



## The Relationship Between Iran and Palestinian Islamic Jihad

Palestinian Islamic Jihad is ideologically, financially and militarily dependent on Tehran, and it plays an important role in Iran's war against Israel. The IRGC makes use of a range of institutions and charitable foundations that support PIJ. It is important that these be sanctioned by the US.

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The Hebrew-language original of this article is at  
<https://jiss.org.il/he/mansharof-relations-between-iran-and-palestinian-islamic-jihad/>

Since its establishment in 1981, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) has aspired towards the destruction of the State of Israel and the establishment of Islamic rule in the Palestinian state that would replace it. PIJ believes in uncompromising armed struggle against Israel. Unlike Hamas, PIJ does not offer social services to the people of Gaza, and is therefore not accountable to anyone in the Gaza Strip. PIJ is the second largest and most important organization in the Gaza Strip after Hamas. Its military arm, Saraya al-Quds (the Al-Quds Brigade) numbers some 15,000 members. Despite its nominal power relative to Hamas, PIJ plays an important role in the escalation of violence against Israel from the Gaza Strip due to its instigation of missile attacks, as has been seen in recent years.

The relations between Iran and the PIJ require close scrutiny, due to the dominant role PIJ has played in the clashes that have erupted between Israel and the Gaza over the past few years. This paper will analyze the development of Iran-PIJ relations throughout the years since PIJ's establishment in 1981, the nature of the Iranian support, and PIJ's role in Iran's strategic plan vis-à-vis Israel.

### The Centrality of Islamic Jihad in Iran's Strategy against Israel

Unlike Hamas, PIJ does not purport to run the Gaza Strip, and is therefore less attentive to public opinion or pressure from within it. PIJ shares a deep ideological connection with Iran, anchored in the organization's philosophy as shaped by its founder, Fathi Shikaki, who saw in Iran under the revolutionary leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini a model and a

solution. PIJ's military and financial dependence on Iran, highlighted by the economic crisis that befell the organization in 2015-2016 (see below) and by senior PIJ officials' statements that Iran is the only weapons provider of the organization, has increased its dedication to Tehran.

The aspiration to destroy Israel has been one of the key pillars of Iranian policy in the region since the Islamic Revolution, and Tehran openly states the practical actions it is taking to advance this goal. As Qassem Solemani, chief of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), declared on September 30, 2019, "During the first phase of the Islamic Revolution [since 1979], we developed the capacity to destroy the artificial Zionist regime, but during the second phase, this sinister regime should be eliminated from the world map. This is not an ideal or a dream anymore, but an achievable goal."<sup>1</sup>

Circles close to Khamenei even see the extermination of Israel as a precondition for the reappearance of the "Hidden Imam." For example, in February 2019, Mehdi Taeb, head of the Ammar think tank that advises Khamenei, declared that "the Zionist regime must be destroyed in order to fulfill the conditions necessary for the reappearance of the Hidden Imam."<sup>2</sup> In July 2017, Ali Fadavi, then-commander of the IRGC navy and currently deputy chief of the IRGC, said that Israel must be destroyed in order to prepare the ground for the reappearance of the Hidden Imam."<sup>3</sup> In addition to the historic desire to destroy Israel, Iran sees Israel as a significant hindrance to its nuclear ambitions and expansionist aspirations in the region. Therefore, Iran is working to deter Israel from carrying out offensives against its nuclear facilities through its staunch support of terrorist organizations (in particular their missile capabilities).

In this context, PIJ constitutes an important component of this cluster of organizations, which also includes the Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Shiite militias in Iraq, and Ansarallah in Yemen. Support for these organizations provides Iran with the infrastructure to conduct many missile attacks against Israel. The IRGC's Aerospace Force Commander, Amir Ali Hajizadeh, boasted about Iran's missile infrastructure against Israel in 2014, stating, "By virtue of Iran's support, Tel Aviv is today under fire, across its length and breadth, by the fighters of Gaza and Hezbollah. The oppressing, accursed Zionist regime cannot stand fast against the resistance front, and it is doomed to defeat."<sup>4</sup> And in September 2019, IRGC Deputy Commander for Operations Abbas Nilforoushan pointed out Tehran's success in reinforcing this strategy, saying that Iran "has encircled Israel from east and west, north and south."<sup>5</sup>

The Palestinian issue is a pillar of Iran's subversive policy in the region. It legitimizes Iran's revolutionary Shiite regime in the Sunni world, and allows it to intervene in the affairs of all Middle Eastern regimes on the pretext of supporting the Palestinians, undermine the legitimacy of the Sunni regimes that do not share its vision of destroying Israel, and even contribute to their

destabilization by supporting domestic subversives. The “Quds Day” plays a key role in these subversive efforts, this being a day that Khomeini declared must be observed every year on the last Friday of the month of Ramadan to commemorate the aspiration to destroy Israel. In fact, Khomeini's thought was that Quds Day should also symbolize the struggle of the oppressed (*mostazafan*) against the arrogant imperialists (*mostakberan*) and the governments associated with them in the region. Thus, Quds Day, marked annually in Iran and its regional satellites, expresses the aim not only to destroy Israel, but also to dismiss the Arab regimes that are Iran's rivals, chief among these Saudi Arabia. Moreover, in countries that are de facto controlled by Iran, such as Iraq and Lebanon, Quds Day ceremonies are used to project the power of Iran's proxies (Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias) in order to deter anti-Iranian elements in these countries and demonstrate Iran's regional power. These subversive efforts were made possible due to the theological shift in the Shiite attitude toward Jerusalem brought about by Khomeini after the Islamic Revolution. After many years of it being neglected by the Shiite scholars, Khomeini recognized Jerusalem's holy status (after Najaf and Karbala), declaring that it is imperative for all Muslims to strive towards its liberation.

Iran's opportunistic use of the Palestinian issue stood out following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. Tehran had been supporting Assad since the beginning of the war, and played an active and significant role in the struggle to prevent his ouster, though over the course of the war Assad's forces killed some 3,700 Palestinians (as of 2018), some in chemical attacks.<sup>6</sup> Iran, which has rejected demands from the Arab world that it stop interfering in the Arab Palestinian issue, maintaining that it is a universal Islamic-humanitarian matter, has in fact proven that it supports the Palestinians only as long as it serves its own interests. The real motivation behind Iran's support for Palestinian resistance organizations in the Gaza Strip and West Bank stems therefore from Iranian interests, in particular its national security. To that end, Tehran is also prepared to impede a solution, if reached, between the Palestinians and Israel. Khamenei demonstrated the Iranian resolve to thwart peace initiatives by declaring that peace with Israel is a plot that would be used by Israel for launching additional attacks in the region.<sup>7</sup>

As Ayatollah Ahmad Alam-al-Hoda, Khamenei's representative in the Khorasan-e Razavi province, declared in May 2019, “[Even] if one day the Palestinian people want to reach an understanding – heaven forbid - with Israel or America and give up [on Jerusalem], we will not surrender because we aim to liberate Jerusalem.”<sup>8</sup> This policy was reflected in Tehran's harsh criticism of Hamas in 2012 for agreeing to form a national unity government led by Mahmoud Abbas, Hamas's support of Syrian Sunni rebels, and the concern in Iran that these developments may herald Hamas's withdrawal from the axis of resistance.<sup>9</sup>

In the wake of Hamas' support for the Syrian rebels and the pragmatic approach adopted by the organization's then-Secretary-General Khaled Mashal, in 2014 Iran established the al-Sabireen movement in the Gaza Strip as an ideological alternative. In 2015, this organization also served Iran as a means of undermining Islamic Jihad after the crisis that erupted between the organization and Tehran (see below). The establishment of the organization reflected Iran's ambition to maintain an organization of emissaries in the Gaza Strip that would fulfill all of its orders. Hence, al-Sabireen's Secretary General Hisham Salem, a former commander in PIJ's military wing, condemned the Saudis' war against the Houthis in Yemen.<sup>10</sup> He also declared his total support for Iran in its regional struggle against Saudi Arabia,<sup>11</sup> and in return, the organization received weapons, including Fajr missiles, which it used during Operation Protective Edge. The organization was also accused by Hamas of disseminating Shi'ism in the Gaza Strip, and tried, unsuccessfully, to extend its influence to the West Bank.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, the Iranian attempt to establish an alternative to Hamas and PIJ in the Gaza Strip failed after Hamas waged an all-out war against it, which included a botched assassination attempt on Secretary-General Salem in 2015 and the shutting down of the organization's charitable fund (which provided humanitarian assistance to families of "martyrs" in an attempt to garner popular support at Hamas's expense), and a 2015 Hamas order (which has not yet been implemented) to dissolve the organization.

### **Fathi Shikaki: The PIJ Founder with Distinctly Pro-Iranian Tendencies**

PIJ's adherence to revolutionary Iran was evident from the organization's creation. It was apparent in the philosophy of one of the organization's founders, Fathi Shikaki (born in Rafah in 1951), who shaped PIJ's ideological and political stance while Abd al-Aziz Awda (born in Jabalya in 1950), served as the organization's spiritual leader. During his medical studies in Egypt in the 1970s, Shikaki joined the Muslim Brotherhood movement together with a group of Palestinian students, and was influenced by the ideas of its principal thought leaders, Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, though he was also drawn to the ideology of Shiite thinkers Ali Shariati and Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. With the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in February 1979, before PIJ was established, Shikaki published his book "Khomeini – The Islamic Solution and the Alternative," in which he expressed his support for Khomeini, the "philosopher and warrior."<sup>13</sup> In the book, Shikaki quotes a fatwa of Khomeini that states that the effort to destroy Israel is a religious duty.<sup>14</sup> Shikaki called for Shiite-Sunni cooperation, and mentioned the 1959 fatwa of Sheikh Al-Azhar Mahmud Shaltut, according to which the Twelver Shia is a legitimate branch of Islam.<sup>15</sup> On this basis, in his book Shikaki laid the ideological foundation for the relationship between Khomeini-led Iran and the Palestinians, pointing out that Khomeini had expressed to Yasser Arafat his support for a joint armed struggle against their common enemy, Israel.<sup>16</sup> Shikaki also pointed out Iran's oil and gas resources and geo-strategic position as advantages that give Iran unique weight in the

international arena.<sup>17</sup> The pro-Iranian orientation of Shikaki's book became the organization's "ID card" a few years later. The book's publication also signaled the ideological clash between Shikaki and the Muslim Brotherhood, which, unlike Khomeini, did not put the Palestinian issue at the top of its agenda (following the publication of the book, Shikaki was dismissed from the Muslim Brotherhood and detained by Egyptian authorities for a few days).

The prominent status given to revolutionary Iran in the organization's ideology was also evident in the statements of PIJ's spiritual leader, Abd al-Aziz Awda. Awda praised Khomeini's efforts to lead an Islamic awakening and unite the Shiites and Sunnis under his leadership. Due to his belief that Iran was the state most committed to the Palestinian cause, he even expressed his support for the Iranian leadership's controversial decision to continue the war against Iraq in the summer of 1982,<sup>18</sup> explaining that the outcome of the war would affect the entire region and benefit the Palestinians.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Institutionalization of Iranian-PIJ Relations in the 1980s and 1990s**

After departing Egypt for the Gaza Strip in 1981, Fathi Shikaki focused on developing the organization's activities in the West Bank and Gaza. PIJ was influenced ideologically by Khomeini's pan-Islamic rhetoric. In 1983, Shikaki was detained by Israel for eleven months after recruiting operatives to his organization, mainly Palestinian students from Egypt, including Ramadan Abdullah Shalah, and was arrested again between 1986 and 1988.<sup>20</sup> His pan-Islamic thinking, influenced by Khomeini, was also evident in Shikaki's second book, "The Shia and Sunna: An Unfortunate, Artificial Turmoil" (published in Cairo in 1985). In the book, Shikaki described the Shia-Sunni conflict as a Western plot, basing this on Khomeini's explicit assertion stating as much, and explained that the Islamic revolution led by Khomeini would stop the West's takeover of the Islamic nation and its resources. His call to place the Palestinian issue at the top of the agenda was prominent in his third book, "A Prologue Regarding the Centrality of Palestine and the Contemporary Islamic Project" (published in Beirut in 1989). During their meeting in Tehran in the 1980s, Khomeini gave Shikaki religious and legal permission to carry out suicide bombings against Israelis (soldiers and civilians),<sup>21</sup> as the former had determined that all Jews living in the area of Palestine were occupiers.<sup>22</sup>

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, three major milestones accelerated Iranian-PIJ relations. Firstly, according to Shikaki's 1993 testimony, Iran began financially assisting his organization as early as 1987 (though he did not specify an amount), probably before the outbreak of the first intifada, and also began to smuggle military equipment to Islamic Jihad in the territories.<sup>23</sup> It would therefore appear that even before the end of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), a decision was made in Tehran to significantly increase efforts to export the Islamic Revolution to the Sunni areas of the Middle East, as a result of the

lesson Iran learned from the little support it received from the Arab world (only from Syria, Libya and South Yemen) in the Iran-Iraq war.

Secondly, in 1988, Israel expelled the Islamic Jihad leadership, including Shikaki, to Lebanon, due to the terrorist attacks carried out by the organization in the 1980s. Islamic Jihad transferred its headquarters to Lebanon and Syria. This created a major turning point in its relations with Iran, as direct financial and military ties were established with IRGC representatives at Iran's embassies in Beirut and Damascus. Moreover, the relationship between PIJ and Hezbollah was institutionalized, and the two groups carried out joint attacks against IDF forces in the security zone in southern Lebanon. Two years after the 1993 Oslo Accords, Hamas also located its headquarters in Damascus, and the two organizations began coordinating terrorist attacks against Israel.<sup>24</sup>

Thirdly, in 1991, there was a further rapprochement between Iran and PIJ after Tehran initiated a conference to promote and coordinate the armed struggle against Israel, entitled the "International Committee for the Support of the Palestinian Intifada," in response to the Madrid Peace Conference that was convened during the same period.<sup>25</sup> Since then, the International Committee for the Support of the Palestinian Intifada meets in Tehran once every few years. The PIJ delegation, led by Secretary-General Shikaki, attended the conference in 1991 that convened under the banner of providing aid to the Palestinians to annihilate Israel and establish a Palestinian state in its stead.

### **Iran's Economic and Military Sponsorship of Islamic Jihad**

Israel's assassination of Shikaki in Malta in 1995, in the wake of murderous acts of terrorism carried out by the organization, severely damaged the group's functioning, though it continued its campaign of terrorism against Israel. With the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000, the organization's terrorist activity escalated significantly, following a substantial increase in the financial aid provided by Iran. US officials have claimed that Tehran gave PIJ a bonus of millions of dollars for every terrorist attack against Israel.<sup>26</sup> The organization's leader, Ramadan Shalah, sent his people in the territories payments from Iran and instructions regarding the carrying out of attacks from his seat in Damascus. Documents seized during Operation Defensive Shield indicate that the PIJ headquarters in Damascus also financed Fatah's attacks against Israel, as well as compensation payments to the families of Fatah members. One of the senior PIJ officials based in Damascus who has been planning terrorist attacks against Israel since the early 2000s is Akram Ajouri, who recently survived an assassination attempt, purportedly by Israel. In addition, in the period following the al-Aqsa intifada in 2000, Iran significantly increased its military assistance to PIJ after it tasked Hezbollah Chief of Staff Imad Moughniyah with strengthening the capabilities of the Palestinian resistance organizations to carry out terrorist attacks.<sup>27</sup> Alongside

this, under the guidance of Iranian diplomat Hossein Sheikholeslam, the ambassador to Damascus at the time with close ties to the Quds Force, PIJ began to carry out terrorist attacks in cooperation with Hamas.<sup>28</sup>

Iran strengthened its ties with the Ramadan Shalah-led Islamic Jihad. In a meeting with Shalah in Tehran in 2002, on the sidelines of the Conference on Supporting the Palestinian intifada, Khamenei pledged to increase Iranian aid to the organization by seventy percent in order to cover the expenses involved in recruiting suicide bombers.<sup>29</sup> During the meeting, Shalah highlighted the direct link and ideological connection between his organization and Iran, declaring that PIJ was “another fruit of the Ayatollah Khomeini's fructuous tree.”<sup>30</sup> At the same time, Khamenei publicly encouraged Palestinian resistance organizations to continue suicide attacks against Israel. During a speech on April 5, 2002, he called on the Palestinians to carry out attacks of self-sacrifice, explaining that this was the only way to liberate Palestine as it rendered the enemy helpless.<sup>31</sup> In May 2002, Khamenei praised suicide bombings as the pinnacle of Palestinian honor and heroism.<sup>32</sup>

Iran's financial and military sponsorship continued during the military campaigns that took place between Israel and the Gaza Strip: Cast Lead (December 2008 - January 2009), Pillar of Defense (November 2012), and Protective Edge (August 2014). Iranian officials boasted that Iran had provided PIJ with the Fajr 5 missiles it used to attack Tel Aviv, while senior PIJ figures Ramadan Shalah and Khaled al-Batsh, as well as the organization's spokesman Daoud Shihab, emphasized that PIJ owes its money and weapons to Iran.<sup>33</sup>

In line with its ideological allegiance to Iran, Islamic Jihad adhered to a rigid anti-Israeli stance focused on the vision of liberating all of Palestine and rejecting any political settlement with Israel. Iran also equips PIJ with the capability of thwarting any possible agreement between Israel and Hamas. In an interview with the Iranian Arabic-language channel Al-Alam in February 2019, PIJ described the advanced terrorist infrastructure it is building in the Gaza Strip with Iranian support, emphasizing the missile stockpiles and tunnel infrastructure it has developed. Abu Hamza, a spokesman for Al-Quds Brigades, the organization's military arm, thanked Iran for the training, funding and armament it provides to the organization's operatives. He presented Al-Alam the underground tunnels that the organization had excavated to replace those destroyed by the IDF, through which it intends to abduct Israeli soldiers in order to force prisoner swaps. The spokesman also described a missile lathe that the organization could use to attack Jerusalem and Netanya. In accordance with Tehran's opposition to any agreement with Israel, the spokesperson emphasized the organization's similar rejection of any such settlement, stressing the PIJ's vision of liberating all of Palestine via armed struggle against Israel.<sup>34</sup>

Iran smuggles military equipment to PIJ in the Gaza Strip in various ways. For many years, Iran transferred weapons to the Gaza Strip through tunnels connecting Sinai to Gaza. During the presidency of Muhammad Mursi (2012–2013), Mursi sought to strengthen the Hamas movement, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, and there was therefore a marked increase in the amount of smuggling via this route. Using this method, Iran smuggled rockets, mortar shells, anti-tank missiles, and explosives, as well as raw materials to be used in the production of explosives. After Mursi's departure in 2014, el-Sisi and the Egyptian army waged an all-out war on the tunnels. In July 2014, the Egyptian army announced that it had destroyed 1,639 tunnels used by the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, PIJ continued to smuggle weapons into Gaza through tunnels in 2015.<sup>36</sup>

The smuggling of weapons from Iran to the Gaza Strip continues, though on a smaller scale. Iran also uses the maritime channel for smuggling. In March 2014, the IDF thwarted an Iranian attempt to smuggle weapons into the Gaza Strip on a civilian vessel flying the Panamanian flag (a fact the ship's crew was unaware of). Iran has also begun to transfer knowledge regarding missile production to the Gaza Strip. Islamic Jihad's representative in Tehran, Nasser Abu Sharif, stated that the IRGC trained members of Hamas and PIJ in Iran to produce missiles and upgrade them upon returning to the Gaza Strip.<sup>37</sup>

### **Channels for the Smuggling of Funds to Resistance Organizations, Including Islamic Jihad, in the Gaza Strip**

Despite the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign against Iran, which has caused it financial hardship, Khamenei is determined to continue sponsoring Palestinian terrorism against Israel, albeit of a smaller scope. He declared in June 2019 that the Palestinian nation's struggle, in its military, political and cultural dimensions, must continue until Israel's surrender to the Palestinians.<sup>38</sup> Khamenei's statement incorporated not only Iranian incitement, but also the promise of financial compensation for the terrorist organizations that continue to fight against Israel. Iran operates an extensive system of financial channels to deliver funds to PIJ as well as the other resistance organizations in the Gaza Strip. This system includes the Martyrs Foundation, the Iranian Red Crescent, the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, and moneychangers.

### **The Martyrs Foundation and its Cooperation with the Al-Ansar Charity Association**

The Martyrs Foundation, which was added to the US sanctions list in 2007, is a key component of Iran's sponsorship of terrorism in the region.<sup>39</sup> In announcing the sanctions, the US Treasury pointed to the direct link between the Martyrs Foundation and PIJ (and other terrorist organizations supported by Iran, such as Hezbollah and Hamas) and the terrorist operatives perpetrating suicide bombings, as well as the families of PIJ prisoners. The

connection between the Martyrs Foundation and the Quds Force was reflected by, among other things, the fact that Hossein Dehqan, who headed the foundation between 2001 and 2009,<sup>40</sup> commanded the Quds Force's Lebanon Corps, in the 1980s.<sup>41</sup>

In February 2009, the Iranian Martyrs Foundation, which operates a branch in Gaza, reported transferring \$1,340,000 to 1,340 families from across the Gaza Strip who lost loved ones in Operation Cast Lead.<sup>42</sup> The Martyrs Foundation itself also directs terrorist attacks. Qasem Aliq, while chairman of the Martyrs Foundation's Lebanese branch, directed attacks by terrorist cells in the Gaza Strip for PIJ and the Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>43</sup>

The Al-Ansar Charity Association, which has been operating in the Gaza Strip since its establishment in 2001, is affiliated with PIJ and serves as the arm of the Iranian Martyrs Foundation that transfers funds to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. In 2019, senior Al-Ansar official Sami Abu Ayadah revealed that Iran provides assistance to 9,000 families of "martyrs," or "shahids" (the vast majority of whom are terrorists), every three months - 7,000 families in the Gaza Strip and 2,000 in the West Bank. He said the foundation gives \$600 to the family of a married shahid and \$300 to the family of a single shahid.<sup>44</sup>

Israel declared Al-Ansar a banned association in 2003. However, the fund resumed its operations in 2005, following the Israeli disengagement from Gaza. The Al-Ansar Charity Association has transferred millions of dollars from Iran to families of shahids in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. In 2012, the fund provided \$1,650,000 to families of shahids killed during the second intifada.<sup>45</sup> Subsequently, the foundation made payments to families of shahids killed in Operation Protective Edge.<sup>46</sup> In addition, a source in the Iranian Martyrs Foundation in Gaza stated in June 2019 that the foundation intended to grant \$651,000 to families of shahids in the Gaza Strip, including 224 Palestinians who were injured during the Marches of Return.<sup>47</sup> It is estimated that between 2015 and 2017, the Al-Ansar Charity Association transferred \$8.7 million to the Gaza Strip.<sup>48</sup> Al-Ansar makes payments to families of Hamas shahids, not only those belonging to PIJ.<sup>49</sup> It is highly likely that this monetary channel is used by Iran to transfer funds not only to the social infrastructures of the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip, including PIJ, but also to their terrorist wings.

### **The Iranian Red Crescent**

Another economic channel used by Tehran to provide financial assistance to terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip, including PIJ, is the Iranian Red Crescent. WikiLeaks documents revealed that the Iranian Red Crescent serves as a cover for Iranian intelligence (MOIS) and the IRGC's Quds Force, which use it to advance Iranian subversion in various countries including Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen and Iraq. It was disclosed that all of the teams that the Iranian Red Crescent dispatched to Lebanon during the Second Lebanon War,

allegedly to assist the civilian population, were in fact members of the Quds Force coming to Lebanon in order to assist Hezbollah. The crews brought shipments of military equipment and weapons disguised as medical supplies.<sup>50</sup> WikiLeaks documents also revealed that the Quds Force used the Red Crescent from 1997 to 2000 to support Shiite opposition activists in Bahrain and Yemen, and to infiltrate their operatives into Iraq during the Iraq War (2003–2011) disguised as Red Crescent workers. Saeed Qassemi, a former senior IRGC commander, divulged that the IRGC used the Iranian Red Crescent as a cover to train terrorists, including al-Qaeda members, during the war in Bosnia in the 1990s.<sup>51</sup>

The Iranian Red Crescent operates regularly in the Gaza Strip on the pretext of providing humanitarian aid.<sup>52</sup> Given the organization's historical affiliation to the IRGC and the Quds Force, it can be concluded that it is being used by Iran to smuggle weapons and funding to the terrorist organizations in Gaza as well. Despite being a key instrument in Iran's subversive efforts, the Iranian Red Crescent is not included on the US sanctions list. Moreover, notwithstanding the direct and extensive assistance it provides to Iranian terrorist activity in several locations, it is still a member of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

The activities of the Iranian Red Crescent and the Martyrs Foundation in the Gaza Strip are rooted in Iranian law. The “Law on the Islamic Revolution’s Support of the Palestinian People” was adopted by the Iranian parliament on May 9, 1990.<sup>53</sup> The law authorizes the Iranian Red Crescent, the Martyrs Foundation, and the Mostazafan Foundation (one of the richest funds in Iran, controlled by Khamenei) to provide financial assistance to the families of Palestinian prisoners and shahids. The direct link between these institutions and Iran’s subversive forces, the IRGC and the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS), is anchored in this law. The law prescribed that a committee made up of representatives of the IRGC, MOIS, the Martyrs Foundation, the Red Crescent, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Culture, and the parliament be established to coordinate and implement Iranian support for the Palestinians.

### **The Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation**

Another channel used by Iran for terrorist purposes in the Gaza Strip is the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation. The foundation’s Lebanese branch was included on the US sanctions list in 2010 for acting as an Iranian pipeline for the transferring of funds to Hezbollah institutions.<sup>54</sup> In addition, in 1997, the foundation's infrastructure in Tajikistan served as a cover for the surveillance of the US embassy in the country.<sup>55</sup> The Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation’s activity in service of Iranian intelligence in Tajikistan was apparently the reason that Tajikistan’s government shut down the foundation’s offices in the country in 2016.<sup>56</sup> In Afghanistan, the foundation acts as a cover for the Quds Force to transfer funds and equipment to the west and center of the country,<sup>57</sup>

and serves as a main anchor for the spread of Iranian influence in Afghanistan.<sup>58</sup>

WikiLeaks documents show that the foundation served as one of the channels through which the Quds Force sent weapons to its various envoys in Iraq during the war against the US-led coalition forces. These weapons were used by the Shiite Iraqi militias supported by Iran at the time, Jaish al-Mahdi, Asa'ib Ahl Al-haq, Liwa al-Youm al-Maw'ud, and Kata'ib Hezbollah.<sup>59</sup> According to the Pentagon, Iran is responsible for the deaths of at least 608 American soldiers in the Iraq War (17 percent of all of the war's American casualties) through its military and financial support of these militias.<sup>60</sup>

Another personality linking the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation to the IRGC is Parviz Fattah, who headed the foundation between 2015 and 2019.<sup>61</sup> Fattah, an alumnus of the IRGC, was included on the US sanctions list in 2010, when he headed Bonyad Taavon Sepah, an economic fund that provides banking services to the IRGC.<sup>62</sup> After serving in the IRGCs, Fattah worked for the IRGC's Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters, which also serves as a cover for the activities of the Quds Force in the Middle East and around the world.<sup>63</sup>

The Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation regularly provides humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip. One indication of the foundation acting as a conduit between the Quds Force and the resistance organizations were [photographs](#) published in the Iranian media in June 2017 showing foundation members handing out Iftar meals (eaten upon the end of the fast during the month of Ramadan) to Kata'ib al-Mujahideen operatives in the Gaza Strip.<sup>64</sup> Established in 2006 after splitting from Fatah, this organization has been included on the US sanctions list since 2018; its members are trained and funded by Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>65</sup> The organization has fought against the IDF during the various clashes and has been involved in launching missiles into Israel. In 2018, the Lebanese channel affiliated with Hezbollah, Al-Mayadeen, broadcast a report filmed from inside one of the organization's tunnels.<sup>66</sup> The Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation has so far not been included on the US sanctions list, though it has accumulated an impressive track record of activities in service of the IRGC.

## **Moneychangers**

Moneychangers serve as another pipeline through which Iran launders funds for its allies in the region. Iran used this channel, alongside other avenues, to transfer money to the Shiite Iraqi militias who fought on its behalf against the US military during the Iraq War between 2003 and 2011, as well as to Hezbollah in Lebanon since the end of the Second Lebanon War.<sup>67</sup>

Similarly, Iran uses moneychangers in the Gaza Strip to fund its allies in the area. In the violent conflict that broke out between Israel and Hamas in May

2019, Israel assassinated Hamed al-Khoudary, a field commander in Hamas' military wing, the Ezzedeen Al-Qassam Brigades. After his assassination, the IDF revealed that al-Khoudary was the owner of the Al-Wefaq money exchange business, which Israel had declared to be a terrorist organization in June 2018. In recent years, the company's status had become firmly established, as had al-Khoudary's status as a major moneychanger in the Gaza Strip. He had transferred large amounts of money to Hamas, PIJ and other terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip.<sup>68</sup>

In August 2019, the US imposed sanctions on a Hamas financial auditor, Fawaz Muhmud Ali Nasser, and a Gaza-based moneychanger, Muhammad Kamal al-Ayy, after they transferred funds from Iran via Hezbollah to Hamas and PIJ.<sup>69</sup>

### **The Crisis in Iran-PIJ Relations (2015–2016)**

During Shalah's leadership (1995–2018), the relationship between Iran and PIJ was firmly established, especially from a military perspective. Tehran provided the organization with everything it needed, including training, weapons, and annual financial assistance estimated at \$30 million per year. However, a crisis that erupted in 2015 clouded the relations between the two sides. According to various reports, the cause was PIJ's refusal to condemn the war launched by Saudi Arabia against the Iran-backed Shiite rebels in Yemen in March 2015 (Operation Decisive Storm).<sup>70</sup> Iran and PIJ endeavored to resolve the crisis away from the spotlight, so did not directly address the decrease in Iranian support and the reasons behind it. However, in July 2015, Palestinian sources explained that the crisis stemmed from the fact that PIJ "refuses to let anyone dictate any position, especially with regard to issues related to the Arab and Islamic nation, about which the movement has an independent and private vision."<sup>71</sup> In addition, hinting at PIJ's refusal to accept Iranian orders, senior PIJ official Muhammad Al-Hindi said in May 2015 that PIJ had decided not to comment at all on regional conflicts, and that its relations with Iran are based on mutual respect.<sup>72</sup> The person responsible for PIJ's foreign relations, Mahfouz Munawwar, who was based in Beirut, also implicitly addressed the issue, saying, "Our movement has a fixed policy based on respecting the decisions of peoples and governments. We do not intervene in the internal politics of states and will continue to abide by this policy."<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, PIJ viewed Iran's establishment of the al-Sabireen Movement in a negative light and saw it as a threat that would undermine it, especially given that the organization was founded in part by former PIJ members.<sup>74</sup> Another reason for the crisis was PIJ's attempt to improve its relations with Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.<sup>75</sup> In 2017, PIJ's then-Deputy Secretary-General Ziad al-Nakhala hinted at this policy by saying that the rapprochement with Egypt did not come at the expense of PIJ's relations with the Arab and Islamic countries that support it (read: Iran), or at the expense of its ideological principles.<sup>76</sup>

There are reports that Iran cut economic aid to PIJ considerably, and that as a result the organization suffered from the most severe financial crisis in its history. It was forced to cut back on its activities, shut down the offices of its television channel *Filastin Al-Youm* in Jerusalem, and dismiss some of the employees of the channel's offices in the West Bank and Gaza. PIJ sought alternative sources of funding, but to no avail.<sup>77</sup>

One of the organization's senior officials said anonymously that the financial crisis damaged PIJ's propaganda efforts on its media channels, and also affected the organization's military arm, al-Quds Brigades, whose members were not paid salaries.<sup>78</sup> It should be noted that this fiscal crisis occurred during a critical period, as at the time PIJ was occupied with restoring its military capabilities, including repairing its infrastructure and recruiting new operatives to its military wing. According to the US State Department, in 2015 PIJ recruited approximately 200 activists to fill its ranks following Operation Protective Edge. In interviews in May and August 2015, the organization's Secretary-General, Shalah, and Muhammad Al-Hindi admitted that the organization was suffering from a financial crisis, but they qualified their remarks saying that this was not an unprecedented development in the history of the organization, and was the result of the siege on Gaza.<sup>79</sup>

Cooperation between the two parties was maintained throughout this period. According to the Israeli security establishment, in August 2015, an PIJ cell launched four rockets at the Golan Heights at the command of Saeed Izadi, head of the Palestinian division of the Quds Force (included on the list of US sanctions against Iran),<sup>80</sup> who passed on the instructions via Ramadan Shalah.<sup>81</sup> During these years, Shalah visited Tehran several times to try to bridge the gaps between the two sides, emphasizing during one of the visits PIJ's willingness to serve Tehran in whatever way it wished; as he declared in a meeting with senior regime official Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, "Defending Iran is defending Islam."<sup>82</sup> According to Saudi Arabia's *Asharq Al-Awsat*, the crisis was resolved in the spring of 2016, after talks that took place in Tehran between a PIJ delegation led by Shalah and the Iranian leadership, including the then-commander of the Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani. The compromise reached between the parties indicates that Iran managed to tighten its grip on PIJ, after the organization accepted Soleimani's demand to appoint Khalid Mansour, a member of al-Quds Brigades, to head the PIJ military wing. In exchange, it was agreed that Iran would give \$70 million directly to al-Quds Brigades.<sup>83</sup> PIJ denied that Iran was providing it with \$70 million a year, but did not deny that Khalid Mansour had been appointed to head the organization's military arm at Qassem Soleimani's order.<sup>84</sup>

### **The Strengthening of Relations in the al-Nakhala Era**

In light of the deterioration in the medical condition of PIJ's Secretary-General Shalah, it was decided that elections would be held to choose a new head of the organization and its political bureau. Iran reportedly preferred to

maintain and strengthen its hold on the organization through its ally al-Nakhala, who served as Shalah's deputy, and replace him without elections, whereas Muhammad Al-Hindi, who is based in Gaza and has close ties with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, would be appointed as his deputy.<sup>85</sup> The organization held elections in September 2018, after the Iranian attempt to cancel them was rejected; their result, however, clearly served Tehran's interests. Ziad al-Nakhala, who is close to Iran, defeated Muhammad Al-Hindi who was elected to serve as a member of the organization's political bureau. Al-Nakhala replaced Ramadan Shalah, who retired due to his medical condition. Following the election, the Saudi paper *Asharq Al-Awsat* explained that the Iranian axis within PIJ had seized hegemony in the organization.<sup>86</sup> According to the Palestinian press, the improving of relations with Iran began even before al-Nakhala's election, when Iran resumed more extensive training of PIJ activists.<sup>87</sup>

In December 2018-January 2019, Al-Nakhala visited Tehran for the first time since being elected to head PIJ. The meeting served as an important anchor for the strengthening of relations between the parties, even under the Trump Administration's maximum pressure campaign against Iran. Hence, Khamenei stated in his meeting with Al-Nakhala that Iran would not retreat from its "divine, religious and sensible duty" to support the Palestinians. Al-Nakhala presented Khamenei with a report on his organization's accomplishments in Gaza, and stressed his determination to thwart Trump's "Deal of the Century," in line with Iran's goal of preventing any possible reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians.<sup>88</sup> In al-Nakhala's meetings with President Hassan Rouhani, National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamhani, and Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani, the parties all stressed the importance of obstructing the Deal of the Century plan, as well as the continuation of Iranian assistance to PIJ.

In his remarks to al-Nakhala, President Rouhani conveyed the Iranian strategy that views PIJ as an important element in deterring Israel from attacking Iran, saying that the Palestinians play an important role in curbing Israel's expansionist aspirations. He called on al-Nakhala to continue the path of resistance, that is, the armed struggle, thereby expressing his desire to wear Israel down. Iran's determination to train PIJ members was also apparent in the remarks of Iranian Police Chief Hossein Ashtari (a former senior IRGC official) to al-Nakhala during the visit, according to which Tehran wants to equip PIJ with its capabilities and experience and provide training of various kinds to its members.<sup>89</sup> Al-Nakhala, on his part, in his meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, expressed his absolute loyalty to Iran and his determination to block any attempt at rapprochement between PIJ and the moderate Sunni states, declaring that some Arab states are trying to weaken the Resistance while Iran is the real proponent of Palestinian rights.<sup>90</sup>

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The alliance between Iran and PIJ is anchored in the organization's historical roots and the philosophy of its founder, Shikaki. With Tehran's backing, PIJ has succeeded in becoming the second strongest and most important military force in the Gaza Strip, after Hamas. Despite its attempt to maintain a somewhat independent decision-making process, PIJ is tied to Tehran ideologically, militarily and financially, so it will find it difficult to deviate from the policy of its Iranian patron. As Nasser Abu Sharif, PIJ's representative in Iran, said in late 2018, Iran remains PIJ's only weapons provider and the organization's sole supporter.

During the crisis in its relations with Iran, PIJ tried and failed to find alternative sources of funding, probably as a result of the deep ideological differences between it and the pro-American Sunni camp (Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia). This fact highlights PIJ's dependence on Iran, in addition to the ideological affinity that links the two. Iran, on the other hand, needs PIJ as a means of maintaining a strategic anchor against Israel, especially in light of its complex relations with Hamas. Although PIJ does not share a common ethnicity with Iran, such as the Shiite militias in Iraq, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Ansarallah in Yemen (all of which were established either with Tehran's direct assistance or by Iran itself), who view Khamenei as their religious leader, PIJ still serves as an Iranian proxy due to its clear dependence on wide-ranging Iranian assistance. If the Saudi *Asharq Al-Awsat* report is true, then Iran was even able to leverage the crisis in its relationship with PIJ to strengthen its influence on the organization, with Khalid Mansour appointed to head PIJ's military wing, as demanded by Soleimani.

Revolutionary Iran has been escorting and nurturing PIJ ideologically since the organization's infancy, and represents a dominant component of its military and financial capability. Both sides share a radical doctrine that seeks to destroy Israel. PIJ's military and financial dependence on Iran leaves it little room to maneuver in the face of directives from Tehran. Therefore, even if the faction within PIJ led by Mohammed Al-Hindi and his supporters tries once again to deviate from Iranian orders, it is likely to face opposition from the pro-Iranian Secretary-General al-Nakhala; even if it does succeed in passing that hurdle, such a move may put the continued existence of the organization at risk.

While in recent years Israel has been concentrating on preventing Iranian efforts to establish itself on the northern front, it should at the same time endeavor to curb Iran's hold on the Gaza Strip. Limiting PIJ's economic and military capability is a common Israeli and American interest. PIJ was declared a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States in 1997, following the brutal terrorist attacks it perpetrated against Israel with Iranian support, in which American citizens were also killed, and after senior PIJ officials established themselves on US soil and the organization carried out fundraising activities throughout the US.<sup>91</sup> This definition allows for a series

of legal measures to be taken designed to deprive the organization of financial capabilities. In 2005, the United States included PIJ's Al-Ihsan Association on the sanctions list, but the organization still maintains financial ties with Iran through the Al-Ansar Charity Association,<sup>92</sup> which is not included on the US sanctions list though Iran has used it to transfer millions of dollars to PIJ. Thus, it is important for the US to impose sanctions on Al-Ansar to toughen its maximum pressure campaign against Iran and improve counter-terrorism activities against PIJ. In addition, the Trump Administration should impose sanctions on the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, which, as discussed, acts as a cover for the activities of the IRGC in Gaza (and in many countries). At the same time, Israel and the United States must continue to track down moneychangers in the Gaza Strip who are helping to transfer Iranian funds to PIJ and include them on the US sanctions list.

It is not particularly surprising that the Iranian regime uses humanitarian institutions such as the Iranian Red Crescent, the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, and others for the purpose of promoting terrorism. However, in light of the expected difficulty in imposing sanctions against the Iranian Red Crescent, Israeli and American public diplomacy efforts should focus on launching an extensive global campaign aimed at establishing oversight of the institution and limiting its subversive activities as much as possible. Furthermore, it is recommended that public diplomacy agencies in Israel and the United States leverage the evidence presented in the current study regarding the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation's services to the Quds Force and to the Iranian regime's sponsorship of the terrorist organizations in Gaza, as well as in other countries. The use of these charitable funds for aid to the Palestinians has already provoked a great deal of resentment among demonstrators in the recent protests in Iran and on social networks,<sup>93</sup> so it is possible that an effective information campaign on the issue will fuel the protests in Iran and weaken the Iranian regime.

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