

Twenty Years After the Launch of Security Sector Reform: Towards Sustainable and Comprehensive Transformation



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Mr. Jehad holds a master's degree in Political Science from the Faculty of Law and Political Science in Tunis since 1999. He has written a weekly article specializing in Palestinian affairs and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. He is a co-author of the Arab Security Index Report, the Arab Reform Report known as the "Arab Democracy Index," and a member of the main team for the Palestinian Integrity Index, and the Integrity Index in the Palestinian Security Sector. He also worked as a member of expert team supporting the work of the National Reconciliation Support and Development Group/Security Sector. He has numerous studies published in Palestinian and Arab research institutions and centers related to the Palestinian political system, good governance, parliamentary work, the integrity system, the security sector, and refugee issues.

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This paper is the third in a series of policy papers issued by the center for the year 2025. These papers address internal and external policy issues relevant to the Palestinian community and decision-makers.

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Introduction

President Mahmoud Abbas's recent decree-law mandating the early retirement of officers holding the rank of brigadier general in the Palestinian security forces raises two critical issues. First, it signals a presidential intention to initiate reform within the security sector. Second, it highlights a persistent structural flaw—specifically, the inflated number of high-ranking officers in Palestinian security institutions.

While this decision may address some organizational imbalances—particularly the "inverted pyramid" in the sector's hierarchy—it does not constitute a comprehensive reform. Sustainable

and meaningful reform must be holistic in scope to avoid the recurrence of similar issues. The current decision is reminiscent of a previous measure taken nearly two decades ago: on April 4, 2005, shortly after assuming office, President Abbas



Source: Al-Quds Newspaper issued on Tuesday, 5/4/2005

ordered the retirement of approximately 1,000 officers. Now, twenty years later, a similar move is being made, with additional retirements across various ranks reportedly forthcoming.

This wave of retirements coincides with increased Arab pressure for reform within the Palestinian Authority. The recent Arab Emergency Summit ("Palestine Summit")² underscored the urgency of reforming both the State of Palestine and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to strengthen national institutions, ensure unified decision-making, and bolster the resilience and aspirations of the Palestinian people.

Simultaneously, these retirements appear to align with efforts to restructure centers of influence and prepare for a potential political transition—possibly distancing current leadership from entrenched power networks within the security services.

Global experiences with security sector reform (SSR) emphasize that success depends on four key conditions: 1. **Comprehensive and Gradual Implementation:** Reforms must operate on multiple levels and avoid piecemeal interventions. 2. **New Security Doctrine:** A modern doctrine must prioritize citizens' rights and the protection of democratic values, rather than merely ensuring regime security or partisan interests. 3. **Integration with Broader Governance Reforms:** SSR should align with efforts to strengthen the rule of law and promote professionalism, transparency, and accountability across state institutions. 4. **Political Will and Consensus:** Effective reform demands a unified vision and an agreed-upon action plan involving all stakeholders.

¹ Director of the THABAT Center for Research and Opinion Polls

² See: Statement of the Arab Summit "Palestine Summit" dated 3/4/2025

[Palestine Summit Comm. Eng. ED.pdf](#)

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This paper contributes to the ongoing dialogue on security sector reform by proposing a vision rooted in the public interest. A successful reform process must be sustainable and preventative—establishing safeguards against institutional stagnation, ensuring professional leadership renewal in accordance with Palestinian law, and enhancing public trust. The ultimate goal is to maintain public order, protect citizens' rights, and uphold professional standards across the security apparatus.

Comprehensive reform of the Palestinian security sector requires legal, institutional, and cultural changes. This paper outlines critical issues and offers targeted recommendations to promote transparency, professionalism, and alignment with democratic governance. These reforms aim to build a security sector that is accountable to civilian leadership, committed to public service, and grounded in the rule of law.

The Decree-Law on Early Retirement of Brigadier Generals: Partial and Incomplete Reform

The recent decree-law ordering the retirement of approximately 1,500 brigadier generals represents a partial attempt at addressing the overcrowding of senior ranks within Palestinian security services. While many of those affected obtained this rank through time-based promotions rather than performance, the law does not apply uniformly. Officers over the age of 55 are targeted, yet some younger officers—who are inactive or lack official roles—remain exempt.

Moreover, the law includes a significant loophole in Article 4, allowing the President to exempt officers holding leadership positions from the retirement directive. This opens the door to favoritism, personal intervention, and the retention of individuals based on connections rather than merit or institutional needs.

Financially, the law is overly generous. It calculates retirement benefits based on the last received salary rather than the average of the final 36 salaries, as stipulated in existing retirement legislation. It also allows service periods to be extended artificially to meet mandatory retirement thresholds. While this may be equitable for retirees, it places an additional burden on the public treasury, pension funds, and future generations. As such, this decree-law demands rigorous fiscal analysis and actuarial review.

Strategic Framework for Reforming the Security Sector

The success of SSR in Palestine cannot depend solely on the political will of the Palestinian Authority. It also requires cooperation from external actors, including the international community, donor states, and—critically—the Israeli government, whose ongoing occupation policies actively undermine Palestinian institutional development.

To avoid repeating past failures, a successful reform process must be grounded in a thorough evaluation of previous attempts and the reasons they fell short. Learning from those experiences can help navigate the barriers and identify strengths to build upon.

Reform must be driven by a clear and unified vision, supported by actionable programs, specific timelines, and designated authorities responsible for implementation. It also requires broad-based community involvement to cultivate public ownership of the process and mitigate resistance from entrenched interests—especially those in elite circles who stand to lose power or privilege.

The six key pillars necessary for comprehensive reform: 1. **A national security policy document**; 2. **Legislative reform** to provide an enabling legal environment; 3. **Institutional restructuring**

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for enhanced efficiency and oversight; 4. Establishment of a **clear political reference authority**; 5. Robust **parliamentary and administrative oversight** mechanisms; 6. Promotion of a **professional institutional culture** within security agencies.

(1) A national security policy document

For over three decades, the official Palestinian authorities have not adopted a comprehensive **security policy document (White Paper)** that articulates a unified vision for the national security doctrine. Such a document should outline guiding principles, strategic objectives, and the foundational pillars of national security. It must serve as an expression of the state's general policy to safeguard internal stability and external sovereignty.

This policy should reflect the internal security needs and priorities at various stages, be grounded in applicable laws, and remain adaptable to regional dynamics, international obligations, and evolving threats. It should identify the nature of these threats—including existential risks—and outline strategies for their mitigation, containment, or neutralization.

Recommendations:

1. Adopt a **security policy document (White Paper)** following a comprehensive national review. This document should unify the work of security sector institutions and align their missions with the general policy of the State of Palestine according to political and security developments.
2. Endorse a **national security doctrine** by decision of the Palestinian government, explicitly identifying threats, challenges, and potential alliances. For example, while Israel remains an existential threat, the costs of eliminating this threat outright may exceed its current impact—thus, the doctrine must include mechanisms for mitigation and risk reduction rather than confrontation alone.

(2) Legislative Reform

Legislative alignment and coherence are critical to institutional reform. Laws governing the security sector must be consistent with the Basic Law and with one another. However, contradictions in legislation—particularly those enacted via decree-laws—have eroded institutional integrity and compromised legal authority.

For instance, Law No. 8 of 2005 on Service in the Security Forces was undermined by subsequent decree-laws, such as Decree-Law No. 11 of 2007 on Preventive Security. These inconsistencies have enabled discretionary appointments, indefinite extensions of leadership terms, and erosion of legal timeframes for senior posts.

Recent amendments—such as Decree-Law No. 4 of 2023³ and the 2024 changes to the Security Forces Service Law—abolished term limits and allowed the continued extension of service for officers past the retirement age. These changes contradict the original legislative intent and undermine transparency and accountability.

Recommendations:

1. Conduct a thorough review of all security-related legislation to ensure consistency with the 2005 Security Forces Service Law and rectify discrepancies introduced by subsequent amendments.

³ See: Law by Decree No. (4) of 2023 on amending the General Intelligence Law No. (17) of 2005

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2. Complete the legal framework governing all security institutions by issuing specific laws and regulatory instruments for each agency, including organizational bylaws and operational manuals.
3. Reinstate **fixed terms for all heads of security agencies**, limited to three years with a possible one-year extension. These terms should align with provisions of the General Retirement Law, which sets a mandatory retirement age of sixty.

(3) Institutional Reform

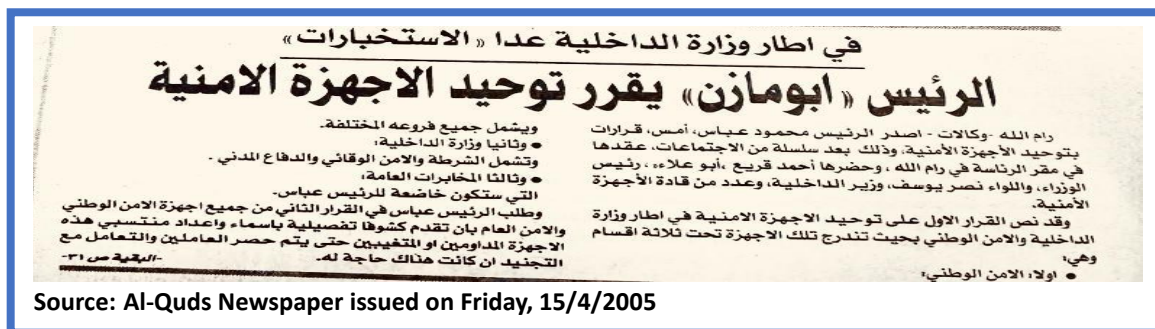
Institutional reform involves restructuring internal systems and relationships across five key dimensions:

1. Agency Integration and Functional Coherence

The current fragmentation of security agencies has led to overlapping mandates and inefficiencies. The 2005 Security Forces Service Law aimed to integrate the National Security Forces, Internal Security, and General Intelligence under a unified framework. However, the 2024 amendment reintroduced fragmentation by adding new entities, such as the **Presidential Guard**, and altering the chains of command within the sector.

2. Organizational Structure

Significant steps have been taken to formalize organizational structures and job descriptions across agencies. However, the proliferation of high-ranking officers has distorted these structures, weakening hierarchy and sustainability. Reinstating discipline in rank distribution is essential to operational effectiveness.



3. Leadership Ranks and Rank Inflation

The persistence of an inverted pyramid—where officers outnumber non-commissioned personnel—continues to destabilize the command structure. Contributing factors include:

- Over-reliance on military college graduates (domestic and international) without strategic workforce planning.
- Promotions awarded based solely on time-in-service, without reference to the performance criteria in Articles 39–42 of the 2005 law, resulting in rank inflation, especially among brigadier generals and major generals.

4. External Appointments

Since 2007, most appointments to senior leadership positions have come from outside the respective agencies, often bypassing internal promotion channels. This undermines morale, stifles competition, and diminishes institutional loyalty. The absence of a clear, merit-based governance framework for appointments exacerbates these issues.

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5. Extension of the Terms of Security Chiefs

Some heads of Palestinian security agencies have remained in office for extended periods, in some cases up to 18 years, with the most recent tenure lasting 16 years and others lasting eight years. These prolonged terms have hindered the professional progression of other officers within the agencies, obstructing their ability to transfer or assume senior management positions.

Decree-Law No. 7 of 2024, which amended the Security Forces Service Law No. 8 of 2005, permits the Supreme Commander to extend the service of officers holding the rank of brigadier general or higher for a period not exceeding three years after reaching the age of sixty. This applies only if the officer holds one of the following posts: A. Commander-in-Chief, National Security Forces Commander, or Military Intelligence Commander. B. Commander of the Presidential Guard. C. Director-General of Internal Security Forces.

Extending the terms of office limits the renewal of vision and the adoption of modern technical and technological advancements. It also fosters frustration among senior officers, curbing their motivation and initiative. In many cases, those recently appointed to senior leadership roles are still in their early fifties, increasing the likelihood of long, unbroken tenures.

Recommendations

1. Institutional Reform and Agency Mergers

- Merge the Intelligence and Preventive Security Services into a single agile, professional, and efficient intelligence body.
- Redistribute personnel from the Preventive Security Service to either the Public Intelligence Service or the Palestinian Police Force, based on their specialties and roles.
- Integrate all military agencies into the National Security Service, including the Military Intelligence Service, the Presidential Guard, and other military entities.

2. Structural and Staffing Review

- Conduct a comprehensive review of the organizational structure of all security agencies.
- Establish job grades (military ranks) in conjunction with clear job descriptions.
- Regulate the number of high-ranking officers, fixing their numbers per agency to prevent inflation of senior ranks.

3. Recruitment and Promotion Reform

- Review the annual intake from military and police colleges, including Al-Istiqlal University and foreign institutions.
- Amend the initial rank upon graduation to “Assistant” rather than “Lieutenant” to facilitate professional development and field engagement, while ensuring equivalent financial benefits.
- Implement Articles 39–42 of Law No. 8 of 2005 regarding promotions to senior ranks to ensure consistency with institutional structures and staffing needs.
- Tie promotions from lieutenant Colonel to Major General to both qualifications and vacancies.
- Apply objective, professional criteria in the selection and advancement of personnel and insulate these processes from political interference.

4. Enhancing Integrity and Leadership Selection

- Establish an independent Integrity Committee for appointments in the security sector, headed by the President or a Supreme Court judge, along with recognized professional figures. This committee would evaluate nominations for heads or directors-general of security institutions.

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- Ensure that appointments to leadership positions are made from within the respective agency to promote competition and reward merit.

5. Enforcing Term Limits

- Adhere strictly to the term limits established in the Civil Service Law and Security Forces Service Law.
- Repeal the amendment introduced by Decree-Law No. 7 of 2024, which allows discretionary extension of service beyond legal limits.

(4) Civilian Political Oversight of the Security Sector

In accordance with democratic principles, the government bears responsibility for security policy. Civilian political authorities, elected or approved by an elected body, should represent the people's will and oversee the security establishment. Security institutions must operate under this authority regardless of political affiliation, with loyalty to the constitution and the democratic system.

The Minister of Interior and the Minister of National Security are tasked with overseeing security institutions per the intent of the Palestinian legislator, as reflected in the Security Forces Service Law.

Article 39 of the Amended Basic Law of 2003 defines the Commander-in-Chief of the Palestinian Security Forces as the Head of State, who may or may not possess military experience. This role is symbolic of civilian control over the military, particularly in matters such as declaring war and peace.

However, Decree-Law No. 7 of 2024 grants the Supreme Commander broad executive powers over the security sector. This contradicts the separation of powers envisioned in the Amended Basic Law, infringing upon the authority of ministers responsible to the Palestinian Legislative Council.

Recommendations:

1. Repeal all provisions in Decree-Law No. 7 of 2024 that reference the Supreme Commander.
2. Ensure that all security institutions and military bodies—excluding General Intelligence—are supervised by the Minister of Interior and/or Minister of National Security, aligning with democratic norms and legislative intent.

(5) Parliamentary and Administrative Oversight

The Palestinian security sector currently lacks effective legislative oversight due to the inactivity of the Palestinian Legislative Council. Although the Central Council was tasked with assuming this role following its 31st session in February 2022, it has yet to fulfill its oversight responsibilities.

On the administrative front, the Financial and Administrative Control Bureau (FACB) has made strides in applying Article 31 of its law, which mandates the supervision of all security agencies. In exceptional cases requiring confidentiality, specific oversight mechanisms should be determined by law.

Recommendations:

1. Hold general elections, especially legislative elections, or activate the Central Council to ensure robust government oversight, including of the security sector.
2. Strengthen the role of the Financial and Administrative Control Bureau in supervising the security sector.

(6) Promoting a Democratic Culture in Security Institutions

Article 89 of the Palestinian Security Forces Service Law stipulates that public office in the security forces is a national duty aimed at serving the public interest, in accordance with laws and regulations. Officers are required to carry out lawful orders honestly and accurately and are accountable for both issuing and executing commands within the bounds of the law.

Fostering a democratic culture means instilling a sense of duty to uphold the rule of law, respect human rights, and avoid politicization. Articles 90 and 169 of the Security Forces Service Law prohibit personnel from engaging in political activities, expressing partisan views, or joining political parties.

Although the Ministry of Interior and various security agencies have initiated training on the Code of Conduct and integrity principles, recent public incidents suggest a weak democratic culture among some officers and personnel.

Recommendations:

1. Review and strengthen training and education programs in security institutions to promote democratic values, respect for the rule of law, and protection of public freedoms.
2. Enforce the prohibition of partisan activities among officers and prevent heads of security services from holding political or partisan positions.

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