



Palestinian Authority President Mahmud Abbas greets U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry as he arrives for meeting in Amman, Jordan, June 2013 (State Department)

# The Palestinian Authority Security Force

## Future Prospects

By Jeffrey Dean McCoy

Should the United States continue to support the Palestinian Authority Security Force (PASF)? To the Western observer, the current violence in Jerusalem is but another iteration of the intractable conflict

between the Israelis and the Palestinians. To the average American, the term *Palestinian* is often synonymous with a masked Arab hurling a rock at the ubiquitous Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The reality on the ground is, of

course, far more complex. Unknown to most is the fact that during the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict, the West Bank was quiet and stable. In fact, since 2009 the PASF has received silent, grudging approval of its performance in the West Bank by Western leadership.<sup>1</sup> The success of the PASF, like that of many nascent security forces supported by the United States, can be short-lived, especially in light of recent attacks by

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both Palestinians and Israelis. However, PASF performance has shown that it is a capable security force that is worthy of Israeli partnership, Palestinian trust, and further U.S. support. To substantiate this position, the development of the PASF will be briefly examined and set against its unique organization. Both its history and its distinct structure allow it to maintain order within the West Bank. The PASF will face challenges to further development if any success in a two-state solution is reached, but it remains the best hope for legitimate security for the Palestinian people.

## Development

The growth of the Palestinian Authority Security Force is not well understood and is often wrapped in misconceptions about regional actors. Development of the PASF began after the September 1993 signing of the Oslo Accords, which followed the end of the First Intifada.<sup>2</sup> Substantial donor support was used to transform the bodyguards and security personnel of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its leader, Yasser Arafat, into an initial security force that swelled under Arafat's leadership.<sup>3</sup> His involvement in the security force, however, caused Western leaders to question the PLO's dedication to achieving peace with Israel. The majority of the PASF was incapacitated following the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000, which resulted in decreased donor aid and the destruction of much of its infrastructure.<sup>4</sup> The death of Arafat in November 2004 and the ascension of Mahmud Abbas as his replacement established the conditions for rebuilding a more enduring Palestinian security organization. Supported by the "Quartet" powers (the United States, European Union [EU], United Nations, and Russia), Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2005 announced the creation of the office of the United States Security Coordinator (USSC) for Israel and the Palestinian Authority, which would oversee the rebuilding of the PASF into a multi-branch security force as a part of the so-called Roadmap

to Peace to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>5</sup> The difficulty of implementation and complexity of the environment increased after Hamas won the Gaza Strip election in January 2006, and its subsequent forceful takeover from the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority in 2007. This development would effectively split the Palestinians into the Fatah-ruled West Bank and Hamas-led Gaza Strip.<sup>6</sup>

## Organization

The PASF is organized into four main services, each with a separate and distinct mission, with other supporting elements of various sizes and capabilities, including an extensive intelligence apparatus. Integral to this architecture is the founding principle that the PASF was created with full transparency to Israel and coordinated by, with, and through the USSC.

The four basic services are the Presidential Guard (PG), responsible for the security of the Palestinian president; National Security Force (NSF), which provides area security and support to the Palestinian Civil Police; Palestinian Civil Police (PCP); and Civil Defense (CD) directorate, which provides basic firefighting and emergency response throughout the West Bank.<sup>7</sup>

The PG was the first service to be trained extensively by the USSC and is seen as the most skilled and most loyal element of the PASF. The PG highlighted its capabilities during the May 2014 visit of Pope Francis to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, providing close-in, vehicle, and route protection. The NSF is broadly organized into nine numbered special battalions that allow for a battalion in each of the West Bank governorates, as well as a battalion to deploy as necessary for emergencies or coverage during training. (Force coverage excludes East Jerusalem, with smaller, company-sized elements in the less-populated governorates, such as Tubas in the northern part of the West Bank.) The NSF provides direct support to its PCP counterparts, who are conventionally deployed throughout the West Bank in various police stations and centers in generally company-size units. The NSF resembles a national

guard force with no arrest authority. It can react quickly to control riots and establish checkpoints in support of PCP operations or response to emergencies. The PCP are trained in a Western European police style of law enforcement and perform much like an average police force. Although they have made strides in their professionalism and training as of late, they continue to be woefully under-resourced in radios, vehicles, and other basic equipment items when compared with their PG and NSF counterparts. As with many security forces, PASF interoperability is heavily reliant on the personal relationships of the various commanders.

## Opportunities and Challenges

The PASF has attained a level of professionalism and ability sufficient to maintain the security environment in the West Bank. This statement could be viewed as a mediocre assessment of its abilities, but it is in fact a huge accomplishment given the challenging environment in which it operates. The PASF is placed between an aggressive IDF and a continuously angry Palestinian populace and must make both sides happy. Of all the security forces trained by the United States, the PASF is the most cosmopolitan in experience, having been trained in a variety of locales. Its members operate with the most to prove. Although basic coordination takes place with the IDF, joint patrolling has been discontinued since the Second Intifada.<sup>8</sup> In keeping the West Bank at a low boil, the PASF is often vilified by fellow Palestinians as "Israeli sub-contractors for security."<sup>9</sup> In fact, most violence occurs at Palestinian and Israeli seam areas such as settlements, where the IDF maintains responsibility. Frustratingly, these attacks often support the narrative for unilateral Israeli action in the West Bank. Although unsophisticated by modern security or police standards, the PASF operates in and among the Palestinian people and is a significant line of defense against extremism and terrorist threats to the region. PASF training continues to evolve, with an assessment that its members are ready

to move beyond the basic skills and training provided in the past to more specialized and joint training that allows for significant skill improvement in lower level PASF leaders and interservice cooperation.<sup>10</sup> In addition, a robust training program is gaining traction with support from the Italian Carabinieri, which provides the “best fit” for the gendarmerie police and security skills that support the PASF situation and ability.<sup>11</sup>

There has been a concerted effort by the USSC to improve both PASF interservice cooperation and the professionalism of its force, but its leadership is resistant; they falsely perceive that the degradation in the standing of the individual services would impact the sharing of donor funding.<sup>12</sup> With an extremely top-heavy rank structure, the PASF must make strides in the institutional training of the junior enlisted members and focus on a multi-service officer training program. This is hard to initiate, as there currently is no Palestinian minister of security or commander of the PASF. This vacancy gives the PG and NSF commanders nearly unfettered communication directly to President Abbas. Few in the PASF leadership, however, would be willing to support the surrender of access and influence to the Palestinian Authority leadership. Lastly, if a two-state solution is to be achieved, the IDF and police must openly improve their cooperation with their PASF counterparts and curb their unilateral activities within the West Bank areas.

The PASF deserves a future. It is a proven and capable security force that succeeds in spite of its extraordinarily challenging mission. With improved cooperation with the IDF and continued support from the USSC, as well as training that continues to address leader, joint, and institutional capacity, the PASF will provide the security environment that is necessary to enable the breathing room for a legitimate peace process in Israel and the West Bank. Given the volatile political and social environment, Israel should embrace the PASF as a legitimate partner for

peace, and the West should continue to support the ongoing professionalization of this key contributor to Arab-Israeli peace. JFQ

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alaa Tartir, “The Evolution and Reform of Palestinian Security Forces 1993–2013,” *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 4, no. 1 (2015), 1–20.

<sup>2</sup> Brynjar Lia, *Building Arafat’s Police: The Politics of International Police Assistance in the Palestinian Territories After the Oslo Agreement* (Reading, United Kingdom: Ithaca Press, 2007), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Friedrich and Arnold Luethold, eds., *Entry-Points to Palestinian Security Sector Reform* (Geneva: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2007), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010), 492–494.

<sup>5</sup> Jim Zanotti, *U.S. Security Assistance to the Palestinian Authority*, R40664 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, January 8, 2010), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, 511.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Terry Wolff, “District Coordination Office and Liaison Workshop,” briefing notes, NATO School, November 23, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Tartir, 12.

<sup>10</sup> John Kenkel, “USSC Training, Education and Leader Development 101 Brief,” USSC briefing slides, August 19, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

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