

Iran:

More Fuel on the Israeli–Palestinian Fire

Apr 25, 2001



Brief Analysis

The last two days have witnessed "The International Conference on the Palestinian Intifada" in Tehran. The conference was a major step in Iran's drive to accelerate terrorist attacks on Israel.

Delegates to the conference came from thirty-four countries, including Syrian vice president Muhammad Zahir Mosahareqa, Lebanese National Assembly Speaker Nabih Berri, and representatives from many parliaments (e.g., Irish Senator Mick Lanigan). Palestinian participants included Palestinian Authority (PA) minister in charge of Jerusalem affairs Faisal Hussein and Palestinian National Council head Salim Za'noun (Abu Adib), one of the founding generation of Fatah and for many years the main link between Yasir Arafat and Islamic fundamentalist circles.

Iran's Hard Line The Tehran conference was organized by the Iranian parliament, which is solidly under the control of reform elements. The conference's secretary-general was Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, the head of the reformist faction in the Iranian parliament and a political ally of President Muhammad Khatami. Mohtashemi, who inspired the formation of Hizballah in 1982, is an example of the radical anti-Israel elements that constitute an important part of the pro-Khatami reform forces. In an April 22 speech, Mohtashemi called for the elimination of the Jewish State of Israel, which he described as a "knife in the heart of the Islamic world," saying, "If the Islamic world tries to live with this knife, it will be accepting a slow death."

As usual, President Khatami took a hard line against Israel in his speech to the conference, calling for the establishment of an "international tribunal to try Israeli leaders like war criminals." His moderation consisted in calling for Israel's elimination not through violence, but instead through "a referendum, in which all those who lived in Palestine prior to 1948—Muslims, Christians, and Jews—would have voted for an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital."

The conference was opened by Iranian supreme spiritual leader Ayatollah 'Ali Khamenei. He declared, "Combat, not a dialogue, was the language Israel understood [in Lebanon]," and condemned "the voices of surrender and compromise inside Palestine." Khamenei also added a new theme, namely, that the Zionists "exaggerated the Holocaust to justify crimes against the Palestinians." He said, "there is evidence that shows close collaboration between the Zionists and Nazi Germany during World War II, and exaggerated statistics about the Jewish Holocaust that were fabricated to elicit the sympathy of world opinion." He added that this collaboration "[led] to a mass emigration of European Jews during and after the conflict . . . There is even evidence on hand that a large number of non-Jewish hooligans and thugs of Eastern Europe were forced to migrate to Palestine as Jews." The purpose of the creation of Israel was, according to the Iranian leader, "to install in the heart of the Islamic world an anti-Islamic state under the guise of supporting the victims of racism."

Khamenei's references to the Holocaust were a continuation of the various steps Iran has taken in the past two years to embrace Holocaust deniers. Jurgen Graff, head of the Swiss Institute for Historical Review, ran away from his

homeland after he had been sentenced there to prison for his denial of the Holocaust. Last November, Graff took up political asylum in Iran. He then set out with the assistance of his hosts to organize an international conference for the denial of the Holocaust, to be held in Beirut during March 2001. However, the conference was banned by Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri. Both Graff and his hosts continued in their efforts to organize the conference, this time for April in Amman, but their intentions were thwarted by King Abdullah II.

Hizballah Activities Inside PA Territories? Among the more prominent participants at the conference in Tehran were Sheikh Hasan Nasrallah of the Lebanese Hizballah, Khalid Mash'al of Hamas, and Ramadan Shalah of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Over the past seven months of Israeli–Palestinian violence, these three organizations have been the target of intensive Iranian efforts to bring about maximum cooperation in the struggle against Israel. Iran has been making progress in this effort. In an interview with *Al-Hayah al-Jadidah* on April 9, Jamal Mansour, one of the prominent new leaders of Hamas in the West Bank, acknowledged that "the experience of Hizballah has been a unique experience that has enriched the struggle experiences of our people . . . Hizballah has become a symbol and not just a mere affiliation in the Palestinian arena."

A main theme of the conference was Arab and Islamic unity against the "Zionist enemy," marked by the unity of the Palestinian and Lebanese struggles with the senior role being reserved for Hizballah. Hamas leader Khaled Mash'al stressed the linkage of brotherhood between the Lebanese and Palestinian resistance movements, emphasizing suicide operations as "the sole weapon to neutralize the advanced Western military technology, especially when the West cannot find the right answer to a one person willing voluntarily to die."

Lebanese Hizballah leader Sheikh Hasan Nasrallah played a leading role in the conference. Rejecting suggestions that Hizballah confine itself to Lebanon, he argued, "We all have an extraordinary historic opportunity to finish off the entire cancerous Zionist project, which has been threatening our region and nation for fifty years. As a nation, it is inadmissible [for us] to waste this opportunity." Just so there was no mistaking his intention, he added, "The ummah (nation)—states, governments, peoples, and living forces—should seize this historic opportunity and carry out their duty in full toward the Palestinian people's resistance and intifada away from hesitation, delay, and routine, and without casting doubts on the feasibility of this path and option." He warned, "We will prove to them that the Palestinians are not alone in this battle. I tell the Zionists—and I do not say this out of excitement, but I mean what I say—await us where you expect or do not expect us."

It should be noted that Hasan Nasrallah has lately taken to being called by his followers (e.g., on his Arabic website www.nasrallah.net) not only the secretary-general of the Lebanese Shiite movement, but also "the religious-legitimate (Shar'i) representative of Imam Khamenei in Lebanon." Such a title implies a kind of sovereignty by the Iranian leader over Lebanon, or at least over its Shiite community. The use of such phrases is part of the continuing internal conflict in Hizballah between those who support affiliation with the broader Islamic world under Iranian hegemony and the supporters of Lebanese–Shiite nationalism, such as Sheikh Muhammad Husein Fadlallah.

Conclusion The intensive use of mortars, side-bombs, suicide operations, in addition to harsh Israeli retaliation, creates an environment in which Islamist fanaticism and violence can grow quickly. Iranian efforts to support radical Palestinian elements, especially if backed up by financial assistance, could be very appealing to some Palestinians. This should be a matter of concern to all who support a return to negotiations, including the Palestinian leadership. Iran's influence on the Palestinians could be measured in the near future by the translation of verbal support into financial support. The absence of Arab financial support thus far has been one of the main causes of Palestinian frustration. Another test of the recent declarations by Iranian leaders is whether there is an escalation of Hizballah activity, either along the Israeli–Lebanese border or in the Palestinian territories. So far there have been just a few cases in which Hizballah sent its members directly to Israel, and only one Palestinian is suspected of collaborating in a terrorist operation with the organization. The Iranian affect on Hamas could be tested if and when

the Israeli–Palestinian negotiations are renewed. Harsh steps taken by the Palestinian security services against Hamas might create space for Hizballah operations as an alternative.

Reuven Paz is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute.

Policy #320

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

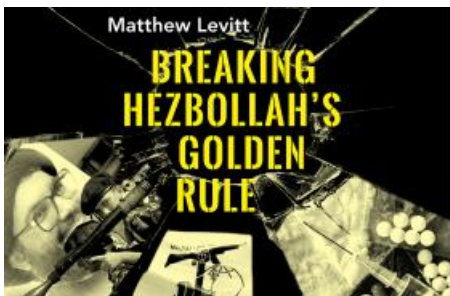
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022

TOPICS

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)