

# Israel's Security Concerns During Ramadan

March 2023



## Introduction

**This year Ramadan once again coincides partially with Passover. Israeli military and security officials are braced for an escalation in the already febrile security situation with the Palestinians.** Since January 2023, 14 Israelis have been killed in Palestinian terror attacks, while 80 Palestinians have died in clashes with Israelis, the bulk either engaged in acts of terror or in direct confrontation with Israeli troops. Last year was the bloodiest year since the height of the Second Intifada. Thirty-one Israelis were killed in a total of 300 terror attacks and 154 Palestinians killed, again the majority combatants.

**In recent years the holy month – as well as the lead up to it – has seen an increase in violence, with Jerusalem’s Temple Mount a regular flashpoint.** Last year, in the lead up to Ramadan, 11 Israelis were killed in a wave of deadly terrorist attacks. During Ramadan in 2021, tensions surrounding the Temple Mount, evictions in Sheikh Jarrah, (and Mahmoud Abbas’ cancelation of Palestinian elections) ultimately led to fighting between Hamas and Israel in Gaza – known as Operation Guardian of the Walls – and riots in mixed Arab-Jewish cities. (For more information, see BICOM Briefing, [The escalation between Israel and Hamas.](#))

## Hamas keeps Gaza relatively quiet, but tries to escalate in the West Bank

**Hamas’ violent rhetoric continues, but until now has favoured a policy of non-escalation in Gaza.** It is notable that during “Operation Breaking Dawn” Israel struck PIJ targets in Gaza in August 2022, Hamas exercised comparative restraint. 17,000 Gazans, and the wider Gazan economy, benefit from access to entry permits allowing work in Israel. Hamas’ Gazan rival (and fellow Iranian proxy) Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), however, is less cautious and could perhaps be tempted by an escalation especially if the Temple Mount is involved.

**Hamas’ calculation means that while it seeks to maintain calm in Gaza, it has an interest in undermining stability in the West Bank.** Terrorist groups in the Strip have increasingly tried to create linkage with Israeli actions in the West Bank with rockets often launched following deadly IDF raids in Jenin and Nablus. Deputy head of Hamas’ military wing, Marwan Issa, recently said that Hamas was “giving room for resistance in the West Bank and Jerusalem, because they are the active arenas and are influential at the current stage on a strategic level.” Echoing this, senior Hamas commander Saleh al-Arouri said that resistance in the West Bank requires restraint in Gaza. Hamas’ long-term aim remains replacing the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA) and taking control over the West Bank.

**At the same time, there may come a point where Hamas finds itself with no choice but to generate escalation in Gaza.** Violence in Jerusalem or the West Bank over Ramadan could convince Hamas that is unable to sit on the sidelines. “In order for the enemy to not be at peace when the resistance in the West Bank escalates” said Al-Arouri, “it may be that it will get to a situation in which Gaza can’t continue to be silent to the enemy.” He warned that “If the resistance in the West Bank escalates and gets to a certain level, the violence will likely expand to all of Palestine and outside of it.”

## An upsurge in West Bank violence

**The ability of the PA, headed by the 87-year-old President Mahmoud Abbas, to maintain control in the West Bank has declined, steadily and inexorably.** Corruption, inefficiency, an inability to be able to point to tangible successes on the national Palestinian front, and a refusal to hold unified Palestinian elections since 2006 have eroded the PA’s legitimacy, while incitement and wilful undermining of its authority by both Hamas and its Iranian patron have weakened its control.

**The result has been not only low – and seemingly ever-sliding – levels of public approval of the PA’s performance, but a vacuum of centralised control and the emergence of small, localised militia in several areas of the West Bank.** In the Northern West Bank towns of Nablus and Jenin, especially, Lion’s Den and PIJ hold sway and dispatch terrorists on deadly missions inside Israel. In a worrying development, two separate attacks recently occurred near Jericho, a town generally considered a more stable power base for PA.

**The new constellations, although containing ostensibly rival groups, have united in opposition to the PA to form an ad-hoc coordination of activities and have inspired a new generation of terrorists.** Many attacks over the past 12-15 months have been committed by “Gen Z” Palestinians, those born after 2000 with neither memory of the calamitous 2nd Intifada nor experience of democratic elections in the PA. Lacking any sort of positive political vision, these young Palestinians lack traditional factional affiliation, are easily radicalised online, and either act alone or under the orders of small, localised militia. Their fame proliferates online – [the case of Ibrahim al-Nablusi is illustrative](#) – inspiring more to take up arms.

**With the PA impotent to restrain the capacity of these groups, Israel has increased its raids inside the West Bank.** “Operation Breakwater”, [initiated following a series of terror attacks at the beginning of 2022](#), has seen Israeli forces repeatedly strike to prevent planned terrorist strikes or to apprehend or neutralise terrorists who have already carried out operations. Security forces estimate that in 2022 alone, they thwarted 330 shooting attacks, 54 stabbing attacks, and about 30 attempts to deploy explosive devices.

**In a new phenomenon, such raids have frequently provoked a violent response – such as massive firing of**

semi-automatic weapons at IDF troops – from dozens of heavily armed Palestinians, with some of these battles lasting for hours. This in turn has led to higher numbers of casualties amongst Palestinians. It should be noted, however, that the number of Palestinians involved remains relatively low and that the escalation continues to fall well short of the scale of a popular uprising.

**This violent response is aided by the prolific flow of weapons into the territory, largely from Jordan.** By August 2022, the IDF had seized more smuggled weapons on the Eastern frontier for the year than in 2020 and 2021 combined. The IDF has begun using surveillance balloons of the kind it deploys in Gaza to help stem the flow. A demoralised PA security service, meanwhile, has been unwilling or unable to stem these factions’ influence and reassert control.

**In the wake of a deadly raid on Jenin in January 2023, the PA announced the suspension of security cooperation with Israel although, the two sides are in ongoing contact on the ground and some coordination on operational activity and shared intelligence has remained behind the scenes.** Barak Ravid reported in Axios that Minister for Civil Affairs Hussein Al-Sheikh and Israel’s National Security Adviser Tzachi Hanegbi were holding secret talks in an effort to de-escalate rising tensions. The PA understands its ultimate survival is tied to cooperative relations with Israel.

**The US has worked to further Israel-PA security ties, pressuring Ramallah to formally reinstitute cooperation and brokering the recent Israel-PA-Jordan-Egypt-US summit at Aqaba in a bid to buttress the PA, calm tensions, and strengthen security in the lead up to Ramadan.** The summit concluded with “an agreement to establish a joint security committee” to examine the resumption of full security cooperation.

**US Security Coordinator for Israel and the PA, Lt. Gen. Michael Fenzel, meanwhile, has drafted a security plan** – delivered to Abbas by Secretary of State Anthony Blinken – which provides for the training of a special Palestinian force that would be deployed to counter terrorism in the Nablus and Jenin areas. The US will also look to deepen the shared interest in degrading the influence of non-PA factions in the West Bank at a follow-up summit, which took place in Sharm al-Sheikh, Egypt in late March.

## **Flashpoint: Temple Mount**

Many fears over a potential Ramadan escalation centre on Jerusalem, and on the Temple Mount/al-Aqsa Mosque compound in particular. The site, holy to both Jews and Muslims, has been a frequent flashpoint in recent years. Radicalisation by Hamas and others has fuelled incitement of Palestinians to act as “defenders of al-Aqsa”. Clashes with Israeli police and security personnel have then acted as triggers for violence from the West Bank and Gaza.

National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir campaigned on a promise to extend Jewish prayer rights on the site, although this view is not shared by the vast majority of Israelis. On January 3rd 2022, shortly after the government was sworn in, he made good on his promise to tour the area (in a short early morning visit before the arrival of crowds), a move criticised as inflammatory by the US and other Israeli allies. In the months since, Prime Minister Netanyahu – a traditional upholder of the status quo – has limited the number of Jewish entrants permitted to the site.

**Experts are divided on the long-term survival chances of the PA.** Some analysts, assert that West Bankers are already living in “the day after Abbas”; that so eroded is his authority and so sclerotic his leadership that it is already appropriate to speak of a *de facto* post-Abbas era. With no obvious viable candidate from within the internationally-favoured PA factions, the leadership vacuum in the West

Bank looks likely to widen further as his authority weakens still more. Yet a dramatic collapse remains unlikely. Former advisor in the Ministry of Intelligence, Yochanan Tzoref told BICOM that, whilst the PA has weakened in the last year, it remains a significant player in the West Bank and is still able to act as a restraining factor. Michael Milshtein, head of the Palestinian Studies Forum at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel-Aviv University, told BICOM that the gradual decline of the PA’s authority remains more likely than a seismic revolutionary power shift.

## **The divergent approaches of the Israeli government**

**Prime Minister Netanyahu, whose political reputation rests partially on his record on security, is known to favour stability and the maintaining of the security status quo.** Thus, while Israel will likely continue to order operations against known terror cells when the PA proves unwilling or incapable of doing so itself, a policy of wider caution is likely to be Netanyahu’s preference.

**Such would mean: no substantive changes to the status quo on the Temple Mount; the resumption of security cooperation with the PA; and an avoidance of overtly inflammatory measures in the West Bank.**

Netanyahu, whose overarching security priority remains Iran, is also aware that US cooperation on the Israeli approach to Tehran’s pursuit of a nuclear weapon will not be aided by antagonising the Biden Administration with West Bank policies interpreted as inflammatory by Washington.

**Israeli Defence Secretary Yoav Gallant is also a known proponent of a more sober security-oriented doctrine** and has indicated a preference for continuing targeted, intelligence-led raids against terrorist personnel and infrastructure, together with improving the Palestinian economy and aiding the PA to re-establish authority and stability. In recent

remarks delivered alongside US Secretary of State Lloyd Austin, Gallant emphasised that Israel remained interested in both promoting economic prosperity and fighting terrorism. Improving Palestinian economic conditions has long been understood as providing some deterrence against terror. Following August 2022's "Operation Breaking Dawn", Israel authorised economic relief in Gaza, having earlier also increased the number of work permits for West Bank Palestinians to work in Israel to 120,000.

**Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and Minister for National Security Itamar Ben Gvir have adopted a more aggressive approach.** Smotrich's has expressed his desire for aggressive settlement expansion, incremental annexation, a more punitive response to terror, and the ultimate end of the PA. Ben Gvir meanwhile has flouted the security establishment's advice by ordering the demolition of Palestinian homes in east Jerusalem and has expressed a desire to challenge the restriction on Jewish access to the Temple Mount during the last ten days of Ramadan. In early March, forty retired Police officers, including former police chiefs, criticised Ben-Gvir's conduct and warned he could ignite another Intifada.

**One key question is the extent to which Netanyahu-Gallant's approach will weigh out over the much more radical agendas of Smotrich and Ben Gvir.** The coalition agreements signed with Netanyahu's Likud afford Smotrich authority over the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), a unit of the Defence Ministry with authority over civilian affairs in the areas of Israeli control in the West Bank. Such a split military-civilian chain of command in the West Bank is unprecedented and is likely to lead both to operational confusion and to an inevitable power struggle between Gallant and Smotrich's divergent approaches.

## Shared Agenda?

**Israel, the PA, and the US all share a desire for calm over the Ramadan period,** both for the preservation and protection of human life and to aid any chance of the political restabilising of the West Bank.

**A summit in Aqaba was followed by another in Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt to discuss lowering tensions.** The summits were attended by high-ranking representatives from Israel, the PA, the US, Jordan and Egypt. In Sharm, Israel and the PA reaffirmed their commitment to desist from taking unilateral action for a period of between three and six months, including any discussion about building new settlement units for a four-month period, and to stop authorising outposts for six months.

**The US is hoping that its support of the PA, together with a cooperative, sober security-oriented approach from Israel, can buy Abbas time to re-establish control.** Relative quiet over the next months will provide some – though a very little – optimism that such a plan has a chance of success.

**Ultimately, despite the good will, shared interests of maintaining calm, and back-channel mechanisms to defuse tensions, events on the ground have the potential to spark escalation.**



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For more information please contact:

Kira Lewis  
[kiral@bicom.org.uk](mailto:kiral@bicom.org.uk)