

# The Lion's Den: Redefining Palestinian Resistance

*A Study on the Revival and Development of Armed Resistance in the West Bank*



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## **Abstract**

This thesis analyses the revival and development of armed Palestinian resistance in the West Bank through the case study of the group “Lion’s Den”, or in Arabic “Areen Al-Usud”. The movement demonstrates a significant shift within Palestinian resistance in the West Bank, as it marks a resurgence of violent tactics on a scale not witnessed since the second intifada, while also exhibiting a unique combination of armed struggle with a more organised form of resistance. The research adopts a collective action theory approach and employs diverse data sources and methodologies to provide a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter. Given its relatively recent emergence, the topic has received limited academic attention, creating a crucial empirical research gap. The study makes a valuable contribution to the theoretical field of collective action by shedding light on how social movements may adapt and resist in contexts characterised by overlapping and contested authorities, such as the complex socio-political makeup of the West Bank. Moreover, this thesis introduces a novel analytical perspective by incorporating the concept of "violent imaginaries" into the framework of collective action, offering relevant insights into the ways armed groups may justify violent tactics within their contention. The research reveals how mounting Israeli repression in the West Bank and an incompetent Palestinian leadership that fails to confront this repression has left Palestinians with limited political prospects, leading to the emergence of the resistance movement that for many appears to be the best alternative. A new form of crossfactional cooperation has given rise to a unique political discourse that projects a sense of unity and purpose and resonates with the desires of many Palestinians, while culturally informed frames and symbols have played a significant role in mobilising support for armed strategies against Israel. The empirical analysis exhibits ongoing political significance as at the time of writing the armed Palestinian insurgency and the corresponding Israeli counterinsurgency continue to dominate the dynamics of the West Bank.

*The youth will not get tired  
Their goal is your independence  
Or they die  
We will drink from death  
But we will not be slaves to our enemies*

*We do not want  
An eternal humiliation  
Nor a miserable life  
We do not want  
But we will return  
Our great glory  
My homeland  
My homeland*

Ibrahim Tuqan, Nablus, 1934

## **Table of contents**

Introduction	5
Theoretical Framework	7
Methodology	8
Outline	11
1. Opportunity Structures: The Evolving Landscape of the West Bank	11
1.1 The Relative Openness or Closure of the Institutionalised Political System	12
1.2 The Stability of the Elite	15
1.3 The State's Capacity and Propensity for Repression	17
1.4 Preliminary Conclusion	21
2. Mobilising Structures: The Organisational Dynamics of the Lion's Den's Mobilisation Efforts	22
2.1 Formal Organisations that Provide Structures for Mobilization	23
2.2 Informal Networks that Facilitate Communication and Coordination among Individuals	25
2.3 Material Sources	26
2.4 Non-Material sources	29
2.5 Preliminary Conclusion	30
3. Framing Processes: Unravelling the Violent Imaginaries of the Lion's Den	31
3.1 Narratives	32
3.2 Performances	36
3.3 Inscriptions	38
3.4 Preliminary conclusion	43
Conclusion	44
Bibliography	47

## Introduction

During a memorial service on the 2nd of September 2022, a crowd of thousands of people gathered in the old city of Nablus, a Palestinian city in the north of the West Bank. A militant dressed in full black military attire stood on stage stating “We have come here today, 40 days after the death of the Den’s lions, and in light of the burning revolution of our people in Jerusalem, in Gaza, in Jeningrad [Arafat’s Second Intifada-era stylization of Jenin after Stalingrad]...we have come to tell you that the spark began in the Old City [of Nablus] when our leader Abu Ammar formed the first cells of the revolution in the al-Yasmina neighbourhood [during the Second Intifada]” (Barghouti & Patel 2022). The speech continued, with the armed man passionately proclaiming a new form of independent Palestinian resistance and a commitment to conducting military operations against the Israeli security forces and settlers in the West Bank. The event marked the first official appearance of a group known as “the Lion’s Den”, or in Arabic *Areen al-Usud*, an armed resistance group that emerged supposedly during the summer of 2022 and comprises many former members of other political and militant Palestinian factions (*Ibid.*). Since then, the group engaged in a number of attacks against and clashes with Israeli forces and settlers, creating significant notoriety and support among the Palestinians population in the West Bank. The group is not a “fleeting phenomenon” as it is generally believed to represent a larger trend within the West Bank, where new non-factional militant groups have emerged that increasingly rely on armed tactics as a means to defy the Israeli occupation (Baroud 2022). These groups first appeared in Jenin, another city in the northern West Bank, and have swiftly multiplied, spreading their influence across the occupied territory. Similar groups emerged in the old city of Nablus, like the Lion’s Den, and the nearby Balata refugee camp, followed by other camps in the northern cities of Tulkarm and Tubas. While the trend seems to be spreading over the West Bank, the Lion’s Den, together with the “Jenin Brigades”, seem to be the largest and most influential groups. The strategic approach adopted by this new generation is particularly notable as it marks a resurgence of armed resistance in the West Bank on a scale not witnessed since the second intifada, the Palestinian "uprising" that took place between 2000 and 2005. Additionally, in contrast to the second intifada where uprisings were more decentralised and spontaneous, the current movement is unique in its combining of armed struggle with a more organised form of resistance, demonstrating a significant shift in the tactics employed within the Palestinian resistance movement in the West Bank (Hatuqa 2023).

The emergence and development of this relatively new phenomenon in Palestinian resistance within the West Bank presents a compelling and significant research opportunity. On the one hand, it addresses a crucial empirical knowledge gap as there is little to no academic literature available on the topic of these newly emerging groups, and on the other hand, this empirical reality also informs an important theoretical contribution. The setting within which the group emerged is that of the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict, more specifically the occupied West Bank, which is known for its unique political characteristics. In order to account for this political reality, some adaptations will

be made to the existing theoretical framework, thereby contributing to our understanding of how and why social movements emerge and evolve within complex and distinct socio-political contexts. The adaptations allow me to move beyond the conventional focus on single political regimes, and they aim to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the ways in which two political regimes together facilitate contention. Such insights can enhance our understanding of how social movements adapt and resist in contexts characterised by overlapping and contested authorities. Moreover, to effectively address the distinctive violent nature of the group, this research will introduce a novel analytical perspective by integrating the concept of "violent imaginaries" into the framework of collective action, which will be further discussed within the theoretical framework section. In combining and synthesising bodies of literature from different fields of research, this approach presents a valuable theoretical contribution.

Capturing the movement in the West Bank at large poses some inherent analytical challenges due to its multifaceted nature and the diverse groups involved, and would most likely result in a broad, more surface-level analysis. Using a case study in order to study the broader movement would be useful as it provides an in-depth examination of a specific group within the movement, enabling me as a researcher to explore the complexities and unique dynamics that may not be readily apparent in a broader analysis. It provides a detailed exploration of the context, actions, and consequences associated with the chosen case, thereby generating more rich and nuanced insights.

While the new militant groups in the West Bank operate under different names and leadership, their common goals and strategies have turned it into one unified front of collective Palestinian resistance, with the Lion's Den emerging as a prominent example of this new form of resistance (Baroud 2022). For this reason, the case of the Lion's Den may serve as an interesting case study to understand and explain the broader process of the changing Palestinian resistance in the West Bank. In light of these considerations, the main research question emerges as follows:

*How can we explain the summer 2022 revival and development of armed Palestinian resistance in the West Bank through the case study of the Lion's Den?*

The main research question will be addressed through the exploration of the following sub-questions:

*What opportunity structures are identifiable in the West Bank that allowed for the Lion's Den to engage in contentious politics?*

*How have mobilising structures facilitated the emergence and development of the Lion's Den?*

*How does the Lion's Den employ and promote violent imaginaries as a justification for its use of violence?*

## **Theoretical Framework**

In order to answer the main question, the research will draw upon the general literature on social movements, with a specific focus on collective action theory. Until the 1960s, social movement scholars generally approached the study of mobilisation for collective action through a structural lens, seeking explanations for contention in the broader structures of society (Tilly & Tarrow 2015: 216). These conventional structuralist approaches to understanding collective action are often criticised for their static nature, as they overlook the role of individual agency and neglect the process through which inherent contradictions evolve into actual acts of violence (Demmers 2017: 127). As a reaction to this theoretical gap, a “cultural turn” emerged within social movement studies, focusing on the agency of the individual and the role of identity and framing in mobilising collective action (Tilly & Tarrow 2015: 216). Scholars like Benford & Snow (2000: 631), have stressed the importance of framing in facilitating collective action, asserting that “the extent to which [political opportunities] constrain or facilitate collective action is partly contingent on how they are framed by movement actors as well as others”. Both the structural as well as the individual approach are criticised for each placing either agency or structure as ontologically prior entities. The individualist approach is generally considered as being mono-causal, neglecting the more structural origins to people’s beliefs, while structuralist approaches fail to account for the individual agency of insurgents and the dynamic processes of mobilisation. The problem with this “ontological gap” is that it fails to account for the dialectical relationship between structures and agents, neglecting how the two entities in fact complement each other in understanding the how and the why of collective action. Through arguing that social structures are created and maintained through human agency, but at the same time also constrain and enable that agency, the theory of “the duality of structures”, as proposed by Giddens (2006), seeks to blur the conceptual distinction between the two entities and demonstrate their mutually constitutive nature (Demmers 2017: 128).

Collective action theory builds on this approach through incorporating both structural factors as well as individual actors in the study of social movements, resulting in a multi-causal approach that is ontologically mixed. Collective action scholars generally argue that studying the emergence and development of a social movement requires considering three key factors, which, when synthesised, offer a comprehensive framework for understanding collective action (McAdam et al. 1996; King 2007). This framework incorporates opportunity structures, mobilising structures, and framing processes, which are not considered as three external elements but rather interconnected lenses through which actors, factors, and strategies interrelate (McAdam et al. 1996). In order to thoroughly explain and understand the mobilisation efforts of the Lion's Den, my research will employ these three analytical categories enabling an examination of both the structural conditions and cultural processes involved in their collective action. The categories of opportunity structures and mobilising structures will be guided by indicators as proposed by McAdam et al. (1996), while the concept of "violent imaginaries" proposed by Schröder & Schmidt (2001) will encompass the examination of the category



of framing processes in this study. This conceptualisation helps to understand the ways in which parties sanction violence as the legitimate course of action, which is of relevance for the study at hand given that the emergence of the Lion's Den marks a shift, or return, to violent strategies within the resistance movement in the West Bank. By comprehending the processes by which such violent tactics are justified and endorsed, we can gain insight into why the group's strategy has resonated strongly with the population, thus shedding light on their substantial support and the mobilising capacity of such imaginaries.

## **Methodology**

The thesis will employ a qualitative research strategy, adopting a case-study approach in order to gain comprehensive insights into the research topic. In order to meet the specific needs of each chapter, the research engages in a comprehensive data collection strategy that incorporates various sources and methodologies, ensuring the availability of relevant and diverse information.

I will draw upon a variety of secondary sources, such as reports, journalistic articles, interviews, and a collection of primary textual as well as visual sources. The reports and journalistic articles will be collected through internet searches, mainly relying on reports of reputable and well-known (non-governmental) organisations, as well as articles of well-established news outlets, like Al Jazeera and The New York Times. When collecting these readily available sources, I will ensure a balanced selection and make sure to critically evaluate their credibility, authoritativeness, and objectivity, and consider potential motives behind the presentation of certain narratives or arguments. Especially considering the highly polarised nature of the debate on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Palestinian cause more specifically, it is crucial to be attentive to any selective or incomplete reporting that may skew the overall picture. Since the phenomenon is quite recent and there is not much data available on it yet, these textual sources will be accompanied by semi-structured interviews with three experts on the matter, in order to add depth to the analysis and strengthen the findings. For the interviews, I have approached one Dutch and two Palestinian experts, who are generally thought to possess extensive knowledge on the topic of this thesis. I first interviewed Aboud Hamayel, assistant professor at Birzeit University and expert on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I then interviewed Dr. Omar Rahal, head of the Palestinian NGO "Human Rights and Democracy Media Center SHAMS" and political science lecturer at Birzeit University, and lastly I interviewed Thomas van Gool, Project Lead Israel-Palestine at the Dutch NGO "PAX for Peace". The selection of these three interviewees serves to provide diverse perspectives and expertise from academic, human rights, and peace-building professionals, enhancing the depth and scope of the research findings. In order to properly address possible ethical considerations, informed consent was obtained from the interviewees, ensuring they understand the purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of their participation. Also, the interviewees were given the opportunity to review and confirm the direct quotations attributed to

them. The primary sources will include the Telegram account of the Lion's Den, as well as videos and images collected through the internet and with the help of an acquaintance from Nablus. The Telegram account encompasses near daily ongoing messages starting from August 2022. For analytical purposes, I have decided to select and analyse the data that was published on the Telegram account from the 26th of January 2023 until the end of February. I decided to choose the 26th of January because a big Israeli raid took place on this day in the Jenin refugee camp, which killed 9 Palestinians (McKernan 2023). Since this day, there seems to have been an increase in the Israeli raids taking place in the West Bank, sparking even more outrage among Palestinian resistance groups, thus possibly providing more interesting insights into how the group justifies its violence. With regards to the end date, I have chosen the end of February simply for practical purposes, based on the assumption that one month of almost daily messages will suffice. Since the data is in Arabic, and contains culturally-specific references, I have ensured a reliable translation of the text through the hiring of a professional Arabic translator. The Telegram account of the Lion's Den is publicly available, and it is generally considered ethically acceptable to conduct research on publicly available information; nevertheless, it is crucial to maintain a responsible approach to prevent any harm or exploitation of the group and individuals involved, and make sure that I am using the data in a responsible way. Furthermore, I have selected the few videos and images available of public gatherings and memorial services of the Lion's Den that were available online, mainly through the news outlet Al Jazeera. And lastly, I have collected 10 posters and 1 image of the logo of the group. These were both retrieved from the internet as well as sent to me by an acquaintance from Nablus, who, since he is a Palestinian local and knows the people from the city, was not put in danger during the process of taking pictures of the posters.

For the analysis of the secondary data of the reports and articles, the method of content analysis will be utilised, allowing for a systematic and objective exploration of themes, patterns, and meanings within the collected documents. Similarly, thematic analysis will be applied to analyse the interview data, facilitating the identification and interpretation of recurring themes and underlying factors expressed by the experts. In order to turn these two approaches into one coherent methodological strategy, rather than two disjointed ones, the method of triangulation will be employed. Triangulation refers to the use of a "combination of methods to explore one set of research questions" (Mason 2018: 190), and can be used to identify the convergence of data obtained through these multiple data sources "to avoid or minimise error or bias and optimise accuracy in data collection and analysis processes" (Johnson et al. 2020: 143). It is within this context that the textual data and the interviews will be compared and cross-referenced, in order to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings, and to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of the research topic. For the analysis of the primary sources, a dual approach of content analysis and visual analysis will be employed. This methodology aims to thoroughly examine both the textual and visual sources, providing insights into how the group justifies violence and communicates their ideology through various mediums. Content

analysis of the Telegram account will help to identify and interpret certain themes, patterns, and discourses, while visual analysis of the videos, photos, posters, and logo will help to analyse how symbolism and imagery contribute to the group's message.

Similar to its ontological position, this research adopts a mixed epistemological standpoint. On the one hand, it recognizes the existence of an objective reality that is shaped by social and historical contexts. This perspective aligns with a critical realist approach, which posits that there are underlying structures and mechanisms that influence human behaviour and shape the social world. The analysis of opportunity structures and external relational fields will be in line with this approach, as it assumes that we can explain the insurgency as resulting from certain events and processes. Through the scrutiny and analysis of textual documents and reports, the research aims to uncover the causal laws and regulations that drive the action of the Lion's Den. In this sense, the research aims to produce general explanations of human behaviour, treating actions as essentially determined and predictable (Demmers 2017: 17). On the other hand, through exploring the meanings and interpretations that the group attributes to their experiences, my epistemological stance will also be informed by interpretivism. By analysing the ways in which the group frames and makes sense of its violence, I seek to uncover the historically and culturally specific understandings and realities constructed by the Lion's Den, thus studying the social world from *within* (*Ibid.*). Through both explaining and understanding human action, this research recognizes the inherent agency and capacity for reflexive self-direction by actors, while it simultaneously acknowledges that these actors are situated within their society, influenced by the social contexts in which they exist (*Ibid.*: 18).

## **Outline**

The thesis outline comprises three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter delves into the evolving landscape of the West Bank, exploring the contextual factors that facilitated the emergence of the Lion's Den, thus also having relevance for other armed resistance groups in the region.

The second and third chapters focus more specifically on the Lion's Den, investigating their organisational capabilities and analysing their justifications for employing violent tactics. The conclusion synthesises the findings from the three analytical categories, examining their interplay to address the thesis' overarching goal of explaining the revival and emergence of armed resistance in the West Bank, thereby contributing to our understanding of the broader trend of changing resistance dynamics in the region.

## 1. Opportunity Structures: The Evolving Landscape of the West Bank

Tarrow (1996: 874), defines “contentious politics” as “collective activity on the part of the claimants—or those who claim to represent them—relying at least in part on noninstitutional forms of interaction with elites, opponents, or the state”. According to him, relating social movements to contentious politics helps us to better position the former in relation to “institutions, political alignments, and long-term political struggles” (*Ibid.*). The analytical category of opportunity structures allows us to explore how social movements navigate institutional constraints, engage with political alignments, and participate in long-term political struggles. By examining such opportunities, researchers can gain insight into the conditions that either enable or constrain contentious collective action and shape the dynamics of social movements (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2009: 266). While scholars do acknowledge that social movements are shaped by the broader set of political constraints and opportunities unique to political contexts in which they operate (Tilly & Tarrow 2015: 14), most of the literature on collective action seems to be exclusively rooted in the empirical studies of societies where insurgents are subjugated to one political regime or entity. The political situation in the West Bank, however, is characterised by a unique set of circumstances that requires going beyond traditional regime classifications. Israel's decision to exert control over the territories in the aftermath of the Six-Day War in 1967 resulted in a dual socio-political structure, where Palestinians were both integrated into Israeli society and yet treated separately in terms of the judicial and political dimensions. This left Palestinians in the West Bank subjugated to the policies and practices of both the PA, as well as Israel and its military rule (Alimi 2009: 222). As a result, a situation of dual governance emerged, with the coexistence and interaction of two regime structures, leading to a complex set of conditions that have shaped the emergence and development of the social movement. Therefore, this chapter seeks to examine the dual set of opportunity structures created by both the PA and Israel, that have facilitated the contentious collective action of the Lion’s Den in the West Bank. This approach allows for each analytical dimension of opportunity structures to assess both the role of the PA as well as Israel. The first two dimensions however focus more on the role of the PA while the third one places more emphasis on the role of Israel, in order to accurately account for the opportunity structures that are relevant for explaining the group’s emergence and development. This chapter thus answers to the sub-question of:

*What opportunity structures are identifiable in the West Bank that allowed for the Lion’s Den to engage in contentious politics?*

Three analytical dimensions will be operationalised in order to answer this question. Based on collective action theory as proposed by McAdam et al. (1996: 10), these will be as follows; “the relative openness or closure of the institutionalised political system”, “the stability of the elite”, and

“the state’s capacity and propensity for repression”, while their proposed dimension of “the presence of elite allies” will be discarded, as the Lion’s Den seems to have no elitist ties (Zubaidi 2022).

### *1.1 The Relative Openness or Closure of the Institutionalised Political System*

The relative openness or closure of the institutionalised political system refers to the degree to which political institutions provide avenues for the participation, representation, and influence of individuals in decision-making processes. An open institutionalised system implies that the governing structures allow for conventional means of participation and redressing grievances, and that the demands of collective actors are likely to have an impact on policy decisions and governance. A closed political system, on the other hand, limits the influence of individuals and groups on political processes. Dissent or alternative viewpoints may be suppressed or disregarded, potentially leading to grievances and the need to engage in contentious politics in the pursuit of collective goals (Meyer & Minkoff 2004: 1459). In such a highly repressive political setting, political violence may appear to be the only alternative (Alimi 2009: 232). This finding appears to be especially relevant for the case of the West Bank, where high levels of PA corruption and the closure of space for any significant popular democratic engagement seems to have provided a significant opportunity for the Lion’s Den to gain support and mobilise.

Before delving into the analysis of the PA’s role, it is important for this particular analytical dimension to refer to the broader context of Israeli policies and their impact on Palestinians in the West Bank. This is due to the fact that Palestinians in the West Bank are subjugated to policies of a regime, namely that of Israel, which denies them any influence in the democratic process (Freedom House 2022). These policies will be elaborated on further later in this chapter, but what is of essence here is that this lack of democratic input restricts Palestinians’ ability to participate in shaping the political decisions that directly affect their lives. This may add to their feelings of frustration and hopelessness, consequently providing an opportunity or incentive to engage in armed resistance, or contentious collective action.

Palestinians in the West Bank are subjugated to the regime of the Fatah-controlled PA, led by President Mahmoud Abbas. Democratic institutions exist, but appear to be dysfunctional (Carnegie Europe 2021). Presidential elections, for example, have not been held since 2005, when Abbas was elected. His four-year term was set to expire in 2009, but he, backed by his Fatah party, has consolidated his power and continues to rule up until today. The Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) was last elected in 2006, but appeared dysfunctional due to rivalry between Fatah and Gaza-based Hamas, and lawmakers being detained by Israel. This has given Abbas free rein to appoint prime ministers and cabinets without legislative approval, resulting in the executive body controlling the judiciary (Freedom House 2023). In addition to this, Abbas effectively dissolved the parliament in

2007, and instead has been ruling by presidential decrees (Carnegie Europe 2021). Since there is no functioning legislative council, these decrees can be effectuated without appropriate checks and balances, leading to a concentration of power in favour of the ruling elite of Abbas (Al Jazeera 2022). It is widely recognized that administrative, political, and financial corruption dominates the scene in the West Bank, and nepotism is considered one of the major manifestations of such corruption. Several leading local as well as international NGOs identify nepotism as an ongoing threat to public institutions, as the PA has consistently filled political positions and decision-making roles related to public affairs with individuals aligned with the ruling power (Transparency International 2012, Al-Shabaka 2018, AMAN 2022).

While the PA has continuously been criticised for its authoritarian tendencies over the last years, Palestinian politics have recently witnessed an even more “autocratic bend”.<sup>1</sup> According to the Economist’s Democracy Index (2022), Palestine, comprising both the Gaza strip and the West Bank, has officially become an authoritarian regime in 2019, and continues to be one up until its last report published in 2022. This democratic deficit can be ascribed to multiple factors, one of the most significant being the further deterioration of the rule of law,<sup>2</sup> as since 2019 Abbas has undertaken a series of measures aimed at further consolidating his authority over the judiciary, including the replacement of the High Judicial Council with a new entity that he himself would head (Freedom House 2023). In addition to this, elections for the PLC and presidential elections were scheduled to take place in May and July, respectively, but were cancelled and indefinitely postponed by President Abbas. The decision was purportedly made due to the fact that Israel had not certified whether the Palestinian residents of Jerusalem would be allowed to cast their vote in the elections. Analysts have however cited Abbas’ loss of control over his Fatah party and the fear of Hamas victory as the main reason for the postponement (European Council on Foreign Relations). While the PA already seemed to be in a crisis of legitimacy, the cancellation of the elections has prolonged and exacerbated this crisis, further weakening Abbas and his Fatah party and facilitating a rise in the risk of institutional collapse (Rahman 2021). In December 2021 and March 2022, municipal council elections took place in the West Bank. While these elections were generally considered to be well-administered and an important opportunity to “reinvigorate municipal council leadership”, the divide between the political parties impeded genuine democratic development on a national level and thus appeared only a semblance of affirmation of democratic rights for the Palestinians (The Carter Center 2022). The high levels of corruption and an increase in the curtailing of democratic involvement has resulted in extreme feelings of distrust among the Palestinians in the West Bank towards their leadership, further widening the disconnect between the political elites and the public (Stern 2023). Geographically, this form of “political unbinding” is especially relevant for the northern part of the West Bank, as PA

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s interview with Aboud Hamayel

<sup>2</sup> Author’s interview with Thomas van Gool

policy is more concerned with governing and controlling its home base of Ramallah, creating a profound ideological rift between more remote northern cities like Nablus and the ruling elites.<sup>3</sup>

Although the Lion's Den itself claims its sole target is Israel, rather than the PA and its members (Al Jazeera 2022), it can be said that the failure of the PA to provide a political horizon for its people has contributed greatly to the emergence of and support for the group. In June 2022, a Palestinian public opinion poll revealed that 86 percent of Palestinians believe there is corruption within the PA, that 73 percent were dissatisfied with the performance of President Abbas, and 77 percent demanded his resignation (PCPSR 2022). Another Palestinian opinion poll, conducted in December of that same year, demonstrated that 72 percent of the public, among whom 65 percent in the West Bank, are in favour of forming armed groups like the Lion's Den, with a vast majority of 87 percent saying that the PA does not hold "the right to arrest members of these groups in order to prevent them from carrying out attacks against Israel or to provide them with protection" (PCPSR 2022). These findings back the claim that the erosion of the PA's institutions has resulted in a crisis of legitimacy, consequently creating a political vacuum that insurgent groups like the Lion's Den are attempting to fill (Al Masri 2022).

### *1.2 The Stability of the Elite*

The analytical dimension of "the stability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity", as proposed by McAdam et al. (1996: 10), pertains to the coherence and durability of connections, partnerships, and networks between various factions of the elite within a political system. The general idea is that instability of political alignments can encourage insurgents to engage in contentious collective action (Tarrow 2011: 165). Based on empirical observations, I have made the decision to redefine the analytical dimension to "the stability of the political elite", as it offers a more comprehensive framework that allows for the study of a broader range of factors in capturing the mobilising opportunities. While recognizing the significance of studying internal political alignments in the case at hand, this redefined dimension also allows for an examination of elite stability beyond internal alignments, which is important for assessing the opportunities that facilitated the emergence of the group. Building on the assumption that the instability of political alignments may evoke contention, this subchapter presumes that a disruption or weakening of the stability of the political elite in general may also provide opportunities for collective action. Besides internal elite fragmentation, external factors may in fact also destabilise a political elite. Internal struggles as well as security cooperation with Israel have gravely affected the stability and legitimacy of the PA, consequently creating a greater space for the Lion's Den to mobilise and challenge the existing power structures, as the following analysis will exhibit.

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<sup>3</sup> Author's interview with Thomas van Gool

While Abbas' Fatah party has experienced periods of relative unity, internal disagreement and factional tensions began to arise in the 1980s. In 2005, Fatah experienced a major internal rift following the death of Yasser Arafat, the founder of the party, exposing deep divisions between the older generation of its members and the younger ones, like the popular figure of Marwan Barghouti, who favoured a more assertive and confrontational approach (International Crisis Group 2023: 8). Since then, Fatah's factional rivalries have continued to challenge its internal cohesion, and efforts to promote unity within the party have appeared relatively unsuccessful. In the run up to the earlier discussed 2021 legislative elections, the ongoing disputes, power struggles, and frustration with the leadership led to the split of the Fatah party into three separate lists, significantly challenging the position of President Abbas and exposing the major power struggle within his party (Tzoreff & Michael 2021). This forced Fatah's supporters to choose between either Abbas' official party, the Barghouti-al Kidwa alliance, led by Marwan Barghouti and Yasser Arafat's nephew Nasser al-Kidwa, and a third splinter group led by Muhammad Dahlan, an exiled former security chief. Analysts have called this a situation "one of the most significant political developments in Fatah since Abbas became president in 2005" (Kingsley & Rasgon 2021). While Abbas initially hoped the elections might lead to reconciliation with Hamas, the fragmentation within his Fatah party ignited fears of a split vote acting as a "spoiler that could benefit Hamas", thus resulting in him postponing the elections (*Ibid.*). The Lion's Den in itself is also a prominent example of the rifts within the political elite, as many of its members have traditionally been affiliated with Fatah, but split from it after rejecting its approach, resulting in a "rebellion" within the party (Al Tahnan 2022). Against the backdrop of the deep internal divisions, there is also the issue of succession, which further destabilises the ruling party. Considering the age and deteriorating health situation of President Abbas, who has been in office for 18 years, power struggles over who will succeed him have emerged, and Abbas has given no indication of his preference. This has led to much confusion and extra-institutional rivalry among possible successors (International Crisis Group 2023: 1), and has resulted in the PA and its elite revolving more around its internal struggles than being concerned with managing the situation for Palestinians on the ground.<sup>4</sup>

While internal divisions and the lack of a renewal of leadership have significantly destabilised the PA and its ruling party Fatah, external partnership through security cooperation with Israel has, through undermining its legitimacy, further contributed to its destabilisation as well. Established as an integral part of the Oslo Accords in 1993, this cooperation aims at addressing security concerns and maintaining stability in the West Bank, but remains immensely unpopular among the Palestinian people, who consider it a form of betrayal, with the PA being the "subcontractor" or "puppet"<sup>5</sup> of Israel (Elgindy 2023). Through continuing its cooperation with a military entity that is becoming increasingly violent and repressive, Palestinians have generally come to see the PA as a "trojan horse" that facilitates the Israeli occupation of the West Bank (Omar 2021). For many Palestinians, it

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<sup>4</sup> Author's interview with Aboud Hamayel

<sup>5</sup> Author's interview with Thomas van Gool



becomes hard to reimagine the PA's role "beyond the current paradigm of security cooperation with Israel" (*Ibid.*), and with this hopes of a Palestinian state, as envisioned in the Oslo Accords, have evaporated. The issue of statehood is of importance here, as the PA's success "lies in its nationalistic representation of its people".<sup>6</sup> Through cooperating with what many Palestinians have come to see as "the enemy", and failing to provide a realistic prospect of a Palestinian state, a "tamed"<sup>7</sup> Palestinian nationalism seems to have further weakened the PA and diminished its support base (Omar 2021).

Internal struggles as well as the security cooperation with Israel have gravely affected the stability and legitimacy of the PA and its leading party of Fatah. The ruling elite is trying to "sustain a political status quo that is unsustainable,"<sup>8</sup> resulting in many Palestinians in the West Bank viewing their leadership as uncharismatic and incompetent. A June 2021 Palestinian public opinion poll showed how only 14% of Palestinians say Fatah under Abbas deserves to represent and lead its people (PCPSR 2021). According to Stern (2022: 28), factionalising "is a way to redress grievances by junior cadres who perceive existing mechanisms for upward mobility ineffective", thus prompting rebel group factions to seek alternative means to voice their concerns or seek advancement. This finding holds particular significance for the Lion's Den, as the group comprises a large number of young former Fatah members who rejected their party's approach, and instead opted to address their cause independently. It seems like the extensive support across the West Bank for the contentious resistance of groups like the Lion's Den has become the symptom of the instability and weakness of the PA's political elite.

### *1.3 The State's Capacity and Propensity for Repression*

"The state's capacity and propensity for repression" refers to the ability and willingness of the state or governing authorities to repress contentious collective action. Within collective action theory, the traditional approach assumes that factors like repression and the state's capacity to present a solid front to insurgents discourages and constrains contention (Tarrow 1994: 85). In order to accurately assess the opportunity structures that were available to the Lion's Den, two modifications will be made to the established definition and the underlying assumption of this specific analytical concept. First of all, while the primary focus of the concept is on its relation to collective action, this chapter presumes that repression has broader implications beyond just being a response to insurgency, further extending it to include state's actions and policies that curtail the rights and freedoms of individuals or groups in general. Secondly, the empirical material challenges the notion that repression becomes a source for submission, rather than mobilisation, and thus a constraint for collective action. The existing literature on contentious action is predominantly based on knowledge obtained from Western histories, resulting in a Western bias in the study of mobilisation processes. Some scholars have come to recognize that

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<sup>6</sup> Author's interview with Aboud Hamayel

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Author's interview with Aboud Hamayel

the opportunities available to insurgents in Western democracies differ significantly from those in repressive settings, and that repression may in fact provide avenues, rather than constraints, for mobilisation (Alimi 2009: 233; Osa and Corduneanu-Huci 2003: 622). This finding is of particular importance for the case of Palestinians in the West Bank, who have been subjugated to extreme repressive policies by both their own authorities as well as Israel and its security forces, further fuelling the violent political agenda of the Lion's Den.

While the PA's internationally sponsored security reform processes envisioned democratic, inclusive, and accountable Palestinian governance as part of its post-2007 statebuilding project, they have in fact consolidated the PA's authoritarian practices, resulting in high levels of repression and persecution (Tartir 2021). Since then, the Palestinian leadership has faced an abundance of allegations regarding its violations of human rights, including its restriction of and crackdown on freedom of expression, assembly, and dissent (United Nations 2011; Eid 2016; Al-Haq 2019). Over the last few years, an intensification of these violations seems to have taken place, as the PA elite has increasingly shown its willingness to use coercive and violent measures to quench any form of opposition. The violent suppression of protests against financial sanctions on Gaza in the West Bank in 2018 marked the beginning of this hardening trend, which has persisted unabated in subsequent years (Omar 2021). The summer of 2021 witnessed unprecedented levels of repression following the killing of Nizar Banat, who was known for his criticism of the PA and its corrupt practices, which resulted in him getting arrested and beaten to death by the PA security forces in June of that same year (McKernan 2021). Peaceful protests against his killing emerged in the streets of the West Bank, which were violently quelled by the security forces, who conducted arbitrary arrests and used unlawful force to target journalists, civil society activists, and lawyers (Tartir 2021). In 2022, Amnesty International (2022) released a report which stated that authorities in the West Bank "continued to unduly restrict freedom of expression, association and assembly, at times using excessive force to disperse peaceful gatherings", referring to instances where public events that honoured opposition figures were repressed or where tear gas was used during peaceful assemblies. According to a specialist team affiliated with the Coalition for Accountability and Integrity (AMAN), the largest amount of the PA's budget was spent on its security sector during the first half of 2022 (Middle East Monitor 2022). These phenomena all together reveal how the PA has increasingly relied on a repertoire of repressive methods to consolidate and preserve its hold on power.

Following the occupation of the West Bank in 1967, Israel has continuously implemented a number of policies and practices that severely violate the rights of Palestinians in the region. These violations encompass a range of issues, with one of the most pervasive ones being restrictions on the freedom of movement. On a daily basis, Palestinians experience the consequences of Israeli military control through checkpoints, where they are often faced with humiliating practices, the separation barrier, the

permit system, and settler-only roads, forcing them to live in constant uncertainty and impeding their ability to perform simple tasks and travel within the West Bank. Only Palestinians suffer these restrictions, as settlers and other non-Palestinian civilians within the West Bank are free to travel (B'Tselem 2017). These limitations severely hamper the economic stability and growth within the occupied West Bank (United Nations 2016), and lead to profound feelings of frustration among its Palestinian population. Another Israeli policy that has far-reaching consequences for the Palestinian community in the West Bank is that of the demolition of houses and forced evictions, which results from Israel rarely granting building permits to Palestinians in the area under its jurisdiction, causing significant displacement and suffering (Human Rights Watch 2022). These demolitions and evictions are part of Israel's broader illegal settlement policy, which is aimed at altering the geographic realities on the ground and extending Israeli presence in the West Bank (European Union 2023). Such expansionist policies contribute to the overall repressive environment experienced by the Palestinians, violating multiple of their rights, including the right to freedom of movement, the right to adequate housing, and the right to security (ACAPS 2021). This structural repression and marginalisation of Palestinians in the West Bank has been a long-standing issue, but an intensification of this repression appears to have taken place under the previous Israeli government led by Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett, which was inaugurated in June 2021 (Human Rights Watch 2023). A 2022 report published by the Israeli NGO Peace Now (2022) revealed that, when compared to the annual average during Netanyahu's earlier rule, there was a 26 percent increase in the creation of settlements in the West Bank under the Bennett-Lapid government. In addition, the latter government deepened the policy of expulsion of Palestinians, as during its first year in office, 639 Palestinian structures in the Israeli-controlled Area C of the West Bank were demolished, marking a 35 percent increase when compared to the average of demolitions during Netanyahu's years (*Ibid.*). Tensions regarding the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes came to a boil, when eviction orders were issued for families residing in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of East-Jerusalem with the aim of making way for Jewish settlers. Many have pinpointed this event as one of the main triggers for the 11-day war between Israel and militant groups in the Gaza strip in May 2021 (McKernan 2022).

While Palestinians in the West Bank have been subjugated to increasing structural repression, recent years have also shown a significant surge in the direct repression, or violence, against Palestinians, as inflicted by Israel and its security services. According to United Nations (2022) experts, 2022 marked the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank since they systematically started documenting fatalities in 2005, resulting from excessive use of force by Israeli forces and an increase in settler violence. Since 2021, several Israeli policies and practices have been implemented which have contributed to this uptick in violence towards Palestinians. In December 2021, for example, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) amended its open-fire policy, allowing Israeli soldiers to use live ammunition, potentially resulting in the injury or death of Palestinians, when they are accused of throwing rocks at Israeli civilian vehicles. This policy remains applicable even if the alleged

Palestinian individuals involved in the incident are not holding rocks at the time when the use of live ammunition is authorised (Baroud 2022). Following a sequence of attacks on Israeli civilians in 2021, the IDF launched a new military campaign in March of that same year, called operation “Break the Wave”, in order to “thwart future attacks and apprehend those involved in terrorist activities against Israeli civilians” (IDF 2023). The campaign directly led to a high number of Palestinian casualties, and while it was supposedly implemented in order to target militants, significant numbers of unarmed civilians, including children, have been killed during the military raids (Al Tahhan 2023). Shortly thereafter, on April 8, 2022, former Israeli Prime Minister Bennett issued a mandate that provided Israeli security forces with unrestricted authority to effectively respond to the upsurge in attacks within Israel. Bennett emphasised that there would be no limitations in this endeavour, stating, “We are granting complete freedom of action to the army, the Shin Bet [domestic security agency], and all security forces to triumph over terrorism” (Al Jazeera 2023). The decision made by Israeli politicians to grant the military and security personnel unrestricted power to combat “terrorism” appears to have created an environment where unjustifiable mistreatment and killings of Palestinian civilians can occur, both at military checkpoints and within the towns, villages, and cities of the West Bank and East Jerusalem (Euro-Med Monitor 2022). Furthermore, Palestinians have witnessed increasing repression during their prayers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, which is an important national and holy symbol to them.<sup>9</sup> Over the last few years, ultranationalist Jews have, accompanied by Israeli police escorts, significantly increased their presence at the holy site, something that many Palestinians consider as an act of provocation (Al Jazeera 2023). During the holy month of Ramadan in both 2021 and 2022, Israeli forces stormed the compound, resulting in hundreds of Palestinians getting arrested or injured and prompting widespread international criticism (Hatuqa & Chughtai 2022).

Israeli repression has also manifested itself through the violence inflicted on Palestinians by Israeli settlers in the West Bank. According to the United Nations (2022), 2022 is the “sixth year of consecutive annual increase in the number of Israeli settler attacks in the occupied West Bank”, with Israeli settlers “attacking Palestinians in their homes, attacking children on their way to school, destroying property and burning olive groves, and terrorising entire communities with complete impunity”. Clear indications of Israeli forces frequently “facilitating, supporting and participating” in settler attacks makes it hard to distinguish between acts of violence committed by the settlers and the Israeli state itself, resulting in a situation where “the impunity of one is reinforced by the impunity of the other” (*Ibid.*), as Israeli authorities have rarely held its security forces or settlers accountable for attacks on Palestinians (Human Rights Watch 2021). The issue of settler violence is of particular relevance for the region where the Lion’s Den emerged, namely the city of Nablus and its surroundings, which is known for being an area with a heavy settler concentration (Al Jazeera 2023). In contrast to the more centrally located settlements around the area of Jerusalem, where many settlers

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<sup>9</sup> Author’s interview with Omar Rahal

are economically-driven, settlements within the rural area around Nablus are known for being home to predominantly ideological settlers who are motivated by reasons of religious zionism. This means that many of such settlers are very committed to the settlement project, and more inclined to engage in acts of violence towards the Palestinian residents of the area.<sup>10</sup> Especially the Palestinian city of Huwara, south of Nablus, has become a site known for violent confrontations between Palestinians and Israeli settlers (Hammad 2022).

Palestinians in the West Bank have experienced a multidimensional repression, resulting from policies and measures from both the PA and Israel. The case of the West Bank defies the conventional notion that repression restricts opportunities for collective action, instead highlighting how a highly repressive setting may fuel extreme political agendas and become the primary catalyst for mobilisation. While the repressive Israeli occupation seems to have been the direct “target” of the resistance movement, growing discontent with the repressive policies of the PA seems to also have contributed to the emergence of the group, as it further undermined the authority’s legitimacy and thus contributed to the creation of the political vacuum that the insurgents are attempting to fill. For the element of repression, it is important to stress the dialectical nature of political opportunity structures. While opportunity structures shape the contention that social movements employ, conversely, the collective action of a social movement may also influence the opportunity structures available to it (McAdam et al. 1996 :13). This is relevant for the case of the Lion’s Den as its emergence and actions have further invoked the use of repressive measures by, primarily, the Israeli security forces. As a response to the emergence of the Lion’s Den, violent Israeli military raids and sieges have occurred in Nablus, which have intensified since the inauguration of the current far-right Netanyahu government in December 2022 (Al Jazeera 2023). While such repressive measures might have decreased the operational abilities of the group, it has only given rise to more support for the resistance movement, providing opportunities for the resistance to further develop (Kingsley & Yazbek 2023). It thus once again shows how, through counterinsurgency measures, the very act of repression serves as a catalyst, rather than a restraint, for increased resistance in the West Bank.

#### *1.4 Preliminary Conclusion*

The analysis conducted in this chapter has revealed the evolving landscape of the West Bank, where conditions have progressively facilitated the emergence of and support for armed Palestinian resistance, and thus the Lion’s Den. Political opportunities, like exclusion from the political system, an increasingly unstable elite, and severe repression have created a setting in which Palestinians have become compelled to embrace more radical political agendas and challenge the existing power

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<sup>10</sup> Author’s interview with Aboud Hamayel

structures. According to Alimi (2009: 221), the concept of opportunity structures helps to capture how more volatile elements within the political environment, such as changes in policies or political alliances, can create openings for collective action. While the opportunities discussed have generally been persistent challenges for Palestinians in the West Bank over time, it is the relatively recent escalation and intensification of these policies and processes that have acted as a more short-term opportunity for the Lion's Den to actively engage in contentious collective action. The analysis has demonstrated how two separate regime structures have together facilitated and shaped contentious resistance in the West Bank. Although the Israeli occupation and the repressive environment it generates appear to be the group's self-proclaimed primary factors behind the resurgence of the armed resistance (Abu Artema 2022), it appears that the weakness of the PA has played a pivotal role in creating the conducive conditions for the group to challenge the Israeli power structure. An increasingly unstable and autocratic Palestinian ruling elite has resulted in the ideological bankruptcy of the PA, creating a political void that the Lion's Den has managed to relatively successfully capitalise on, as many Palestinians consider it to be the best, or only, alternative to confront the Israeli occupation (Omar 2022). What seems to be at stake here, both in relation to the PA and Israel, is "the issue of agency, as many Palestinians feel like they have lost this, and through supporting or being in the Lion's Den they feel they have in some way regained control over their own lives again".<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Author's interview with Thomas van Gool

## **2. Mobilising Structures: The Organisational Dynamics of the Lion's Den's Mobilisation Efforts**

While the analytical category of opportunity structures has set out the broader political context which allowed for the Lion's Den to emerge, it overlooks the agency of individuals and their ability to engage in diverse forms of action within those same structures (Demmers 2017: 127). While these "opportunities" form an important prerequisite to contention, the analytical category of "mobilising structures" allows us to examine the internal resources and mechanisms that allowed for the movement to organise and mobilise effectively (McAdam et al. 1996: 8). Tilly & Tarrow (2015: 120) define mobilisation as "an increase of the resources available to a political actor for collective making of claims". These resources can encompass both tangible aspects, such as financial resources and weaponry, as well as intangible elements, like skills and legitimacy (Romano 2006: 12). Successful episodes of contention usually draw on pre-existing social networks or create self-sustaining organisations, which sustain their claims and recruit new supporters, consequently facilitating the mobilisation and coordination of individuals for a common purpose (Tilly & Tarrow 2015: 141). For these reasons, the main sub-question of this chapter will be as follows:

*How have mobilising structures facilitated the emergence and development of the Lion's Den?*

To assess the mobilising structures, the following indicators will be utilised: formal organisations that provide structures for mobilisation, informal networks that facilitate communication and coordination among individuals, material sources, and non-material sources. By focusing on mobilising structures, we can examine the importance of formal and informal networks, how material and non-material resources are mobilised and managed, and how they have collectively contributed to the overall effectiveness and impact of the Lion's Den. This analytical approach provides a more nuanced understanding of the organisational dynamics that underpin mobilisation efforts and offers insights into the mechanisms through which social change is pursued.

### *2.1 Formal Organisations that Provide Structures for Mobilization*

"Formal organisations that provide structures for mobilisation" refers to established and organised entities that play a role in facilitating collective action efforts, without actively participating in the mobilisation process. Such organisations contribute to the mobilisation of the social movement in "constituency- or client-oriented" ways (Kriesi 1996 :153), which can offer stability, legitimacy, and strategic guidance to contentious efforts, enhancing the overall efficacy and impact of the movement. While it is important to approach such an assertion cautiously, it is plausible that the Lion's Den has received support from outside parties like Iran and its proxies, which has most likely enhanced the operational abilities of the group.

Given that the Lion's Den is a relatively recent phenomenon at the time of writing and its organisational structures may not be openly disclosed for their own reasons, there have been circulating speculations regarding their potential receipt of external support. While the group has denied such claims, possibly for strategic reasons, several, Palestinian,<sup>12</sup> Israeli and international experts and officials have observed coordination between Iran, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Hezbollah, and the Lion's Den (Foundation for Defense of Democracies 2022; Baruch 2023). While it is necessary to exercise caution and thoughtful consideration when dealing with such claims, there are indications that support their validity. These indications generally exhibit the existence of a larger geopolitical dimension to the emergence of the Lion's Den, which is tied to Iran pushing for "a new frontier of resistance" against Israel in the West Bank.<sup>13</sup> A former Israeli commander in the West Bank, Yaron Buskila, confirmed such observation, stating that Iran wants to "sponsor a new group that does not listen to the Palestinian Authority" and fund the Lion's den in "its efforts to use proxies to attack Israel" (Gradstein 2023). In August 2022, the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Chief, Hossein Salami, stressed the importance of supporting Palestinian resistance, stating that "the same way that Gaza was armed, the West Bank can be armed in the same way and this process is happening" (Iran Press 2022). It thus appears that Iran is not only offering political backing but also directly providing military and strategic assistance to the group. According to Israeli and Palestinian officials, Hamas and the PIJ clandestinely provide financial support to the Lions' Den with the aim of combatting Israel, destabilising the Palestinian Authority, and deepening divisions within Fatah, albeit discreetly (Kingsley & Yazbek 2023). Also within the Israeli security establishment, there seems to be a growing consensus that "Iran-backed terror groups in the West Bank like Islamic Jihad and Hamas are supporting the Lion's Den's activities" (Foundation for Defense of Democracies 2022). Both in terms of money and arms, there are substantial arguments that can back such claims. Iran has been known for being a long-time supporter of other armed groups that defy Israel like Hamas and the PIJ, providing "tens of millions of dollars per year" to the groups, according to the former Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz (Foundation for Defense of Democracies 2023). Furthermore, the West Bank seems to have become a sales market for weapons, with Hezbollah but also people from Iraq and Syria smuggling arms into the region.<sup>14</sup> Such a claim was backed by a senior Israeli military official "who spoke on the condition of anonymity", who stated that Hezbollah, Iran's key regional proxy, has been smuggling a significant number of arms into the West Bank in its support of militant groups (Rubin 2022). Considering the history of Iran's support for other forms of armed struggle against Israel, and the growing market for weapon smuggling into the West Bank, it is plausible that external parties have bolstered the mobilisation efforts and intensified the impact of the Lion's Den in the West Bank. These

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<sup>12</sup> Author's interview with Aboud Hamayel

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Author's interview with Aboud Hamayel



aforementioned observations stress the importance of seeing the phenomenon of the Lion's Den within "the regional tensions and dynamics between different parties vying for power in the Middle East", especially the long-standing power struggle between Israel and Iran.<sup>15</sup>

## *2.2 Informal Networks that Facilitate Communication and Coordination among Individuals*

According to Diani (1992: 8), various theories on collective action converge in acknowledging the diversity of actors engaged in social movements and the informal nature of the ties that connect them. This understanding culminates in a synthetic definition stating that "a social movement is a network of informal interaction between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations". Collective action researchers emphasise that such networks play a crucial role in mobilising individuals and facilitating collective actions by providing channels for communication, coordination, and resource sharing, ultimately enhancing the capacity of social movements to effect change (Kissane & Volacu 2015: 260). Osa and Corduneanu-Huci (2003: 623) further argue that social movements are most likely to emerge "when society manages to overcome internal divisions and creates links between individuals and groups". These findings are of relevance when assessing the networks that facilitated the emergence and growth of the Lion's Den, as the group has overcome factional divisions but at the same time benefitted from cooperation with other militant factions.

The Lion's Den is generally considered to represent a "new sense of cooperation" among young Palestinians, one that no longer relies on traditional Palestinian factions (Abu Artema 2022). While the group does seem to receive financial and logistic support from various sources, they do not officially align themselves with political parties (Barghouti & Patel 2022), resulting in the emergence of a movement that transcends factional disagreement and competition.<sup>16</sup> The refusal of the Lion's Den to align themselves with political parties and their ability to transcend factional rivalry reflects a deliberate choice to prioritise collective action and cooperation over individual agendas. This approach allows the group to create new connections between individuals and groups that would have otherwise been hindered by the traditional factional divisions. By embracing a broader cross-factional front, the Lion's Den embodies a spirit of inclusivity and collaboration, enabling the emergence of a stronger and more cohesive resistance movement. The political independence of the Lion's Den seems to also have played a pivotal role in its emergence and development in an ideological sense. The group's independent and politically unaffiliated nature has appeared instrumental in attracting and mobilising a youth that was disenchanted by the internal political divisions and rivalry, making it a key factor contributing to its success. Mazen Dunbuk, a spokesperson for the Fatah movement in Nablus' Old City, underscored such observation, stating that his party knows that "people are tired of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Author's interview with Aboud Hamayel

the political factions, they want a united resistance”, claiming “nothing is more evident of that than the popularity of the Lion’s Den” (Barghouti & Patel 2022). The group seems to be “political as a phenomenon, but they are not engaging in politics or a power play”,<sup>17</sup> and this seems to be exactly what has contributed to the group’s influence. It is this appealing ideology of independence, freed from the “shackles of old political factions”, that has drawn more youth in and provided the group with the moral resources to act as the “legitimate” leaders (Barghouti & Patel 2022).

Although there is no evident formal connection between Lions' Den and established factions, it is believed to have emerged from the “Nablus Battalion”, a local alliance including Islamic Jihad's al-Quds Brigades, Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, and Hamas' Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades. While the Lion’s Den distances itself from such established groups in a political sense, the group probably continues to benefit from coordination and collaboration with them (European Council on Foreign Relationships). In addition, following a rally in December 2022, the leader of the “Balata Battalion”, a group based in the Balata Refugee Camp near Nablus, said that “the Lion’s Den and the Balata Battalion are fully coordinated”, conveying the message of the increasing power of Palestinian resistance (Abu Toameh 2022). The Lion's Den's cooperation with other politically unaffiliated local militant factions likely played a pivotal role in enhancing the group's capacity to effect change and mobilise individuals, amplifying their collective efforts through shared resources and coordination, and forming a united front of people across the established political factions to work together against Israel, their common adversary.

### *2.3 Material Sources*

Material sources refer to tangible and physical resources that are crucial for the functioning and long-term viability of a collective action movement. These resources may include money, arms, infrastructures, and media access, and the availability and strategic utilisation of these resources can significantly impact the organisation’s ability to mobilise, sustain momentum, and achieve its objectives (Romano 2006: 12). Empirical observation in the subsequent analysis has revealed how the Lion’s Den has profited from several material sources like the availability of weapons, the spatial area of Nablus, and digital platforms, consequently enhancing its military strategies and generating support for its mobilisation efforts.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, acquiring entirely reliable information regarding the financing and weaponing of the Lion’s Den has appeared challenging due to the limited transparency surrounding the internal structures of the movement. Still, some careful observations can be drawn, but it must be mentioned that their complete reliability cannot be guaranteed. The group appears to

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<sup>17</sup> Author’s interview with Aboud Hamayel

benefit from significant external support both in terms of arms and financing, while also leveraging internal resources contributed by its own members. According to Israeli officials, the group's fighters wait to inherit rifles from those who were killed during clashes with Israeli soldiers, or they either borrow guns or make their own (Kingsley & Yazbek 2023). Furthermore, there are indications that the members of the organisation also contribute their personal funds to support its activities, suggesting a level of financial commitment from within the group itself.<sup>18</sup> However, the groups' major sources of funding and weaponing seem to be Iran and its proxies of Hezbollah, Hamas, and the PIJ, as previously discussed. The provision of financial resources and advanced weaponry to the Lion's Den plays a crucial role in empowering the group to effectively plan and execute its activities, while also enhancing its credibility and appeal to potential recruits. This does not only strengthen the movement's infrastructure but also enables it to establish a significant presence and emerge as a powerful entity within the context of armed resistance in the West Bank.

The geographical area of Nablus emerges as a valuable material resource that contributes to the effectiveness of the Lion's Den and its operational strategy. The group's military successes primarily manifest through its defensive capabilities rather than an offensive strategy, with fighters being able to obstruct Israel's power of arrest (Al Tahhan 2023). This relative success can partially be ascribed to the confined and concentrated character of the old city of Nablus, where the group resides, with its narrow alleyways and roads, which makes it hard for Israeli forces to enter. The area thus provides a natural cover, making it a good self-defence zone and enhancing the defensive capabilities of the group.<sup>19</sup> The area of the old city of Nablus thus bolsters their operational and military effectiveness, enabling them to effectively thwart Israeli forces and resist arrest attempts. This success in evading arrest and maintaining control over their territory in turn also strengthens their reputation and position within the broader resistance movement, as it showcases their resilience and effectiveness in the face of adversity. Also, the northern West Bank and more specifically Nablus is known for being a rather conservative place with a cohesive social fabric, where generations of the same families have been living with relatively little influence from the outside.<sup>20</sup> This has resulted in a high concentration of intimate ties between its people, with many people in Nablus considering the Lion's Den members as their "brothers, sons, and friends", or people's "neighbours – neighbours who watched them grow up" (Barghouti & Patel 2022). This has allowed for a social identity to be constructed around the material space of Nablus, which provides a "basis for an ideological linkup" that enables people to look at themselves as "the sons and daughters" of the city.<sup>21</sup> This remarkable social cohesion creates a strong support base for the group within Nablus, which makes it easier for the group to recruit and results in them enjoying high levels of protection from locals, who for example offer them spaces to hide or

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<sup>18</sup> Author's interview with Aboud Hamayel

<sup>19</sup> Author's interview with Aboud Hamayel

<sup>20</sup> Author's interview with Thomas van Gool

<sup>21</sup> Author's interview with Aboud Hamayel

notify them when Israeli security forces are entering the city.<sup>22</sup> This ‘grassroots’ nature of the Lion's Den further accentuates the significance of local community dynamics in social movements, as it demonstrates the organic and bottom-up nature of the group’s mobilisation efforts. By drawing on the support and active involvement of the local population in Nablus, the Lion's Den has been able to foster recruitment, heightened levels of protection, and effective mobilisation of resources in response to external threats, exemplifying the crucial role of grassroots engagement in their emergence and development.

Moreover, much of the group’s influence seems to be rooted in its reach on digital platforms, like TikTok and Telegram. Although its TikTok account has been suspended in the meanwhile, the group used the platform to publish statements and videos of its attacks, garnering hundreds of thousands of followers (Kingsley & Yazbek 2023), some even calling it a “TikTok intifada” (The Jerusalem Post 2022). By opting for a direct mode of communication with the wider Palestinian community, the group has sparked the emergence of similar groups in various Palestinian cities and effectively mobilised strikes and marches throughout the West Bank (Kingsley & Yazbek 2023). Also, in a voice message that was spread on several Palestinian digital platforms, Ibrahim al-Nabulsi, one of the group’s leading figures, recorded some last words shortly before he was killed, saying: *“If I am martyred, guys, I love my mother. Take care of the homeland after I’m gone, and my final will to you, on your honour: don’t let go of the rifle — on your honour. I’m surrounded, and I am going towards my martyrdom”* (Barghouti & Patel 2022). Such messages are circulated widely and seem to reinforce the resilience and willingness of young Palestinians to actively participate in the resistance (Abu Artema 2022). By leveraging digital platforms, the Lion's Den has been able to effectively communicate its message, showcase its activities, and engage with a wide audience, resulting in increased awareness, resonance, and participation among individuals who may align with the movement's objectives. The ability to easily share information and mobilise supporters through technology has thus contributed to the growth and support of the collective action movement represented by the Lion's Den.

#### *2.4 Non-Material sources*

The element of non-material sources pertains to the intangible factors that play a crucial role in the emergence and success of a collective action movement. Whereas material sources provide the physical means to engage in contention, non-material sources serve an essential function in fostering a sense of shared purpose and identity, influencing the motivation and behaviour of individuals involved in collective action (Romano 2006: 68). Non-material sources may encompass factors like legitimacy, skills, and the commitment of group members (*Ibid.*: 12). The notion of martyrdom and a generational

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<sup>22</sup> Author’s interview with Thomas van Gool

dynamic of a Palestinian youth that is not deterred by memories of the second intifada have appeared as strong motivators for the insurgents to engage in the armed resistance of the Lion's Den, as will be further discussed.

Given their limited offensive capabilities and the significant power disparity when compared to the Israeli security forces, the Lion's Den know that, apart from obstructing Israel's power of arrest, their military effectiveness is comparatively less impactful. What seems to make them dangerous and subversive politically speaking, however, is the fact that they are not afraid to die, as “between that moment of holding arms and dying they create that space that we call Areen al-Usud, a space that is outside of Israeli and PA power”.<sup>23</sup> There is a cultural and national element to this characteristic of the group, as the group members seem to accept the possibility of death through the ideological notion of martyrdom in their struggle against Israel. The majority of the group's leaders have either been killed or arrested by Israeli forces (European Council on Foreign Relations), and while one may think that through leaving a void in the leadership this may weaken the group, it is the memory of such people that in fact seems to further mobilise the insurgents,<sup>24</sup> as will be further discussed in the subsequent chapter.

Furthermore, there seems to be a generational dynamic to the emergence of the Lion's Den. Approximately a third of Palestinians in the West Bank is between the ages of 15 and 29, which means that most of them did not witness Israel's harsh crackdown on Palestinian uprisings during the second intifada—a factor that tends to discourage older Palestinians from actively partaking in armed resistance efforts (Stern 2023). Al-Nabulsi, for example, was not born yet during the 2002 Operation Defensive Shield, which denoted Israel's incursion into West Bank cities that were ostensibly under PA jurisdiction, and Udai Tamimi, another leading figure of the movement, was too young to remember it (Abu Artema 2022). The fact that this generation of youngsters has not experienced Israeli power in this way before and the traumatic memory of seeing people getting killed on such a scale, has given them the “imagination and will to act politically”,<sup>25</sup> further enhancing their commitment to the armed struggle. It thus serves as a powerful mobilising factor by inspiring active engagement in the armed struggle of the Lion's Den.

## *2.5 Preliminary Conclusion*

Having analysed the different mobilising structures has allowed us to come to a better understanding of the initiating process and the pivotal role the specific constituent indicators have played in the emergence and development of the Lion's Den. Support from political entities like Iran and its proxies but also a new sense of cross-factional cooperation as well as cooperation with more informal parties

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<sup>23</sup> Author's interview with Aboud Hamayel

<sup>24</sup> Author's interview with Thomas van Gool

<sup>25</sup> Author's interview with Aboud Hamayel

like other local militant groups seem to both have enhanced the operational capabilities of the group, allowing it to further develop. The availability of material sources like funds and equipment, the area of Nablus' old city, and the strategic use of media platforms have further enhanced its military strategies and its capability to generate support, while non-material sources such as the notion of martyrdom and a lack of memory of the second intifada appeared to be strong behavioural motivators for the insurgents. The different mobilisation structures that were available to the Lion's Den, and their strategic utilisation thereof, have provided the necessary tools and mechanisms to recruit, organise, and sustain their contentious efforts, allowing them to relatively successfully adopt their innovative form of pursuing social change.

### 3. Framing Processes: Unravelling the Violent Imaginaries of the Lion's Den

The preceding chapters primarily focused on the impact of structural opportunities and organisational mechanisms on the mobilisation of the Lion's Den, consequently failing to account for the significance of discursive practices in shaping the movement's identity and framing of its cause. Such a discursive approach acknowledges that political opportunities and mobilisation efforts require recognition and framing in order to create an environment conducive to collective action, thus calling for an integrated approach that allows us to study text within its context. On the one hand, discursive representations mobilise supporters by fostering an antagonistic us/them divide, while on the other hand they also provide legitimacy to acts of violence (Demmers 2017: 134). Such observation is further explored through the concept of “violent imaginaries”, as proposed by Schröder and Schmidt (2001: 9), who assert that violence “needs to be imagined in order to be carried out”. These violent imaginaries encompass the discursive means by which the justification and acceptance of violence are communicated to individuals who may engage in or support violent actions. Such imaginaries can manifest through narratives, performances, and inscriptions, which all together make up “the whole spectrum of violence as it presents itself to anthropological analysis” (*Ibid.*: 2). The substantial support garnered by the armed resistance of the Lion's Den raises interesting questions about the mechanisms behind their ability to mobilise such backing for their violent tactics. The concept of violent imaginaries, with its particular focus on the element of violence, allows us to assess the role of framing and how it has contributed to the group’s ability to cultivate such widespread support for their persistent engagement in acts of violence. Thus, the sub-question of this chapter will be as follows:

*How does the Lion's Den employ and promote violent imaginaries as a justification for its use of violence?*

In order to answer this question, Schröder's and Schmidt's analytical indicators of narratives, performances, and inscriptions will be operationalised. Through these indicators, we can gain deeper insights into the ideological underpinnings and motivations behind the group’s persistent engagement in violent tactics, and the support thereof. The conceptualisation of violent imaginaries will help us to understand how antagonistic discourses draw upon strict us-them divides and culturally-specific interpretations of past and present, consequently serving as a justification for the group’s use of violence.

### 3.1 Narratives

Schröder and Schmidt (2001: 10) stress the importance of narratives in preserving the remembrance of historical conflicts and prior acts of violence. These narratives can serve the purpose of either celebrating the accomplishments and advantages of the group, or highlighting the perceived injustices, losses, or suffering endured by one's own group. As people navigate experiences of violence, they construct their own interpretations of conflicts and mould their views of themselves and others, giving rise to distinct cultural narratives that inform their communication and actions within their circumstances. These cultural narratives, expressed through diverse ideologies, histories, and politics, shape a contested landscape where individuals can interpret or shape different understandings of their social environment. Such narratives may serve as a significant avenue for nation-building and the formation of collective identities. In their Telegram account, the Lion's Den perpetuates a narrative that emphasises culturally-specific interpretations of history, injustices, and death as well as antagonistic discourses in which the actions of the "enemy" are perceived as an imminent threat. It is within this context that armed struggle becomes a necessary means to address the perceived hostilities and protect the group identity, thus serving as a strong justification for their use of violence.

According to Schröder and Schmidt (2001: 9), the "most important code of the legitimation of war is its historicity". This finding is relevant when assessing the ways in which the Lion's Den frames its cause, as in their Telegram account, they engage in a discourse through which the symbolic significance of past conflict is interpreted and brought to life. The group for example continually refers to a Palestinian land that was taken from them by the "Zionist" "invaders",<sup>26</sup> drawing upon memories of the "Nakba", which means "catastrophe" in Arabic and signifies the mass displacement of Palestinians during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. The group's message to the sons of "Judea",<sup>27</sup> referring to the historical Jewish denomination of part of the West Bank, is that the "Zionists" should return to their "original homeland",<sup>28</sup> as there is "no place for you on our land".<sup>29</sup> This demonstrates the relevance of competing historical claims over the same land within the conflict, and how the group is aiming to establish its own view or memory of the conflict as the legitimate one. Along with the importance of this historicity and the culture-bound representation thereof comes the element of nationalism, which constitutes "the most common currency of violent imaginaries" (*Ibid.*: 11). The group calls upon the "sons of our nation"<sup>30</sup> to "leave behind tribal and political differences"<sup>31</sup> in order to defend "all of holy Palestine",<sup>32</sup> stressing the importance of "not offending"<sup>33</sup> the people of their

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<sup>26</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, January 30

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 23

<sup>31</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 11

<sup>32</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 22

<sup>33</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 23



own nation. Through invoking sentiments of nationalism and unity, they justify the violence as a necessary response to safeguard the nation and its people against external Israeli aggression. The memory of violence is further kept alive through calling upon the perceived injustices and grievances that Palestinians both endured and continue to endure. Within the group’s rhetoric, the Palestinian people are “the oppressed people”,<sup>34</sup> whose “land and homes”<sup>35</sup> have been taken, and who suffer the consequences of the occupation. This is further reinforced by referring to the heart of the “enemy”,<sup>36</sup> which “fears a small child with a stone in his hand”<sup>37</sup>—appealing to instances where children throwing stones at Israeli security forces are met with severe and disproportionate levels of violence. Another culturally-specific element relates the group’s mourning of their martyrs, who they consider to be honourable heroes who died in the “righteous” act of resistance. Groups often attach cultural meanings of their own to the suffering they endure, and the idea of martyrdom is a prominent example of this (*Ibid.*: 6). The cultural performance of human sacrifice seems to not only be accepted by the group but at some instances even imperative, as they “would rather die than accept to live a life of humility”<sup>38</sup> under the occupation, allowing them to reclaim some form of agency through the willingness to sacrifice their lives. There is another cultural element to the justification of violence enacted by the Lion’s Den, as references are made to Quranic verses saying “and you did not kill them, but it was God who killed them”,<sup>39</sup> and that the ones who are holding the trigger have “clean hands”<sup>40</sup> and act with “God’s blessings”.<sup>41</sup> Such ideological references allow the group to distance themselves from direct responsibility for their violent actions by attributing them to a higher power, thus serving as a moral justification for their contention.

Antagonistic discourses do not emerge in isolation or as detached from history; rather, they arise from fragments of memory that are rearranged to construct “new definitions of collective identity” (Schröder & Schmidt 2001: 11). The construction of such an identity often results in a “strictly polarised structure” of “we” and “they”, that “no individual can escape and leaves no room for ambiguity” (*Ibid.*: 10). Such dichotomous discourse manifests in the group’s Telegram account, where a stark contrast is drawn between the “righteous”<sup>42</sup> and “majestic”<sup>43</sup> Palestinians, who have “pure hearts”,<sup>44</sup> and the “treacherous”<sup>45</sup> “stupid”<sup>46</sup> Zionists who are led by a “government of rats”.<sup>47</sup> There is also an ideological element to this, as they allude to Quranic verses which call for a struggle

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 22

<sup>37</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 15

<sup>38</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 15

<sup>39</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, January 28

<sup>40</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 13

<sup>41</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, January 28

<sup>42</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, January 30

<sup>43</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 13

<sup>44</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 20

<sup>45</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 2

<sup>46</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 13

<sup>47</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 11

against the “disbelievers”,<sup>48</sup> or “God’s enemies”,<sup>49</sup> while the “lions of our glorious den”<sup>50</sup> are the “men of God”<sup>51</sup> filled with love for “the sake of God’s heart”.<sup>52</sup> The Zionist “enemy” only knows the language of “shooting and gunpowder”,<sup>53</sup> and the group’s reaction to their offences is framed as a “battle of dignity and honour”,<sup>54</sup> done for the cause of defending “an entire nation”.<sup>55</sup> This altogether demonstrates how an imagined sense of internal solidarity and external hostility is formed, and how “our” side of the struggle is being identified with the “survival and well-being” of every single Palestinian (*Ibid.*: 11). Another characteristic of violence is that it is never completely idiosyncratic, as it always expresses a certain relationship with another group or party (Schröder & Schmidt 2001: 3). In the context of this adversarial relationship, any action or communication from the other party is immediately perceived as a potential threat or act of aggression that requires a reactive defensive action (*Ibid.*: 10). This is of relevance when assessing the Telegram account of the Lion’s Den, as they continuously frame their actions as acts of “resistance”<sup>56</sup> and “liberation”<sup>57</sup> against the “Zionist aggressors”,<sup>58</sup> led by a government of “rats” that is threatening to “impose restrictions on our Palestinian people and launch wide military operations in all areas”.<sup>59</sup> Such assaults cannot pass without a “punishment”,<sup>60</sup> and everything must be done in order to eliminate the adversary. The group openly discusses several attacks against their “enemy”, reporting how they “sustained serious injuries”<sup>61</sup> and attacked checkpoints, and expressing how “thirsty”<sup>62</sup> they are to murder this enemy. Also, at several instances the group suggests that each violent encounter will only reinforce their commitment to more use of violence, for example through stating that they will not “step back”<sup>63</sup> or “perish”,<sup>64</sup> and that the blows they receive only increase and strengthen their “determination to continue on the path”.<sup>65</sup> This illustrates the transformative power of violence, as the group attributes symbolic meaning to the violent confrontations through transforming them into sources of motivation and inspiration for future confrontations. Not only does the group report and glorify their own attacks, they also call upon Palestinian civilians to attack the enemy, encouraging them to “engage in clashes

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<sup>48</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 13

<sup>49</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 20

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, January 30

<sup>52</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 20

<sup>53</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, January 26

<sup>54</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 13

<sup>55</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 20

<sup>56</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, January 30

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 11

<sup>60</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 15

<sup>61</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, January 26

<sup>62</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 11

<sup>63</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 22

<sup>64</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 23

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

at all points of contact”,<sup>66</sup> or “make them feel unsafe wherever they are”.<sup>67</sup> The group even condemns those Palestinians who “do not defend”<sup>68</sup> their people, stating “shame on everyone who has a rifle and does not go with it to the field of honour and manhood”<sup>69</sup> and that God may “disgrace” them.<sup>70</sup> This showcases how violence is never devoid of meaning for the individuals involved, highlighting the inherent link between violence and the "instrumental rationality" guiding the actor's actions (*Ibid.*: 3). The condemnation of individuals who choose not to partake in these acts further underscores the significance and meaning attributed to violence by the group, suggesting that failure to participate is seen as a dishonourable betrayal.

### 3.2 Performances

The transformation from violent imaginaries to actual violent practices does not occur spontaneously; rather, it is always enacted by human agency. The relationship between the imaginary and the practice is further explored through the category of performances. Schröder and Schmidt (2001: 10) define performances as “public rituals in which antagonistic relationships are staged and prototypical images of violence enacted”. Given the relative ease of performing a violent act and its highly tangible nature, it appears to be an effective means of “transforming the social environment and staging an ideological message before a public audience” (*Ibid.*: 4). This holds true for the case of the Lion’s Den, whose performances embody symbolic meanings that in several ways justify and foster acts of violence. For this particular analytical category, two types of performances of the Lion’s Den have been chosen, namely the funerals/memorial services of martyrs, as well as public gatherings in a broader sense, both taking place within the city of Nablus.

As mentioned earlier, groups often attach cultural meanings of their own to the suffering they endure (Schröder & Schmidt 2001: 6). While we already witnessed the tradition of commemorating martyrs in the textual form of the Telegram account, the Lion’s Den also mourns their martyrs through the performance of funerals and memorials of its members. Typically, the martyrs are carried through the streets of Nablus, wrapped in both a Palestinian flag and a flag containing the logo of the group, symbolising the person’s sacrifice for their homeland. This tradition acts as a public spectacle in which the Palestinian people's sorrow, resiliency, and commitment are clearly shown. During these rituals, the militants point their rifles in the air and at some instances also fire them. We can understand this performing or staging of violence through the idea that violence is never completely idiosyncratic, as it always expresses a certain relationship with another group or party (Schröder & Schmidt 2001: 3).

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<sup>66</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, January 26

<sup>67</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 15

<sup>68</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 22

<sup>69</sup> Telegram Areen al-Usud, February 13

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

This act of firing their rifles carries symbolic meaning and can be seen as a poignant message of revenge against the Israeli forces responsible for the deaths of their fellow fighters. It signifies the desire to seek justice, retribution, and an assertion of power in the face of perceived aggression and oppression. By staging this act of violence, the mourners not only express their collective sorrow but also reaffirm their determination to resist and defend their rights. In addition, the act of firing their rifles illustrates the transformative power of violence, as the group attributes symbolic meaning to violent confrontation through transforming them into sources of motivation and inspiration for future confrontations in the form of revenge (Schröder & Schmidt 2001: 4). In a sense, the martyrs, in their sacrificial act, also embody this transformative power, as they emerge as agents with the potential to hold the Israeli forces accountable for the violence committed against Palestinians.

Another cultural element to the performances of the Lion's Den pertains to the Arabic exclamation of *Takbir*, which through the phrase of "Allahu Akbar" stresses the greatness and magnificence of God. During the memorials and the public gatherings, members of the group engage in the ritual of reciting the *Takbir*, thereby linking their performance to religious duty and divine approval. Invoking the name of God and proclaiming His greatness provides a moral and ideological framework that reinforces the belief that the group's cause is sanctioned by a higher power and can be considered as virtuous. This religious justification may strengthen the commitment of individuals to engage in or approve violence as a means of achieving their goals. This once again demonstrates how through attributing symbolic meaning to their performances, the group transforms these performances as sources of motivation for future confrontations.

Moreover, both during the memorials and the public gatherings, members of the Lion's Den are dressed in all black attire, wearing face masks that hide their faces and carrying large rifles on their bodies. These rituals create a sense of unity, anonymity, and armed readiness, projecting an image of strength and determination to confront and resist perceived oppressors. The deliberate display of weaponry and militant appearance can be seen as a form of "psychological warfare", intended to intimidate adversaries and reinforce the notion that violence is a justifiable means to protect their cause and secure their rights. Since such displays are highly visible and concrete, they serve as an effective way of performing an ideological message before the audience (*Ibid.*).

*Visual Examples of the Lion's Den's "Performances"*



*The Judean, 2022*



*Al Jazeera, 2022*



*Al Jazeera, 2022*



*Al Jazeera, 2022*

### 3.3 Inscriptions

The following pages will exhibit the posters and logo that were analysed, in order to give the reader a better understanding of the materials that were studied for the category of inscriptions, before turning to the analysis.



Visual Materials Lion's Den



Visual Materials Lion's Den

Despite the growing significance of visual media in contemporary society, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of visual displays, such as images on social media or murals, in inscribing violent imaginaries onto the cultural landscape. Such images, just as textual representations, serve an important purpose in disseminating and reinforcing antagonistic representations and often contain important symbolic meaning (Schröder & Schmidt 2001: 10). Visual materials such as posters however have a special capacity to elicit emotions, offer immersive experiences, and convey strong messages that extend beyond the limitations of textual content. Delving deeper into these visual artefacts can yield valuable insights into how violent narratives are collectively constructed and perpetuated within society. Inscriptions can serve to present the individual victim as representative of a larger collective, to perpetuate feelings of commitment in the face of defeat, and to assert one's own view of the past as the legitimate one. This holds true for the case of the Lion's Den, where the imagery of martyrs, artillery and national symbols seem to strategically play into sentiments associated with heroism, identity and nationalism, in order to justify acts of violence.

The analysed posters are particularly notable for their consistent inclusion of images depicting martyrs. Typically, the posters feature a central image portraying a single martyr, sometimes surrounded by a background composed of imagery reminiscent of other martyrs, emphasising the larger narrative of shared sacrifice. As mentioned earlier, martyrdom can be a powerful symbol within violent imaginaries. The figure of the martyr represents sacrifice, bravery, and devotion to a cause. In addition to this, the individual victim may represent some larger category of people, which idealises the role of the martyr as someone who engaged in a selfless act in service of a collective purpose (Schröder & Schmidt 2001: 3). The visual image of the martyr, as opposed to a mere textual representation, may exert a greater influence on individuals, as it creates a more tangible connection with the sacrifice and courage he embodies, and fosters a sense of identification and inspiration that transcends the limitations of words alone. A recurring figure on the posters is the earlier mentioned martyred leading figure of Ibrahim al-Nabulsi, who has become a popular figure among residents in Nablus (Karbalaei 2023). Such an admired martyr figure can emerge as a powerful symbol of resistance, inspiring numerous Palestinians to follow their courageous example and actively partake in or support the enacted violence. The imagery of martyrs may thus reinforce the belief that engaging in violent actions aligns with the righteous ideals and goals they embody, thereby serving as a justification for violence.

Furthermore, all posters as well as the logo of the group contain imagery of machine guns. The depiction of the men holding arms can serve to convey a message of strength, defiance, and readiness to engage in violence. This visual representation fuels the imagination and in turn justifies violence by creating an idealised and glorified image of armed resistance, portraying it as a legitimate and necessary means for achieving specific goals or defending certain beliefs. In addition, the fact that it is



martyred men who are holding the rifles corresponds with a central characteristic of the symbolism of violent imaginaries, namely that “a defeat will not eliminate the rightness of ‘our’ position” (Schröder & Schmidt 2001: 11). The imagery conveys this resolute message: the loss of the fallen comrades does not affect their unwavering commitment to the struggle; instead, it serves as the very catalyst that justifies and fuels future acts of violence.

Similar to the Telegram account and the performances, the posters also leverage the power of nationalistic sentiments. Multiple figures on the posters, for example, are wearing a *keffiyeh*, which is a chequered black and white scarf that has become a symbol of Palestinian nationalism and resistance (Saber 2021). Also, two of the posters display the flag of Palestine. These two symbols may tap into deep-rooted feelings of collective identity, evoking a sense of pride and unity among Palestinians. This powerful symbolism can serve to justify acts of violence carried out in the name of defending and reclaiming their homeland. Such symbolism also manifests itself through the imagery of a piece of land comprising historical Palestine and the Dome of the Rock, which can be observed in both the posters and the group’s logo. The group uses a map of the land comprising Palestine before the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, before the proclamation of the state of Israel. This reveals how the group tries to re-narrate and re-imagine the boundaries of the nation, thus establishing their own view of the past as the legitimate one, once again demonstrating how wars are fought from and over memory (Schröder & Schmidt 2001: 9). While the Dome of the Rock itself is of importance for Palestinians, as it is considered one of the most sacred sites in Islam, it also represents the significance of the city of Jerusalem. For many Palestinians, Jerusalem represents a powerful reminder of their ancestral connection to the land and their aspirations for self-determination, freed from Israeli occupation (Hasson 2001). In this context, the imagery and symbolism associated with the Dome of the Rock become potent tools for Palestinians to assert their historical and territorial claims, serving as a visual representation of their attachment to Jerusalem and their resistance against the occupation. This demonstrates how the powerful symbolism associated with the Dome of the Rock and Jerusalem can be harnessed to justify acts of violence once again undertaken in the pursuit of defending and reclaiming the “homeland”.

### *3.4 Preliminary conclusion*

The foregoing analysis has revealed how different narratives, performances, and inscriptions have been instrumentalised by the Lion’s Den in order to justify its use of violence. The textual form of the violent imaginaries as embodied by the Telegram account has played a crucial role in the justification of violence, and the highly visible and concrete nature of the performances and inscriptions seems to have further reinforced the ideological message of the group. While the three analytical categories may exhibit some distinct characteristics, they ultimately share the common objective of employing

and promoting culturally-specific violent imaginaries as a justification for the use of violence. The narratives, performances, and inscriptions work together to create a re-interpretation of the past, reinforce group identity, and leverage feelings of antagonisms. The contention of the group is portrayed as a zero-sum struggle, as there can only be total defeat or complete victory, and in order to achieve the latter the group will do everything to eliminate its adversary. Ideological elements like religion and nationalism have significantly contributed to the establishment of a moral framework that rationalises violence, reinforcing the belief that violence is not only just but also imperative in pursuit of the group's objectives. This has created a social environment that not only accepts past violence but is also more conducive to future violence, perpetuating a cycle where violence becomes an accepted response to perceived challenges and the preservation of group interests. While the violent imaginaries of the Lion's Den in themselves may exhibit specific characteristics that resonate with individuals, we cannot completely understand their appeal without seeing them within their broader context. The way in which the group frames its cause has demonstrated how they navigate the opportunities available to them, making sense of their grievances and the world around them. Violence is framed as a just and necessary response to increasing Israeli repression, creating an appealing discourse which in turn entices individuals to engage in mobilising efforts. Additionally, it is important to consider the fact that these violent imaginaries may resonate as violence, for many, appears to be the best alternative to a dysfunctional and ideologically bankrupt PA.

## **Conclusion**

The study into the case of the Lion's Den has provided valuable insights that help to answer the main research question of how we can explain the revival and development of armed Palestinian resistance in the West Bank. The analysis has uncovered the intensifying conditions in the West Bank, establishing it as a setting increasingly conducive for insurgent groups to engage in armed resistance. While both the autocratic leadership of the PA as well as the Israeli occupation provided long-term opportunities for the Lion's Den to emerge and develop as it did, it seems to have been the gradual escalation of certain policies and processes over the last few years that has provided a greater space for the group to challenge the existing power structures of both entities. Strongly increasing forms of both structural and direct violence as inflicted by the Israeli forces on the Palestinians in the West Bank has fuelled the willingness to engage in more radical political agendas, while growing discontent with a weak and dysfunctional PA has created a political vacuum that the Lion's Den seems to have capitalised on, effectively establishing themselves as a relevant player in the political arena. The Palestinians' disillusionment with their fragmented political representation and its failure to address the occupation led to a newfound spirit of cooperation that surpasses factional divisions and challenges the firmly entrenched leadership of Mahmoud Abbas. The group's strategic utilisation of various mobilising structures has equipped them with the essential tools to gain support, effectively organise, and sustain their cause. Through their violent imaginaries, the violence enacted by the group is framed as a necessary and just response to increasing Israeli repression, and the effective leveraging of antagonisms perpetuates a cycle in which violence is not only justified but also becomes imperative. Culturally specific narratives, performances, and inscriptions have provided a moral framework that rationalises the group's violent tactics. The collective mobilisation of grievances and framing of shared discontent and threat, driven by an action-oriented political consciousness, thus seem to have been instrumental in shaping the group's framing tactics. The analysis conducted within this dissertation has demonstrated how the three analytical categories of opportunity structures, mobilising structures, and framing processes are well-aligned and mutually reinforcing. The Lion's Den inclination to operate autonomously, freed from the shackles of factional rivalry, reveals how political dynamics in the West Bank have consequently influenced the group's organisational structures and mobilising capacity. The violent imaginaries employed by the Lion's Den demonstrate how the group strategically framed the available political opportunities, thereby enhancing the conditions that support armed contention and support thereof, thus demonstrating the mobilising capacity of these frames. Referring back to the dialectical nature of political opportunity structures, the ways in which the group has managed to mobilise and frame their cause in turn shapes the opportunities available to them as well. The group's organisational capacity and well-framed justification of violence may further destabilise the political elite, invoke Israeli repression, and mobilise public support, thus reinforcing the broader opportunity structures in which they operate.

Although the case of the Lion's Den might display some distinctive characteristics, the analysis into the group's emergence and development allows us to draw some larger conclusions that exhibit relevance for the story of the organised armed resistance movement in the West Bank at large. The geographical relevance of the northern part of the West Bank comes into play here, more specifically the region between Nablus, Jenin, and Tulkarm, where we generally witness the resistance in its current form. While the crisis of legitimacy of the PA has appeared a central factor to the mobilisation of the groups, this crisis holds even greater significance for the more remote areas where the groups emerged. This process of political unbinding together with the confined and more conservative character of these cities are an important explanation as to why the armed resistance as we currently witness it, as a popular grassroots movement that primarily engages in defensive tactics, emerged specifically in this area. So to return to the main research aim, the analysis has revealed that in the West Bank, increasing Israeli repression and an incompetent Palestinian leadership that fails to confront this repression has left Palestinians with a profound lack of political horizon, leading to the emergence of the resistance movement that for many appears to be the best alternative. The new form of cross-factional cooperation has given rise to a unique political discourse that projects a sense of unity and purpose and resonates with the desires of the Palestinian people, while culturally informed frames and symbols have played a significant role in mobilising support for armed strategies against Israel.

While the case-study approach adopted in this research has facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the intricacies and dynamics of the subject matter, its capacity for generalisation remains limited. Undoubtedly, this approach has yielded valuable insights that contribute to the comprehension and explanation of the wider armed resistance movement in the West Bank. However, caution must be exercised when extrapolating the specific case-related findings to the broader movement. Although certain observations endorse the potential for generalisation of some findings, similar studies on the other armed groups are imperative to provide a holistic understanding of the movement as a whole, providing interesting opportunities for future research. Another limitation pertains to the inability to conduct direct interviews with the members of the armed resistance group in Nablus. This limitation suggests an avenue for future research, where an in-depth exploration of the group through direct interviews could provide valuable first-hand data, further enriching the understanding of their perspectives, experiences, and motivations.

The empirical observation of the complex socio-political setting of the West Bank has contributed to the scholarly discourse on social movement and collective action. The adaptations that were made, primarily in the chapter on opportunity structures, filled a gap in the literature by exploring the ways in which two political regimes, rather than one, together facilitate contention, enhancing our understanding of how social movements adapt and resist in contexts characterised by overlapping and contested authorities. Additionally, in order to account for the violent character of the group, the research has introduced a new analytical framework by integrating the concept of "violent

imaginaries” into collective action theory, providing relevant insights into how armed groups specifically justify violent tactics within their contention.

Moreover, the empirical contribution of this research is significant as it addresses a crucial knowledge gap, with limited academic literature available on the topic of these newly emerging groups. The empirical analysis holds ongoing political significance as the armed Palestinian insurgency and the corresponding Israeli counterinsurgency currently continue to dominate the dynamics of the West Bank. At the time of writing, for example, Israeli forces launched a large military operation in the city of Jenin, marking the biggest West Bank incursion in 20 years and further exacerbating the already extremely volatile circumstances. Under the current hardline Israeli government led by Netanyahu, it is highly probable that such offensive policies will persist and exert continued dominance over the West Bank. Since violence begets violence, a historical reality that holds particular significance for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this raises interesting questions about the prospects of the armed resistance movement. Regardless of what the future holds for the Lion’s Den, it does seem like the resistance in its current form will not be easily quenched. Even if the resistance is eradicated, another, possibly more dangerous form will likely emerge. By providing a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and motivations of the movement, this study may offer valuable insights for policymakers to develop informed strategies and responses that are tailored to effectively address the challenges posed by such groups.

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