

Palestinian Authority bans *Al Jazeera* as it wages war on the Palestinians in a bid to secure a role in post-war Gaza

Jean Shaoul
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The Palestinian Authority (PA) of President Mahmoud Abbas has announced a temporary ban on *Al Jazeera*'s reporting and broadcasting operations in the area under its control in the West Bank, occupied illegally by Israel since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. It accused the broadcaster, without citing any evidence, of "inciting sedition" and "interfering in internal Palestinian affairs."

WAFA, the PA's official media arm, said *Al Jazeera* must close its local offices immediately and "freeze all the work of its journalists."

The broadcaster, the most widely watched in the West Bank, condemned what it said was a PA "incitement campaign" against the network and "an attempt to prevent coverage of the escalating events witnessed in the occupied territories." It called on the PA to rescind the decision and allow its journalists to report freely.

The Fatah-dominated PA has accused *Al Jazeera* of supporting its political rival Hamas with which it has fought pitched battles in the past. Hamas denounced the decision to ban the network and issued a statement saying, "We call on the Palestinian Authority to immediately reverse this decision ... It is crucial to ensure the continuation of media coverage that exposes the occupation and supports the steadfastness of our people."

The move comes nearly one month after the PA's security forces launched a lethal crackdown, called "Operation Protecting the Nation" to "put an end to sedition and chaos", aimed at disarming and suppressing militants of the Jenin Battalion in the northern West Bank city of Jenin—some of whom are affiliated with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad—who took control of the camp more than a year ago.

Jenin has a high poverty and unemployment rate, amid a drastic decline in economic conditions across the West Bank. According to the World Bank, the West Bank has lost 144,000 jobs since the start of the war. A further 148,000 Palestinians who previously worked in the settlements and Israel are now also without jobs.

The PA sent armoured vehicles through Jenin's streets that engaged in gun battles with armed groups in the city's refugee camp. Its forces, in moves that emulated Israeli military tactics, used surveillance drones and occupied the hospital, cut off electricity and water to the camp and closed schools. Anwar Rajab, the PA security forces' spokesperson, claimed, "The gunmen in Jenin are not resistance fighters, but mercenaries serving the dubious agenda of an outside party," and likened their activities to "ISIS-style efforts."

The armed clashes have killed at least 11 people including at least five PA security personnel and a number of civilians, including two teenagers and 21-year-old Shatha al-Sabbagh, a female journalist, and injured dozens more. More than 50 Palestinians have reportedly been detained. Such is the violence that UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, has been forced to suspend its operations in the area.

Videos showing the killing of 19-year-old Ribhi Muhammad al-Shalabi while he was riding a motorcycle with his 15-year-old cousin, who was injured with a shot to the head by PA security officials, have caused widespread anger prompting the residents of Jenin refugee camp to mount several days of general strike action and call for the PA to be dismantled. One member of the PA's security forces took off his uniform and resigned his position in protest.

The PA's crackdown has been accompanied by a broader clampdown on free speech, with the security forces summoning and interrogating dozens of people about their posts on social media criticising the PA's operation in Jenin. Some have been beaten up. While most of those detained have been released, rights groups told *Al Jazeera* that several were forced to upload apology videos.

In assaulting Jenin, the PA is following up on a series of massive, days-long search and arrest campaigns by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) over the last two years, following the

election of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government, on towns and cities across the West Bank, including a major incursion in Jenin in August. These operations included aerial bombardments, the murder of Palestinian militants as well as children and the uprooting of roads and infrastructure.

Since October 2023, more than 800 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, at least 63 from Jenin. Emboldened far-right settlers have carried out 1,423 reported attacks, resulting in 21 deaths and over 650 injuries, plus extensive property damage. More West Bank land has been confiscated by Israel in this period than in the previous 20 years combined, with settlers also establishing 60 new outposts and forcing over 1,000 Palestinians from their homes.

Israel's far-right finance minister Bezalel Smotrich, whose portfolio in the defence ministry also includes extensive authority over daily life in the West Bank, is determined to collapse the PA. He has repeatedly threatened to withhold revenues that Israel collects on behalf of the PA. While Smotrich renewed the waiver that allows Israeli banks to interact with Palestinian banks for a year in early December, there are fears that he will refuse to do so again after Donald Trump assumes the US presidency later this month. This would precipitate the collapse of the PA—and the West Bank—paving the way for Israel to formally annex the West Bank.

Moreover, last month Smotrich announced his intention to dissolve the Civil Administration and transfer its responsibilities to Israeli ministries, effectively making them directly responsible for both the settlers and the 250,000 Palestinians living in Area C, which constitutes 60 percent of the West Bank.

The PA has justified its brutal crackdown on Palestinian groups resisting Israel's land grabs and military occupation as necessary to maintain "law and order." In reality it is seeking to prove its role as Israel's subcontractor in enforcing its control over the West Bank. This is an appeal not just to Tel Aviv and Washington but to Saudi Arabia's de-facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman, an ally of the first Trump administration, who has made normalization of relations with Israel conditional on a Palestinian statelet.

In an article for the Axios website, the Washington-based Israeli journalist Barak Ravid cited Palestinian and US officials as saying that "Abbas ordered the operation for two key reasons—to send a message to the incoming Trump administration that the Palestinian Authority is a reliable partner and to prevent what happened in Syria from happening in the West Bank."

According to *Haaretz*, PA security chiefs met Michael Fenzel, the US lieutenant general in charge of security ties

between Israel and the PA, to discuss the plans ahead of the operation. Axios reported that PA officials also gave Fenzel a list of the weaponry they needed for their offensive, including "the urgent delivery of ammunition, helmets, bulletproof vests, radios, night vision equipment, explosive disposal suits and armoured cars." However, Israel has refused to authorise the transfer of weapons.

The *New York Times* reports that US officials directly urged the PA, whose security forces are funded and trained in part by Washington, to escalate its operations against the Palestinian population, while also asking Israel to hold fire and allow the PA's "law enforcement" time to work. The Biden administration and Saudi Arabia are seeking a role for the PA in postwar Gaza, although Israel has rejected the idea. Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia reportedly backed the PA's operation in Jenin because they didn't want to see "a Muslim-Brotherhood style or an Iranian-funded takeover" of the Palestinian Authority.

Among the Palestinians, the 88-year-old President Abbas, whose four-year term expired in 2009, and the PA, established under the 1993 Oslo Accords that was supposed to usher in a Palestinian statelet alongside Israel—the so-called two state solution—are viewed with disgust. Corruption is rampant, with PA officials enriching themselves while ordinary Palestinians languish in poverty. By far the largest part of its budget, heavily funded by international donors, goes on its 80,000 strong security forces—one of the largest per capita in the world—that cost more than the education, health, and agriculture sectors combined.

Israel's war on Gaza has only intensified opposition to the PA, one of whose officials stated, "This time, Israel must destroy Hamas, otherwise [the PA] is done." Abbas, speaking shortly after the October 7 attack, condemned violence against civilians, saying, "We reject the practices of killing civilians or abusing them on both sides because they contravene morals, religion and international law." He sparked further outrage when he commented, "The policies and actions of Hamas do not represent the Palestinian people," a statement that was later withdrawn.



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