Summary

Palestinians living in the West Bank consider themselves to be living under a double-barrelled occupation: on the one hand there are the Israeli military forces, who remain omnipresent throughout the West Bank, and on the other there is the PA, which has become increasingly authoritarian over the years, actively suppressing political opposition as well as cooperating with the Israeli authorities. Since 2005, which roughly marks the end of the al-Aqsa intifada, the PA did bring considerable stability to the West Bank, putting an end to the prolonged period of lawlessness and gang wars but trust in the authorities has remained low. Although most people praise the tough crackdown on local militias, the mukhabarat – the intelligence service – has now become a major source of insecurity, especially for those who support other political factions than Fatah, which is the dominant party in the PA.

This study is an investigation of the ways in which security is provided and perceived in such an intricate situation. I aimed to investigate whether an analysis of the security fabric in the West Bank would provide valuable insights in the characteristics of the various actors who try to provide human security, in what ways they do this, how they interact, and how the context of the Israeli occupation influences the dynamics between them.

The so-called security fabric is a new concept that describes the interactions between actors who provide human security from above and below, respectively. During approximately one year of doing fieldwork in the West Bank, I have analysed the security fabric of this particular region, describing the dynamics between, on the one hand, the rapidly developing Palestinian Authority (PA) – most notably the security forces – and, on the other hand, social institutions – like political movements and the clan system – that were pivotal in providing human security prior to the establishment of the PA and to a large extent still are of vital importance to people. The analysis entails a specific focus on the context of the Israeli occupation, since it considerably influences and shapes the on-going interaction between the various actors involved.

I propose to interpret human security as freedom from individually experienced fear, specifically applied in the context of violent conflict, in which human-caused violence is the primary source of insecurity. This conception illustrates the pivotal merit of human security, namely as an individualist approach to understanding what security means and how it can best be improved. The main difference with prevailing interpretations of human security is that my approach acknowledges the agency of individuals and local communities in war-torn areas. Operations aimed at
improving human security that are devised on a national or international level will not take place in a vacuum, since the local population is not waiting idly for foreign assistance. The key issue of how to effectively provide human security to people in need is therefore to harmonise human security from above and from below.

This specific take on human security has its consequences for my analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The individualist or bottom-up approach of looking at security issues asks for a different way of looking at what is taking place on the ground. Instead of solely looking how traditional security providers, be it the state or a coalition of UN-member states, can alleviate insecurity, one must also take into account what is already taking place; look at what people themselves are already doing to improve their own security.

In the framework of the two-state solution, international actors are providing considerable aid and assistance to develop Palestinian state institutions, specifically with regards to the security organisations. In the wake of the second or al-Aqsa intifada, this state-building project seriously commenced but until now, approximately seven years later, the PA’s legitimacy does not match its institutional development. The most important reasons are:

Infrastructural problems; despite the Palestinian as well as international efforts, the Palestinian Authority is still suffering from a lack of suitable infrastructure, both in physical and institutional terms.

Lacking performance-based legitimacy; since the PA is not allowed to operate in large parts of the West Bank, most people living in these areas do not consider the PA to be their representative and, thus, feel forced to fend for themselves and organise their own security measures; since the PSF can seldom come in the B and C areas, let alone protect the Palestinians from Israeli soldiers and settlers, they remain a rather distant entity. Also within PA-governed A areas the PSF cannot live up to people’s expectations. In addition the widespread corruption amongst the political establishment is detrimental to people’s trust in the authorities.

Prevalence of traditional social institutions; that the PA suffers from a legitimacy problem not only stems from its impotency towards struggling against the occupation nor from its overt cooperation with the occupier. There are also causes within Palestinian society that can be traced back to times prior to the establishment of the state of Israel. Since there has never been an actual Palestinian state in the sense of a centralised government and security apparatus with a monopoly on coercion, political life has always revolved around non-statutory actors, based on regional and clan affiliation, mostly taking place on the village level.
Political strife; both Gaza and the West Bank, which together are envisioned as the future Palestine state, are ruled by rather authoritarian leaderships that are in competition with each other. By severely cracking down on political and clan-based security structures – security initiatives from below – the two regimes have each damaged the legitimacy of their rule. It follows that a viable Palestinian state, and a state that does not pose a threat to surrounding states, without legitimacy stemming from Palestinian society at large, can currently only exist as an authoritarian regime.

Israeli omnipresence; the perceived impotency of the PA is evidently exacerbated by the Israeli-imposed restrictions. That the PSF are not allowed to work freely in more than half of the West Bank’s territory is but one of the many obstacles. Although cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians has improved over the last years, and the latter are occasionally allowed to work in hitherto restricted areas, the process of coordinating access to B and, sometimes, C areas is so time-consuming that the efficacy of the PSF is largely nullified. The checkpoints between the different A areas add to this problem.

Geo-political influences; it is hardly imaginable that the future Palestinian state will be viable when the interests and security of the Palestinian people are not firmly put in first place but will always come second after those of other states, most notably Israel. Even though the EU and US are unanimous in their intent to support the Palestinians in building up their own viable state, geo-political considerations concerning regional stability and security, as well as historical pledges to stand by Israel, seem to prevail over the legitimacy of, and popular support for the developing Palestinian state institutions.