

Spring 2009

# Fifteen Months in the West Bank – Working towards a Secure and Stable Palestinian State

Brigadier John Deverell CBE

"By the end of January, when you will have been in Ramallah for a couple of months, you should let us know your objectives – be they ever so modest". Spoken by Number 10's Defence and Foreign Policy Adviser, these words were Whitehall's farewell to me and underlined the broad latitude within which I was to operate, in what was a new post. I was thus liberated from the Ministry of Defence. I had completed one year there, out of what should have been a 3 year tour as Director of Defence Diplomacy.

I had served in the Middle East for a total of 5 years and felt at home there. My last tour in that part of the world had been as deputy to US Major General Keith Dayton in Baghdad at the end of the 2003 invasion, when he built and directed the Iraq Survey Group, responsible for tracking down those elusive – or, as it turned out, non-existent – weapons of mass destruction. Dayton had moved to Jerusalem in due course and, promoted to Lieutenant General, had taken over a small team of Americans, Canadians and Britons as the United States Security Coordinator. President Bush had provided the context



Map of Israel showing the West Bank and Gaza Strip (CIA)

by saying: "I've directed Secretary of State Rice to lead a diplomatic effort to engage moderate leaders across the region, to help the Palestinians reform their security services." So, General Dayton's main task, working for the US Secretary of State, was to build the security capability of the Palestinian Authority - with Israeli acquiescence. The idea behind the USSC's "train and equip" programme with the Palestinians is that local forces could and would do more. This would enable the Israeli forces to remove their own security presence in the Occupied Territories when they saw that the Palestinians could manage security themselves. The

Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defence Forces, General Ashkenazi, had said: "As the Palestinians do more, we will do less."

Come Autumn 2007, there was some optimism that the recently-agreed Annapolis peace process, with the US-endorsed goal of a Two State Solution, might just work – and that Her Majesty's Government could therefore usefully reinforce local efforts. Mindful that security is the key to Palestinian statehood – because it underpins the viable state alongside which Israel will one day be able to exist with confidence – Dayton and his team were considered by HMG as good as anything else to

support. One or two key people knew that I had worked for Dayton before, that Dayton would be pleased to have some extra help from the United Kingdom – and that the MOD would be happy to do without me. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development and the MOD, who together fund the Conflict Prevention Pool which pays for British contributions to the USSC, supported the plan. And so I was chosen to join Dayton's team as the next most senior officer.



Lt Gen Dayton visiting RDCS with Maj Gen Sir Sebastian Roberts (SDS Army RCDS)

The British Defence Attaché in Tel Aviv, Colonel Mark Rollo-Walker, then suggested that I could – if I were happy to do so – break with the USSC's routine of working out of Jerusalem and base myself in Ramallah. But this would be a leap in the dark: no British government servants actually lived in the West Bank. HMG's way of doing business with Palestinians was usually to drive there, have a meeting and then return to Jerusalem which was the base for most of the international community. Indeed, on the American side, government servants were rarely allowed to visit at all – and only then under heavy security escort. But, sufficient precautions taken, Richard Makepeace, the British Consul-General (in formal terms my employing officer), decided that it should be safe for me to be based there. All parties agreed that there would be big presentational and practical advantages in my doing so. So it was that I came to live in a comfortable and modern block

of flats in Ramallah. This was a convenient arrangement. For example, whenever I did business with the Palestinian Interior Minister – General Abdul Razzaq al Yahya – who was responsible for overseeing most of the Authority's security forces, I had but to walk down the road for 5 minutes. To travel further afield in the West Bank, I was equipped with an armoured Toyota lent to me by the British DA. Otherwise I had no support: no assistant, no team, no driver, no interpreter – not even a laptop to begin with. I felt truly liberated. The only way to spend my time was to listen to lots of people and see the West Bank – in order to work out what was happening, who was worth getting to know and how I could make myself useful to General Dayton, whom I met regularly back in Jerusalem. I was given some introductions to helpful Palestinians in the West Bank by David Craig from the British Consulate-General. These introductions grew into friendships and through them I made other invaluable contacts over time. Palestinians are not reticent about what needs to be done to improve matters and so I did not lack ideas – some were simply easier to fulfil than others. Of those, "get rid of the Occupation" might have been a worthy aspiration but was hardly realistic as a short-term goal for a lone British brigadier. However, other exhortations such as "help our senior officers to realise that they need to be loyal to the state and not to a party" did give me plenty of food for thought.



Palestinian Children (John Deverell)

My role, as I saw it, was to reinforce General Dayton's existing efforts to increase the professional capability of

the Palestinian Authority's security forces, to suggest other things which could be done in that line – and to ensure, from my growing knowledge of local conditions, that what was done was appropriate to Palestinian needs. Dayton's principal programmes were twofold: firstly, to train a battalion at a time of the Palestinian National Security Forces – in Jordan, through the Jordanian police; and secondly, to build the professional capacity of the Palestinian Authority's Interior Ministry – remembering that the original interior ministry had been in Gaza and was destroyed by HAMAS in June 2007 when it seized Gaza from the Palestinian Authority by force. As Minister al Yahya said: *"I didn't even have a typewriter to start with, in my new ministry in Ramallah"*. So, the Americans, at General Dayton's instigation, funded a Strategic Planning Department – a team of international and Palestinian consultants, who were fast becoming the engine-room of the new ministry. Their job, amongst other things, was to advise on transformation of the forces from the plethora of over-manned militias spawned by Arafat, to a slimmed-down, accountable and altogether much more professional force. A small number of British officers and ex-officers have played a key part in both of these principal programmes of Dayton's: crucially, Major Steve Brooks as an assistant instructor for a time in Jordan and Major Kieran McManus in the Ministry of the Interior.

The US-educated Prime Minister of the caretaker Palestinian government, Doctor Salaam Fayyad, had shown the way to a new professionalism through his clear orders to the security forces to sort out law and order in three key West Bank cities: first in Nablus (in November 2007), then Jenin (in May 2008) and later Hebron (in September 2008). Over time, the Israelis began to replace their initial scepticism with a grudging acceptance that the Palestinians could carry out the less demanding security functions. But we knew that the graduates from the US-financed Jordanian training (the NSF 'special

battalions') could do far more, including – given sufficient political backing – tackling terrorists and their supporters. Following much urging by Dayton and other senior Americans, this translated into the IDF allowing the Palestinian forces just enough latitude to carry out operations to clean up those West Bank cities - though with considerable interference on occasion. Once upon a time, it would have been unthinkable for the Israelis to have allowed the Palestinians to carry out security operations in Hebron, because of the presence of hard-line Israeli settlers in the centre of the city and of a concern that confrontation might be sparked between the two sides. But the good conduct and effectiveness of the Palestinian security forces in Nablus and later in Jenin was, in the end, sufficient to persuade the Israelis to sanction Palestinian operations in Hebron. As a result, all three cities are now much safer for Palestinian civilians going about their lawful business.



West Bank Graffiti (John Deverell)

But it was clear to me and to those members of Dayton's team who had the freedom to travel regularly round the West Bank, that there was much more to be done. The different Palestinian security forces – Presidential Guards, National Security Forces (quasi-military – under the Oslo accords, the Palestinians are not allowed an army), the Preventative Security Organisation (a sort of Special Branch with its own executive arm), General Intelligence (also with its own executive arm) and the Civil Police – had shown that they could work together, at least up to a point, under the local area commanders

(who are always supplied by the NSF) in each Governorate. But there was scope for considerably more cooperative working. The concept of policing primacy and thus the correct role of the NSF to support, rather than to lead, operations was somewhat alien to most Palestinians. This was despite the efforts of the EU's policing mission to the Palestinians. Furthermore, there were (and remain) serious problems in the judicial sector – an improved capability through good training to arrest wanted men would not bear fruit unless a reasonable process of law then took effect. Furthermore my Palestinian contacts agreed that – useful as US-funded Jordanian training efforts had been to date – the 'special battalions' would only be really effective if they were properly led and employed.

So, after visiting senior Palestinian officers in Bethlehem with General Dayton in December 2007, I suggested to the NSF commander (Major General "Abu Fateh") and then to the Interior Minister that a Senior Leaders' Course might be helpful in training and educating the next generation of Palestinian security commanders. The level would be set at somewhat above a staff college and the aim would be to educate officers to understand the wider political and security context and to employ force more effectively and objectively. They grasped the idea with alacrity. General Dayton and the Conflict Prevention Pool stakeholders in Jerusalem and Whitehall agreed to support the idea of such a course. So it was over to me to make it happen.



Our Man in Ramallah

At this stage, it was clear to me that neither I nor General Dayton's team back in Jerusalem had the capacity to help the Palestinians cover the various gaps which had become apparent in their capability to carry out security. I was on my own in Ramallah and numbers of British (3 only), Canadians and Americans (less than 20) working for General Dayton in Jerusalem were strictly limited. The Americans were further constrained by their own security rules, in that the US Consul-General had continued to recommend to the US Secretary of State that the USSC should only travel into the West Bank for specified and approved meetings and under security escort at that. So I would have to seek outside help to augment my efforts. Whitehall had told me from the outset that they would be prepared to finance a team for me, if I identified and justified the requirement. But the Chief of the Defence Staff had let it be known that he would only approve operational deployments to places other than Iraq or Afghanistan exceptionally. MOD told me that this meant that I could have a team of civilian contractors but not serving British officers. Thus, by May 2008, having written the necessary terms of reference, I began the process of interviewing and recruiting. My aim was to establish a small team to write and deliver – with the Palestinians - a Senior Leaders' Course, and another well qualified team to work closely with the Palestinians in the specific areas of governance, rule of law, strategic communications, the manpower aspects of security sector reform – and information-sharing and cooperative working between the different security services. These, as I saw them, were real areas of need.

With the help of Dayton and the British DA, I had in the meantime begun to build productive relationships with the Israeli brigadier general – "Poly" Mordechai – and his staff who were in charge of the civil administration of the West Bank. Poly's job was to direct the representatives of Israeli ministries in fulfilling the functions of the occupying power in the West Bank. He also advised

the Israeli operational commander of the West Bank, Major General Gadi Shamni (another Israeli officer whom I came to know well), in the implications of Israeli military operations for Palestinians. Through his advice - and ultimately that of Shamni to Minister Ehud Barak - Israeli security organisations could - if they chose to - alter the way they did things. This was provided that they felt that Israeli security requirements would not be prejudiced and that there would not be adverse political reactions on the Israeli side - remembering as always the political power of the settlers in the West Bank. My relationship with Poly was therefore important if we were to enable the Palestinians to carry out more of their own security for themselves, with less Israeli intrusion. Over time, both Poly and Gadi Shamni came to believe in the work that Dayton and his team were doing to promote improvements in Palestinian capacity, to the mutual interest of both sides. But my relationship with these officers was thrown into jeopardy several times by unfounded concerns of other senior Israelis about what I was really doing in the West Bank and elsewhere - and were only rescued by the intervention of Dayton, supported by the British DA. The episodes showed the importance of being explicitly backed by the US machine. The original decision to make me part of Dayton's team was amply vindicated.

Come June I had recruited a first-rate team of British assistants to take forward the Senior Leaders' Course idea, following on from work by retired Brigadier Nick Clissitt to draft with me a detailed syllabus in concert with the Palestinians. Retired Colonel Witek Nowosielski, who had instructed at Shrivenham, became the Director of Studies. He was assisted by another ex-Army officer, James Withington, who had worked at the Defence Academy. I also secured the services of 2 high-grade ex-police officers: Doug Brand, who had been the senior British policeman in Iraq after the invasion, and Neil Page. In time, Americans and a Canadian and a German instructor joined them. The aim

has been to establish a Palestinian-run course for Palestinians, in keeping with the core strategy of equipping Palestinian society to provide its own security: essential for statehood.

The course concept is to enable middle and senior ranking officers to respect human rights and the needs of the people; to acknowledge that Palestinian aspirations have to be considered as part of regional needs and cannot be seen in isolation; to be loyal to a state not to a party; and to be able to plan and coordinate operations professionally between the various different forces. The outline of the course having been agreed, in 3 months the first students were sitting in classrooms: this was considerably faster than could have been achieved in Britain. This is a credit to the Palestinian hierarchy, who saw the potential, and to the British team who drove the project forward. In essence, the objective of building well-led security forces has been greatly strengthened by the establishment of the course. With the ethos and intensity of a staff college, the SLC graduated 36 officers of generally high quality from its first nine-week course up to December 2008, with 40 more on the second course and a third already planned. Some of the graduates of the first course are now filling key positions and are starting to bring about positive change. The course is already a force for reform and for more cooperative working between the different services.

By June 2008 my own team was also well established and since my departure after 15 months' Palestinian service at the end of February 2009, continues under my successor Brigadier George Lowder. The team consists of: Michael Stewart (civil defence, crisis management, economy), Joe Walker-Cousins (ground truth, engagement with Governorates and civil society, development of joint operations by Palestinian security forces), Josh Paul (rule of law, governance, developing an inspectorate general for the security forces) and John Williams (strategic communications). This team of 4 is supported by a junior British serving

officer as team coordinator and three Palestinian staff: Samira, Rami and Amin. It constitutes an accumulation of valuable and relevant experience. Out of the 4 core members, 2 have military experience, one has worked inside the US administration at senior level, 2 have good Arabic qualifications, and our strategic communications adviser was spokesman to the British foreign secretary. Regrettably I do not have the space here to cover the team's work in any detail. Suffice it to say that they greatly increased my own and General Dayton's capacity to help the Palestinians develop a professional and accountable security capability. They achieved this through their expertise and by building good relationships across the board - without which effective working in the Middle East is not possible. Although I could not have serving officers, in a way I got the best of both worlds by being able to choose good contractors who had relevant security, governance and commercial experience. My teams and I cost less than £2million per year which constitutes a very cost-effective means of delivering day by day some of Britain's highest foreign objectives: stability and reconciliation in the Middle East, a strong relationship with the US in practice on the ground - as well as public diplomacy, in the wider sense of showing commitment to those who look to Britain for support. And, finally, as part of this theme, the position of our teams under the command of the USSC gives Britain a direct link to the highest levels of US decision-making through an operational route which is valued by the Americans.

In July 2008 General Dayton visited senior Whitehall representatives with me in tow. He asked the MOD and Foreign Secretary David Milliband if they would agree to my being the coordinator for all international efforts to improve the quality of life for all Palestinians living in Jenin Governorate, the most northerly part of the West Bank. The thesis was that this would consolidate the position of the moderates and show all Palestinians that there was a valid and preferred alternative to the violence

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promoted by extremists. In security terms, conditions had already been set by the Palestinians themselves through their operations in May, which had made Jenin a safer place. But security is of course only a means to an end: Palestinians needed to see that effective security both improved their daily lives and helped build their independent future. The thesis was that a combination of a secure environment, the rule of law, sound institutions and potential economic growth would provide a strong basis on which to build public support for difficult security decisions, especially where cooperation with Israel was required. Internally, the link between security, quality of life and institution-building is potentially a powerful counter-narrative to the consistent HAMAS argument that PA security operations amount to collaboration with Israel and the US. Quartet Representative Tony Blair and General Jim Jones, ex-SACEUR and the US Special Envoy for Middle East Regional Security until his appointment as US National Security Adviser, had both advocated this approach with Jenin. General Dayton and his team had worked closely with them. Whitehall agreed and thus my team and I became closely involved in efforts to help with Jenin.



Quartet Representative Tony Blair shakes hands with a West Bank villager (Office of Tony Blair)

At the time of writing (April 2009) this particular project may or may not be extended across other areas of the West Bank and is far from complete. A number of international projects were in any case in train and some of these have had positive results. The Palestinians themselves have succeeded in improving

matters in certain areas. But real change can only take place when the Palestinians are given much more freedom of access and movement – heavily constrained by the Israelis at present, despite a handful of hard-won concessions. So our success should be measured against the task of ensuring that key issues have been consistently and correctly identified, described and briefed up to the highest level in the US and to the Quartet Representative, and that a cohesive ‘line to take’ has been agreed and adopted across all relevant international representatives in all dealings with Israelis. Without our local presence, insight and relations with all parties, Palestinians and Israelis included, it is reasonable to claim that initiatives would have lacked cohesion and stood significantly less chance of being moved forward.

How about my use of ‘free’ time, such as it was? Living in the West Bank as we did, we spent more time off-duty with Palestinians than with other internationals. I took friends on long walks across the West Bank hills. There were plenty of walks to do across that wonderfully scenic and pastoral landscape, where so many hills and villages evoke biblical associations. The prophets, Christ, his disciples: all had their ministries in this land. I was particularly interested in the fate of the Palestinian Christians of whom there is extraordinarily little awareness in the West. And yet, their ancestors were Christians long before ours in Britain. Christian Palestinian friends told me that they consider themselves ‘under a double occupation’ today: their land is occupied both by Muslims and Israelis. No wonder their numbers are much diminished – perhaps 2% of the population in the West Bank and in Israel are Christian. For those who remain, Christianity is important. I attended an Easter Day service in a West Bank town and was uplifted by the wildly enthusiastic reaction of hundreds of churchgoers of all ages to the lighting of the ‘Holy Fire’ which had been brought to Ramallah from the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and thence to every West Bank church.

Overall, 15 months seemed a short period. There was much to do, and remains plenty more yet. Indeed, perhaps the job will not be finished for years and ultimately it is not for us outsiders to determine the nature of Palestinian security. I do not believe it is possible to get to know another culture sufficiently to be able to contribute fully, in much less time than 15 months. Certainly 6 months, originally my planned length of tour, would have been laughably short. If I did not have other demands on my time and on my life, I would have been very happy to have spent a second full year amongst that humbly hospitable and fascinating people, the Palestinians – assisting them to build their capacity to support and administer themselves, as part of their much-justified quest for statehood.

And what of the outcomes of our work, in professional terms? Perhaps the most obvious recent indicator of a new professionalism and objectivity within the Palestinian Authority’s security forces was the calm which persisted throughout the West Bank during the IDF war in Gaza early in 2009, despite significant conflicting tensions which were caused not least by HAMAS’s calls for an uprising. This relative calm came as a surprise to many and was the result of a combination of factors, including the clear orders given by Prime Minister Salaam Fayyad to the security forces’ leadership. Before the USSC’s training programmes, it is unlikely that the Palestinian security forces would have been professionally able to carry out the task of preventing demonstrations from getting out of hand and the resulting escalation. The key achievement of our team was to emphasize through our boss, the US Security Coordinator, and to other senior internationals the need to persuade the Israelis to loosen their controls on the West Bank in order to show the people that self-restraint is worthwhile; and then to enumerate what IDF controls could usefully be relaxed. General Dayton briefed to the highest levels accordingly – and in turn the Quartet Representative emphasized the need for the IDF to make big concessions

on the West Bank – for which we and the Palestinians continue to wait.

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The USSC's efforts are essentially to enable Palestinians to provide for their own security, crucial for statehood. In testimony to US Congress, General Dayton had said: *"I'm trying to achieve a Palestinian security sector that has people of the right type and the right size for a*

*political entity its size...and I'm looking for something that can give the Israelis confidence that they have a partner on the other side that can control its internal affairs. That's really what I am trying to do."* The British have been playing a key part, and with significant success to date, in helping Palestinians to build this capability - from the bottom upwards. This has never been done before. Ultimately, though, this can only have a good chance of success if the US Administration decides to engage very actively with the new Israeli government - in effect matching our 'bottom up' approach with a 'top down' strategy to help the Israelis make real changes on the ground. The chances of this working are as good if not better than at any other time in the past. The new US President has consistently stated that the Middle East Peace Process is a very high priority, General Dayton has close links with key people at the top of the US Administration and he is Senator George Mitchell's deputy for security. Furthermore, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has commended the work

of the United States Security Coordinator on Palestinian security reform, describing it as an example of 'smart power'.

So the planets are aligned favourably for results. But there is a need for urgency. The strengthening of the Palestinian Authority's reputation after the trauma of Gaza and in preparation for potentially very difficult elections is crucially important - not least because this is in the face of an unrelenting communications campaign by HAMAS that violent resistance can pay dividends. So the Palestinian moderates who promote peaceful negotiation as a better strategy than violence for getting a state desperately need to be able to show the people some tangible results for their pains. Otherwise, the baton may well pass from the moderates to the extremists, which would be likely to end our mission and bring about significantly increased challenges for the West, for Israel and the region at large. □



29 Armoured Engineer Squadron, part of 35 Engineer Regiment normally based in Paderborn Germany, took part in Operation Whirlpool 2, an operation to repair a vital bridge spanning the Shatt al-Arab Waterway in central Basra. (20 Bde)