

Iran and the Palestinian Nationalist Movement

November 2023

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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 and uses 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, depriving the Jewish state of one of its most important regional—and few Muslim—allies. Therefore, Arafat was receptive when Khomeini dispatched a follower in 1973 to establish alliances in the Muslim world. 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.

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.

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By 1977, Fatah had trained more than 700 of Khomeini's fighters, [including](#) the cleric's 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 commanded 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 police officers. 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 showed [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.

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](#)

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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. A ceasefire would have also taken the pressure off Arafat to take a side in the Iran-Iraq War. Supporting Iran would have risked the PLO's relations with the Gulf Arab states, who feared Iran's intention to export the revolution. The ayatollah rejected Arafat's 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 one-time Palestinian patrons as equal partners. The CIA [estimated](#) that Khomeini's regime intentionally kept the PLO's presence in post-revolution Iran "relatively limited" 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 Iran, tomorrow Palestine." Rather than seeking to liberate Palestine, they exploited 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

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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 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 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 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’s 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 advised Abu Jihad to move from Tunisia to Iran and lead the fight against Israel. Abu Jihad hesitated but soon relented and planned to relocate until Israel [assassinated](#) him in April 1988.

In December 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 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

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increase Tehran's influence over Arafat and the PLO.

In 1996, Hezbollah's leadership met in Iran and established a "Palestine Unit" to work 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.

While funding, arming, and equipping these terrorist groups is done covertly and through Hezbollah, Iran's top leadership does not hide its belief that their use of violence against Israel is justified. In 2000, Iran's [Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said](#), "The Palestinian people must continue the blessed Jihad and standing against the enemies of Islam...The Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Fatah forces must continue the struggle in a united way. Indeed, the only solution is eliminating the root of this crisis, which is the Zionist regime imposed on the region."

Iran has two goals in arming Palestinian militant organizations. The first is to foment continued violence between the Palestinians and Israel to prevent a peaceful resolution to the conflict, which would deprive Iran of a vehicle to export the Islamic Revolution. Iran exploits the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to galvanize support in the predominantly-Sunni Arab world. 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 logistical and financial support. Hezbollah's former military commander [Imad Mughniyeh](#), began his career as Yasser Arafat's bodyguard. Because of his relationships with the Palestinian leadership, Mughniyeh would become Hezbollah's—and, by extension, Iran's—most significant point of contact with various Palestinian factions. Many groups, such as Hamas' Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades, [credited](#) Mughniyeh with their warfighting expertise.

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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.

Hezbollah also offers Palestinian terrorist organizations operational support when a conflict between them and Israel escalates. In 2021, Hezbollah and the IRGC [created](#) a joint operations center in Beirut, Lebanon, to share intelligence and coordinate Hamas rocket attacks against Israel. Quds Force commander [Esmail Qaani visited](#) the operations centers. Up to 12 Palestinian factions—including Fatah splinter groups—[participated](#) in the attack from this center, along with Hezbollah and IRGC operatives. At this location, Hamas [obtained](#) aerial intelligence for targeting purposes, possibly via reconnaissance drones sent from Lebanon or Syria. Hezbollah also [shipped](#) weapons and ammunition to Hamas during the conflict. Some analysts [believe](#) that this center was used to coordinate the shipments and the movement of personnel.

On September 2, 2023, Hezbollah Secretary-General [Hassan Nasrallah convened a meeting](#) with [Hamas](#) deputy politburo head [Saleh al-Aroui](#) and [Palestinian Islamic Jihad \(PIJ\)](#) Secretary-General [Ziyad al-Nakhalah](#). The meeting was one of many regularly-occurring [bi-weekly meetings in Beirut](#) of the leaders from Palestinian terrorist groups and officials in the IRGC's Quds Force, in which the October 7, 2023, coordinated Hamas [attack](#) against Israel was planned, and the aftermath of the attack was discussed. The commander of the IRGC's Quds Force, [Esmail Qaani](#), [attended](#) some of these meetings in Beirut. By the end of September 2023, Hamas, PIJ, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), each discussed in this report, had [announced their intention](#) to escalate violence against Israel.

That happened on October 7, 2023, just over fifty years since the 1973 Yom Kippur surprise attack against Israel. Hamas militants infiltrated Israel to kill, rape, and abduct civilians, including women, children, and elderly people. Israel [responded with airstrikes](#) against Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip and [has](#) begun its ground invasion of the enclave to obliterate the Iranian-backed terrorist groups embedded there and rescue hostages.

The ongoing war between Israel and Hamas has given rise to fears that a broader regional conflagration could emerge in which Israel is attacked from multiple fronts. A multi-front battlefield is what [Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Khamenei](#) envisions as the precursor to the downfall of the Israeli state and the establishment of an ISIS-like caliphate. That is not to mention that the highest levels of the Iranian regime [view an all-out apocalyptic war](#) and Israel's destruction as a precursor to the return of the "Hidden Imam." Hezbollah would undoubtedly play a role in Khamenei's deluded conspiracies if and when it expands action on a second front and intensifies attacks against Israel from the north. Such a move would not be unprecedented, as the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel was [precipitated by a localized escalation of violence](#) from Gaza. Skirmishes at the northern border are ongoing as of November 8, 2023, with Hezbollah launching rockets into Israel.

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

Fatah

Fatah is a Palestinian nationalist political party whose current leader, Mahmoud Abbas, is president of the Palestinian Authority. 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 established 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 Palestinian factions' ranks under Hezbollah's auspices. 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. 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 rifles in Arafat's car and presidential plane, and 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 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 communication with Hezbollah. He also instructed Fatah's Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades to cooperate with Mughniyeh, who 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.

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Mughniyeh also established Unit 1800 within Hezbollah, tasked with executing attacks against Israeli targets abroad and providing logistical, media, cultural, and economic support to the Intifada. Unit 1800 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 repeatedly tried 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. Shoubaki was arrested and detained in Israel, where he served a 17-year sentence. In 2023, the convicted weapons smuggler was released by Israel and [welcomed](#) by the Fatah leadership upon his return to the Palestinian territories. The Palestinian press widely praised Shoubaki as a "hero," and [noted](#) that the thwarted shipment of arms and ammunition he arranged were intended for those who carried out the Second Intifada.

[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 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. The Israeli Navy [found](#) 22 mm and 107 mm

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Katyusha rockets, with ranges of 20 and 8 kilometers, respectively; 80 mm and 120 mm mortar shells; various types of anti-tank missiles, anti-tank mines, sniper rifles, Kalashnikov rifles, and ammunition.

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. Yet, Abbas has made overtures to Iran. In early 2014, Jibril Rajoub, a Fatah's Central Committee member, visited Tehran on Abbas' [behalf](#). Some observers [believed](#) the PA attempted to exploit tensions between Hamas and Iran rooted in Iran's support for Syria's Assad. He met then-Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif and reported that the PA was ready to strengthen ties with Tehran. Increasingly, ordinary Palestinians are rejecting Abbas and embracing violence as a means toward statehood, frustrated by the Fatah leadership's failure to deliver on promises of statehood. This could make Iranian proxy groups more appealing.

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."

But after unveiling the Trump administration's Deal of the Century, Iran reached out to the Palestinian Authority in early 2020. Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif [phoned](#) Abbas, expressing his opposition to the peace plan and encouraging internal Palestinian unity—likely an attempt by Tehran to co-opt Abbas. Sensing this opportunity, Tehran will likely continue to meddle in Palestinian internal affairs after Abbas [declared](#) in May 2020 that "the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the State of Palestine are absolved...of all agreements and understandings with the American and Israeli governments."

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This statement signaled that the PLO would not join the Gulf states in warming relations with Israel. However, this position has to contend with shifting public opinion toward Israel. Improving ties with the Gulf states will bolster Israel's standing in the Arab world, routing the Iranian propaganda that it is a warmonger.

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 toward Israel. Initially, the PRC was largely comprised of former PA security elements, but it has [drawn recruits](#) from Fatah, PIJ, Hamas, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) over the years.

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. [According](#) to Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hamas also has funded, trained, and cooperated with the PRC to conduct violence toward Israel that it could disavow. The PRC does not recognize Israel's right to exist and [opposes](#) diplomatic talks or political and security arrangements with Israel. Echoing Hezbollah, the PRC sees comprehensive resistance as the only way to liberate historical Palestine.

[Abu Samhadana](#) led the PRC until his assassination by Israel in 2006. PRC's inaugural cadres were former Fatah and Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades operatives and 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.

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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.

In February 2018, an explosive device attached to a Palestinian flag detonated at the Gaza border with Israel, [wounding](#) four Israelis. The PRC, skilled in making IEDs, [praised](#) the attack as a “heroic operation.” 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. But a [report](#) by the IDC Herzliya’s International Institute for Counter-Terrorism in January 2020 cited a new bitcoin fundraising drive for the PRC, indicating that they were running low on Iranian funds.

Hamas

Hamas has been Iran’s most important Palestinian partner for over two decades. The Sunni terrorist organization is the de facto ruler of the Gaza Strip, where it seized control from Fatah in 2007. 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

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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 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 kept its distance from Iran at the insistence of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Hamas’ co-founder and spiritual leader. These reservations did not preclude military cooperation, as Iran [reportedly](#) provisioned the terrorist group with up to 50 tons of weapons and ammunition in 2002, including rockets, mortars, mines, and small arms. After Yassin’s assassination in 2004, Hamas began accepting more aid from Iran and Hezbollah, including funds and logistical support. Iran [increased](#) its financial support to Hamas after the assassination to prop up new leadership and preserve internal cohesion.

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.

Between 2006 and 2010, Iran often [transferred](#) arms to Hamas in the Gaza Strip through Yemen and Sudan. The weapons smuggling operations [intensified](#) after Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007. Hamas’ military commander Mahmoud al-Mabhouh led the operations until his assassination by Israel in Dubai in early 2010. After making their way through Yemen and Sudan, the arms were moved through the Suez Canal to Egypt, where they were then channeled through tunnels into the Gaza Strip. Palestinian terrorist groups have also [received](#) weapons and explosives concealed in humanitarian aid shipments.

In 2008, hundreds of Hamas operatives [trained](#) in Iran on how to build explosives and operate rockets, anti-tank weapons, light weapons, and mines. These trainees, in turn, trained other operatives in Gaza that could not leave the territory. At the end of the year, the 2008 – 2009 Gaza conflict broke out, during which Iran increased its aid to Hamas, including more advanced rockets. In early 2009, the U.S. Navy ordered an Iranian-origin ship in the Red Sea to dock at a Cyprus port, where 1,980 wooden cases of powder for 130 mm guns and 1,320 cases of powder and powder pellets for 125mm guns were [discovered](#). Reports [indicated](#) that the ship, between Yemen and Sudan, was en route to Hamas, through Egypt.

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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. The cooling relations revealed the tension between Tehran's demands and the Sunni terrorist group's domestic constituency's demands. Hamas even [pledged](#) to support the Sunni opposition, leading Iran to cut funding. Hamas' position on the Syrian civil war also damaged relations with Hezbollah, who was fighting on the ground in Syria against the opposition. 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, [such as](#) the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, [Ali Shamkhani](#).

During his second visit to Iran, al-Arouri—noting the group's good relations with 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. Thus, Hamas appears to have adopted a neutral stance on Sunni-Shiite regional conflicts, focusing on the common ground in combating Israel.

The second meeting occurred days after a reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah was inked. Arouri [stated](#), "We are here in Iran to affirm our adherence to the choice of resistance in the face of the occupation and the Zionist project...until its removal." The visit to Iran underscored that the terrorist group had no intention of changing its policy toward Israel after the purported reconciliation with Fatah.

In 2019, media [reports circulated](#) that Hamas had asked Iran to mediate between itself and the Assad regime. In 2017, Hezbollah also [played](#) a role in mediation between Hamas and Syria under

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Iranian auspices. Iran also allegedly expressed a willingness to increase its monthly payments to Hamas in exchange for intelligence on Israeli missile capabilities. [According](#) to Israel's Channel 12, during a meeting between Iran's supreme leader and Hamas officials, Tehran offered to provide \$30 million per month. This was a [substantial increase](#) as a previous Ynet report listed the total as \$70 million per year, with other outlets [saying](#) it was as high as \$100 million per year. If accurate, it demonstrated the premium Tehran would pay for intelligence on Israeli military capabilities.

The Abraham Accords, signed between the U.S., Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain in 2020, could inject new momentum into the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The accords have [resulted](#) in less communication between the Gulf Arab states and Hamas. The warming relations between Israel and the Gulf states might increasingly isolate Hamas, forcing the terrorist group into closer alignment with Iran.

In May 2021, Iran supported Hamas' armed conflict against Israel. Twelve Israelis were [reportedly](#) killed in the 11-day conflict, which saw a record number of rockets fired at civilian targets in Israel. According to some [estimates](#), over 4,000 rockets were fired into Israel. Hamas' political bureau chief Ismail Haniyeh [said](#) Iran "did not hold back with money, weapons, and technical support" during this conflict. Quds Force commander [Esmail Qaani](#) called Haniyeh via phone to praise his actions and [encourage](#) further violence.

Hamas has amassed a large and diverse rocket [arsenal](#) with Tehran's assistance. The larger the quantity of rockets in its arsenal, the more capable it is of saturating Israeli air defenses in targeting civilian populations, compensating for qualitative deficiencies. This tactic was seen in the fighting in May 2021. Some of the rockets are imported from Iran directly, while others are built [locally](#) with assistance from Iran. Local production is a threatening alternative to bolster Hamas' combat capabilities as Israel degrades its smuggling routes.

Hamas is believed to have been involved in an IED attack in mid-March 2023 in Megiddo, Israel. [Reports](#) suggest that Hamas operatives in southern Lebanon, trained by Hezbollah, coordinated with Hezbollah to attack with Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's approval. Nasrallah [declined to claim responsibility](#) for the bombing, saying instead that his silence on the attack was part of the "psychological war with the enemy," intended to leave Israel "confused." Israel's decision against responding militarily weakened Israel's deterrence against Iranian-backed proxies, thereby increasing the likelihood of attacks in the near term.

The erosion of Israeli and U.S. deterrence against Iran and its proxies and partners—in part [the result of unrest in Israel](#) surrounding Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's controversial judicial reforms—may have contributed to Hamas' decision to attack Israel on October 7, 2023. According to several officials in Israel's security establishment, Israel lowered its guard in the aftermath of the May 2021 Gaza conflict. [Reuters reported](#) that Israel increased its efforts to pacify the Gaza Strip by providing some residents economic stability and livelihoods. Since May 2021, Israel has extended thousands of work permits so that Gazans could work in Israel and the West Bank,

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where wages are in some industries as much as ten times higher than in Gaza. These officials believe that Israel's failure to detect Hamas' coordinated assault [owed to a perception that Hamas was not intent on fighting](#). "Hamas used an unprecedented intelligence tactic to mislead Israel over the last months, by giving a public impression that it was not willing to go into a fight or confrontation with Israel while preparing for this massive operation," the source said. In fact, Hamas was able to carry out training operations in the open, without raising red flags in Israel. On one occasion, it rehearsed an assault on a mock Israeli settlement.

According to reporting by the Washington Post, New York Times, and Wall Street Journal, Iran was involved in planning Hamas' October 7, 2023, terrorist attack against Israel and in training and equipping the terrorist group to carry out the attacks over between one and two years. The Washington Post spoke with current and former intelligence officials, who [said](#) that unspecified Iranian allies supported Hamas' military training, logistics, and financing over a year. The Wall Street Journal alternatively reported that the planning took place over [two years](#) and that Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad [participated in specialized combat training courses](#) in Iran that were run by IRGC Quds Force officers in the weeks leading up to the attack. The unprecedented sophistication of the attack—which saw coordinated air, sea, and ground assaults—pointed to extensive planning and advanced training.

The Wall Street Journal separately [reported](#) that IRGC personnel and other regime officials, including Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, an IRGC affiliate, oversaw the final stages of planning over weeks of meetings in Beirut and greenlit the assault. Hamas operatives joined these meetings, which were convened by IRGC Quds Force commander Esmail Ghaani, as early as [April 2023](#) to coordinate escalation against the U.S. and Israel among groups within the "Axis of Resistance." The New York Times carried a similar story, which [described](#) a series of covert planning meetings over a year attended by Ghaani, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, and Hamas leaders. The IRGC, therefore, played the lead role in planning, training, and authorizing the attack.

[Palestinian Islamic Jihad](#)

Another Palestinian group courted by Iran is Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Iran has provided comparably more direct military assistance to PIJ, arming, training, funding, organizing PIJ operatives, and even directly appointing the group's leadership. Compared to Hamas, PIJ is more militant and closely reflects Iran's interests in creating a threat to Israel and undermining the peace process. The group's manifesto states that the group [rejects](#) "any peaceful solution to the Palestinian cause" and believes that "the Jihad solution and the martyrdom style" are the only way to achieving their political aims, namely the destruction of Israel and the establishment of a Palestinian state.

PIJ was [founded](#) by Fathi al-Shaqaqi and Ramadan Salah, two Palestinians who met while they were medical students at Egypt's Zakazik University, and a small nucleus of other Palestinian

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students. Though they adopted the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood's ideology, they quickly allied with Iran upon returning to the Palestinian territories and sought inspiration from its Islamic 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 Shafaqi 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 Shafaqi 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 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 Shafaqi 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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According to some [reports](#), Iran reduced funding for PIJ in May 2015 when relations were strained because of PIJ's position on the civil war in Yemen. Iran wanted PIJ to issue a clear statement of support for the Houthis against the Saudis. At the time, PIJ's foreign policy chief, Mahfouz Munawwar, [said](#), "Our movement has a fixed policy...We do not intervene in the internal politics of states." A source from inside PIJ [said](#) that the terrorist group's neutrality on the civil war—where Iran backs the Houthi rebels against the internationally-recognized government of Yemen—resulted in the funding cuts, precipitating a financial crisis for PIJ. Thus, Iran seeks to use its economic leverage to compel PIJ to support its war in Yemen.

The war in Yemen is an area of contention between Iran and its Sunni proxies in the Palestinian territories because Iran's proxy in Yemen, the Houthis, is hostile to the Gulf Arab states. Hezbollah [played the role](#) of mediator to reconcile the differences between Iran and PIJ. Then-PIJ Secretary-General Sheikh Ramadan Salah visited Tehran on several occasions to mend ties. The reduction in funding proved to be short-lived, with transfers [increasing](#) again a year later.

Intelligence and Israeli military officials [told](#) the Wall Street Journal in May 2019 that Iran provides Hamas and PIJ \$60 million annually. In 2020, PIJ Secretary-General al-Nakhala [disclosed](#) that the former head of the IRGC Quds Force, [Qassem Soleimani](#), "personally" managed an operation to send weapons to Gaza, traveling to different countries to supply weapons to the Palestinians. That year, the U.S. State Department [revealed](#) that Iran provided Palestinian terrorist groups Hamas, PIJ, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine with \$100 million annually. Yet, on several occasions, Palestinian leaders have remarked that Iran does not provide money for the Palestinian people, underscoring that the money funds the groups' fighting capabilities rather than humanitarian programs.

In the May 2021 conflict, PIJ launched rockets at Israel with Hamas. However, PIJ has also militarily engaged Israel on its own. In August 2022, while Hamas may have wished to avoid an escalation, PIJ [launched](#) over [1,000 rockets](#) at Israel in two days. One day before the attack, Nakhala met Supreme Leader Khamenei's top advisor, Ali Akbar Velayati, who [emphasized](#), "We have a close and serious relationship with the Islamic Jihad movement and the Palestinian resistance." On the same trip to Tehran, Nakhala [met](#) with Iran's Foreign Minister [Hossein Amir-Abdollahian](#), who conveyed the usual anti-Zionist mantra.

Since at least September 2021, PIJ has [coordinated](#) with the IRGC to establish new terrorist organizations in the West Bank. Senior PIJ officials claimed that the impetus for the initiative was the escape of terrorists from Gilboa prison that month. The new terrorist groups—such as the "Jenin Battalion" and the "Nablus Battalion"—are mostly [situated](#) north of the West Bank, particularly Jenin and Nablus. At the same time, terror attacks from the West Bank and the West Bank increased in 2022, with Israeli security officials [indicating](#) that the PA has lost control over parts of the West Bank, notably Jenin, and Nablus. To make matters worse, the PA under Abbas' leadership [praises](#) and incites Palestinian violence in the West Bank while blaming Israel for its

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counterterrorist operations. The Palestinian attacks, which killed [20 Israelis](#) in March and April 2022 alone, prompted Israel's counterterrorist operation, Operation Break the Wave, centering on the West Bank.

The uptick in Palestinian violence in the West Bank corresponded with multiple acknowledgments on behalf of the IRGC's leadership that the West Bank would be the site of "resistance" against Israel. "You hear the names of Jenin, Nablus, Ramallah, Tulkarm, Sheikh Jarrah... these are the main cities of the West Bank," IRGC chief [Hossein Salami exclaimed](#) when discussing how the Palestinian "resistance" has thus far been confined to the Gaza Strip.

The new groups established in the West Bank by PIJ and the IRGC draw fighters from other groups, namely Fatah, Hamas, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Sheikh Bassam al-Saadi organized the effort. He was arrested by the Israel Security Agency (ISA) and is currently on trial in a military court. In early August 2022, PIJ threatened violence against Israel unless Saadi was freed, and Israel responded with [Operation Breaking Dawn](#)—airstrikes targeting PIJ military targets in the Gaza Strip. PIJ responded by launching rockets at Israeli cities.

The growth of these new groups is particularly concerning in the context of an April 2023 [Israeli strategic assessment](#), which concluded that deterrence against Iran and its proxies in the Palestinian territories is eroding. Iran [views](#) the judicial reforms that have provoked a significant backlash in Israel as a vulnerability and window of opportunity to build up its proxies' terrorist capabilities and instigate violence.

As Western media outlets focused their attention on Hamas, the main perpetrator of the brutal attack against Israel on October 7, 2023, PIJ's role has largely skirted under the radar. PIJ likely participated in the assault, given its commitment to violence against Israel and its willingness to act at the behest of Tehran. PIJ leader Ziyad al-Nakhalah [attended meetings](#) in Beirut in the weeks and months preceding the attacks, and members of his terrorist group penetrated Israel's northern border, days after Hamas carried out its brutality in Israel. PIJ [claimed it injured seven Israeli soldiers](#) in the incursion.

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

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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 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, Iran has denied involvement in the bombing, and official investigations into the attack squarely blame the Qaddafi regime.

In 2020, Israel [alleged](#) that a PFLP senior operative based in Lebanon, Khaled Yamani, attempted to recruit an Israeli citizen, Ayman Haj Yahya, to spy for Iran. The recruitment took place on Facebook, which has been used as a recruiting portal for spying and terror operations against Israel.

Al-Sabireen

In addition to using local Palestinian groups to spread its influence within Palestinian society, Iran established its own proxy, al-Sabireen. The group’s flag and [logo](#) resemble that of the IRGC and Hezbollah, underscoring the close ties between these terrorist organizations. Its charter [defines](#) its purpose as a violent jihad against the “racist Zionist body” and “America the great Satan.”

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](#). Hisham Salem was a former senior official in PIJ.

Al-Sabireen recruits from other Palestinian terrorist groups, rendering them more loyal to Iranian objectives. Iran [does not deal with the same resistance](#) from al-Sabireen regarding its war in Syria or Yemen, as it does from Hamas and PIJ. These groups’ resistance to Iran may have been the impetus for bolstering al-Sabireen. However, the latter group has not gained as much popular support as Hamas and PIJ.

Furthermore, al-Sabireen increases Iranian leverage in its relations with other Iranian proxies in the Palestinian territories as Iran looks to generate competition among the proxy groups. Al-Sabireen is present in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and in 2016 received [\\$10 million](#) from Iran. It has been responsible for several attacks against Israel, including in [late 2015](#) when it

fired rockets into Israel and detonated an explosive device near an Israeli army patrol.

Social Support

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

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.](#)

An [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](#) packages worth \$50 each. In [2016](#), the IKRF provided over 7,500 *iftar* meals daily 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.

Iran also uses the Martyrs Foundation to channel money and resources to its terrorist proxies in the Gaza Strip and beyond. The U.S. Treasury Department [designated](#) the Martyrs Foundation in 2007 under Executive Order 13224, noting that the organization is part of Hezbollah, Hamas, and PIJ’s “financial backbone.” A former Quds Force commander in Lebanon, Hossein Dehqan, [headed](#) the Martyrs Foundation between 2001 and 2009.

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Additionally, the Iranian Red Crescent, an ostensibly humanitarian organization, is deployed as cover for Iran's Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) and the Quds Force's efforts to fund Iranian-backed proxies. During the Second Lebanon War, Quds Force operatives were [smuggled](#) into Lebanon to support Hezbollah's war effort, posing as humanitarian actors and concealing weapons and equipment as medical supplies. Likewise, the dual-purpose entity operates in the Gaza Strip on the pretext of providing humanitarian aid. Despite its ties to designated terrorist entities, the U.S. government has not sanctioned the Iranian Red Crescent.

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 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](#).

Iraq's Al-Nujaba Islamic Resistance Movement, an Iran-backed entity, has also carried out activities in Gaza and even has an [office](#) there. In May 2020, it [distributed](#) aid packages to mark Ramadan.

Iran's Infiltration of the Palestinian Diaspora

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In addition to operating in the Palestinian territories, Iran tries to spread its influence in the Palestinian diaspora, particularly in Lebanon. With Iran and Hezbollah's assistance, Hamas has bolstered its propaganda capabilities. Under the [mentorship](#) of Iran's [Islamic Radio and Television Union](#) (IRTVU), which provides financial, administrative, and technological support to the propaganda outlets of Iranian-backed proxies and coordinates their messaging, Hamas and PIJ have been able to spread their malign influence in Lebanon and Israel. Vulnerable populations—for instance, those residing in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon—are often the [target](#) of this propaganda, expanding the terrorist groups' recruitment capacity. Once again, Iran's goal is to radicalize Palestinians and—in some cases—use them for propaganda 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 has an [explicitly](#) pro-Iranian orientation.

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic of Iran supports the Palestinian cause 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. Iran uses the Palestinian nationalist movement as a way to bridge the Sunni-Shia divide. Instead of focusing exclusively on the Shia religion, which binds pro-Iran proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen to their benefactor, Iran focuses on "Palestine," a cause that can rally Sunnis against Israel. Moreover, Iran hopes that stoking violence in Gaza and the West Bank can hinder the warming of ties between Israel and the Gulf Arab states. By supporting more extremist factions and actors to undermine pragmatists and moderates, Tehran ensures that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will remain a point of contention that 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, thereby radicalizing Palestinian

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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 co-opt 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.