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Country Report on Terrorism 2020 - Chapter 1 - Israel, West Bank, and Gaza - The West Bank and Gaza

Overview: The Palestinian Authority continued its counterterrorism and law enforcement efforts in the West Bank, where U.S.-designated terrorist organizations Hamas, the PIJ, al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades, and the PFLP remained active to various extents. PA officials expressed a commitment to nonviolence but halted security coordination with Israel in May, before officially resuming it again in November, proclaiming the decision as necessary to deter Israel’s application of sovereignty to parts of the West Bank.

Despite stopping official coordination with Israel, PA security forces in the West Bank constrained the ability of terrorist organizations and individuals to conduct attacks, in part by arrests targeting those suspected of planning attacks against Israelis. Per Oslo Accords-era agreements, the PA exercised varying degrees of authority over the West Bank, with the IDF securing Areas B and C, as well as periodic Israeli entry into PA-controlled areas (Area A) for counterterrorism operations. The IDF and the Israeli Security Agency also arrested individuals and members of terrorist organizations operating in the West Bank, including a group of 21 Hamas members in early September in the largest operation in the West Bank since 2014.

The United States, through the multinational office of the U.S. Security Coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority (USSC), worked with the PA Ministry of Interior and PA security forces on training (including counterterrorism) and reform efforts (including professionalization and police primacy), except during the May-September cessation. During that period, USSC staff from other member states under U.S. leadership continued to assist the PA until the resumption of security coordination with Israel, as it developed professional security forces capable of some, but not all, counterterrorism functions.

According to the IDF as reported in the *Times of Israel*, “the West Bank saw 60 terror attacks in 2020, up from 51 in 2019, but down from 76 in 2018 and 75 in 2017.” Numbers vary slightly depending on the source — the IDF, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), or human rights groups such as B’Tselem. While this decrease is partially attributable to greater movement restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, it also reflects a general downward trend in violence indicators since 2016, including deaths of Israelis, deaths of Palestinians, and terrorist attacks in the West Bank.

Israelis living in the West Bank also committed a variety of physical attacks and property crimes against Palestinians, some of which caused serious injury, according to Israeli human rights organizations and media reports. Over the course of 2020, UN OCHA documented 771 incidents of settler violence that brought injury to 133 Palestinians and damaged 9,646 trees and 184 vehicles, mostly in the areas of Hebron, Jerusalem, Nablus, and Ramallah. For example, in July, Israeli settlers allegedly poisoned more than 60 domestic animals in the Jordan Valley town of al-Auja, north of Jericho. According to UN OCHA, Israelis destroyed more than 1,000 Palestinian-tended olive trees over the course of 2020.

In May, Israel’s Lod District Court found Amiram Ben-Uliel guilty of a terrorist act in 2015 and sentenced him to three life sentences for killing a Palestinian family in a fire that erupted after he threw a Molotov cocktail through the window of the family’s home in the West Bank village of Duma.

Israeli settlers also committed violent acts against Israeli law enforcement. According to news reports, during the year there were also 42 instances of violence against Israeli soldiers and police by right-wing extremists, compared with 29 such incidents in 2019. For example, in March, media reported that settlers threw Molotov cocktails at the Israeli Border Patrol near Yitzhar. In December a 16-year-old settler died in a car accident after police gave chase when he and his companions threw rocks at Palestinians in the central West Bank; the incident resulted in clashes between settler groups and police, including a December 21 attempt to storm a Jerusalem police station by 200 demonstrators.

Hamas, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), maintained control of Gaza in 2020. Several militant groups, including Sunni violent extremist groups and the PIJ, launched rocket attacks against Israel from Gaza. Hamas and its affiliates launched incendiary balloons and devices toward Israel, damaging farms and nature preserves. Hamas and PIJ tunneling activities continued. In October the IDF used new underground sensors to uncover a two-kilometer-long, 74-meter-deep tunnel running from the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis toward the Israeli community of Kibbutz Kissufim.

2020 Terrorist Incidents: Terrorist incidents during the year included the following:

- In May, the PIJ’s militant wing al-Quds Brigades kidnapped 25-year-old Gazan journalist Yousuf Hassan in retaliation for his reporting on corruption, blackmail, and embezzlement related to aid distribution. He was ultimately handed over to Hamas and later released.
- On June 23, Israeli border police shot and killed Ahmed Erekat after his car crashed into a checkpoint. Israeli authorities described the incident as a car-ramming terrorist attack, a characterization disputed by Palestinian authorities and his family, which claimed it was an accident.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: The PA lacked comprehensive counterterrorism-specific legislation, although existing Palestinian laws criminalize actions that constitute terrorist acts. Presidential decrees prohibit incitement to violence, illegal associations, providing financial support to terrorist groups, and acts that run counter to Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) agreements with other states (a reference to the Oslo Accords with Israel). President Mahmoud Abbas has governed by presidential decree since 2007. NGOs claimed that at times the PA arbitrarily arrested individuals based on their political opinions, including for criticizing the PA online. Several anticorruption activists were jailed before they could begin a protest in July; they were released about one week later.

The Palestinian Preventive Security Organization is the key PA institution that works to prevent West Bank terrorist attacks and investigates security-related criminal conduct. Palestinian General Intelligence also plays a critical role in this effort, as does, to a lesser extent, the Palestinian Military Intelligence. Per previous agreements, Israel retained control of border security across the West Bank and general security throughout Area C, which encompasses most of the West Bank.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: The Palestinian Authority is a member of MENAFATF. Its FIU, the Palestinian Financial Follow-Up Unit, is a member of the Egmont Group. The PA’s MENAFATF mutual evaluation was postponed from 2020 to 2022-23 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Countering Violent Extremism: Official PA traditional and social media accounts affiliated with the ruling political faction Fatah featured content praising or condoning acts of terrorism. For example, on June 25, Fatah Secretary General Jibril Rajoub made a variety of statements on PA TV, saying, “If there will be annexation, then we won’t suffer alone and we won’t die alone.” Problems with misleading textbooks, some with maps not depicting Israel, and public ceremonies celebrating Palestinian “martyrs” continued. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas stated a commitment to nonviolence, a two-state solution, and previous PLO commitments, but others in the Palestinian leadership have avoided making such commitments. The Palestinian leadership continued to offer so-called martyr payments to families of Palestinians who were wounded or died while committing terrorist acts or in connection with terrorism.

International and Regional Cooperation: Palestinian Authority justice, security leaders, and PA security force personnel continued to participate in regional conferences and meetings to combat terrorism, though in 2020 these opportunities were limited — given COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

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