

Hizballah, Iran, and the Prospects for a New Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process

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Brief Analysis

The death of Yasser Arafat and the approach of Palestinian elections on January 9 have rekindled hopes for the peace process. However, if history is a guide, Hizballah and Iran—which worked tirelessly to undermine the Oslo Process—will try to sabotage such efforts. (Indeed, Israeli intelligence reports cited in the Israeli press indicate that they are preparing to do so.) Having emerged from the al-Aqsa Intifada as the principal outside actors in Palestinian politics and emboldened by what they see as recent successes, Hizballah and Iran could pose major obstacles to efforts to defuse the conflict and promote Israeli-Palestinian reengagement.

Background: Hizballah-Iran Collaboration in Lebanon

The Islamic Republic of Iran's involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict dates to the creation of the Lebanese Hizballah and the dispatch of 2,000-2,500 Revolutionary Guards to Lebanon in the wake of the 1982 Israeli invasion, to train and advise the fledgling organization. Iran played a central role in the establishment of Hizballah, and the security organs of the two organizations have worked together closely over the years. Hizballah personnel have participated in Iranian-led operations while Iran has provided financial, logistical, intelligence, and operational support to Hizballah operations. (These include attacks on Israeli forces in southern Lebanon from 1982-2000; the bombing of the Israeli embassy and a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in March 1992 and July 1994, respectively; and the recent overflight of northern Israel by an unmanned aerial vehicle).

The launch of the Madrid peace process in October 1991 spurred Hizballah to intensify operations against Israeli forces in southern Lebanon, with 19 attacks in 1990, 52 in 1991, 63 in 1992, 158 in 1993 (not including attacks during Israel's Operation Accountability), 187 in 1994, and 344 in 1995. Its main goal was to oust Israel from Lebanon, but on several occasions it timed its attacks to disrupt peace negotiations between Israel and Syria, which Hizballah feared would greatly constrain its political and military freedom of action. Through these attacks,

Hizballah also sought to gain the upper hand in its rivalry with the Lebanese Shiite Amal movement.

Following a further intensification of Hizballah operations against Israel's security zone in South Lebanon and renewed rocket attacks on northern Israel, Israel launched Operation Grapes of Wrath in April 1996, spurring Iran to accelerate arms shipments to Hizballah, including night vision devices, the AT-3 Sagger antitank guided missile, and massive numbers of katyusha-type rockets. Benefiting from improved training and equipment, Hizballah nearly tripled the number of attacks on the Israeli security zone between 1996 (508) and 1999 (1,408), pushing up the casualty rate for Israeli soldiers serving in Lebanon to 25-35 a year. The pain of these losses was magnified by a highly effective psychological operations campaign orchestrated by Hizballah (via its television station, al-Manar) that exploited Israel's sensitivity to casualties and prompted a public debate in Israel about that country's ongoing presence in Lebanon. It eventually led Israel to withdraw from Lebanon in May 2000, handing Hizballah and Iran a major victory, and paving the way for the al-Aqsa Intifada four months later.

Since then, Iran has transferred massive numbers of rockets to Hizballah. According to Israeli intelligence estimates, Hizballah now has 13,000 artillery rockets. (Most are short-range Iranian-made katyusha-type systems, but Hizballah also has several hundred longer-ranged Iranian Fajr-3s and -5s and Syrian 240mm systems capable of reaching Haifa, and it may have a new Iranian system capable of reaching the Tel Aviv region.) And in November, northern Israel was overflown by an unmanned aerial vehicle owned by Hizballah but made in Iran and operated with the assistance of Iranian advisors.

The Palestinian Arena

As the United States laid the groundwork for the Madrid Peace Conference in October 1991, Iran and Hizballah sought to deepen and strengthen ties to Islamist and secular-nationalist Palestinian groups opposed to Arab-Israeli peace. These include the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), a Sunni group unique in its embrace of the Khomeinist vision; Hamas, which has maintained a discrete distance from Tehran even while cooperating with it; and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command.

Starting in the early 1990s, PIJ and Hamas members attended Hizballah and Revolutionary Guard terrorist training camps in Lebanon and Iran. Families of suicide bombers were paid compensation, while PIJ and Hamas were awarded cash bonuses by Iran (to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars) for each successful terrorist attack. These efforts to unhinge the Arab-Israeli peace process accelerated following the signing of the Israeli-Palestinian "Interim Agreement" (September 1995) and culminated in a series of suicide bombings in the first three months of 1996 (three by Hamas, two by PIJ) that left more than 80 Israelis dead and hundreds wounded, greatly complicating Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and contributing to the defeat of Labor and the triumph of Likud in May elections that year.

The election of Ehud Barak as prime minister of Israel in May 1999, on a platform promising a withdrawal from Lebanon within a year, set Hizballah and Iran to planning the next phase in their struggle against Israel. As a first step, they sought to encourage greater cooperation among Palestinian groups opposed to the peace process. The eruption of the al-Aqsa Intifada in September 2000, however, created new, unprecedented opportunities for Iran and Hizballah in the Palestinian arena.

Prior to the al-Aqsa Intifada, Hizballah and Iran had excoriated the Palestinian Authority (PA) for negotiating with Israel; the intifada, however, led Hizballah and Iran to reassess their relations with the PA, resulting in several attempts to further stoke the violence by transferring arms to the PA by sea. The best-known case is that of the *Karine-A*, captured by Israeli naval commandos in January 2002. Hizballah also opened an arms pipeline into Gaza by way of the network of clandestine tunnels that pass under the border between Egypt and Gaza, and on at least one occasion it tried to smuggle rockets into the West Bank from Jordan.

While arming the PA, Hizballah and Iran have sought to recruit and co-opt members of the tanzim and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades (arms of Yasser Arafat's own Fatah movement) for their own purposes. In this, they benefited from the drastic economic slowdown in the Palestinian areas as a result of the intifada, which has led to mass unemployment and the breakdown in the PA's patronage system; disarray in the ranks of the PA as a result of Israeli efforts to target its infrastructure and leadership through mass arrests and targeted killings; Yasser Arafat's policy of fomenting chaos as a means of asserting his centrality to peace-making and of forestalling an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza; and the demise of the regime of Saddam Hussein, which subsidized terror by paying \$25,000 to the families of suicide bombers.

All these factors have created recruiting opportunities for Hizballah and Iran (as has the treatment of hundreds of Palestinians injured during the intifada in Iranian hospitals, where they receive a recruiting pitch from their hosts). These efforts, however, are not limited to Fatah-affiliated groups. More recently, Hizballah and Iran have achieved a degree of success in recruiting members of Hamas, which is experiencing economic hardship as a result of U.S. and Saudi efforts to halt its fundraising efforts abroad.

To this end, Hizballah has created an organization, Unit 1800, based in its headquarters in Beirut, devoted to recruiting Palestinians to collect intelligence and conduct terrorist operations. Israeli intelligence estimates that there are now some forty Hizballah-sponsored cells operating in the West Bank and Gaza, and that some 80 percent of all terror operations occurring in or emanating from the West Bank in recent months have been coordinated by Hizballah.

Since 2000, Hizballah and Iran have also tried to recruit Israeli Arabs (including some serving in the Israeli military), playing on the alienation of many Israeli Arabs from the Israeli state; the creeping "Palestinization" of the Israeli Arab community (a process dating back to the Six Day War, but accelerated by the al-Aqsa Intifada); the high standing of Hizballah in the eyes of many Arabs following the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon; and the fact that some Israeli Arabs in northern Galilee have family ties to Palestinians living in Lebanon who are employed as recruiters for Hizballah. Israeli Arabs have been trained at Hizballah camps in Lebanon and used to obtain intelligence regarding Israeli military movements and deployments in northern Israel, and there is concern that they might eventually participate in terrorist attacks.

Hizballah has also helped Hamas develop and extend the range and capability of its al-Qassam family of homemade rockets, in order to be able to threaten population centers throughout the breadth and depth of Israel. Since October 2001, Hamas has launched more than 460 al-Qassams against Israeli settlements in the Gaza strip and towns in Israel. Hamas has been trying to produce and operate these from the West Bank as well, which would put much of Israel's densely populated coastal plain within range. Workshops and rockets have been found in the West Bank, though no al-Qassam has yet been successfully launched against Israel from there. Iran has likewise tried to recruit PIJ and Hamas militants to conduct mortar and rocket attacks against Israel from Jordan, though these efforts have repeatedly been disrupted by Jordanian security. And Hizballah has taught and transferred bomb-making skills and techniques to Palestinians of all political stripes, as well as guerilla tactics, techniques, and procedures it pioneered and refined in operations against the Israeli military in Lebanon, which the Palestinians have used to good effect during the intifada.

Conclusion

The activities of Hizballah and Iran in the Arab-Israeli arena are noteworthy for both their duration (spanning more than two decades) and their scope (involving activities on all fronts of the conflict and in several regions and countries—including Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran). Their activities bespeak a rare combination of seriousness, constancy of purpose, technical competence, and strategic acumen. It is hard not to conclude that for Hizballah and Iran, the ability to disrupt Arab-Israeli negotiations,

undermine and demoralize Israeli society, and threaten Israel's major population centers are strategic objectives of vital importance to be actively pursued.

The successes of Hizballah and Iran in the Palestinian arena in the last four years are based not on sectarian or ideological affinities, but on their ability to exploit the chaos and disarray in the Palestinian areas as a result of the intifada, in order to establish patronage networks, provide arms and know-how, and offer an ostensibly successful model of "resistance." If economic conditions in the Palestinian areas were to improve and a reformed PA were established, offering an alternative path to "armed struggle" to those not wedded to absolutist goals, the influence of Hizballah and Iran in the territories might diminish.

The international community can improve the prospects for the peace process by effectively dealing with the Hizballah-Iran axis through: first, improving economic and political conditions in the Palestinian areas; second, pressing Hizballah (via Syria) and Iran to halt their support for Palestinian rejectionist groups; and third, ensuring a verifiable freeze and then a halt to Iran's nuclear program. Failing such action, it is possible that Hizballah's activities could well provide the spark that might someday lead to a confrontation between a nuclear Israel and a nuclear Iran.

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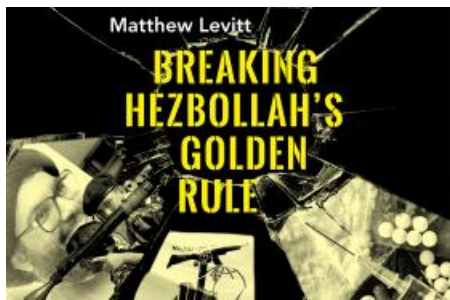
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