

From Proxy to Patron: Iran's Relationship with the Palestinian Nationalist Movement

April 2019

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From Proxy to Patron: Iran's Relationship with the Palestinian Nationalist Movement

Introduction

Since its establishment in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has become a leading patron of the Palestinian cause. Tehran's motivation is twofold: it seeks an independent Palestinian state established at Israel's expense while also using Palestinian nationalist movements to export its Islamic Revolution.

Any peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would contradict Iran's narrative that Israel is the cause of all conflict and instability in the Middle East. Therefore, Tehran works to undermine Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts through military support to Palestinian groups, direct and indirect social support for the Palestinians, and infiltration of the Palestinian diaspora.

History of the Relationship: Khomeini's Revolutionaries Transform from Proxies of Fatah to Patrons of Palestinian Armed Groups

Khomeini and Arafat's Confluence of Interests

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Iranian rebels established ties with Palestinian leaders years before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Anti-Semitism and ideological anti-Zionism [drove](#) Khomeini's opposition to Israel's existence. Further, Khomeini saw that the Palestinian cause's centrality to the Arab world could serve as a gateway for him [to spread](#) his revolutionary ideology to the otherwise unreceptive and predominantly Sunni Arab street.

Khomeini found a willing partner in Yasser Arafat, the founder of Fatah, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and de facto leader of the Palestinian nationalist movement. Arafat considered Khomeini a tool to turn Iran against Israel and thereby deprive the Jewish state of one of its most important regional—and few Muslim—allies.

Therefore, when Khomeini dispatched a follower in 1973 to establish alliances in the Muslim world, Arafat was receptive. Arafat [met](#) with Khomeini at least twice in the latter's residence in exile in Iraq, and agreed to train the ayatollah's supporters at Fatah's bases in Lebanon.

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Fatah Trains Khomeini's Revolutionaries

Between 1976 and 1978, Fatah [trained](#) Khomeini's revolutionaries in Lebanon and provided [funds](#), guidance, and equipment. Fatah effectively created and tutored [the nucleus](#) of what would become the Iranian regime's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and intelligence apparatuses.

By 1977, Fatah had trained more than 700 of Khomeini's fighters, [including](#) the cleric's two sons [Mustafa](#) and Ahmad. Many of these Iranian [graduates](#)—including Ahmad, who became an honorary Fatah member—participated in Fatah's assaults against Lebanese Christian factions.

Arafat also developed a personal relationship with Khomeini, [sending](#) him a condolence letter when Mustafa died in 1977. In return, when Khomeini came [under pressure](#) from Saddam Hussein in 1978, the ayatollah considered seeking refuge among Arafat's [Palestinian militias](#) in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, but eventually moved to France.

Fatah Aids the Islamic Revolution

Fatah directly and indirectly aided Iran's Islamic Revolution, with one Palestinian official even [boasting](#) in 1978 over [the PLO's role](#) in "fomenting trouble in Iran." Senior Fatah operative [Hani al-Hassan](#) directed the Khomeini forces' intelligence efforts. (Al-Hassan went on to command Khomeini's bodyguards immediately after the cleric's return to Iran, and Arafat named him the PLO's first ambassador to the Islamic Republic.)

In [August 1978](#), bands of heavily armed, Palestinian-trained men engaged the shah's forces, killing five policemen. Palestinians may also have helped instigate the revolution's ["point of no return,"](#) the "Black Friday" massacre by the shah's forces of protesters at Jaleh Square on September 8, 1978. Investigations into the incident turned up [evidence](#) that [Palestinian gunmen](#) may have provoked the bloodbath by firing on soldiers from within the crowd.

As the revolution escalated, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi fled Iran on January 16, 1979, paving the way for Khomeini's return to the country two weeks later. Khomeini quickly [requested](#) Arafat's help in forming an Islamist government. The ayatollah promised that once he had consolidated his grip on the new regime, he would "turn to the issue of victory over Israel." Arafat welcomed the revolution's success, viewing it as a [turning point](#) in the Palestinian struggle against Israel, and [arrived](#) in Tehran on February 5 with a 31-member Fatah and PLO [delegation](#). The group included many of the best-trained commandos of Fatah Force-17, Arafat's personal security service, whom he assigned to protect Khomeini.

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Khomeini's opponents claimed that significant numbers of Palestinian militants remained in Iran well after the revolution—“[over 20,000](#),” according to former Iranian Prime Minister Shahpour Bakhtiar. Others [claimed](#) Palestinians were piloting the new regime's air force or were present among the militants who seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran. A 1980 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) [memorandum](#) indicated that about half a dozen PLO-linked Palestinians remained in Tehran to train the nascent IRGC.

Khomeini Begins to Use the Palestinian Cause as a Regime Tool

Despite Fatah's assistance in toppling the shah, Khomeini's regime quickly subordinated the Palestinians to Iran and usurped their cause.

At first, Arafat attempted to exploit his ties with Khomeini. During the Iran hostage crisis, he used his ties to the ayatollah in a [bid](#) to act as an intermediary for the release of the American hostages, and thereby obtain [recognition](#) from the United States. However, Khomeini objected, and Arafat withdrew his offer, demonstrating the limits of his influence on the ayatollah.

Likewise, after Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 and destroyed the PLO's stronghold in Beirut, and as the Iran-Iraq War was raging, the PLO recommended that Khomeini accept an Iraqi proposal for a ceasefire and join the battle against Israel. The ayatollah rejected this counsel, [proclaiming](#) that the “road to Jerusalem passes through [the Iraqi city of] Karbala!” Again, Khomeini showed that Iran—not the Palestinians—dictated the terms of their relationship.

Tehran soon showed it would not treat its onetime Palestinian patrons as equal partners. The CIA [estimated](#) that Khomeini's regime intentionally kept the PLO's presence in post-revolution Iran “relatively limited” in order to “prevent the Palestinians from playing a significant role in Iran's internal affairs.” Though Khomeini invited PLO fighters to train the newly-formed IRGC, these Palestinians ended up [playing](#) “little role in the formation of the Guards because many Iranian officials including regular military advisors feared that the Palestinians would gain too much influence in the Iranian military.”

As his regime matured, Khomeini continued to exploit his relationship with the Palestinians to further Tehran's regional interests. At a November 1979 PLO solidarity conference in Lisbon, one of Fatah's first Iranian graduates, Mohammad Montazeri, [vowed](#) to recruit 100,000 Iranian volunteers to fight Israel on behalf of the Palestinians. On its face, this pledge appeared to fulfill Khomeini's promise to begin joining the Palestinian fight against Israel, but Iran had other intentions.

A month later, the first 400 Iranian volunteers arrived unannounced in Damascus. But rather than join one of the several Palestinian factions operating in Lebanon, they declared their intention to travel to Lebanon to establish a *Shiite* movement, chanting slogans like “Today

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Iran, tomorrow Palestine.” Rather than seeking to liberate Palestine, they were exploiting the Palestinian cause to spread Iran’s revolution. Soon, these efforts would culminate in Iran’s formation of Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Iran Uses Hezbollah to Subsume Fatah

The Islamic Republic’s ties with Fatah and the PLO soon began to deteriorate, particularly in the late 1980s as Arafat signaled his desire for détente with Israel. As relations between Tehran and Arafat soured, Imad Mughniyeh— Hezbollah’s future storied commander who began his terrorist career as Arafat’s bodyguard in Fatah’s Force-17 – stepped in to act as a conduit between his old mentor and Iran and Hezbollah. Mughniyeh had become disillusioned with Fatah after the PLO’s defeat during Israel’s invasion of Lebanon, and soon defected to the IRGC. Nonetheless, Mughniyeh [maintained](#) contact with Arafat and other Palestinian factions, even after their expulsion from Beirut to Tunisia in 1982.

In early 1988, Mughniyeh [traveled](#) to Tunisia to meet with Arafat. Arafat briefed Mughniyeh on impediments to the West Bank activities of Khalil al-Wazir—aka Abu Jihad, the PLO’s military chief and Arafat’s top aide, who was managing the intifada. Mughniyeh then returned to Beirut and dispatched Ali Deeb—aka Abu Hassan Khudur Salameh, once Mughniyeh’s former commander in Fatah—to Tunisia to meet with Arafat. Deeb tried to convince Arafat to cease negotiations with the Israelis and instead move to Tehran and continue the struggle against Israel from there. Mughniyeh’s goal was both to undercut reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians, and to transfer the center of the Palestinian nationalist movement from the Arab world to Iran.

Arafat declined Deeb’s offer, fearing Arab states would [“kill him,”](#) but Deeb did not relent. He accompanied Arafat to the Sixth Arab Summit Conference in Morocco in 1989, and attended his meetings with Arab leaders. Deeb reported back to Mughniyeh that there was no chance to [“liberate Palestine”](#) under Arafat’s leadership. Mughniyeh soon convinced Deeb to leave Fatah and join Hezbollah, with Arafat’s blessing. Deeb would prove critical to Mughniyeh’s plans to weaponize the Palestinian cause until the former’s assassination by Israel in 1999.

Apparently influenced by Deeb’s disillusionment with Arafat, Mughniyeh turned his attention to Arafat rival Abu Jihad, with whom Mughniyeh reportedly had a [“close relationship”](#) from their Fatah days. Mughniyeh began corresponding directly with Abu Jihad, and secured funds from Tehran for his operations in the West Bank and Gaza. As with Arafat, Mughniyeh began advising Abu Jihad to move from Tunisia to Iran and lead the fight against Israel from there. Abu Jihad hesitated, but soon relented and planned to relocate, until Israel [assassinated](#) him in April 1988.

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In December of 1988, Arafat [announced](#) the PLO's recognition of Israel, signaling his pursuit of a peace agreement with the Jewish state. Mughniyeh again stepped up efforts to undercut his old mentor and bring the Palestinian national movement under Iran's aegis. He asked yet another Palestinian leader, Salah Khalaf (aka Abu Iyad), the head of Fatah's central security, to relocate to Tehran. Khalaf agreed but, like Abu Jihad, was assassinated in Tunisia in 1991.

In the early 1990s, a former Fatah leader close to the IRGC visited Arafat in Tunisia and advised him to improve relations with Iran and Hezbollah. Arafat responded that the Arab countries would cut him off if he did, but expressed readiness for improved ties with Hezbollah, asking for Mughniyeh to be the go-between. While Hezbollah and Iran officially cut off contact with Arafat after he signed the Oslo Accords in 1993, Mughniyeh maintained his ties and continued trying to increase Tehran's influence over Arafat and the PLO.

In 1996, Hezbollah's leadership met in Iran and established a "Palestine Unit" with the duty of working within Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. Mughniyeh would later [tell](#) Palestinian contacts that the unit would not replace Palestinians themselves in fighting Israel, but would "provide for all of the necessities to support the resistance fighters in Palestine... to push out [the Israelis] gradually." Mughniyeh tasked Ali Deeb with this portfolio and with communication with the Palestinian factions. Gone were the days when the Palestinians lavished support on Iran's nascent revolutionaries. Tehran now assumed the upper hand—and has used the Palestinian cause as a tool for regional expansion ever since.

Full-Scale Patronage: Iran's Military Support to Palestinian Groups

In the 1990s, Iran began providing training and other [aid](#) to various armed Palestinian groups. Since then, Iran has mostly worked indirectly—mainly through Hezbollah—to help Fatah, the Popular Resistance Committees, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Iran also established its own proxy—al-Sabireen—in Gaza.

Iran has two goals in arming Palestinian militant organizations. The first is to foment continued violence between the Palestinians and Israel in order to prevent a peaceful resolution to the conflict, which would deprive Iran of a vehicle to export the Islamic Revolution. Secondly, arming the Palestinians enables Tehran to play one faction against another, allowing Iran to maintain leverage over the various Palestinian groups and thereby the Palestinian nationalist movement as a whole, bringing them into line with the regime's foreign policy objectives.

Hezbollah—Iran's Emissary to the Palestinians

Hezbollah has long provided Palestinian armed factions with training and with logistical and financial support. Hezbollah former military commander [Imad Mughniyeh](#) began his career as Yasser Arafat's bodyguard. Because of his relationships with the Palestinian leadership,

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Mughniyeh would go on to become Hezbollah's—and, by extension, Iran's—most significant point of contact with various Palestinian factions. Many of the groups, such as Hamas's Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades, [credited](#) Mughniyeh with their warfighting expertise.

On Hezbollah's orders, Mughniyeh also worked to upgrade the Palestinian armed factions' tactical warfare capabilities, created specialized units—including infantry, engineering, sniper, anti-tank, and rocket units—and organized their fighting formations for war against Israel.

Iran—through Hezbollah—has clearly made Palestinian factions more belligerent and lethal. The following six sections detail Iranian military assistance to different Palestinian groups.

Fatah

Over the last 20 years, Fatah's military relationship with Iran has consisted primarily of backchannel communications and weapons smuggling through Hezbollah so that Fatah could maintain plausible deniability before Western audiences.

Hezbollah and Iran used Imad Mughniyeh for backdoor communications with Yasser Arafat after they officially broke relations upon the signing of the Oslo Accords. Mughniyeh was particularly interested in Arafat's ability to import thousands of gunmen and their light weapons into the West Bank and Gaza. According to *al-Akhbar*, Mughniyeh also [began](#) laying the groundwork for the Second Intifada years before its outbreak in 2000. He set about establishing contacts with Fatah's leadership in Tunisia and the Palestinian territories to establish a plan of action to carry out attacks against Israel.

Mughniyeh also moved to unify the ranks of the Palestinian factions under the auspices of Hezbollah. In 1998, Israel allowed all PLO member organizations to enter Gaza to participate in a Palestinian National Council session. Mughniyeh seized this opportunity to bring Fatah members who worked with Hezbollah into Gaza as well. At the time and with Arafat's approval, Fatah fighters were linked up with Hezbollah in Lebanon, especially those factions that supported continuing the armed struggle against Israel.

That same year, Mughniyeh soon began [transferring](#) arms from Lebanon to the territories, smuggling small amounts of rifles in Arafat's car and presidential plane, and also via the Jordanian border overland into the West Bank. Mughniyeh also discovered a sea current from the Sinai Peninsula to Gaza that he used to move barrels laden with weapons to the Gaza Strip. Hezbollah also increased the amount and variety of weapons sent to the Palestinian factions, including explosive devices and detonators transferred from Lebanon and Syria.

Weeks after Israel withdrew from south Lebanon in May 2000, Arafat wrote to Mughniyeh, [expressing](#) his desire to ignite another Intifada in the West Bank. Arafat had earlier instructed

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Fatah's cadres to "work quietly and calmly [with Hezbollah]" and that he "[didn't] want your activities discovered." To give Arafat plausible deniability, he did not want to be told details of Fatah's cooperation with Hezbollah. Arafat also instructed close Fatah officials to move to Tunisia to ease their communication with Hezbollah. He also instructed Fatah's Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades to cooperate with Mughniyeh, who in turn sent a group of "resistance fighters" to work with the Brigades. Al-Aqsa operatives admit that Hezbollah began making [offers of assistance](#) to them from early in the Intifada, and recruited several of the Brigades' operatives.

Mughniyeh also established Unit 1800 within Hezbollah, tasked with executing attacks against Israeli targets abroad, as well as providing logistical, media, cultural, and economic support to the intifada. Unit 1800 in turn spawned Hezbollah's "[Special Research Apparatus](#)"—Mughniyeh's own fiefdom within Hezbollah—which recruited Hebrew-speaking Palestinians to spy on the Israelis. According to Israeli military intelligence, Mughniyeh and his Hezbollah [apparatus](#) were Iran's main conduit for recruiting Palestinians for training in Lebanon or Iran.

According to Shin Bet [estimates](#), Hezbollah was involved in 21 percent of Palestinian terrorist attacks in Israel in 2004 and in 2005 Hezbollah funded 90 percent of the attacks carried out by Fatah's Tanzim faction. According to one Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades operative in Nablus, Hezbollah provided his local group with \$8,000 per month to purchase weapons and ammunition.

Israel tried repeatedly to disrupt Hezbollah's funding to the Palestinians, starting a few months after Ariel Sharon became prime minister in 2001. Sharon met with Major General Meir Dagan and asked him to set up a new counterterror body within the prime minister's office, code-named "[Harpoon](#)," to disrupt Iranian and Hezbollah funding to Arafat and other Palestinian factions.

The "[Karine A](#)" incident is perhaps the most notorious of Iran and Hezbollah's attempts to arm the Palestinians during the Second Intifada. Fouad Shoubaki, the head of the PA General Security's financial directorate and a close Arafat confidante, [organized](#) the ship's voyage, with Mughniyeh and Hezbollah facilitating the effort.

[According](#) to pro-Hezbollah *al-Akhbar*, Adel Mughrabi, the primary purchasing agent in the Palestinian Arms Procurement Apparatus, contacted Hezbollah and the Iranians in October 2000 to aid the PA in carrying out a huge weapons-smuggling operation. According to the Israelis, in [exchange](#) for these weapons, the PA would have allowed the IRGC to establish a foothold in Gaza and the West Bank.

The Palestinian Authority purchased the Karine-A in Lebanon in late August 2001. It sailed from Lebanon to Sudan, where it spent 12 days. From there, the ship sailed to Hodeida in Yemen, where some of its cargo was offloaded. It was then loaded with weapons hidden in 180 tons of

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rice and other goods totaling \$3 billion, and set off for Dubai. It finally reached Iran's port of Kish on December 11, 2001. There, it was loaded with weapons for which Hezbollah intermediaries paid Iran \$15 million. Hezbollah members prepared the weapons to be smuggled to the PA but Israel intercepted the *Karine A* ship in the Red Sea.

In addition to weapons smuggling, Mughniyeh tried to ease Israeli pressure on the Palestinian factions and Arafat during the intifada. He sought to provoke the Israelis to cross the Lebanese border, including by aiding a March 12, 2002 Palestinian Islamic Jihad [attack launched](#) from Lebanon on the northern Israeli town of Shlomi, killing five Israeli civilians and one soldier.

Ties between Fatah and Iran have deteriorated in recent years, particularly following the death of Arafat and Mughniyeh. Mahmoud Abbas' more moderate leadership of Fatah and the PA and Iran's continued support of Fatah rivals like Hamas have also weakened the relationship.

In late 2017, Redwan al-Akhras, a member of Fatah's Legislative Council, [accused](#) Iran of being the source of the tensions between Hamas and Fatah, saying Tehran had "interests in ensuring the failure of [ongoing] reconciliation [talks between the two groups]." [Later](#), Azzam al-Ahmad—the head of Fatah's reconciliation talks with Hamas, and a member of Fatah's Central Council—[blamed](#) Iran and its proxy [Palestinian Islamic Jihad](#) for intra-Palestinian disunity, calling Tehran "the number one sponsor of division." He even said, "[I]t seems that one of the conditions of the resumption of Iranian aid [to Hamas] is the continuation of the division."

As late as June 2018, Fatah's official spokesman, Osama al-Qawasmi, [said](#) Iran "had not given a single cent to the Palestinian people." He added, "Not a single Palestinian has seen or heard of Iranian support at all. We have not seen or heard of Iran trying to build a school, university, or hospital, or any development project. If some Iranians think that their support for a particular party constitutes support for the Palestinian people, that's a big mistake. Iran, by supporting Hamas, is not supporting the Palestinian people at all."

Popular Resistance Committees

Iran and Hezbollah's efforts to create more radical splinters within Fatah paid off in September 2000, with the founding of the so-called Popular Resistance Committees (PRC) by [Jamal Ataya Abu Samhadana](#). The PRC was a coalition of armed factions [opposed](#) to Arafat and Fatah's perceived conciliatory approach towards Israel. The PRC is the [third-strongest](#) Palestinian faction in Gaza, behind Hamas and PIJ, and has [repeatedly](#) tried and failed to gain a foothold in the West Bank. [Reports](#) indicate Hezbollah has given the PRC funding and arms—specifically missiles, rockets, and bomb-manufacturing capabilities.

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The PRC does not recognize Israel's right to exist, and [opposes](#) any diplomatic talks or political and security arrangements with Israel. Echoing Hezbollah, the PRC sees comprehensive resistance as the only method to liberate all of historical Palestine.

[Abu Samhadana](#) led the PRC until his assassination by Israel in 2006. PRC's inaugural cadres were primarily former Fatah and Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades operatives, but also included former Hamas, PIJ, and PFLP militants. Its military arm is the "[Al-Nasser Salahuddin Brigades](#) (NSB)."

Initially, Yasser Arafat gave limited support to the PRC's armed activities to use them as a political pressure point against the Israelis. However, the PA soon cut off funding. Abu Samhadana initiated contact with Hezbollah's leadership in Lebanon, which agreed to provide military assistance to the NSB, including improvised explosive devices and anti-armor missiles. Abu Samhadana drew inspiration from Hezbollah and [wanted](#) to emulate in the Palestinian territories the group's successes against Israel in south Lebanon.

The NSB cooperated with Hezbollah's cadres in charge of supporting the intifada. Hezbollah helped the NSB develop its missile and bomb-manufacturing capabilities, and later supplied the NSB with Russian-made Grad rockets, which the NSB fired on Beersheba in 2004 and 2005. By 2002, with Hezbollah-provided expertise, the NSB began producing weapons in Gaza.

The PRC began its militant [activities](#) during the Second Intifada, carrying out mortar and rocket attacks against Israel's Gush Katif settlement bloc in Gaza and Israeli communities in the Negev. The PRC also specialized in roadside bombings and carried out IED attacks against Israeli tanks and armored vehicles. The PRC is also suspected of [responsibility](#) for an October 2003 roadside bomb attack in Gaza against a U.S. diplomatic convoy, killing three American security guards. The PRC also [participated](#)—together with Hamas' Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades—in a 2006 attack during which the groups captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. The NSB also [abducted](#) and murdered Israeli student [Eliahu Asheri](#) in 2006, hours after Shalit's kidnapping.

In recent years, tensions have grown between the PRC/NSB Hezbollah and Iran over Tehran's regional adventurism. In a 2016 video, a masked NSB gunman [condemned](#) "polytheist Iran" for "rallying its fighters from the corners of the Earth" to kill Sunnis in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere.

However, a year prior, PRC spokesman Abu Mujahid condemned Israel's assassination of Jihad Mughniyeh and other Hezbollah operatives in Quneitra in an [interview](#) with pro-Hezbollah *al-Akhbar*. Abu Mujahid stated that the PRC had been in constant contact "with our brothers in the Islamic Resistance (Hezbollah) and the brothers in the Islamic Republic of Iran, during, and after" the 50-day war between Israel and Gaza's militant factions during the summer of 2014. He also said that Hezbollah and Iran continued providing "both military and material support" to the PRC during that time.

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More recently, on November 13, 2018, Abu Mujahid [thanked](#) “our allies in Hezbollah and Iran” for their help in the wake of a heightened round of violence between Israel and armed Palestinian factions in Gaza.

Hamas

Hamas has been Iran’s most important Palestinian partner for over two decades. Hamas’ military ties with Tehran have involved intelligence sharing, provision of arms, organizing, and training—all through Hezbollah. The Iranian regime has also publicly and vociferously supported Hamas’ armed struggle against Israel.

Hezbollah cemented its relationship with Hamas in 1992 after Israel expelled 400 Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad militants to Lebanon, where they honed their military skills at what they called “Hezbollah University.” Hezbollah [established](#) a camp for them at Marj al-Zuhur and provided them with extensive military training, with the assistance of Iranian intelligence and the direct involvement of the IRGC’s Ali Reza Askar. The training included instruction in carrying out suicide bombings and making car bombs and other explosive devices. The most prominent graduate of Hezbollah University was Hamas’ master bomb-maker, Yahya Ayyash, aka “the Engineer.”

In December of 1993, the exiled Palestinians returned to the West Bank and Gaza, and in less than a year they carried out a string of attacks that killed almost 100 Israelis. These returnees formed a network Hezbollah [activated](#) to [cripple](#) Israeli-Palestinian peace initiatives. From his hiding place in the Gaza Strip, Ayyash directed numerous suicide bombings until Israel assassinated him in 1996. Hezbollah and Iran’s connections with Hamas allowed them to control the tempo of violence between the Israel and the Palestinians.

During the late 1990s, Khaled Mashaal [coordinated](#) Hamas’ ties with IRGC intelligence. However, despite strident overtures from Hezbollah and Tehran, Hamas otherwise kept its distance from Iran at the insistence of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Hamas’s co-founder and spiritual leader. However, after Yassin’s assassination in 2004, Hamas began accepting other aid from Iran and Hezbollah, including funds and logistical support.

Hezbollah’s efforts to support Palestinian armed groups continued after the Second Intifada. According to *al-Akhbar*, Hezbollah commander Imad Mughniyeh visited Gaza after Israel’s 2005 Disengagement, meeting with ‘resistance’ leaders, inspecting rocket production facilities and launchpads, and establishing contact with Hamas’ tunnel operatives. After Hezbollah’s 2006 war against Israel, Mughniyeh, with Iran’s approval, returned to Gaza and spent [months](#) there training Palestinian factions in rocket warfare.

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Relations between Hamas and Iran cooled for several years in the early 2010s after the onset of the Syrian civil war, during which the Iranian and Syrian regimes fought Sunni opposition groups. Despite [that dynamic](#), Iran was indispensable in building up Hamas' military capabilities during the group's 2014 war with Israel, and a Hamas delegation then visited Tehran to repair ties. At the time, Musa Abu Marzouk, deputy chairman of Hamas' politburo, [downplayed](#) the rift, saying "bilateral relations between us and the Islamic Republic of Iran are back on track."

The Iranians [likewise](#) gave that impression, admitting to [arming](#) Hamas during the war and stressing the group's importance in Iran's fight against Israel. Ali Akbar Velayati, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's senior foreign policy advisor, [confirmed](#) that Iran has supplied most of Hamas' weapons and steadily built-up the group's arms-manufacturing capacity—a claim [seconded](#) by Hamas' own leadership. Hamas and Hezbollah also [restored](#) ties and after Yahya al-Sinwar assumed political command of Hamas and became commander of its Qassam Brigades, relations seem to have returned to their state before the Syrian civil war.

Just before his 2017 election as Hamas' deputy political chief, Saleh al-Arouri—[described](#) by pro-Hezbollah *al-Mayadeen* as the "sponsor of reconciliation with Iran and Hezbollah"—[visited](#) Iran and met with Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. The discussions reportedly centered on "reconciliation [between Hamas and Iran] and the developments of the struggle against [Israel]." After his election, al-Arouri visited Iran again with a Hamas delegation and met with senior regime officials.

Hamas now appears to have adopted a neutral stance on Sunni-Shiite regional conflicts and focuses on the common ground in combating Israel. During his visit to Iran, al-Arouri—noting the group's good relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran—[declared](#) Hamas' [neutrality](#) on all the conflicts dividing the Sunni and Shiite world, including the Syrian civil war. Al-Arouri added, "Palestinian factions which have involved themselves in these conflicts in the past have harmed the Palestinian cause." He stressed, however, that Hamas' "strategic relationship" with Iran and Hezbollah was based on a shared commitment to resistance.

Palestinian Islamic Jihad

Another Palestinian group courted by Iran is Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Iran's has provided comparably more direct military assistance to PIJ, arming, training, funding, and organizing PIJ operatives, and even directly appointing the group's leadership.

PIJ was [founded](#) by Fathi al-Shaqqi and Ramadan Shalah, two Palestinians who met while they were medical students at Egypt's Zakazik University, and a small nucleus of other Palestinian students. Though they adopted the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood's ideology, upon their return to the Palestinian territories, they quickly allied with Iran and sought inspiration from its Islamic

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Revolution. In 1981, they began setting up a network of cells in Gaza. Members of these units were enthusiastic supporters of Khomeini, strengthening the group's pro-Iranian orientation.

In 1988, Israel expelled Shaqaqi to Lebanon, where the IRGC's intelligence branch took him under its wing, arranging a work permit and job for him in Damascus and funding him. Having failed to co-opt Hamas due to Yassin's resistance, Iran viewed Shaqaqi and PIJ as its next best option.

With Iran's support, PIJ established itself in Damascus and built up its network in the Palestinian territories. Iran also [established](#) training bases for PIJ (and Hamas) in Sudan, beginning in the late 1980s. Hezbollah also stepped in [to train](#) the nucleus of the al-Quds Brigades, PIJ's military wing, including [Mohammad al-Sheikh Khalil](#), one of the Brigades' founders.

Soon thereafter, PIJ began launching terrorist attacks, including a well-organized February 1990 assault on a bus of Israeli tourists near Cairo; a stabbing attack in the Israeli city of Bat Yam on May 1992; and a 1994 suicide bombing of an Israeli military checkpoint in the Gaza Strip.

After Israel assassinated Shaqaqi in 1995, Iran appointed [Ramadan Shalah](#) to replace him. Under Shalah's leadership, PIJ's influence waned and it became a full-fledged Iranian puppet.

During the pivotal 2000 Israeli-Palestinian peace talks at Camp David, Iran decided to [resuscitate](#) PIJ from its operational nadir. On the eve of Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon that year, Shalah met with Iran's ambassador in Damascus, who [demanded](#) that PIJ carry out attacks in Israel and the Palestinian territories, without claiming responsibility. Through Shalah, Iran [funneled](#) large sums of funds to PIJ operatives in the West Bank.

Hezbollah's Imad Mughniyeh also moved to establish ties with Shalah. After Israel's May 2000 withdrawal from south Lebanon, Mughniyeh took Shalah on a tour of the Lebanese-Israeli border, vowing to him that "by God, we will expel [the Israelis]" from all of historical Palestine.

Shalah even credited Mughniyeh with being the [first person](#) to smuggle weapons into Gaza from outside the Palestinian territories, and PIJ became a conduit for Hezbollah's weapons-smuggling activities to the Palestinians. In October 2006, Syrian opposition sources [claimed](#) Hezbollah had coordinated an operation with Syrian intelligence to smuggle weapons to Palestinian factions via Jordan. The sources claimed that the operation was arranged by Mughniyeh's then-deputy Talal Hamiyeh; then-head of Syrian military intelligence Major General Assef Shawkat; and PIJ's Ziad al-Nakhala (who would be [elected](#) as the group's secretary-general in 2018). The IRGC's then commander, Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, funded and directly oversaw the operation. This came to light shortly after Jordanian officials discovered a similar operation, in 2006, to [smuggle weapons](#) to Hamas in Jordan for use in terror attacks against Jordanian officials.

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Other Palestinian Factions: PFLP/PFLP-GC

Iran and Hezbollah also built ties with smaller Palestinian groups. In the 1980s, Hezbollah developed a relationship with the Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). The two executed a joint operation on [April 26, 1988](#), deploying a guerilla unit into Israeli-held territory near Mount Hermon and killing an Israeli infantry battalion commander and tracker.

In some cases, Iran used breakaway factions within existing Palestinian organized groups as its terror proxies. One such faction was the PFLP–General Command (PFLP-GC), a PFLP splinter group based in Lebanon. On July 3, 1987, the USS Vincennes accidentally shot down an Iranian passenger jet, killing all aboard. In response, Iran used Jibril’s PFLP-GC to strike at American targets in Europe and the U.S., even [attempting](#) to murder [Sharon Rogers](#), the [wife](#) of [Vincennes captain](#) William C. Rogers, by [blowing up](#) her car in San Diego on March 10, 1989.

Abolghassem Mesbahi, a former Iranian intelligence official who defected to Germany, [claimed](#) that the Pam Am 103 Lockerbie [bombing](#)—generally blamed on Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi—was actually ordered by Ayatollah Khomeini “to copy exactly what happened to the Iranian Airbus” and [carried out](#) by the PFLP-GC. In Mesbahi’s telling, the Iranians recruited Jibril because of his previous experience of bombing aircraft. Jibril, in turn, assigned the task to Hafez Dalkamoni, who at the time of the bombing had been suspected of involvement in the [Lockerbie bombing](#). However, that Iran has denied any involvement in the bombing, and official investigations into the attack squarely blame the Qaddafi regime.

Al-Sabireen

In addition to using local Palestinian groups to spread its influence within Palestinian society, Iran established its own proxy, al-Sabireen. The State Department officially [designated](#) Al-Sabireen as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) on December 19, 2017. Al-Sabireen’s rise is generally and erroneously [dated to 2014](#), when the organization announced its existence after the death of one of its operatives—[Nizar Said Issa](#), initially thought to belong to [PIJ](#)—in an accidental explosion. However, the organization itself claims to have been active for [years](#) beforehand. Indeed, [Al-Bakiyat El-Salehat Society Palestine](#) (ABSSP) – its charitable arm – was established in the Gaza Strip in 2004, with Hisham Salem as its [chairman](#).

Social Support

As with military assistance, Iran also provides direct and indirect social support to the Palestinians to radicalize Palestinian society, and thereby perpetuate and exacerbate Palestinian rejection of peace with Israel.

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Direct Social Support

Iran directly aids Palestinians through the [Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation \(IKRF\)](#), one of the earliest organizations Khomeini created upon returning to Iran in 1979. Its stated mission is “[providing livelihood and cultural support to the needy and underprivileged people living inside and outside the country in order to secure self-reliance, to strengthen and increase piety, and to preserve human dignity.](#)” [According](#) to current IKRF head Parviz Fattah, a former IRGC commander, [75 percent of the organization’s funding comes from the Iranian government.](#)

A [IKRF branch](#) operates in the Gaza Strip. Iran has long used the IKRF’s various branches as conduits for funding its regional proxies. For example, the U.S. Treasury Department [designated](#) the IKRF’s [Lebanese branch](#) in [2010](#) for “providing financial and material support to Hizballah (sic)” and helping “fund and operate Hizballah [sic] youth training camps, which have been used to recruit future Hizballah members and operatives.” The IKRF created a foothold in Gaza in 2007, in the wake of the Israeli blockade of the Strip.

Reports indicate that beginning [in 2011](#), the IKRF began annual distribution of food packages to the poor in Gaza for the month of Ramadan. In [2013 alone](#), the IKRF—in cooperation with PIJ and the PFLP-GC—distributed [40,000](#) such packages, worth \$50 each. In [2016](#), the IKRF provided over 7,500 *iftar* meals, on a daily basis, to an equivalent number of needy Gazan families, and food packages to tens of thousands of others.

The IKRF also provides charity to Palestinian orphans and the poor. [In Ramadan of 2018](#), for example, IKRF provided daily *iftar* meals for 300,000 Palestinian families—in addition to those taking part in the “March of Return” demonstrations on Gaza-Israel border—culminating in an Eid al-Fitr party and the distribution of holiday clothing and sweets for children.

Indirect Social Support: Charity/Social Projects Through Proxies

Iran also uses local proxy groups to provide social aid to the Palestinians. One of these is Al-Sabireen’s charitable arm, [Al-Bakiyat El-Salehat Society Palestine](#) (ABSSP). The ABSSP says it was established “in response to the reality in Gaza...and to needs of poor families, [to provide them] with comprehensive financial, social, educational, and recreational care.”

The ABSSP was founded as “Al-Ghadir Youth Welfare Authority” in Gaza while the coastal Strip was still under Israeli control before changing its name to the ABSSP in 2007. As its initial name suggests, the organization initially [focused](#) on youth and education. However, according to its [annual reports](#), in 2007 it began carrying out broader charitable programs with Iranian financial sponsorship and aid, including distributing food packages to the needy. These initial projects were carried out on a smaller scale but would expand to reach more residents of Gaza in

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subsequent years. As time went on, it expanded its [target populations](#) to include the families of “martyrs”; the wounded; prisoners; the poor; orphans; other youths; women; and infants.

After the 2014 Hamas war with Israel, the ABSSP carried out several projects with IKRF funding, providing the victims of the war shelter, clothing, [blankets](#), and food packages in coordination with [UNRWA](#). Other projects were carried out in cooperation with Hamas authorities in Gaza.

Iran’s [sponsorship](#) was [emblazoned](#) on [almost](#) all ABSSP’s [activities](#), indicating that the organization was meant to double as a recruitment tool. Gaza’s Hamas authorities eventually shut down the ABSSP in 2016 for [receiving](#) funds from Iran and engaging in “political activities.”

Another [IRKF-funded](#) organization is the Islamic Gathering for Palestine’s Workers, [part](#) of the “Islamic Union of Trade Unions,” which is in turn part of PIJ’s “Trade Union Framework.” The Gathering carries out charitable work, including distributing [food packages](#) and [winter clothing](#).

Iran’s Infiltration of the Palestinian Diaspora

In addition to operating in the Palestinian territories, Iran tries to spread its influence in the Palestinian diaspora, particularly in Lebanon. Once again, Iran’s goal is to radicalize Palestinians and—in some cases—to use them for propaganda purposes against Arab countries.

Iran uses both indirect and direct means to sway diaspora Palestinians. Tehran’s embassy in Beirut, for example, operates as the Islamic Republic’s [conduit](#) into the Palestinian diaspora in Lebanon. Iran also operates indirectly in the midst of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon via proxies. One of these is the “Council of Palestine Scholars in Lebanon,” which has an [explicitly](#) pro-Iranian and Khomeinist [orientation](#). The Council is hostile to traditional Sunni Arab states, accusing them of “abandoning and selling out Palestine,” and condemning them for carrying out wars in Yemen and elsewhere in order to harm “the project of Resistance.” It parrots Iranian and Hezbollah [propaganda](#) on Palestine verbatim seemingly as part of the unified message Iran is imposing on Palestinian factions like Hamas. Another Iranian proxy is the Alliance of Palestinian Factions, led by Hassan Zeidan, which also has an [explicitly](#) pro-Iranian orientation.

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic of Iran supports the Palestinian cause as a means to thwart Israeli-Palestinian rapprochement and spread its hegemonic, revolutionary dogma throughout the Arab world. It has used indirect military support to various Palestinian factions to undercut Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations and maintain a hold over the course of the Palestinian national movement and its cause. By supporting more extremist factions and actors to

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undermine pragmatists and moderates, Tehran ensures that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will remain a point of contention which it can exploit.

Iran's charitable and social activities within Palestinian society have a similar end-goal. The extent to which Iran's charity has influenced Palestinians to adopt positive views of Tehran or loyalty to its Islamic regime—akin to Hezbollah's activities in Lebanese Shiite society—is unclear. However, it does appear that Iranian largesse succeeds in helping to funnel Palestinian social support to more extremist local actors. Thus, even without earning Palestinian loyalty, Iran nonetheless furthers its goals by growing the popular bases of more extremist factions and thereby radicalizing Palestinian society. Hamas' charitable activities, funded at least in part by Iranian largesse, have allowed it to gather popular support to rival the more pragmatic Fatah, for example, and likely have contributed to Hamas' electoral successes as well.

Finally, Iran continues to attempt to coopt the Palestinian diaspora, directly through Iranian embassies and indirectly through proxy groups on the ground. Though Palestinian leaders allied with Iran—both within the Palestinian territories and in the Palestinian diaspora—often express their gratitude to Tehran, determining whether grassroots Palestinians share this view is beyond the scope of this report.

Iran's execution of a multifaceted scheme to influence, support, and exploit Palestinian actors, requires policymakers to counter Tehran's efforts with a comprehensive approach. That plan must go beyond both counterterrorism and fostering Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, and include an across-the-board strategy to win the hearts and minds of Palestinian society.