



PERSPECTIVES

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Ahead of the Bahrain Conference, Hamas Casts Its Lot with Iran

by Prof. Hillel Frisch

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A week and a half ago, Hamas organized its weekly confrontation on the Gaza fence in honor of World Jerusalem Day, an event inaugurated by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 and celebrated since then primarily by Iran and its Hezbollah proxy. This move reflects the organization's defiance of the Sunni Arab states, especially those who plan to attend the Trump-sponsored conference in Bahrain.

At first glance, it appears that the title given to the June 7 confrontation in Gaza – World Jerusalem Day – was little different from the various titles given to the sixty confrontations that preceded it since their inauguration over a year ago.

But by using the title World Jerusalem Day, Hamas and Islamic Jihad sent a clear message to the Arab audience – from kings and presidents of Arab states all the way down to followers of Arab media.

In the Arab world, it is public knowledge that World Jerusalem Day – *Ruz Jihani Quds* in Farsi – was one of the first commemoration days Ayatollah Khomeini created and placed on the official calendar of the newly created Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. World Jerusalem Day demonstrations and rallies since then have overwhelmingly taken place in Iran or in the Shiite areas of Lebanon, under Hezbollah auspices.

Inevitably, these events include the chants, “Down with the great Satan, the United States and the small Satan, the Zionist entity” and the burning of American and Israeli flags and effigies of their leaders. Images of these events are then disseminated by the official Iranian media sites in Farsi, English, Arabic, and Turkish.

World Jerusalem Day's identification with Iran and its proxies can also be heard in the speeches of leaders honoring the event. Year after year, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic and sometimes its president address the Islamic world to champion the Palestinian cause and denigrate Israel.

Another stalwart speaker who addresses the crowd from his bunker in Beirut annually on World Jerusalem Day is Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah.

While Iranian leaders and their proxies are vocal on that day, Sunni Arab leaders never so much as mention it, let alone give speeches in its honor. This even includes the Qatari ruler, who maintains close ties with the Iranian leaders as a bulwark against Saudi Arabia and its allies, the UAE and Bahrain (the latter of which might be better viewed as a Saudi client).

The Palestinian Authority is also clearly in the Sunni Arab state consensus in ignoring World Jerusalem Day.

So linked is World Jerusalem Day with Iran and its proxies that even Hamas, a Sunni organization with traditionally strong ties with Iran, has refrained from commemorating it up to now.

This begs the question why Hamas has changed course – not only to name its major staging event to commemorate the event, but to convene a conference featuring Hamas leaders under that name.

Yihya Sinwar, the head of the movement's political bureau, gave a clear answer to this question at the conference.

Sinwar focused on Trump's "deal of the century," which he views as an attempt to end conflict in the area, integrate Israel into the Arab and Islamic region, and, more forebodingly, change the mindset of the Arab nation, turning enemies into friends and vice versa.

He explicitly thanked Iran for aiding "the Resistance." Without its help, he said, Hamas could never have developed the military capabilities it demonstrated in the last round.

Sinwar added that Hamas cannot be castigated for thanking Iran, an obvious reference to the Arab Sunni states, led by Saudi Arabia.

This was followed by a scarcely veiled accusation:

...it is our duty to thank all those who offer aid and succor to achieve the objectives of our people and nation, underlining that those who

support the resistance and Jerusalem are friends and those who wager on selling Jerusalem are enemies.

Sinwar, addressing the Arab leaders, claimed they are at an historic juncture at which the positions they take “will be either commemorated or disparaged” and urged them “to adopt the choices of the nation, the Palestinian people, and Jerusalem.”

For all Sinwar’s brashness – in his speech he also warns Israel that in the next war, Hamas will hit Tel Aviv hard – the speech and, even more so, Hamas’s decision to honor Iran by commemorating World Jerusalem Day reflect weakness.

Both the decision and the speech reflect Hamas’s worry that President Trump will successfully woo the Arab states to get behind his peace plan.

Hamas must realize that placing World Jerusalem Day on the “resistance” calendar deepens the Palestinian divide that has existed since its takeover of Gaza 12 years ago. The fact that the Hamas media highlighted both the speech and the commemoration, in contrast to the PA and Fatah sites, which disregarded them completely, reflects this divide.

Wooing Iran will also have a negative effect on Hamas’s relations with Egypt, Gaza’s gateway to the Arab world and beyond.

Ever since the Iranian revolution, the Egyptian deep state has evinced hostility toward the Iranian Republic – not only for the way it meddles in the affairs of Arab states, but for historical reasons. During the Fatimid revolution in the 10th century in Egypt, Persian ayatollahs employed subversion to establish a Shiite dynasty that ruled Egypt for 200 years.

President Sisi, who is convinced (as was his predecessor Mubarak) that Iran is intent on trying to repeat that historical event, suppresses any sign of Shiism in Egypt.

Hamas is enough of a trial to Egypt for being a Muslim Brotherhood organization. Close relations with Tehran will serve only to increase Cairo’s hostility toward the organization.

The fallout from championing Iran may explain why Sinwar, who is closer to the military wing of the organization, took the lead on World Jerusalem Day rather than a leader like Ismail Haniya, who is more attuned to the needs of Hamas’s public. The people of Gaza desperately need Egypt’s gateway in Rafah to the outside world, and they fear possible Egyptian retribution.

Assessing the benefits against the debits of commemorating World Jerusalem Day is just one more lesson Hamas is learning since its takeover of Gaza in 2007.

While many in Israel, likely including PM Netanyahu, believe these lessons will lead to a “tamer” Hamas in the long run, Avigdor Lieberman thinks that only force will change the organization’s behavior.

Lieberman is probably right. After all, Sinwar’s decision to antagonize most of the Arab states, including Egypt, demonstrates his refusal to allow Hamas to be “tamed.”

This is an edited version of an [article](#) that appeared in the Jerusalem Post on June 12, 2019.

Prof. Hillel Frisch is a professor of political studies and Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University and a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.