

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	712
Land:	Gaza-Vestbredden
Kilde:	ACLED
Titel:	The Resurgence of Armed Groups in the West Bank and Their Connections to Gaza
Udgivet:	14. december 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	28. februar 2024

The Resurgence of Armed Groups in the West Bank and Their Connections to Gaza

14 December 2023

In an unprecedented surprise attack, Hamas launched a large aerial and ground operation from the Gaza Strip into Israel on 7 October, killing over 1,200¹ Israelis and capturing over 200 soldiers and civilians. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) vowed to use all means to destroy Hamas, starting a scorched-earth military campaign that has killed thousands of civilians in less than two months. The scale of Hamas's operation sent a shockwave across the world, as Israel's intelligence failed to detect and avert the attack. Before 7 October, a period of relative calm had prevailed in the Gaza Strip since the last outbreak of violence in May 2021. In fact, many pundits believed that Hamas — presiding over the lives of two million Palestinians as the de facto governing body in the Gaza Strip — was not ready for another full-scale conflict, and was satisfied with Israel's economic incentives.²

Meanwhile, violence was mounting in the West Bank for over a year. Between October 2022 and September 2023, political violence in the West Bank was up by 50% compared to the year prior as a result of a steady increase in settler violence, stepped-up IDF operations, and, importantly, the reemergence of Palestinian armed groups after over one and a half decades. Since Hamas ousted the Palestinian Authority (PA) from the Gaza Strip in 2007, relegating the PA to the West Bank, patterns of violence in the two Palestinian regions have rarely followed the same trajectory. An imminent danger of spillover of violence from the West Bank into Gaza was, therefore, not immediately recognized. However, the makeup of the Palestinian armed groups that drove much of the violence in the West Bank since 2022 was already pointing to an increasing interconnectedness between the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

To assess this link, this study examines the activity of Palestinian militant groups in the West Bank in the year before the outbreak of the most recent conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. Over 20 distinct armed groups engaged in more than 500 incidents of violence against Israel's security forces and settlers during this period. ACLED classifies these armed groups under four categories: Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Hamas, Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades (AAMB), and their respective affiliates, in addition to the independent Lions' Den. A closer look at the activity of these armed groups indicates that Gaza-based militant groups PIJ and Hamas played a significant role in the deterioration of security in the West Bank through direct engagement in violence, supporting the establishment of new local armed groups, and helping to arm other factions, including Fatah-affiliated militants.

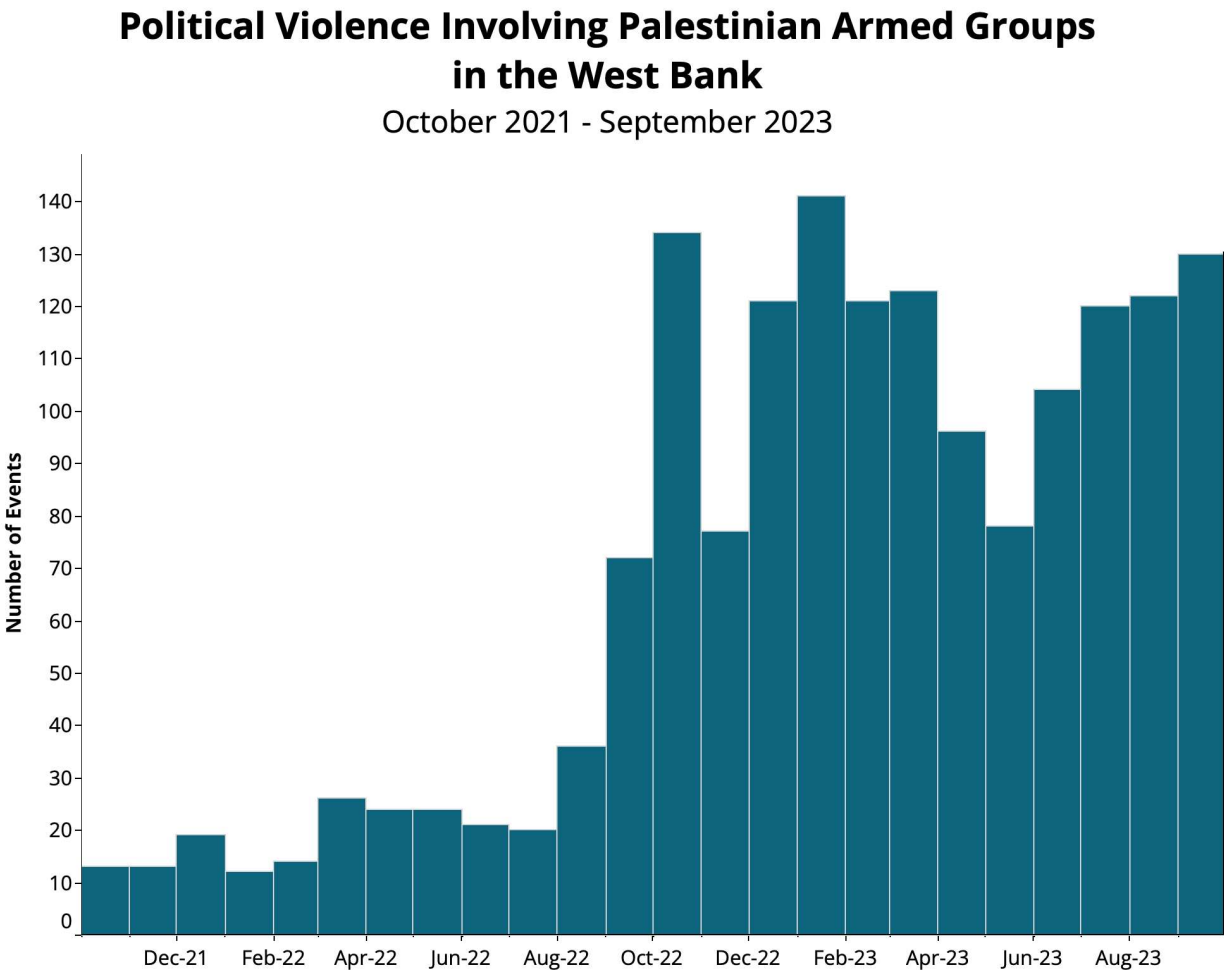
Given this escalation, Israel's security establishment concentrated its focus on the West Bank, seemingly diverting intelligence and security resources from the border with the Gaza Strip. This gave Gazan militants an operational opportunity to launch their surprise attack. As Israel now continues to intensify its operation in Gaza, it is also faced with significant security challenges on the other conflict front in the West Bank. Furthermore, the proliferation of armed groups in the West Bank will continue to pose a challenge to a weakened PA's ability to rule the West Bank, and will complicate any international efforts to push for the reinstatement of the PA's control over the Gaza Strip in the short term.

Turmoil in the West Bank and the Proliferation of Armed Groups

The Palestinian national movement has historically involved diverse political and ideological factions, including secular nationalist, Marxist-Leninist, Pan-Arabist, and Islamist tendencies.³ While various Palestinian armed groups historically embraced violence against Israel in pursuit of sovereignty, 11 factions operating under the umbrella of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the leadership of Fatah denounced armed resistance and signed the Oslo Peace Accords with Israel in the 1990s.⁴ Although during the Second Intifada, some groups associated with the PLO – including the Fatah-affiliated AAMB – engaged yet again in militant activities, they largely refrained from armed resistance after they were absorbed into the security apparatus of the PA following Mahmud Abbas succeeding Yasser Arafat at the helm of the PA in 2005.

In contrast, armed groups operating outside the umbrella of the PLO, above all Hamas and PIJ, continued to oppose negotiations with Israel and undertake armed resistance. Against the backdrop of the conflict between Hamas and Fatah, which led to a de facto separation of the Palestinian territories in 2007, Gaza-based militants led by Hamas fought several rounds of war with Israel. Despite these tensions, militant activity largely spared the PA-administered West Bank in the following years, amid stringent controls by both the PA and Israel's security forces. ACLED records only around two dozen events of political violence directly linked to named armed groups in the West Bank between 2016 — when ACLED coverage of Palestine begins — and 2021.

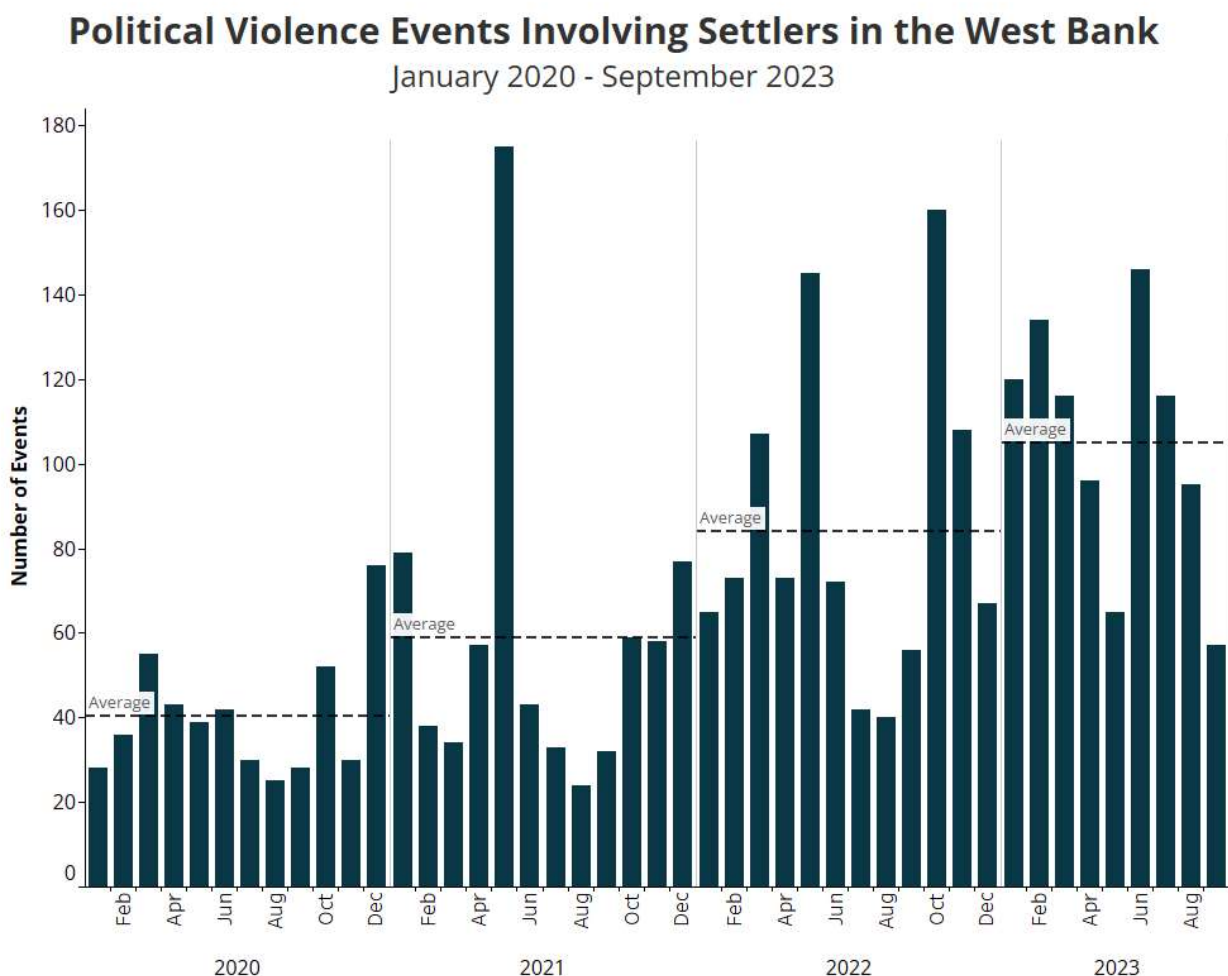
This situation has, however, changed significantly in recent years. In the 12 months before the October 2023 attacks in Israel, ACLED records more than 1,300 political violence events involving Palestinian armed groups in the West Bank, nearly five times greater than in the preceding 12 months (*see graph below*). Although Palestinian armed groups contributed to only about one-fifth of all political violence in the West Bank between October 2022 and September 2023, nearly 70% of all reported fatalities during this period resulted from armed clashes between Palestinian armed groups and Israel's security forces.



With Israel continuing to further its occupation and the de facto annexation of the West Bank,⁵ the prospects of a two-state solution have increasingly faded, leading to disillusionment among many Palestinian youths. Against this backdrop, multiple factors have contributed to the growth of armed groups and their expanded activity in the West Bank: the weaknesses of the PA, increasing settler violence, and forceful security measures by Israel, particularly *Operation Break the Wave*, which the IDF launched in response to a string of deadly attacks by Palestinian gunmen in 2022.

The weakness of the PA in governing towns and refugee camps has been an important factor that has enabled the re-emergence of armed groups' activity in the West Bank. Failing to promote a realistic path to statehood, along with rampant corruption and the inability to effectively deliver public services, has pushed the PA into a legitimacy crisis, further compounded by an uncertain succession to aging leader Abbas and internal fragmentation.⁶ Israel has contributed to this crisis by following a strategy of keeping the PA alive to ensure the continuation of the security coordination but weakened by withholding tax revenues, for example.⁷ This is while Israel, despite its adversarial relationship with Hamas, made several concessions to the PA's arch-rival, including facilitating the entry of Qatari funds into the Gaza Strip,⁸ permitting Gazans to work in Israel,⁹ and engaging in negotiations with Hamas regarding natural gas extraction near Gaza's offshore areas.¹⁰ Unable to protect people in the West Bank from settler violence and the heavy-handed approach by Israel's security forces, the PA has increasingly lost legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Its security forces were widely seen as lacking the weight and credibility to impose order in many areas of the West Bank, thus leaving a power vacuum that other armed groups have attempted to fill.

The expansion of settlements, accompanied by a steady rise in settler violence, has been another important factor that has contributed to the resurgence of armed activity in the West Bank. While in 2020 ACLED records a monthly average of 40 events involving settler violence in the West Bank, this figure increases exponentially from 2021, leading to a monthly average of 105 events as of September 2023 (*see graph below*). Not only has the uptick in settler violence directly preceded increases in armed group activity, particularly in areas of heightened settler activity like Nablus (discussed further in the Lions' Den section below), but it has also led to increased popular support for armed resistance among Palestinians in the West Bank. An opinion poll in December 2022 suggested that 65% of Palestinians in the West Bank supported the formation of armed groups independent from the PA.¹¹



Finally, the IDF launch of *Operation Break the Wave* in March 2022 in response to a string of attacks that killed 19 people in Israel exacerbated frictions, leading to increased violent interactions with young Palestinians. The IDF significantly increased its presence in the West Bank as part of the operation, with troop numbers doubling by October 2022.¹² Between March 2022 and September 2023, the IDF carried out more than 2,000 raids, with at least 115 incidents turning deadly and resulting in over

210 reported fatalities. Many of the new armed groups in the West Bank emerged locally to act against the IDF during these arrest raids.

In this context, the number of active armed groups in the West Bank significantly increased between October 2022 and September 2023. During this period, ACLED records 23 active armed groups in the West Bank involved in over 500 violent events. Given that many additional armed actions remain unclaimed, it is possible that these groups have been involved in more violence but did not claim responsibility to evade the extensive PA's and Israel's intelligence measures.¹³ Furthermore, unaffiliated individuals and other armed groups may operate clandestinely in the region. The majority of armed groups in the West Bank¹⁴ can be broadly linked to PIJ, the AAMB, and Hamas, while the Lions' Den is a self-proclaimed independent group (*see chart below*).¹⁵

A closer examination of the active armed groups in the West Bank suggests that Gaza-based PIJ has played a crucial role in the escalating violence in the West Bank, supporting at least nine new militant groups that have taken up arms against Israel between 2022 and 2023. In an effort to broaden armed action against Israel, PIJ has also provided critical support for the re-emergence of AAMB armed activity by helping to arm and militarily coordinate with the Fatah-affiliated militants. Meanwhile, by engaging in limited but lethal shooting attacks against settlers in the West Bank, Hamas has helped to aggravate the cycle of violence with more settler revenge attacks. In turn, this has exacerbated the PA's loss of credibility, which increasingly looks complicit and weak in the face of IDF security operations and settler violence. Hamas members were also among the founding members of the Lions' Den, which played an important role in the intensification of violence in the northern West Bank.

Palestinian Islamic Jihad

PIJ and its affiliates spearheaded the violent escalation in the West Bank in the year preceding the 7 October assault on southern Israel (*see graph below*). PIJ was established in the Gaza Strip in the 1980s as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is among the least compromising factions, adhering to the principle of armed struggle as the only legitimate means to achieve its goal of a Palestinian Islamic state in the historical Palestinian territories.¹⁶

While PIJ's power base has always been the Gaza Strip, its strength in the West Bank grew during the Second Intifada when its cells engaged in attacks against the Israeli military and settlements and suicide bombings in Israel. Due to the tight security control by Israel and the PA following the Second Intifada, the group lacked any significant operational presence in the West Bank. PIJ has, however, reinvigorated its position since 2022. It championed a new strategy of backing smaller local armed groups mainly active in the northern areas of Jenin, Tulkarm, Tubas, and Nablus. In these areas, PIJ has long had a foothold that goes back before the Second Intifada, when it recruited members in the area through ties of kinship and friendship.¹⁷

Many members of these local groups are youths, often with no prior training in using arms, nor with a political background or strategy beyond armed resistance,¹⁸ who operate on their own initiative¹⁹ without a command hierarchy.²⁰ While their emergence reflects the higher flexibility among local armed groups in the West Bank, they do not operate as fully autonomous groups. These groups openly acknowledge their affiliation with PIJ on media platforms,²¹ and their fighters wear the headband of PIJ's military wing, the al-Quds Brigades.²² At the same time, PIJ officially recognizes deceased militants associated with these groups as PIJ members.²³ With Israel's adversary Iran as its main sponsor, PIJ has also likely helped fund local groups purchasing smuggled expensive weapons, including advanced M4 and M16 rifles. These rifles cost about 40,000 US dollars each in the Israeli market, with ammunition priced at around US\$5 per bullet.²⁴ Furthermore, obtaining smuggled weapons through the Jordanian border requires a complex network and logistical capacities that potentially exceed the capabilities of those local fighters.

PIJ and affiliated groups were involved in at least 330 events of political violence in the West Bank between October 2022 and September 2023, more than any other armed group. The overwhelming majority of these events involve the nine newly established groups that self-identify with PIJ: Katibat Balata,²⁵ Katibat Birqin,²⁶ Katibat Jaba,²⁷ Katibat Jenin,²⁸ Katibat Jericho,²⁹ Katibat Nablus,³⁰ Katibat Qabatiya,³¹ Katibat Tubas,³² and Katibat Tulkarm.³³ These local groups were established mainly to engage with IDF raids in the regions after which they have been named, with at least four out of the nine affiliated groups operating within refugee camps (*see maps below*).

The three most active groups – involved in over 70% of all violence attributed to PIJ-affiliated groups – are Katibat Jenin, Katibat Nablus, and Katibat Tulkarm. The current strength of PIJ affiliates in these regions is reminiscent of PIJ's cells in Jenin, Nablus, and Tulkarm during the Second Intifada, collectively known as the 'Triangle of Fear.'³⁴

Jenin governorate has been at the heart of escalating violence in the West Bank during the last year. Jenin was the stronghold of PIJ in the West Bank already during the Second Intifada — where most PIJ suicide bombers originated — with the Jenin refugee camp becoming a 'safe haven' for wanted militant leaders during this period.³⁵ The groups' armed activity once more has been reinvigorated over the past two years at Jenin refugee camp, where PIJ-affiliated Katibat Jenin has emerged as one of the largest and foremost armed groups. The *katibat* (brigade in Arabic) is believed to have its roots in a small cell established by PIJ militant Jamil al-Amuri to carry out shooting attacks on Israeli soldiers on the heels of the May 2021 outbreak of violence across Palestinian territories and Israel.³⁶ While al-Amuri was killed in an IDF raid in June 2021, the group later rose to prominence providing protection for militants in Jenin camp who had escaped from Gilboa prison in Israel in September 2021.³⁷ Katibat Jenin has since increasingly coordinated with other groups active in the governorate, further eroding the authority of the Palestinian security forces in the area,³⁸ and posing a significant challenge to Israel's army. The IDF has referred to the Jenin refugee camp as the "command center" for the new wave of Palestinian militants³⁹ and has carried out some of its most forceful operations in the West Bank against the group over the past year.

Nablus has been another hotbed of armed activity in the West Bank, where the local PIJ Katibat Nablus has been highly active along with some other groups, including the Lions' Den. Katibat Nablus was established in May 2022⁴⁰ after IDF shot a 16-year-old Palestinian in the head near the Tomb of Joseph in Nablus, an important site for Judaism.

Frequent visits by more settlers to the tomb — perceived by Palestinians as provocation⁴¹ — often sparks confrontation as hundreds of Israel's military forces enter the city of Nablus in advance of such visits to secure the area. Furthermore, Nablus is home to 24 Israeli settlements and illegal outposts, the majority of which were created for ideological or religious reasons.⁴² This governorate is home to some of the most radical settlements, including Yitzhar, Itamar, and Bracha, and settler violence is endemic in the area (*see maps below*). The city of Nablus is the only area of the governorate that is part of Area A of the West Bank, under the control of the PA, with security in other towns and villages under Israeli control. Katibat Nablus and other armed groups in the area — including the Lions' Den — have increasingly taken matters into their own hands, engaging in violence against Israel's security forces in both offensive and defensive postures, and also occasionally targeting settlers.

Based in **Tulkarm** governorate, Katibat Tulkarm is the third most active among PIJ-affiliated groups. The group emerged in late 2022 at Nur al-Shams refugee camp and has since been active in neighboring Tulkarm refugee camp. The April 2022 killing of a Nur al-Shams resident — who had joined Katibat Jenin — is believed to have spurred the formation of Katibat Tulkarm by local youths.⁴³ These militants patrol the streets and alleys of both camps during the day, barricade their entrances with iron barriers, set up night watches, and engage with Israeli soldiers during raids.⁴⁴ The group has also attacked Israeli military checkpoints in the area and occasionally fired shots at nearby settlements, without inflicting casualties.

Political Violence Carried out by Settlers in the West Bank

PIJ has played a significant role in the emergence of the recent wave of armed violence in the West Bank, with the Gaza-based group attempting to broaden armed action against Israel across Palestine. Already in October 2022, the PIJ's secretary general suggested in an interview that the armed group aims to connect the fighting in the West Bank and Gaza, and escalate violence on all fronts.⁴⁵ Given the recent developments, PIJ will likely continue keeping tensions high in the West Bank while fighting alongside Hamas in Gaza.

Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades

AAMB is associated with Fatah, the Palestinian nationalist movement founded in 1959 that controls the PA. AAMB has its roots in Tanzim, a militant faction of Fatah, established by its late leader Arafat. Tanzim was created to counter Hamas's expanding influence at the community level after non-PLO groups adopted violence to resist Israel and counter the newly established PA. During the Second Intifada, Fatah's Tanzim members established AAMB — a collection of local, decentralized, and autonomous brigades that emerged in response to the changing political environment and increased popular support for armed resistance. Their affiliation with Fatah was strongest under the leadership of Arafat.⁴⁶ Under Abbas, however, the PA attempted to dismantle and absorb AAMB militants into its security forces.⁴⁷

In recent years, however, AAMB has increasingly engaged in numerous armed operations against Israel, highlighting Fatah's internal fragmentation. With the PA facing declining popularity, disagreements have surfaced among Fatah members over the notion of armed struggle against Israel.⁴⁸ Some militants, who reject Fatah's absorption into the PA and its support of the peace process, have thus supported the revival of AAMB's armed activities in the West Bank after nearly two decades of inaction.⁴⁹ These militias are believed to operate largely independently of Fatah's political elites, but still self-identify with Fatah and maintain informal connections with some local Fatah leaders.⁵⁰ Some AAMB militants have either worked in the security force of the PA⁵¹ or maintained kinship ties with security personnel.⁵² AAMB militants engaged in over 200 political violence events in the West Bank between October 2022 and September 2023 — especially in northern regions of Jenin, Nablus, and Tulkarm (*see map below*) — making them the second most active group.

Additionally, there are at least three AAMB-affiliated armed groups active in northern West Bank that have been established over the past year, namely Katibat Tulkarm – Quick Response,⁵³ Katibat Askar,⁵⁴ and Katibat al-Fajr.⁵⁵ An additional two groups, Katibat Bayt Ummar⁵⁶ and Katibat al-Samu,⁵⁷ operate in the southern West Bank. These new local groups engaged in over 50 events of political violence between October 2022 and September 2023. The most active among these new groups has been Katibat Tulkarm – Quick Response, which was founded in February 2023. Most of the group's militants are affiliated with AAMB and the group was named after a prominent AAMB leader who was known for organizing rapid operations during the Second Intifada.⁵⁸ But a founding member of Katibat Tulkarm – Quick Response is believed to have been the Hamas militant Amir Abu Khadija.⁵⁹

Efforts to control AAMB militants and affiliated groups have been particularly problematic for the Fatah-led PA. Members of AAMB often play an essential role in maintaining the legitimacy and influence of the Fatah movement in areas outside the control of the PA and its security forces, particularly in refugee camps in the northern West Bank. Therefore, the PA must contain the militants' activities without utilizing force to avoid further fragmentation within the party, which in turn has created a greater room for maneuver for the AAMB militants and affiliates to engage in violence against Israel.

While it is unlikely that Gaza-based militants coordinated their 7 October assault with AAMB, PIJ and AAMB have established strong ties and military coordination. Between October 2022 and September 2023, ACLED records nearly 120 events where AAMB and PIJ-affiliated groups were together involved in violence against Israeli forces. PIJ has helped to arm AAMB militants,⁶⁰ likely by providing the funds for their purchase on the black market. At the same time, these ties ensured a certain level of protection for PIJ's affiliated groups vis-à-vis PA security forces. AAMB has, therefore, played an important part in driving the violence in the West Bank, and can continue to pose a challenge to Israel's security forces and the PA's political elites amid the hardening public opinion in favor of armed violence — particularly as Israel's campaign in Gaza intensifies.

Hamas

For the past three and a half decades, the Islamist movement Hamas has followed a strategy of armed violence against Israel. Hamas has refused to recognize the Israeli state or accept previous agreements between the PLO and Israel.⁶¹ Hamas occasionally made compromises in order to ease the land, sea, and air blockade on the Gaza Strip imposed by Israel and Egypt since 2007, but in parallel it continues to push its image as the leader of Palestinian resistance.⁶²

While it has engaged in several intense armed conflicts against Israel from the Gaza Strip since its overtake of the coastal enclave, the group's armed activity in the West Bank remained very limited for decades. Between January 2016 and September 2022, ACLED records about 30 violent events attributed to Hamas in the West Bank. However, in the 12 months preceding the 7 October assault alone, the number rose to over 50. While this is a lower number of events compared to those attributed to other armed groups, Hamas has largely focused on high-impact operations and attacks against settlers. Between October 2022 and September 2023, Hamas militants carried out at least 12 shooting attacks in Israel and the West Bank, seven of which were fatal, killing 11 settlers. In addition, Hamas killed two non-settler Israeli citizens from Ashdod in Huwara on 19 August and killed one Israeli citizen in an attack in Tel Aviv in March. This represents the highest number of Israeli fatalities caused by any armed group during that period (*see map below*).

Hamas's military operations against settlers carry political messages and consequences for both Israel and the PA. For instance, Hamas carried out an attack on the Kiryat Arba settlement, home to Israeli Minister of National Security Itamar Ben Gvir, just two days before the Knesset elections on 1 November 2022. Likewise, a deadly Hamas shooting in Hawara south of Nablus city coincided with the Aqaba Security Summit on 26 February 2023, when Palestinian and Israeli officials met to discuss the reduction of violence in the West Bank. Hamas has also repeatedly linked such attacks to the 'protection' of East Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa mosque, a significant priority for the organization's narrative of a religious war against Israel.⁶³ In this vein, Hamas militants claimed responsibility for the killing of three settlers in a shooting incident near the al-Hamra checkpoint between Nablus and Tubas on 7 April 2023, after Israeli police raided the al-Aqsa mosque during Ramadan. Later in the year, Hamas killed four Israeli settlers in Eli, a settlement located between Nablus and Ramallah, branding the attack as a response to the Israeli "crimes against al-Aqsa mosque, Nablus and Jenin."⁶⁴

Hamas's own militants also directly confronted Israeli military forces across the West Bank, including in Jenin, Nablus, Tulkarm, and Jericho over the past year. Hamas militants fought together with PIJ's Katibat Jenin and AAMB militants against IDF forces during the large-scale operation in Jenin camp on 3 and 4 July 2023, with at least one Hamas member reported to have been among the 12 fatalities. At the same time, Hamas is also linked to the establishment of Katibat Aqabat Jabr, a militant group active in the Jericho refugee camp since February 2023.⁶⁵ Another group, Katibat al-Ayyash, identifies itself as a Hamas affiliate, using Hamas's logo on its Telegram channel.⁶⁶ On at least six occasions, Katibat al-Ayyash attempted to launch rockets at Israeli settlements, although none of the attacks reached their target.

Through its direct engagement, helping newly established armed groups, and also importantly engaging in limited but lethal shooting attacks, Hamas helped to escalate the security situation in the West Bank. Not only did this exacerbate the legitimacy crisis of the PA, it also simultaneously diverted the Israeli security establishment's focus away from Gaza while it prepared its violent assault on southern Israel.

Lions' Den

Hamas has also played a role in the establishment of other armed groups with which it is not directly affiliated. Among these groups, the most notorious is the Lions' Den. The Lions' Den militia is a self-styled independent armed group primarily consisting of young militants with alleged links to other militant groups. Hamas commander Musab Shtaya, a co-founder of the

Lions' Den, secured funding and logistical aid for the new group from Hamas until he was detained by the security forces of the PA in September 2022.⁶⁷ The group is one of the most prominent actors to have emerged in the West Bank and operates mainly in the northern governorate of Nablus.

The Lions' Den emerged in the context of a sharp increase in violence involving settlers in the governorate of Nablus, a hotbed of the tensions between Palestinians and settlers in the West Bank (*see graph below*). The Lions' Den has its roots in an initial small cell of individuals who carried out shooting attacks against the IDF in and around Nablus city; the militia first came to prominence in February 2022 when Israel's army killed three of its gunmen. Other members were killed in subsequent arrest raids, including Ibrahim al-Nabulsi – a prominent 18-year-old AAMB commander dubbed the 'Lion of Nablus' – who was killed in August 2022. After his death, al-Nabulsi became a folk hero among many of the youth of Nablus and across the West Bank, and young fighters affiliated with various factions subsequently announced the birth of an independent group named the Lions' Den.

According to a member of the group interviewed in an Al Jazeera documentary, the collective goal of the Lions' Den is to maintain resistance and confront Israel's army whenever it launches an offensive operation into Nablus and its surrounding areas, further maintaining that the group was independent and refused to take instructions from other groups.⁶⁸ From an organizational perspective, the armed group does not follow a centralized leadership.⁶⁹ It lacks a clear organizational structure and does not have an operations room to direct its field activities.

Lions' Den activity has driven much of the surge in armed activities within the Nablus area. Over 100 political violence events involved the group between October 2022 and September 2023, making up one-third of all political violence involving armed groups in Nablus governorate. Yet the PA has had some success in curbing the activities of the Lions' Den. This was possible after negotiations with the group members and providing incentives for them to surrender through promises of financial incentives, protection, and potential integration into the Palestinian security forces.⁷⁰ While the group's activity has declined in recent months, the Lions' Den has maintained its military capability and has continued to engage in a limited amount of violence against Israel's security forces. Amid ongoing hostilities, developments across the Palestinian territories may lead to an increase in the group's violent activities once again.

A New Season of Conflict in the West Bank

The deterioration of security in the West Bank preceded the 7 October events, with much of it driven by a resurgence of Palestinian armed groups amid the PA's weakness, increasing settler violence, and harsh measures by Israel's security forces. The recent pattern of armed activity in the West Bank demonstrates the decline of the pro-peace camp after years of stagnation in the peace process and Israel's increasing entrenchment in the occupied territories. Despite tight surveillance and harsh crackdown that restricted militant activity in the West Bank in previous years, militant groups found an opportunity in a new generation of disillusioned youth to drive forward their political aims. The PA, confronted with an existential crisis of legitimacy, has struggled to act against militancy. For its part, Israel's security operations in the West Bank have also failed to suppress this wave of violence. More informal networks, flexible structures, spontaneous actions, and fluid cooperation between old factions and new groups have made the detection and suppression of this wave of violence ever more challenging for Israel.

As consensus prevailed that Hamas would prefer to keep the Gaza front calm in the wake of the May 2021 conflict, Israel's military and intelligence community turned its attention to the West Bank, where tensions grew increasingly violent. Throughout 2023, the IDF launched some of its largest military operations in the West Bank since the end of the second Intifada almost two decades ago, including the July incursion in the Jenin camp. As security deteriorated, an increasing number of troops were positioned in the West Bank to contain the violence between settlers and Palestinians.⁷¹

While PIJ spearheaded the escalation of violence in the West Bank, Israel targeted the PIJ military command in Gaza in August 2022 and May 2023, killing nine of its senior leaders. But Hamas sat out of the fighting, misleading the Israeli authorities into thinking that the militant group was shying away from the tensions in the West Bank to prevent a major military confrontation in the coastal enclave. The violence in the West Bank, therefore, distracted Israel's intelligence establishment from developments inside the Gaza Strip. It is believed that on 7 October there were not enough forces stationed on the border with Gaza,⁷² which provided Hamas and its allies with an opportunity to infiltrate the border.⁷³

As the war continues to rage in Gaza, the West Bank has seen a further uptick in violence. Amid an intensification of raids by the IDF, nearly 400 armed clashes were recorded between 7 October and 30 November, resulting in at least 120 reported fatalities. The outbreak of settler violence and widespread anger resulting from Israel's unprecedented military campaign in Gaza may now even motivate more Palestinian youths to join the armed struggle, potentially descending into all-out conflict in the West Bank. The PA remains unable to exercise full control over key areas such as the Nablus old city and refugee camps in the northern West Bank, and its future remains uncertain amid deep rifts within its ranks and a lack of legitimacy among the population.

With the Fatah-led body struggling to effectively govern the West Bank, the United States' vision to revitalize the two-state solution and reunite Gaza and the West Bank under the PA,⁷⁴ therefore, remains highly unfeasible for the time being. The most right-wing government in Israel's history, viscerally opposed to the very idea of the two-state solution, will almost certainly block such efforts. The question of what will happen in Gaza after the end of the IDF campaign, therefore, remains unclear. Even if Israel manages to militarily defeat Hamas and removes it from governing Gaza — a likely scenario that is not yet guaranteed — this will unlikely translate into a full eradication of militant groups or the pro-resistance sentiments among Palestinians. Thus, a prolonged period of armed violence under intensified security control by Israel across the Palestinian territories can be expected.

Visuals in this report were produced by **Ana Marco**.

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Turmoil in the West Bank and the Proliferation of Armed Groups
3. Palestinian Islamic Jihad
4. Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades
5. Hamas

- 6. [Lions’ Den](#)
- 7. [A New Season of Conflict in the West Bank](#)

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