



The Iranian Modus Operandi

by Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Dany Shoham

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,029, December 6, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Time and again in recent decades, Iran has used its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to attempt to deprive Israel of calm borders with its neighbors. As this problem is likely to recur in the context of the Gaza Strip, it is essential – and by no means impossible – to root it out from that area.

Iran considers Israel an archenemy, and it is a highly sophisticated and clever antagonist. While in Lebanon and Syria, the rooting out of the Iranian threat is extremely complicated, it is an achievable goal in the Gaza Strip (with Egyptian assistance). Iran has employed a consistent pattern in its long battle against Israel. In January 2000, a senior IDF intelligence officer told the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Security Committee: "Consequent to the ongoing peace process between Israel and Syria, there is now, already, an appreciable Iranian-induced escalation of Hezbollah activity in Lebanon against Israel. And along with the progress of the Israeli-Syrian peace process, Iran will increase its terror activities against Israel, and there will be an elevation in sabotage events." This is what indeed happened.

On October 27, 2018, while intensive contacts were being led by Egypt and the UN to reach an arrangement between Israel and Hamas, Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus, Head of the International Media Branch at the IDF Spokesperson's office, said (relying on IDF intelligence) that Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) had delivered heavy barrages of dozens of rockets from the Gaza Strip while working "under guidance, instructions, and incentives from Iran's Revolutionary Guard Quds Force, based in Damascus." In other words, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force directly ordered Islamic Jihad and orchestrated the rocket fire. And while Hamas is regarded as responsible for all violence and provocations stemming from Gaza, by way of its control of

the Strip since 2007, IDF Spokesperson Brig. Gen. Ronen Manelis pointed out that “Islamic Jihad did not wait to get a green light from Hamas” to fire the rockets. Its activator was Iran, which precluded the necessity for Hamas approval.

Back in 1982 (just three years after the Islamic revolution), in response to the alliance formed in South Lebanon between Israel and the South Lebanon Army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) conceived and established the Shiite group Hezbollah to violently harass the IDF and South Lebanon Army forces who were trying to maintain that peaceful alliance. Hezbollah troops were organized and trained by a contingent of 1,500 Revolutionary Guards who arrived from Iran with the permission of the Syrian government, which was occupying Lebanon at the time. Fostered by the IRGC, Hezbollah gained power and influence to become the predominant entity in Lebanon and a serious threat to Israel.

Last year, Hezbollah, together with the IRGC, formed the Golan Liberation Brigade in Syria, an umbrella organization of Shiite militias that reportedly has many fighters at its disposal who can be activated on the Israeli-Syrian border.

Thirty years after the founding of Hezbollah, in 2012, the Shiite terrorist faction Sabireen was established by the IRGC in Gaza. Its full name is “Harakat al-Sabireen Nasran li-Filastin,” or “The Movement of the Patient Ones for the Liberation of Palestine.” Tehran created Sabireen on the heels of the November 2012 truce between Hamas and Israel that followed more than a week of fierce fighting.

The resemblance between Sabireen and Hezbollah is striking. The two Iran-sponsored Shiite entities have very similar logos, and the founding document of Sabireen starts with the same words Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah usually uses at the beginning of his speeches: “Peace be upon Allah's Prophet... and upon his chaste and pure household and his chosen companions.” Iran has not formally claimed ownership of Sabireen, but it is clear that the group is yet another Shiite proxy group in Iran’s violent orbit.

In this they differ from Hamas and PIJ, which are Sunni. The Popular Resistance Committees – the third-largest armed force in the Gaza Strip – are Sunni as well. It thus appears that, while they remain basically Hezbollah-oriented, the affinity of Gaza extremists towards Hezbollah and Iran deteriorated somewhat due to their involvement in the civil war in Syria.

Sabireen is estimated to comprise from 400 to a possible 3,000 fighters. It reportedly receives at least \$10 million a year from Iran, which is also believed

to have supplied it with Fajr and Grad rockets in addition to mortars and related technologies. The movement established a rocket factory in Gaza that was destroyed in the summer of 2014. A video posted in October 2017 shows the manufacture of a missile, the “Ahmed al-Sarhy,” by Sabireen.

Sabireen is led by Hisham Salem, who was born near Gaza and became a Shiite. Salem was formerly a leading figure in PIJ, other members of which have also joined Sabireen. The group is thus an Iranian-fostered, largely Shiite derivative of PIJ. While there are ideological discrepancies between PIJ (as well as Hamas) and Sabireen, they are unable to crack down on the movement because of its strong connection to Iran. Hamas and PIJ must restrain any forceful action against Sabireen if they are to maintain their own relationships with Iran and the accompanying IRGC support. Although both Hamas and PIJ are basically the IRGC’s partners, there have been periods of tension that would make cultivating a direct proxy in Gaza, such as the Sabireen movement, very useful for Iran.

Iranian influence in the Gaza Strip has been meaningful for years. Tehran reportedly cut off funding to PIJ in 2015 because it refused to support Iran’s involvement in Yemen, but in 2016, it resumed support, reportedly allocating \$70 million annually to PIJ. A further upgrade took place at the end of September 2018, when PIJ internal elections reinforced Iranian dominance over the movement’s leadership.

The election brought in the pro-Iran Ziad al-Nakhla as secretary general to replace Ramadan Shalah. Born in the Gaza Strip in 1953, Nakhla spent 14 years in an Israeli prison. He lived thereafter in Syria and Lebanon, where he was in frequent contact with Hezbollah. From Tehran’s point of view, that is an ideal resumé. Iran is also pleased that Nakhla's election as chief left his competitor Muhammad al-Hindi, a less Iran-oriented figure, with the lesser post of deputy secretary-general.

Iran has also paid attention to its relationship with Hamas. It restored ties with the group after the February 2017 elections, in which Ismail Haniyeh was elected as head of Hamas’s political bureau and Yahya Sinwar as supreme political leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip and commander of its military wing. Both individuals are considered more receptive to Iran than was Khaled Mashaal, the former political leader of Hamas.

In August 2017, Sinwar noted that “Iranian military support to Hamas and its al-Qassam Brigades is strategic,” adding that the relationship had “become excellent, returned to the former era, and is developing: namely, Iran is once again the largest supporter financially and militarily. This will be reflected in the resistance [against Israel] and in the [Hamas] agenda to achieve

liberation.” Weapons and technologies provided by Iran to Hamas and to PIJ include Fajr-3, Fajr-5, M-75, M-302 and Grad rockets, as well as mortars and drones.

Some Palestinians see Tehran as a pernicious influence. In November 2017, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, Azzam al-Ahmad (then head of Fatah’s delegation for Palestinian reconciliation), in a rare example of full-throated criticism of Iran by a senior Palestinian official, pointed to the Islamic Republic as the key cause of tensions between Hamas and Fatah. “Iran is the number one sponsor of the division... the number one financier,” he said, and added that “it seems one of the conditions for the return of Iranian support [to Hamas] is the continuation of the division.”

Thus, while Sabireen remains a murky movement, its very existence is a clear sign that Iran is not prepared to tolerate quiet in the Palestinian territories, even as Hamas and Fatah seek time and space to solidify their fragile unity arrangement. This is a strong indicator of Tehran’s broader goals in the Palestinian arena. Instead of heeding the will of the overwhelming majority of Palestinians, who support efforts to re-forge a unified national identity after years of fracture, Iran appears intent on pushing the Palestinians into conflict with Israel – or even with each other.

Asked recently whether Iranian influence in Gaza could hinder the ceasefire with Israel, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov diplomatically replied: “There are forces out there that want to disrupt that agreement and push us all into the abyss of a confrontation.” Coincidentally or not, soon thereafter (during the Islamic Unity Conference in Tehran) Iran announced it will financially support the families of Palestinians killed or wounded at the Gaza Strip-Israel border “while participating in the riots as marchers.” In response, Hussein Mansour, a member of the Coordinating Committee for the March of Return and Breaking the Siege, said, “Iran’s adoption of the martyrs of the return and wounded marchers is an important step in supporting the steadfastness of the people and supporting the resistance in this way and in other ways.”

Iranian conduct in 1982, 2000, 2012, and 2018 – as well as on many other occasions – exhibits a clear *modus operandi*. Thanks to that pattern of behavior, Iran has significantly strengthened its position in Gaza, possibly to the point that it is now a critical factor. Tehran’s chief goal is in all likelihood to obstruct the broad efforts of Egypt and the UN to stabilize the ceasefire between Israel and Gaza and possibly expand the terms of the truce. Without Iranian interference, the situation in Gaza – indeed, in much of the Middle East – would be a great deal more promising.

One way or another, an end must be brought to Iranian influence in the Gaza Strip. Were this to occur, it would perhaps be possible to establish a lasting ceasefire between Israel and Gaza. Without bringing an end to Iranian influence there is no chance of that at all.

The Iranian regime, its orientation, its forces, and its offshoots are very familiar to Maj. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, who is soon to become IDF Chief of Staff. Kochavi served for almost four years (November 2010 to September 2014) as Head of the Military Intelligence Directorate. A gifted officer, he should be able, together with Shabak and the Mossad, to effectively cope with Iranian influence in the Gaza Strip. In practical terms, this will mean rooting out – entirely and for good – whatever Iranian presence exists in that area, or otherwise terminating its impact. While difficult, this task is both vital and feasible.

Although Tehran is under considerable pressure right now, it will endeavor to adhere to its standard modus operandi and do everything it can to foil the Israel-Hamas ceasefire. Jerusalem must take steps to ensure that it fails.

Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Dany Shoham, a microbiologist and an expert on chemical and biological warfare in the Middle East, is a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He is a former senior intelligence analyst in the IDF and the Israeli Defense Ministry.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family