



## PALESTINIAN SECURITY REFORM: A MOMENT OF TRUTH

By Tally Helfont

One of the many factors, terrorism aside, that has hindered the Palestinian people from obtaining a state has been the sheer number of disparate armed groups acting simultaneously in the Palestinian Territories over the last decades. While at least two separate leadership structures, one West Bank-based under President Mahmud Abbas and the other Gaza-based under Hamas, have emerged in the Territories, a plethora of security apparatuses and armed militias continue to exist and lash out violently. This situation has only exacerbated the security threat facing Israel and further jeopardized the prospect of gaining a Palestinian state. There is no single representative who can negotiate or speak for the Palestinian people, and there is no single entity to hold accountable for the unrelenting Palestinian violence. Considering that Israel's primary roadblock for moving forward on any peace negotiations and eventual two-state solution lie specifically in the constant state of insecurity engendered by Palestinian violence, this multi-militia climate ensures a stalemate at best. To put it plainly, Israel will not offer any concessions because of Palestinian violence and the Palestinians will not stop the violence because Israel continues its occupation.

In light of this dynamic, in March 2005, the Office of U.S. Security Coordinator (USSC) was created in an effort to assist Palestinians in reforming their security services. The idea was to create an entity comprised of a multinational contingent of experts that would coordinate international donations and mobilize resources towards restructuring and properly training a single Palestinian security force. The hope was, as current USSC U.S. Lt-General Keith Dayton recently noted, "to improve their ability to enforce the rule of law, and make them accountable to the leadership of the Palestinian people whom they serve."<sup>1</sup> The training, which is based on a four-month program run out of the Jordan International Police Training Center (JIPTC) outside of Amman, focuses on "human rights, proper use of force, riot control, and how to handle civil disturbances." The training also emphasizes unit cohesion and leadership. So far, three battalions--an average of five hundred men each--have graduated JIPTC, with another battalion currently in training. Graduates have taken over security responsibilities in various West Bank cities. General Dayton lauded the program, now in its fourth year, as being extremely effective and an important step for the Palestinians. Perhaps most telling about the unique nature of this particular program, for the first time, Palestinians are being given a security mission that does not include "resistance" against Israel. Dayton quoted one of the JIPTC graduates as having told his graduating battalion, "You were not sent here to learn how to fight Israel, but you were rather sent here to learn how to keep law and order, respect the right of all of our citizens, and implement the rule of law so that we can live in peace and security with Israel."<sup>2</sup>

What does this translate into on the ground? Well, one success story he referenced was the lack of a violent backlash from West Bank Palestinians during the July 2008 Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. While widespread demonstrations against the Gaza invasion occurred, they were primarily peaceful and focused on showing their support for Gazans by organizing blood, clothing, and food drives. Likewise, the demonstrations never got out of control, he said, in large part due to the Palestinian police forces' applying the training they had learned and even coordinating with Israeli security forces. In this spirit, President Abbas, in a meeting with President Barack Obama last month, said he would like to pay tribute and thank "General Dayton and all those who work with him in helping and supporting and training our security organizations to carry out their duties and responsibilities." He continued, "time is of the essence. We should capitalize on every minute and every hour in order to move the peace process forward."

It might seem that this experiment is bearing fruit that once and for all could break the stalemate, but can it? On June 16, the

<sup>1</sup> "Speech by Lieutenant General Keith Dayton, U.S. Security Coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority" *Washington Institute For Near East Policy*, May 7, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Palestine Information Center<sup>3</sup> released a joint statement issued by five Palestinian “resistance factions” condemning the killing of a Qassam Brigades commander in Qalqilia by Ramallah security forces. The killing of Mohammed Samman, which took place on May 31 as part of a clash between trained Palestinian security forces and Hamas, resulted in a storm of criticism and outrage from militant groups in the Territories. In response, the five factions, which comprise Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades (Hamas), Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (Fatah-offshoot), Saraya al-Quds (Palestinian Islamic Jihad), the National Resistance Movement (DLFP),<sup>4</sup> and the Popular Resistance Committee (militant coalition), have united to confront the “traitor leaders” who have “sold their homeland and conscience to Dayton.”<sup>5</sup> Calling for the trained security forces to “answer to the people” and “not to listen to instructions given to them by the traitor leaders [Abbas and Fayyad],<sup>6</sup> the coalition of factions argued that “the Zionist enemy is the only one benefiting from such incidents,” and stressed that “resistance is a legitimate right of the Palestinian people in the face of the Israeli occupation.”<sup>7</sup>

It is apparent that the unification of these groups represents an attempt by the militants not only to regain control of the West Bank, but also to ensure their relevancy and the relevancy of their message. A cohesive, singular Palestinian security force cracking down on militant groups poses a real threat to the survival of such groups. Branding the leadership as traitors and denouncing those who do their bidding as having sold out the Palestinian people are the only available propaganda tools. However, violence speaks louder than words, and it is clear that the coalition of factions plans to make good on their promises to retaliate.

Similarly negatives responses have been voiced by other West Bank Palestinians. Sattar Kassem, a professor of political science at Al Najah University in Nablus, writes on Hamas’ website, “This General [Dayton] who represents the US and its administration headed by Hajj Obama is working relentlessly at dismantling the Palestinian society and turning the Palestinians into mere individuals who each of them is concerned about his/her own living.” He goes on to argue that the true U.S. intentions are “to turn Palestinians into Israeli security recruits who finally would reign over a Palestinian entity of collaborators.”<sup>8</sup> If this type of skepticism becomes widespread, General Dayton’s mission and the trained security forces are likely to be challenged by militants and populace alike.

Nevertheless, General Dayton’s request to expand the program has been approved. Citing various accomplishments, including the recent crackdown on Hamas cells in Qalqilya, Dayton informed the U.S. and the Israelis of the Palestinian Authority’s preparedness to take over security responsibility in additional areas in the West Bank. The Supplemental Appropriations Bill for the 2009 fiscal year will include \$109 million for USSC projects in Israel under Dayton, specifically including a two-year plan to train a total of 10 battalions. An additional \$100 million is under review for continuing and expanding the training in 2010.

If the coalition of militants is able to exploit any cracks in Dayton’s trained force, we are likely to see a return to the status quo and to the cycle of violence that has plagued the two embattled sides for years. Alternatively, a sustained effort that subdues the militants could strengthen the support of the newly trained forces in the eyes of the people and serve as a positive example for another way of life. Much is on the line. If there is any event on the ground that could change the face of the political game, this is it. Not only General Dayton but the White House should be prepared to stay the course in the face of adversity in light of the stakes at hand.

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<sup>3</sup> The Palestine Information Center is widely acknowledged as being Hamas’s official website.

<sup>4</sup> While Fatah and Hamas are currently experimenting with reconciliation efforts on certain fronts and clashing on others, the armed factions, or in Fatah’s case, offshoot, are pursuing independent action alongside the other three militant factions. This serves to highlight even further how many actors are involved in this arena and therefore how many agendas are being played out simultaneously.

<sup>5</sup> “Five Factions: We formed a Joint Armed Group in the West Bank to Pursue to the Killers of the Resistance and Liquidate Them,” *Palestine Information Center*, June 16, 2009 <[www.palestine-info.info/ar/](http://www.palestine-info.info/ar/)>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> “Palestinian Factions: Resistance Legitimate Right,” *Palestine Information Center*, June 16, 2009 <<http://www.palestine-info.co.uk/en/>>.

<sup>8</sup> Sattar Kassem, “Dayton’s Joy,” *Palestine Information Center*, June 12, 2009 <<http://www.palestine-info.co.uk/en/>>.