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Country Report on Terrorism 2023 - Chapter 1 - The West Bank and Gaza Strip

Overview: Palestinian Authority Security Forces (PASF) had formal responsibility for administration and security of 17.5 percent (called Area A) of the West Bank, as agreed by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel in the Oslo Accords, but Israeli security forces frequently conducted security operations there. Israeli security forces (ISF) maintained responsibility for security in the remaining 82.5 percent of the West Bank, including Area B (22.5 percent), where the Palestinian Authority (PA) had administrative control, and Area C (60.0 percent), where Israel maintained administrative control and designated most of the land as either closed military zones or settlement zoning areas. The PASF and the ISF continued counterterrorism and law enforcement efforts in the West Bank, where U.S.-designated terrorist groups such as Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine operated. The PASF and the ISF constrained the ability of those organizations to conduct attacks, including by arresting members of terrorist groups. The United States, through the multinational office of the U.S. Security Coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority and the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, worked with the PA Ministry of Interior and the PASF on reform efforts and training, including counterterrorism.

The PASF continued proactively to arrest individuals planning attacks against Palestinian and Israeli targets or those suspected of supporting terrorist organizations, though not at the pace Israeli authorities have requested, and to arrest Palestinians wanted for weapons smuggling or illegal weapons possession. PASF officials maintained that ISF incursions into Area A constrained the maneuvers of PASF units carrying out security activities during the year.

The pace of Israeli incursions into areas of PASF security responsibility increased after October 7, as did the number of new Israeli checkpoints. This increased ISF presence led the PASF to further reduce security operations, including those that targeted terrorist groups. PA President Abbas declared that the PASF would cease security cooperation with Israeli counterparts in January, following an ISF incursion in Jenin that resulted in nine Palestinian fatalities. He declared the same after Israel's response to the October 7 attacks, citing civilian casualties in Gaza. Coordination between PASF and the ISF did continue as necessary at certain levels, however.

Hamas, a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, maintained de facto control over Gaza in 2023 before October 7 and provided safe haven for itself and other terrorist groups, such as the PIJ. Israel's military response following the October 7 attack disrupted much of Hamas's de facto control over much of Gaza by the end of 2023, outside of pockets in the South of Gaza where most Hamas fighters and other terrorist groups withdrew ahead of the Israeli advance from the North.

2023 Terrorist Incidents: The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported 1,232 incidents of Israeli settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank, including 871 attacks against Palestinian property, 52 attacks that caused physical injury, and 134 attacks that caused both property damage and injury, the highest level of violent incidents in the West Bank ever recorded since the United Nations started reporting settler-related violence in 2005. Settler attacks on Palestinians increased after October 7. Of the 15 Palestinians whom settlers killed during 2023, eight were killed after October 7. The number of Palestinian fatalities from settler violence also increased in 2023, over prior years. From 2017 through 2022 Israeli settlers killed a total of 16 Palestinians. PA (and some Israeli) officials described settler violence as terrorism. The Department of State made public statements condemning Israeli settler violence, and in some cases referred to it as terrorism, including in August following the murder of a Palestinian by a group of armed settlers.

The Israeli security agency Shin Bet reported 270 Palestinian shooting attacks committed in or emanating from the West Bank in 2023, a drop from 2022 (305), though there was no report for August of this year. Incidents included the following:

- On January 27, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, a Palestinian gunman killed seven Israelis – some of whom were exiting the Neve Yaakov synagogue in East Jerusalem. Police killed the gunman as he tried to escape. The shooter was believed to have acted alone and possibly in retaliation for the death of a relative two days earlier at the hands of Israeli security forces. Terrorist groups praised the attack but did not claim responsibility. The PA did not

condemn the attack. At the time, this was the deadliest terrorist attack in Israel since 2008.

- On February 26 a Palestinian gunman opened fire on the car of two Israeli brothers from the Har Bracha settlement while they were caught in a traffic jam near the Palestinian town of Huwara, killing them both. No terrorist group claimed responsibility. Later that day, approximately 400 settlers attacked Huwara and nearby Palestinian villages, shooting and killing one Palestinian 19-year-old man, wounding hundreds of Palestinians, and causing extensive property damage, including the torching of Palestinian-owned cars, businesses, and approximately 30 homes. The Israeli military commander in the area condemned the rampage, calling the attack a “pogrom,” but Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich urged the military to wipe out the village. On March 7 in Jenin, the ISF killed the primary Palestinian suspect from the February 26 attack on Har Bracha. Israeli police arrested 14 Israeli suspects from the February 26 attack on Huwara, but all were released by the courts.
- On June 20, two Palestinian gunmen killed four Israelis at a gas station and restaurant near the settlement of Eli. An armed Israeli citizen killed one of the shooters, and Israeli security forces killed the other as he tried to escape. Hamas did not take responsibility for the attack, but a statement recognized the gunmen as members of the terrorist group. In response to the attack, hundreds of settlers on June 21 attacked the Palestinian community of Turmus Ayya, where many U.S. citizens reside, and killed one U.S. Lawful Permanent Resident and committed extensive property damage. ISF soldiers routinely were filmed guarding and standing by during major settler attacks in the West Bank, including in Turmus Ayya, as well as in Huwara and Umm Safa.
- On August 21, two Palestinians shot and killed an Israeli woman traveling on the highway near the Beit Hagai settlement. Her driver was injured, but her 12-year-old daughter in the backseat was unharmed. No terrorist group claimed responsibility, but Hamas praised the attack. The ISF captured the two gunmen.
- On November 16, three Palestinian gunmen attacked Israeli security forces manning the “Tunnels” checkpoint between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. One Israeli officer was killed, and several officers were injured. All three attackers were killed. The attackers were well armed and possessed uniforms similar to Israeli uniforms. Israeli officials believed they intended to conduct a high-casualty terrorist attack in Israel. Hamas claimed responsibility for the attack.

Incidents of Israeli violence in the West Bank during the reporting period included the following:

- On March 6, several Israelis attacked a Palestinian family near a supermarket in Huwara as they fled to their car. After smashing the driver's window, one Israeli repeatedly attacked the driver with an axe, hitting both his hand and shoulder. The other attackers used a hammer and stones to break the remaining windows while yelling, "Death to the Arabs." Two of the attackers were subsequently arrested. According to a Shin Bet arrest announcement, "The two suspects are part of a violent group that work to harm Palestinians, as well as to disrupt security forces contending with counter-Palestinian terrorism operations and maintaining public peace in the area." Israeli Central Command Chief Maj. General Yehudah Fuchs labeled this incident a "pogrom."
- On August 4, two settlers killed a Palestinian man and wounded others in Burqa, near Ramallah. The United States labeled this incident a "terror attack" at the time.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: There were no changes in PA laws applicable to the West Bank and Gaza in 2023.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: The PA is a member of the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force, and its Financial Intelligence Unit, the Palestinian Financial Follow-Up Unit, is a member of the Egmont Group. There were no significant changes in 2023.

Countering Violent Extremism: PA President Abbas maintained a public position against incitement of violence and terrorism and frequently reiterated his commitment to non-violence, a two-state solution, and other PLO commitments. This continued after October 7, although he did not explicitly condemn the October 7 attack after it happened. Hamas, the de facto authority in Gaza, praised attacks against Israeli civilians in Israel.

The PA and the PLO continued payments to Palestinian security prisoners, some of whom were connected to terrorism, and the families of "martyrs" likewise connected to acts of terrorism. The PA's 2017 cybercrime law prohibited the production or sharing of content that jeopardizes "the public order," including promoting human trafficking, drugs, and terrorism. However, PA enforcement has been inconsistent. Certain official PA traditional and social media, affiliated with the Fatah political party, featured content praising or condoning acts of terrorism.

Few cases of settler violence in the West Bank against Palestinians have resulted in arrests or convictions; there were no convictions related to settler violence in 2023, though some settlers were placed in administrative detention or barred from entering the West Bank. Media also reported incidents where the IDF was present during settler attacks. After October 7, media and human rights activities reported Israeli settlers

who were military reservists committing acts of settler violence while officially serving as IDF soldiers.

International and Regional Cooperation: PA justice and security leaders, including security force leadership, continued to participate in regional conferences and meetings to combat terrorism.

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