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# The Iranian Gambit in Gaza

*Jonathan Schanzer*

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THE ISRAELI incursion into the Gaza Strip that began in late December has focused the world's attention on the conflict between the Jewish state and the armed cadres of the Palestinian terror faction Hamas. Yet the media coverage has, for the most part, failed to provide an accurate picture of the larger geopolitical confrontation in Gaza. The conflict is viewed as simply another battle in the ongoing war between Israel and the Palestinians. But in fact, the Israelis found it necessary to move against Hamas in part due to the machinations of an outside player that has long fomented discord and civil war within the Palestinian population for its own ends. That outside actor is Iran.

The predicate of Jerusalem's decision to move against Hamas targets was the decisive outcome of the 2007 Palestinian civil war that left the Islamist group in control of Gaza, one of the two territories under Palestinian management. The other territory, the West Bank, is under the shaky authority of Fatah, the faction directed by Yasser Arafat for 30 years before his death in 2004. Now under the leadership of Mahmoud Abbas, Fatah is the dominant force within the Palestinian Authority, the official governing body of the aspirational Palestin-

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JONATHAN SCHANZER, a former intelligence analyst at the U.S. Treasury, is deputy director of the Jewish Policy Center and the author of *Hamas vs. Fatah: The Struggle for Palestine*.

ian state. But Abbas has no power or authority in Gaza, which is now a Hamas fiefdom.

The Palestinians in Gaza are the chief victims of Hamas's decision in December to provoke more bloodshed by raining rockets on southern Israel following a loosely observed six-month ceasefire. The Israeli retaliation has reinforced Hamas's status as the primary voice of "resistance" to Israel (the same Israel that disengaged itself from Gaza in 2005 and is, therefore, no longer an occupying force requiring "resistance"). Accordingly, the Arab world and its sympathizers in the West have railed against the Israelis for their targeting of Hamas fighters and arms supplies. But the real fear of Abbas, and of the surrounding Arab countries, is actually the same as Israel's—that Hamas, and, by extension, its Iranian sponsors, will, in the end, be able to declare the Gaza action a victory for their cause. Such an outcome would be the flowering fruit of an Iranian intervention in Palestinian politics that dates back decades.

The internecine Palestinian struggle began in 1988, in the early days of the first *intifada*, when the upstart Hamas organization began brazenly to circulate *bayanat*, or leaflets, in direct competition with Arafat's Fatah for leadership of the struggle against Israel. The tension between Hamas and Fatah grew steadily, until it reached its zenith with the June 2007 Gaza coup, during which Hamas took control of buildings, roads, and the media.

Public discussion of the Hamas-Fatah struggle

for domination of the Palestinian cause has been flaccid. Academic analysis has been virtually nonexistent. It should therefore come as no surprise that Iran's significant role in exacerbating the conflict is all but unknown.

IN 1979, when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini succeeded in ousting the Shah from power and launched Iran's Islamic Revolution, Khomeini had Fatah leader Yasir Arafat to thank, at least in part. While Khomeini was still in exile in France, Arafat's Lebanon-based guerrilla network, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), aided his cause by providing military training and weapons. Indeed, the first members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which is now the elite military force under whose auspices the country's nuclear program is being managed, were recipients of Arafat's largesse. In a show of appreciation for Arafat's support, Khomeini closed the Israeli embassy in Tehran, handed the keys over to Arafat, and flew a Palestinian flag overhead. The building became an official PLO entity, complete with an ambassador.

The honeymoon did not last long. During the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, the Palestinians threw their support behind Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, and Khomeini rejected Arafat's attempts to mediate between the two countries. But it was Arafat's 1988 decision at the United Nations to call for peace talks with Israel that ultimately led to the total unraveling of the relationship. In 1989, Khomeini's successor, supreme leader Ali Khomeini, denounced Arafat as "a traitor and an idiot."

One of the factors contributing to Arafat's decision to embrace negotiations after decades of launching terrorist attacks against the Jewish state was the outbreak in 1987 of the first *intifada*, the violent Palestinian resistance effort in the territories held by the Jewish state. At the time, Arafat was based in Tunisia, to which he had been exiled after being ousted from his perch in Lebanon in 1982. As the uprising spread, he ordered Palestinians loyalists in the territories to take control of the broad spectrum of groups comprising the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising. But he found himself unable to manage the situation from a distance of 1,500 miles. Members of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood created a breakaway organization called Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya (Islamic Resistance Movement), whose acronym was Hamas. By February 1988, Hamas began dropping its leaflets challenging Arafat's authority. Thereafter, the two groups engaged in a propagan-

da war for the loyalty of West Bank and Gaza Palestinians. Each offered competing guidance, and sought to claim credit for inspiring and leading the uprising.

In an effort to retake the initiative during an emergency meeting of the Palestine National Council later in 1988, Arafat recognized General Assembly resolution 181, passed in 1947, which mandated the partition of Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab. He soon called for peace talks based on other UN resolutions.

The West rushed to begin a direct "peace process" between Israel and the Palestinians. Almost overnight, the PLO and Fatah were treated as though they constituted a makeshift government. At the same time, Hamas took the place of Fatah as the leading edge of the openly violent, openly rejectionist resistance, with its primary, indeed its only, stated aim being the destruction of Israel and Israel's replacement with a rigidly Islamic Palestine.

Hamas's intransigent approach was clearly more in synch with Iran. The mullahs quickly understood this and reached out to the new group. In December 1990, Hamas leaders paid an official visit to Iran, along with other rejectionist groups, for a conference in support of the ongoing *intifada*.

Once U.S.-sponsored peace negotiations enshrined Arafat as the West's only interlocutor in the Palestinian camp, Iran steadily increased its support for Hamas. As early as 1992, Arafat complained that Iran had provided some \$30 million to the rival group, in effect corroborating a report in the Lebanese magazine *Al-Shira* that Iran had been doling out some \$10 million a year to Hamas in funds from oil sales.

After Arafat became a party to the 1993 Oslo accords, signed on the White House lawn with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, his relations with Iran worsened further. In December 1994, hundreds of Iranian demonstrators occupied the PLO embassy in Tehran, destroying property and condemning Arafat as the "biggest collaborator with Israel and the United States." The mullahs were careful to distance themselves from the incident. But around the same time, Iran began openly to offer support to PLO members still in exile in Tunisia, from which Arafat had returned in glory to the West Bank, if they would maintain their opposition to Arafat. A 1995 report in the *Independent*, a British newspaper, claimed Iran had backed an attempt to assassinate Arafat. Other hazy reports from the region said Iran was training Hamas members in redoubts in Sudan, Lebanon, and elsewhere.

The Clinton administration recognized the threat that Iran posed to the peace process through its support for Hamas and other terrorist groups, including Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hizballah. International financial aid, weapons, and military training were lavished upon the PA in an attempt to strengthen it, and Iran came under increased sanctions. Indeed, the 1995 U.S. trade embargo on Iran and the 1996 Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) were designed in part to weaken Iranian support for Arafat's enemies.

In an effort to humiliate Arafat and disrupt the Oslo process, Hamas had inaugurated a wave of suicide bombings inside Israel in 1994—a form of terrorism perfected by the Iranian-backed Hizballah, which had used car bombs as an effective terror weapon in Lebanon in the 1980s. There is evidence that Hamas adopted the technique as a result of Hizballah training. Mohammed Hafez of the United States Institute of Peace says that when Israel deported 415 Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad activists to Lebanon in 1992, these Palestinian exiles received support and training from Hizballah. In the words of Michael Horowitz, a scholar at the University of Pennsylvania, “Hizballah was the hub from which suicide tactics spread to the Palestinians and other groups.”

Suicide bombing quickly became Hamas's preferred tactic of terrorizing Israel. Moreover, every time Hamas carried out an attack on Israeli soil, it sent a signal that the Fatah-run Palestinian Authority at best did not speak for all Palestinians, and at worst had no ability to exert control over its own people. Prompted and armed by Washington and Jerusalem, the PA cracked down on Hamas and PIJ, carrying out mass arrests of their activists (though many would quickly be released).

The two factions continued to fight for the hearts and minds of the West Bank and Gaza Palestinians. Support for the PA dwindled rapidly on the streets of the West Bank and Gaza during the late 1990's, as Palestinians grew frustrated with the fact that billions of dollars in international aid were disappearing into the pockets of Arafat and his cronies. All the while, Hamas improved its standing by maintaining its steadfast opposition to the Oslo peace process, and by waging its savage campaign of violence against the Jewish state. More and more Palestinians came to believe that, in contrast to Fatah, Hamas was fighting for the Palestinian cause. That it was doing so with Iranian money did not appear to be a concern to the majority of Palestinians.

IN THE LATE summer of 2000, the Camp David II talks, designed to bridge the gap on several thorny outstanding issues dividing the Palestinians and Israelis, broke down when Arafat rejected a dramatically generous Israeli land-for-peace offer that went far beyond any previous concessions. Rather than continuing to negotiate, Arafat elected to launch the war against Israel that he called the “al-Aqsa *intifada*.” The fact that he chose violence over continued negotiations is likely a reflection of the fact that by this point, the Hamas approach to the conflict had begun resonating far more powerfully among Palestinians. By his own admission, Arafat—a secular Marxist-Leninist by training and inclination—finally surrendered to the Islamist agenda. As he said to Iranian President Mohammed Khatami: “We chose the way that . . . Muslims have entrusted to us.” He named his violent assault on Israel after the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, Islam's third holiest site, and exhorted Hamas and Islamic Jihad to join forces with Fatah's manifold paramilitary groups. Those groups included the newly formed al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades—an Islamist subsidiary of Fatah that had clearly been modeled on Hamas.

Iran supported Arafat's decision. According to U.S. intelligence, Iran provided funding to the Brigades, “mostly through Hizballah.” Zakariya Zubeidi, one of the Brigades' West Bank leaders, confirmed the connection:

Without the help of our brothers in Hizballah, we could not have continued our struggle. They give us money and weapons. We coordinate our military operations.

Unambiguous proof of Iran's new alliance with Arafat came in early 2002, when Israel captured the *Karime A*, a Hizballah ship in the Red Sea bearing 50 tons of Iranian-supplied weapons on its way to Gaza. Israeli sources suggested that the shipment was the work of Imad Mughniyeh, Hizballah's operations chief, who coordinated closely with the Iranians.

Though Iranian funding for Arafat's paramilitary operations appeared to indicate an overall thaw in ties between Fatah and Iran, Fatah continued to lose ground to Hamas in the court of Palestinian public opinion. Amidst the gruesome cycle of Palestinian terrorist attacks and Israeli reprisals, Hamas found that its attacks against Israel had the ancillary benefit of weakening Arafat. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon punished the Palestinian Authority for nearly every Palestinian attack on Israel, even when Arafat's men were not responsible for the specific assault. The more Hamas bloodied Israel, the harder the Israelis pounded the Palestinian Authority.

Within months, Arafat found himself trapped in his Ramallah presidential compound surrounded by Israeli tanks while the rest of his Palestinian Authority infrastructure was reduced to rubble.

With the PA in shambles, Arafat's Fatah could no longer provide what few government services it had dribbled out to the disgusted masses in Gaza and the West Bank. Hamas's *dawa*, or outreach network, picked up the slack by providing food, education, and other vital services. At the same time, Hamas began to encroach on territory once unquestionably controlled by the Palestinian Authority. Tribes, families, and clans loyal to Hamas fought openly with those loyal to Fatah. As the mainstream media filed story after tired story about Israeli-Palestinian violence, internecine Palestinian skirmishes grew increasingly common and went mostly unnoticed.

When Arafat died in November 2004, he left a yawning vacuum. The territories were in disarray. None of the Fatah leaders—and especially Abbas, the heir apparent—seemed to know how to assert leadership. Hamas itself was also in flux. The Israelis had launched a campaign of targeted assassination that forced many of the group's leaders underground. Hamas's political office, based in Syria, assumed increased prominence, while the group's infrastructure in the West Bank and Gaza shrank. Hamas increasingly appeared to be run from abroad, and the close relationship between Iran and Syria suggested that Hamas had become entirely dependent on Iran for its succor.

At around this time, Saudi Arabian funding for Hamas dried up. A rash of domestic terror incidents inside the kingdom had forced the ruling family to reconsider its monetary support for Islamist terrorist infrastructure. This was painful for the Islamist group. While the exact figures are difficult, if not impossible, to find, Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimated that in 2003 Hamas received \$12 million annually from Saudi Arabia—about one quarter of its total annual budget.

The Saudi cutoff provided Iran with an opportunity to increase its hold. Iranian funding increased over the next two years while Hamas continued to fill the void left by Arafat and the Palestinian Authority. According to an article on the website of *al-Jazeera*, "Iran is known to have given \$120 million to Hamas" over the past three years.

After Israel completed its disengagement from Gaza in the summer of 2005, local elections were held in January 2006, and Hamas stunned Fatah by scoring a landslide victory. In response, the United States imposed sanctions to ensure that no Western aid dollars for Palestinians would be run

through Hamas's hands. As the West, following the American lead, threw its support behind Fatah, a Hamas spokesman confirmed that Iran "was prepared to cover" the group's "entire deficit." During a 2006 visit to Tehran by Hamas leader Ismael Haniyeh, Iran pledged \$250 million in aid to compensate for the Western boycott.

The standoff between Hamas and Fatah continued through June 2007, when Hamas launched the brutal military offensive that toppled Fatah in Gaza. Within weeks, Fatah intelligence sources were openly accusing Iran of funding the coup and training the fighters. "It was," according to Tawfiq Tirawi, "a joint program with Iran."

WHILE THE stated goal put forward by Israel's leaders for their incursion into Gaza in the first week of 2009 was merely to make it more difficult for Hamas to fire missiles at Israel, the fate of the Palestinian Authority was clearly on their minds as well. So long as Hamas rules Gaza and can use it as a base for anti-Israel violence, it will have an effective veto over any peace initiative. The tacit support the Israeli offensive received from Egypt, which views Hamas and Iran as a threat to regional stability, illustrates as well how the internecine Palestinian conflict has mushroomed into an international crisis.

Hamas's reckless decision to risk a new confrontation with Israel cannot be understood without taking the full measure of Iran's role in nurturing, training, sustaining, financing, and perhaps directing the group's actions. As the Obama administration begins its tenure with the intention of bringing new energy and determination to Middle East diplomacy, it would be folly for the new President and his team to assume that restraining Israel from measures of self-defense like the recent incursion into Gaza will aid their efforts.

Until there is some resolution of the conflict within the Palestinian body politic, there will be nothing to discuss, primarily because there is and will be no legitimate interlocutor on the Palestinian side. And if Hamas, with the backing of Iran, finally emerges victorious in its twenty-year effort to be the defining force of Palestinian nationalism, it will have no interest in serving as that interlocutor, no matter what Obama and the West might do or say or promise. If the past two decades are any indication, a Hamas-led Palestinian Authority will, instead, openly act as the vanguard for Iran's dogged determination to see Israel (in the phrase of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) "wiped off the face of the earth."