**Signs of shake-up in Palestinian security Abbas is considering a tough Fatah leader as interior chief, to consolidate forces and crack down on extremist groups**

By**Michael Matza**Inquirer Staff Writer

JERUSALEM - As Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas begins consolidating power, he is considering naming seasoned Fatah leader Nasser Yusef to the post of interior minister, in which he would oversee the proposed realignment of Palestinian security forces in the choppy wake of Yasir Arafat's one-man rule.

Arafat rejected two earlier attempts to give the job to Yusef, who staged a crackdown on Hamas in the 1990s. His appointment by Abbas and Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia would send a clear signal to armed Palestinian groups that things have changed.

The security issue took on added urgency yesterday when Abbas ordered Palestinian security forces to prevent attacks against Israelis and to investigate a commando raid that killed six Israelis at a Gaza Strip border crossing last week.

Filling the interior job is the top priority in the cabinet reshuffle, Israeli and Palestinian analysts say. Whoever gets it will implement Abbas'  
proposed transformation of a dozen overlapping security services into a streamlined group of three: National Security, General Intelligence and Civil Police.

The nine remaining services would be incorporated into those three, with Abbas expected to name commanders in the coming days.

Arafat had fiercely resisted domestic and international pressure to cut the number of security forces and share powers with the prime minister. A cabinet makeover could be a catalyst for change.

"They will be looking for a senior, respected member of Fatah," political analyst Mahdi Abdul Hadi said, referring to Abbas' political party. "They want to avoid any questions about experience and professionalism."

The job has three components, Abdul Hadi said: Advise the president as a member of the National Security Council; oversee the new security branches; enforce the civil law.

"Taking all of the above into consideration, the strongest candidate is Nasser Yusef," said Abdul Hadi. "When I met him a few days ago, he was confident of the nomination."

An aide to Abbas, speaking on condition of anonymity, said current Interior Minister Hakam Balawi, an Arafat loyalist, very likely would be replaced.  
Although several are being considered, Yusef is seen as a leading candidate, he said, because Abbas wanted him for the job when he was prime minister in 2003.

"In the past, Nasser's was the name that always floated," the aide said.  
"He has a history of doing the job right when it needs to be done right."

Arafat blocked two attempts to appoint Yusef interior minister - under Abbas and later under Qureia.

Yusef, a major general and former commander of Palestinian forces in Jordan and Lebanon, has belonged to Fatah's Central Committee since 1989. In the mid-1990s, under interim peace accords with Israel, he returned to the Palestinian territories and oversaw a crackdown on Hamas in which dozens were jailed.

Although Abbas has said he will use persuasion rather than force to tame the gunmen, Yusef's possible appointment provides the credible threat of experienced muscle amid indicators it might be needed.

"Hamas is not planning to give the weapons of its fighters to the Palestinian Authority," Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar said in Gaza last week.  
"As long as occupation and aggression continue... no one could disarm us."

Abbas, under increasing international pressure to rein in gunmen, gave clear instructions after a cabinet meeting in Ramallah yesterday that security services should prevent attacks on Israelis.

"A decision was taken that we will handle our obligation to stop violence against Israelis anywhere," Minister of Negotiation Affairs Saeb Erekat said.

Abbas' pronouncement came a day after the executive committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which he heads, called on all Palestinian organizations to end attacks against Israel - and a day before traveling to Gaza today to talk with Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade about declaring a cease-fire, provided Israel does the same.

The composition of Abbas' cabinet could play a role in those talks, with the possibility that the factions may offer a cease-fire only in exchange for a ministerial lineup to their liking, which could mean someone other than Yusef.

Abbas, who is also known as Abu Mazen, has said he intends to start carrying out security commitments under the U.S.-backed road map peace plan. Israelis await evidence he means business.

"The question now is whether he has the will and determination to bring Palestinian terror to an end. His test is now," Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom said Wednesday, a day before Palestinian gunmen killed six Israelis at Gaza's Karni crossing.

The Karni attack is particularly troubling because Israeli officials charged that the attackers passed easily through a checkpoint of the Palestinian Preventive Security Service, which controls the Palestinian side of crossings into Israel.

Abbas' instruction to Palestinian security forces yesterday includes an order to investigate.

The resignation last week of Jibril Rajoub, Arafat's national security adviser, was another indicator that a security shake-up was in the works.  
In an interview after Abbas' inauguration Saturday, Rajoub said he stepped aside so Abbas could choose new advisers and ministers.

"I think the first step for Abu Mazen is to reorganize the security services," he said.

Rajoub resigned less than 48 hours after he and his archrival in the security services, Mohammed Dahlan, met with Abbas to reconcile. Insiders say both men could play pivotal roles in the government

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