

Iran's Policy on the Gaza Strip

Sima Shine and Anna Catran

For many years Iran has enjoyed close relations with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in the Gaza Strip. For years this backing has taken primarily the form of military aid – weaponry and know-how for self-manufacturing and the training of personnel. This was complemented by financial assistance (hundreds of millions of dollars annually) and political backing in public events, in order to place the Palestinian issue on the global agenda.

The anti-Israel stances of Iran and Hamas are apparently a common denominator of greater weight than their divergent Sunni-Shia orientations, although this ethnic divide has widened in recent years due to changes in the regional arena. Indeed, the war in Syria created a significant rift between Iran and Hamas, when Hamas decided to leave Damascus, support the Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt, and refused to support Bashar al-Assad, leading to an extended suspension of relations. Particularly after the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas needs Egyptian good will regarding the Rafah crossing, closed in recent years, and was compelled not to draw closer to Iran. This is a bone of contention between the Hamas military wing, which is eager to resume cooperation with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Iranian intelligence, and the Hamas political wing, which ascribes much importance to relations with Sunni Arab states. Against the background of this internal dispute, Iran and Hamas subsequently worked to repair the damage between them.

Background: Iran in Gaza

Tehran's policy on the Gaza Strip is derived from Iran's desire for regional hegemony and its consistent drive to assist every regional party opposed to Israel. In Iran's view, Israel is a foreign implant in the Middle East and the Zionist movement is an imperialistic, colonialist element that in effect

is a vanguard of the United States – otherwise known as “the Great Satan” – and what enables the United States to advance its interests in the region. Moreover, the hostility toward Israel allows the Iranian regime to gain influence and prestige in the Arab world, which in turn feeds its ambition to lead the entire Muslim world.¹

One of Iran’s most important tools for exporting the revolution and promoting its interests and regional influence is its support for states and organizations that use terrorism against Israeli, US, and other Western interests and subvert the political establishments of pro-Western states. Thus, although the Gaza Strip Palestinian factions supported by Iran, i.e., Hamas and Islamic Jihad, are Sunni and Iran itself is Shiite, and at certain times tensions between them run high, the Iranian regime sees the organizations as a legitimate means for promoting its interests against Israel. For their part, the Palestinian organizations have found the revolutionary Iran with its anti-Israel position a staunch ally. In fact, since the start of the Islamic Revolution, Iran has provided Palestinian organizations political, economic, logistic, and military aid. In addition, Iran invests enormous resources to put the Palestinian cause on the international agenda: it hosts conferences to promote the issue and holds an annual day of national commemoration to express its opposition to Zionism (World Jerusalem Day, falling on the last Friday of Ramadan). Iran’s connection to Palestinian organizations is often noted in speeches by senior regime officials, who consistently stress the commitment of the Islamic Republic to the Palestinian cause in general and their Palestinian allies in particular. For example, on October 20, 2000, Supreme Leader Khamenei said: “We view Palestine as an organ of our body and support for the Palestinian nation is the pride of the Iranian people; the Palestinian nation must continue its blessed jihad and remain firm in its position against the enemies of Islam. Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Fatah must continue their struggle as a united front. The solution to the regional crisis is one, and only one: drying up the root of the crisis, that is the Zionist regime, which has been forced on the region.”²

The so-called Arab Spring brought on a crisis in relations between Iran and Hamas, the most significant of the Palestinian resistance organizations, after Hamas decided to abandon the Syrian regime, Iran’s ally, and support Egypt after the Muslim Brotherhood, headed by President Morsi, took the reins of government there. Since then, Iran has alternately reduced and suspended

its aid to Gaza. The Iranian public has also experienced a longstanding sense of alienation from the Palestinian issue. But even if there has been a change in the scope of cooperation and the degree of closeness, this is not enough to halt Iran's continued assistance to the Palestinian organizations in the Gaza Strip.

Iran's Relations with Hamas

Established early in the first intifada as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza, Hamas initially maintained only loose ties with Iran, mostly because of the latter's close association with PIJ and Hamas's desire to operate as an independent movement. In practice, Iran established permanent and ongoing relations with Hamas only in the early 1990s, when the Islamic Republic assisted Hamas and PIJ operatives expelled to Lebanon by Israel. Closer relations were later forged after a conference to show support for the Palestinians was held in Iran and attended by a senior Hamas delegation that met with senior Iranian personnel, including the Supreme Leader himself.³ Thereafter Iran began its economic and military support for Hamas.

When Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, Iran significantly increased its aid package, based on Iran's belief that the establishment of a Hamas government would translate into an important tool for leading the armed struggle against Israel and for promoting its own influence over the Palestinian arena. The scope of assistance, which until that point consisted of tens of millions of dollars annually, rose to some \$200 million a year, according to some reports.⁴ At the same time, Iran began to arm Hamas, first with standard 20 and 40km range 122mm rockets and standard 120mm mortar bombs. Over the years, Iran has also invested in upgrading Hamas's arsenal and shipped higher quality weapons directly from its soil to Gaza. For instance, the Israeli navy intercepted several ships ferrying arms to the Gaza Strip (the *Karine A* in 2002, the *Victoria* in 2011, and the *Klos C* in 2014) bearing anti-tank Katyusha missiles and anti-aircraft Strella missiles. Had they reached Hamas, they would have represented an important enhancement of its arsenal and improved the organization's ability to harm Israel. In addition to direct arms shipments, and because of the difficulty in penetrating Israeli surveillance, Iran has given Hamas and PIJ advanced technological knowledge to develop an independent missile industry in the Gaza Strip. The transmission of know-how has allowed the movement to

increase the range of its rockets and improve the precision and destructive force of its mortar bombs and projectiles. As for training, a unit of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards has provided military instruction to Hamas operatives outside of Gaza.⁵

Iranian aid helped Hamas during Operation Cast Lead (December 2008-January 2009), when most of the weapons used by Hamas were provided by Tehran, as Hamas former Political Bureau head Khaled Mashal affirmed during his visit there in February 2009. Mashal added that Hamas prevailed against Israel thanks to Iran, and that Iran had played a significant role in Hamas's victory in the battle against Israel.

But despite the massive aid Iran has provided to Hamas in recent years, a deep rift between the two occurred in 2011 because of the Syrian civil war. In response, Iran suspended military and financial support to Hamas. Operation Pillar of Defense (November 2012) provided an opportunity for a partial rehabilitation of relations and, despite public criticism, Iran renewed arms shipments to Gaza. But the most significant improvement of relations occurred only after Operation Protective Edge (July 2014), when senior Iranian officials, headed by Supreme Leader Khamenei, hurried to announce their commitment to help Hamas. During his speech on World Jerusalem Day on July 23, 2014, Khamenei made an exceptional call to arm the West Bank as well. Other senior members of the Iranian regime made similar declarations, and the Basij arm of the Revolutionary Guards announced that at Khamenei's directive, it was opening a bank account to raise funds to arm the Palestinians. When the last military confrontation ended, Iran also provided financial assistance, mainly to rebuild Gaza's network of tunnels. Hamas accepted the Iranian aid with open arms, given its need to renew its weapons stores and help the Gaza Strip population harmed during the weeks of fighting.

But the changing state of the Middle East has continued to place further obstacles in the path of reconciliation. The fighting in Yemen has led to a sudden closeness in relations between Hamas and Saudi Arabia given the organization's support for the legitimacy of President Mansour Hadi after the Houthis seized control of the state. Saudi Arabia greeted Hamas's overtures warmly, and in 2015 even hosted an official Hamas delegation. This development led to another crisis in Hamas's relations with Iran, which took a dim view of the organization's closeness with its Sunni rival for

supremacy in the Middle East. But this crisis did not lead to a severing of relations, and in October 2016, Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, announced that Iran would continue providing arms to the Palestinians. According to Shamkhani, weapons provision to "Palestinian resistance groups" are carried out on the basis of directives from the most senior echelon in Iran's leadership in order to protect the Palestinians and increase their ability to defend themselves against "attacks by the Zionist regime."⁶

However, the past year has seen a renewed effort to improve relations, and a significant warming in relations is evident, against the background of Iran's May 2017 decision to resume the financial assistance to Hamas. The improvement in relations resulted first and foremost from the changes in Hamas leadership, with the appointment of Yahya Sinwar as head of Hamas in Gaza (February 2017) and Ismail Haniyeh as head of Hamas's political bureau (May 2017).

These new appointments were welcomed in Tehran. Ali Khamenei and Qassem Soleimani, the head of the Quds Force, expressed their hope that cooperation with Hamas would resume. In addition, three important delegations from Gaza came to Tehran. One significant visit included the participation of a senior delegation in Hassan Rouhani's inauguration for a second term as president (August 2017); these Hamas representatives met with senior Iranian figures, who stressed their principles and irrevocable commitment to the Palestinians and the resistance. The two sides thus announced a new chapter in their relations. A second important visit was led by Saleh al-Arouri, deputy head of the political bureau, following the reconciliation agreement reached by Abu Mazen. Arouri stated that the visit was Hamas's answer to the demand by Israel and the United States in the wake of the agreement that Hamas sever its ties with Iran and disarm. Yahya Sinwar, the head of the Hamas political bureau, likewise affirmed that Hamas would not sever its ties with the Islamic Republic.

Iran's Relations with Islamic Jihad

Palestinian Islamic Jihad is Iran's closest ally in Gaza. The organization, established by Fathi Abdulaziz al-Shiqaqi, was established in the late 1970s as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, which at that time was operating in Egypt. The organization adopted Khamenei's principles of

jihad and the idea that Palestine must be liberated through armed struggle. The organization's identification with the Islamic Revolution's values led Iran to support it militarily and economically. In fact, Iran is virtually the organization's sole sponsor, providing for the organization's activities at every level, from weapons to salaries. PIJ has a permanent representative in Iran, who maintains ongoing contacts with Iranian parties to maintain and expand relations. Over the years, Iran's economic and military aid to PIJ has grown commensurately with the organization's terrorist activities directed against Israel, with PIJ rising in status and succeeding in establishing itself as a major source of influence in Gaza. According to senior US officials, Tehran provided PIJ with bonuses of millions of dollars for every terrorist attack against Israel.⁷ Moreover, the Revolutionary Guards of the Islamic Republic have often trained the organization's operatives, and in 2002, they ran a training base for Palestinian militants in Syria at a cost of \$50 million, where operatives of PIJ, Hamas, and Hezbollah learned to use Fajr-5 and SA-7 missiles and carry out suicide bombings.⁸

A partial crisis in Tehran-PIJ relations occurred during 2015, when PIJ refused to endorse Iranian support for the Houthis in Yemen. In response, Tehran cut 90 percent of its financial support for the organization. It was only in mid-2016 that Iran renewed its full support for PIJ, and that after a senior level visit by the organization's leader, Ramadan Shalah, to Iran. The delegation met with senior officials in the Iranian regime, including Qassem Soleimani. At the end of the visit, in May 2016, Shalah announced that "Iran is the only state providing assistance to the intifada and the families of the *shahids*."⁹

Conclusion

The assistance Iran provides to organizations in the Gaza Strip reflects its desire to be a significant player in the Palestinian arena and to be the main supporter of continued armed resistance against Israel. Since the start of the Islamic Revolution, Iran has sought regional hegemony and desires to expand its influence over the Palestinian arena. To achieve this, Iran has provided financial and military aid to Palestinian organizations operating in the Gaza Strip, which it sees as a military wing against Israel and a means to counteract the Palestinian Authority's leadership, which has expressed a desire for political negotiations. The organizations in Gaza, especially the

military wing of Hamas, view the ongoing relationship with Iran as very important, given their isolation and lack of an alternative, even if in certain regional situations they choose to ally themselves with parties Iran does not support. Despite the differences of opinion that have arisen in recent years between the Gaza organizations and Iran, mostly over the split in the Arab world and the persistent fighting in Syria, it seems that Iran is not willing to concede its stake in the Gaza Strip, and in the future will continue to help parties that demonstrate active opposition to Israel.

Notes

- 1 "Iran and Israel: The Ideological Enmity and Its Root," *Studies in Israel's Rebirth* 14 (2004): 369.
- 2 *Khabar TV*, Iran, October 20, 2000/.
- 3 Rachel Brandenburg, "The Iran Primer," United States Institute of Peace, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-palestinians>.
- 4 Sarah el-Deeb, "Haniyeh: Iran Pledges \$250M in Aid," *Washingtonpost.com*, December 11, 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/11/AR2006071100742.html>.
- 5 "Iranian Assistance to Hamas," Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israeli Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center, January 12, 2009.
- 6 Ali Hashem, "Hamas and Iran: New Era, New Rules," *al-Monitor*, February 19, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/02/iran-hamas-arab-spring-tehran-visit-repair-relations.html#ixzz41GE5Ep00>.
- 7 "Palestinian Islamic Jihad Backgrounder: 2016," CAMERA, http://www.camera.org/index.asp?x_context=7&x_issue=11&x_article=3403.
- 8 "Iranian Assistance to Hamas."
- 9 Hazem Balousha, "Islamic Jihad's Coiffers Run Dry," *al-Monitor*, June 2, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/palestine-islamic-jihad-financial-crisis-money-iran-hezbollah.html>.