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The Benefits of Decreased Security Cooperation with the PA

by Prof. Hillel Frisch

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A lull in security cooperation between Israel and the PA could be a blessing in disguise for Israel's security forces. A changed environment is always a summons to organizational innovation and self-reliance, the lack of which cost many lives during the Oslo years and Arafat's war against Israel that began in 2000.

One of the arguments against extending Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley is that it will lead to little or no security cooperation with the PA. Muhammad Abbas has already announced that this would ensue. The fear is that diminished security cooperation would render Israel more vulnerable to terrorism.

There is no doubt that security cooperation with the PA contributed to a reduction in terrorism. The questions are how much, and whether or not Shabak and the IDF can make up the difference.

Answering the first question calls for a comparison of the number of Israelis killed by Palestinian terrorism before and after close cooperation with the PA.

2007 was a critical juncture. Abbas's eviction from Gaza by Hamas and the emergence of a rival fundamentalist entity there drove home to Abbas and his Fatah cronies that without cooperation with Israel, the PA could meet the same fate in the West Bank. At best, it would find itself fighting an interminable civil war with the PA/Fatah on one side and Hamas and Islamic Jihad on the other.

This understanding coincided with the rebuilding and retraining of the PA security forces after their mauling during Arafat's war against Israel from

2000 to 2005. US Lieut.-Gen. Keith Dayton and his staff began that retraining process in 2006.

The careful selection of new recruits to ensure that they were not Hamas moles, the professional training of the security forces, and Abbas's resolve to work with the IDF combined to yield a close and efficient security cooperation between the PA and Israel.

Comparing Israeli performance against terror before and during the period of cooperation reveals that while the sum is greater than the parts, the contribution to the reduction by the IDF and Shabak was greater by far than that of the PA.

Israeli security was able to reduce terrorism from the unprecedented heights of over 450 terror-related deaths in 2002 to low double-digit figures by 2007, halving the costs in lives in each successive year during this period. The temporary takeover of PA-controlled cities and multiple daily point raids to apprehend active and would-be terrorists destroyed the sanctuary areas from which the terrorists emerged.

So hounded were the terrorists that by 2006, the Tanzim begged for an agreement that would allow them to give up their arms in return for assurances that their members—barring those with blood on their hands—would not be hunted down by Israel.

Even with close security cooperation that ensured against a common enemy, it was Israel, not PA security forces, who apprehended at least 75% of those suspected of terrorism. This division of labor did not change over the years.

Of course, one important dimension of the cooperation is harder to quantify—the sharing of intelligence. Frequently, the press reported two-way intelligence traffic that contributed to the apprehending of terrorists, the thwarting of terrorist acts, and the arrest of fugitive terrorists after they had committed their acts of violence. Israeli forces sometimes took action based on PA leads, and the reverse occurred as well. Hamas and Islamic Jihad media sites often trumpeted this intelligence sharing to embarrass and delegitimize the PA in the eyes of the Palestinian public, but in the process, they demonstrated the efficiency of the cooperation.

Yet even in this dimension, contemporary history provides a good lesson that undue reliance on external security intelligence without the building of internal capabilities can backfire—especially in Humint (human intelligence), which involves building informant networks in enemy territory.

PM Yitzhak Rabin famously justified the Oslo process on the grounds that Arafat, without the hindrance of Israel's Supreme Court and the human rights

organization Betselem, could deal better with Palestinian terrorism than Israeli security forces that act under the scrutiny of both.

Of course, he was tragically wrong. Not only did Arafat fail to clamp down on terrorism, but he spurred it on to new heights in his war against Israel, six years after he entered Gaza in his “liberation” uniform and kefiyyeh and whisked known terrorists into his entourage.

So ardent was Rabin in his belief that he could rely on Arafat that Shabak intelligence gathering in PA-controlled areas was seriously reduced. Israel paid dearly for this “intelligence withdrawal.” Multiple suicide squads were formed undetected, with lethal consequences. The long hunt for their organizers extended into 2007.

A lull in such cooperation, then, will undoubtedly keep Israeli security on its toes. Shabak will fill in the gaps via its own self-generated intelligence network, which emerged during 13 years of close cooperation.

The challenge of coming to grips with more mass forms of Palestinian protest, which the PA rarely prevents and often goads, will force the IDF and the Border Police to train more ardently and creatively.

My colleague, Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoen, often writes about the virtues of friction with the enemy to keep Israeli security forces sharp and innovative. One can add the virtues of meeting an altered environment.

A good example is the world of high tech. Its inventiveness stems from its ability to attract innovative minds who thrive when solving problems—but it is also honed by the competitive and ever-changing environment that made the once cutting-edge Nokia name a has-been and Huawei a household word.

Much of the IDF brass and former brass pine for the tried and true. The lull in security cooperation will only contribute to making the Shabak and the IDF better-honed organizations.

Prof. Hillel Frisch is a professor of political studies and Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University and a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.