PODCAST | POLITICS

Palestinian Authority's Jenin Invasion Amid Gaza Ceasefire

By: Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network · January, 2025

The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Yara Hawari 0:00

The PA is a governing body that was created by an outside force. And it's one that is supported and propped up by outside forces. It's not a body that is interested in Palestinian representation or legitimacy. And I think everything that the PA has been doing in Jenin is to position itself in that post-ceasefire world.

This is the first podcast episode in a collaborative series between Al-Shabaka and Mondoweiss, where we covered the latest events unfolding on the ground in Palestine. Make sure to follow and subscribe to both Al-Shabaka and Mondoweiss wherever you listen to your podcasts, as well as on social media and YouTube so you don't miss an episode.

On the 21st of January 2025, the Palestinian Authority hastily withdrew their security forces which had been laying siege to Jenin Refugee Camp for over a month. Shortly after, the Israeli army entered and closed off all the entrances and exits to the camp, and since then they have been shooting anyone who tries to leave. People on the ground claim that the PA's security forces removed many of the weapons from the camp during the siege, severely weakening the resistance and effectively clearing the way for the Israelis.

This particular episode was recorded prior to the ceasefire in Gaza and the Israeli invasion of Jenin. In it, Yumna Patel, editor-in-chief of Mondoweiss, interviews me about the Palestinian Authority's siege of the camp and its aspirations for rule over Gaza, providing crucial context for what's currently unfolding.

Yumna Patel 1:36

Dr. Hawari, thanks for joining us.

Yara Hawari 1:39

Thanks for having me.

Yumna Patel 1:40

So Yara, I wanted to start by asking you to just first help us contextualize the events in Jenin for our listeners. What has led us to this point?

Yara Hawari 1:50

So Jenin, the wider Northern West Bank, including areas such as Tulkarem and around Nablus, has long been a thorn in the side of the PA, the Palestinian Authority, because of the presence of armed resistance groups, groups that are not only resisting the Israeli regime's occupation of their lands but also crucially are in opposition to the PA.

There are various reasons why they're in opposition, ideological reasons, refusal of the increasing authoritarianism of the PA. But also crucially, the security coordination mechanism between the PA and the Israeli regime. And this is where they coordinate on all matters pertaining to security. And I think coordination doesn't even describe the reality very well. It's a form of subordination. The Israeli regime tells the PA what to do security-wise, and for a large part, it complies. That's because the PA's existence is predicated on the fact that this coordination continues.

So the PA has done its job of subduing Palestinian armed resistance against the Israeli regime in really large parts of the areas of the West Bank that it governs. But there are areas and particularly in refugee camps where they haven't been able to do that, and that includes Jenin. So what we're seeing now is a result of increased pressure from the Israeli regime on the Palestinian Authority to gain control over these areas and to once and for all subdue the armed resistance groups there.

Yumna Patel 3:30

Yara, you said that the existence of the PA is predicated on this security coordination. Could you just tell us a little bit more about what you mean by that?

Yara Hawari 3:42

So, after the Oslo Accords, the PA was established as the governing body of certain areas of the West Bank, the Bantustans, as it were, and this was premised on the idea that it would maintain full security cooperation or coordination with the Israelis. So it would be in complete communication with the Israelis on all matters pertaining to security. Now, security here is a sort of a code word for any kind of armed resistance groups, any kind of armed operations against the Israeli regime. It includes also all kinds of training and all kinds of sharing of information.

The PA in turn has used it to crack down on political opposition and the Israeli regime has used it to crack down on groups that it fears.

Yumna Patel 4:40

I want to go back to Jenin right now. The fact that this PA operation is happening in Jenin specifically, I mean, you mentioned that there is armed resistance, there are groups all over the Northern West Bank, but the fact that it's happening in Jenin also carries a deep significance, right? I mean, the PA, if it was carrying out this massive of an operation anywhere in the West Bank, it would be news, but it's

clear that there is this message that the PA is trying to send here by targeting Jenin. What is that message to Palestinians in the West Bank?

Yara Hawari 5:12

So for a long time, Jenin has occupied this very significant place in the hearts and minds of Palestinians. It's known for its resistance fighters, for its steadfastness. It has seen some of the most brutal attacks by the Israeli regime, including the infamous Battle of Jenin in 2002 during the Second Intifada, when the camp was invaded by Israeli soldiers and large parts were razed to the ground. I think 35 percent of the camp was destroyed and there were massacres.

But there was also a resistance struggle that for many put up a heroic fight against these invaders. And so there is this collective narrative of Jenin being this historic site of resistance, but also a present site of resistance, especially as so many other urban hubs in the West Bank have been subdued.

So in a way, what the PA is doing now is not surprising. It's very symbolic that it's going after this particular area. It's a very clear message that the PA will work hand in glove with the Israelis to quell armed and popular resistance. It's also very much connected to what's happening in Gaza with the genocide. The Israeli regime is really battling on all fronts to once and for all end the Palestinian armed resistance, which most analysts will agree is an impossible feat, but they've recruited the PA to assist in that endeavor. And I think it's even more of a blow to Palestinian morale at a time of genocide, when your so-called leadership has done very little to stop it, rather it's collaborating with the Israelis to put down resistance elsewhere. So on the one level, there's a very practical goal in mind, and that's to eradicate armed resistance. But there's also a goal of damaging the Palestinian morale at a time when it's at a low.

Yumna Patel 7:16

This connection to Gaza and the connection to Israel's attacks on Palestinian resistance and Palestinian life is critical. We're going to talk about that later, because ultimately, that is really the context to understand what's happening now. But I want to go a little bit more in-depth into the current operation that the PA is conducting in Jenin, just to paint a picture for listeners, for people who maybe have been following the news, but aren't totally clear on what are the power dynamics that are at play right now.

So the PA has said that it's conducting this "operation" in order to establish law and order. I think to the average person that sort of language evokes comparisons to gangs or other "lawless" groups that are operating maybe in contravention or outside of law enforcement, but could you explain why in this specific context, in the context of Palestine and of Jenin, the dynamics here are different than what would be typically thought of in popular culture as a lawless group?

Yara Hawari 8:44

The Palestinian Authority, the PA, as you mentioned, is using this language of law and order in an attempt to win over popular opinion and to reinforce the notion that it is this governing authority in the West Bank. I think it has worked on some small sectors of the population, but by and large, people know that this is propaganda. Firstly, because the people know who these groups are, they're not necessarily new groups that are being targeted by the PA. Secondly, because people understand the reality that the only governing authority in the West Bank is the Israeli occupation.

So the PA is using this kind of language as a smokescreen to obscure the reality, to also fearmonger. And I think this happens not just in Palestine, but I think in many contexts, the language of gangs and of people operating outside the law has always been deeply politicized, one that's often used against marginalized and impoverished communities. It's not by coincidence that the PA is routinely

targeting refugee camps. When we talk about Jenin in this instance, we are talking about largely Jenin Refugee Camp, where those populations have been marginalized and excluded from the PA, from the national project for so long. So this language is weaponized against people in particular from refugee camps, so that the PA can enforce control, and can enforce political and practical control over these communities.

Yumna Patel 10:27

I think it's interesting and important to speak and talk about the community that these resistance groups are operating from, right? Mondoweiss has done extensive reporting from inside the Jenin Refugee Camp and the areas around it. Of course, there are people who don't share one blanket opinion. There's an array of nuanced perceptions and opinions when it comes to these dynamics, but overwhelmingly in our reporting, when our reporters, or even myself, when we've gone and interviewed residents of the camp, residents who have experienced immense destruction and tragedy at the hands of Israeli authorities who are coming in to arrest people from the camp, also recently to target this resurgence of armed resistance. But despite this, the perception largely, I would say, is one where people understand and are sympathetic to, and even supportive of these young men, because at the end of the day, the young men that are fighting in these resistance groups, at least in Jenin, they're not these outside actors that are coming in, which is another kind of allegation that the PA has thrown at them, that they've got an outside agenda and are trying to disrupt order in Palestine.

But the reality is these are mostly young men who were born and raised, grew up in the Jenin Refugee Camp, grew up under Israeli occupation and grew up witnessing the extreme violence that Israel exacted on their communities. And so, not just in Jenin, but we've seen over the years that polling has even shown immense public support for these resistance groups, at times even more so than the Palestinian Authority itself.

So when it comes to this question of safety, right, the PA accused the Jenin Brigade in this case of endangering civilians, saying that the PA is trying to bring back safety and stability for the ordinary people of Jenin and the people of the Jenin Refugee Camp. How do you respond to that? I'm curious how you respond to that. And also, we don't, of course, want to speak on behalf of people in Jenin, but do you believe that the average person in Jenin would consider themselves, let's say, safe under PA rule, which is what the PA is implying here, that we're getting rid of these groups so that you can be safe under our control and our authority?

Yara Hawari 13:07

I think one thing can be sure is that people in the Jenin Refugee Camp do not feel safe under a PA siege, which is what they're currently facing. This question or this line of safety, that the resistance groups are endangering civilians, we've heard this line before. We've heard it from the Israelis that it's the Palestinians themselves that are endangering them, not the ones holding the guns, shooting at civilians. It's a form of deflecting the blame.

I mean, this idea that the ones who are setting up the checkpoints in the camp, who are stationing snipers on rooftops, who are shooting at civilians, including a young journalist who was standing on the doorstep of her own home, who are beating up ambulance crews, that they're the ones that are bringing safety and stability for ordinary people is ludicrous. I think people in the camp see that very much with their own eyes. I think people outside of the camp know that to be true as well. It does absolutely nothing to instill confidence in the PA. I don't think people across the West Bank look to the PA for safety. We're talking about decades of Israeli occupation, of Israeli raids, of the demolition of homes, of mass incarceration across the board. In the last year and a half, we've seen over 14,000 Palestinians from the West Bank incarcerated in Israeli prisons. The PA has been nowhere to be seen. They have not provided safety or protection for the people that they claim to serve.

So that line and that narrative is particularly egregious, I think, at a time of genocide, at a time of ongoing colonial occupation. So I think it's something that they have learned from the Israelis quite clearly. I think it's not something that will be widely believed by the population in the West Bank.

Yara Hawari 15:10

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Yumna Patel 15:26

You touched on two critical points here. One is public opinion and public perception of the PA, which as you said, this operation in Jenin is certainly not going to help that. Also, when you were speaking about the different tactics that the PA has employed during its operation in Jenin, one can't help but draw the very obvious parallel and similarity, which is something that you've written about and something that you've been vocal about.

So before I ask you some more questions as to why we're seeing these parallels, can you just paint a picture for people? What are the tactics that the PA has been employing throughout its operation in Jenin that are very strikingly similar to the Israeli tactics that are employed when attacking Jenin?

Yara Hawari 16:20

As I mentioned before, we've seen the PA set up checkpoints across the camp limiting the movement of residents. We've seen the PA as well place snipers on the top of rooftops, and if it weren't for their uniforms, one might mistake these snipers for Israeli soldiers.

We've also seen a lot of videos on social media of beatings, of interrogations.

There was a video doing the rounds of two men, Palestinian men, being forced to stand on one leg and recite, the president, Abu Mazen, Mahmoud Abbas, is God, over and over. There's another video of the security forces, PA security forces, beating a young man senseless because he criticized the siege on the camp.

So, whilst it's true that they are using similar tactics to Israeli soldiers, it's also, I think, very unsurprising that many are using the word Shabiha to describe the security forces. Shabiha is a term that's commonly used for forces and groups that were loyal to Syria's former dictator, Bashar al-Assad. On the one hand, they are similar tactics used by the Israeli regime, but they're also similar tactics that are used by other oppressive and authoritarian governments in the region.

I think for the PA, what is particularly astounding is that they've managed to have this very robust security sector without actually having a state. That's because the focus of the so-called Palestinian State Building Project in the West Bank has always been about bolstering this security sector. It's funded by the likes of the US, the UK, the EU, all of whom provide these resources, weapons, and training for the security forces. So it's not surprising that there are shared tactics across the board.

Yumna Patel 18:20

I want to go back and just kind of zoom in on this point that you made and the similarities of the terminology that's being used by Palestinians when referring to the Palestinian security forces, right, using that term that was used by Syrians to criticize the henchmen of Bashar al-Assad. I mean, that to me is very striking. And I'm curious, has there been a moment like this where that sort of language and those comparisons have been drawn? Because that's indicative of just the anger and frustration that ordinary Palestinians are feeling watching this unfold. So has there been another moment like this where these sorts of frustrations are coming to such a head? Or is this moment of betrayal that Palestinians are witnessing from their own forces, is that kind of unique to right now?

Yara Hawari 19:25

I think the use of the term Shabiha in this current moment is topical, obviously because of the fall of the Assad regime. So it's not surprising that people would use that language, but it's certainly not the first time that Palestinians have used that term to refer to the PA thugs, the PA security forces. And it's certainly not the first time that Palestinians have faced repression from the Palestinian security forces. I think this time is particularly egregious because it is reaching new levels of cruelty and violence. I think also because it's happening simultaneously as the genocide in Gaza rages on.

So there are reasons why this moment is perhaps unique and is causing so much outrage. But there have been plenty of moments in recent Palestinian history where we have seen the really nasty and ugly side of the Palestinian security forces. If we just go back to 2021, the unity Intifada and how brutally that was put down by the Palestinian security forces when they killed the civil society activist Nizar Banat, and the demonstrations that followed his assassination were really horrifically put down in the streets of Ramallah and Bethlehem and other places.

So this is not a new thing. PA cruelty and PA oppression are not new and neither is trying to control the political landscape to make sure that they are the only ones who hold any kind of power. That is why the PA was established, to centralize that power into one governing body, so it's not new in that sense.

But I think what's been shocking, at least for me, has been all these videos going around of the cruelty, of the torture and the interrogations. It's something that hurts even more perhaps than the cruelty of the Israeli regime because this is coming from your own people, the people who are claiming to serve you and claiming to protect you.

Yumna Patel 21:44

I've seen some of those reactions on social media, and it's exactly as you said, it's very painful for people, for Palestinians, to watch the Palestinian Authority besiege the refugee camp, cut off water and electricity, even invade the local hospitals in Jenin, just these striking images that, like you said, if it weren't for their uniforms, you would think it was the Israeli military carrying out these attacks.

I think what's especially painful right now for people, as you said as well, is that this is happening in the context of the genocide in Gaza. What we're speaking about now, is what's happening in Jenin and the West Bank, and as you've alluded to throughout our conversation, those two things can't be separated. In an op-ed that you wrote recently for Al Jazeera, you said that for the PA leadership, the operation in Jenin is part of a much larger picture, one that allows it to position itself as the body to take over Gaza after a ceasefire. You also said that this is part of a larger quote crisis of legitimacy for the PA. So as we speak right now on January 14th, there are reports swirling of an imminent ceasefire. I want to ask you to tell us more about what you mean by this crisis of legitimacy that the PA is in, and presumably that it's vying for a position of power in a post-war governance situation in Gaza.

Yara Hawari 23:32

So the crisis of legitimacy, I think, refers to the fact that public perceptions of the PA have plummeted even further since the start of the genocide, if that's possible. This is a deeply unpopular governing body, an unelected governing body, might I add. I think the inability of this leadership to do anything at the time of genocide, to even say anything, has been enraging for so many people. Even worse yet, when people in the West Bank have mobilized against genocide in Gaza, they have been brutally repressed by PA security forces. So its public perception really is in the mud.

I think the siege on the Jenin Refugee Camp, even though not unexpected, has

made that even worse. The problem is that there isn't an opposition so to speak. There's no sort of possible alternative to the PA emerging. That's also by design. I think whilst there is that popular sentiment that is anti-PA, it's also really difficult to think of an alternative. The PA knows all of this and they're trying to do damage control or to shape the narrative.

One of the ways they've been doing that is limiting the reporting of its operations on journalists. We've seen journalists being arrested and beaten up, but perhaps in an even bigger move, in a more shocking move, the PA actually suspended the Al Jazeera news network from reporting in the West Bank. And in addition to suspending their operations, they've also ordered all of the telecommunication companies and channels to not broadcast anything from Jazeera. So even access to their websites has been blocked in the West Bank. The justification for this is that Al Jazeera has been supposedly putting out inciting materials and reports stirring strife in its coverage of the siege of the camp.

And this is a big deal. Al Jazeera is a foreign news network, so it can't be subjected to the same form of intimidation as local news networks. It can report more critically on the PA and it has been doing so. And Al Jazeera's audience has been growing in Palestine particularly because of its extensive coverage of the ongoing genocide in Gaza. And so it has been gaining more legitimacy and popularity as a reliable source of information. So for the PA to suspend it means that it's really concerned about its plummeting image. And I think it's particularly an egregious move at a time when Palestinian journalists, including those working for Al Jazeera, but also journalists across the board, have been targeted and killed at an exceptional rate by the Israeli regime forces.

So all of this is to say that they're very concerned with their image, but instead of actually doing better and actually becoming an authority or some kind of governing body that the people could at least look to at this time of genocide, they've actually just been bolstering the Israeli regime's goals.

I think we have to understand all of this in the wider context of what the PA is and what it wants in the future. The PA is a governing body that was created by an outside force, and it's one that is supported and propped up by outside forces. It's not a body that is interested in Palestinian representation or legitimacy from the population. I think as we're recording this, as you mentioned, it seems like a ceasefire deal is imminent. I think the PA, or everything that the PA has been doing in Jenin, is to position itself in that post-ceasefire world.

Yumna Patel 27:41

You just ended on this point that what the PA is doing in Jenin is trying to position itself in that sort of post-war world. I think this is a question that a lot of people have. So let's say that answers the question of what the PA is kind of seeking in Gaza, seeking some sort of role in governance, more functions of power. Still, how does fighting a resistance group in Jenin in the West Bank achieve some PA goals or visions of power in Gaza?

Yara Hawari 28:23

I think some in the PA leadership think, or this is the equation, that if they prove themselves in Jenin in the Northern West Bank, in the camps, they pave the way for a takeover in Gaza. Because if they can prove that they can subdue these smaller armed resistance groups in the West Bank, then they prove that they won't allow for a Hamas return to power in Gaza. So I think they're trying to put on a show for the big boys, but I don't think the Israelis care about that. I think they're just happy for someone else to be doing their dirty work.

But it is what the Biden administration has been vocalizing since the start of the genocide, that it would be the PA who would run Gaza if they can prove themselves. And the Biden administration has been really sort of keen on this idea. We know that the Israelis haven't been, and sort of all signs from the Netanyahu government have been adamant that this is not going to happen. There are some

within the Israeli government who have been a bit more cryptic and said that in its current form, the PA wouldn't take over Gaza. Sort of in a similar vein, there have been other actors such as the UAE who've called for a reformed PA to govern. This word reform means new leadership inevitably.

So the PA, I think, is at one of its weakest points it has ever been. And so this is sort of one of its final efforts to cling on, and to even cling on to power, but also to try and claim some more power. It's really sad that this is what they have decided to do amidst the genocide.

Yumna Patel 30:03

It's a very vivid picture that you paint of all the actors involved, all the different pieces that are at play here, right? We talked about an imminent ceasefire deal, and the PA vying for power, also for survival, for relevancy. But as we speak now, as well, we're a little less than one week away from Trump coming back into office, which in the West Bank, at least, will very likely mean a return to explicitly pro-settlement and annexation policies. Calls by Israeli settlers and far-right leaders for annexation of the West Bank have been getting louder and some in just very recent weeks are calling for Israel to cut all ties with the PA.

This is as the PA has been conducting its operation in Jenin, and what you said could be it's to try and prove itself to the big boys. But let's say for argument's sake, let's say the PA is successful in this operation, it manages to significantly weaken or even neutralize the resistance in Jenin, which, as you said earlier, is unlikely given that Israel itself has not managed to do that in Jenin and in the West Bank. But let's say the PA is "successful," would it even matter to Israel and the US, not just in post-war Gaza, but in the West Bank, the territory that the PA currently has some sort of nominal control over? Would it even matter, or is the PA just fighting a losing game here?

Yara Hawari 32:03

I think that's a difficult question to answer. I'm not sure that it would matter, because I think what we've seen over the last 14 months is that what the Israelis and the Americans want will happen. Having said that, I also think it's difficult to predict what we can expect from a Trump administration. We know that Trump has been the one pushing hard for this latest ceasefire deal and putting pressure on Netanyahu, something which he said that he would do throughout his campaign and many people didn't believe him. So that's transpiring to be the case.

What we can be certain about is that the situation for Palestinians is not going to get better, it's going to get worse across the board. I think it's also really important to remember that the Biden administration, and I think Mondoweiss published a piece about this, has done more damage to the international norms of humanitarian law than any other US government in recent history. So it's really difficult to say what's going to come and what's going to be worse to make these comparisons between the Biden administration and the Trump administration. We know what we're getting with the Americans, and I think it's just how it's going to be presented.

But we're living in unprecedented times. We did not expect that a genocide would be able to be conducted in this day and age with such cruelty and such lack of accountability and such impunity. So I think it would be interesting to see, but I think the PA is not a significant player for either the Israelis or the Americans. I think they're a useful tool, but I think they can be done away with or summoned at the behest of the Americans and the Israelis. It just depends on where they fit into that wider picture.

Yumna Patel 33:57

I think we can leave it here. Dr. Yara Hawari of Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network, thank you so much for joining us.

Yara Hawari 34:06

Thank you for having me.

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