

AI Report 2006

Palestinian Authority

Inter-factional violence within the Palestinian Authority (PA) and its security forces, and between political factions and armed groups, caused a further deterioration in security in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Armed confrontations, attacks and abductions by Palestinian armed groups increased, and scores of Palestinians were killed amid growing lawlessness. Killings of Israelis by Palestinian armed groups diminished significantly compared to previous years. Impunity remained widespread as PA security forces were unable or unwilling to prevent killings and attacks or to apprehend the perpetrators. Members of PA security forces also participated in attacks, abductions and other abuses. Five Palestinians convicted of murder were executed, ending a three-year *de facto* moratorium on executions.

Background

After the election in January of President Mahmoud Abbas, Palestinian armed groups agreed to an indefinite *tahdīyeh* (quiet), during which they would refrain from attacking Israelis, and the Israeli authorities announced a suspension of offensive attacks against Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Attacks by both sides continued nonetheless, but to a lesser extent than in previous years of the Palestinian intifada (uprising) that began in 2000. In 2005, Israeli forces killed some 190 Palestinians, many of them unlawfully and including some 50 children (see Israel and the Occupied Territories entry). Palestinian armed groups killed 50 Israelis, most of them civilians and including six children, both in the Occupied Territories and inside Israel. Most attacks against Israelis were claimed by the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades (an offshoot of Fatah) and Islamic Jihad. Hundreds of Palestinians and Israelis were injured in attacks by both sides. Palestinian armed groups also launched mortar attacks from the Gaza Strip towards nearby Israeli towns.

In August and September Israel removed all its 8,000 settlers and all its troops from the Gaza Strip. However, the Israeli army retained control of the airspace, territorial waters and land borders of the Gaza Strip. Israel imposed a closure at the Rafah crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, the only point for Palestinians to leave or enter the Gaza Strip, from September to November.

Blockades and stringent restrictions imposed by the Israeli army throughout the West Bank continued to hinder or prevent Palestinians' access to their agricultural land, workplaces and education and health facilities. The Israeli army also carried out frequent raids into Palestinian towns and villages and stepped up its construction of a 600km fence/wall and major checkpoints throughout the West Bank, including in the East Jerusalem area, cutting off towns and villages from one another. Such restrictions continued to prevent economic recovery and caused high unemployment and extreme poverty in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, where more than half of Palestinians were obliged to rely on international aid for subsistence.

Municipal elections, which began the previous year, were held in several locations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Parliamentary elections, scheduled for July, were postponed to January 2006.

Increased lawlessness and impunity

The PA took some steps to reform its security services, which had been repeatedly targeted and largely destroyed by the Israeli army in previous years. In April President Abbas replaced some security forces' chiefs, but the security and judicial institutions remained dysfunctional, beset by factional fighting and power struggles, and unable or unwilling to restore law and order. Rare attempts by security forces to confront political and criminal armed groups invariably resulted in armed clashes, with the security forces often being forced to retreat. Several PA officials were attacked by armed groups. In other cases PA security forces' members participated in attacks and abuses alongside armed groups. Some armed groups and security forces' members used the call for PA reforms and accountability to justify their own attacks and abuses. The Israeli army continued to prevent PA security forces from operating in much of the West Bank, including by refusing to allow them to be present or to carry weapons in many areas. Faced with PA security forces and judicial institutions perceived as powerless or unwilling to address their grievances, many people sought the protection or mediation of armed groups to resolve their problems.

The proliferation of armed groups, the absence of the rule of law and systematic impunity compounded the atmosphere of insecurity. Scores of bystanders, including children, were killed and injured in clashes between armed groups and security forces, and by reckless use by Palestinian armed groups of weapons and explosive devices. Palestinian mortars aimed at nearby Israeli towns often missed their targets and landed in Palestinian residential areas in the Gaza Strip. Armed groups continued to use children to carry out attacks and transport explosives or weapons. Several Palestinian children were arrested by the Israeli army for their alleged involvement in such activities. The main armed groups reportedly disavowed the use of children and some blamed such abuses on local cells acting on their own initiative.

- On 2 October, two bystanders, a PA police chief and a security forces' member were killed during armed clashes between PA forces and Hamas gunmen in Gaza City and in an attack by a previously unknown armed group, the Popular Army, in the southern Gaza Strip town of Khan Younis. Armed clashes broke out when PA security forces attempted to enforce a PA-imposed ban on armed groups carrying weapons in populated areas. Several bystanders and dozens of Hamas supporters and PA security forces' members were also wounded in the clashes.

Abductions

More than 20 Palestinians and foreign nationals, including journalists and aid workers, were abducted in the Gaza Strip by Palestinian armed groups. In many cases the groups demanded jobs or protested against PA policies or actions. Those abducted were generally released unharmed within hours.

- Two staff members of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) were abducted in Gaza City on 29 July by relatives of a senior member of the PA Intelligence, who had been abducted the previous day by gunmen affiliated to Fatah. The three were released unharmed by their respective kidnappers a few hours later.
- On 8 August gunmen abducted three staff members of the UN Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA) in Khan Younis. The three were released after a few hours. The gunmen demanded the release of a Fatah official detained the previous day by PA security forces.

Unlawful killings and targeting of suspected 'collaborators'

Well over 100 Palestinians were killed in political inter-factional fighting, family feuds and score-settling, and several were killed or attacked by armed groups who accused them of "collaborating" with Israeli security services. Most of the killings were attributed to the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and other Fatah splinter groups.

- Major-General Musa Arafat, PA national security adviser and former chief of military intelligence, was killed on 7 September in Gaza City. Gunmen dragged him out of his house, shot him dead and abducted his son. His son was subsequently released. PA security forces from a nearby police station did not intervene.
- In September Farid Manasra was abducted in the West Bank village of Beni Na'im by gunmen who tortured him for four days. The gunmen, who allegedly included members of PA security forces, accused him of "collaborating" with Israeli forces and demanded money to release him and the publication of a communiqué. When he refused to pay, they shot him in the foot and stole his money, before releasing him.
- In October, two Palestinians were abducted in the Gaza Strip by the Knights of the Tempest, a previously unknown Fatah splinter armed group. After the abduction the gunmen held a press conference, displaying the two men hooded and bound, and accusing them of "collaborating" with Israel. The group's spokesman said they had seized the two because PA security forces had failed to bring "collaborators" to justice. The two were shot in the legs before being released several days later.

Death penalty

In June President Abbas authorized the execution of four prisoners who had been convicted of murder between 1995 and 2000. These were the first executions to be carried out by the PA since August 2002. A fifth execution was carried out in July. At the end of June, President Abbas ordered the retrial of those who had been sentenced to death by the State Security Court, which was disbanded in 2003. Some 50 Palestinians were believed to be under sentence of death.

Illegal detentions

In May the PA released several detainees who had been held for several years in Gaza City Prison without trial or in spite of court orders for their release. Other detainees continued to be held for prolonged periods without trial or beyond expiry of their sentences.

Violence against women

Palestinian women, especially those in the Occupied Territories, suffered particularly because of the conflict, including from the impact of home demolitions, movement restrictions that impeded their access to health services and education, and increased poverty. At the same time there were increased demands on women as carers and providers. The high level of conflict-related violence contributed to increased family and societal violence, and many women faced grave abuses in their homes. At least four women were known to have been killed by male relatives in so-called “honour” crimes. In February the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women called on the PA to enact legislation to provide for the punishment and redress for the wrongs caused to women victims of violence.

AI country visits

AI delegates visited areas under the jurisdiction of the PA from March to May and met PA officials.