

Hamas as Tehran’s Agent

by Jonathan Schanzer

Since the late 1980s, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been plying the Hamas terrorist group with cash and weapons while also teaching it how to be self-sufficient. With hundreds of millions of dollars from the Islamist Shiite regime in Tehran pouring into its coffers, the Sunni group has evolved over the past decades into the foremost Palestinian terror organization, capable of hitting Israel’s main population centers and strategic infrastructure. Yet Iran’s role is often overlooked when assessing the performance of Hamas in its multiple armed confrontations with Israel.

Surprisingly, Israeli officials tend to downplay the Iranian regime’s role even though history shows that Tehran has played a major part. With continued Iranian assistance, Hamas can only be expected to grow in sophistication and lethality.

The Early Years

The Islamic Resistance Movement, or Hamas as it is known after its Arab acronym, is the Palestinian offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, with roots dating back to the late 1920s. It was founded under its current name in December 1987 during the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, or intifada, with the explicit goal of destroying the State



Iran has provided Hamas with arms as well as military training. In 1991, Hamas opened offices in Tehran and was invited to a conference with other Iranian clients.

of Israel and “rais[ing] the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine,” as a stepping-stone to the creation of a worldwide Islamic community.¹

Within a couple of years, the nascent terror organization found assistance from the Islamic Republic in Iran, following what Hamas

¹ “[Hamas Covenant](#),” Avalon Project, Yale Law School, New Haven, Conn., art. 6.

spokesman Ibrahim Goshi called “meetings at the highest level.”² Until then, Tehran had primarily funded its Lebanese offshoot Hezbollah and, to a lesser extent, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), a small terrorist group that also vowed to destroy Israel.

While Hamas attracted funds from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab sources, according to Israeli security sources, Iran initially provided it with an estimated US\$30 million annually, along with military training abroad.³ In 1991, Hamas opened offices in Tehran and, later that year, Tehran invited the organization to a conference with other Iranian clients to promote the “Islamic intifada.”⁴

With assistance from Iran, Hamas began to professionalize. In 1991, the organization established its military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, and the following year Egyptian intelligence reported that Iran was training up to three thousand Hamas terrorists.⁵ That same year, a Hamas delegation led by Politburo chief Musa Abu Marzouk visited Tehran for meetings with key Iranian officials, report-edly including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.⁶

**Israeli prime minister
Yitzhak Rabin expected the PLO
to counter the rise of Hamas.**

The Oslo Years

In September 1993, the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) signed a historic declaration of principles that provided for Palestinian self-rule in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for a transitional period of up to five years, during which Jerusalem and the Palestinians would negotiate a permanent peace settlement. The PLO had been exiled to Tunisia in 1982 after a decade of terror attacks on Israel launched from Lebanese soil. The PLO was further ostracized by most Arab states following its support for Saddam Hussein’s brutal occupation of Kuwait in 1990. For Yasser Arafat, the Oslo process offered a golden opportunity to reassert the PLO’s (and his own) relevance and to push Hamas to the periphery. Hamas was keenly aware of this as was Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, who expected the PLO to counter the rise of Hamas without the constraints of Israel’s supreme court or human rights groups. Hamas, thus, vowed to derail the PLO’s “betrayal of the Palestinian cause.” The group found encouragement from Iran’s supreme leader, who urged Palestinian clerics to “fill their sermons with slogans against Israel and the White House and the treasonous PLO leaders.”⁷

In December 1993, Marzouk returned to Iran and met with President Ali Rafsanjani. Soon after, Hamas launched its first wave of suicide bombings—a tactic up to that point associated with the Iran-backed Hezbollah.

2 Zaki Chehab, *Inside Hamas: The Untold Story of the Militant Islamic Movement* (New York: Nation Books, 2007), p. 41.

3 Elie Rekhess, “The Terrorist Connection: Iran, the Islamic Jihad and Hamas,” *Justice*, May 1995.

4 J. Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins, *Sudan in Turmoil: Hasan al-Turabi and the Islamist State* (Princeton: Markus Winer Publishers, 2010), p. 85; Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2001), p. 83.

5 “About Us,” [Ezzedeen Al-Qassam Brigades](#) website; Yohanan Ramati, “Islamic Fundamentalism Gaining,” *Midstream*, Feb./Mar. 1993, p. 2.

6 Chehab, *Inside Hamas*, p. 142.

7 Samih K. Farsoun and Christina E. Zacharia, *Palestine and the Palestinians* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), p. 196; Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 188.

Hamas's first successful suicide bombing rocked the northern Israeli town of Afula in April 1994, and by the autumn, the organization had launched three more suicide bombings. Amidst the carnage, Osama Hamdan, the group's envoy to Tehran, boasted of flourishing ties with the regime.⁸

During the 1990s, Hamas terrorists refined their tactics in Iranian training camps located in Iran, Syria, and Sudan. Indoctrinated by Iran and ready to die for their cause, the fighters returned to the West Bank and Gaza to carry out terror attacks and suicide bombings. Iran also hosted conferences with Hamas, PIJ, and other terror groups, during which the regime pledged money, training, arms, and operational guidance.⁹ And while Arafat turned a blind eye to Hamas's murderous campaign—if not tacitly encouraged it—his Gaza chief, Muhammad Dahlan, accused the organization of acting on behalf of “foreign interests”—a clear reference to Iran.¹⁰

In 1998, Hamas founding leader Ahmad Yassin visited Tehran for what was effectively a state visit where he lauded “Iran's support for the Palestinians' struggle against Israel.”¹¹ The following year, Iranian for-



In 1998, Hamas founding leader Ahmad Yassin (left) met with Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei in Tehran where Yassin praised “Iran's support for the Palestinians' struggle against Israel.”

eign minister Ali Akbar Velayati boasted that “Iran is the main supporter of Hamas and Hezbollah and their struggle against Israel.”¹² By 2000, Iran had gifted Hamas as much as \$50 million annually, plus training and other assistance.¹³

When Arafat waged his war of terror at the end of September 2000 (euphemized as “al-Aqsa Intifada”), Hamas viewed the development as both a vindication of its militant approach and a golden opportunity to erode the control of the PLO-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and Gaza. So did the ayatollahs in Tehran, who quickly transferred at least an additional \$400,000 to Hamas.¹⁴ In April 2001, Hamas Politburo chief Khaled Meshal attended a

8 Matthew Levitt, “[The Origins of Hezbollah](#),” *The Atlantic*, [Oct. 3, 2013](#); Chehab, *Inside Hamas*, p. 142.

9 Reuven Paz, “[Hamas's Lessons from Lebanon](#),” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., [May 25, 2000](#); Maria do Ceu Pinto, “Some concerns regarding Islamist and Middle Eastern terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Fall 1999, pp. 88-9.

10 Efraim Karsh, *Arafat's War* (New York: Gove Atlantic, 2003), pp. 112-21; Chehab, *Inside Hamas*, pp. 113-4, 224.

11 Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: A History from Within* (London: Olive Branch Press, 2011), p. 113.

12 Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 174.

13 Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 172.

14 “[Translations of seized Palestinian documents evidencing Iranian involvement in terror](#),” Intelligence Heritage Center, Ramat Hasharon.

conference in Iran alongside Hezbollah and PIJ leaders, asking the regime for political, financial, and military support.¹⁵

According to a leaked South African document from later that year, Hamas maintained a military headquarters in Iran with the regime financing the organization through a “Fallen Soldiers Fund” in Lebanon.”¹⁶ Israeli intelligence at the time assessed that Hamas leaders traveled to Tehran “every three to four weeks.”¹⁷

As the Palestinian war of terror progressed, Hamas took a leading role in the violence with Arafat’s tacit blessing. This allowed the PLO chairman to instigate the most horrendous atrocities and then feign innocence by ascribing them to “extremist fringe groups” over which he allegedly had no control. In the coming years, Hamas perpetrated the greatest number of terror attacks and the most gruesome suicide bombings, including the June 2001 bombing of a Tel Aviv disco in which twenty-one people were murdered and the March 2002 Passover massacre in which twenty-nine people were killed. The Passover massacre triggered Operation Defensive Shield, the biggest Israeli military operation since the 1982 Lebanon war, and signaled a turning point in the war of terror.¹⁸

By the time the Israelis quelled the Palestinian terrorist campaign in mid-2005, and despite their killing of top Hamas leaders (including Yassin), Hamas had emerged as

**Israel’s 2005 withdrawal
from the Gaza Strip provided
a major boost for Hamas.**

equal politically and superior militarily to the PLO. This was the result of an Israel miscalculation; the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) had emasculated

the PLO’s West Bank’s terror infrastructure while leaving Hamas’ primarily Gaza-based infrastructure largely intact. This led to internecine strife in the territories, contributing to chaos that ultimately favored Hamas, not to mention its patron in Tehran.

Hamas Conquers Gaza

Jerusalem’s summer 2005 withdrawal of its military forces from the Gaza Strip and the evacuation of twenty-two Israeli villages with their 8,600-strong population¹⁹ provided the next major boost for Hamas. Though the move was designed to bolster the PLO’s standing in the area, in the eyes of the local population, it appeared to be an Israeli defeat at the hands of Hamas as the group that had spearheaded the anti-Israel “armed struggle.”

The Gaza withdrawal was not the only Israeli error. Jerusalem also acquiesced in Washington’s call for Palestinian parliamentary elections in the West Bank and Gaza (held on January 25, 2006). Again, the idea was to sideline Hamas, but instead the organization reaped the fruit of its burgeoning prestige and won 74 of the 132 parliamentary seats. Fatah, the PLO’s foremost constituent organization, which had dominated the Palestinian Authority since its creation in May 1994, was roundly defeated, winning only 45 seats.²⁰

¹⁵ Levitt, *Hamas*, p. 46.

¹⁶ Briefing document prepared for the South African president, Thabo Mbekei, National Intelligence Agency, Washington, D.C., [Sept. 24, 2001](#).

¹⁷ Beverly Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrell, *Hamas: The Islamic Resistance Movement* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 93.

¹⁸ Karsh, *Arafat’s War*, ch. 13.

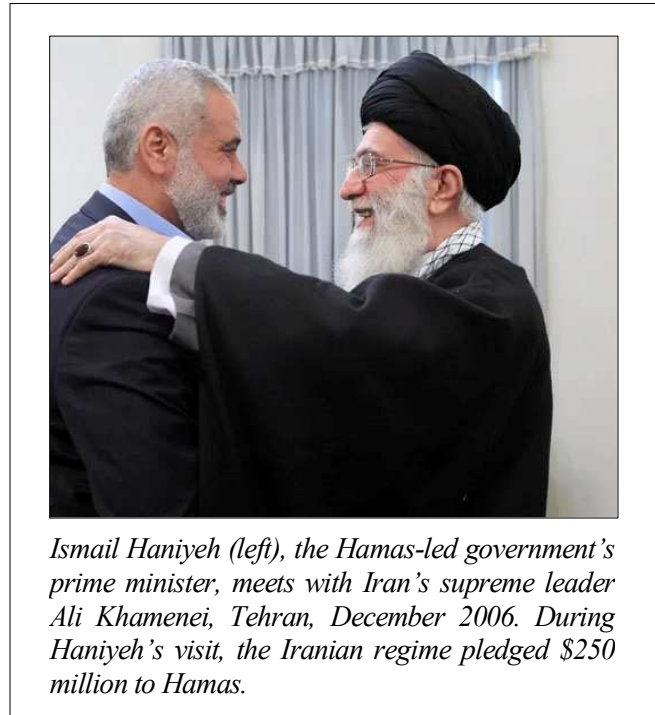
¹⁹ “Israel’s Disengagement from Gaza and North Samaria (2005),” Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jerusalem, Nov. 14, 2021.

²⁰ CNN, [Jan. 26, 2006](#).

A stalemate ensued for a year-and-a-half as Mahmoud Abbas, who became PLO chairman and PA president upon Arafat's death in November 2004, refused to recognize the elected Hamas government. Hamas responded by intensifying its military buildup in Gaza, taking full advantage of the Israeli withdrawal, which left the Philadelphia security route along the Egyptian border and the Rafah crossing—the strip's main entry point to Egypt—wide open. This enabled Hamas to smuggle huge quantities of weapons and explosives into Gaza with significant help from Tehran. They did so through a network of rapidly expanding underground tunnels built with Iranian assistance. Hamas terrorists were also able to leave the enclave at will for training in Iran.²¹

No less importantly, the tunnels enabled Hamas to smuggle large sums of money into the strip with little difficulty. According to a prominent Hamas leader, Iran provided \$22 million in cash in 2006. During a December 2006 Tehran visit by the Hamas-led government's prime minister, Ismail Haniyeh, the Khamenei regime pledged \$250 million—a significant increase over previous years.²²

A full-blown crisis emerged in early June 2007 when Hamas and the PLO fought for the strip's control. By June 14, all of Gaza had come under Hamas's domination with some 160 PLO fighters killed and another 700 wounded.²³ Tehran was suspected to be behind the Islamist group's success, with U.S.



Ismail Haniyeh (left), the Hamas-led government's prime minister, meets with Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei, Tehran, December 2006. During Haniyeh's visit, the Iranian regime pledged \$250 million to Hamas.

secretary of state Condoleezza Rice voicing concerns about Iranian support for Hamas during congressional testimony later that year.²⁴ Hamas never denied Tehran's support. During his December 2006 visit to Tehran, Haniyeh applauded the Islamic Republic as “the Palestinians' strategic depth”—reaffirming the unanimity within the organization's leadership regarding Tehran's championship of the Palestinian cause:

[Israelis] assume the Palestinian nation is alone ... This is an illusion ... We have a strategic depth in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This country [Iran] is our powerful, dynamic, and stable depth.²⁵

21 Milton-Edwards and Farrell, *Hamas*, p. 132.

22 *IranWire* (London), [Dec. 30, 2020](#); Associated Press, [Dec. 11, 2006](#).

23 “Black Pages in the Absence of Justice: Report on Bloody Fighting in the Gaza Strip from 7 to 14 June 2007,” Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, Gaza City, Oct. 2007.

24 Associated Press, [Oct. 24, 2007](#).

25 *The Guardian* (London), [Dec. 8, 2006](#).

Hamas-affiliated journalist Zaki Chehab reported, “The Iranian connection is real and long-standing. It is one whose deep roots I witnessed at first hand.” He confirmed that by way of countering the sanctions on Hamas, Iran “was prepared to cover the entire deficit in the Palestinian budget, and [to do so] continuously.” The Bonyad-e Mostazafan za Janbaza (Foundation of the Oppressed and War Veterans), a fund controlled by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), reportedly provided significant support.²⁶ Hamas fighters also continued to train in Iran.²⁷

By the end of 2008, according to Israeli intelligence sources, Hamas had more than twenty thousand armed terrorists.

smuggling of weapons to the coastal enclave.³⁰

Better armed and trained than ever thanks to Tehran, and flush with large quantities of weapons and ammunition won by the defeat of the PLO/

PA, Hamas continued to overhaul its fighting capabilities. By the end of 2008, according to Israeli intelligence sources, there were more than twenty thousand armed terrorists directly subordinate to the organization’s Izz ad-Din Brigades or designated to be integrated into this force during a conflict.³¹

This Iran-backed military buildup, together with its absolute control of the Gaza Strip, enabled Hamas to establish a balance of deterrence with Jerusalem whereby it disrupted the lives of a growing number of Israeli cities and villages at the relatively low cost of limited retaliatory Israeli air strikes. During 2008, 1,665 rockets landed in Israeli territory—more than twice the previous year and nearly ten times as many as in 2005—endangering the country’s strategic infrastructure (e.g., the Ashdod port, the Ashkelon power station, hospitals, educational and academic institutions) and disrupting the daily lives of nearly one million Israeli citizens—about 15 percent of the total population.³² Many of these rockets were either provided by Iran, or were assembled locally with assistance from the Tehran regime.

The Early Gaza Wars

In the wake of the Gaza takeover, Washington attempted to halt Iranian assistance to Hamas. In July 2007, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned Iran’s Martyrs Foundation, citing declassified intelligence showing that the foundation funneled money to Hamas, among others.²⁸ Later that year, Treasury targeted the IRGC’s elite Quds Force and Bank Saderat, also citing declassified evidence that they funded Hamas (as well as Hezbollah and PIJ).²⁹ However, Iranian cash continued to flow to Gaza as did Iranian weapons. The tunnels connecting Gaza to the Sinai Peninsula, many dug with Iranian funding or technical assistance, facilitated the

26 Chehab, *Inside Hamas*, pp. 134-9.

27 Milton-Edwards and Farrell, *Hamas*, p. 133.

28 “Twin Treasury Actions Take Aim at Hizballah’s Support Network,” U.S. Dept. of the Treasury, Washington, D.C., [July 24, 2007](#).

29 “Iran Sanctions,” Congressional Research Service, Washington, D.C., Feb. 2, 2022.

30 *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), [Jan. 14, 2008](#).

31 “The Operation in Gaza 27 December 2008-18 January 2009: Factual and Legal Aspects,” Prime Minister’s Office, Jerusalem, [July 7, 2009](#).

32 “[Summary of Rocket Fire and Mortar Shelling in 2008](#),” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center (IICC), Tel Aviv, p. 2.

In late February 2008, as Hamas intermittently battered Israeli population centers with rockets, Jerusalem mounted its first major military response. Operation Warm Winter was brief, just four days, targeting a handful of Hamas terrorists along with the organization's rocket facilities.³³

In March 2011, the IDF interdicted a Liberian ship and seized Iranian weapons destined for Hamas.

The next war came on December 27, 2008, eight days after Hamas had unilaterally abrogated an Egyptian-mediated, informal six-month lull agreement (*tahdi'a*) with Israel and resumed its rocket attacks. Codenamed Operation Cast Lead, Jerusalem's immediate goal was to strike tunnels, rocket facilities, and other Hamas military assets built with Iranian largesse. One week into the war, the IDF sent in ground troops. Israeli troops found booby traps and other deadly surprises waiting for them, courtesy of Iran. The IDF pushed forward under air cover, achieving most of its objectives. By the time Jerusalem ended the operation on January 18, 2009, and withdrew its forces from Gaza after twenty-two days of fighting, Hamas's infrastructure had been seriously damaged despite the organization's attempts to downplay its losses.³⁴

After Cast Lead, it was clear that Tehran was helping Hamas prepare for the next round. In January 2010, Mossad agents assassinated a senior Hamas official in Dubai who had acted as liaison to Iran for weapons procurement.³⁵ Seven months later, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned a senior Quds Force official who, according to the accompanying press release, "oversees distribution of funds to Levant-based terrorist

groups and provides financial support for designated terrorist entities including ... Hamas."³⁶ In March 2011, the IDF interdicted a Liberian ship sailing to Egypt and

seized Iranian weapons, including anti-ship missiles, destined for Hamas. The following month, Israeli forces killed two Hamas weapons procurers, striking their car near Port Sudan in eastern Sudan—a jurisdiction that Iran often used to transfer weapons to the African continent. For its part, the State Department designated a senior Hamas official as a terrorist that year, noting extensive links to Iran.³⁷

War came to Gaza again in 2012. This time the context was perhaps even more important than the conflict itself. On the night of October 23, Israeli fighter jets entered the skies over Khartoum and bombed the Yarmouk weapons factory, which belonged to the IRGC.³⁸ The targeted weapons—Iranian-made Fajr-5 rockets—were bound for Gaza and Hamas.

Three weeks later, as Hamas once again fired rockets into southern Israel, the Israeli Air Force launched Operation Pillar of Defense against Hamas targets throughout the strip. The operation's primary target was the Iranian-provided Fajr-5 rockets, most of which (about 100) were destroyed in the early days of fighting.³⁹

33 *The Jerusalem Post*, [Mar. 3, 2008](#).

34 "Operation Cast Lead (2008)," Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jerusalem.

35 *The Guardian*, [Feb. 17, 2010](#).

36 News release, U.S. Dept. of the Treasury, [Aug. 3, 2010](#).

37 *The Jerusalem Post*, [Mar. 18, 2011](#), [Apr. 7, 2011](#); "Terrorist Designation of HAMAS Operative Muhammad Hisham Muhammad Isma'il Abu Ghazala," U.S. Dept. of State, Washington, D.C., [Sept. 22, 2011](#).

38 *BBC News* (London), [Oct. 24, 2012](#); Associated Press, [Oct. 27, 2012](#).

39 CNN, [Nov. 28, 2012](#).

The following year, the speaker of Iran's parliament met with Imad Alami, the Hamas representative to Tehran and a key figure in procuring funds and weapons, who had been sanctioned a decade earlier by U.S. Treasury.⁴⁰ Suspicions that the meeting was part of an Iranian effort to replenish Hamas's arsenal were confirmed in March 2014 when the IDF intercepted a Panamanian-flagged cargo vessel carrying Iranian-supplied M-302 rockets and other advanced weapons bound for Gaza.⁴¹

War began again in early July 2014 and lasted for fifty-one days (July 4-August 21). Hamas fired nearly five thousand rockets and missiles that struck deep in Israeli territory with some targeting Jerusalem and even Israel's inter-national airport. As Hamas rockets were pounding Israel's cities and villages, an Iranian official boasted that Tehran was "sending rockets and military aid [to the organization]." Following the war, Khamenei's foreign affairs advisor Ali Akbar Velayati stated, "Without the help of Iran, [Hamas] could not have obtained these rockets, with such long range and accuracy."⁴²

Velayati was not lying. Hamas's longer-range M-302 and M-75 rockets had been



Seized missile shipment, March 5, 2014. As Hamas rockets were pounding Israel's cities and villages, an Iranian official boasted that Tehran was sending rockets and military aid to Hamas.

smuggled to Gaza courtesy of Iran. Hamas also had more shorter-range rockets thanks to Tehran, as the speaker of Iran's parliament, Ali Larijani, boasted.⁴³ During the war, the IDF was also surprised by the extent of Hamas's underground attack tunnels that snaked into Israeli territory, believed to have been built with Iranian assistance.⁴⁴

After the conflict, Hamas's deputy leader Abu Marzouk spoke of positive "bilateral relations between us and the Islamic Republic of Iran" while Qassem Soleimani, Quds Force commander and a favored Khamenei protégé, described Hamas leaders as "my dear brothers" and reaffirmed Tehran's support.⁴⁵

40 Press TV (Tehran), [Jan. 17, 2013](#); "SDGT Designations," U.S. Dept. of the Treasury, Washington, D.C., [Aug. 21, 2003](#).

41 *Long War Journal* (Washington, D.C.), [Mar. 5, 2014](#).

42 *Al-Monitor* (Washington, D.C.), [July 17, 2014](#); "Iran provided most of Hamas' weapons," Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jerusalem, [Aug. 31, 2014](#).

43 *Naharnet* (Beirut), [July 24, 2014](#).

44 Raymond Tanter, "Iran's terror tunnels," *Foreign Policy*, [Dec. 23, 2014](#).

45 Reuters, [Dec. 17, 2014](#); Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Analysis: What the Gaza War Means for Iran," *Long War Journal*, [Aug. 1, 2014](#).

On September 9, 2015, U.S. Treasury sanctioned four Hamas financial facilitators and one company. Among those sanctioned was Saleh Arouri, head of Hamas military operations in the West Bank, who was also a Hamas fundraiser. In the years that followed, Arouri visited Iran at least five times.⁴⁶

In August 2019, the Treasury Department issued more sanctions, this time targeting “financial facilitators moving tens of millions of dollars between Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) and HAMAS’s operational arm, the Izz-Al-Din Al-Qassam Brigades in Gaza.” One key figure Treasury indicated was Muhammad Sarur,

[a] middle-man between the IRGC-QF and HAMAS and worked with Hezbollah operatives to ensure funds were provided to the Izz-Al-Din Al-Qassam Brigades. ... in the past four years, the IRGC-QF transferred over U.S. \$200 million dollars to the Izz-Al-Din Al-Qassam Brigades.⁴⁷

In May 2020, Iran’s supreme leader stated,

Iran realized Palestinian fighters’ only problem was lack of access to weapons. With divine guidance and assistance, we planned, and the balance of power has been transformed in Palestine, and today the Gaza Strip can stand against the aggression of the Zionist enemy and defeat it.⁴⁸

46 “[Sanctions List Search](#),” Office of Foreign Assets Control, U.S. Dept. of the Treasury, Washington, D.C.; *Ynet* (Tel Aviv), [Aug. 3, 2018](#).

47 “Treasury Targets Facilitators Moving Millions to HAMAS in Gaza,” U.S. Dept. of the Treasury, Washington, D.C., [Aug. 29, 2019](#).

48 Reuters, [May 22, 2020](#).

A few months later, Jerusalem seized \$4 million from Gaza businessman Zuhair Shamalach, who tried to funnel the money from Iran to Hamas.⁴⁹

Iranian Arms Fuel 2021 Gaza War

On May 10, 2021, Hamas again began firing rockets toward Jerusalem. The terror group claimed to be defending al-Aqsa Mosque from “Zionist machinations”—the standard Palestinian-Arab rallying cry for anti-Jewish violence since the 1920s. But there was another aspect to its action that escaped notice at the time: the growing number of Israeli strikes against Iranian targets in Syria in an attempt to halt Tehran’s military entrenchment in that country and the smuggling of advanced weapons to Hezbollah.

In April, weeks before the war, an Iranian general warned,

The Zionists imagine that they can continuously target the Syrian territories and conduct mischief in different places and in the sea and receive no response. ... the Resistance Front will give a principal response.⁵⁰

Similarly, IRGC commander Hossein Salami declared that “the evil deeds committed by the Zionists in the region will turn against themselves and expose them to real dangers in the future.” Shortly thereafter, Salami declared that Israel’s “biggest weakness is that any tactical action could bring about a strategic defeat ... just a single operation can ruin this regime.”⁵¹

49 *The Times of Israel* (Jerusalem), [Dec. 22, 2020](#).

50 Fars News Agency (Tehran), [Apr. 25, 2021](#).

51 *Tehran Times*, [Apr. 26, 2021](#); *Newsweek*, [May 5, 2021](#).

Once war erupted, Hamas revealed the advances it made with Iranian help, firing off larger salvos of rockets than ever before. Also, as analyst Michael J. Armstrong observed,

Accuracy has improved ... About 50 per cent of the rockets arriving over Israel have threatened populated areas. That's up from 22 per cent in 2012 and 18 per cent in 2014. Fewer rockets land in empty fields after missing their targets.⁵²

For the IDF, rocket range was also a concern. Most Hamas rockets were short-range threats. The locally produced Ayyash rocket, however, could fly 240 kilometers, reaching deep into Israel. Hamas claimed to have thousands of rockets with a similar range, thanks to Iran. It also managed to import Fajr-3 and Fajr-5 rockets from Iran and M-302 rockets from Syria, with ranges of 480, 750, and 180 kilometers, respectively.⁵³

Hamas also succeeded in flying unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in the skies over Israel. Hamas said its drones were built locally, but weapons specialists noted similarities with Iranian drones. Ephraim Sneh, a retired Israeli brigadier general and former deputy defense minister, noted, "The design [of Hamas weapons] is Iranian but the production is local." Or as Scott Crino, the



Israeli forces guard a burning car, Lod, May 12, 2021. Israeli Arabs rioted in cities considered showcases of Arab-Jewish coexistence. Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards were accused of orchestrating the violence.

CEO of consulting firm Red Six Solutions, said, "Iran's hands are all over this." Upon closer examination, the Shehab Kamikaze drones Hamas launched at Israel resembled the Iranian Ababil-T and Qasf-series UAVs deployed in Yemen by the Iran-backed Houthis.⁵⁴

The May 2021 Gaza war also witnessed another Hamas innovation with Iranian assistance: unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs). The Israeli navy intercepted one, reportedly deployed to attack the Tamar offshore natural gas rig. The UUV was reportedly a commercial vehicle converted for military use and loaded with up to 110 pounds of explosives.⁵⁵

The 2021 war also revealed a massive underground project, which the IDF called

52 *The Conversation* (Waltham, Mass.), [May 17, 2021](#).

53 *The Washington Post*, [May 13, 2021](#); *The Jerusalem Post*, [May 31, 2021](#); *Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C., [May 24, 2021](#).

54 *The War Zone* (U.S.), [May 13, 2021](#); *The Wall Street Journal*, [May 20, 2021](#).

55 "Add Egypt and the UAE to the Noble Dina Exercise," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Washington, D.C., [July 2, 2021](#); *Asia Times* (Hong Kong), [May 21, 2021](#).

the “ Hamas Metro.” This labyrinth of subterranean commando tunnels was suspected to have been built with Iranian financial or even technical assistance.⁵⁶

Israel’s U.N. ambassador warned, “ Hamas has been building its own military force covertly in Lebanon.”

Hamas in Lebanon

One aspect of the 2021 Gaza war that baffled the Israeli political and security establishments was the mass riots by Israel’s Arabs in support of Hamas. The cities of Jaffa, Haifa, Acre, Ramla, and Lod, among others—long considered show-cases of Arab-Jewish coexistence—were rocked by violence as Arab rioters attacked their Jewish neighbors, burned cars, synagogues, and other buildings, threw stones and Molotov cocktails, and even fired weapons. Here, too, Iran had a hand. As noted by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs,

Israeli security officials see the outbreak of violence by Israeli Arabs as a response to incitement choreographed by Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards sitting in a Beirut command center.⁵⁷

The existence of this command center was confirmed by a senior Israeli intelligence official.⁵⁸

Iran’s role was evident in other ways, too. On the night of May 13, terrorists fired three rockets at Israel from Lebanon; all

landed in the Mediterranean Sea. Four days later, another six rockets were fired into Israel from the Shebaa Farms border area on the inter-

section of the Lebanese-Syrian-Israeli border; all landed in Lebanese territory. On May 19, terrorists fired four more projectiles from near the city of Tyre. Israel’s Iron Dome defense system knocked one out of the sky. Another landed in an uninhabited area, and two more splashed into the Mediterranean.⁵⁹

The rockets were a reminder of Jerusalem’s warning to the United Nations in 2017 that Hamas was “ colluding with Hezbollah and its sponsor in Tehran to expand its malicious activities ... to areas within Lebanon.” A 2018 letter by Israel’s U.N. ambassador Danny Dannon further detailed the military cooperation between Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas in Lebanon. It placed a special emphasis on an operation

led by Saleh al-Arouri, the Lebanon-based deputy head of Hamas’ Politburo, and Saeed Izadi, head of the Palestinian Branch of the Iranian al-Quds Force ... Iran has publicly declared its commitment to increase its support for Hamas.⁶⁰

The letter also stated that

⁵⁶ *The Telegraph* (London), [Apr. 4, 2015](#).

⁵⁷ Yoni Ben Menachem, “ Were Jerusalem and the Al-Aqsa Mosque the Driving Forces Behind the Violence of May 2021?” [Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs](#).

⁵⁸ Author interview with a senior Israeli official, Washington, D.C., Mar. 10, 2022.

⁵⁹ France 24 TV (Paris), [May 13, 2021](#); *The Times of Israel*, [May 18, 2021](#); *The Jerusalem Post*, [May 19, 2021](#).

⁶⁰ Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council, U.N. Security Council, New York, May 11, 2018, [S/2018/450](#); Jonathan Schanzer, *Gaza Conflict 2021: Hamas, Israel and Eleven Days of War* (Washington, D.C.: FDD Press, 2021), Appendix, pp. 197-8.

Hamas has been building its own military force covertly in Lebanon. Hamas has recruited and trained hundreds of fighters ... who will operate as a force on Hamas' behalf in Lebanon. At the direction of Hamas operative Majid Hader, Hamas has assembled infrastructure in Lebanon ready to manufacture its own missiles and unmanned aircraft. ... [Hamas] also intends to use its armed force and growing arsenal of rockets to pull Lebanon into conflict with Israel. This intention increases the possibility of a conflict that could engulf the entire Middle East.⁶¹

That same year, then-Shin Bet chief Nadav Argaman warned that "Hamas was trying to build a 'post' in Lebanon."⁶² One Lebanese outlet picked up on the story, noting that Hamas intended to drag Lebanon into a future Hamas-Israel conflict, forcing Israel to fight on two fronts.⁶³

Conclusion

During the 2021 Gaza war, Tehran did not hide its patronage of Hamas. Supreme Leader Khamenei openly cheered Hamas.⁶⁴ Esmail Qaani, who succeeded Soleimani as Quds Force commander, called Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh to offer moral support and

lauded Hamas military chief Muhammad Deif as a "living martyr." An IRGC statement warned that "in the future, the Zionists can expect to endure deadly blows from within the occupied territories."⁶⁵ After the war, Haniyeh thanked "the Islamic Republic of Iran, [which] did not hold back with money, weapons, and technical support."⁶⁶

As of March 2022, according to one senior Israeli intelligence official, Hamas received \$80 million annually from Iran. Hamas engineers are also studying precision guided munition (PGM) technology in Iran to learn how to target Israel more accurately in future wars.⁶⁷ And while Hamas has other patrons, including Turkey, Qatar, and Malaysia, none of them have influenced the organization's military or financial capabilities like the Islamist regime in Tehran. This assistance and money will only grow if the Biden administration resuscitates the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and relaxes sanctions on Tehran.

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61 Ibid.

62 *The Jerusalem Post*, [Mar. 17, 2018](#).

63 *Beirut Observer*, [Jan. 20, 2018](#).

64 *The New York Post*, [May 12, 2021](#).

65 *The Wall Street Journal*, [May 20, 2021](#); *The Jerusalem Post*, [May 20, 2021](#); Reuters, [May 21, 2021](#).

66 *The Jerusalem Post*, [May 22, 2021](#).

67 Author interview with senior Israeli official, Washington, D.C., Mar. 10, 2022.