

How Afghanistan Influences Hamas, PIJ, and Iran in their Approach to Israel

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Brief Analysis

As the Taliban takeover boosts Iranian proxies' morale, Israel and the United States should develop a coordinated strategy against these groups to enhance Israeli security and restore confidence in American commitments to regional partners.

Although it was predictable, the Taliban's rapid takeover of Afghanistan nonetheless shocked the West. This development and its outcomes are liable to tar the United States with the brush of defeat and paint it as a failure in its role as leader of the free world and the West. Moreover, the United States has long been viewed as the most bitter foe of fundamentalist Islamist movements and the most significant obstacle to the latter realizing its visions. Therefore, necessary and justified as it may have been, the disturbing images of the U.S. withdrawal—though no withdrawal ever looks good—are proving a tailwind in jihadists' sails.

The fact that the Taliban regime can reestablish itself in Afghanistan, knowing with a high degree of certainty that the world will stand by—condemning and protesting but not intervening—will fuel jihadists throughout the world, particularly in the Middle East. And in this crowded neighborhood, the Taliban has many allies and fans, including the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas.

Ismail Haniyeh, the leader of Hamas, had a well-covered public meeting with Taliban leaders in Qatar. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad has historic ties to the Taliban: Abdullah Azzam, one of the Islamic Jihad's prominent leaders, even joined the Taliban and helped it develop its military capabilities.

The leaderships of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad both hurried to issue a statement of support and

congratulate the Taliban on its brilliant victory. And when the leader of the Taliban expressed his gratitude to the well-wishers, he made a point of tying the success in Afghanistan to the Palestinian effort to eradicate Israel and establish a Palestinian state from the river to the sea.

Even if Hamas leaders understand how its strength matches up to Israel, and recognizes the massive responsibility they bear for the people in the Gaza Strip—including the importance of advancing rebuilding efforts and improving the humanitarian situation there—what Hamas sees as the Taliban’s tenacity and sacrifice resulting in a glorious victory over the United States may well destabilize Hamas’s sense of responsibility and care, and loosen their reins of restraint.

Even if Hamas does not immediately throw all caution to the wind, one may assume that the sense of self-confidence and euphoria, and certainly the emergence of other jihadist organizations in the sphere, will affect Hamas’ conduct—and could contribute to escalation.

In addition, this success has likely bolstered the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)—generally a partner to Hamas—but also an Iranian proxy, motivated by an even more extreme, militant philosophy than Hamas’ own. From time to time, PIJ challenges Hamas, operating independently and against Hamas interests by escalating military moves against Israel.

Iranian Coordination and the Israeli Response

There is also a broader regional effect, due to coordinating attacks against Israel. During Operation Guardian of the Walls, Israel faced attacks from four different fronts: the Gaza Strip, Southern Lebanon, Southern Syria, and Western Iraq. The four fronts, as well as the fifth operated by the Houthis in Yemen, should be seen as a single entity or system—operated by the same organizing principle rationale and led by Iranian proxies.

While Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad differ when it comes to their characteristics as Iranian proxies—the Islamic Jihad is an obvious Iranian proxy whereas Hamas acts like a more independent entity and, unlike the Islamic Jihad, is not under Iran’s absolute rule—this by no means changes the Iranian-led essence of the regional system.

But both Ismail Haniyeh, the leader of Hamas, and Ziyad al-Nakhalah, the leader of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, along with Naim Qassem, the deputy secretary-general of Hezbollah, sat in the first row of dignitaries at the swearing-in of Iran’s new president Ibrahim Raisi. This highly symbolic positioning demonstrates that Iran views these proxies, whether Shia or Sunni, as participants in its ‘axis of resistance’.

For years, Iran has systematically built these five fronts as a core component of its effort to deter and exhaust Israeli defenses. Iran can control the height of the flames by issuing instructions to its proxies, and they get to determine how to operate these fronts against Israel. And despite the long-standing enmity between Iran and the Taliban, the two drew on the twenty years of U.S. presence in Afghanistan to rebuild their relationship and establish a functional coexistence.

As far as Iran is concerned, the Abraham Accords were motivated by the desire to form an anti-Iranian coalition of regional allies led by the United States. Especially given this interpretation, Iran is keen on driving a wedge between Israel and Iran’s neighbors in the Gulf—the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. Israel and the Gulf nations are focused on Iran’s nuclear program and the threat posed to their territories by Iran’s proxies. Iran also is worried about an increased Israeli intelligence and operational presence in the Gulf.

But both Israel and the Gulf nations feel that the deterrence inherent in cooperation with the United States has taken a hit with the new administration in Washington and that the current administration’s desire is to return to the nuclear agreement with Iran and reduce its own footprint in the Middle East: first in Afghanistan, then likely in Iraq and Syria.

The regional system Iran has built is notable for its ideological hatred of the United States, Israel, and everything the West represents, as well as fervent religious belief and dedication to jihad as a method of action. The aim of the system is to undermine America's regional hegemony and influence, weaken and topple the region's Sunni governments, and destroy the State of Israel, followed by an Islamization of the region. This system prefers to leave the resolution of the historic conflict between Shia and Sunni until a later point in order to facilitate these changes.

When it comes to jihad, the Taliban's supposedly brilliant achievement in its rapid takeover of Afghanistan appears to be a clear proof of the potency of *sumud*—steadfastness—and for the group's righteous cause. The reestablishment of the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan is more like a fountainhead of hope than a simple morale boost for the jihadist vision of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other similar groups in the region.

Therefore, it would be prudent to assume that the resultant elation will only enhance the euphoria, similar to that which Hamas enjoyed during and after Operation Guardian of the Walls. As such, it will be no surprise if jihadist groups seek to provoke Israel and the Arab powers. For example, it is not inconceivable that the Islamic State's proxy in the Sinai Peninsula might increase both the number and scope of attacks on the Egyptian army stationed there, and perhaps also from the Sinai Peninsula, against Israel.

In the face of this shift, Israel must change its strategic approach to the regional system currently being formed and solidified. Now more than ever, Israel must develop a strategy to undermine the organizing principle of the regional system Iran heads, dismantle the ties connecting the players, and damage its multiple infrastructures. To that end, Israel must focus on coordinating its efforts against these groups, rather than responding piecemeal to the actions against it by one entity or another. The guiding principle must be that all system components and players bear joint responsibility.

Had such a rationale been in place during Operation Guardian of the Walls against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Israel would have responded to all involved parties. When Shia militia in Western Iraq chose to fire an armed UAV at Israel, and Palestinian organizations under the protection of Hezbollah aimed rockets at Israel from Lebanon, and Hezbollah declared its commitment to and ran a joint ops room with Hamas, threatening to retaliate against Israel in case of another conflict with Hamas, the latter, as part of a coordinated system, would have lost their immunity as part of a coordinated system.

Israel should likewise make every effort to establish a counter-system consisting of pragmatic Arab nations while enlisting the active support of the United States. The psychological sting of America's weakness and its reversal in its commitment to its allies, as reflected by the decision to pull its forces out of Afghanistan, may actually function as an incentive to the U.S. administration. In countering Iranian proxy actions, there is an opportunity to reverse the current narrative and preserve the status and influence of the United States in the region. Practical backing of a regional system constructed to effectively confront the Iranian regional system would act to suppress the inspiration the Taliban's success has inspired in the system's components.

Israel should work to enlist the Biden administration to support growing the Abraham Accords into a platform for regional cooperation against Iran. This is especially the case against the background of the Arab nations' worry that the United States might abandon the region, and the United States' own retreat from direct involvement. Arab nations see Israel as having particularly strong influence in Washington. A persuasive argument to the administration to support a stronger regional partnership would contribute to regional stability, and help shape a countervailing power against the proxies seeking to perpetuate conflicts. Such an arrangement would also provide the United States with a sphere of flexibility in which it can simultaneously confront both regional and global problems likely to be fueled by the Taliban's victory. ❖

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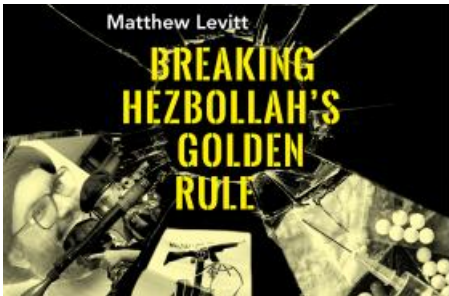
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