

From Tehran to Beirut to Jerusalem: Iran and Hizballah in the Palestinian Uprising

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Brief Analysis

As Arab leaders gather in Amman for the first regular Arab summit in a decade, non-Arab Iran is keenly watching to see whether Arab heads-of-state once again make grandiose promises to support the Palestinians. If Arab leaders fail to deliver on these promises, as has been the case with Arab financial commitments to the Palestinians, it would open the door for Tehran to build on Hizballah's success in Lebanon and to deepen its already worrisome role in the Israeli–Palestinian arena.

Iran, Hizballah, and the Palestinians Among the Palestinian public in the West Bank and Gaza, popular sympathy for Hizballah started to rise about one year ago, when Israel began to prepare for its withdrawal from southern Lebanon. Hizballah's popularity then skyrocketed when Israeli troops withdrew in May. Once the al-Aqsa Intifada got under way in late September, Hizballah's yellow flags were a daily sight in demonstrations and popular events. Soon thereafter, Hizballah's kidnapping of three Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers and an Israeli civilian fed Palestinian expectations that these acts would lead to a prisoner exchange in which Hizballah would insist on the release of Palestinian prisoners as well. In recent months, there has also been a warming of Palestinian media views on Iran, in which Tehran has been praised as a steadfast supporter of the Palestinian cause. Indeed, this popular sympathy for Iran was most likely a critical factor in prompting Iraq to begin funneling substantial financial support to the families of Palestinians killed or wounded in clashes with Israel.

Involvement in Palestinian Terrorism Over the last decade, terrorist operational links among Iran, Hizballah, and the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) have developed substantially. Previously, Iran worked through the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which has long been dependent upon and supportive of Iran. The turning point came in early 1993, when Hamas activists among the 415 Palestinians deported to Lebanon by Israel made contact with Hizballah. At about that time, Hamas was the first Islamic movement connected to the Muslim Brotherhood to open an official office in Tehran. In 1994, following the signing of the Oslo Accords, Tehran began hosting dozens of Hamas members for terrorism-related training sessions and increased its efforts to assist Hizballah in establishing closer ties with Palestinian elements in the refugee camps in Lebanon. Relations between Hamas and Iran then took a quantum leap forward as a result of the official visit of Shaykh Ahmad Yassin to Tehran on March 1998.

However, the Tehran–Hamas connection barely registered with the Palestinian public when the Palestinian Authority (PA) was involved in negotiations with Israel. The events of recent months — from Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon to the collapse of the peace process to the onset of the intifada — have changed this equation. The emergence of the Fatah Tanzim as a popular armed militia and the evolution of various Palestinian security forces from enforcers of Oslo into participants in the armed struggle against Israel have helped engineer a growing operational cooperation between various Palestinian factions, both Islamic and non-Islamic. This new phenomenon, which did not exist during the first intifada (1987-93), opened the way for Hizballah to broker unity among various Palestinian groups and to recruit Palestinians inside the territories to undertake Hizballah-led terrorist activity of

their own.

The first major Hizballah operation in the territories was carried out in Gaza last February against the Israeli settlement of Netzarim, by a group led by Mas'oud Ayad, a senior officer of Yasir Arafat's personal guard, Force 17; Ayad was subsequently killed by Israeli forces. According to the Israeli press, Israel has in recent months arrested several Palestinians suspected of ties with Hizballah. There has also been a disturbing trend of Hizballah operatives entering Israel with European passports — one with a British passport was arrested two months ago (the second arrest of a Hizballahi with a British passport), while a German citizen was arrested in 1999 for gathering information on behalf of Hizballah. It should also be noted that Arab Israeli citizens were arrested in October 2000 on suspicion of involvement in Hizballah's kidnapping of Israeli civilian Elhanan Tennenbaum.

The Palestinian Card in Lebanon In recent months, Iran has redoubled efforts to widen its base in Lebanon. Highlighting the Palestinian cause has been a highly successful theme in this campaign. In late January, the Iranians organized a conference in Beirut for the purpose of establishing a new organization for "the liberation of Jerusalem and al-Aqsa from the Zionist enemy." Senior Hamas leader Musa Abu Marzouq, chairman of the board of the new organization, described it as "an alternative to all the official Arab bodies that deal with the issue of Jerusalem." While this event can be characterized as just another effort at Iranian propaganda, the conference was an unabashed success, as more than 400 Muslim and Christian participants from throughout the Islamic world joined together to fight for Jerusalem under the Iranian banner. On the sidelines of the conference, Iranian delegation head Ali Akbar Mohtashemipour, one of the architects of Iran's involvement in Lebanon, met with Hizballah leader Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah and, according to Iranian news agency, promised that "Iran's support for the Palestinian resistance will continue until the Palestinians will gain their denied rights." Tehran itself will be host to a "Conference on Supporting the Intifada" in late April.

The triangular connection between Iran, Lebanon, and the Palestinian cause was underscored by Iran's linkage of financial assistance to the new Lebanese government of Rafiq Hariri to Lebanon's continued front-line status in the battle against Israel. When he visited Tehran in mid-January, Hariri heard from Iranian president Mohammad Khatami that "since Lebanon has resisted the aggression, it is now the duty of Arab and Islamic countries to help the Lebanese nation, and Iran is interested in the reconstruction of Lebanon and considers it a revolutionary, national, and Islamic duty." Khatami then pledged to support the economic reconstruction of Lebanon as a reward to Beirut for "ejecting arch-enemy Israel from the south of its territory." Since then, Tehran has been active in mediating a dispute between Hariri and Hizballah (see PolicyWatch #523, "Lebanon: Between Hong Kong and Hanoi"); foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi just visited Beirut and vice president Hasan Habibi is due there shortly.

Conclusions Interestingly, virtually none of Iran's official press coverage of Mohtashemipour's visit to Lebanon mentioned his talks with Syrian leaders or Syria's role in Lebanon. Circumstantial evidence suggests that the Iranians are trying to extend their influence in Lebanon through their links with Hizballah and through financial aid to the Lebanese government. Growing Iranian influence in Lebanon, coupled with a rising Iranian presence in the Palestinian territories, gives Tehran an opportunity to build ties among the groups most amenable to carrying on the battle against Israel, especially among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. If Lebanon (and Syria) effectively restrict anti-Israeli activity to the four kilometers of Shebaa farms, then Iran and Hizballah might try to inject the "spirit of Hizballah" directly into the intifada by using more aggressive means to infiltrate into the PA territories.

That the official Palestinian leadership has begun to recognize the emerging challenge from Iran's Palestinian supporters is evident from a stinging critique of the Beirut conference that appeared in the pro-PA newspaper al-Hayat al-Jadida (February 2, 2001). In an article entitled "Those Who Trade in Jerusalem," commentator Fu'ad Abu Hijlah wrote: "We know that such conferences and other events that are organized in various Arab capitals seek only to overshadow the Palestinians' steadfastness and give the Arab populace an impression that the ruling regimes of

the host countries are hostile to Israel. Had the intentions been sincere, the money paid for holding this conference would have been earmarked for supporting the steadfastness of our kinsfolk in Jerusalem."

Indeed, before long Iran may exploit Palestinian frustration at the slow pace of direct Arab financial aid to the PA itself. The high profile of Saddam Husayn's financial aid to Palestinian "martyrs" may boost Iran's motivation. Such a step could pave lead to a wholly new level of Iranian involvement in the Arab–Israeli arena – utilizing Lebanon as a way station on the road to Palestine. For years, Iranians have touted the route from "Beirut to Jerusalem" as a strategic objective, but it has failed to operationalize this for two decades. Now, the growth of Palestinian sympathy for Hizballah and its Iranian sponsors gives the Iranians hope that they may be able to convince Palestinians to take the road less traveled.

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