

# Hamas and Iran Are Trying to Ignite Israel's Eastern Fronts

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Jun 20, 2024

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Brief Analysis

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**Jordan and Israel can take assertive action to alleviate the risk, from additional border security measures to economic steps such as lifting the ban on West Bank workers and establishing a humanitarian corridor in south Syria.**

**W**hile the world's attention is focused on Israel's military operations against Hamas to the south and Hezbollah to the north, the leaders of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Qods Force are bent on opening new fronts to encircle Israel with a "ring of fire" and gain the upper hand in what they see as a war of attrition. In particular, they seek to light up Israel's eastern frontiers. According to reliable sources in Damascus, Russia has quietly but firmly told Tehran not to drag Syria into the current conflict; therefore, the West Bank and Jordan have become Iran's prime targets.

## Escalation and Smuggling via Jordan

In the immediate aftermath of the October 7 attack on Israel, Hamas leaders and Qods Force commanders alike were frustrated by the absence of large-scale sympathy attacks inside the West Bank or across Israel's long border with Jordan. Indeed, one of Hamas's unfulfilled objectives in the war's opening days was for some of its elite Nukhba units to drive a convoy of pickup trucks and motorcycles into the West Bank city of Hebron, a traditional Hamas stronghold located just forty kilometers from Gaza.

Realizing that such threats could still materialize, Amman bolstered its army deployments along the Jordan River with an additional 1,000 troops. Today, it has more soldiers on the border than the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

In the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority security forces made dozens of arrests outside the territory's eighteen refugee camps in the weeks after the war broke out, focusing on Hamas cells. At one point, President Mahmoud Abbas briefly sent 1,500 troops to Jenin following an IDF raid, but he has refrained from similar moves in other cities. In addition, the 30,000 members of Fatah's unofficial Tanzim armed "wing" have formed "Defense Committees," though they have largely stayed on the sidelines.

To break the relative calm on these fronts, Iran stepped up its orchestrated campaign to smuggle large quantities of rocket launchers, rocket-propelled grenades, sophisticated explosive charges, and other weapons from Syria to Jordan, with many of them intended for transfer to the West Bank. These deliveries have often been bundled with drugs—mainly Captagon pills that are produced in parts of Lebanon and Damascus and transported by traffickers in league with the Syrian Army’s 4th Armored Division, led by President Bashar al-Assad’s brother Mahan. Around 20-30 million of these pills are smuggled out annually, worth an estimated \$5-7 billion once they are sold in Jordan, the Gulf states, and beyond.

More specifically, local criminal groups and Iran’s proxy militias in southern Syria pick the drugs up from Hezbollah-operated labs in Lebanon’s Beqa Valley or production sites outside Damascus and move them to storage depots—some located on the outskirts of Syria’s Druze-dominated Suwayda province, others in the desert west of the U.S. military base at al-Tanf. Well-armed bands with as many as 400-500 men then attempt to bring their deliveries across the border with Jordan, frequently resulting in fierce, hours-long battles with the kingdom’s army forces. Amman has even been spurred to take the unprecedented step of launching occasional airstrikes inside Syria. In other cases, smugglers use drones and adapted mortars to propel drugs into Jordan by air.

As for arms transfers, it is difficult to assess their exact amount and composition, but various evidence indicates a steady flow from Syria into Jordan and on to the West Bank. Indeed, Iran’s local partners have intensified their clandestine effort to establish armed cells in Jordan’s Ghor Valley and certain refugee camps. Young members of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood—the historical parent movement of Hamas—are being encouraged to set up such cells, echoing the latter group’s repeated calls exhorting Jordanians to take to the streets in solidarity with the war against Israel.

Meanwhile, Iran-backed Shia militias in Iraq have taken positions along sections of the Jordan-Syria border, launched drones toward Israeli targets [such as Haifa port \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-groups-and-yemens-houthis-claim-more-joint-attacks-israel\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-groups-and-yemens-houthis-claim-more-joint-attacks-israel), and interrupted the movement of fuel trucks to Jordan via the Karama crossing point near Trebil. They have also repeatedly threatened to storm the border in order to “reach the frontline with Israel.”

## Iran’s “Katiba” Strategy in the West Bank

To escalate violence in the West Bank, Qods Force Units 840 and 3900 have established a “joint operations room” with Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. One of their main goals is to finance more terrorist activities in the territory by illegally transferring funds there, sometimes using private currency exchange offices. Many of the operatives involved in these efforts are based in Turkey, where the government has seemingly turned a blind eye to such financing.

In January, the architect of this funding effort—Hamas official Saleh al-Aroui—was killed by [an Israeli strike \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hamas-leader-dies-beirut\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hamas-leader-dies-beirut) in Dahiya, Hezbollah’s “capital” in the southern suburbs of Beirut. Yet his replacement, Zaher Jabarin, is pursuing the same strategy based on Iran’s advice. Namely, Hamas has abandoned any plans to reestablish an armed hierarchical underground in the West Bank for now, realizing that Israeli security agencies have repeatedly dismantled this type of structured outfit. Instead, it is simply flooding the territory with weapons and money. These resources are made available to anyone willing to mount attacks, without requiring them to swear allegiance to Hamas or any other faction.

This flexible policy has encouraged the formation of more than a dozen politically unaffiliated *katibas* (battalions), some in refugee camps in the northern West Bank, others in rural villages or the slums of bigger towns. The trend began with the now-defunct “Lion’s Den” group in Nablus; today, around 1,000 armed youths are estimated to have joined such battalions. According to Israeli intelligence sources, these elements often receive cooperation from

officers of the PA security forces who are critical of President Abbas's policies. Their typical approach is to improvise a "war room" in their locality, set up local surveillance cameras and radio communications, plant explosives along the roads leading into their community, and prepare combat positions. Although some coordination exists between neighboring battalions, there is no overall command. From time to time, squads will emerge from these areas to shoot at Jewish settlements, lay ambushes on major arteries, plant booby-trapped cars, attempt to launch improvised rockets and quadcopters, or even initiate suicide bombings on two occasions. They also routinely offer to convert airsoft guns—which residents can easily purchase online—into M-16-style rifles capable of firing lethal ammunition.

As a result of such activities, Palestinian violence in the West Bank has reached its highest level since 2002, when the IDF responded to a similar wave by launching Operation Defensive Shield. Between October 7 and this May, around 280 terrorist incidents were recorded; this year alone, 187 Palestinians have been killed in the territory, along with 13 Israelis.

Immediately after October 7, Israel decided to begin shaping the nascent battlefield in the West Bank rather than concentrating on stabilization. As part of this proactive, preemptive approach, the IDF's seven territorial brigades have conducted over 500 raids involving fierce, sometimes multiday exchanges of fire. A handful of battles even witnessed Israel's first use of combat aircraft in the West Bank since 1967. The main goal of these operations was to capture top figures on Israel's wanted list (including *katiba* leaders) while dismantling the military infrastructure that had been built up in refugee camps and other hotspots. For key camps such as Jenin and Nur Shams near Tulkarem, the IDF had to carry out as many as fifteen sequential operations against the same *katiba*. In all, roughly 2,000 Palestinians were arrested on charges of terrorist activity.

## Policy Implications

**T**he threat of flare-ups in Jordan and the West Bank calls for decisive steps to foil Hamas and Iran's plans to activate Israel's eastern fronts. Several measures should be urgently considered:

- **Keep improving the Jordanian army's ability to prevent weapons smuggling from Syria.** The army's current border deployment needs to be boosted in both numbers and technological capabilities. U.S. attack helicopters and intelligence support would be especially welcome. The amount of weapons crossing the border poses a serious threat to Jordan's domestic stability and could roil the longstanding calm it has enjoyed along the frontier with Israel as well.
- **Revisit the Syrian Druze request for a humanitarian corridor.** Most of the key smuggling routes into Jordan pass through Syria's Suwayda province, spurring intermittent clashes between armed smuggling bands and local Druze groups. Moreover, many Druze have been engaged in months-long protests and boycotts against the Assad regime, drawing heavy pressure from Damascus (e.g., fuel restrictions). One way to alleviate both problems is by opening a three-kilometer humanitarian corridor from the Jordanian border to the southernmost Druze village of al-Anat, from which supplies could then move to other Druze centers located around fifty kilometers further north. This would help the Druze relieve the regime's economic pressure while improving their ability to act against traffickers.
- **Recruit and train more Palestinian forces.** The United States could encourage the PA security forces to implement existing proposals for adding 10,000 more troops and training them in Jordan or other locations. In addition to replacing personnel who are past or near retirement, this would strengthen the PA's ability to deal with Hamas in the West Bank.
- **Let West Bank workers back into Israel.** The IDF and other authorities believe that these workers—who numbered more than 100,000 before they were banned in October—can gradually resume their jobs in Israel without creating undue security risks. A new technology allows for monitoring them to ensure they do not attempt to stay in Israel overnight. This would dramatically ease the West Bank's growing economic crisis

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/west-bank-economics-are-key-stabilizing-palestinian-authority-or-forcing-its>), but [far-right members \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/gantz-out-can-netanyahu-resist-far-rights-pull\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/gantz-out-can-netanyahu-resist-far-rights-pull) of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s government still oppose lifting the ban.

- **Take necessary legal measures against violent settlers.** Israeli police in the West Bank have generally refrained from taking serious legal action against the minority of Jewish settlers who commit violent acts against neighboring Palestinian communities. The IDF estimates that around 400 such crimes have occurred during the Gaza war, and the fact that most go unpunished only exacerbates tensions in the territory. Netanyahu’s government should be urged to stop restricting police from actively addressing this problem.

All of these measures are even more crucial at a time when Hamas spokesmen such as Ghazi Hamad and various IRGC commanders and other Iranian figures are publicly discussing the prospect of more October 7-style attacks against Israeli communities, this time from the Jordanian and West Bank frontiers.

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