

# THE PALESTINIANS: GAZA LAW AND ORDER

By Newsweek Staff    On 8/21/05 at 8:00 PM EDT

It lacked the brutality of Iraqi kidnappings, but for Steve Sabella, the ordeal one afternoon last month was a worrisome sign of Gaza's future. A photographer working on a project for the United Nations in Gaza City, Sabella was standing outside a beachfront hotel when six armed men grabbed him and an Australian colleague and stuffed them into separate cars. The gunmen explained their motives as they raced through the narrow alleys of a nearby refugee camp: one of their relatives, a member of Palestinian intelligence, had been abducted by a rival militia, and Sabella and his friend would be held hostage until his release. "They were angry that the Palestinian Authority was not doing its job to rescue him," Sabella, a Palestinian from Jerusalem, recounted recently. "They kidnapped us to put pressure on the Authority." The peculiar strategy apparently paid off. Within hours, all three captives--the relative, Sabella and the Australian--were on their way to a better place.

But Gaza was not. With so much attention trained lately on Israeli settlers set to be evacuated from the Gaza Strip, it's easy to forget what they're leaving behind after 38 years of occupation: an overcrowded land belt with almost no natural resources, a weak and corrupt central

government, a proliferation of militias and a badly fragmented security force. Though Palestinians have known for more than a year that Israel would be vacating the area, authorities still have no broad plan for protecting the assets the Jewish state leaves behind. (They say Israel has withheld much of the information they need for the planning.) And while President Mahmoud Abbas has moved to Gaza to assert the Palestinian Authority's control, Muslim radicals from Hamas are more popular and better armed in many parts of the Strip. "The Gaza disengagement has certainly been a framework for more power struggles between Palestinian figures," says Jarat Chopra, of the Washington-based group Strategic Assessments Initiative, who recently oversaw a survey of the Palestinian security agencies.

His findings were worse than most. Palestinian troops are low on weapons, discipline and morale. Reforms instituted by Abbas since his election in January have been mostly cosmetic. Though the Palestinian leader has managed to keep Hamas loosely committed to a ceasefire with Israel, the group has its own political agenda, which may soon dictate a return to rocket attacks and suicide bombings. Violence from Gaza will almost certainly prompt punishing Israeli reprisals. "The Palestinian Authority has postponed its conflict with Hamas, but it will come," Chopra said.

The picture is not totally grim. With the help of special envoy James Wolfensohn of the Quartet (the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United

Nations), Israeli settlers agreed last week to leave their Gaza greenhouses behind in exchange for money from private donors--including Wolfensohn himself--allowing nearly 4,000 Palestinian laborers to keep their jobs. And Israeli and Palestinian officials seem to be making progress in discussing a Gaza-West Bank access route for goods and people, a key to economic growth. But nobody expects good times to come to Gaza unless the Palestinian Authority can guarantee security. "If you're going to attract investors, you have to have law and order," says Nigel Roberts, a World Bank official who frequently mediates between the sides. Kidnappings just aren't in the mix.