council and select committees; the ministries of the interior, foreign affairs, and planning; customary and traditional authorities; financial management authorities (Ministry of Finance, Bureau of Financial and Administrative Control); and the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights (PICCR).
- The **justice and law-enforcement institutions** comprise the regular courts (magistrate courts,

courts of first instance, courts of appeal, High Court), the High Constitutional Court, High Criminal Court, administrative courts, *shari'a* and religious courts, military courts, High Judicial Council, Ministry of Justice, correction and rehabilitation centers, criminal investigation departments, and public prosecution, as well as customary and traditional justice systems.

- **Non-statutory security forces** are the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades (military wing of Hamas), Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades (Fatah-affiliated armed groups), Al-Quds Battalions (military wing of Islamic Jihad), Nasser Salah ad-Din Brigades (military wing of the Popular Resistance Committees), Martyr Abu Ali Mustafa Battalions (military wing of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, PFLP), and the National Resistance Brigades (military wing of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, DFLP).
- **Non-statutory civil-society groups** include **professional groups**, such as the Palestinian Bar Association, Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions, Palestinian Federation of Industries, and Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees; and **media**, such as *Al-Quds* newspaper, *Al-Ayyam* newspaper, Maan News Agency, Ramattan Studios; and **research organizations**, such as Applied Research Institute - Jerusalem (ARIJ), Bisan Center for Research and Development,

Palestinian Academy for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA), Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR), and Palestinian Council on Foreign Relations (PCFR); and **advocacy organizations**, such as Al-Haq – Law in the Service of Man, Addameer Prisoners Support and Human Rights Association, Mandela Institute for Political Prisoners, Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights, and the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR); **religious organizations**, such as Higher Islamic Council, zakat centers, and religious charitable organizations; **other nongovernmental organizations**, such as community-development centers and NGOs that work for women, the environment, and health; and also **universities**, such as Birzeit University, Al-Quds University, An-Najah University, Islamic University Gaza, and Al-Azhar University – Gaza.

In the special case of Palestine, the occupying power should be added as **external forces**, namely, the Israeli military. This category also includes international actors, such as the United States and European and other states, which are active in training and equipping some of the Palestinian security forces.

A well-functioning security sector requires more than well-trained security forces, it needs to be governed according to the **principles of good governance**, which means that the organizational structure, systems,

and processes must adhere to the principles of **transparency** in decision making in security-related issues, of **accountability** to the people and their elected representatives, and of **inclusiveness or participation** of the various actors within the security sector in the making and implementation of policy decisions.

The Palestinian security sector is complex and shaped by domestic, regional, and international factors. Internally, it is constrained by the occupation and by power struggles between different factions and actors. Externally, the Israeli occupation controls all entry and exit points to the territories. Furthermore, the division into areas A, B, and C fragments the territories in which the Palestinian National Authority has the mandate to establish security, and exercise its legislative and administrative powers. This mandate gives jurisdiction (in theory) over Area A (about 18 percent of the West Bank), very limited jurisdiction in Area B (approximately 22 percent of the West Bank), and no jurisdiction in Area C (over 60 percent of the West Bank).

Military occupation and armed conflict are among the major challenges that the sector faces in its highly necessary efforts to reform, transform, or restructure (all these terms are debated and used). Reform proponents suggest that what is needed should include the strengthening of the rule of law and the establishment of a strong legal framework that provides for critical oversight; the strengthening

of democratic control over security organizations through the executive, legislative, and judiciary, as well as civil-society organizations; the professional training and better equipping of the security forces; and regional cooperation and the demilitarization of armed groups. However, in this context it is important to consider that such reform activities must be interlinked, mutually supportive, and properly sequenced. Overemphasis on one aspect alone might prove to be highly counterproductive.

In 2002, the internal security forces, which comprise the civil police, the preventive security, and the civil defense, were placed under the Ministry of Interior and at the command of the Director-General for Internal Security.

The following is an outline of the individual security forces.

## INTERNAL SECURITY FORCES

### Civil Police

The Civil Police are the PNA's main law enforcement apparatus and handle ordinary police functions such as combating crime and upholding public order; they are also in charge of the PNA prisons. The Civil Police have various sub-branches such as the Criminal Investigations Department, the Anti-Drug Department, the Public Order Forces, the Border Police, the Traffic Police, and the Women's Police. The Civil Police also have a rapid response unit, the Emergency Response Department. The organization employs some 18,500 policemen, of whom about 12,000







Photo by Fadi Arouri.

are deployed in Gaza (including 3,100 Public Order Forces) and some 6,000 in the West Bank (including 1,000 Public Order Forces). The Civil Police wear dark blue uniforms, except for the Public Order Forces, who wear blue-black-white camouflage fatigues.

### **Preventive Security**

The Preventive Security, an internal intelligence organization, had in 2007 an estimated strength of 8,000 agents, 3,500 in the West Bank and 4,500 in Gaza. It has long been one of the most powerful PNA intelligence organizations. Its main task, the protection of the Oslo peace process against internal opposition, involved action against Islamist factions and armed groups. In 2005, the Palestinian leadership announced the dismantling of the organization's Security and Protection Department, the so-called Death Squad, which had been established in the late 1990s against activists of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. In practice, however, it has remained in place. To the Preventive Security belongs a well-equipped paramilitary unit in light green dress.

### **Civil Defense**

The Civil Defense consists of the emergency and rescue services and the fire departments and has an approximate strength of 950.

### **INTERNAL SECURITY FORCES**

The National Security Forces are often described as the PNA's "proto-army." The National Security Forces are set to merge various organizations with military functions under a unified military command, including the *actual* National Security Forces, the Naval Police, the Military Intelligence, the Military Liaison, and possibly the Presidential Security/Force 17. No precise figures concerning its overall strength are available. Following massive recruitment, various sources estimated its strength in 2007 at 42,000.

#### **National Security Forces**

The National Security Forces (2005: 11,000) are the successor organization of the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA), the PLO's military formation in the diaspora. The National Security Forces recruited most of the personnel from the PLA and gradually added local recruits. Prior to the Intifada, the National Security Forces were responsible for guarding the borders of Area A and for conducting joint Israeli-Palestinian security patrols. In Gaza, the force is organized into three brigades (2005: 6,700): a northern brigade for the northern strip, including Gaza City; a southern brigade for the region of Rafah and Khan Yunis, and a border brigade of approximately 1,000 troops. The border brigade in Gaza was initially set up to patrol Gaza's border with Israel. In the

West Bank, the force consists of nine battalions of around 500 troops each, which are deployed in Ramallah, Jenin, Tulkarem, Qalqilya, Nablus, Hebron, and Bethlehem (overall strength in the West Bank in 2005: 4,500). The National Security Forces wear plain green or green US-style camouflage dress.

#### **Naval Police**

The Naval Police, the Palestinian "proto-navy," officially protect the PNA's territorial waters and have a strength of some 1,000 men (2005). They are deployed primarily in Gaza, and consist of about 600 men. An additional 300 Naval Police are deployed in Nablus, Bethlehem, and Jericho in the West Bank. In addition to its naval activities, the organization has actively participated in interrogating opposition activists and collaborators. During the Oslo years, the mandate of the Naval Police also included the protection of the president of the PNA. The Naval Police wear various uniforms, including brown-beige US-camouflage uniforms.

#### **Military Intelligence**

The Military Intelligence comprises some 500 to 600 plain-clothes agents (2005) who collect intelligence on the external military environment. Under Arafat, however, it acted primarily as an internal security organization for monitoring and repressing opposition from within Fatah. The organization has been officially integrated into the National Security Forces as the Military Intelligence Department.

#### **Military Police**

The Military Police were part of the Military Intelligence until they became a separate unit of the National Security Forces in 2005. The Military Police enforce order and discipline among the various security organizations and provide backup support to riot control and infrastructure protection. The Military Police have one reinforced

battalion (2005: 1,400) in Gaza and one regular battalion (2005: 600) in Ramallah. The unit wears plain green or green US-style camouflage with red berets.

#### **Military Liaison**

The Military Liaison (2005: 100) coordinates security with Israel and is in charge of the PNA elements in the District Coordination Offices (DCO). It conducted joint Palestinian patrols with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) until its function became obsolete with the outbreak of the second Intifada. Technically it is now a department of the National Security Forces.

#### **Presidential Security/Force 17**

The Presidential Security, better known as Force 17, is a military unit responsible for the protection of members of the PNA's political establishment, as well as for the protection of important PNA infrastructure. It has long been the "elite unit" of the PNA. The Presidential Security/Force 17 has a strength of some 4,500 men (2005): 2,500 troops in Gaza (three battalions, in northern and southern Gaza and Gaza City) and 2,000 in the West Bank (based in Ramallah, Nablus, and Hebron). The unit wears green US-style camouflage dress with Bordeaux-red berets.

#### **General Intelligence**

As the official PNA intelligence service, the General Intelligence is independent and under the direct command of the PNA president. In 2005, the General Intelligence was placed under the split command of the president and the minister of the interior for the duration of the planned reorganization process of the PNA security sector. Its structure, organization, and leadership replicate the PLO intelligence department in exile. The organization collects intelligence inside and outside the Palestinian Territories, counters espionage and collaboration, and cooperates with

foreign intelligence services. In 2007, the General Intelligence had an estimated strength of some 7,000 agents, divided equally between the West Bank and Gaza. Both branches also have a small paramilitary strike force.

## Executive Force

In the summer of 2007, the Executive Force consisted of an estimated 6,800 members of the armed wings of Hamas and the Popular Resistance Committees (PRCs), as well as a number of members from smaller factions in Gaza. The PNA Ministry of Interior set it up in April 2006 as an instrument to establish law and order in the Gaza Strip. The status of the Executive Force has been a major source of tension between the PNA presidency and Hamas. Talks on integrating the Executive Force into the Civil Police had not materialized by spring 2007. The Executive Force wears either black-blue-white camouflage or black dress.

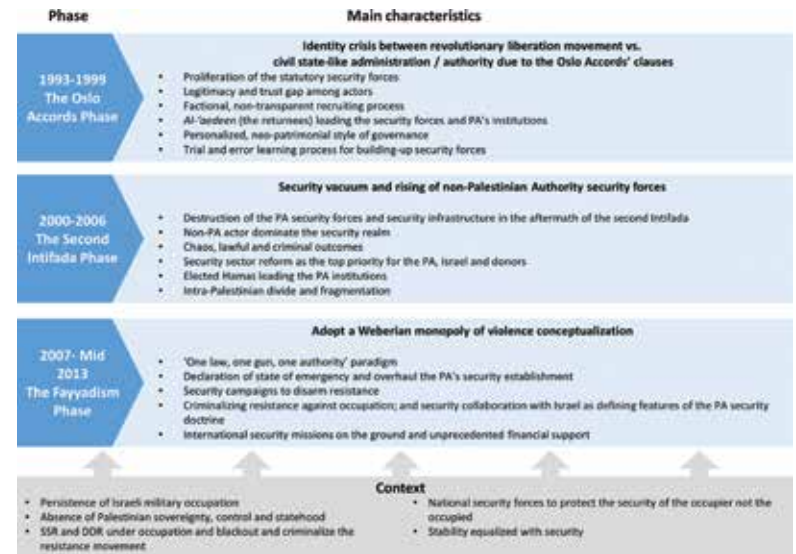
## Presidential Guard

The Presidential Guard was originally a military unit of some 400 men responsible for the protection of the PNA president. It had long been part of the Presidential Security/Force 17, but became a separate force in 2006, mainly because of US legal restrictions that prevented the United States from cooperating with Force 17. The Presidential Guard operates outside the National Security Forces and reports directly to the president. In addition to personal protection, its new mission includes counter-insurgency and rapid intervention tasks. In 2007, the Presidential Guard was set to increase its strength from some 3,500 men (2006) to an estimated 8,000. It also comprises a rapid deployment unit (450) in Gaza and the West Bank. The Presidential Guard wears green and the rapid deployment unit black dress. Its members have received training from the United States, Jordan, and Egypt.

According to an article published in *Al-Monitor* in May 2015, expenses for the security sector amount to up to a third of the PA's budget, at the expense of funds allocated to the health, education, and agricultural sectors.<sup>i</sup> Despite these expenditures, the internal security situation has improved little since 2006, at which time a report by the Public Oversight Committee of the PLC published the following:

“Within the scope of its work and capacity, the Public Oversight Committee examined the deteriorated internal security situation in the territory of the Palestinian Authority (PA). The Committee concludes that a state of severe insecurity and chaos dominates the PA-controlled territory: law and public order are being violated; public and private property is being attacked; members of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) are being assaulted; and there is gunfire on various occasions. Also prevalent throughout the PA-controlled territory are masked individuals; robbery; citizens taking the law into their own hands; factional and family feuds; misuse of senior positions and public property; administrative and financial corruption; and various other violations. The death toll among innocent Palestinian civilians has increased sharply. Crime has also risen to an unprecedented level. According to a statement of the Palestinian Attorney-General in a hearing before the Public Oversight Committee, an average of 35 murders are reported each month in the Gaza Strip and 20 in the West Bank. In this appalling situation the Palestinian security forces do not act firmly, and some Palestinian security officers are even involved in committing atrocities. Moreover, acts of violence are common at Palestinian universities. University professors are assailed and factional and partisan disputes take place at universities. The Palestinian security headquarters and offices are also subjected to numerous attacks. In contempt of religious or national values and respect for their sanctity, medical establishments and services are also targeted.”<sup>ii</sup>

Since the PLC has not been functioning since 2007, at which time the internal division between Hamas and Fatah led to the formation of two entities in the OPT, with the West Bank led by Fatah and Gaza led by Hamas, no recent reports have been issued by this body. However, following the split, Mahmoud Abbas appointed Salam Fayyad as head of an emergency government and attempts at reform of the security forces were a major preoccupation of the years 2007–2013. They involved the restructuring of the internal and national security forces, resulted in better training, equipment, and remuneration of the security personnel, all completely dependent on donor moneys, with the security sector receiving a third of total aid granted to Palestinians. This period also witnessed a proliferation of security-related NGOS. Alaa Tartir in “The Evolution and Reform of Palestinian Security Forces 1993-2013” outlines three stages of development.<sup>iii</sup>



Tartir's assessment of the reform process is summarized as follows: “At best, the security reform under Fayyadism's state-building project – and the leadership of PA's president Mahmoud Abbas – resulted in better stability and more security to Israel and its occupation, but it did not result in better security conditions for the Palestinian people in the occupied West Bank. At worst, the enhanced functionality of the PA's security forces and the reformed style of governance that was defined through security collaboration with Israel, resulted in creating authoritarian transformations and criminalising resistance against the Israeli occupation, and as such directly and indirectly sustained it.”

*Thanks go to the Geneva Centre for the Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), whose publication “Entry Points to Palestinian Security Sector Reform” (2007) forms the basis of most of this article.*

*Although some of the numbers cited in this article are old, the information is still relevant and includes all the information that is currently available.*

<sup>i</sup> Andan Abu Amer, “Security Forces Drain Palestine's Budget,” *Al-Monitor*, May 10, 2015.

<sup>ii</sup> “PLC Report on the Unstable Security Situation in the Palestinian Authority-Controlled Territory (June 2006),” quoted in DCAF, 2007, Appendix C.

<sup>iii</sup> For a contextual analysis of the evolution and reform processes of the Palestinian security forces over the last two decades, please refer to Alaa Tartir's article “The Evolution and Reform of Palestinian Security Forces 1993–2013,” *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 4(1): 46, pp. 1–20, available online at <http://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.gj/>.