

MERIA

PALESTINIAN MILITARY PERFORMANCE AND THE 2000 INTIFADA

By Gal Luft*

Violent confrontations between Palestinians and Israeli forces raise the question of the effectiveness and role played by Palestinian police/military forces. The article finds that these units have improved training and weaponry. But their institutional conflicts inhibit their performance. Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat keeps tight control over them and is now playing off the Fatah militia as a new factor to portray the upheaval as a struggle by the masses.

The violent upheaval by Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza during September-November 2000 raised many political issues. One of the most interesting but least addressed is the role of Palestinian police and military units during this second intifada. At various times, they tried to stop violence, participated in it, or acted merely as onlookers. What does this tell us about the capabilities, political function, and future character of these all-important institutions?

Four years earlier, following the September 1996 opening of the Hasmonian Tunnel in Jerusalem, Palestinian policemen and Israeli soldiers exchanged heavy fire throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip leaving 85 Palestinians and 16 Israelis dead, and more than 1,200 Palestinians and 87 Israelis wounded. The "September riots," as they were called, showed the Palestinian security services (PSS) acting very differently than had been expected under the Oslo agreements, which gave them the task of providing for peace and security in

the Palestinian Authority (PA) ruled territories.

While engaging in diplomatic negotiations with Israel, the Palestinians have been planning and preparing for the scenario of a failed diplomatic option and the possibility of a next round of violence. After the 1996 events, the 41,000-strong security forces improved their tactical sophistication, introduced new training methods and obtained new weapons and equipment.

But after weeks of intensive fighting in September-November 2000 between PSS troops and the Israel Defense Force (IDF) the PSS's poor performance is puzzling.

Certainly, during those demonstrations, the Palestinian police failed to fulfill all the duties and functions assigned to them by the Oslo agreements. These include: the maintenance of internal security and public order; the protection of property and places of special importance such as Jewish holy places in Palestinian-controlled territories; the prevention of

incitement to violence and the fight against terrorism.

At the same time, though, PA Chairman Yasir Arafat and his lieutenants not only refrained from using their armed forces as an instrument to impose peace, they also did not--contrary to some analysts' predications--use their troops as a tool of war either. Throughout the clashes Palestinian troops did not demonstrate even a fraction of the capabilities they had developed. They inflicted minimal casualties on the IDF, used virtually none of the special weapons--such as anti-tank missiles--in their possession, and failed to initiate and execute any significant military operation against Israeli targets.

Was the poor military performance a result of pure incompetence? Lack of will? Or was it a result of Arafat's calculated strategy of incremental use of force that leaves, for now, the Palestinian military units in their camps?

PALESTINIAN MILITARY BUILDUP SINCE SEPTEMBER 1996

Being more than a regular police force and short of being a fully matured army, the 12 branches of the PSS have invested great efforts to learn the lessons from the previous major clashes with the IDF. New weapons and tactics have been introduced, and training has improved considerably.

Palestinian police officers go through a rigorous training program. Junior officers are being trained in the Jericho police academy; more senior company and battalion commanders

received professional training in Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, and Pakistan as commanders of combat units. (1) This training enabled them to think and plan as field commanders rather than as police officers.

Since 1996, the PSS have increased the size of formations capable of executing independent military operations from small-sized units such as platoons and companies to full battalions. In the first half of 2000 alone, half a dozen battalion-level exercises were held in the Gaza Strip. (2) Despite the fact that live-fire training has been restricted to platoon level, the battalions trained in rather complicated combat scenarios such as gaining control of an area of land and mock attacks on IDF posts and Jewish settlements.

In an attempt to increase the number of Israeli casualties in case of a war, the Palestinians recruited a large number of snipers equipped with telescopic sights for their M-16 and AK-47 rifles. In addition, it has been reported that some of the Palestinian security apparatuses obtained weapons prohibited by the Oslo agreements such as light anti-armor weapons, rocket propelled grenades, anti-tank missiles, light mortars, land mines and hand grenades. Several reports indicated that the Palestinians also obtained shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles and truck-mounted anti-aircraft guns. (3)

The PA succeeded in amassing stocks of weapons and ammunition through smuggling and theft from Israeli military bases and private homes. Cross-border smuggling, mainly from Jordan and Egypt, also

enriched the PA's arsenal. In this way, Palestinians were able to triple the number of light weapons originally entrusted to them by the Oslo agreements and, hence, to arm civilian militias such as the Tanzim and veterans of the Fatah Hawks militia. The September 28, 1995 Oslo II agreement permitted the PA 15,000 light weapons and 240 machine guns of 0.3" or 0.5" caliber.

Preparing for a long, protracted military confrontation with Israel also required the build-up of a strong logistical base to supply Arafat's forces with food, water, medications, weapons and ammunition. Throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the PA established warehouses where war material--mainly light ammunition, hand grenades and first aid equipment--was prepared and stored. Since no IDF operations are allowed in Area A, the Palestinians store most of their weapons and ammunition in the towns, where there is no risk of IDF raids. Prior to the eruption of the al-Aqsa intifada, the PA imported large amounts of food supplies, stored large amounts of water and oil and prepared an alternative power source by deploying large generators in various locations in the PA. Most of the purchases are legal imports, some of the equipment was bought in Israel.

ASSESSMENT OF PSS PERFORMANCE DURING THE RIOTS

The massive wave of violent demonstrations that broke out in late September, following Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif,

was met with a weak response by the Palestinian police. In September 1996 Palestinian policemen formed, in many cases, human chains to prevent demonstrators from advancing on Israeli settlements and military outposts. During the current crisis, they did not interfere with Palestinians demonstrating against Israel in such areas as the Neztarim Junction in Gaza or outside the West Bank towns of Nablus, Ramallah, Tulkarm, Qalqilia Bethlehem, and in Hebron.

Two incidents in October--the destruction of the Jewish holy site Joseph's Tomb in Nablus and the attack on the Palestinian police station in Ramallah that murdered two Israeli soldiers held by the police--showed the Palestinian police's lack of resolve in dealing with a rioting mob. In many cases, Palestinian policemen took off their uniforms, joined the demonstrators and opened fire on IDF troops.

There were several reasons for this conduct. First, the PSS have had relatively little training in crowd control. They also lack necessary equipment such as shields, helmets, flak jackets, clubs, radio equipment, armored vehicles, tear gas and other non-lethal weapons to contain massive demonstrations.

Second, the policemen themselves are strong nationalists who support the demonstrators' cause and methods. As one Western diplomat put it: "they don't have their hearts in it because they'd probably prefer to be throwing stones at the Israelis themselves." (4)

The Palestinian police showed in the past that it could put down

violent riots aimed against the PA itself. On Friday, November 18, 1994, the PSS clashing with thousands of Hamas demonstrators outside the Filastin Mosque in Gaza killed 13 and wounded about 200 demonstrators. This kind of resolution could not be demonstrated when demonstrators attack IDF troops. PSS personnel do not want to be seen as Israeli lackeys and would not even contemplate opening fire at their own people.

Third, the PSS is responsive to Arafat's orders. This explains the difference between its performance during the earlier part of the 1996 violence and the role it played during the 2000 violence.

Nevertheless, the PSS also seemed to show less military ability in 2000 compared to the part it played in the rioting of 1996. Despite the heavy volume of fire exchanged between Palestinian policemen and the IDF--and despite the long training undergone--Palestinian policemen didn't reach a high level of marksmanship and proficiency with their weapons. Unlike the September 1996 riots in which PSS officers succeeded in killing 14 Israeli soldiers including some senior officers, in the al-Aqsa intifada not one Israeli soldier was killed in combat with Palestinian police officers for the first seven weeks of the confrontation, until a Palestinian police captain infiltrated Kfar Darom on November 18 and killed a sentry before being killed himself.

This outcome could be attributed to the great efforts the IDF made since 1996 to improve its troops' protection, but the main reason for the

IDF's low casualty rate lies in the fact that most Palestinian fire was sporadic and inaccurate. The sniper units were not put into action.

GOOD COP, BAD COP

The main problem in the PSS's operations is lack of coordination among the various security services and between members of the official security services and the civilian militias. The PSS is comprised of no less than 12 different services, the most prominent of which are the Civil Police, National Security Forces, Preventive Security Forces, General Intelligence, Civil Defense, Military Police, Military Intelligence and the Presidential Security Forces, better known as Force 17.

Most of the branches have two commanders, equal in rank: one in the West Bank and the other in the Gaza Strip. Those regional commanders report directly to Arafat rather than being subjected to an intermediate level of operational command or a general staff-like body. Competition, suspicion and tense relations exist between the security chiefs to the extent that in several cases armed clashes occurred between members of competing services.

Palestinian security apparatuses invest great efforts undermining each other and are encouraged by Arafat to spy on each other. Arafat, as a result, is the only one who can arbitrate among the different forces and through him their chiefs communicate with each other. This system of command ensures that none of the security forces becomes powerful enough to pose a threat to

Arafat's leadership. But in time of war Arafat's style of command impairs coordination and unity of effort between the security apparatuses. Studies on military effectiveness of Arab armies conclude that lack of coordination and lack of trust are among the main reasons for poor battlefield performance. The conduct of Palestinian military affairs so far indicates that the Palestinians are not likely to be the exception. (5)

Heads of security apparatuses receive, mostly through unsecured phone lines, contradictory orders from Arafat's office. Simultaneously, one service may receive an order to tighten control over the crowd while the other receives an order to loosen it.

Arafat's differing use of his security services can be seen in his treatment of Hamas and Islamic Jihad members. One PSS unit may be ordered to arrest opposition activists while another unit may be instructed to release Hamas prisoners or allow them to "escape" from prison. IDF head of the Southern Command Major General Yom-Tov Samia revealed that the senior PSS officers who are in daily contact with the IDF are aware of the fact that Arafat "speaks in a different language with each body in the PA's security establishment." (6)

Consequently, PSS chiefs do not feel accountable to agreements Israel entered with their colleagues. Israeli military officials complained that at least three times during the first two weeks of the clashes they succeeded in securing commitments by senior PSS military commanders--among them commander of National Security Forces in Gaza General Abd

al-Raziq Majaida and his West Bank counterpart General Haj Ismail--to reduce the violence but to no avail.

The Palestinian commanders admitted that they could not exercise their control over any security forces not under their direct command. In most countries, all the branches of the military forces submit to the command of a general staff headed by a chief of staff. By way of contrast, Arafat is the only person who controls all the PA's military bodies. But for seven of the first nine days of the crisis Arafat was away from the battle scene. Rather than managing the crisis from his command post in Gaza, Arafat preferred to travel between Jordan, Egypt, France and Spain. In his absence, the PSS became an even more confused, chaotic organ that did not have much effect on events on the ground.

The Palestinians' weak system of command and control may undermine their capability to engage in a long, protracted war against Israel. The disunity between the services and the absence of a general staff-type body prevents effective control over essential elements of the war effort such as supplies, manpower, weapons and ammunition.

Several times during the clashes, Palestinian fighters ran out of ammunition and had to cease-fire. There were warehouses of weapons and ammunition not far away but these belonged to another security force which would not reduce its own supplies (and, hence, power) by giving equipment to another group. There is little mutual logistical assistance among the forces and they do not

coordinate their operations.

THE PROBLEM OF TANZIM

Another problem the PSS face is the growing power of the Tanzim, the armed wing of Fatah, the largest faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Tanzim led the rioting and confrontation with the IDF in September 1996 and the Nakba riots of May 2000. It has about 20,000 members, some of whom are armed with automatic weapons and trained by the PSS. The turning over of arms to the Tanzim contradicts the Oslo agreements.

The Tanzim's primary duty is to control opposition to Arafat in the PA. For this purpose, Arafat has been funding and grooming the organization. At the same time, though, Arafat has distrusted and tried to undercut the power of the Tanzim's chief, Marwan Barghuti, leader of Fatah in the West Bank. For his part, Barghuti has often criticized Arafat indirectly and battled the PA's official security organs, which he accuses of corruption. Barghuti also blamed the PSS for not having done their job to protect the Palestinians from Israeli attacks. (7) The organization, however, has grown in power and prestige, at the expense of the PA's military apparatus.

Armed Tanzim activists often brush off the uniformed policemen and disobey their instructions. Palestinian policemen are reluctant to confront the militia which has grown to become the most visible and active armed body of the PA. Arafat prefers to yield leading role of his armed intifada to the popular, plainclothes

Tanzim activists since this lets him present the Palestinian struggle as an authentic popular uprising.

Several times during the first weeks of the clashes, Arafat instructed the Tanzim to escalate the violence, while at the same time giving his uniformed security chiefs opposite instructions. As a result, Palestinian policemen find themselves confronted by an uncontrolled armed force backed by Arafat. Hence, they are prevented from exercising the power and authority granted to them by both the Oslo agreement and the PA itself.

Another problem is that many members of Tanzim, especially in the Gaza Strip, are in fact PSS employees. During the day, these people work as intelligence agents and police officers enforcing the law. Off-duty, they participate in the same activities they are being paid to thwart.

One incident demonstrates the complex relations between Tanzim and the PSS. When a critically wounded IDF soldier was trapped on October 1 in Joseph's Tomb in Nablus, the IDF requested that two PSS commanders in the West Bank, Preventive Security chief Jibril Rajub and Palestinian Police chief Haj Ismail facilitate his evacuation. But the tomb compound was surrounded by Tanzim activists. For two hours, the Tanzim prevented the PSS chiefs from entering the compound. The soldier died of his wounds before medical assistance was allowed to arrive while the helpless PSS chiefs stood by powerless to act.

Since the beginning of the clashes, many speculated on the extent in which Arafat controls the Tanzim.

The dominant assessment is that the Tanzim is tightly controlled by Arafat and will continue to submit to his authority, whatever personal or political frictions take place between Arafat and Barghuti. (8)

Yet this situation also creates a new problem for Arafat in regulating the relations between the official security forces and the unofficial forces of the Tanzim. Failure to do so would continue to erode the PSS's power, let the Tanzim claim credit for waging the struggle, and lead more Palestinian policemen to give their loyalty to the Tanzim and not their own commanders. As a result, Arafat could face resentment from the security forces and a challenge from the Tanzim itself. (9)

CONCLUSIONS

At first sight, the PSS's performance during the recent clashes in the West Bank and Gaza Strip may raise doubts about the Palestinians' military effectiveness and the PSS's ability to pose a serious challenge to the IDF. But the apparent weakness of the Palestinian police is more likely due to a calculated decision by Arafat to spare, at least for the moment, his uniformed armed forces from the fray.

Arafat seems to have chosen to keep the lion share of his security forces disengaged from the fighting and put them into action only if and when an all-out war with Israel broke out. Seeking international sympathy and wary of the IDF's military superiority, Arafat did not want to escalate the battle too much. To do so would have destroyed any chance of using a diplomatic option. Thus, the

PSS as such did not launch concerted attacks or use certain weapons in its possession, while Arafat portrayed the rioting as a defensive but popular struggle of the masses.

Equally important, Arafat surely knows that an exposure of the PA's true military capabilities might confirm the Israeli claim that the PA has been clandestinely developing an army under the disguise of a police force. Exposing the PA's military capabilities at this stage would be self-defeating because it would enforce the legitimacy of the Israeli demands for Palestinian demilitarization as part of future negotiations.

Indeed, to show the capability of the PA's military could also be a serious disincentive for Israel to make concessions or accept the creation of an independent Palestinian state. Beyond a certain point, it is against Arafat's interest to expose the threat that Palestinian forces could pose to Israel under such circumstances.

A month into the clashes, when Palestinian casualties were 12 times higher than those of Israel, Jibril Rajub commented in an interview: "So far the PA has shown restraint in its conflict with Israel but the crimes of the settlers, the closure, the collective punishment and the heavy hand of the IDF will leave no other alternative to the PA but to respond." (10) Rajub's comment should indicate to Israel that it would be imprudent to draw premature conclusions on the PSS's poor military effectiveness based on its performance during the events of autumn 2000.

* *Lieutenant colonel IDF (Res.) Gal*

Luft is a doctoral candidate at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies and author of "The Palestinian Security Forces: Between Police and Army (Washington, DC: 1998)." His article, "The Palestinian Armed Forces" appeared in MERIA Journal, Vol. 3 No. 2 (June 1999).

NOTES

- (1) Ha'aretz, July 12, 2000.
- (2) Yediot Ahronot, Weekend Supplement, June 23, 2000.
- (3) Ha'aretz, June 23, 2000, Yediot Ahronot, November 3, 2000.
- (4) The Washington Post, October 22, 2000.
- (5) See Norville de Atkine, "Why Arabs Lose Wars," MERIA Journal, Vol. 4, no. 1 (March 2000) and Kenneth M. Pollack, "The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness," Ph.D. Dissertation MIT, 1996.
- (6) Interview with Maj. General Yom-Tov Samia, Yediot Ahronot, October 8, 2000.
- (7) Interview, Jerusalem Post November 2, 2000.
- (8) Yediot Ahronot, Weekend Supplement, October 13, 2000.
- (9) For a discussion of the security forces, the Tanzim, and their political positions, see Barry Rubin, The Transformation of Palestinian Politics (NY, 1999). See also Gal Luft, "The Palestinian Armed Forces," MERIA Journal, Vol. 3 No. 2 (June 1999). Available at <<http://meria.biu.ac.il>>.
- (10) Ha'aretz, internet edition, October 27, 2000.