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## FOCUS

### 'A prescription for civil war'

By Jon Elmer in Bethlehem



Allegations of misconduct have been made against Palestinian security services [GALLO/GETTY]

Abu Abdullah has never been charged with a crime, but he has been arrested by Palestinian security forces so many times in the past two years that he has lost count.

He has been arrested at work, in the market, on the street, and, more than once, during violent raids by masked men who burst into his home and seized him in front of his family.

Deep in the heart of the Deheishe refugee camp on the outskirts of Bethlehem, Abu Abdullah describes in detail the beatings he has endured in custody, the numerous cold, sleepless nights in cramped and filthy cells, the prolonged periods bound in painful stress positions, and the long hours of aggressive questioning.

"The interrogations always begin the same way," Abu Abdullah explains. "They demand to know who I voted for in the last election."

Abu Abdullah is not alone. Since Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's caretaker government took power in Ramallah in June 2007, stories like Abu Abdullah's have become commonplace in the West Bank.

The arrests are part of a wider plan being executed by Palestinian security forces - trained and funded by American and European backers - to crush opposition and consolidate the Fatah-led government's grip on power in the West Bank.

#### An international effort

The government of Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, is bolstered by thousands of newly trained police and security forces whose stated aim is to eliminate Islamist groups that may pose a threat to its power - namely Hamas and their supporters.

Under the auspices of Lieutenant-General Keith Dayton, the US security coordinator, these security forces receive hands-on training from Canadian, British and Turkish military personnel at a desert training centre in Jordan.

The programme has been carefully coordinated with Israeli security officials.

Since 2007 the Jordan International Police Training Center has trained and deployed five Palestinian National Security Force battalions in the West Bank.

By the end of Dayton's appointment in 2011, the \$261mn project will see 10 new security battalions, one for each of the nine West Bank governorates and one unit in reserve.

Their aim is clear. Speaking before a House of Representatives subcommittee in 2007, Dayton described the project as "truly important to advance our national

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interests, deliver security to Palestinians, and preserve and protect the interests of the state of Israel".

Others are even more explicit about what the force is for. When Nahum Barnea, a senior Israeli defence correspondent, sat in on a top-level coordinating meeting between Palestinian and Israeli commanders in 2008, he says he was stunned by what he heard.

" Hamas is the enemy, and we have decided to wage an all-out war," Barnea quoted Majid Faraj, then the head of Palestinian military intelligence, as telling the Israeli commanders. "We are taking care of every Hamas institution in accordance with your instructions."

### After the takeover

When he arrived in the last days of 2005, Dayton's assignment was to create a Palestinian security force ostensibly tasked with confronting the Palestinian resistance. The project began in Gaza.

Sean McCormack, a state department spokesman at the time, explained Dayton's role as "the real down in the weeds, blocking and tackling work of helping to build up the security forces".



Ten new security battalions will be created under the Dayton project [GALLO/GETTY]

But within weeks of his arrival, things began to fall apart. Hamas' decisive January 2006 election victory ushered in a crippling international blockade on the Palestinians in Gaza. Soon after, the security forces of Hamas and Fatah began fighting in the streets, culminating in Hamas' June 2007 takeover of the enclave.

Dayton's initial aims lay in tatters, and while Fayyad became prime minister in a 'caretaker' government in Ramallah, a new security strategy was formulated.

As a grim status-quo established itself in Gaza, Dayton's new mission became clear. The job of the security coordinator was now "to prevent a Hamas takeover in the West Bank," according to Michael Eisenstadt, Dayton's former plans officer.

A coordinated attack on Hamas' civilian apparatus was launched immediately after the takeover in Gaza in June 2007. Major-General Gadi Shamni, the head of the Israeli army's central command, led an initiative to target the base of Hamas' support in the West Bank. The plan, dubbed the Dawa Strategy, involved pin-pointing Hamas' extensive social welfare apparatus, the lynchpin of their popularity amongst many Palestinians.

Dr Omar Abdel Razeq, a former finance minister in the short-lived Hamas government, explains the effect this had. "When we talk about the infrastructure we are talking about the societies and the cooperatives and the institutions that were to help the poor," he says. "They finished [off] the infrastructure of Hamas."

Israeli Brigadier-General Michael Herzog, the chief of staff to Ehud Barak, Israel's defence minister, summed up the Israeli view of the project. "[Dayton's] doing a great job," he said. "We're very happy with what he's doing."

### Torture allegations

The Dawa Strategy has seen more than 1,000 Palestinians jailed by Palestinian Authority (PA) forces. The arrests - though concentrated on Hamas and its suspected allies - have touched a broad swathe of Palestinian society, and all political factions.

They have targeted social workers, students, teachers, journalists. There have been regular raids on mosques, university campuses and charities, and repeated allegations of torture carried out by US and European-funded security officers, including several deaths in custody.

In October, Abbas issued a decree against the most violent forms of torture used by his forces and replaced the interior minister, General Abdel Razak al-Yahya, a long-time US and Israeli partner, with Said Abu Ali.

While noting an improvement since the decree, human rights workers say the changes are not enough. "There is still no due process, still no legal justifications for many of the arrests and civilians are still being brought before military courts," says Salah Moussa, an Independent Commission for Human Rights attorney.

Major-General Adnan Damiri, a spokesperson for the Palestinian security forces, acknowledged wrongdoing but attributed the acts to individuals and not to a policy.

"Sometimes there are officers or soldiers who have made mistakes in this way, with torture," Damiri said. "But now we are punishing them."

Damiri cited 42 cases of torture in the past three months that resulted in various forms of reprimand, including loss of rank. Six soldiers were dismissed for their acts.

But on the streets, the mood is darkening as the foreign-backed security services tighten their grip on the West Bank.

Naje Odeh, a leftist community leader in Deheishe who operates a thriving youth centre in the camp, characterised the security apparatus as akin to the US-allied regimes in Jordan and Egypt. "If you speak out, you are arrested," he explains. "This behaviour will destroy our society."

Odeh says the security forces carrying out the raids know that what they are doing is wrong. "Why are they masked?" he asks rhetorically. "Because we know these people. We know their families. They are ashamed of what they are doing."

Some fear that the behaviour of the US and EU-trained security forces will spark potentially deadly confrontation.

"If they attack your mosques, your classrooms, your societies, you can be patient, but for how long?" a senior Islamist leader in the West Bank asks.

Abdel Razeq, the former Hamas finance minister, is more explicit in his predictions.

He says: "If the security forces insist on defending the Israelis, this is a prescription for civil war."

Source: Al Jazeera

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