A ‘nervous’ Abbas steps up crackdown on critics

August 22, 2021

By Khaled Abu Toameh

The Jerusalem Post

<https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/a-nervous-abbas-steps-up-crackdown-on-critics-677430>

The Palestinian Authority is growing increasingly intolerant toward its critics and political rivals, Palestinian human-rights advocates, lawyers and political activists said Sunday.

“The continuing crackdown on public freedoms shows that the Palestinian leadership is nervous and does not want to hear about democracy and freedom of expression,” they said in a statement after the arrest of dozens of Palestinian activists on Saturday by the PA Security Forces in Ramallah.

PA President Mahmoud Abbas was angry because [last week’s deal](https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/deal-reached-for-qatari-cash-to-gaza-ahead-of-bennett-biden-parley-677198) to transfer Qatari aid funds to the Gaza Strip through the UN was reached behind his back, some activists said.

Abbas believes any deal concerning Gaza that excludes the PA further emboldens Hamas and undermines the Palestinian leadership’s standing and credibility, they said.

Last week, Qatar and the UN signed a deal whereby the international body would distribute financial aid to more than 100,000 families in the Gaza Strip. The PA had initially demanded that the money be transferred only through its Ramallah-based government.

Abbas, 85, is said to be enraged by critics’ growing demands that he be removed from power. [Calls for Abbas](https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/palestinian-pm-to-overhaul-cabinet-in-hopes-of-fresh-start-677237) to quit have become commonplace since the death of Nizar Banat, a prominent anti-corruption activist from Hebron who was reportedly beaten to death by PA security officers last June.

Abbas was angry because he feels the US is not putting enough pressure on Israel regarding settlement construction and other issues related to Jerusalem, other activists said.

On Saturday, the PA Security Forces arrested more than 20 Palestinians who were planning to participate in a protest in the center of Ramallah to demand justice for the slain activist.

The PA said it has detained 14 of the officers who were involved in the incident, but no one has been indicted until now. The officers are believed to be held in a PA security facility in Jericho.

Banat’s family and friends have vowed to continue protesting his violent death until those responsible are held to account.

Fearing the PA was seeking to “bury” the case by failing to prosecute the detained officers, Banat’s family and friends called for holding another protest in Ramallah on Saturday.

Dozens of PA officers, however, sealed off the area shortly before the planned protest. A number of journalists who arrived to cover the protest were warned by plainclothes officers that they would be arrested if they did not leave the scene.

When the protesters started showing up, they were immediately detained and escorted to nearby police vans.

The first to be arrested was Jihad Abdo, a prominent political activist and outspoken critic of the PA. Maher al-Akhras, another outspoken critic of the PA who had been previously arrested by Israel for his affiliation with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) terrorist organization, was then arrested.

Most of those arrested are known for their affiliation with various Palestinian factions. In addition to the PIJ, they represent Hamas and the PLO’s Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP).

Altogether, 23 people were arrested as part of the PA effort to prevent the protest, according to Ramallah-based Lawyers for Justice, which regularly monitors human-rights violations by the Palestinian Security Forces.

Among those arrested were two women, Dr. Kawthar Abwainy and social activist Doha Ma’adi, the group said.

The detainees are accused of participating in an “illegal gathering” and “stirring up sectarian strife,” a term often used by the PA to describe all forms of criticism of the Palestinian leadership, it said.

Twenty-four protesters were arrested because they did not have an official permit to hold the gathering, the PA police said.

On Sunday morning, the PA Security Forces arrested another prominent PIJ activist, Sheikh Khader Adnan, while he was protesting in Ramallah against Saturday’s crackdown.

According to Lawyers for Justice, more than 120 Palestinians, including 15 women, have been arrested by the PA Security Services since last May on charges related to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and political affiliation. Some of the detainees were severely beaten by PA security officers, it said.

More than 160 Palestinians have been summoned for interrogation by various branches of the PA Security Services over the past three months, a human-rights activist said.

“Most of them were questioned about their posts on Facebook and Twitter,” the activist said. “Many were forced to delete the posts or even close down their social-media accounts simply because they dared to criticize the Palestinian leadership or demand justice for Nizar Banat.”

“The crackdown by the Palestinian Authority is backfiring,” said Ghassan Awad, a political activist from Ramallah. “The repressive measures are seen as part of an attempt to intimidate the public and silence critics. But this is making Hamas and the opposition even stronger.”

“The Palestinian leadership in Ramallah is afraid of criticism,” said Najwa Abdel Rahman, a student at Bir Zeit University. “President Abbas is even afraid of many of the people working for him. He does not trust most of them. He does not want to see anyone demonstrating against him or the PA.”

The Palestinian Independent Commission for Human Rights called for the immediate release of all those who were arrested on Saturday. The group called on the PA “to respect their right to peaceful assembly,” but it stopped short of denouncing the crackdown.

Hamas, PIJ, the PFLP and DFLP issued separate statements strongly condemning the ongoing crackdown on PA critics in the West Bank and calling for the immediate release of all those who were arrested in the past few weeks.

“This disgraceful policy of the PA amounts to a national sin and is an insult to the Palestinian struggle,” Hamas said.