



Can Hamas, an Iranian Proxy, Be Deterred?

by Ofira Seliktar and Farhad Rezaei

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,058, May 31, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The question of how to deter Hamas from starting another conflict has dominated recent discourse. Most observers ignore the fact that the terror group is an Iranian proxy, meaning it presents unique challenges to deterrence.

As the recent round of fighting between Israel and Gaza died down, the question of how to deter Hamas and its junior partner, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), resurfaced. The debate plays out against the backdrop of a long list of clashes and tenuous ceasefires. In the most recent encounter, 232 Palestinians were reportedly killed, 60,000 were allegedly left homeless, and infrastructure suffered serious damage. On the Israeli side, 12 people died and material damage was modest. While acknowledging Israel's right to self defense, the plight of the Palestinians attracted international attention, with UN chief Antonio Guterres saying, "If there is hell on earth, it is the lives of children in Gaza."

For those familiar with Iran's strategy of warfare-by-proxy, the placing of non-combatants in harm's way comes as no surprise. Starting with Hezbollah, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and foreign division unit, the Quds Force (QF), have sought ways to protect proxy militias. The Guards chose the practice of embedding within and hiding among civilians (*ekthefa dar miane gheire nezamian*). The IRGC manual describes embedding as "the concealment/hiding of strategic assets in places the enemy cannot target."

Hassan Abbasi, head of the Guards' Center for Borderless Doctrinal Analysis, notes that while international rules of war require a strict separation between combatants and civilians, proxies can, by embedding fighters within local populations, dictate "the rules of the game."

To justify the resulting casualties among fellow Muslims, the Guards embraced *The Koranic Concept of War* by Brig. Gen. S. K. Malik, an Islamist who served on the Pakistani High Command. Malik famously stated that Muslims are duty bound to bolster jihad, either as volunteers in suicide attacks or passively, as collateral damage. In the latter capacity, they would serve as human shields, boosting casualty numbers and creating the perception that retaliation was not “proportional” as required by laws of war.

Human shielding became a critical element for Iran when, in the early 2000s, the IRGC substituted rockets and missiles for suicide bombings. Under the leadership of senior IRGC commander Muhammad Hejazi, Hezbollah gradually built up an arsenal said to contain some 150,000 projectiles and dispersed those weapons across heavily populated areas.

During the 2006 Lebanon War, the IDF was surprised by the extent of embedding it found: Hezbollah had positioned its assets in public spaces such as schools, mosques, and private houses, along with an extensive network of tunnels and command posts. Abbasi proudly noted, “Hezbollah skillfully used different places including mixing of military forces with civilians. It also stashed military hardware and communication devices in cities so they could not be identified.” After the war, engineers from Khatam al Anbia, the Guards’ construction company, helped rebuild the underground fortifications. Recently, a 100 km tunnel between the Shiite south and Beirut was constructed to draw the IDF in case of another war.

Hamas and PIJ used the Hezbollah blueprint to radically embed its military wings—Izzadin al Qassam and the al Quds Brigades, respectively—in the densely occupied Gaza Strip. Over time, under the direction of Khatam al Anbia, an elaborate network of tunnels and command bunkers was built, some of them cross border for smuggling purposes as well as to facilitate the kidnapping of IDF personnel and Israeli civilians. A study on underground warfare gave Hamas high grades for mixing components of urban and tunnel warfare. Assets and fighters were also stashed in public spaces and private homes.

Thousands of Gazans have died during the rounds of conflict, exposing Israel to charges of violating war conventions: an outcome the embedding doctrine all but predicted and, indeed, intended. As Bassem Eid, a Palestinian human rights activist, put it: “Hamas is using its people to protect its rockets.”

The IDF’s technological innovations and tactical advances have gradually undermined Hamas’s advantages. Alerting residents to impending strikes on buildings has greatly reduced numbers of Palestinian victims. On the Israeli

side, the Iron Dome, with a reported ability to intercept some 90% of missiles and rockets, protected the population.

Most crucially, tunnel detection technology nullified the key advantage of the embedding strategy. In the current conflagration, the IDF performed exceptionally well. It demolished a sprawling complex of tunnels and command posts dubbed the “Metro” without a costly ground invasion. The reduced Palestinian death toll must have been disappointing for the Iranian patrons of Gaza: the reported 232 Palestinians killed in the 2021 clash were a fraction of the more than 2,000 killed in the 2014 round—let alone in other regional wars involving massive employment of air power, from the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) to the 1991 Gulf War to the 2003 invasion of Iraq to the anti-ISIS air campaigns, and so on.

Some claim the destruction of its assets will deter Hamas from instigating another conflict for years to come. One government minister, in making this assertion, noted that Hezbollah’s 2006 debacle stopped it from provoking Israel for 15 years. But this analogy is tenuous at best. Lebanon operates under a hybrid sovereignty system whereby Hezbollah has created a parasitic infrastructure diverting resources for sectarian use. As co-sovereign, however, the terror militia is being held accountable for the catastrophic state of the Lebanese economy. There have been increasing numbers of protests in recent years blaming Hezbollah for the country’s political and economic paralysis.

Hamas faces no such constraints. In 2007, the terror group expelled Fatah in a bloody coup and has ruled the enclave with an iron fist ever since. While the *de facto* sovereign, the terror group feels no obligation to create an economy capable of providing the population with any comfort whatsoever. To all intents and purposes, Gaza is a ward of the international community, which has poured billions of dollars into it to keep it afloat. Hamas has diverted considerable resources to the acquisition of a massive arsenal of projectiles and the construction of an ever-more extravagant infrastructure for underground warfare. If the past is any guide, Hamas and PIJ will be able to rebuild and start another conflagration sooner rather than later. In the words of former Oslo negotiator Dennis Ross, “If they have rockets, they will shoot.”

None of Israel’s options to avert another cycle of violence are good. Temporary reoccupation of the Strip to remove Hamas, a suggestion made by another cabinet member, would be extremely costly in human terms and devastating from an international perspective. The intersectionality movement, which is constructed around the notion that all “oppressed minorities,” be they racial, gender-based, or ethnic, must support each other, has embraced the Palestinian cause, marshaling large crowds in the US and Great Britain. Black Lives Matter (BLM), a part of the intersectionality

conglomerate, gave the anti-Israeli demonstrations a huge boost—so much so that *Politico* concluded that BLM has changed the American discourse on the Middle East.

The idea of rehabilitating the Gaza Strip while diminishing the influence of Hamas has emerged as a popular alternative that enjoys the support of the US. This time around, there is reportedly a strong resolve to create an oversight mechanism for disbursing funds and materials. Skeptics note that given the poor governance record of the enclave, Hamas is likely to subvert the process and rebuild its terror infrastructure.

Interestingly enough, the idea of demilitarizing Gaza in return for foreign aid, arguably a more foolproof measure against continuing the cycle of violence, has made little headway. Anticipating Hamas's violent objections, analysts consider it a long shot not worth investing in politically. Still, the Israeli government would be well advised to launch a robust public diplomacy initiative to press for the plan.

Two points need to be emphasized.

First, Hamas is not a legitimate resistance movement. As per its Charter and spokesmen, it seeks to “liberate” the Holy Land and take control of Jerusalem while denying Jews the right to exist. Not surprisingly, the Hamas Charter comports with Ayatollah Khomeini's eschatologically driven postulate that the liberation of Jerusalem will precede the return of the Mahdi.

Second, Hamas is not an independent agent but, along with other proxies, a part of the so-called “Axis of Resistance,” Iran's tool for spreading its hegemony across the region. With Hezbollah immobilized and its leader reportedly seriously ill, the IRGC-QF activated the Palestinian militants. As early as mid-April, the Iranians were urging Hamas to “defend Jerusalem.”

The regime regarded the fresh violence as not only a chance to destabilize Jewish-Arab relations but as payback for Israel's special operations against Iranian assets and an opportunity to undermine the Abraham Accords. The Guards' Aerospace Force has also been eager to test the performance of Israel's Iron Dome. IRGC chief Hossein Salami praised Hamas for destabilizing Israel, complicating its relations with the Accord states, and proving the alleged deficiencies of the Iron Dome.

Even if full demilitarization is not an immediate option, exposing Hamas as a subsidiary of Iran is essential. No enduring agreement is possible as long as the Axis of Resistance lives on.

Ofira Seliktar is Professor Emerita at Gratz College, Pennsylvania and Farhad Rezaei is Visiting Professor of Political Science at York University in Toronto. These observations are based on their book, Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars (Palgrave Macmillan 2019).