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Israel & Palestinian Territories Analysis: Situation following prison break remains volatile despite capture of four of six escapees; maintain vigilance, review contingency plans

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Executive Summary:

- As of September 11, Israeli authorities have captured four of six Palestinian prisoners who escaped Gilboa Prison on September 6. The discovery of a pair of unarmed fugitives in a truck parking lot and another pair alone, both near Israel's Nazareth, indicates that the escapees neither had a sophisticated escape plan nor involved accomplices in the prison break.
- The capture of the four prisoners alive has slightly decreased the risk of a broader increase in regional violence. Had the escapees been found dead or been killed in clashes with Israeli forces, especially in the Jenin area from where they emanate, this would have raised their profile as "martyrs" and possibly prompted an outbreak of violence in the West Bank and/or Gaza.
- Israeli security operations will continue until the remaining two prisoners are found, posing a risk of a militant attack by the escapees or armed clashes that could raise regional tensions. The heightened risk of friction between local residents and Israeli authorities will elevate the likelihood of civil unrest and low-level militancy, particularly at checkpoints and junctions within the West Bank and East Jerusalem.
- The development will add to the volatile situation in Gaza amid a Qatari announcement that the Palestinian Authority (PA) has withdrawn from a deal to facilitate the transfer of Qatari funds to Hamas employees and impoverished families in Gaza.
- **Those operating or residing in Israel and/or the Palestinian Territories are advised to remain vigilant, particularly within a 20-30 km radius of the Gilboa Prison in northern Israel, due to ongoing operations. Due to the current volatility, it advised to continue to review contingency plans within Israel.**

Current Situation:

Prison Break

- As of September 11, Israeli authorities have successfully captured alive four of the six Palestinian prisoners who escaped the maximum-security Gilboa Prison on [September 6](#).
- Two of the prisoners were captured on September 10 near northern Israel's Nazareth and a second pair was discovered on September 11 in a truck parking lot in the village of Umm al-Ghanem, just east of Nazareth. These locales are situated 14-18 km from the prison.
- Among those captured was Zakaria Zubeidi, a prominent militant from the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade militant group, which is aligned with the Fatah political faction.
- Two other prisoners, members of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) militant group, remain at large. One was serving a life sentence for kidnapping and killing an Israeli minor.

Developments in the Gaza Strip

- On September [10](#) and [11](#), Gaza-based militants fired singular rockets towards southern Israel. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) stated that they were intercepted by the Iron Dome air defense system. The Israel Air Force (IAF) responded to both attacks by conducting aerial strikes against Hamas' military compounds in the Gaza Strip.
- Per reports from September 10 citing Qatar's envoy to Gaza, Mohammed al-Emadi, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has withdrawn from an agreement to facilitate the transfer of Qatari aid to the Gaza Strip. The deal would have created a mechanism for PA banks to transfer money to Hamas employees. Aid distribution to impoverished families by the UN has also yet to begin.
- Following the May [escalation](#) between Israel and Hamas, Qatar pledged 500 million USD in aid to the Gaza Strip. It has stated it will seek to resume talks to resolve the disagreement. PA banks are

reportedly concerned that the transfer of funds to Hamas could lead to allegations of support for militancy, resulting in sanctions against them.

- Hamas' military spokesperson, Abu Obeida, stated on September 11 that the group will only agree to a prisoner exchange with Israel when the six escapees in the September 6 jailbreak are released. Hamas referred to them as the "heroes of the Freedom Tunnel".

Jerusalem and the West Bank

- On September 10, amid calls by Hamas for a "[Day of Rage](#)", up to 1,000 demonstrators at 11 different protest points gathered throughout the West Bank. At the Jalamah checkpoint near Jenin, Palestinians reportedly opened fire at IDF soldiers. Protests and confrontations were also reported in Ramallah, Nablus, and at the al-Fawar Refugee Camp near Hebron as well as at the Qalandiya checkpoint north of Jerusalem. Protests were also reported in the Hebron area on September 11.
- On September 11, a Palestinian physician from East Jerusalem tried to stab Israel Police officers next to the Jerusalem Old City's Lions' Gate. He was neutralized by the security forces.

Assessments & Forecast:

Capture of prisoners alive slightly reduces likelihood of regional violence, potential for escalation remains due to ongoing operation for remaining fugitives

1. The capture of four of the six Palestinian prison fugitives, who remain alive and did not resist rearrest, by the Israeli security forces will slightly reduce the potential for a broader regional increase in violence. Had the militants been killed in clashes with the security forces or died before their capture, this would have raised tensions. It may have led to clashes in the West Bank's Jenin area, from where the escapees emanate, or other parts of the West Bank. It would have also increased the likelihood of rockets from the Gaza Strip in solidarity with the prisoners, who would be considered "shahids" (martyrs). However, this broad scenario of violence is still possible given that two Palestinian militants remain at large. This could either be as a result of a militant attack conducted by the prisoners, especially should they succeed in obtaining weapons and logistical assistance, or alternatively in the event that they are killed or die. While the manhunt to pursue the escapees continues, tensions will be high and the overall security situation within the region will remain volatile.
2. Despite the seeming sophistication of the escape from the prison itself, which was largely facilitated by a series of major security flaws and blunders by the Israeli prison and intelligence agencies, the discovery of the militants over the past days indicates that the escape plot thereafter was limited and unsophisticated. The four militants were all discovered unarmed, reportedly hungry and exhausted, having failed to cover a significant distance in the five days since their escape. In line with Israeli security assessments, this strongly suggests that the escapees did not have accomplices or logistical support inside or outside the prison and seemingly had a very limited plan to execute should their escape from the prison succeed.
3. The development has triggered significant discourse within both Israeli and Palestinian societies. In Israel, the focus has primarily been on the security gaps and blunders, such as sleeping on-duty guards, unmanned posts, and the failure to reinforce prison facilities despite prior warnings. The discourse has also related to the assistance provided to the authorities by Arab citizens of Israel, who in both cases reported the fugitives' presence to the police. This indicates that despite localized unrest and clashes between Jewish and Arab citizens [during the escalation between Israel and Hamas in May](#), which led to concerns regarding social discord and long-lasting intra-communal strife, the latter populace is willing to cooperate with Israeli authorities to prevent a sharp rise in tensions. It indicates that the violence recorded in May was an outlier, rather than a long-lasting

trend. Among the Palestinians, the fugitives have been treated by large parts of society as heroes or freedom fighters. The initial news prompted elation in the West Bank, particularly Jenin. This is due to the fact that the issue of Palestinian prisoners, and their desired release, resonates with large parts of Palestinian society and is a cause for unity for all Palestinian factions. For this reason, the escape of the prisoners prompted widespread euphoria, while their capture has subdued the public mood and reportedly triggered disappointment and rage.

Hamas, other Gaza-based militants trying to remain relevant, capitalize on regional tensions; difficulties transferring Qatari funds potential catalyst for violence

1. Although no militant group has claimed either of the two singular rocket attacks in recent days, these were expressions of solidarity by Gaza-based militant groups with the escapees. The limited scope and scale of the attacks suggests that the perpetrators do not seek to prompt a major escalation with Israel, but are willing to accept the retaliatory IDF attacks and potential punitive civil restrictions imposed by Israeli authorities. This is in order to send a message of support to the prisoners and defiance to Israel. The rocket attacks are also a symbolic condemnation of Israel's operation in pursuit of the fugitives and perceived oppressive measures within Israeli prisons against militant security prisoners since the incident occurred, which has led to rioting on a number of occasions. The prisoners have condemned the Israel Prison Service's (IPS) decision to relocate and disperse militants from the same faction as well as perceived excessive violent measures against them. Overall, the current development shows the potential for events within Israeli prisons holding Palestinian security prisoners to inflame tensions outside of the detention centers within the wider region.
2. Hamas in particular is seeking to make itself relevant amid the current escalation in tensions. Five of the six escapees were from the Iran-backed PIJ and the remaining fugitive, Zakaria Zubeidi, was from the secular Fatah-aligned al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. Thus, the statement by Hamas' spokesperson Abu Obeida insisting that the Islamist group will only agree to a prisoner exchange with Israel when the six fugitives are released shows its efforts to gain influence within the Palestinian street and project itself as the protector of the prisoners. Hamas controls the Gaza Strip and currently holds captive two Israeli civilians and the remains of two IDF soldiers. It is therefore also likely an effort to project to other Palestinian factions, particularly the PA that controls some territory in the West Bank, that it holds the power against Israel and is the only Palestinian actor that will be able to achieve such results.
3. The ongoing failure to find a viable mechanism to transfer Qatari funds that satisfies all the parties of the region is a potential catalyst for violence. The humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip remains dire, with a Gaza-based civil society organization reporting in mid-August that since the escalation in May, 8,500 residents of the territory remain internally displaced and around 250,000 residents live in partially damaged homes. **FORECAST:** The months-long failure to transfer 100 USD each month to 100,000 Palestinian families in Gaza, distributed by the UN, as well as pay the salaries of Hamas civil servants, will continue to lead to the deterioration of the humanitarian situation. This, in turn, will both increase the pressure on Hamas to find a solution and its efforts to distract from the conditions in the Palestinian enclave. It will also reduce some local residents' willingness to refrain from violence as they increasingly act out of a sense of desperation. Both of these factors increase the chances of a rise in tensions and potential escalation as Hamas aims to extract concessions from Israel. This could manifest in border riots, cross-border hurling of explosives or shootings, and limited rocket fire.

Unrest, low-level militancy likely to persist in West Bank, parts of Jerusalem over coming days, weeks as tensions remain high

1. Although the unrest in the West Bank has so far been spread across a wide geographical region, it has failed to mobilize vast numbers of Palestinians, with only 1,000 reportedly attending in total during the “Day of Rage” on September 10. This indicates that despite online support and political statements in solidarity with the escapees, many Palestinians are reluctant to engage in violent confrontations with Israeli troops. However, as mentioned, the holding of Palestinians in Israeli jails is a core component of the Palestinian narrative and cause. For this reason, despite widespread international condemnation, the PA maintains a “pay for slay” policy wherein it distributes funds to the families of Palestinian prisoners and “martyrs”, considered militants by Israel. This shows the centrality of this issue to the Palestinian people and to all of its factions, regardless of their modus operandi or ideological/religious affiliations.
2. **FORECAST:** Therefore, as long as Israel’s extensive security operation and heightened crackdown within detention centers continues, tensions will increase. The Israeli security presence in Palestinian-populated areas both within Israel and the West Bank will possibly grow and lead to increased friction between local residents and Israeli forces. There is thus an increased likelihood of violent confrontations between Israeli security forces and protesters. These will likely primarily occur at friction points in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, such as checkpoints, major junctions temporary roadblocks, and IDF watchtowers. There is also a heightened risk of “lone wolf”, low-level militant attacks within the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and to some extent, the Old City of Jerusalem as an expression of solidarity and support with the remaining Palestinian escapees. In this context, the Jenin area in the West Bank, where both Hamas and the PIJ maintain infrastructure and support, will continue to be a focal point for tensions and a potential escalation, which may include attempts to fire at IDF forces and installations. The risk of unrest or a militant attack within Israel’s 1967 borders remains relatively low at the current time.

Recommendations:

1. Those operating or residing in Israel and/or the Palestinian Territories at the current time are advised to remain vigilant throughout the region, particularly with a 20-30 km radius of the Gilboa Prison in northern Israel, due to the current deterioration of the security situation and ongoing operations.
2. Although an escalation is currently less likely, due to the current volatility, it is advised to continue to review contingency plans and emergency security protocols within Israel. This includes ensuring that personnel are aware of Color Red warning sirens for incoming rockets, can identify their nearest bomb shelter, have downloaded the Color Red mobile application to their smartphones, and have undergone situational awareness training in the event of a rocket attack.
3. When a Color Red siren is sounded, if a designated shelter exists, immediately go there. If not, go to a room with as few external walls, windows, and openings as possible, close all openings, sit on the floor below the window line and near an internal wall. In an open area, lay down on the ground and cover your head with your hands. When driving, safely pull over and follow the above instructions. Remain in position for at least ten minutes unless instructed otherwise and stay away from any unidentified objects.
4. It is advised to maintain heightened vigilance in Jerusalem, particularly in the Old City and Arab-populated eastern parts of the city, due to the increased tensions and elevated risk of unrest or a militant attack.
5. Travel to the West Bank should be for business-essential travel only due to the currently heightened risk of unrest and sudden and rapid deterioration of the security environment.