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A West Bank tinderbox Israel can't let explode

ANALYSIS

• By ANNA AHRONHEIM

Amid an increase in Palestinians who have been killed by IDF fire this year, Israel is growing concerned but does not think the West Bank will spiral out of control.

More than 40 Palestinians have died since the beginning of the year, including children and others in questionable circumstances. Another four Palestinians were killed early Monday morning during a raid in Jenin.

The numbers are twice those of the same period in

See WEST, Page 7

WEST

Continued from Page 1

2020, and the Palestinian street is not quiet.

Amid the rise in Palestinian casualties, IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Aviv Kohavi said while the West Bank is "a violent environment," the military would not tolerate reckless disregard for human life.

"We will support you when you follow your professional doctrines, but we will deeply criticize those who do not," he told soldiers. "We will support you when you follow orders, but we will not accept deviations. We will support you when you use judgment, even if you make mistakes, but we will not tolerate negligence."

Those comments were heard loud and clear on the Palestinian street, said Col. (ret.) Dr. Michael Milstein, head of the Forum for Palestinian Studies at the Moshe Dayan Center and senior analyst at IDC Herzliya's Institute for Policy and Strategy.

While Kohavi's message was met with anger among Palestinians, Milstein told The Jerusalem Post what is happening in the West Bank is a mix of circumstances and tensions between Palestinians and Israel, whether settlers or soldiers, and between Palestinians and the Palestinian Authority.

But, there are two major reasons why, despite the high number of Palestinian fatalities, the West Bank is not inflamed, he said.

One reason is that Palestinians "really understand that while their lives are not ideal, they are still better than the rest of the Arab world and Gaza," Milstein said. "They don't want conflict with Israel because they understand that they will lose their salaries and their lifestyle."

The second reason is that the PA "doesn't want a crisis with Israel," he said. "They are afraid for their regime. They understand that a violent crisis with Israel will lead to chaos and that

Hamas might raise its head."

Even though Israeli security forces carry out near-nightly raids in the West Bank to arrest wanted Palestinians, as well as to uncover workshops producing weapons and to confiscate funds that could be used for terrorism, Jenin is the only city where troops come under heavy fire.

Jenin is one of the more violent cities in the West Bank, a security source told the Post. Its refugee camp is the only place where whenever Israeli forces enter, they get engaged in fierce firefights.

Since Operation Guardian of the Walls and the cancellation of the PA elections, Hamas and Fatah have been fighting for dominance.

With armed struggle gaining support following the May conflict, militants are feeling more confident about engaging Israeli forces, the security source said.

The founding of the illegal settlement outpost of Evyatar and the delay by the IDF and police in evacuating it has also led to a high level of violence by Palestinians living in the neighboring village of Beita.

The almost nightly violent protests of hundreds of Palestinians has led to at least six deaths. It's a level of violence the IDF hasn't seen in years.

Even though the violence in Beita has angered Palestinians, those living in Hebron or Bethlehem "are really focusing on their own issues," Milstein said. "They know what's happening and support the people in Beita, but they won't do anything."

The issue of Beita "is more local," he said. Had it been in Jerusalem, "then it's another thing."

The PA has also been weakened in the West Bank, especially in Jenin, where they have little control. The lack of authority has led to an increase in weapons, which in turn has emboldened groups such as Tanzim and Palestinian Islamic Jihad to engage with Israeli security forces, similar to the group that engaged troops overnight on Monday.

"Israel doesn't have any other way to control what's happening in the Jenin refugee camp other than arresting or killing those trying to promote terrorist attacks," Milstein said. "It's an ongoing effort."

But the issue in the refugee camps, especially in Jenin, is not like the Gaza terrorist cells, he said, adding: "Unlike Gaza, it's more relations between gangs. Many of these young terrorists are neighbors. In Gaza, it's totally different; they are armies."

The ongoing coordination between Israel and the PA security forces is also an important strategic interest for both sides for containing the violence, Milstein said.

"It's a headache not only for the IDF but for the PA security forces who are trying to impose their authority," he said. "But it's a failure all the time. The power of the gangs and clans is sometimes much stronger than that of the regime."

On Monday afternoon, thousands of Palestinians took part in the funerals of the four men killed by Israeli security forces in Jenin, chanting slogans glorifying the dead and vowing to avenge them.

"The pictures of the funeral are creating a lot of anger on the Palestinian street," Milstein said. "But 99.9% of Palestinian youth will express their anger with the keyboard. Only a very small part will translate this anger to lone terrorist attacks."

Still, Israel should be ready for any attacks in the coming days following the deaths of the four men, he said, adding: "This is the situation that [was] dominant in the knife Intifada. Maybe we will see some attacks this week by young men from [the] Jenin camp."

On Monday afternoon, one such attack was thwarted by troops after a Palestinian dressed as a soldier was arrested near the settlement of Ma'aleh Levoona armed with a fireman, ammunition, a meat cleaver, a smaller knife and pepper spray. He was from Jenin, Hebrew-language media outlets reported.

And while tempers remain high, Milstein does not foresee a new uprising or an increase in violence.

"There's no Third Intifada and no Palestinian Spring," he said. "There's so much tension, but at the end of the day, they go home and not to the street." •