



PODCAST

# Palestinian Securitization vs Liberation with Alaa Tartir

By: Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, Alaa Tartir · July, 2021

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

## **Alaa Tartir 00:00**

The final outcome, after all these millions of dollars and years spent on establishing that security forces, it resulted in what I call professionalization of authoritarianism, where security forces became more professional, but in repressing and in following authoritarian trends, and this is where the international community did and still doing.

## **Yara Hawari 00:31**

This is *Rethinking Palestine*, a podcast from Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, a virtual think tank that aims to foster public debate on Palestinian human rights and self-determination. We draw upon the vast knowledge and experience of the Palestinian people, whether in Palestine or in exile, to put forward strong and diverse Palestinian policy voices. In this podcast, we will be bringing these voices to you, so that you can listen to Palestinians sharing their analysis, wherever you are in the world.

At the end of June 2021, activist and outspoken critic of the Palestinian Authority Nazar Banat was arrested and beaten to death by the Palestinian Authority security services. Many are dubbing this as a political assassination. And since



then, Palestinians across the West Bank and beyond have hit the streets in protest.

They're demanding justice for Nazar and his family, but the chants have also escalated into a larger call for the fall of the regime. And for the end of PA president Mahmoud Abbas. The protests in the West Bank, particularly in Ramallah have been met with extreme violence and repression at the hands of the security forces, including the use of tear gas, stun grenades, beatings, and arrests.

There has also been an increase in gender violence and the targeting of female protesters and activists. Even though this is an escalation, none of this is particularly new. Rather it follows a pattern of systematic abuse and violations of rights at the hands of the Palestinian security forces. To discuss all of this and more I am joined once again by Dr. Alaa Tartir, program and policy advisor for Al-Shabaka, researcher and academic coordinator at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva and a global fellow at the Peace Research Institute – Oslo. Thank you so much for joining us.

## **Alaa Tartir 02:26**

Thank you so much for hosting me again.

## **Yara Hawari 02:29**

So Alaa perhaps we can begin with an explanation of the Palestinian Authority security forces and how they are a key pillar of the regime.

## **Alaa Tartir 02:37**

I think it is it's important when we talk about the Palestinian Authority security forces to think about the bigger picture, which is the Oslo Accord framework because these security forces are also the key pillars of that Oslo Accords framework.

And that is important to keep in mind. The Palestinian Authority is part of that



picture, but these security forces that are being created with the Oslo Accords were created in the first place to secure and sustain that framework. And this is largely why we see the security forces becoming even stronger.

And the Oslo Accord is still dominant and the main element that they are doing that through is security coordination and security collaboration, which is one of the defining features of the Oslo Accords. So when we're talking about Palestinian Authority security forces, it's really important to keep in mind the original function of the security forces that relates to the Oslo Accords framework. But when we look more at the evolution of the security forces of the Palestinian Authority, we can talk about three different phases. That goes from the first phase under Arafat time with the foundation of the Palestinian Authority, the second phase in the aftermath of the second intifada and the third phase that was accompanied with the state-building project of the Palestinian Authority from 2007 until today.

And this categorization mattered. And they matter because they were largely based on issues that happened on developments that took place and it was not part of the original plan if we may say so. So they were led by shifting donors' priorities, by different donors conditionalities, by Israel, either pressure, by regional changes, and by entire Palestinian political dynamics.

And it's important to keep in mind that these actors all shaped the Palestinian Authority's security forces and the security establishment that we have in place today. So if we look at the first phase, when the Palestinian Authority security forces were established and the Yasser Arafat, then we're talking about a clash that happened between two approaches, one of state-building and one of national liberation. And that confused the identity of these security forces. Are they there to continue the liberation and revolution or are they there to build these state-like institutions of security forces and security establishment, so that confusion in identity affected the work.



But at that time, the Palestinian Authority and the donor community and the leadership of the PA didn't care about the quality of the security establishment that they are building. They cared more about the quantity and how they are instrumentalizing that security establishment in order to gain hearts and minds to adopt the Oslo Accords framework.

So to give you an example, it was supposed to be the case that around 9,000 security personnel, will be part of this Oslo Accords in its initial year and largely to be police forces. Five years after around the year 1999, we had close to 50,000 security personnel and that figure tells a lot about the quality of the security establishment that we have at the time. Moving forward in the aftermath of the second Intifada and the involvement of the security forces, lots of infrastructure of the Palestinian security forces were destroyed by the Israeli occupying forces.

And this is like the new project for the international community to rebuild these security forces and that was the main entry point where we witnessed the consequences of that process. So that process was featured by a new project for the international community, new funding going to the security establishment to build it, especially because at that time there were many security gaps that they were filled by other non-state actors. If you want to say, non-security forces actors and the international community was not happy, neither was Israel.

And this is when they started the process of reforming the Palestinian security forces through establishing European security and police missions, American military missions in order to supervise and dictate the reform process of the Palestinian Authority. And that was the second phase. And the third phase that we're witnessing from 2007 until the present day is related to the process of the state building, where the state-building project of the PA became mainly about security sector reform and how to create a strong security establishment that is able to sustain the Palestinian Authority and the Oslo framework and the two-state solution.



And this is when the final outcome, after all these millions of dollars and euros spent on establishing those security forces, resulted in what I call professionalization of authoritarianism, where security forces became more professional, but in repressing and in following authoritarian trends, and this is where the international community did and still doing harm.

To end this with and to give you a more tangible example about the magnitude of the security establishment that we're talking about, we're talking about nearly 83,000 security personnel and individuals working in the security and governance domain divided between 65,000 security personnel who receive salaries from the Palestinian Authority and around 18,000 receiving salaries from Hamas in the de facto government in Gaza. These are big figures when we put them even in a global context, if we want to translate it, what does it mean? It means that almost every 50 Palestinians have one security personnel, which is one of the highest figures in the world yet their security is not there.

The security sector receives around 30% of international aid, receives around 44% of all civil servants working there, and receives around \$1 billion of Palestinian Authority budget. All these figures tell us that the security forces and the security establishment are so solid and part of the Palestinian Authority and it's the key pillar of its regime.

## **Yara Hawari 09:11**

Thank you for that Alaa. You talked about how much the Palestinian authority security sector has grown exponentially really over the years. The fact that the security forces get more funding than the health education and agricultural sectors combined is quite mindblowing, especially in the context of an occupied people who face systematic health insecurities, they face this unemployment and dwindling agricultural production. You've explained a little bit about this extreme securitization, but perhaps you can delve a bit deeper into this mentality.



## Alaa Tartir 09:49

It is important to acknowledge and to keep in mind that the security establishment received lots of aid over the years because it was the defining feature of the state-building project of the Palestinian Authority.

If we want to make it simple, but yet accurate in terms of reflecting realities on the ground, the Palestinian Authority state-building project is pretty much equal to a larger security sector reform process. And this is why we saw, and why are we still seeing, lots of international aid going to that security establishment.

Because that is what is a state like for the international community. It is about the ability of the security establishment of the PA to govern and to rule over Palestinians, including with an iron fist. And that is really why we see all this international investment in that security paradigm because the most important element for them is to secure stability and stability means having a strong security force that does not mean that it's providing security for the Palestinian people, but that is irrelevant according to their calculations and priorities.

What is important is to keep stability and to keep the security of Israel and sustain its occupation. And that's why the lots of money from the PA budget and from donor money are targeting and going to the security sector. And what is really important to keep in mind as well, in this case, is that we're talking about the absence of any culture of accountability or institutions that provide checks and balances, and the donors are aware of all of that.

And there is the absence of any kind of solid structures that sustain an inclusive, transparent democratic political system. And therefore the Palestinian Authority security establishment was given this opportunity as well by the international community to run the affairs of the Palestinian life with an iron fist.

And that's what made it really, even stronger, especially that if we think about the



status of emergency, that's been declared almost since 2007. So all of these actors plus the absence of the Palestinian legislative council, since 2007, making it very clear that the evolution and the reform of the Palestinian security sector that was sponsored by the international community is happening within a highly securitized space that nourishes authoritarianism.

## **Yara Hawari 12:25**

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Now Alaa all of this cannot exist without international funding and you've talked about that, that the PA security forces are funded by international donors, namely the US that EU, the UK and Canada, and this is something that activists and human rights workers have been keen to point out. And it's actually led to calls to defund the PA security forces. Can you explain what exactly it is that is funded and how likely is it that in the face of massive and systematic violations this funding would be cut?

## **Alaa Tartir 13:16**

This is a very important question, especially in light of the assassination of Nizar Banat, because there was a lot of pressure on the international community, particularly the EU in relation to the sponsorship of Palestinian security forces.

And the response was like, no we are not doing that we're not sponsoring these authoritarian structures and techniques, but that's a very clear lie. That's very clear hypocrisy because we're talking here about a long process and I think the donor community needs to stop and take a moment to reflect and think about all the harm that they have caused over the past years, especially over the past 15 years.

And in particular, the roadmap was created because the harm that the



international community caused over the years is very clear. It's very evident from day one in the aftermath of the second Intifada, where the international community sponsored the rebuilding of all the security compounds or the police stations or the prisons.

So they invested in building the infrastructure, the physical infrastructure for the Palestinian security forces. And that was the first thing they wanted. Then they invested in building the equipment and the equipment stock of equipment and clothes and weapons and cars and vehicles and all these tools that they can use all these equipment for these security forces

And later on, they invested in all the training and all the capacity-building programs by bringing security experts or sending these groups to different places to get professional education. All of that happened mainly through the work of the US security mission and the EU one, and they invested millions and billions of dollars in doing that.

And there's of course, During the time of crisis, you see more of that investment. So if we think about if this trend will end soon, or not, It really depends on if we have a different Palestinian political will, because from the international community point of view, this status quo is very convenient and it's very good to keep because it is ensuring stability to the large extent.

And they have zero incentive to change these dynamics of sponsoring these security forces. They are the guarantors for this element of stability. And only if the Palestinian leadership, obviously the existing Palestinian leadership is not interested in this, but any future Palestinian leadership needs to redefine that process and have the different political will that is able to force the international community to put their funds in sectors that matter to the Palestinian people most and not to sectors that violate their security and protect the security of the occupier.





**Yara Hawari 16:11**

That is very sobering analysis Alaa, but I don't think it should dissuade activists and analysts and others from making that demand to defund the PA security forces, I think that that remains a vital policy ask.

I want to turn a little to the tactics of the PA security forces apart from the obvious so-called crowd control weapons, which are more often than not manufactured in Israel, but there are also tactics that are less well known, like the use of security forces and civilian clothing, the use of Fateh loyalists thugs, also known in Arabic as the Shabiha, to do the dirty work, really to do beatings, to carry out very gendered tactics aimed at women.

Could you tell us a little bit more about that?

**Alaa Tartir 17:00**

Yes. The techniques that the Palestinian security forces use as you said, vary according to the time and depending on the severity of the crisis that they are facing. But what is important to keep in mind is that policing is indeed the key element on all of that and policing or controlling with an iron fist is the most defining feature, whatever it takes.

So they use different kinds of security forces in uniforms, but importantly, not in uniforms. And that is also not something that is happening only today. This happened years ago when the Palestinian Authority was established. Just a quick reminder that when the Palestinian Authority was established, Edward Said at the time mentioned that RFI had established several security forces, five of which were intelligence services tasked with spying on each other. That is relevant to the realities of today.

The mushrooming of all these security forces means that the active protesters on the ground don't know who's controlling them, who's attacking them. And that is



not happening by coincidence. That is by design. That is by structure. And this is what authoritarian regimes are good at to confuse the protestors by who's attacking them by whom.

And we need to keep a very clear fact in our mind is that the security establishment of the Palestinian authority is also. One of the facts is that establishments and vice versa. So these actors or this security personnel are also factional. They are led by factional politics that can easily be instrumentalized.

And these techniques that are used in the streets, the repressing of protestors, the violence, the excessive use of violence like the ones that we see, are the visible ones that can be documented in the media and all of that. And they can be exposed. But what is also more dangerous, maybe arguably are the invisible ones, the techniques, the tactics that are used mainly in the PA prisons that we don't see on cameras that we don't see a visible there are over the years that.

Rather scary accounts of all these torturing techniques that the Palestinian Authority security forces used against Palestinian protestors and Palestinian critics of the Palestinian authority. Many of these techniques are very similar to the ones that Israel use in Israeli jails. There is kind of a replica, but it comes even harder.

When at this practice by a Palestinian, uh, national security forces, and there are enough reports out there of him, human rights organizations, local and internationals from different researchers that documented all these techniques of torturing. And that is unacceptable. But in reality, unfortunately, uh, it happened, but blinking also your question about these techniques and the very action of the Palestinian authority with the, with this iron fist of security establishment with what's happening now, it is obvious that the political.

And the security leadership of the Palestinian authority will push back. We'll push back against any efforts that aim to challenge or shake the fundamental pillars of the status quo. And this is exactly what is happening now because that's not the



school, although it is damaging to the Palestinian people, and this is why they are revolting against it, but it is convenient and conducive to the Palestinian leadership and its security establishment.

And they pushed back using these different techniques that you presented. And we talked about are they pushed back by using excessive force and violence against civilians, uh, peaceful protestors and using all these strategies and techniques of repression that we see from across the world, including from our region, but also they can use, or th this Bush back can be instrumentalized.

If you want to. All of the ongoing protests under uprising to become political maneuvers with the ultimate objectives of going back to the negotiation table. These are the hints that we are seeing now where the security establishment clearly hinted to the political leadership of VPA. Let's try to maneuver, let's try to instrumentalize these uprisings into political maneuvers.

By coming back to the negotiation table, that's really key to keep in mind. Uh, these approaches are being used by the Palestinian authority over, over decades by now. So they are not just a derivative of today's reality. They are in the built end. There are structural issues that they use that empowered and failed the Palestinian people, but sustained and empowered the Palestinian authority, leadership, and security establishment.

And this is part of the gap that we obviously see and with all of. All of that happened under the supervision and the sponsorship of key international actors who were so instrumental in creating these necessary tools of a strong repressive security establishment that is able to rule and the political paradigm that does not deviate from the holiness of the ASTA Accurate's frame.

And both tools are fundamental to the sustainability of the status quo and neither the PA nor security establishment are interested or willing to compromise on either. This is why we see all these tactics of repressive regimes being used and



deployed in the streets of Palestine.

**Yara Hawari 22:44**

As you said, Alaa, Palestinian, and international human rights organizations have documented these techniques of pressure and including how a human Rights Watch. Just to name a few, if people do want to read more about this, I think many who stand in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle are really unaware of this extra layer of oppression. I'll quite surprised by the situation unfolding on the ground. So I think this analysis is incredibly important. So I wanted to ask you a final question about what has been happening over the last few weeks.

What do you think is the future of the Palestinian security forces?

**Alaa Tartir 23:24**

The future of the Palestinian security forces and the security establishment is very much linked with the future of the political leadership because both political leadership and security establishments are so synchronized at all levels.

So whatever happens with the political leadership will definitely impact the security establishment, but my fear is not what we're seeing now in terms of repressive practices and paradigms on the protesters in the streets of Palestine. My fear is that what we're seeing now is a rehearsal of what will come. What I fear is that the security establishment will fill any kind of gap that will be created sooner or later because they are the most dominant, the most powerful establishment as of now. And that is problematic, dangerous, and will take the struggle for rights, many steps back because now we would have security establishment filling these gaps and the rehearsals that we're seeing now on the ground are really not boding well for what is coming later on.

So this is what is really important to keep in mind. If we want to change the structures of the security establishment, then we need to have a different, security



paradigm, different from what we call The Al-aqida Al-amneyah and that coming requires a different kind of leadership. The reconfiguration of the Palestinian authority duties will be reflected in the security establishment.

And that needs to be part of a larger conversation, national dialogue that we will have to situate: what is the role of the security establishment of the PA as of now and in the future and the political structure, but also in the future options that the Palestinians will have? So, a new leadership will be tasked to redefine the role of the security establishment and to minimize the role of the international community that's been largely damaging when it came to Palestinian rights for security. so judging by what we're seeing now, the evidence on the ground is not giving us particularly good news about the role of security forces, where we will witness some similar aspects of what we see in other repressive regimes.

But this is also the moment to join forces, to challenge the depressive structures and institutions to expose them and to have the very short-term clear corrective operational measures in a way to reinvent this security paradigm of the Palestinian Authority as part of the project of reconfiguring the PA duties.

And that is a big task that is ahead of us. And the only way to engage with this is really to have a comprehensive national dialogue that we define and redefine the duties of the Palestinian authority and where the security establishment fits in this struggle for Palestinian rights.

## **Yara Hawari 26:36**

Alaa, I thank you so much for joining me on Rethinking Palestine and for that comprehensive and nuanced analysis as usual.

## **Alaa Tartir 26:45**

Thank you very much, Yara!



## Yara Hawari 26:52

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