

Report

Analysis: Hamas, Islamic Jihad Redefining Relations with Iran

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Abstract

This paper discusses new dimensions of the relationship between Iran and the two key Islamic resistance movements in Palestine, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, in light of several factors. Foremost of these factors are the Syrian revolution, Iran's negotiations with the West on the nuclear agreement, Iran's role in the MENA region and Iran–Saudi rivalry. It also seeks to examine the relevant actors' positions regarding the future of this relationship.

Introduction

The Palestinian resistance movements Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad have passed the stage of debating the influence of the Islamic Revolution in Iran on their direction and performance. Neither denies the significant impact Iranian revolutionary thought has had on them, but in recent years their relationship with Tehran has come to be governed by factors other than those which influenced it during previous periods. This change is due to a number of geopolitical shifts in the region, changes in the Islamic Republic itself and in the nature of Iran's regional role, as well as changes in the position of the two movements, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, in relation to that role.

After developing beyond the initial stage of basic cooperation and support, the relationship entered a new phase following the start of the Syrian revolution, and assumed yet another dimension after the development of the confrontation in Yemen. This new phase of the relationship is governed by Iran's expanded influence and regional presence. Iran's nuclear programme and its efforts to have Western sanctions against it

lifted became its leadership's foremost priority. However, despite its shift in priorities, Iran remains keen on maintaining its presence in the Palestinian arena at a time when it is seeking to acquire global and regional acknowledgement of the legitimacy of its role in the region. In return, the Palestinian resistance movements desire a redefinition of the relationship between them and Iran rather than a complete termination.

Understanding the relationship

Hamas and Islamic Jihad's admiration for the Iranian model can be understood if the Iranian revolution is framed as a model for change. While this sometimes works in the movements' favour, and sometimes against, this "transformative" dimension is the deciding factor in this position they take towards Iran. The Palestinian resistance movements' admiration of (or as some suggest, infatuation with) the Iranian model should not be disconnected from the Iranian revolution's use of Palestine as an icon of struggle in its literature and slogans. Furthermore, this is clearly found within the Iranian constitution and Iran's legislative texts.

Sunni identity and "Islamic Iran"

Hamas and Islamic Jihad believe that their relationship with Iran is not marred by any ambiguity, as both are Sunni movements from a doctrinal perspective.⁽¹⁾ Intellectually and even politically, what links both movements to Shiite Iran are Islam and Palestine. In other words, Iran is an Islamic state that defends the Palestinian cause.⁽²⁾

The two movements state that they are both independent Palestinian Islamic liberation movements whose goal is to liberate Palestine from Zionist occupation, and that they have no agenda beyond this central goal.⁽³⁾ Despite the broader umbrella of resistance, Iranian support for Palestinian forces has conditions, notably: Iranian proliferation and presence, and gaining legitimacy with Sunni movements. Thus, Hamas, given its larger presence, has received greater financial and military support from Iran than Islamic Jihad, despite the latter's description as being closer to Iran.

Islamic Jihad: the movement's identity

For a long time, the Islamic Jihad movement was classified as the traditional Palestinian ally closest to Tehran. The movement does not deny being influenced by Khomeini's extreme ideology. This is clear in the thinking of its founder, Fathi Shaqaqi, the author of *Khomeini: The Islamic Solution and the Alternative*. The book does not hide Shaqaqi's admiration for the Islamic revolution and the possibility of its application in Palestine.⁽⁴⁾

In fact, the Islamic Jihad movement's conception combined Hassan al-Banna's reformist ideology and Khomeini's revolutionary thought. However, Shaqaqi himself was decisive with regard to "the movement's Sunni identity" and engaged in frank discussions with the Iranians, which caused tension with them prior to his martyrdom.⁽⁵⁾ To this day, the movement can clearly define the points of agreement and disagreement between the Palestinian resistance movements and Iran. Of course, foremost among the points of agreement is Palestine's position on the conflict with Israel, which is regarded as a significant point for collaboration.⁽⁶⁾

In regards to points of disagreement, Islamic Jihad's emphasis on "Sunni identity" has led it to take a decisive stance against leaders from its ranks who convert to Shiism, notably Muhammad Shahada, whose deceased body was covered with the Hezbollah flag,⁽⁷⁾ and Hisham Salem, the most prominent leader of the recently formed Al-Sabireen (Those Who Endure) movement, which was established amid accusations that it was a "Shia movement linked to Iran".⁽⁸⁾

A strained relationship

Despite statements emphasising the strength of the relationship between the Islamic Jihad movement and Iran, there are several revealing indicators of a potential shift: the Islamic Jihad movement has entered a financial crisis,⁽⁹⁾ while its relations with Tehran are simultaneously strained due to its refusal to support the Houthis in Yemen or to publicly reject Saudi Arabia's war there.⁽¹⁰⁾ Based on the available information, it could be argued that Iran's cessation of support reflects a severe crisis between the movement and Iran, after decades of strong ties,⁽¹¹⁾ with even mediation by Hezbollah failing to prevent this split. Palestinian sources attribute this crisis to "the movement's rejection of Iran's request to issue a clear statement regarding the crisis in Yemen, supporting the Houthis and denouncing the Saudi–Gulf attack, which Islamic Jihad rejected by stressing its commitment to neutrality".⁽¹²⁾

Causes of the crisis: reasons why the support was cut off

Some analysts cite the weight of Iran's financial burden resulting from its unprecedented presence in the region (which has economically drained it to a significant degree) as the main reason for its suspension of financial support to Islamic Jihad. While this reasoning may be valid on some level, especially given Iran's expanding regional wars of attrition, it is not the primary reason. The Palestinian arena continues to be, politically and ideologically, an important space for Iran. The media's explanation that the severance of funding stems from the movement's inability to bring money into Gaza is also inaccurate, because the existing situation in Gaza long predates the current crisis.

The primary reasons revolve around the following several factors:

1. The Islamic Jihad movement's position on the overall regional conflict and the movement's continued efforts to distance itself from entering as a party to the conflict. Despite the movement's denial, many sources say that the disagreement with Iran followed an Iranian request that Islamic Jihad issue a clear statement on the crisis in Yemen supporting the Houthis and denouncing the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm, a request which Islamic Jihad rejected. Despite the movement's keenness to maintain a cautious diplomatic response to the crisis, those supporting the Iranian axis subsequently began to condemn Islamic Jihad, accusing it of following Hamas' example by "contradicting its own political values".(13)

Thus, Islamic Jihad's position on the aggression against Yemen was viewed as unacceptable by Iran's supporters, with some arguing that the Palestinian movement's decision to remain silent meant distancing itself from any Arab affairs. This silence was condemned by critics on the pretext that "those being slaughtered in Yemen are a peaceful Arab Muslim people who did not attack Saudi Arabia nor threaten its regime or undermine its security or stability".(14) The movement has also denied statements aired on an Iranian radio station and supposedly attributed to Islamic Jihad's leadership in support of the the Houthis, strongly reiterating its opposition to interventionism in the internal affairs of any Arab country.(15)

2. The essence of the relationship between Islamic Jihad and Iran. Iranian attempts to form pressure groups within the Palestinian resistance movement, and to attract groups to build parallel entities within its ranks, have provoked anger among Islamic Jihad leadership.(16) The Islamic Jihad movement has strongly objected to what it called "an organised enclave's formation" within the movement but separate from it, pointing to the al-Sabireen (Those Who Endure) movement, asserting that there is covert Iranian support for such separatist groups.(17)
3. The changing order of Iran's priorities. It is evident from Rouhani's foreign policy that while the importance of the Palestinian cause has diminished in the hierarchy of Iran's concerns, it has not disappeared entirely. For Iranian leadership, Palestine's significance is now preceded by Iran's relationship with the West, resolving the remaining problems with the nuclear dossier and lifting Western sanctions.

Extent of the relationship

Islamic Jihad does not have the financial and political space to mobilise and respond to the current critical situation in the same way that Hamas can, despite having weathered a previous financial crisis in 2009 which lasted for five months. The end of Iranian support will have a profound impact on Islamic Jihad, and perhaps on its orientation and regional relations. Mediation may succeed in bridging the rift between the movement and Tehran and restoring financial support, but even if this is successful, the backing will not be as significant as it was previously. The movement may succeed in finding alternative support for its resistance project, which the movement's Secretary-General, Dr. Ramadan Salah, has begun to seek out. Ultimately, this crisis will not end without having a significant effect on the future relationship between Islamic Jihad and Iran.

Hamas and Iran: the search for common denominators

Hamas does not deny its common interests with the Islamic Republic and has made no secret of receiving financial and moral support from the Iranians, having thanked Iran for its support on a number of occasions. In return, Iran has undoubtedly been able, through its relationship with Hamas, to influence and involve itself in the region's political balance. Hamas shares the Islamic Republic's view of Israel as a usurping and illegal colonial entity,⁽¹⁸⁾ and has even faced accusations of being "Iran's workforce" in the region.⁽¹⁹⁾ These accusations may have been the incentive for the head of Hamas' political bureau, Khaled Mashal, to emphasise in a recent interview that the Iran-Hamas relationship is one of "political interests" but that the movement is an "independent decision maker".⁽²⁰⁾ Hamas has unequivocally rejected the accusation that "Iran uses it as a tool", pointing out that it has challenged Iran's will on more than one political issue.⁽²¹⁾

Syria and its implications

The relationship between Iran and Hamas began to change a few months after the start of the Syrian revolution in April 2011, when the movement voiced support for the aspirations and hopes of the Syrian people,⁽²²⁾ albeit without criticising the Syrian regime. According to Hamas' statement, the objective of the movement's support was to "preserve Syria's stability and its internal cohesion, and enhance its role in the resistance [against Israel]".⁽²³⁾ While Hamas appeared cautious in its approach to the Syrian situation, it avoided conferring any legitimacy on the Syrian regime's use of violence and armed force against the peaceful protest movement, which were the key features of the regime's response to the Syrian revolution in its first few months. During this period, Khaled Mashal avoided appearing with President Bashar al-Assad at bilateral meetings, with Hamas attempting to mediate between the regime and the revolutionary forces. However, the regime's refusal and insistence on dealing with the revolution as a security matter led Hamas to exit Syria.⁽²⁴⁾

Due to the disparity in their positions on Syria, Hamas rejected Iranian demands to support Assad. Despite this, however, Hamas continued to emphasise the importance of its relationship with Iran, while Iran continued to describe the movement as “resistance”, with low-level meetings between the two sides taking place regularly and the movement’s office in Tehran continuing to represent it. Tehran’s positive attitude towards Hamas and its leaders did not last, however, with Iran cutting off aid, which some sources claimed amounted to twenty-four million US dollars per month.⁽²⁵⁾ During the same period, Khaled Mashal was attacked by Iranian media and figures affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, who described him as “a traitor pretending to resist”.⁽²⁶⁾ Iranian media also gloated at the ousting of former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi in 2013 and the resulting end of Hamas’ strong, positive relationship with his deposed Muslim Brotherhood government. Arab media close to Iran accused Hamas of “laying down its weapons” in reference to the 2014 Israeli aggression on Gaza (Operation Protective Edge), which lasted more than fifty days and which the movement withstood without Iranian support.

Following this period of hostility, Iran began attempting to rebuild its relationship with Hamas, with the two parties holding high-level meetings amid rumours of an upcoming visit by Khaled Mashal to Tehran. However, this visit has not occurred to date due to disagreements over the visit’s itinerary and the figures Mashal would meet with. The continuing tensions in relations between Hamas and the Iranian leadership were evident in a statement made in February of this year, by the adviser to the head of Iran’s Shura Council for International Affairs, Hussein Sheikh al-Islam, who said, “Arrangements for Mashal’s visit are the responsibility of the host...it is a flaw in our culture for visitors to specify where they will stay or go”.⁽²⁷⁾

Iran has focused its attacks on Khaled Mashal, and is attempting to portray tensions between itself and the movement as the result of internal splits within Hamas. Iran is hinting there is a faction which holds views opposing Mashal’s views on relations with Iran inside Gaza, and this could explain unconfirmed rumours regarding Iran’s support of projects supervised by a senior leader of Hamas in Gaza, Mahmoud al-Zahar.

Hamas, which is well aware of the changes in Iran’s priorities, has not discounted the option of restoring its previous relationship with the Iranian government but is linking that decision to its relations with other regional powers, such as Qatar, Turkey and more recently, Saudi Arabia.

In a brief statement issued in March 2015, Hamas announced its position on the war in Yemen as being in support of “political legitimacy in Yemen” and “a democratically

approved option for the Yemeni people”, adding that it “stands with Yemen's unity and security, and rejects everything that affects its security and stability”.(28)

Some analysts perceive Hamas’ position on the war in Yemen as a “redrawing of the map of its political alliances in the region” towards repositioning the so-called “Sunni axis”, led by Saudi Arabia and including most of the Arab Gulf states, as well as Egypt and Turkey. While Hamas’ statement left the door open to rapprochement with Iran and did not sever ties with the leadership there, Hamas’ new lines of communication with Saudi Arabia indicate that while Hamas’ overtures to Iran have been positive for several months, these have not translated into full normalisation of relations between them which would ensure the return of financial and military aid to the movement, especially because Iran continues to impose impossible conditions on Hamas.(29)

In light of Hamas’ new political realignment, Khaled Mashal visited the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in mid-July, where he met with King Salman bin Abdulaziz and the Saudi leadership, a noteworthy move after years of estrangement. Although Saudi openness to Hamas remains limited, Iran has been unable to hide its displeasure at these developments, with media close to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard attacking Hamas and Khaled Mashal over the visit. Hamas responded with diplomatic caution to these accusations, simply reaffirming the consistency of its foreign policy.

Perhaps this convergence is what has prompted supporters of the movement’s relationship with Iran to criticise it. These supporters may perceive the current rapprochement between Hamas and the Sunni axis (with Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar at the forefront) as well as efforts to distance itself from Iran as reflecting “political miscalculation” by Hamas, a bias in the party’s interest against the greater Palestinian interests and a “denial of Iran’s unlimited support to the Islamic movement for decades”.(30)

Building parallel entities: Iran’s search for an alternative

With all the controversy over the tensions between Iran and resistance leaders in Palestine, a number of parties and prominent figures familiar with the Palestinian situation have submitted recommendations to Iranian decision-makers proposing an expansion of the scope of Iran's protection beyond Hamas and Islamic Jihad to other Palestinian movements, despite the view that Hamas and Islamic Jihad are the Palestinian movements that most “protect the essence of the cause”.(31) Iran is clearly seeking to develop political entities subject to its will rather than allies (or equals) in the Palestinian arena. Although both Hamas and Islamic Jihad previously received significant support from Iran, both have taken a stance independent of Iranian policy on sensitive issues.

This has led to recommendations from those administering Iran's Palestinian file for the formation and development of Iranian proxy groups in the Palestinian territories, with the Iranian leadership playing a pivotal role, both in founding these groups and in shaping their identities and ideological standpoints. The announcement of the establishment of the al-Sabireen (Those Who Endure) movement led by Hisham Salem, the former leader of Islamic Jihad's military wing, confirms that this strategy is already underway. There are claims that al-Sabireen adopted a logo sharing some of the features of Hezbollah's logo. Al-Sabireen has already begun receiving funds from Iran, forming affiliate institutions and employing staff who receive generous salaries.

Al-Sabireen is perceived as part of Iran's quest to build a parallel entity to implement Iranian policies in the Palestinian arena in ways unacceptable to Hamas and Islamic Jihad. In addition to the sensitivity concerning this new entity for obvious political reasons, the doctrinal (madhhab) factor is also clearly demonstrated in the homegrown resistance movements' rejection of al-Sabireen. The Sunni resistance movements are sensitive to overt efforts of Shia conversion and stand firmly against it,⁽³²⁾ considering that it does not serve any party. Given the overwhelmingly Sunni identity of the Palestinian people, they feel that the Palestinian cause is related to Sunni doctrine, and that involvement in this controversial new entity is harmful to the cause. In the same way, it is widely agreed that the Palestinian people's needs, widespread hunger and the siege in Gaza should not be exploited in order to proselytise on behalf of a certain doctrine. Hisham Salem, meanwhile, denies that there is any sectarian dimension to his movement, saying, "We are not a sectarian movement. We are a Palestinian Islamic resistance movement, and we reject our name's inclusion in cheap and despicable takfiri conflicts".⁽³³⁾

However, insiders close to al-Sabireen and familiar with the circumstances of its inception assert that Hisham Salem founded the movement following his expulsion from Islamic Jihad due to his Shia beliefs and his calls for the propagation of Shiism.⁽³⁴⁾ It seems that Islamic Jihad is aware of the significance of the new movement in the network of resistance groups in Palestine because al-Sabireen emerged from Islamic Jihad and has attracted many of its members and supporters, and even more so because Iran has redirected much of its aid from Islamic Jihad to this new movement".⁽³⁵⁾

It may be too early to judge al-Sabireen's sectarian tendencies, but its manifesto indicates strong Iranian influence, with the terminology almost a carbon copy of Hezbollah's rhetoric and bearing strong similarities to the Iranian-backed Lebanese movement's first "Open Letter". Al-Sabireen has also begun engaging in activities that are clearly Iranian in nature. The Tehran-inspired rhetoric in the movement's document is evident when it discusses "arrogance and vulnerability", and states that:

“The new Islamic Revival is in the pure hands and believing souls of the mujahideen (Islamic fighters) who fought – in the midst of a heroic confrontation with its belief, faith, culture and politics – against the illegal Zionist entity, which was and still is a dagger embedded in the nation’s heart, and against the arrogant powers supporting it, especially the Great Satan America. These mujahideen arose to meet the call to the Truth, which extends through history. Thus, they fought in the face of America, Israel and repressive authoritarian structures, and their revival and revolution formed a major turning point in the history of Islam... [which] was the beginning of Muslim victory, the liberation of Palestine and a vanguard for Islam to cross into the state of the just caliphate, which will fill the earth with equity and justice as it was previously filled with injustice and oppression”.⁽³⁶⁾

Elsewhere in this document, there is what looks like a replica of a speech by the late Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of Iran’s Islamic Revolution with respect to the term “Mohammadan Islam”, stating: “It is apparent through these centuries that the Muslims are tasting that bitter fruit due to their deviation and abandonment of the original Mohammadan discourse”.⁽³⁷⁾

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority’s announcement of moves to strengthen ties with the Iranian government after years of estrangement in the same context is understandable. A number of news agencies have reported that the Palestinian Authority and the associated Fatah movement are seeking to develop a relationship with Iran after agreement is reached on the Iranian nuclear programme, with a high-ranking delegation from Fatah reportedly due to visit Iran shortly to arrange a visit by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.⁽³⁸⁾

The new Iran following the nuclear agreement

The Iranian government’s attitudes towards the Palestinian cause have developed in stages. The first stage was primarily ideological in character, using slogans of solidarity and unity broadly similar to those deployed in Iran’s Islamic Revolution. Due to subsequent social transformations and political challenges, however, Iran has since adopted a more realistic and pragmatic approach regarding international relations in order to achieve the Islamic Republic’s aims of strengthening its regional position and achieving recognition of its role as an important global player.

With the election of Hassan Rouhani, who follows Hashemi Rafsanjani’s line of thinking, Iran’s domestic priorities overshadowed its foreign policy, and Iran succeeded in accomplishing a landmark agreement with the West on its nuclear programme. The agreement’s geopolitical aspects cannot be disregarded, particularly considering the

existence of the agreement's hidden clauses, which were revealed during hearings held by the US Congress.⁽³⁹⁾

The declining backing within Iran for a narrative prioritising the Palestinian cause – which shows clear ideological tones and rhetoric, and which embraces and reproduces specific political tendencies – shows that its influence is waning in contemporary Iranian politics in favour of President Rouhani's domestic focus and the expansion of Iran-US rapprochement. It is likely that Iran's foreign policy towards the Palestinian cause will witness a shift towards a strategy of "accepting what the Palestinians accept". This decline does not mean that Iran is withdrawing from the arena of the Palestinian cause, as they realise that supporting this cause adds to their soft power and improves the balance of power in the region to their favor. However, a successful convergence with Washington will not reap the desired fruit inside Iran without a real shift in Iranian foreign policy. After the nuclear deal, Iran will seek to impose a new equation that would preserve the Islamic Republic as a key player in the Palestinian cause, while simultaneously pursuing its own interests related to domestic and other regional issues.

The relationship's new look

The new element of this relationship between Iran and these Islamically-oriented Palestinian resistance movements is that it is independent of other regional political alliances. Islamic Jihad's Secretary-General Dr. Ramadan Salah describes the movement's relationship with both Doha and Tehran as "excellent". However, this assessment cannot be understood unless it is analysed from the viewpoint of recognising the movement's status outside the polarisation and re-alignment currently taking place in the region, which has begun to assume new features after Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen. This appears to be linked to the need to create a new definition of the "axis of defiance and resistance", particularly given that this axis was effectively dismantled when Hamas exited. "There can be no talk about the axis of defiance and resistance without Hamas, particularly because Islamic Jihad prioritises the relationship with Hamas above any other".⁽⁴⁰⁾ One analyst credits this deconstruction to "coming changes and new foci in the Palestinian arena built on the emissions released across the region after the Arab Spring".⁽⁴¹⁾

In Salah's deconstruction process, or Mashal's restructuring, it can be said that both seek to convert the term "axis of resistance" to a "project of resistance". The project's terms include that it should not be subject to political partisanship. This applies to the "Sunni axis" and its relationship with other axes. Each party, in this case, would be judged unconditionally, according to its contribution to the project. In Salah's words, "We have to make the resistance a project, because the Palestinian resistance is a project and not merely an axis".⁽⁴²⁾

Whatever the variations in the positions of Hamas and Islamic Jihad relating to the Syrian revolution and their relationship with Bashar al-Assad's regime, the developments in the Syrian arena and the accompanying Iranian presence in more than one Arab sector, has led to policymakers in the two movements revising their frame of reference. Even if Hamas and Islamic Jihad were not in favour of ending relations with Iran and prioritised the need to resolve their existing differences, they have become dissatisfied with Iranian policy on a number of regional issues, namely in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. The two movements are also sensitive to the emergence of new entities which clearly bear Iranian features in terms of their intellectual and ideological construction.

All of this being said, it is reasonable to conclude that the two movements' relations with the Islamic Republic, as well as the Iranian role in relation to the Palestinian issue, have entered a new stage.

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