

Replacing Hamas: Iran's New Proxy Militia in Gaza

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Articles & Testimony

With millions of dollars in Iranian funding, a marginal PIJ splinter faction is aiming to establish a powerful, Hezbollah-style proxy in Gaza.

Since the start of the civil war in Syria, the Iranian-funded Palestinian militant group Hamas has irked Tehran in a number of ways. First, it refused to support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, one of Iran's allies. Then it further provoked Tehran by establishing closer ties with Turkey, moving its headquarters from the West Bank to Istanbul. In July, top Hamas leaders sought to cultivate ties with another of Iran's enemies -- Saudi Arabia -- and even flew to Riyadh to meet with Saudi King Salman.

Iran has responded to Hamas' defiance by reducing funding and making a serious attempt at empowering another Palestinian terror group in the Gaza Strip. Over the past year and a half, the Quds Force of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, assisted by the Palestinian Operations department of Lebanon's Hezbollah, has financed and provided media exposure to the al Sabirin ("the patient") movement in the Gaza Strip. This new militant group seeks to emulate Hezbollah and the Iraqi Shiite militias such as the Badr Organization, known for its blatant pro-Iranian sentiments. Iran hopes that al Sabirin will become a reliable proxy militia in Gaza.

THE SPLIT

Al Sabirin is headed by Hisham Salem, a former member of the Sunni group Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), which also uses violence to oppose the existence of Israel and was once one of Iran's main proxies in Palestine. In fact, al Sabirin broke off from the PIJ after Iran also suspended funding to that group for a few months, which, much to Iran's dismay, has remained silent on Saudi air strikes in Yemen against the Iran-backed Houthi rebel group.

Salem, now in his early 50s, is a little-known former mid-level commander of the PIJ. He lives in the Gazan townlet of Beit Lahia and comes from a large family of refugees that were originally from the al Habaria village, which is now part of southern Israel. In April 1990, as an early recruit to the PIJ, the young Salem was arrested by Israeli security forces on charges of terrorist activities for his involvement in setting up explosives against soldiers from the Israel

Defense Forces. He was imprisoned for 20 months. Israel later put him on its most wanted list and in 2002 bombed his five-story house, killing his father. Salem also had difficulties with the Palestinian Authority's security agencies in the Gaza Strip, which jailed him for a few weeks in May 1996 after he masterminded a series of suicide operations in Israel. In June 2011, the Hamas Internal Security Apparatus arrested Salem for a week to discourage him from challenging Hamas' more restrained policy toward Israel.

After splitting from the PIJ, Salem and his followers' first move was to establish a charity named al Baqiyat al Salihat ("the enduring good deeds"); by spring 2014, they proclaimed the birth of the al Sabirin movement. It is not clear at this point how many members have joined the new militia and how militarily active it is.

Rumors among Islamist circles in Gaza claim that Salem receives an annual budget of \$10 million from Iran, typically smuggled in suitcases through the tunnels along the border with Egypt. Al Sabirin allegedly distributes a portion of these funds to families of Palestinian prisoners in Israel. And it has spent relatively significant sums to commemorate, through a documentary, one of its members, Musaab al-Kheir Salah Sakkaifi, whom they consider a martyr. He was killed during Israel's Protective Edge operation in July 2014 after a rocket he was trying to fire into Israel exploded during launch.

BORROWING FROM IRAN

The name of the group, al-Sabirin, was chosen to associate the organization in people's minds with the late Palestinian Liberation Organization Chairman Yasir Arafat, whose favorite slogan was a Koranic verse promising that "Allah is with those who patiently endure." Indeed, the Koran heavily emphasizes the virtue of endurance, or "*sabr*," and the rewards promised to those who wait. The value of endurance is also very prominent in Shiite theological literature, and the concept is closely linked in the Koran with jihad and promises of paradise.

As a result, al Sabirin, and Salem in particular, are widely accused within Gaza, where there are no Shiites, of having converted to Shiism. Salem himself is very careful in the many interviews he grants, as well as on his website, Facebook page, and Twitter account, to avoid confirming that he has converted to Shiism, but never explicitly denies it either. And the circumstantial evidence is mounting: al Sabirin's members have apparently distributed Shiite literature and held seminars on Shiite theology. The movement was also the first among Palestinian groups to adopt Shiite rituals such as the Day of Ashura, which includes self-flagellation, a practice never before observed in the Gaza Strip. Salem also recently declared that "the road to the liberation of Palestine goes through Karbala," a Shiite holy city, and that the struggle against Israel requires "a modern Immam Husayn [ibn Ali]," the sacred and legendary Shiite leader who was killed by Sunnis in 680 AD.

Salem makes a point of holding rallies on the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and frequently praises Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary-general of Hezbollah. Salem often borrows from the rhetoric of other Shiite leaders as well, describing Israel as "the absolute evil" that is "bound to disappear," words familiar to those who listen to speeches by Iran's supreme leader, Ali Hosseini Khamenei. Al Sabirin's logo, which is a gun sprouting from the center of its name in Arabic, is nearly identical to Hezbollah's, as are its slogans and terminology. Unlike Hamas and the PIJ, which have ignored Iranian requests to denounce the Saudi offensive in Yemen, Salem was very quick to oblige. The group's members wrote profusely and disparagingly of the Saudis in Iranian media outlets.

Like Iran, al Sabirin pursues a fiercely anti-American agenda, issuing endless denunciations of U.S. policies. The movement's publications describe the United States as the "source of superpower terrorism" and claim that Washington is pursuing a doctrine of "supremacy" against "the wretched of the earth." Al Sabirin also bitterly criticized the inclusion of Hezbollah operatives on the American terrorist list.

SLOW TAKEOFF

ut beyond its rhetoric, al Sabirin appears to have encountered serious difficulties in its efforts to become a

Bsignificant player in the Gaza Strip. Its Shiite leanings in devoutly Sunni Gaza deter many young would-be followers from joining the group. Hamas is also restricting al Sabirin's freedom of movement in the area, blocking members from holding public gatherings and prohibiting any mention of them in the local press.

Hamas is aware that Salem has successfully attracted disgruntled cadres from the PIJ (mainly because the PIJ is in arrears over member salaries), and it is certainly not disappointed to see its rival weakened. But at the same time Hamas is wary of Salem growing too powerful. In the first week of July, there were reports by Gazan journalists that Hamas was planning to ban all of al Sabirin's activities, even though Salem immediately denied these rumors. It is fair to say that Hamas tolerates al Sabirin -- provided it doesn't violently provoke the Salafis aligned with the Islamic State (also known as ISIS), which considers Shiites apostates, and as long as Salem refrains from challenging Hamas' control of the Gaza Strip and its current policy prohibiting the launch of rockets into Israel. Salem has been careful so far not to cross these red lines.

Al Sabirin's main activities at the moment include gathering several other small militias under its wing. Salem is actively cultivating an alliance with Amr Abu Shariah, head of the Mujahideen Battalions, and with Zakaria Doghmush, leader of the Popular Resistance. He is also collaborating with the battalions of Abd al-Qader al-Husseini, Abu al-Rish, al-Aqsa, and a number of others. His plan is to convene all these rather small factions under a joint military council that he will chair. He is apparently promising these groups Iranian funds in return for their loyalty.

It seems that Salem's sponsors in Tehran and Beirut are disappointed, however, with how little progress he has made. Al Sabirin remains nearly unrecognized by most Palestinians. His public appearances and numerous interviews and statements did not have much of an impact on Palestinian public discourse. Nevertheless, Iran most likely regards al Sabirin as an extremely useful tool to help keep Hamas and the PIJ in line by signaling to them that it has alternatives. Thus, the survival of Salem's project seems guaranteed for the foreseeable future. In that regard, the United States should keep an eye on this group before it becomes the powerful militia that Iran and Hezbollah are seeking to create, and before al Sabirin obtains a solid foothold in the Gaza Strip.

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