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Palestinian Cops Can't Stop Militants

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KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip - Palestinian policemen, who have been given the task of restraining militants, say they can't or won't do the job. Interviewed at their front-line positions, some say they feel sympathy for the gunmen, while others fear getting shot at by Israeli troops.

The shortcomings of Palestinian police were evident last week when officers stood by as Hamas militants fired dozens of rockets and mortar rounds at Jewish settlements in Gaza. Officers also did nothing when gunmen broke into Gaza's central jail, killing two inmates and abducting a third who was later slain.

"This is all part of the state of chaos we have been living in," said Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' security adviser, Jibril Rajoub.

The poor performance is a result of years of rampant corruption, rivalries among commanders of numerous police forces set up by the late Yasser Arafat and a lack of discipline and training. After the outbreak of Israeli-Palestinian fighting in 2000, the deterioration accelerated when many policemen joined the battle and Israel targeted security installations in Gaza, leaving the security forces in tatters.

Abbas must now depend largely on the good will of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other militant groups to uphold a fragile truce with Israel.

The Palestinian president has promised to clean house, and fired nine police commanders in recent days, but overhauling Gaza's 17,000-member police force will take time, Rajoub said. Palestinian legislators are considering a law to reduce the number of security services to three, with clearly defined authorities and new commanders, but passing it could take months.

A tour of four Palestinian security posts near the southern Gaza town of Khan Younis - a frequent launching ground for mortar fire at Israeli settlements and border communities - found the policemen are there largely as symbols.

At one post, consisting of a tin shack, a tent and broken plastic chairs held together by rope, a dozen officers watched a teenager climb a sand dune, perilously close to an Israeli army watchtower. The officers yelled for the boy to get back, but did not go after him.

They wouldn't chase militants either, the officers said, fearing they would be shot at by Israel's soldiers.

"It's terrifying," said one officer, who like his colleagues spoke on condition of anonymity, in line with police regulations. "We're stuck between the settlers and soldiers on one side, and the fighters on the other."

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In any event, the officers added, they have to coordinate with Israeli troops if they move closer than 400 yards to an Israeli army position or Jewish settlements. Such coordination causes delays, and by the time they got permission, any militants firing mortars would be long gone, they said.

At another outpost, a policeman said he was not willing to risk his life when Abbas gives no clear instructions on how to deal with militants. While the Palestinian leader has said he wants police to restore calm, he also stresses the need to avoid confrontations. In addition, many policemen have relatives who are militants.

"I will never raise my weapons against the fighters," one officer said. "I can only ask them not to fire."

Meanwhile, widespread corruption has turned some security chiefs into warlords, who dispatch officers to extort money from businesses or settle personal scores.

Until last year, commanders personally distributed monthly pay to policemen, often keeping large sums and turning subordinates into serfs. In one major reform by Finance Minister Salam Fayyad, wages are now deposited directly into officers' bank accounts by the Palestinian Authority.

Many officers are more loyal to their clans or to militant groups than to the Palestinian leadership.

One top security official estimated 80 percent of all killings in Gaza in recent years were committed by members of the security forces, but said they are rarely brought to justice.

Several months ago, the 16-year-old son of Dr. Moawiya Hassanain, a senior official in the Palestinian Health Ministry, was killed by five gunmen as part of a family feud. Hassanain said he knew the identities of the gunmen, but that his son's murder was never investigated.

"The law is absent and the Palestinian Authority is weak," Hassanain complained.

On Monday, relatives of the three inmates killed in last week's jail break-in protested outside Abbas' office, demanding he take action. Seven people have been arrested so far, including prison guards and gunmen.

"The Palestinian Authority was responsible for their life, and so it is now responsible for their death," said Mohammed Abu Yousef, whose brother, Hussein, was dragged from the prison to a nearby refugee camp and killed in the street in broad daylight.

Gaza residents have mixed feelings about the increased police presence ordered by Abbas. They are happy to see uniformed officers in the streets, yet most believe the officers are incapable of making them safe.

"They can't stop anything or anyone right now," said Bassam Qannan, 42, in Khan Younis. "It's all for show. They're useless."

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