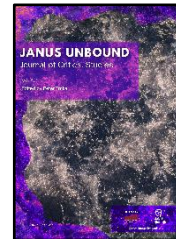


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Letter from Palestine:

The Palestinian Authority's demonization of Palestinian armed resistance groups

Ekrema Shehab and Bilal Hamamra

The contemporary internal division within the Palestinian political sphere is not limited to political rivalry; it also involves a deliberate strategy by the Palestinian Authority (PA) to demonize and delegitimize armed resistance movements. This process is driven by a rhetorical campaign aimed at stripping resistance groups of their legitimacy (Awwad and Toyama 2024; Cohen 2022; Salama *et al* 2023). The recent emergence of new armed factions in the occupied West Bank is a direct consequence of widespread Palestinian disillusionment, rooted in a moribund peace process and the persistent conditions of military occupation (Tartir 2018/2020; Iqtait 2023). For a younger generation of Palestinians who came of age after the Oslo Accords, the prospect of statehood has become illusory (Arda and Banerjee 2021; Tartir 2020). This cohort increasingly perceives the Fatah-dominated PA not as a means for national liberation, but as an institution that functions within the security structures of the occupation (Al Jazeera 2023; Carnegie Endowment 2023; Foreign Policy 2023). This widespread disaffection has precipitated the emergence of new armed resistance movements, which are characterized not as a monolithic or centralized entity, but as a decentralized network of localized and operationally autonomous groups (Greven 2019; Kopty 2018; Reuland Bhavnani 2023). In cities such as Jenin, Nablus, Tulkarm, and Tubas, and their corresponding refugee camps, including Jenin, Balata, Tulkarem, and Nour Shams, a new generation has engaged in armed activity (972mag 2024; Crisis Group 2025; ACLED 2025). This phenomenon was driven by established factions like Islamic Jihad's Al-Quds Brigades and Hamas's Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, while also leading to the formation of more fluid, cross-factional collectives, most notably the Lions' Den (JStreet 2024).

In this context, several individuals emerged as prominent local commanders (Tartir 2019a/2019b). Ibrahim al-Nabulsi, known as the "Lion of Nablus," em-

erged as an iconic figure of the new armed resistance, operating independently despite his affiliation with Fatah's Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades. His charisma and defiance of both Israel and the PA earned him immense popularity. The PA pursued a strategy of co-optation, repeatedly offering him amnesty and integration into its security forces, which he publicly refused. As he became a primary target for Israeli forces, surviving several assassination attempts, pro-PA narratives framed him as a purveyor of "armed chaos" (*fawda al-silah*) that undermined its authority (Salameh-Puvogel 2025; Elmimouni *et al* 2024). Al-Nabulsi was killed in a targeted Israeli military operation in Nablus's Old City on August 9, 2022, and his massive funeral procession served as a public repudiation of the PA's narrative (Barari, and Yacoub 2024).

Adham Mabrouka ("al-Shishani") and Mohammad al-Dakhil ("the ghost of Nablus") were also prominent commanders within Fatah's Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades who operated with significant autonomy in Nablus's Old City. Their independent armed activity placed them in direct opposition to the PA's security doctrine, which seeks a monopoly on force. Consequently, they were framed within PA-affiliated discourse as "outlaws" (*kharijoun 'an al-qanun*) contributing to "security chaos." Both men, along with a third fighter, Ashraf Mabslat, were assassinated on February 8, 2022, in a targeted daylight operation by Israeli special forces who ambushed their vehicle. Their public elimination exemplified the dual pressures these fighters faced: being high-value targets for Israel while simultaneously being delegitimized and left exposed by the PA's security policies (Domínguez de Olazábal 2023; Middle East Eye, n.d.). Similarly, Mohammad Jaber (Abu Shuja), commander of the Tulkarm Brigade in Nour Shams camp, was a central figure in the new wave of West Bank armed resistance. Despite his local popularity, he faced sustained antagonism from the PA, which had previously imprisoned him. This conflict peaked in early 2024 when, after being injured in an Israeli raid, PA security forces attempted to arrest Shuja at Thabit Thabit Hospital in Tulkarm, sparking local outrage. Concurrently, he was subjected to a PA-affiliated demonization campaign that alleged criminal activity, while simultaneously being one of Israel's most wanted individuals in the north of the West Bank (Middle East Monitor 2024; International Crisis Group 2025). Shuja' was ultimately killed by Israeli forces during a large-scale military operation in Nour Shams camp on April 19, 2024, concluding his two-front conflict. The ascent of these groups and their leaders presented a significant challenge to the operational control of the Israeli occupation and the political authority of the PA. In response, the PA initiated a strategic counter-narrative intended to discredit these individuals and delegitimize their movement in public perception (Jewish Voice for Peace 2025; CSMonitor 2025).

A direct policy of repression by the PA was not politically viable due to the substantial popular support these fighters commanded. They were seen as embodying the national dignity that many felt the PA had traded away for international aid and security coordination. A direct crackdown would have been politically suicidal (CNN 2024; BBC 2025). Thus, the initial approach was one of attempted co-optation, a classic Fatah strategy of absorbing dissent to neutralize it. Governors and senior officials extended offers of amnesty, financial sti-

pend, and integration into the PA's security forces for fighters who would surrender their weapons. Ibrahim Ramadan, the governor of Nablus, famously pleaded with the fighters to "return to the embrace of the homeland," a paternalistic call for them to submit to the PA's authority. This strategy, however, was built on a fundamental misunderstanding of the movement. These young fighters did not view the PA as the "homeland's embrace" but as a key component of the structure of their subjugation. The refusal of figures like Ibrahim al-Nabulsi to accept these deals, a defiance he ultimately paid for with his life, transformed him into an icon and signaled the spectacular failure of this soft approach. The PA's inability to buy their loyalty necessitated a shift in strategy: if they could not be co-opted, they had to be delegitimized. Their very identity as resistance fighters had to be systematically dismantled and replaced with something far more sinister (Middle East Eye n.d.; Washington Post 2024).

The first front in this narrative war was political. The PA and its affiliated media apparatus began a concerted campaign to sever the link between these new armed groups and the Palestinian national cause (Musleh 2020; Reul and Bhavnani 2023). The new armed groups were deliberately reframed as agents of chaos, driven not by patriotism but by external, nefarious forces (Salameh-Puvogel 2025). The most frequently used accusation was that they were pawns of Iran, acting on Tehran's orders to destabilize the West Bank and undermine the legitimate Palestinian leadership in Ramallah (Washington Institute 2024; JCPA 2023). The resistance in Jenin, particularly, was a frequent target of this smear. Fatah officials and pro-PA commentators would argue that Iran, through its proxy Islamic Jihad, was attempting to "clone the Gaza experience in the West Bank," a loaded phrase invoking the trauma of the 2007 Fatah-Hamas split (Stoycheff *et al* 2020; the Media Line 2021). This narrative was politically astute, serving many purposes simultaneously. Internally, this strategy utilized the deep-seated political rivalry with Hamas and Islamic Jihad by characterizing the new resistance movements as proxies for an Islamist bid to assume political control (Winder 2020; Zureik 2020; Reuters 2024). Externally, it presented the PA to its American and European patrons as a responsible, moderate partner and a crucial bulwark against Iranian expansionism in the region. This framing allowed the PA to justify its unpopular security coordination with Israel not as collaboration with an occupier, but as a necessary act of statecraft, a preemptive measure to save the West Bank from falling into the hands of Iranian-backed extremists (Nashif, and Fatafta 2017; İşleyen 2018; Elmimouni *et al* 2024).

Every arrest of a fighter, every raid by PA security forces on a resistance stronghold, was thus packaged as an act of preserving national unity against foreign meddling. When political smears proved insufficient to erode the deep-rooted local support for these fighters, the campaign descended into the realm of personal and social defamation (Awwad and Toyama 2024; Al-Haq 2024). This was a far more insidious tactic, aimed at poisoning the social well from which the resistance drew its strength and protection. A torrent of allegations, disseminated through pro-PA social media channels, sympathetic journalists, and whispered rumors, sought to tarnish the personal reputations of key resis-

tance figures. Shuja' in Nour Shams camp was accused by these networks of using and dealing drugs (BBC 2025; CNN 2024). Fighters in Jenin and Nablus were said to be involved in stealing cars for illicit trade and using the banner of resistance to accumulate personal wealth by buying up land and property. Another common and deeply damaging smear involved accusations of inappropriate and illicit relationships with women, a charge designed to strike at the core of their honor within a socially conservative society (Cohen 2022; Barari and Yacoub 2024).

These allegations were meticulously crafted to transform the image of the fighter from a selfless ascetic, dedicated to the nation, into a common criminal, a thug using a patriotic cause as a cover for personal vice and enrichment (Elmimouni *et al* 2024). The goal was to plant seeds of doubt and resentment in the community, to make residents question whether the danger and destruction brought upon their neighborhoods by Israeli raids were for a noble cause or merely for the benefit of corrupt and immoral individuals (France24 2025; Greven 2020). By painting them as a social menace, the PA hoped to foster a public atmosphere that would not only tolerate but welcome a crackdown, justifying the suppression of the resistance without facing a popular backlash (Amnesty International 2025; Jewish Voice for Peace 2025). This campaign of demonization was not a series of random attacks but a coordinated policy, a reality substantiated by a wide array of documentary evidence. The PA's official news agency, Wafa, systematically adopted a specific lexicon when reporting on confrontations. The term "resistance" (*muqawama*) was conspicuously absent, replaced with terms like "outlaws" (*kharijoun 'an al-qanun*), "gunmen" (*musalaboun*), and purveyors of "security chaos" (*fawda amniya*) (Middle East Eye n.d.; CS Monitor 2025; Washington Post 2024; Middle East Monitor 2024; France24 2025; Reuters 2024; New Arab 2024; The Media Line 2021; BBC 2025; CNN 2024).

This linguistic choice was a deliberate political act, stripping the fighters of their political legitimacy and reducing their struggle to a mere public order problem. Leaked documents and audio recordings, allegedly from senior officials like Fatah Central Committee member Hussein al-Sheikh and General Intelligence chief Majed Faraj, provide a glimpse into the strategic thinking behind this campaign, detailing plans to "dry up the sources" of support for these groups and to coordinate with Israeli counterparts to "handle" them (Iqtait 2023). The PA's actions on the ground were the most damning evidence. The September 2022 arrest of Musab Shtayyeh, a prominent Hamas-affiliated resistance figure in Nablus, was officially justified as a necessary measure to thwart a Hamas plot to destabilize the northern West Bank (Amnesty International 2025). To the public, however, who knew Shtayyeh was also a high-value target for Israel, the arrest was seen as a blatant act of service to the Israeli occupation. The subsequent protests against the PA in Nablus, which were met with tear gas and batons, laid bare the deep chasm between the official narrative and the street's perception. The PA claimed it was preserving "one gun, one law, one authority," but to a growing segment of the population, this translated to enfor-

cing Israeli security interests at the expense of Palestinian lives (Amnesty International 2025; Jewish Voice for Peace 2025).

The logic of this demonization was not a new invention tailored for the West Bank; it was the application of a long-standing strategy previously directed at the resistance in the Gaza Strip. For years, the PA and Fatah had cultivated a narrative that portrayed Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza not as legitimate parts of the national movement, but as a rogue element that had hijacked the Palestinian cause (Amer 2023). Hamas' takeover of Gaza in 2007 was consistently referred to as a "coup" (*inqilab*), and its governance was depicted as a tyrannical, illegitimate rule that had brought nothing but isolation and destruction upon its people. Every round of conflict between Gaza and Israel was framed by pro-PA voices as a reckless "adventure" by Hamas, an irresponsible act that sacrificed Palestinian lives for the political ambitions of its leaders and the strategic goals of its patrons in Tehran and Doha (International Crisis Group 2007; Human Rights Watch 2008; PCHR 2009). This narrative sought to divorce the people of Gaza from their leadership and to present the PA as the sole rational and responsible actor, committed to a political path of negotiation and state-building (Amer 2023).

The demonization of the new West Bank factions was therefore a continuous extension of this existing political trend. In the PA's worldview, any armed resistance operating outside its direct control and command, whether in Gaza or Jenin, was an existential threat to its authority and its political program, and thus had to be discredited, isolated, and ultimately eradicated (New Arab 2024). The events of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent catastrophic Israeli Gaza-cide threw this internal conflict into stark, agonizing relief. In the immediate aftermath, an unprecedented wave of pan-Palestinian solidarity swept across the West Bank, momentarily silencing the PA's critical rhetoric. The resistance fighters in Jenin and Tulkarm were lionized more than ever, seen as the defiant frontline of a nation under existential assault (Amer 2023). An overt crackdown by the PA was politically untenable, as it would have been widely perceived as a betrayal of the national cause. However, as the war continued, the PA and its allies began to employ the extensive destruction in Gaza as a new element within their political narrative and they began to weaponize Gaza's suffering (Al-Haq 2024). The message, now articulated with a somber, cautionary tone, was: "This is the result of Hamas' path. This is the 'chaos of arms' made manifest. Do you want Nablus to become Gaza City? Do you want Jenin to become Khan Younis?" This argument positioned the PA as the prudent guardian of what remained of Palestinian civil society in the West Bank, the only force capable of preventing a similar cataclysm there (Barari Yacoub 2024). This narrative was powerfully reinforced by the PA's international partners, particularly the United States, which began heavily promoting the vision of a "revitalized" PA as the only entity suitable to govern post-war Gaza. This geopolitical backing provided the PA with renewed justification and cover for its security operations in the West Bank. The "day after" plan for Gaza became a "day now" imperative to crush dissent in the West Bank, all under the banner of preventing a greater tragedy (Amnesty International 2025).

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It was in this context of heightened political tension that the most explicit forms of dehumanization emerged. In a widely reported leaked audio recording from a meeting with Fatah officials, PA President Mahmoud Abbas was heard launching into a vitriolic tirade against his rivals, Hamas, furiously calling them "dogs" and "sons of dogs" (BBC 2025). This visceral language, stripped of all political pretense, revealed the depth of the enmity, portraying political opponents not merely as misguided, but as subhuman. Despite the intensity and sophistication of this campaign, it has been met with a powerful and persistent counter-narrative. The resistance groups and their supporters have proven adept at using the same modern tools of communication—Telegram, TikTok, and other social media platforms—to disseminate their own story. Their narrative is built on a simple, powerful binary: martyrdom (*shahada*) versus collaboration (*'amala*) (Al-Haq 2024).

It is the PA leadership that has betrayed the nation, becoming security sub-contractors for the Israeli occupation in exchange for VIP passes and international funding (Cristiano 2018; CSMonitor 2025). The last testaments of fighters, often recorded on their phones just before their final battle and shared posthumously, are potent forms of counter-propaganda. In these poignant messages, they speak not of factional politics but of God, the homeland, and the duty to avenge their fallen comrades, directly identifying their enemies as the Israeli army and, increasingly, the PA security forces that hunt them (Al-Haq 2024). The most visible battleground in this narrative war is the funeral procession. The funerals for killed fighters, such as Ibrahim al-Nabulsi and members of the Jenin Brigade, consistently transform into large-scale political demonstrations. These events are characterized by mass public participation, where chanted slogans serve as vocal condemnations directed not only at Israel but also, with notable intensity, against the PA. This public veneration constitutes a direct refutation of the PA's official narrative, which categorizes these individuals as criminals and deviants. It indicates that, contrary to the PA's portrayal, these figures retain significant legitimacy as resistance fighters within the local community (Al-Haq 2024; B'Tselem 2024; Aljazeera 2023).

The PA's systematic campaign to dehumanize and discredit resistance movements in both the West Bank and Gaza is indicative of a severe internal conflict that has fractured the Palestinian national movement (Marten 2014; ACLED 2025). This narrative strategy is motivated by the threat that independent armed actors pose to Fatah's political dominance and the Oslo-based security coordination setting. It employs a range of political, social, and criminal allegations designed to isolate fighters from their popular support base and to legitimize their suppression (Awwad Toyama 2024). The strategy has been consistent, targeting resistance in Jenin, Nablus, and Tulkarm with the same logic used against Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, portraying all who operate outside PA control as reckless agents of chaos or foreign powers (Barari Yacoub 2024). This campaign has, in turn, severely damaged the PA's own legitimacy, solidifying its image among a large and growing segment of the population, especially the youth, as an instrument of the occupation (Amer 2023). The result is a fragmented and antagonistic political environment in which the younger

generation of Palestinians confronts a two-front conflict, simultaneously opposing the Israeli military and its own national authority. Consequently, what began as localized disillusionment in West Bank refugee camps has evolved into a central dynamic within the Palestinian political arena. This development indicates that the broader national movement is being significantly undermined by internal conflict (International Crisis Group 2025; Al-Haq 2024; B'Tselem 2024).

Biography

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