

The Palestinian State: A Springboard for Iran's Plan to Destroy Israel

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 22.07.2024

Introduction

The Biden administration adheres to the “two states for two peoples” plan, viewing it as a key component in shaping the Middle East after the “Swords of Iron” war. At this stage, the main players in the Israeli political system (Likud, the National Camp, and Yesh Atid) understand the current impracticality of establishing a Palestinian state, which would reward terrorism. However, it is possible that under American pressure and over time, some may agree to the division of the land and the establishment of a Palestinian state. We believe that the establishment of a Palestinian state would pose an existential threat to Israel because it would quickly become a platform for Iran and its Axis of Resistance to eliminate Israel. Given Hamas's popularity in Judea and Samaria, it is expected to take over this area easily and without violence. Its control there will serve as a catalyst for its cooperation with Iran and the realization of their shared vision of Israel's destruction. This article aims to present how Iran is expected to use a Palestinian state to advance its plan to destroy Israel.

A. The Iranian Modus Operandi Against Israel: Encircling Israel Under an Existential Threat

Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has made the destruction of Israel a central tenet of its ideology, as articulated by the regime's founder, Ruhollah Khomeini, and his successor since 1989, Ali Khamenei. However, Iran's actions suggest that from the outset of its revolutionary era, it has designated for itself a supporting role to fulfill this vision, instead aiming to destroy Israel through its network of proxies. Despite the historic direct confrontation between Iran and Israel in April 2024, we assess that Iran remains committed to this proxy-based strategy. This is mainly because it has been proven that using proxies is profitable for Iran. The strategy allows Iran--which recognizes the inherent risk in direct combat against Israel--to wage war against the Jewish state while dodging the price for these

actions. Therefore, Tehran has been promoting a method of action, particularly in the last two decades, aimed at empowering its proxies against Israel. This includes training and arming its network of proxies with advanced weapons such as heavy rockets, cruise missiles, and precision missiles, upgrading the capabilities and offensive power of these proxies. Statements by senior IRGC officials indicate that a plan has gradually developed to encircle Israel with existential threats through a network of proxies: in November 2014, for example, IRGC Air Force Commander Amir Ali Hajizadeh proudly stated that “thanks to Iran’s support, Tel Aviv is now under a crisscross of fire from Gaza and Hezbollah fighters.” In September 2019, the then head of IRGC’s operations command, Abbas Nilforushan, declared Iran’s success in encircling Israel and threatening it from all sides. The declaration followed significant advancements in the proxy strategy, especially regarding Iran’s increased support for the Houthis, pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, the “Imam Hussein” division in Syria, and deepened Iranian support for Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza. Accordingly, at the end of this month, IRGC Chief Salami declared that “this mission of eliminating the Zionist regime is no longer a vision but an achievable task.” It should be noted that in addition of strengthening Tehran’s involvement in different fronts, it looks to deepen its foothold in Jordan next, seeing it as the last barrier to arming Judea and Samaria.

In the Palestinian arena, Hamas and Islamic Jihad stand out as the spearhead of Iran’s plan to destroy Israel. Hamas, the most popular organization in the Palestinian arena, has ruled Gaza since 2007; Islamic Jihad, a protégé of Iran, is falling under Tehran’s increasing influence due to the ideological proximity between the parties; and, in the background, Hezbollah, Iran’s strategic arm in the region, poses a significant threat to Israel from southern Lebanon. Alongside these, Iran also supports other organizations and Palestinian factions that support armed struggle against Israel, primarily the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and Fatah - Munir al-Maqdah. Iran’s close cooperation with Fatah elements is evidenced by the investigation of the Karine-A arms ship detainees and the involvement of Fuad Shubaki, who was not only Arafat Administrations’ “Finance Minister” but also the mastermind behind the attempt to smuggle this arms ship from Iran to Gaza.

Alongside these organizations, Iran, with Hezbollah’s assistance, is trying to

establish terrorist cells in East Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria to maximize its penetration into the Palestinian arena and assist Palestinian terrorist elements harm, bleed, and exhaust Israel. Munir al-Maqdah's activity stands out in this context. Recent Shin Bet investigations revealed that al-Maqdah, a Palestinian-descended resident of Lebanon's Ain al-Hilweh, works increasingly closely for the IRGC and Hezbollah vis-a-vis the Palestinian arena, recruiting elements in Judea and Samaria to carry out attacks, promoting the smuggling of Iranian weapons, and transferring funding through various channels to Judea and Samaria terrorist cells.

Two examples stand out in this context: On July 21, 2020, the Shin Bet and IDF thwarted a Popular Front-affiliated (and directed by Iran and Hezbollah) terrorist cell's attempt to carry out serious attacks, including a planned attack in Harish and a plot to kidnap a soldier to be used as a bargaining chip to get prisoners released from Israeli jails. The investigation revealed that one of the cell's members was expected to go to Lebanon for military training organized by Hezbollah, including shooting, manufacturing weapons, operating drones, and more. Then, in September 2020, the Shin Bet reported that Yasmin Jaber, a resident of East Jerusalem, was arrested on suspicion of being recruited by Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Quds Force to help recruit more operatives among Israeli citizens and residents of Judea and Samaria. The subsequent investigation revealed that Jaber was identified by Hezbollah operatives during her participation in a conference in Lebanon in 2015. During another visit to Lebanon in 2016, she was recruited by a Hezbollah operative named Jafar Qubeisi, known to the Shin Bet for his involvement in other recruitment attempts of elements in Israel and Judea and Samaria for terrorist activities. Since her recruitment by Hezbollah, Jaber had been in covert contact with her handler through social networks, according to security briefings and instructions received from Hezbollah.

B. The Advanced Iranian Terror Network and the Danger to Israel

Amidst the intense struggle between Iran and Israel and the growing activity of the Iranian terror network, various units spearheading the network have been exposed. These units are responsible for training, smuggling arms, financing, and providing other forms of support to Tehran's proxies, including various Palestinian terror organizations. A Palestinian state, if established, would serve as

a prime target for these units for weapons smuggling, planning, and promoting terror attacks aimed at exhausting Israel and striving for its destruction. The main units of this type are as follows:

- **Branch 2500 (Palestine Branch) of the Quds Force:** This operational unit of the Quds Force is responsible for assisting Palestinian terror organizations, primarily Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The unit is commanded by the shadowy figure Saeed Izadi, who was recently captured on rare footage. The effort Izadi invests in strengthening the terror capabilities of Palestinians in Judea and Samaria was reflected in the warning (2019) of Israel's Ambassador to the UN, Danny Danon. The warning recognized Said Izadi's central role in Iran's and Saleh al-Arouri's (who led Hamas's terror array in Judea and Samaria) attempt to turn this area into another against Israel.
- **Unit 840 of the Quds Force:** This secret operational unit is responsible, among other things, for planning and establishing terror infrastructures outside of Iran, against Western and Israeli targets, and for promoting special operations against Israel. The unit operates worldwide, and in mid-2021, its attempt to assassinate two Israeli businessmen in Colombia was foiled. Led by Asghar Bakeri. The unit leads terror operations against Israel, also pushing them into Judea and Samaria, as recently demonstrated by the foiling of its attempt, along with the IRGC's Operations Division (4000)'s, to smuggle advanced weapons into Judea and Samaria.
- **Division 4000:** The special operations division of the IRGC Intelligence Organization. The division is headed by Javad Ghafari, who until his removal from his post in 2021 commanded the Syrian corps of the Quds Force. In March 2024, the IDF and Shin Bet foiled the smuggling of advanced weapons, including anti-tank mines, RPG launchers, fragmentation mines, 50 pistols, and more, from Iran to Judea and Samaria. The operation was led by the special operations division of the IRGC Intelligence Organization (4000) in cooperation with the special operations unit of the Quds Force (18840) in Syria, under the sponsorship of Unit 840's head, Asghar Bakri.
- **Unit 190:** The IRGC's smuggling unit, led by Behnam Shahriari. The unit uses various air, sea, and land routes to advance smuggling operations to the terror proxies operating in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the

Palestinian arena. The smuggled goods are disguised as innocent commerce, violating several UN Security Council resolutions prohibiting Iran from exporting weapons, including Resolutions 1929 (2010) and 2105 (2013). The unit uses Iranian and other airlines, most of which continue to operate despite American sanctions. The unit is responsible for various smuggling operations to Gaza, including using civilian ships that transport weapons on the Iran-Sudan-Egypt-Gaza route. We can assess that over the years, the unit has not only instrumentalized the Gaza- *Sinai* tunnel network but may also used humanitarian organizations, primarily the Iranian Red Crescent and the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, which operate in Gaza and have been exposed as operating on behalf of the Quds Force.

- **Unit 340:** The Quds Force's technological assistance unit, providing knowledge and technological equipment for Iran's proxy network in the region. The unit deals with technological projects related to weaponry. It is headed by Hamid Fazei, a mechanical engineering doctor from Sharif University of Technology in Tehran. According to reports, among the projects the unit is working on in the missile field are improving accuracy, extending range, and increasing the destructive capabilities of the missiles Tehran supplies to its proxy network, including Islamic Jihad.

In addition to these units, Iran's diplomatic representations in the region serve as a cover for Quds Force activities. Notably, the ambassador role in key countries in Iran's regional proxy network is held by a Quds Force officer. Accordingly, it is known that Iran's ambassadors in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime - Hassan Kazemi-Qomi (2005-2010), Hassan Danaeifar (2010-2017), Iraj Masjedi (2017-2022), and Mohammad Kadhim al-Sadeq (2022-present) - are all senior Quds Force officers. Additionally, Iran utilizes diplomatic positions as cover for its intelligence officers, as was prominently revealed in the case of Assadollah Asadi, who served as a counselor at the Iranian embassy in Austria while he was actually an intelligence officer for Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). Asadi was sentenced in 2020 in Belgium to twenty years in prison but was released in 2022 as part of a prisoner exchange deal between Belgium and Iran. Asadi was arrested in 2018 in Germany and extradited to Belgium after transferring a device containing 500 grams of explosives to an Iranian-Belgian couple in Luxembourg to carry out an attack against a gathering of the Iranian opposition organization, MojahedinKhalq, in a Paris suburb (Villepinte). Notably,

the meeting was expected to include participation by Rudy Giuliani, lawyer of then-president Donald Trump. The attack was foiled by the Mossad in cooperation with French, German, and Belgian intelligence services.

In light of all this, Israel will find it difficult to prevent the presence of Quds Force elements in the hypothetical Palestinian state because, as a sovereign state, the Palestinians will be entitled to decide who will serve as an ambassador to their state. Moreover, even if a buffer zone were to be established to separate Jordan from the Palestinian state in Judea and Samaria, the Quds Force will find a way to circumvent the obstacle using front organizations and various covers by exploiting infrastructure that ostensibly serves civilians. This infrastructure includes a series of charity organizations and humanitarian and religious associations, including the Iranian Red Crescent, the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, the Headquarters for the Restoration of Holy Sites, Al-Mustafa International University, the World Assembly of Ahl al-Bayt, and others.

Additionally, Hezbollah's Unit 133, responsible for recruiting Palestinian agents - including Israeli Arabs and some from the village of Ghajar- and carrying out attacks, is similarly expected to advance Palestinian terrorism with the establishment of a Palestinian state. Alongside carrying out attacks, the unit promotes drug and weapons smuggling, as well as intelligence gathering. Within the unit also operates Jawad, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah's son. Unit 133, led by Muhammad Ataya, conducts some of its activities through face-to-face meetings abroad, coded phone calls, and encryption means. According to the Shin Bet, experienced in dealing with Hezbollah's recruitment efforts in the Palestinian arena, the preferred method for recruiting Palestinians--including Israeli Arabs--is the Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, located in Saudi Arabia. Other recruitment is done through internet mediation, focusing on social networks, and meetings in Scandinavian countries. Since its establishment about two decades ago, the Shin Bet and IDF have thwarted various cells recruited by the unit among Palestinians and Israeli Arabs.

One of the prominent thwartings was the arrest of "Haaretz" journalist, CEO of the Ittijah organization, and one of the heads of the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel, the spy Amir Mahoul, who was arrested in 2010 and imprisoned for nine years for serious espionage and conspiracy to assist Hezbollah.

C. Past Experience in Gaza: How Iran Assisted Hamas Become a Terror Monster

Since the 1990s, Iran has been increasingly assisting Hamas with military and technological training while also providing significant funding to the organization. Iran has supported Hamas since its early days in the late 1980s. This support increased after the assassination of its spiritual leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, in 2004, who, as a Sunni theologian, limited the cooperation of the terror organization with Shiite Iran. However, even during Yassin's period, ties between Hamas and Iran were established. The 1998 meeting between Yassin and Khamenei in his Tehran office represents a significant development in the relationship. Soon thereafter, Iran began providing millions of dollars in aid to Hamas, alongside military and technological training. Iranian support increased significantly after Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007, imported into Gaza through a sophisticated smuggling network primarily utilizing the underground tunnels along the Philadelphi Route. Both sides even overcame a crisis in their relations following the 2012 establishment of a unity government between Hamas and Fatah and Hamas' active support for the rebels in Syria against Bashar al-Assad.

Throughout the period, Iran did not cease to support Hamas's military wing, with Sinwar meeting with Khamenei in February 2012 (a few months after his release from prison in the Gilad Shalit deal) in Iran as part of a Palestinian delegation led by Ismail Haniyeh. He essentially served as the architect of the deepening of relations between Hamas and Tehran. After Iran's 2014 attempt to establish a rival organization to Hamas in Gaza (Al-Sabireen) failed, Tehran also realized the seniority and popularity of Hamas in the Palestinian arena. As Iranian official Hossein Sheikholeslam, who played a key role in the relations between Iran and its proxies, put it: "Hamas needs weapons, so it cannot separate from Iran, and Iran cannot separate from Hamas." Sinwar's election in 2017 in the internal elections to lead Hamas in Gaza helped accelerate the trend of strengthening relations with Tehran. As various senior officials in Tehran admitted after the October 7 attack, the Quds Force played a senior role in promoting and enhancing Hamas's underground network, and the head of Hamas's military wing, Mohammad Deif, even used to plan many Hamas operations together with Quds Force Commander Soleimani. Simultaneously, Tehran maintained regular contact with the deputy head of the military wing, Marwan Issa, who "used to

visit Tehran whenever possible.” Meanwhile, alongside the military efforts in Gaza, the IDF revealed in early January 2024 components for the production and development of precision missiles for Hamas under Iranian guidance in the Daraj Tuffah area in northern Gaza. This revelation underscores Iran’s role in smuggling advanced knowledge into Gaza through the training it provides to Hamas and Islamic Jihad experts in its territory. This was publicly declared by the Islamic Jihad representative in Tehran, Nasser Abu Sharif, in an interview with Iranian media (November 2018). The training received in Tehran by Muhammad Zawari (assassinated in 2016), one of the key founders of Hamas’s UAV array, also illustrates Tehran’s determination to export its knowledge to Hamas in Gaza as a complementary leg to the tunnel network, which encountered some difficulty after Sisi’s Egypt took action against it, albeit to a very limited extent.

D. How a Palestinian State Will Look - The Expected Takeover by Hamas

We assess that given Hamas’s immense popularity in Judea and Samaria, it is likely that a hypothetical Palestinian state would fall into Hamas’s hands like ripe fruit. Hamas’ popularity was well reflected in a June 2024 poll published by Dr. Khalil Shikaki, chairman of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research. The poll, conducted between May 26 and June 1 in Judea and Samaria and the Gaza Strip, found that 73% of Judea and Samaria Palestinians support Hamas’s decision to carry out the massacre of October 7, 71% prefer Hamas to rule Gaza after the war (compared to 11% who prefer a new Palestinian Authority with an elected president to rule Gaza), and 41% declare themselves Hamas supporters (compared to 17% who said they were Fatah supporters).

Therefore, Hamas is expected to take over the Palestinian state in Judea and Samaria without difficulty and without violence. Once it wins the elections, it will impose its authority by force to suppress any signs of resistance, and in this context, it is expected to use significant violence even against security mechanisms identified with Fatah, just as it did in Gaza in 2007.

In such a situation, Hamas will rely on Iran to advance their shared vision of destroying Israel. Iran will push the Palestinians to carry out more massacres following the model of October 7. As much can be gleaned from the statement on December 1, 2023 of IRGC Commander Hossein Salami that another such raid from the south, north, and east of Israel is enough to destroy Israel; and from

Khamenei's statement (June 3, 2024) that the region "urgently needed" such an attack; as well as his statement (October 10, 2024) that "we kiss the foreheads and hands of the young people who carried out the attack and those who planned it." It should be emphasized that even before Hamas carried out the massacre, there were signs in Iran of such an attack against Israel when Khamenei's office published in May 2020 the illustration titled "The Final Solution," showing militants from various militias supported by Iran (including Hezbollah and others) celebrating the liberation of the Al-Aqsa Mosque with their weapons in hand.

We assess that before Hamas organizes to carry out raids and massacres, the areas evacuated by Israel in Judea and Samaria will become forward bases for Hamas to terrorize Israelis living on the border and to launch missiles against strategic facilities in Israel, primarily the Dimona reactor, Ben Gurion Airport, and Air Force bases. In fact, as early as August 20, 2014, the Kayhan daily, close to Khamenei, determined that arming the West Bank would serve as a strategic step for Iran that "would completely change the balance of war" because "this area is in the heart of Palestine and very close to the occupied areas." He continued, "Therefore, if a missile is launched from the West Bank to Tel Aviv, Haifa, Ashdod, or even the Zionist regime's nuclear center in Dimona, there will be no need for missiles with a range of 80-100 km, but 15-20 km range missiles will suffice."

A Palestinian state led by Hamas will therefore make it easier for Khamenei to realize his vision of arming Judea and Samaria, which he has publicly called for since 2014. It should be noted that the statements of senior Iranian officials between August 2022 and January 2023 reflect Iran's eagerness to deepen its foothold in Judea and Samaria. Hezbollah, led by Nasrallah, would also be expected to expand its terrorist activities throughout Israel in the hypothetical Hamas-led Palestinian state in order to realize Nasrallah's ambition to destroy Israel and pray in the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

E. Policy Recommendations

The pressures from the Biden administration and the "dowry" offered in the form of normalization with Saudi Arabia do not justify taking the immense risk inherent in establishing a Palestinian state in the heart of the country. Hamas's significant popularity in Judea and Samaria and its extensive cooperation with Iran constitute a recipe for disaster, endangering Israel's very existence. Instead of being a

leverage for promoting the end of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, we assess that a prospective Palestinian state might serve as a significant springboard for advancing Hamas' and Iran's goal of destroying Israel.

Israel must wage an all-out war against Hamas and formulate a persistent and prolonged fight against the organization's infrastructure, its leaders, its pool of operatives, its economic apparatus, and even its Da'wah network (religiously inspired terror operative recruitment) in Gaza and in Judea and Samaria. As seen by its declarations since October 7th massacre, Hamas intends to repeat it, and there is no doubt that it has only been prevented from doing so because of the war Israel has so far waged against it.

Israel's advocacy networks must effectively convey to the Biden administration and the international community that a Palestinian state will serve as a significant reward for Palestinian terrorism, carried out under Iranian auspices. Israel must engage in detailed advocacy about the various units of the Quds Force and the IRGC Intelligence Organization that will operate in Judea and Samaria and assist Hamas in promoting the joint aspiration of Hamas and Iran to destroy Israel. Such advocacy should incorporate various examples of the different attempts of these Iranian units to advance terrorist activities against Israel, while also explaining the severe danger that a hypothetical Palestinian state that would pose as an instrument to tighten Iran's noose against Israel. Importantly, Israel must clarify to the Sunni bloc countries in the region that a Hamas-led state in Gaza and Judea and Samaria under Iranian influence would also be contrary to their security interests, as it would significantly strengthen the Iranian Shiite-led Axis of Resistance in the region and might harm their security as well.

Moreover, a Palestinian state in Gaza would render Israel's victories against Hamas so far as pointless. Hamas would be able to gradually rebuild its damaged capabilities and, with Iran's assistance, reestablish its sophisticated underground tunnel network and missile arsenal, and even upgrading them through the missile precision project. Hamas's underground tunnel network under the Philadelphi Route proves that Israel cannot let a foreign force become the guarantor of its security. Israel must maintain its hold on the Philadelphi Route, which serves as a primary economic-military lifeline for Hamas. Furthermore, Israel must pursue Hamas's financiers, including the middlemen who assist it circumvent sanctions, in order to make it financially difficult for Hamas to rebuild itself.

Israel cannot focus solely on pursuing Hamas and Islamic Jihad and ignore the source of their support: Iran. Limiting the confrontation to Iran's Palestinian proxies will not constitute a lasting national security strategy. Therefore, Israel's updated national security doctrine following the events of October 7th must include a response to the challenge Iran poses to Israel through its proxy network. Israel cannot tolerate the smuggled weapons that Iran delivers to its Palestinian proxies, so it must target the UAV and missile networks in Iran before they reach the Palestinian terror organizations. To this end, it must search for the formula that will facilitate operations against Iran, especially the Quds Force, utilizing all the power components it developed (kinetic, cyber, and influence operations), and efficiently exploiting Tehran's weaknesses - mainly its aversion to a direct war against Israel.

Additionally, given the increasing activity of the Axis of Resistance led by Iran against Israel from the Jordanian arena, Israel must accordingly improve its preparedness on this border. This includes completing the border fence and reinforcing the fence at weak points to make it difficult for Iran and its partners to smuggle in weapons or terrorist operatives. Furthermore, security coordination with Jordan must be enhanced according to the vital interest of both parties, in light of Iran's intensive pressures against the Jordanian royal family.

Published in I24, July 22, 2024.