

# Iran Says Much, Does Little on Gaza

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## Brief Analysis

Iranian hardliners are using the Gaza Strip crisis as an opportunity to restate their claim as the true Muslim leaders by denouncing Arab governments as complicit with Israel, stirring up the regime's supporters throughout the world, and suppressing Iranian civil society groups. Iran, while facing international pressure over its nuclear program, and aware of the dangers of pushing Arab governments too far, is unlikely, however, to translate its rhetoric into action or to intervene in the Gaza situation.

### Demonstrations in Iran

Following the launch of Israeli air strikes in Gaza, the Iranian leadership spurred its followers to action. Gen. Muhammad Ali Jafari, commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), declared his desire to prepare for action similar to the 1979 occupation of the U.S. embassy, if necessary. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, issued a statement criticizing Muslim governments for silence in the face of "Zionist crimes." Calling Israel a "warring infidel," he appealed to the conventional Islamic legal opinion that every Muslim has the religious duty to fight non-Muslims with whom they are at war. The duty of defending the people of Gaza belongs to the Palestinian mujahids (religious fighters) and all believers throughout the Islamic world, Khamenei said, adding that those who die doing so would be considered martyrs.

On December 30, students affiliated with the Basij militia attacked the British embassy in Tehran, burning the U.S. flag and raising the Palestinian and Lebanese flags. They proceeded toward the Egyptian interests section, warning that if Egypt did not open its borders with Gaza, they would attack the building and occupy it "as they occupied the U.S. embassy in 1979." Others moved toward the Jordanian embassy, condemning its relationship with Israel and making similar threats.

At this point, Iran's leaders stepped in, recognizing that it was dangerous to push the Arab governments too far. After allowing the Basiji students to remain in front of the embassies for a few days, Khamenei sent a message ordering them "not to enter diplomatic places and to end the sit-in strike immediately."

Withdrawing from the streets, the Basiji students found new venues for their protests. Seventy thousand registered to go to Gaza as *ishtihadi* (suicide fighters), and hundreds held a sit-in at the Tehran airport, demanding that the government deploy them immediately. They also announced a million-dollar bounty for the assassination of

Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak.

Once again, Iran's leaders reined in its potentially violent followers. The six-day strike ended after entreaties from Jafari and Davood Ahmadinezhad, the president's brother and head of the Office of the President. Jafari sent a letter asking the students to leave the airport and instead pursue a "mental and political jihad against the enemy." Davood Ahmadinezhad told the Basiji strikers that "We must provide spiritual support for the victimized people of Gaza, and you have accomplished this very well. But if you think that you must be sent to Palestine, you cannot impose this on the government."

While civil demonstrations against Israel occurred worldwide, even in Europe and the United States, all actions and demonstrations in Iran were organized -- and ultimately curtailed -- by the government.

#### Financial and Military Support to Hamas

Even Iran's financial and logistical support to Hamas during the crisis has been inconsistent. In a recent Friday prayer sermon, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the head of the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Council, urged the Islamic umma to "politically, culturally, and militarily support the people of Gaza." He stated, "If [Israeli] tanks enter Gaza, something amazing will happen. Palestinians will use new weapons and hunt [Israelis] from a long distance. This was not possible before." However, three days later, General Jafari stated that Gaza does not need the logistic and military support of other countries to defend itself. Still, the Iranian parliament is preparing a bill that would obligate an unspecified budget allocation for Gaza. In addition, the Ministry of Industry and Mines has suspended the activities of companies with suspected "Zionist" shareholders.

So far, it seems that Iran's support for Hamas is limited to political and diplomatic efforts. The choice of Said Jalili, the secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, for a diplomatic trip to Lebanon and Syria should also be understood in this context. Iran could have sent Foreign Minister Manoucher Motaki, who is close to hardline president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad, for its meetings with Hassan Nasrallah and Syrian president Bashar al-Asad, had it wished to irritate Arab leaders and increase their fears of Iran's influence over Hizballah and the militia's potential actions in support of Hamas.

#### Suppression of Civil Society

Although Iran undoubtedly saw Israel's attack on Gaza as a great opportunity to spread anti-Israeli, anti-American, and anti-Western propaganda domestically, the regime likely saw other benefits as well. Most importantly, perhaps, the government has used the situation to increase its pressure on civil society. A newspaper affiliated with Rafsanjani was shut down for publishing a statement that was written by Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat, Iran's main independent student organization. In the statement, the students condemned both Israel and "terrorist groups like Hamas who hide themselves in the schools and hospitals." The Ministry of Science and Technology declared the student organization illegal.

Also, Basiji paramilitaries have repeatedly and openly threatened Nobel Peace laureate and rights activist Shirin Ebadi. The militia accused her of not supporting the Gaza cause strongly enough and for serving her "masters" in the West. Government officials last month shut down the nonprofit she heads, the Center for Defense of Human Rights, and her house and law office have been attacked several times in the past two weeks. On January 3, UN secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon expressed great concern over the recent threats toward Ebadi.

#### Tensions with Arab Governments

While trying to both incite and control domestic displays of support for Hamas, Iran has remained inactive on the international scene. Perhaps one reason is to avoid exacerbating its relationship with powerful Arab states such as Saudi Arabia. In recent months, tensions have been growing between Iran and the Arab world over Tehran's nuclear

activities. In the weeks prior to the Gaza conflict, Iranian leaders were especially critical of Arab interference in this area. Iran reacted harshly to the presence of Arab diplomats in the P5+1 (United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany) meeting in New York on December 16, 2008. Khamenei described it as "the maximum thing that the enemy can do." Rafsanjani stated that involving Arabs in the Iranian nuclear portfolio is a new conspiracy, and that "the West is trying to exploit the current situation in the Middle East to its own benefit." Speaker of parliament Ali Larijani also warned Arab governments to "be careful not to intervene in Iran's nuclear dossier and jeopardize their credentials."

## Conclusion

It appears that Iran prioritizes its nuclear program and national security over its military support for Hamas against Israel. It is likely that Iranian leaders are hedging their bets at this point, waiting for President-elect Barack Obama to take office. Iranian leaders are undoubtedly wondering, in light of Obama's campaign pledges to open direct talks with Iran, what his administration will offer their country and the extent to which a diplomatic deal is possible. In the meantime, Tehran may not want to muddy the situation, complicate their relations with Arab countries, or darken the prospects for potential negotiations with the new U.S. administration.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the role of politics in contemporary Shiite clericalism in Iran and Iraq. ❖

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