



## Iran's Proxy War

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Islamic Jihad's efforts to degrade Israel's security are driven by Iranian interests. Israeli decision-makers must understand the nature of the struggle with this organization and continue to take steps to prevent its becoming a significant military force in the West Bank. This must be done in order to prevent the "unity of fronts" Iran is striving to create through its proxy organizations.

On January 26, 2023, Israel eliminated an Islamic Jihad cell in the heart of Jenin, including a leader of the organization's Jenin Brigade, Salahat Ezz a-Din. This operation returned the spotlight to Islamic Jihad, a proxy organization that works to change the regional order in the Iranian interest.

In early August 2022, Islamic Jihad threatened to engage in violence against Israel if it did not free Sheikh Bassam al-Saadi. This threat led to Operation Breaking Dawn (August 5-7, 2022). This heightened activity by Islamic Jihad, especially in the northern West Bank with an emphasis on Jenin, reflects Iran's efforts to use its proxies to create a balance of deterrence.

There are other examples of Iranian proxies threatening Israel on Iran's behalf in the Palestinian arena, which Tehran perceives as an Israeli weak spot. Hezbollah, for instance, threatened to strike the Karish gas field with Yakhont missiles before the signing of the maritime border agreement with Lebanon; and Hamas warned that Israel would regret holding the flag march in the capital on Jerusalem Day.

What is common to all three organizations (Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, and Hamas) is the considerable military assistance and support they receive from Iran. Through the organizations it sponsors, Iran has forged a broad terrorist front that includes the Houthis in Yemen and Shiite militia organizations in Iraq and Syria. Iran's proxies strive to create a new equation vis-à-vis Israel—a country that prefers quiet to military operations, even though, in the Middle East, quiet is an elusive thing.

Islamic Jihad was established under Iranian influence in the early 1980s. Its founder, Dr. Fathi Shaqaqi, authored the book *Al-Khomeini al-Hal al-Islami wa-al-Badil (Khomeini, the Islamic Solution and the Alternative)*. This book views the Iranian revolution as the model for a comprehensive Islamic revolution that will foster a widespread Islamic renaissance.

Since its establishment, the group has carried out a succession of terror attacks, with Iran providing it with the necessary logistical infrastructure of weapons, ammunition, money, and guidance. Islamic Jihad operatives in Gaza are proud of the advanced weapons and drones in their possession, some of which are produced locally and some with Iranian technology.

Since the 1980s, following a series of Israeli actions, the group's leaders, including current head Ziad al-Nakhalah, have been living in Syria. Islamic Jihad does not have an extensive *dawah* infrastructure like Hamas, and concentrates primarily on military activity against Israel. According to its leader, "Resistance is the only choice with which we can restore our people's rights."

Islamic Jihad states repeatedly on its various websites that jihad and the struggle against Israel will be "eternal until victory." Its spokesmen say jihad is legal (according to Islamic law) and a national duty. Its jihad activity in the West Bank is based on an array of brigades spread across Jenin, Tulkarem, and other districts, similar to Gaza.

On August 2, 2022, the Jerusalem Brigades, the military wing of Islamic Jihad, declared that the jihad would continue until victory over the enemy. This statement came against the backdrop of the death in Jenin of 17-year-old Islamic Jihad operative Derrar Alkafarini. While statements of this kind are common on the group's websites, Islamic Jihad does not require any special pretext to threaten or attack Israel. The group's recent stepped-up activity stems from something deeper: namely, its relationship with Iran.

In the eight years that have passed since Operation Protective Edge in 2014, Islamic Jihad has grown in strength and armament, and the organization now believes it is equipped to respond to the IDF capabilities displayed during that clash. In a manifesto Islamic Jihad issued in July 2022, it sang its own praises and hailed its purported ultimate victory.

Islamic Jihad appears to have augmented its power and capabilities with Iranian assistance and support, and its operations are gaining more and more legitimacy among the Palestinian public. Its activity in Jenin is part of the “Unity of the Fronts” approach that Islamic Jihad adopted last year. It was not by happenstance that the group chose to call the 2022 operation, in which two of its top commanders were killed, Unity of the Fronts. The fronts in the Palestinian space to which this phrase refers -- East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and Israeli Arabs -- could also include Lebanon, Syria, and all Iran’s other proxy organizations.

On January 5, 2023, Ziad al-Nakhalah declared that the role model admired above all by Islamic Jihad fighters is Qassem Soleimani. He described Soleimani as a martyr-hero and a brave fighter honored by all the resistance fronts and their offshoots. Soleimani was the Revolutionary Guard commander assassinated by the United States in January 2020. In its publications, Islamic Jihad sets forth its aim to conduct a terror attack to mark the anniversary of his death. At the January gathering, Al-Nakhalah also expressed his esteem for beloved comrade and great commander Karim Younis, who was freed last month after 40 years in prison for the murder of Israeli soldier Avi Bromberg in 1980.<sup>1</sup>

Islamic Jihad’s threats to attack Israel if it did not release Sheikh Saadi, the senior Jenin operative, marked the first time the group conveyed through the media, and in Hebrew, a clear ultimatum with regard to the freeing of a prisoner. Islamic Jihad highlighted Sheikh Saadi’s medical condition and made much of the court’s refusal to photograph his physical state. A declaration by the Jerusalem Brigades on August 1, 2022, stated: “We announce a general mobilization and a heightening of the [operational] alert in response to the call to fulfill [our] duty toward the treacherous enemy that assaulted the great commander Sheikh Bassam al-Saadi and his family a short time ago in Jenin.”

On August 3, Al-Nakhleh proclaimed that “the resistance frameworks in the Gaza Strip are strong and the resistance force has grown and has many capabilities.” He discussed a meeting in Tehran with Iranian foreign minister

Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, and said “the resistance brigades urgently need to unite and coalesce in order to bolster the Islamic resistance of the Palestinian people.” He underlined “the important role and the important place of the Islamic Republic [Iran], Syria, and the Lebanese resistance in supporting the Islamic resistance front.”<sup>2</sup>

Al-Nakhleh’s visit to Iran was not in vain, and may have been deliberately timed. Sheikh Saadi’s arrest appears to have been a pretext for Iran’s proxies to launch a local military operation against Israel. The meeting between Al-Nakhleh and senior Iranian officials was apparently intended to prepare the ground for further wide-scale clashes in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, possibly to include Hamas.

Islamic Jihad is voicing new threats following the killing of the group’s operatives in Jenin, including grandsons of Sheikh Saadi who were themselves well-known fighters. Threats in Hebrew on Facebook include a declaration of revenge: “The sons of Islamic Jihad are coming.” Islamic Jihad’s issuing of warnings in Hebrew is a form of psychological warfare that the group, which receives most of its budget from Tehran, is developing with Iranian assistance.

Islamic Jihad is more than a military organization with a broad pan-Islamic outlook blended with Palestinian nationalism, and it does not operate in a vacuum. Islamic Jihad, together with Hamas and Hezbollah, represent a “resistance axis” that wishes to fashion a new strategic equation vis-à-vis Israel in Iran’s interests. This new equation is essentially a kind of protection racket. Quiet on Israel’s borders, in Jerusalem, and on the West Bank will entail significant concessions and sacrifices regarding Israeli sovereignty and the IDF’s ability to act.

Islamic Jihad’s struggle against Israel is driven by the Iranian desire to heat up the West Bank front, including East Jerusalem, particularly against the backdrop of the approaching Ramadan. Actions by Islamic Jihad have the potential to aggravate the security situation and lead to suspension of Israel’s security cooperation with the Palestinian Authority, as occurred after the Jenin operation. Israeli decision-makers must understand the nature of the struggle and continue to act against Islamic Jihad’s entrenchment as a significant military force in the West Bank. This is essential in order to prevent the “unity of the fronts” that Iran is trying to achieve through the proxy organizations, with Islamic Jihad at the forefront.

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