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Mahmoud Abbas' big gamble to crush West Bank resistance

In its high-stakes campaign to target Jenin's resistance, the unpopular Palestinian Authority, with tacit Israeli and US support, is risking internal division and intensifying clashes in a last-ditch attempt by an ailing Abbas to hang onto power.

Since 5 December 2024, the [Israel-supported](#) security apparatuses of the Palestinian Authority (PA) have launched an extensive media, political, and military campaign in the northern West Bank, with a particular focus on Jenin and its refugee camp.

Branded as a fight against “outlaws” and “Iran’s proxies,” the operation escalated on 14 December into a large-scale military-security offensive. It began with the extrajudicial killing of teenager Rubhi Shalabi and the deaths of two others, including [Yazid Ja’ayseh](#), a prominent leader in the Jenin Brigade, the local branch of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's (PIJ) Quds Brigades.

This campaign was accompanied by widespread incitement among Fatah loyalists, PA employees, and university students aligned with the authority, alongside attacks on both public and individual expressions of dissent.

At the time of writing, clashes in Jenin persist under a media blackout, with the camp facing an unprecedented level of danger amid “additional offensive and defensive measures” [approved](#) by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The prelude before the campaign

To uncover the operation’s full scope, *The Cradle* contacted various sources in the West Bank and beyond. Many declined to be named for fear of retribution. Their accounts consistently pointed to a decision that was neither a Fatah consensus nor fully endorsed by

the PA's leadership. Instead, the campaign's driving force appears to be President Mahmoud Abbas himself, supported by a close circle of confidants.

Notably, Abbas made sweeping changes to the security apparatus before and during the operation. Insiders inform *The Cradle* that "Abu Mazen [Abbas] removed the old guard who could challenge him and brought in a younger generation eager to please him without question."

The most significant change occurred in November, when Major General Munir Ayed Salem al-Zoubi, commander of the Presidential Guard, was reassigned to an honorary advisory role. He was replaced by Mohammed Dajaneh, a relatively unknown figure who was promoted from brigadier general to major general. Although Dajaneh's career has had its ups and downs, his appointment signaled Abbas' preference for compliant leadership.

Simultaneously, reports of leadership changes within the National Security Forces (NSF) emerged, though details remain unclear.

Reshuffling in Ramallah

Rumors have also circulated that Major General [Nidal Abu Dukhan](#) was replaced as commander and reassigned as the PA ambassador to Cairo. Major General Saeed Khalil took over his position, and Brigadier General Pilot Hafez al-Rifai was his deputy. However, other sources denied that Abu Dukhan had been reassigned, stating that he remains in his post with Rifai as his deputy.

Earlier, in September, Abbas, from his residency in Ramallah, appointed Major General [Allam al-Saqa](#) as police chief, replacing Major General Yousef al-Hilu. Shortly after, Brigadier General Rashid Hamdan was named deputy police chief. This overhaul of the police leadership soon became evident as a strategic move to involve the force in direct confrontations with resistance groups.

These changes, excluding the leadership of General Intelligence and Military Intelligence, cemented Abbas' control over the security apparatus and underscored his ability to maintain authority despite ongoing discussions about his succession.

The reshuffle aimed to install younger leaders eager to prove themselves through loyalty and execution of Abbas' directives, particularly regarding operations against resistance groups.

On the ground in Jenin

Field analysis and eyewitness accounts reveal the police's prominent role as the operation's public face. They issued frequent statements about arresting "wanted individuals" and manned checkpoints at the camp's perimeters.

Meanwhile, incursions into the camp are carried out by NSF, supported by Preventive Security and Military Intelligence officers. Snipers occupy strategic points, ensuring significant firepower control over the camp's streets.

Resistance factions have responded fiercely, escalating beyond warning shots to more direct engagements. This shift has led to increasingly intense clashes and higher casualties on both sides.

It was also noted that the forces that entered the city and the camp were largely from outside Jenin Camp. This appeared to be due to factors related to the secrecy of the preparations, as the security services called upon small specialized units from various regions and governorates.

In this operation, a mixture of small groups was utilized, but their movements were controlled by a central command that managed the operation.

Following the operation, on 24 December 2023, the Israeli channel I24NEWS quoted an official in the PA saying that some Palestinian officers refused to enter Jenin due to the high number of casualties during the operation, internal tension, and fears of being accused of betraying the resistance.

According to sources close to Abbas and reports in the Israeli media, the ailing president seeks to maintain his position and demonstrate the PA's ability to govern effectively to the US, Israelis, and allied Arab states.

Observers have linked Ramallah's refusal to approve Egypt's proposal for a Gaza administrative committee to Abbas' ambitions for tangible gains in the West Bank. These gains would strengthen the PA's claim over the territory and showcase its ability to [govern Gaza](#) under a security-first approach that suppresses resistance.

Challenges and opposition

Resistance factions view this as the PA's final opportunity, facilitated by Israeli security and military support for the past seven months, to stay in control and ward off a potential collapse. Israeli officials see the outcome in Jenin as a microcosm of the PA's broader control over the West Bank. Success could lead to similar operations in other camps, while failure may signal the PA's decline.

Hebrew newspaper *Haaretz* quoted an Israeli security source as saying, "Jenin is now a miniature model that reflects the situation of the entire West Bank. If the PA stumbles there, its control over the entire West Bank will be in danger." However, he stressed that "the PA apparatuses currently enjoy Tel Aviv's support to operate despite the criticism."

“If the PA succeeds in Jenin, it is likely that it will try to expand its activity to additional camps in the northern West Bank. However, if it fails or we force it out of there, this may indicate the beginning of the end of its rule,” he added.

According to the Israeli Reserve Colonel Udi Ebenthal, there are two approaches toward the PA in Israel. The first is the extreme right-wing approach that wants to annex the West Bank, expand settlements, and dissolve the PA, which would make Israel directly responsible for millions of Palestinians. The second approach is the security approach, which stipulates “maintaining the PA’s work as a moderate body that recognizes Israel and coordinates with it in the security sphere, on the basis that this will contribute to stability and alleviate the civilian and security burden on the army.”

Despite Abbas’ efforts, opposition has emerged within Fatah itself. Prominent prisoners, including Zakaria Zubeidi and Jamal Hawil, along with Fatah cadres in Israeli prisons, issued statements condemning the campaign.

Additionally, three Fatah Central Committee members reportedly urged Abbas to halt the operation and pursue dialogue. Abbas dismissed these appeals, insisting that a military solution was the only viable path.

Before the operation, US Security Coordinator General Mike Fenzel met with PA security leaders to dangle the bait of a [four-year \\$680 million plan](#) to boost the training of its special forces and bolster its supplies. Despite US requests, Israel refused to supply the PA with additional weapons, citing concerns over their potential use against Israeli targets.

A detailed report published by *Axios* explains that the operation in Jenin is crucial to the future of the PA and sends a message to US President-elect Donald Trump that “the PA is a reliable partner.” Palestinian sources also told Israeli and foreign media outlets that Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia support the operation, which “will result in victory or defeat for the PA.”

The resistance's stance

Leaders of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) expressed concern to *The Cradle* regarding the escalating campaign targeting their affiliated battalions in Jenin, Tubas, Tulkarem, and Nablus. The Jenin Battalion, central to this conflict, has refused to disarm but is willing to reduce armed visibility. Despite this, clashes have intensified, resulting in casualties on both sides; however, the battalion asserts that its actions aim to warn, not kill, security personnel, except when unavoidable.

The group sees the PA campaign as politically motivated, aimed at appeasing the Israeli occupation and preparing to oversee Gaza post-war while also aligning with US-backed

normalization deals involving Saudi Arabia and Israel. Islamic Jihad views Ramallah's actions as a fight for its survival, one that ultimately serves Israel's interests by deepening Palestinian divisions.

Caught between avoiding an internal conflict and preserving its military presence, Islamic Jihad has sought compromises, such as limited disarmament agreements, all rejected by the PA. The movement hopes political and popular pressure will force Ramallah to back down or that Israel's intervention will redirect the focus toward the occupation.

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