



Declarations of Senior Iranian Officials Concerning the West Bank Point to Intensifying Iranian Effort to Expand Its Influence in this Arena
Dr. Raz Zimmt

February 13, 2023

Main Argument

► **In recent months, senior commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have paid increasing attention to the growing tide of “Palestinian resistance” in the West Bank and the challenges facing Israel and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in this arena:**

- ◆ In August 2022, the Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Salami, declared that the “Palestinian resistance” was able to expand its struggle against “the Zionists” from Gaza to the West Bank, and declared that just as Gaza armed itself, so can the West Bank, and that this process has begun and is at its peak.
- ◆ In December 2022, Esmail Qa’ani, the Commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force, claimed that on a daily basis, between 40 to 50 operations are carried out against Israel in the West Bank alone and that “the Zionist regime” has become helpless and is under immense pressure.
- ◆ In January 2023, Qa’ani once again addressed Israel’s supposed weakness vis-à-vis the Palestinians, claiming that over half of the Army of “the Zionist regime” is stationed in the West Bank, whose territory amounts to only about half of that of Kerman Province in southeastern Iran.
- ◆ In January 2023, the former Deputy Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Najat, declared that during the term of the former Qods Force Commander, Qasem Soleimani, the West Bank was not particularly active, while now it has become even more active than the Gaza Strip.

► The increasing number of statements by Iranian officials concerning the state of affairs in the West Bank comes following growing Iranian efforts to gain a foothold in this arena, as exposed by Israeli intelligence. Those efforts include attempts to establish Iranian intelligence networks in Israel and the West Bank, to form terrorist networks under the guise

of civilian organizations, and transfer explosives to the West Bank utilizing unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

► Iranian involvement in the Palestinian arena, including the West Bank, began in the 1990s. The IRGC's Qods Force worked to encourage terror attacks against Israel and was involved in supporting Palestinian militant groups, chief among them Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), by providing weaponry, transferring technical-operational knowledge, training, and transfer of funds. Following the takeover by Hamas over the Gaza Strip in June 2007, most of the Iranian assistance was directed toward the Gaza Strip. The conflict in the summer of 2014 in Gaza (known in Israel as "Operation Protective Edge") provided Iran's leadership with a further opportunity to express its support for Palestinian militant groups. On July 23, 2013, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, delivered a speech on "International Jerusalem Day," which is marked every year in Iran on the last Friday during the month of Ramadan. The supreme leader did not stop at the traditional expression of support for Palestinian resistance, but extraordinarily, called for the arming of the West Bank.

► Since this declaration, senior Iranian officials repeated and stressed the guidance of the supreme leader of Iran to expand the "Palestinian resistance" to the West Bank as well. However, the increasing number of public statements by senior Iranian officials concerning developments in the West Bank, in parallel with the exposure of growing Iranian activities in this arena, **bolster the assessment concerning growing Iranian efforts to expand its influence in the West Bank, and not merely in the Gaza Strip.**

► It is possible to point to three main factors driving the intensification of Iranian efforts to expand its footprint in the West Bank:

- ◆ **Growing tensions between Iran and Israel**, particularly due to the strikes – attributed to Israel - carried out against Iranian targets in Syria, along the Iraqi-Syrian border, and on Iranian soil. Increased Iranian influence in the West Bank can expand the Iranian toolbox used for possible retaliation against Israel. This toolbox includes, among other things, strike capabilities (independently or through proxies) from Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, cyber-attacks, strikes against Israeli vessels, and terror attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets around the world. Tehran's growing sense that Israel is trying to encircle it through expanding its presence along its borders (in the Persian Gulf, in Iraqi Kurdistan, and in the Caucuses), is further bolstering its

determination to cement its presence and influence along Israel's borders to improve its ability to deter and retaliate against Israel.

- ◆ **The weakening of the Palestinian Authority and its internal security organs, and the growing wave of militant attacks in the West Bank** provide Iran with new opportunities to intensify its activities and expand its influence in this arena. Iran is able to exploit the growing security tensions in the West Bank, the governance vacuum and the decline in the ability of the Palestinian Authority to maintain its control over the territory.
- ◆ **The warming ties between Iran and Hamas in recent years**, after the relationship worsened for several years due to Hamas' apprehensive position toward the Syrian regime, and its support for Saudi Arabia in its military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen. The improvement in relations manifested in a growing number of Hamas delegations visiting Iran, and in public statements by senior Iranian officials thanking Iran for its military support for the group.

Declarations of Senior Iranian Officials Concerning the State of Affairs in the West Bank

- ▶ In recent months, senior IRGC commanders addressed with growing frequency the expansion of "the Palestinian resistance" to the West Bank and the growing challenges facing Israel and the IDF in this arena. In August 2022, the Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Salami, provided an extensive interview to the website of the supreme leader of Iran following the Israeli clashes with Gaza militants in August 2022 (known in Israel as "Operation Breaking Dawn").



The Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Salami.

Source: website of the supreme leader of Iran, August 19, 2022

- ▶ In the interview, Salami claimed that over the past year, the “Palestinian resistance” was able to expand its struggle against “the Zionists” in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, despite the geographic disconnection between the Strip and the West Bank, and the restrictions and technological means employed by Israel to monitor Gaza and keep it isolated from the outside world. These restrictions have failed to prevent the Palestinians from gaining greater power and developing advanced weaponry. He stressed, however, that the rocket and missile capability in the hands of Hezbollah and the Palestinians are insufficient to liberate the occupied territories, and there is a need to bolster the ground fighting capabilities of these forces, to allow them to defeat Israel through using waves of citizens and military personnel to storm Israel, as Iran did during its war with Iraq in the 1980s, while utilizing the small size and high population-density of Israel. Salami remarked that the strategy of the “resistance” is to force the enemy to accept the conditions of the Palestinians through limited and brief battles, and that it has been proven that “the Zionist regime” is incapable of fighting even just one group of the “resistance,” pointing as evidence to Israel’s desire to end the latest conflict. Salami stated that as Gaza armed itself, so can the West Bank, and that this process has already started and is ongoing. He argued that there is no challenge in manufacturing weaponry and moving it from one place to another (the website of the supreme leader of Iran, August 19, 2022)
- ▶ In December 2022, the Commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force, Esmail Qa’ani, addressed the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, declaring that Israel’s situation is dire, and soon enough, the Palestinians will remove the Israelis from occupied Palestine. During a ceremony commemorating the former Iranian Ambassador to Yemen, Hassan Irlou, Qa’ani

claimed that between 40 to 50 militant attacks are carried out daily against Israel in the West Bank alone, and that “the Zionist regime” has become helpless and is under a great deal of pressure. He added that the more Israel and the United States increase their pressure on Iran, they will face double that pressure (Tasnim, December 20, 2022).



The Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Esmail Qa'ani

Source: Tasnim, December 20, 2022

- ▶ In January 2023, Qa'ani again addressed Israel's supposedly dire state in the campaign it is waging vis-à-vis the Palestinians. During a ceremony in the city of Kerman, the commander of the Qods Force, claimed that for the first time, over half of the army of the “Zionist regime” is deployed in the West Bank, whose size is about half of Kerman Province. Qa'ani addressed the pursuit of the IDF after a Palestinian militant (likely, Oday al-Tamimi, who carried out the attack against the Shuafat Crossing and later the shooting attack near Maale Edomim in October 2022) and stated that the entire security establishment of “the Zionist regime” was recruited to find the young man who shot at them and failed to apprehend him. Only a week later, when he shot at them again, they killed him (Tasnim, January 5, 2023).
- ▶ In January 2023, the former Deputy Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Najat, stated that the West Bank has become even more active than the Gaza Strip as an arena of contestation. In an interview to Tasnim news agency (January 3, 2023) Najat, who also served as the deputy head of the IRGC's Intelligence Organization, addressed the accomplishments of the former Commander of the Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, who was assassinated in January 2020 by the United States. According to Najat, owing to Soleimani, the Palestinian were able to improve their capabilities significantly. He added that Soleimani's successor, Esmail Qa'ani, continued in Soleimani's path and thanks to him, Yemen and the West Bank have become stronger. Najat remarked that the West Bank was not this active during the time of Soleimani, but now it is more active than the Gaza Strip. In 2022, he claims, about 30 “Zionists” were killed in the West Bank, and the volume of attacks executed there is unprecedented.

Thwarted Iranian Infiltration Efforts in the West Bank

- ▶ The statements coming from Iranian officials have occurred alongside the exposure by Israel of increased Iranian activity in this arena in recent years. In June 2019, the Israeli General Security Service (Shin Bet) exposed an attempt by Iranian intelligence to establish a spy network in Israel. Two months prior to the announcement, the Shin Bet arrested Thaer Shaafout, a 32-year-old Jordanian businessman, whose origin is from Hebron, who entered Israel on a mission dictated by Iranian intelligence, in an effort to promote the establishment of networks of assets in Israel and the West Bank, to be used for Iranian covert activity. According to the Shin Bet's statement, the link between Shaafout and Iranian intelligence was establishment in Lebanon, where he met two Arabic-speaking agents of Iranian intelligence, who presented themselves with the noms de guerre Abu Sadeq and Abu Jaafar. He met them in 2018 and 2019 several times in Lebanon and Syria and was instructed to establish a business network in Israel, to serve as a cover for future Iranian activities. During his entries to Israel in July and August 2018 and April 2019, Shaafout began creating contacts with people on the ground, with the aim that they will assist him in future missions. Additionally, Shaafout offered his handlers to establish a factory in Jordan that would employ Shia workers and would serve for future Iranian activities against Israel. The investigation also uncovered that Iranian intelligence intended to utilize him to transfer funds to terrorists in the West Bank and Israel (Haaretz, June 20, 2019).
- ▶ In July 2019, the Shin Bet announced the exposure of a network that worked to recruit people in Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for the benefit of Iranian intelligence. The Shin Bet reported that the network operated from Syria with Iranian guidance and led by a Syrian individual known as Abu Jihad, who initially tried to contact people utilizing fake Facebook profiles, and later by engaging with these individuals through messaging applications. The recruited assets were tasked with, among other things, collecting information on military bases, sensitive security installations, specific personalities, police stations and hospitals, as potential targets for carrying out attacks in Israel based on Iranian orders (Maariv, July 24, 2019).
- ▶ On July 21, 2020, the Shin Bet declassified that as part of a joint operation with the IDF, they were able to thwart a terrorist group operating under the guise of a civilian organization

named al-Shabab al-Qawmi al-Arabi (Nationalist Arab Youth). According to the Shin Bet, the network began to unravel during the investigation of Yazan Abu Salah, a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a resident of Araba in the West Bank. During the course of the investigation, Abu Salah disclosed plans to carry out an attack in the city of Harish and kidnap a soldier for the purpose of trading them in exchange for Palestinian terrorists in Israeli prisons. In light of the findings of the investigation of Abu Salah, his cousin, Muhammad Abu Salah, a resident of Bir Zeit, was also arrested. The cousin confessed during the interrogation that his organization in conducting joint trainings with individuals in Iran, as well as with Hezbollah and the Syrian Army. The organization was headed by As'ad al-'Ameli (whose nom de guerre is Dhu al-Fiqar) who operated from Lebanon, and was the contact person of the Palestinian group with Iran and Hezbollah (Ynet, July 21, 2020).

► In September 2020, the Shin Bet reported that a resident of east Jerusalem, Yasmin Jaber, was arrested for suspicion that she was recruited by Lebanese Hezbollah and the IRGC's Qods Force to assist them in recruiting additional operatives among Israeli citizens and West Bank Palestinians. The Shin Bet investigation showed that the woman was marked by Hezbollah personnel while she attended a conference in Lebanon in 2015. During another visit of Jaber to Lebanon in 2016, she was connected to a senior officer in the joint terrorism unit of the Qods Force and Hezbollah, Jaafar Qubaisi, through two operatives in the same unit, Ataya Abu Samhadna and Muhammad al-Hajj Musa. Qubaisi is known for his involvement in other efforts to recruit operatives in Israel and the West Bank for terrorist activity. Since her recruitment by Hezbollah, Jaber secretly maintained contact with her handlers by sending agreed-upon coded messages via social media, in line with instructions and an operational security briefing she had received from Hezbollah. Several among her acquaintances in Ramallah and east Jerusalem were also detained for questioning, as they were suspected of being members of a cell the woman had operated (the Israeli General Security Service, September 17, 2020).

► In November 2021, the former Minister of Defense, Benny Gantz, revealed that in 2018, Iran had tried to move explosives to the West Bank using a UAV. At a conference held at the Center for Policy and Strategy at the Reichman University, the minister stated that in February 2018, Iran dispatched a Shahed 141 UAV from the T4 airbase in Syria, which was carrying the explosive TNT. The UAV was intercepted near Beit Shean, and the IDF assessed that its target were militants in the West Bank (Ynet, November 23, 2021).

► In November 2022, the Commander of the IDF's Military Intelligence Directorate, Major General Aharon Haliva, stated that the Israeli security apparatus is identifying an Iranian fingerprint in the West Bank too, and not merely in Gaza. During a conference held at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), the chief of the Military Intelligence Directorate assessed that if Iran continues to finance and encourage Palestinian terrorism, with a focus on the West Bank, this may preoccupy Israel's security agencies more than other challenges (Haaretz, November 21, 2022).

Developments in Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

- Iranian involvement in the Palestinian arena, including the West Bank, traces back to the 1990s, when the IRGC's Qods Force began encouraging terror attacks against Israel and providing financial support for those carrying them out. The Force was involved in smuggling weapons to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. It assisted most Palestinian terrorist groups, chief among them Hamas and PIJ, by providing weaponry, transferring technical-operational assistance, including information and know-how on how to manufacture DIY weaponry, training, guidance and transferring of funds to finance ongoing activities totaling in several million dollars annually. During the Second Intifada, Iran assisted terror groups operating in the West Bank and Gaza. The assistance was provided directly or via Lebanese Hezbollah.
- Following Hamas' takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, Iran directed most of its support to the Gaza Strip. The Qods Force provided Hamas and PIJ military assistance, along with financial, political and propaganda support. Iran saw the establishment of Hamas rule over Gaza as an important lever for conducting the armed struggle against Israel, and a means to promote its influence in the Palestinian arena. By subjecting Israeli towns and cities during the rounds of conflict between Israel and Gaza, the Palestinian militant factions in the Strip demonstrated to the Iranians the benefit incurred from building the military infrastructure of Hamas and PIJ.



A meeting between the Supreme Leader of Iran, Khamenei, and the Head of Hamas' Politburo, Ismail Haniyeh. Source: website of the supreme leader, February 12, 2012

- ▶ The Gaza War of summer 2014 (“Operation Protective Edge”) provided Iran’s leadership with further opportunity to express its support for Palestinian militancy. The Iranian regime saw the war as an opportunity to rebuild ties with Hamas, which were damaged after Hamas expressed opposition to the Syrian regime during the Syrian civil war. The rebuilding of this relationship would have increased Iran’s footprint in the Gaza Strip, expand its influence in the Palestinian arena, and bolster the unity of the “resistance camp.” Hamas, for its part, understood that it requires Iranian financial and military support more than ever, especially in light of the deteriorating relationship with Egypt, following the coup against the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the summer of 2013.
- ▶ The Iranian desire to exploit this opportunity was evident in statements of senior Iranian officials, chief among them the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who in July 23, 2014 delivered a speech celebrating International Jerusalem Day, which is marked annually on the last Friday during the month of Ramadan. The supreme leader did not stop at the common expression of support for the Palestinians, but extraordinarily called for arming the West Bank too. Since, senior Iranian officials echoed his statements repeatedly. The Commander of the Aeronautics Force of the IRGC, Amir Ali Hajizadeh, declared that the arming of the Palestinians in the West Bank will accelerate the destruction of Israel (Fars, July 25, 2014). The Basij arm of the IRGC announced the opening of a bank account used to raise funds for Palestinian militants, in accordance with the guidance of the Supreme Leader, Khamenei (Fars, July 24, 2014). In recent years, senior Iranian officials repeated and stressed the order of Khamenei to also arm the West Bank. Thus, for example, in June 2019, the Military Adviser of the Supreme Leader and former Commander of the IRGC, Yahya Rahim Safavi, repeated the call of the supreme leader and declared that the strategy of arming the West Bank is being

actively implemented, in line with the instructions of the supreme leader. He admitted that Iran's efforts to transfer rockets to the West Bank are yet to achieve success. He remarked that "the holy armed Jihad" has become more popular today, both in Gaza and the West Bank (Palestinian news agency Sada, June 7, 2019).



“The West Bank should be armed as Gaza has”. Poster from the website of the supreme leader of Iran, November 25, 2014

► The warming of relations between Iran and Hamas was stymied after in early 2015, Hamas backed Saudi Arabia in its campaign in Yemen. With the start of the military operation in March 2015, Hamas issued a statement expressing support for the ousted Yemeni president, who is backed by Riyadh, thus implicitly expressing support for the Saudi operation. Tehran perceived this statement as another slap in the face by Hamas, and an indication for its preference to promote ties with Saudi Arabia and the Sunni camp at the expense of bolstering ties with Tehran. A visit that the leader of Hamas, Khaled Mashal conducted to Saudi Arabia in July 2015 further exacerbated the rift between Iran and Hamas, and led the cancelation of a planned trip of a Hamas delegation to Iran. Despite this tension with the political leadership of Hamas, Iran continued to provide support to the military arm of the group. Practically, Iran's ability to transfer advanced rockets and weaponry to the factions in Gaza through the ground, sea and the network of underground tunnels to Sinai was severely hampered following the 2014 Gaza War and the intensive Egyptian campaign to destroy the tunnels under the Egyptian-Gazan border. At the same time, developments in Iraq and Syria forced Iran to prioritize defending the Assad regime and stemming the offensive ISIS launched in Iraq. These conditions, based on Iran's strategic priorities, severely constrained

the ability of the Qods Force to make significant investments in the Palestinian arena to advance the goals of the Iranian regime there.¹



“Soleimani, from us, the people of Palestine.” Message of support to then-Commander of the Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, from east Jerusalem. Source: Facebook page Haj.Qasem.Soleimani, April 13, 2015

► Starting in late 2017, relations again began to improve between Iran and Hamas. This manifested in an increasing number of Hamas delegations visiting Iran and public statements by Hamas officials about the importance of the military support Iran has been providing the organization. The changes in Hamas leadership, and the rise of the members of the armed wing of Hamas, and particularly, Yahya al-Sinwar, to a position of prominence, also contributed to the improvement in Iranian-Hamas relations.² Additionally, Iran provides assistance to families of Palestinian “martyrs” in Gaza and the West Bank through the charity organization al-Ansar, which operates in the Gaza Strip and is affiliated with PIJ. The funds originate in the Iranian Martyrs’ Fund, which serves as a channel for transferring funds to support the social base backing Palestinian factions.³

¹ For more, see the publication of the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center from October 29, 2015: “Portrait of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps’ Qods Force, Instigator of Iranian Subversion and Terrorism in the Middle East and around the Globe.”

² See in this context the publication of the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center from January 9, 2018: “Iran-Hamas Rapprochement: the Current Situation.”

³ See in this context the publication of the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center from February 13, 2020: “Iranian support for Palestinian terrorism: Distribution of Iranian funds to shaheeds’ families in the Gaza Strip by PIJ-affiliated Al-Ansar Charity Association.”