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Don't Let Iran's Regime Win the Battle for Hearts and Minds in Gaza

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Brief Analysis

The United States should address Iranian soft-power expansion in Gaza when approaching Israeli-Palestinian issues.

An Israel-Hamas ceasefire is in place, and the military phase of this conflict appears to be at an end, but the battle for hearts and minds in Gaza continues. While many international leaders were calling for de-escalation during the conflict, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, was urging Hamas to intensify the conflict. “The Zionists only understand language of force, so the Palestinians must increase their power & resistance to force the criminals to surrender & stop their crimes,” **declared** Khamenei on May 11, as Hamas unleashed a new wave of rockets into Israel, a significant proportion of them Iranian-made.

Khamenei's statements fit squarely into the regime's self-styled narrative as defender of the Palestinian cause. The regime in Tehran has spent billions of dollars **nurturing militancy** across the Middle East in pursuit of **its ideological goal** of eradicating what it call the “cancerous tumour” of Israel from the map.“

However, the Islamic Republic also sees destruction in Gaza as another entry point for influence. Tehran—which would receive billions of dollars in sanctions relief should the United States re-enter the 2015 nuclear agreement—has been eyeing post-war aid to Gaza as a way of expanding its soft-power influence, radicalizing and recruiting local Palestinians for its ideological battle against Israel.

Such a strategy is a tried-and-tested method for Iran; exploiting post-war devastation to build local support has long been a key element of the Islamic Republic's strategy for expanding its power and spreading its Islamist ideology in the region. While policymakers and analysts often approach the threat of Iranian-backed militancy by focusing

almost exclusively at the hard-power militia assets of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—the clerical regime’s ideological army, it is important to emphasize that the formal groups that make up [Iran’s militia network](#) are only the tip of the iceberg. The IRGC has also created a soft-power infrastructure across the Middle East and beyond with the full support of Iran’s [soft-power agencies](#). The goal of this infrastructure is the [recruitment and radicalization](#) of local populations, as in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

The template for this tactic is the IRGC's aid in southern Lebanon following Hezbollah’s 33-day War with Israel in 2006, an operation the IRGC hopes to replicate in Gaza today. Conventional analyses of that war often focus on the brief conflict itself, yet it was its aftermath which proved most valuable to Khamenei and his regime. Led by Hassan Shateri, the IRGC Quds Force commander who was subsequently killed in the Syrian Conflict, the Guard entered the post-war scene under the guise of the “Iranian Committee for the Reconstruction of Lebanon.” Less than two weeks after the end of the war, the Guard was on the ground and, in its own words, had resolved the electricity problems of [73 villages](#) in southern Lebanon.

By 2009—during the peak of U.S. and UN sanctions against Tehran—Iran had implemented nearly [400 development projects](#) in southern Lebanon, building schools, religious centers, sports complexes and hospitals, all promoting Tehran’s extreme Shia Islamist ideology. Tehran spent [\\$100 million](#) rebuilding southern Lebanon’s road infrastructure alone. In contrast, 31 years after the Iran-Iraq War, infrastructure in much of Iran’s own border provinces, such as Khuzestan, remains devastated, underlining the priority the clerical regime gives to spreading its ideology over the welfare of the Iranian people.

These reconstruction and aid efforts were accompanied by ideological-propaganda operations designed to recruit and indoctrinate local populations for Hezbollah. Reflecting on Hassan Shateri’s strategy in southern Lebanon, which [aimed](#) to “spread and expand the Islamic Revolution”, IRGC officials openly [recall](#) how Shateri would “build football schools for children and under the pretext of football schools mobilized soldiers for the Islamic Revolution.”

This is the model Tehran hopes to export to the Palestinian Territories, with a particular focus on Gaza. Islamist extremists of all stripes have long exploited the Palestinian cause in an attempt to bolster support for own ideologies, and the Islamic Republic is no exception. Just days after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, [Khomeini’s Islamists](#) went out of their way to ensure Yasser Arafat, as leader of the then-militant Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), would be the first foreign leader to visit Tehran.

The success of the soft power model in Lebanon resulted in the IRGC establishing the “[Iranian Committee for the Reconstruction of Gaza](#)” following the Gaza War in 2008-2009. After the destruction caused by that 22-day conflict, the committee [vowed](#) to build “1000 housing units, 10 schools, 5 mosques” and reconstruct and equip “500 commercial units, a hospital and Gaza’s university campus.”

In contrast to Lebanon, where Tehran could access the territory to bring personnel and materials in through Syria, entry into Gaza is strictly controlled by Israel. These restrictions mean that in the end the IRGC has to date relied simply on cash handouts by way of delivering support to the Palestinians and garnering support for its cause. To achieve this, they have [targeted](#) the wounded and the so-called “families of martyrs”—a direct application of IRGC tactics seen elsewhere, most successfully within Iran itself.

Hamas would thus become Tehran’s main vehicle for such soft-power operations. Despite the numerous mechanisms put in place by Israel to prevent resources reaching the hands of Hamas, the IRGC was able to penetrate this system. This includes providing Hamas officials with suitcases full of millions of dollars in cash, as had been done in 2006 following a [Hamas delegation](#) visit to Tehran.

[But while Hamas receives arms, funding, and training from the Islamic Republic, it is not an Iranian proxy](#); Tehran does not exert command and control over its actions. As a Sunni Islamist organization, Hamas does not subscribe to

the Islamic Republic's Shia Islamist ideology, nor has it embraced Ayatollah Khamenei as its supreme authority in the manner of Hezbollah. Most notably, Hamas rejected Khamenei's call to defend Bashar al-Assad's regime in 2012—a move that resulted in Tehran cutting all of its **£15 million** a month funding to the group.

Since **2017**, however, both sides have sought to repair relations based on their shared strategic goal of eradicating Israel and mutual opposition towards the recent trend of normalized relations between several Arab states and Israel. The destruction in Gaza provides Khamenei and the IRGC with an opportunity to further build its influence and potentially win hearts and minds of local Gazans, using aid in the form of cash handouts via Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad to recruit and indoctrinate young men for its official policy of “wiping Israel from the map.”

Khamenei also hopes such activities and Tehran's support for the fight against Israel will make his regime more popular across the wider Muslim world, just as after the 2006 Lebanon war. Tehran's backing of Hezbollah against Israel at that time generated a surge in support for the Islamic Republic across the Muslim world, with polls in Sunni Arab nations finding Iranian President **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** had become hugely popular. While Iran's regime would soon lose all of this soft-power capital among Sunni communities following the unprecedented level of sectarianism that typified its support for Assad during the Syrian civil war, it hopes to use the latest Israel-Hamas conflict to shift the narrative back in its favor.

To achieve this, the clerical regime aims to once again transform support for the Palestinian cause into an Islamic duty that is linked to support for Tehran as Palestinians' one true defender. In doing so, it seeks to both harness support from Muslim populations worldwide and stigmatize the normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel, **framing** the historic peace agreements as a “betrayal of the Islamic ummah and the Palestinian cause.” This could not be more important for Khamenei, who is hungry to find ways to legitimize his self-proclaimed role as the leader of Islam and disrupt any prospect of peace between the Jewish state and the Muslim world. Should Tehran succeed, we can expect further regional tension and violence in the not-too-distant future.

Given this framing, the United States and Western European countries have several options for mitigating these efforts. First and foremost, the United States should carefully consider whether now is the right time to give the Islamic Republic billions in **sanctions relief** as part of its re-entry to the **2015 nuclear deal**. It is now clear that the relief Iran received as part of the deal not only failed to temper Tehran's destabilization of the region but also helped fuel a surge in IRGC militancy and support for armed militias. The United States currently has leverage over Tehran and it should use that leverage to gain more concessions and scale back Iranian-backed militancy.

Of course, Israel will not allow a heavy Iranian presence in Gaza and has put in the most stringent security checks to prevent this. But we know Iranian money still makes its way through these mechanisms and that soft-power influence is much harder to prevent than direct involvement. Even still, in recent weeks Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad have made it clear that their flow of missiles and capabilities derive from Tehran. While security approaches will certainly be able to limit these hard-power capabilities, in isolation, they cannot stop the ideas driving violence – something Khamenei's regime is fully aware of. Against this backdrop, there is little doubt that the proceeds from sanctions relief would encourage and enable the IRGC to double down on its post-war plans in Gaza.

The latest flare-up between Israel and Hamas is a reminder that the United States and the European powers cannot formulate policy for Iran without considering the broader implications for conflicts in the region. Rather, the United States needs to develop an overarching strategy towards the Middle East that acknowledges and addresses the interconnected nature of conflict and instability in the region. Addressing each issue in isolation is not only untenable, but it risks causing longer-term escalation and instability.

This also applies to regional nations. Khamenei's clear and open commitment to exploiting the Palestinian cause

should set off alarm bells for Arab states. Hesitancy and reluctance towards the Palestinian issue plays into Tehran's hands. For the first time—due to the Abraham Accords—Arab states are in a strong position to re-assert their role in protecting Palestinian interests, as a friend of both Israel and the Palestinians. Doing so would serve normalization and help to counter the soft and the hard power capabilities of the regime in Iran—one of the biggest challenges to stability in the Middle East. Preventing future conflict means fighting for hearts and minds now. ❖



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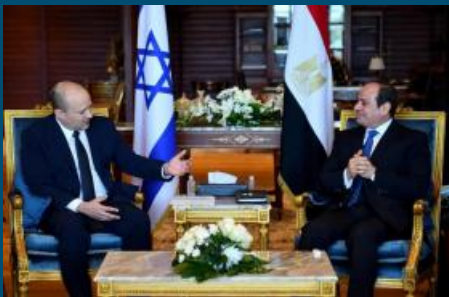


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