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## ***The PA's West Bank crackdown: A crisis of legitimacy***

Under mounting external pressure and growing internal dissent, the Palestinian Authority's crackdown on West Bank resistance groups has not only deepened public mistrust but also jeopardized its legitimacy and long-term survival.

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In tandem with its relentless land annexation in the occupied West Bank, Israel has systematically severed connections between the Palestinian Authority's (PA) security forces and West Bank resistance groups.

This paved the way for PA President Mahmoud Abbas to give the Palestinian Authority Security Forces (PASF) orders to launch an armed crackdown, using US-trained forces, on the Jenin Brigades resistance groups. The decision sparked dissent among PA officials who viewed it as a strategy orchestrated by the US and Israel.

Under Israeli military supervision, the PA forces imposed a siege on Jenin Camp, cutting water and electricity, and enforcing a curfew that confined residents – many without food – for days.

Within days, the operation resulted in significant civilian casualties, including the deaths of a teenager, Rebhi Shalabi, and a senior Jenin Brigades commander, Yazid Ja'ayseh. The UN humanitarian office accused the PA of commandeering part of Jenin Governmental Hospital for military purposes, detaining eight individuals from within the health facility.

### **A divide-and-conquer strategy**

The crackdown provoked widespread protests in Jenin and a general strike against the military incursion. A PA Preventative Security Force member, speaking anonymously to *The*

*Cradle*, reveals that the US and Israel were behind the raid, pressuring the PA into compliance.

“This is not just the PA attacking Palestinians. This is the US and the occupation working together to force the PA into this situation,” he says, claiming that while some initial PA actions sought to protect fighters, connections with Hamas were deemed a redline.

“When Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas] ordered the operation, most of the officials disagreed, and although most of us working with the authority disagreed, it was ordered anyway,” the source continues.

**“This is what the US wanted from us for two years, then when Israel began attacking Jenin, pay attention to who they killed and how that changed the connection with the PA and the armed groups, they wanted to divide the people.”**

This timeline aligns with Washington’s controversial “Fenzel plan,” first proposed in January 2023 to the PA during a visit to Ramallah by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. The plot was drawn up by US Security Coordinator Michael Fenzel and sought to use a US-trained PA unit to crush the Palestinian resistance groups that had been emerging in the northern West Bank since 2021.

There were then two follow-up meetings hosted in Egypt and Jordan, held between PA, Israeli, US, Egyptian, and Jordanian officials.

The PA’s elite 101<sup>st</sup> Unit, trained by US and Canadian forces, spearheaded the Jenin crackdown. While PA sources denied direct implementation of the Fenzel Plan, three PA sources who spoke to *The Cradle* acknowledged US involvement. According to *Axios*, US officials provided logistical support, including “ammunition, helmets, bulletproof vests, radios, night vision equipment, explosive disposal suits, and armored cars.”

Mahmoud Mardawi, a member of the Hamas political bureau who is based in the West Bank, tells *The Cradle*:

**“What the [Palestinian] Authority is doing in the city of Jenin is to be condemned and rejected. This targeting came because the city and its camp have become a center for resistance in the West Bank. We support the calls of the wise from all factions, political forces and dignitaries in the city of Jenin, who tried with all their might to contain the escalation scene.”**

However, PA Interior Minister Ziad Hab al-Reeh has defended the crackdown, labeling Jenin Brigade fighters as “outlaws” and drug dealers, asserting the operation would persist until the resistance adhered to the Palestinian Liberation Organization’s “national program,” to which Mardawi responded:

**“What was stated by Reeh, confirms that what is happening in Jenin is not a passing event or a response to a transgression committed by the sons of the Jenin Battalion against the Authority, but rather a political conviction of the leadership of the Authority to end the state of resistance as an extension of the Axis of Resistance and Iran. This diagnosis intersects greatly with the Israeli propaganda against the resistance in the city of Jenin. “**

### **The PA’s existential dilemma**

On 3 July 2023, the Israeli military launched a two-day military assault on Jenin Camp, dubbed “Operation Home and Garden,” during which it killed 12 Palestinians, injured dozens, and destroyed crucial infrastructure.

Immediately following the two-day assault that had included the use of attack helicopters and drones to launch airstrikes in Jenin, the PASF launched an arrest campaign against resistance fighters.

Protests erupted, and senior PA officials were expelled from public events in Jenin. Efforts to restore PA control through President Abbas’s visit to the camp did little to alleviate tensions. Since then, the PA has intensified actions against resistance groups across the West Bank, often targeting fighters and dismantling explosives meant for Israeli incursions. The PSF member who spoke to *The Cradle* believes that Israel’s strategy allowed resistance groups to emerge only to justify eliminating them, a theory lacking concrete evidence but widely accepted within PA circles.

As revealed in a previous investigation for *The Cradle*, Israeli raids, arrests, and assassinations had worked to sever relations between the PA and the resistance groups. From the outset, the resistance groups were pluralistic and included fighters from varying political parties, many of whom were either active duty PASF officers or were related to PA officials. In fact, a large portion of the fighters, who owed allegiance to the Fatah-linked Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, were closely linked to their local PA forces. Take the Lion’s Den group that emerged from the Old City of Nablus; while its founders included Tamir al-Kilani of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and prominent Hamas member Musab Shtayyeh, it was led by a PASF officer named Oday al-Azizi.

The PA initially appeared to tolerate the presence of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) within resistance groups in the West Bank, even as it firmly rejected any involvement from Hamas. However, this stance shifted dramatically with PASF spokesperson Anwar Rajab labeling all resistance fighters as Iran-backed “mercenaries,” accusing them of serving “the agendas of external forces that were responsible for the destruction of Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria.”

## **Public discontent and leadership crisis**

Amid these claims, Israel has intensified its actions, accelerating violence and signaling imminent annexation plans that threaten the very existence of the Ramallah-based PA itself. Since October 2023, Israeli settlers have established over 60 new outposts in the West Bank, actively participating in the ethnic cleansing of more than 26 villages and communities.

“Here, the question of timing emerges from the campaign carried out by the Authority,” says Mardawi. He questions why the PA would “fight the resistance in light of the threat of the Israeli enemy government to annex the West Bank and decide its fate.”

**“Is it reasonable for the Authority to end the resistance that protects our people and prevents the encroachment of settlers? There have been dozens of settler attacks in which Palestinian homes were burned, the latest of which was a mosque in the village of Marda, and dozens of Palestinians were martyred in these attacks, and the Authority remained silent and unable to defend the Palestinians in the face of settler aggression.”**

He calls for “an urgent national dialogue to protect resistance in the West Bank and confront occupation and settlement,” urging the PA to stop employing its security forces to serve Israel’s interests.

A former senior PA official in Ramallah, speaking anonymously, describes to *The Cradle* the PA’s precarious situation: “The Palestinian Authority is in a crisis. It wants to assume control of the Gaza Strip, it wants to look strong for the Trump administration, and it wants to be part of Saudi Arabia’s deal with Israel.”

The official suggests that the PA is unwilling to align with resistance efforts, fearing it would jeopardize its standing with the US and Israel. With the occupation state likely to annex significant portions of the West Bank and settlers poised for more aggression, the PA faces the grim choice of either embracing resistance or fading into irrelevance.

Public sentiment reflects this discontent. Polling from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) shows increasing support for armed resistance groups and declining approval for Fatah, which leads the PA.

By December 2023, 90 percent of Palestinians polled wanted President Abbas to resign. With consistent disapproval rates for the PA hovering at around 80 percent, its leadership is viewed as corrupt and ineffective.

As Israeli occupation forces and settlers carry out state, and state-backed violence, the West Bank’s economy deteriorates, while the PA’s survival seems increasingly uncertain. Its crackdown on the Jenin Camp has fueled internal dissent, raising questions about whether the PA can withstand the mounting pressures or if it is indeed on the brink of collapse.

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