

The Para-Diplomacy of the Palestinian Islamic Movements towards Iran in Post-Arab Spring Era; A Strategic Connection beyond ideological Chemistry

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to understand how the main Palestinian Islamic Movements remodel their interactions with the Islamic Republic of Iran. This article scrutinises the para-diplomatic activities of the Palestinian Islamic factions governing Gaza toward the Islamic Republic of Iran and the region, identifying phases of rapprochement and divergence that embeds in the contemporary historical context up to the present day. As a basis for relations, I investigate the power aspirations, ideologies, and geopolitical interests of both sides. In particular, the article examines how Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) established and developed para-diplomatic relations with the Iranian theocratic establishment. This side of the Palestinians' foreign relations has been little researched to date. This article's added value lies in its examination of the roots, reasons, and developments of Palestinian Islamic factions' relations with Iran. In doing so, I document that it was not least Israel's policy against Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip and its continued policy of occupation in the West Bank that then led, as this paper shows, to Iran becoming the traditional ally of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, despite political and ideological divergences.¹

Introduction

The emergence of the Palestinian Islamic Movements and their ideologies is a compelling subject, particularly given their role in the Palestinian political terrain since early the 1980s. In February 1979, the inspirational waves of the Islamic Revolution in Iran reached the shores of Gaza. Fathi al-Shiqaqi, a Palestinian activist living in exile in Egypt, was influenced by the idea of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Frustrated with the failure of the Arab nationalist front

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during the Six-Day War in 1967 and the impassivity of the Muslim Brotherhoods towards the Palestinian cause, Al-Shiqaqi authored a book praising Khomeini's ideology of Political Islam (Alavi 2019).

Soon after publishing his book "Khomeini, the Islamic Solution and Alternatives" in 1979, Al-Shiqaqi was arrested in Egypt and expelled from Muslim Brotherhoods. Al-Shiqaqi was inspired not only by Khomeini's Islamic ideas but also by the Revolutionary resistance against its well-equipped adversaries (Alavi 2019, 95). In 1981, Al-Shiqaqi and his comrades established *Saraya al-Quds* (al-Quds brigade) which would become Islamic Jihad military wings. Subsequently the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) emerged as a product of the Six-Day war and the Islamic Revolution in Iran. According to Skare (2021, 38) the centrality of Palestine and the struggle for its liberation holds a historical and Qur'anic dimension for PIJ's founding fathers. The Qur'anic dimension contains the religious aspects of the cause, we shall overview this now. Shortly after the triumph of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini declared the last Friday of Ramadan as *Yom al-Quds* (The day of Jerusalem), calling on all Muslims to demonstrate solidarity with Palestine (Alavi 2019). In other words, the leadership of the Revolution in Iran began the process of the "Islamisation" of the Palestinian cause, aiming to situate the question beyond its Arab-Israeli context. The PIJ founding fathers appreciated that despite the geographical distance. Khomeini treated the Palestinian cause as an internal problem (Alavi 2019, 94), especially during the Iran-Iraq war. Unlike the PLO that later sided with Saddam's Iraq, Al-Shiqaqi described the isolation of Iran as the "war against Islam" (Skare 2021, 41).

As Al-Shiqaqi and the other members of PIJ aspired to liberate Palestine, this support necessarily affected and inspired them, as the success of the revolution did (Skare 2021, 53). Against this backdrop, December 1987 stands out as a turning point in the Palestinian socio-political terrain. Palestinian frustration boiled into action and the first popular uprising known

as Intifada erupted throughout the occupied lands following the killing of four PIJ members by the Israeli armed forces (Alavi 2019).

Following the outburst of the Intifada, Islamic Jihad's key figures were either jailed or involuntarily exiled to Lebanon in 1988. The expulsion of Islamic Jihad's leadership created a new momentum for its leadership to become closer with the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hezbollah. Hatina (2001, 41) argues that with the move to Lebanon and Syria, the ideological link of the Islamic Jihad to Iran as a revolutionary model was further translated into a close political and organisational tie. Soon after moving to Lebanon and Syria, PIJ opened its diplomatic office in Tehran. Since then, PIJ's delegates actively attend political events in Iran, particularly during the annual conferences in Tehran on Palestine.

According to Skare (2021, 107) the exile and subsequent alliances provided the possibility for PIJ militants to participate in the training camps of Hezbollah in Lebanon. This new opportunity and the corresponding coordination of Al-Shiqaqi manifested in close-knit alliances resulting in economic aid and weapons from Iran, sanctuary in Syria, and training camps provided by Hezbollah (Skare 2021, 109). In terms of alliance building and aid, PIJ managed to exploit the exile. After the assassination of al-Shiqaqi in October 1995, his successors, Ramadan Shallah and Ziad al-Nakhala crafted their Iran policy with similar bravado.

Hamas and the Islamic Republic of Iran: A Strategic Enquiry

We turn now to Hamas and what might be called the "Islamisation" of the Palestinian governance. In examining the Palestinian movements, Skare (2021, 144-145) observes that several years before Hamas, the PIJ engaged with armed struggle against Israel and had created a social base in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Inspired by the Islamic revolution in Iran,

PIJ appropriated the discourse of resistance and imbued it with Islamic rather than nationalist or secularist values to distinguish it from other forms of resistance. One of the most important outcomes of this process of “Islamisation” was the formation of the Islamic Resistance Movement, known in Arabic as *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya*: Hamas. The emergence of Islamic Palestinian factions further encouraged the Iranian leadership to deepen its pro-Palestinian stance. The Islamic Republic viewed Palestinian Islamic factions as closer ideologically than the PLO (Alavi 2019). Israel and Iran have been at loggerheads since the revolution in 1979. The Islamic Republic views the state of Israel as its ideological and strategic adversary and therefore welcomes Palestinian movements that reject the concept of the occupation. In 1992, Hamas published a pamphlet entitled the “Holiness of Palestine” which replicated Ayatollah Khomeini’s contention that Palestine is holy to all Muslims (Seliktar and Rezaei 2020, 63). Hamas categorically refuses to recognise the state of Israel and established its military wing, *Ezza-din Qassam* Brigades to launch military operations against the Israeli army throughout the occupied lands. This approach towards the Palestinian cause became the main source of intimacy between Iran and Hamas.

Since the First Intifada in 1987, Iran diverted its attention towards the Palestinian “rejectionist” movements. Tehran soon established political relations with Hamas, only to be followed by the Oslo Accords between the PLO and Israel in 1993. Despite the propaganda from the PLO favouring the Oslo Accords, most Palestinians were frustrated by the PLO's recognition of Israel’s occupation and turned instead towards Hamas and Islamic Jihad. After 1993, Hamas continued its strong electoral showing – beating Fatah in al-Najah student elections in 1996 and again in 1997. In April 1998, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, Hamas’ spiritual leader made a state visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran and was warmly received by its leadership (Alavi 2019). The year 2000 was a turning point in the regional history. After two decades - in compliance with United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 425 – the Israeli army pulled its

troops from south Lebanon and dismantled its militias. Some have attributed Israel's defeat in south Lebanon to Iranian and Syrian support for Hezbollah. According to Khatib and Matar (2014, 73), the liberation of southern Lebanon on May 25, 2000 was a watershed. It was the first time that Israeli troops had been expelled from Arab lands "at the hands of an Arab paramilitary group" since 1948, when the state of Israel was formed (Khatib and Matar 2014, 73). Hezbollah's victory emboldened its Palestinian allies of Hamas and PIJ to intensify their activities and further cement their ties with Iran. Shortly after Hezbollah's triumph in south Lebanon, Israeli provocations kindled a second Palestinian uprising throughout the occupied territories. On September 28, 2000, Ariel Sharon's unwelcome visit to *Haram al-Sharif* – Islam's third holiest site – under heavy security protection by Israeli armed force triggered the Second Intifada and unified the Palestinians as never before.

The peace negotiations proved to be less fruitful than many Palestinians hoped, as the Israeli government failed to comply with the commitments it made within the interim peace accords (such as withdrawing from the occupied territories and not expanding the settlements in the West Bank). Shortly after the Second Intifada began, Iran and Hezbollah exhibited solidarity with the *al-Aqsa* Intifada. Some wounded Palestinians were treated in hospitals in Iran and in April 2001, Ramadan Shallah, the leader of PIJ visited Ayatollah Khamenei who agreed to increase the organisations funding by some 70 percent (Seliktar and Rezaei 2020, 71).

In August 2005 Israel withdrew its armed forces from Gaza. After 38 years, the occupation of Gaza had ended. Led by Hamas, the people of Gaza celebrated and attributed the victory to the defeat of Israel's superior military might. Tamimi (2009, 206-207) argues that the failure of repeated peace negotiations – whether the Oslo Accords, Bush's Road Map, or Sharon's disengagement policy – vindicated Hamas' approach. On January 26, 2006 Hamas gained a landslide victory in Gaza's legislative elections. The 2006 elections became a rocky road for

the PA. Rejecting the perceived corruption of the secular Fatah organisation, Palestinians gave Hamas a reverberating triumph. The outcome of the election was not what the White House was hoping for. Instead of acknowledging the outcomes and endorsing the Palestinian democratic process it had promoted, the Bush administration hurriedly called for an embargo of Hamas and stopped all funding to its government. Ostovar (2016, 170) is well founded when he argues that the vacuum created by its abandonment of financial support for the Hamas-led administration opened the way for Iran to step in. Sustained by a precipitous increase in oil prices, Iran was able to become the leading financial supporter of the Hamas-led government. Also, through its sponsorship of Hamas, Iran obtained another client able to influence the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Palestinian Islamic Movements and Iran in post-Arab Spring Era: Turbulent Moments

The political locus of Hamas altered according to the shifting opportunities in the regional political atmosphere. With the deviations that occurred at the regional level, characterised by the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Tunisia, Hamas contemplated these conversions as a triumph and provision for its own status. Subsequently Hamas political leadership changed its approach toward the “axis of resistance”. It left Syria (which embraced, supported, and trained its military wing) in order to join the Muslim Brotherhood alliance, represented by tripartite of Egypt, Turkey, and Qatar, under pressure from the Global Muslim Brotherhood and the leadership of Hamas abroad (Salah 2017).

The Islamic Republic and its allies were caught off guard when Hamas moved its offices from Syria and endorsed the anti-Assad forces. Nevertheless, the Islamic Republic's authorities avoided any direct criticism of Hamas and maintained the channels of communication (Alavi

2019). This is understandable when we consider that the political leadership of Iran was aware of the central role that Hamas played in Gaza and its anti-Israeli policies, and maintained its commitment to the Palestinian cause. Nevertheless, during the early stages of the Arab Spring, Hamas prioritised its common theological ground with the international Muslim Brotherhood over its anti-Israeli stance with Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah.

It soon became clear that Hamas lost its bet on the collapse of the Assad regime. Instead, in July 2013, Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood was toppled and replaced with a government dominated by the military. Hereafter, General Fatah al-Sisi, the new head of government in Cairo, pressurised Hamas by isolating it economically and politically to purge the country of the Muslim Brotherhood (Alavi 2019). Syria severed its ties with Hamas and Iran reduced its financial support. According to Salah (2017) Hamas faced a risky gorge; it could not return to the “axis of resistance” in the absence of trust that followed its attitude change on regional and internal levels. The internal leadership and the military wing were ashamed of the movement’s political move, which let down those who had embraced it when everyone else had abandoned it (Salah 2017, 571). In October 2013, the deputy chief of Hamas Musa Abu-Marzouk stated that “Khaled Mesha’al was wrong to have raised the flag of the Syrian revolution on his historic return to Gaza at the end of last year” (Alavi 2019, 141). Subsequently, Iran refused to receive Khaled Mesha’al for his role in moving away from the “axis of resistance”. Simultaneously the Hamas military wing, *Ezzadin al-Qassam* Brigade and Iran maintained ties. Israel’s wars on Gaza in 2012 and 2014 marked a turning point in Hamas’ relations with Iran and created a reconciliatory environment for both sides.

In both November 2012 and July 2014, Gaza was heavily bombarded by the Israeli defence forces, and intensive military campaigns ensued. Israel’s aim was to eliminate the Palestinian Islamic movement’s firepower. Nonetheless, repairing relations with Hamas seemed

imperative for Iran in order to guarantee the balance of power against Tel Aviv. Overall, after its support of the Syrian regime, the Islamic Republic estranged many Sunni Arabs that perceived Tehran regional policies as “belligerent sectarian-driven gestures”. Rapprochement with Hamas could enhance Iran’s regional status beyond the sectarian dichotomy within the Sunni world. Meanwhile Hamas faced some regional challenges that limited its relationship with Iran. On a number of occasions, the Egyptian government prevented Hamas officials from travelling to Iran through Cairo. Egypt desires to keep Gaza as its exclusive diplomatic file (Abu Amer 2018). Despite all these challenges, Hamas seemed determined to mend relations with its traditional ally, Iran.

In November 2012, as Iranian-manufactured rockets were fired out of Gaza, large billboards on three major road junctions in the Gaza Strip bore the message "Thank you Iran" in Arabic, English, Hebrew and Farsi. The posters also depicted the Iranian Fajr-5 rockets. It was the first time that there has been such public admission of Iran's role in the arming of the Islamic fighters in the territory (Alavi 2019, 139). Hamas sturdily confronted the Israeli military aggression and utilised all its tools to slow down the Israeli sophisticated war-machine. Over time, the idea that Hamas is still the major Palestinian power, capable and determined to resist against Israel, once again began to gain currency in Iran. The Palestinian resistance in Gaza received public support from various strata of the Iranian state, including the supreme leader, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and the presidency. Both conservative and reformist factions within the Iranian parliament unanimously voiced their strong support for the people of Gaza (Alavi 2019).

On the other side of the Palestinian political domain, PIJ retained its stance within the “axis of resistance”. Following the outbreak of the Syria crisis, PIJ’s leadership declined to sever relations with Damascus and preserved its neutrality. In January 2012, Ramadan Abdullah Shallah and his entourage visited the Iranian supreme leader. During the meeting, Ayatollah

Khamenei referred to the unfolding situation in Syria, stating: “Regarding Syria, if the developments are considered from a broad and comprehensive perspective, it becomes completely clear what plot America has designed for Syria and unfortunately certain countries inside and outside the region are cooperating with America in this plot” (Alavi 2019, 136). In fact, with the election of Shallah, PIJ began to terminate its contact with a number of non-state armed Islamic groups.

Skare (2021, 157) suggests that PIJ’s policy of disconnecting with other jihadi movements in the region demonstrates that the movement became more rationally oriented as its formal connections were with its benefactors, Syria and Iran. In the words of Ramadan Shallah, PIJ adhered to a “principled pragmatism” in order to preserve the alliance of the movement in the Palestinian arena and the region (Skare 2021, 192). This is not to suggest that PIJ has little autonomy in formulating its policies and that it only follows its main benefactor, Iran. Conversely, in the case of Yemen, PIJ pursued an independent path from its traditional allies. As civil war broke out in Yemen, PIJ echoed its obstruction to intervene in the internal affairs of the region and refused to publicly support the Iranian backed Houthis. PIJ even attempted to diversify its fiscal networks beyond Iran, looking for alternative sources of financial support in Turkey and Algeria. This support, however, never exceeded what has been provided by Iran (Skare 2021, 195). Similarly, Hamas has been proactive in widening its regional networking beyond Iran since the beginning of the Arab Spring. In October 2012, Qatar’s Emir became the first head of an Arab state to visit Gaza and since then Hamas enjoys close ties with Doha. In May 2021, Ismail Haniyeh thanked, during a visit he made to the Emir in Doha, Qatar and its people for their popular support for the Palestinian people (Hamas 2021). Commenting on Qatari Emir's donations to Gaza, Ismail Haniyeh stated “We have received with high evaluation the decision of His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, the Emir of the state of Qatar,

for offering \$360 million in humanitarian aid to Gaza in 2021” (Qods International News Agency 2021).

The Palestinian Islamic factions and the Rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia

We now turn to the impacts of rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the region on the Palestinian political landscape, specifically on Palestinian relations with Iran. The main point to be made here is that the Palestinian Islamic factions maintained neutrality over the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is vital to notice that the leadership in Saudi Arabia remained concerned over the prospect of the incorporation of Hamas into the Palestinian government and the ramifications of Hamas close relations with Iran. In October 2019, The Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman and Mahmoud Abbas met in Riyadh and agreed to establish a joint Saudi-Palestinian economic committee. The PA’s finance ministry records show that Saudi Arabia contributed \$132.8 million to the PA between January and August 2019 (Rasgon 2019). For the PA in West Bank, it is vital not to alienate Riyadh as its main regional benefactor and to maintain the balance of diplomatic relations within the region.

On the other side of the spectrum, Saudi Arabia has been increasingly pressurising Hamas. Saudi’s leadership initiated an anti-Hamas campaign on its own territory. Since April 2019 dozens of Saudi citizens, Jordanians and Palestinians (including Hamas’ representative in Saudi Arabia, Mohammed al-Khudari), have been arrested and accused of belonging to and supporting Hamas. According to Abu Amer (2019), since Hamas was formed in the 1980s, its leadership enjoyed good relations with Riyadh for years. Although Saudi authorities never directly funded Hamas, they allowed fundraising to take place on their territory. Nevertheless,

Hamas and Saudi relations were outshined by the Egyptian military coup in 2013 which removed the Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi. Saudi support for the removal of the first democratically elected Egyptian president and Hamas' opposition strained their connection. Feeling increasingly isolated as a result of the Egyptian and Saudi pressure on Gaza, Hamas began to reach out to Iran. Azzam Tamimi (2021) argues that when King Salman ascended to the throne and his son, Mohammed bin Salman, became the kingdom's de facto ruler, things deteriorated for Hamas rapidly. It did not take long for Hamas to learn why: Mohammed bin Salman planned to make peace with Israel. Nevertheless, in hope that Iran-Saudi Arabia recent diplomacy will develop into more robust regional supports for the Palestinians, Hamas and PIJ call for "unity" between the regional rivals, Iran and Saudi Arabia. In a statement issued in May 2021, the Hamas spokesperson claimed, "We hope the talks [between Iran and Saudi Arabia] will succeed, and we expect that this would help stabilize Iran and the whole region, this for sure will help increasing solidarity with the Palestinians." (O'Connor 2021a).

In March 2023, Khalil al-Hayya, Head of Hamas' Arab and Islamic Relations made a public announcement on behalf of Hamas leadership regarding Iranian-Saudi Arabia rapprochement and stated "this is a significant step to unite the Arab and Muslim world, boost security and understanding between the Arab and Muslim nations and achieve stability in the region" (Hamas Public Relations Office 10 March 2023). Welcoming the Iranian-Saudi Arabia ties, the representative of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Iran, Nasser Abu Sharif states the reconciliation pact between Iran and Saudi Arabia has dealt a devastating blow to Israel (Tehran Times 2023). The agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia to restore ties are hailed unanimously by the Palestinian Islamic factions as the deal is seen as a positive step that could enhance stability in the region. For the Palestinian Islamic factions, the agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia will enable the Muslim world to summon collective support for the Palestinian cause beyond the sectarian cliché. On the other side of the spectrum, the deal

between Iran and Saudi Arabia increases hope within the Palestinian street about intra-Palestinian reconciliation. According to Ahmed Majdalani, the Palestinian minister of social development, the agreement between Riyadh and Tehran might help to improve the relationship between Fatah and Hamas (Arab News 2023).

Abraham Accord, Sheikh Jarrah Incident, and the War on Gaza 2021: Underpinning Palestinian Connections with Iran

In January 2020, standing side by side with the Israeli Prime Minister, Donald Trump unveiled details of his vision for the Middle East peace. Trump's 181 pages of plan reversed decades of policy by refraining from endorsing the internationally backed two-state solution. It further recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital, cut millions of dollars in aid to Palestinians, and announced it no longer views Israeli settlements in occupied territory as "inconsistent with international law". Palestinian leaders were absent from the event, having pre-emptively rejected his proposal, citing flagrant bias (The Guardian 2020).

Subsequently the PA cut its ties with the Trump administration and Israel after rejecting the so-called Middle East peace plan. Mahmoud Abbas refused to discuss the plan with Trump by phone and asked for an emergency meeting with the Arab League. However, after Trump unveiled his plan, some Arab states including Bahrain and United Arab Emirates (UAE) appeared, despite historic support for the Palestinians, to prioritise close ties with the U.S. and a shared hostility towards Iran over traditional Arab alliances (France24 2020, 24). In response, Iranian foreign minister, Javad Zarif contacted Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas leader, Ismail Haniyeh to express opposition to the so-called U.S. deal of the century. He reiterated Iran's position backing the Palestinians, and its willingness to exert diplomatic and political effort to support them. As Abu Amer (2020) points out, Iran demonstrated great opposition to the U.S.

deal. Before Zarif's contacts with Abbas and Haniyeh, Esmail Ghaani who replaced Qassem Soleimani as chief of Iran's Quds Force, called Ismail Haniyeh and Ziad al-Nakhala, the leader of PIJ, to voice his rejection of the deal. Ghaani expressed Iran's readiness to work to thwart the deal. In contrast to some Arab regional powers that pursued silence, the Palestinian political elites received political support from Iran.

Like the creak of a sail-rig as a ship begins to turn, a sign of political rapprochement between some Arab states and Israel can prove decisive. A few months after announcing Trump's so-called deal of the century, the foreign ministers of Bahrain and UAE appeared on the Truman balcony of the White House besides Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump, signing a general declaration of principles that the White House named the Abraham Accord in September 2020. The overriding detail of the accord was mainly about how the three states will normalise their ties at all levels including trade, political and cultural relations, tourism, and security. The accord made negligible reference to the fate of the Palestinians. Even some advocates of the accord, like Jeremy Ben Ami, the president of J Street, stated that "It's not conflict resolution and it's not peace, this is a business deal. Israel's decades-old conflict with the Palestinians remains unaddressed with this agreement." (Crowley 2020). In fact, the accord is another step toward the formation of a de facto alliance between some conservative Gulf monarchies and Israel under the supervision of the Trump administration against their common rival, Shiite Iran. The Palestinians expressed their anger over the agreements by launching rockets into Israel from Gaza during the White House ceremony (Crowley 2020).

From my point view, the Abraham accord was a drama replete with Shakespearean twists that has unfolded in full public glare. For many Palestinians, the solidarity of the Arab states of Bahrain and UAE has loosened as national interests and rivalry with Iran come to the fore. The Palestinians caught flatfooted by the accord have criticised and condemned the agreement.

Ahmad Majdalani, social affairs minister of the PA described the agreement as “a stab in the back of the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian people” (Aljazeera 2020a). In the besieged Gaza Strip, Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem said Bahrain’s decision to normalise relations with Israel “represents a grave harm to the Palestinian cause, and it supports the occupation” (Aljazeera 2020a).

Echoing Palestinian sentiments towards the Abraham accord, Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei criticised the initiative and called it a “humiliation”. He stated that “Muslim nations will never accept the humiliation of compromising with the Zionist regime” (Staff 2020). In his public speech, Ayatollah Khamenei stated that the UAE “betrayed the Islamic world and the Palestinians” by normalising ties with Israel (Aljazeera 2020b). The Palestinian factions in Gaza embraced Iran’s political stance against the accord. In December 2020, Hamas and PIJ conducted their first joint military drill. On the eve of the exercise, a large portrait of Iranian military commander General Qassem Soleimani, who was assassinated in January 2020 in a U.S. attack in Baghdad, was erected along Gaza’s main coastal road (al-Mughrabi 2020). Ayatollah Khamenei takes a more radical step by frequently calling for a referendum, after the return of Palestinian refugees, in an obvious attempt to tilt the demographics in favour of the Palestinians. Although under current conditions this approach is unlikely to harvest much support in the region, it morally appeals to the Palestinian streets.

May 2021 became a moment of reaping the whirlwind in East Jerusalem. The Israeli forces stormed Sheikh Jarrah, a tiny neighbourhood in East Jerusalem, attempting to evict Palestinian families. According to Garbett (2021) Israeli Police vehicles, known as “skunk trucks”, were spraying Palestinian homes and shops with putrid water. The water causes stomach pain and skin irritation. These forms of collective punishment aim to stop the growing movement to save Sheikh Jarrah and halt the dispossession of 27 Palestinian families of their homes there.

Nevertheless, Palestinian anger swiftly spread to Gaza and resulted in an all-out war between the Israeli armed forces with Hamas and PIJ that lasted for eleven days.

While it was difficult to voice anti-Israeli opinion in the UAE when the Emirati embassy in Tel Aviv was tweeting congratulatory messages to Israel for its “independence” day (Harb 2021), in response to the war in Gaza, two non-Arab states of Iran and Turkey appeared more vocal against Israeli policies. The relative silence has been led by states that made peace with Israel in the last year of the Trump administration and are now standard bearers of the so-called Abraham Accords (Chulov 2021). While Turkish leaders called on Muslims to take a clear stance on Gaza (Reuters 2021a), Ayatollah Khamenei urged Muslim states to support the Palestinians financially and militarily (Reuters 2021b). Following the end of the Israeli war on Gaza, Ziad al-Nakhala and Ismail Haniyeh sent letters of appreciation to Ayatollah Khamenei. In his letter, al-Nakhala stated “Your continuous, uninterrupted, clear support in all areas has played the greatest, most considerable role in the *Sayf* (Sword) of al-Quds Operation and its achievements.” (Tehran Times 2021a).

Although much attention is given to the roots of wars in Gaza, far less is known about the impact of Palestinian-Iranian relations on the *modus operandi* of the conflicts. Iranian support of Gaza has enabled the Palestinian movements to enhance their military capabilities vis-à-vis the fully equipped Israel’s Defence Forces (IDF), despite having no regular army. Congratulating the authorities in Gaza, Iran’s Revolutionary Guard issued a statement at the end of the war, underlining that “The intifada has gone from using stones to powerful, precise missiles” (Reuters 2021b). Referring to the barrage of rockets fired at Israel, Hamas “representative in Iran, Khaled al-Qaddoumi, attributed the “Palestinians triumph to the support provided by Iran to the Palestinian resistance, including rocket technology” (Tehran Times 2021b). PIJ’s military wing, *Al-Quds* Brigade spokesperson Abu Hamza thanked Iran

and “forces of axis of resistance” in televised remarks and described them as “true supporters and patrons in strengthening the capabilities of the Palestinians in Gaza” (O’Connor 2021b).

While the Palestinian Islamic movements in Gaza face regional isolation, the Iranian government invited the leaderships of Hamas and PIJ to president Ebrahim Raisi’s inauguration in August 2021. The seating arrangements of the Iranian presidential inauguration attracted global attention. During the ceremony, Iranian media showed the European Union (EU) representative, Enrique Mora, seated in the second row, behind the leaders of Hamas and PIJ who were positioned in the first row (Rasmussen 2021). Moreover, in October 2021, at the invitation of the Iranian leadership, both PIJ and Hamas delegates attended the 35th Islamic Unity Conference in Tehran and delivered a speech at the opening ceremony (Mehr News Agency 2021). Such diplomatic gestures by the Islamic Republic demonstrate the weight of Hamas and PIJ within Iran’s political calculations and more importantly boost Hamas and PIJ’s political confidence at the regional level. On 19 June 2023, the Israeli troops raided the Jenin Refugee camps, using combat helicopters, killing five Palestinians including a 15-year-old boy. Violence in the West Bank territory occupied by Israel during the 1967 Middle East war has worsened since early last year when Israel began mounting repeated army raids after a spate of Palestinian attacks (Guardian 2023). Coinciding with the Israeli raid on Jenin Refugee Camps, the leaders of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad visited Iran and were greeted by the Iranian president, Ebrahim Raisi and the Supreme Leader, Seyed Ali Khamenei, showcasing Iran’s support for the Palestinians in Gaza and Jenin (Al-Monitor 2023).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined how Palestinian Islamic factions formulate their ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran. This examination suggests that Palestinian-Iranian relations have been determined by the character of their respective political specifications, ideologies, regional politics, and most importantly, their stance on Israel. For the Palestinian Islamic factions, survival of their organisations and maintaining the Palestinian cause are the priorities. To this end, their leaderships design their ties with regional and external powers. Intra-Arab politics and the kaleidoscopic pattern of partnerships in the region affect these ties.

When assessing the Palestinian Islamic factions' relations with Iran, we also see that both Hamas and PIJ pursue foreign policies that are autonomous from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although Hamas and PIJ might be characterised as "junior partners" within Iran's "axis of resistance", both have demonstrated their political sovereignty from the Islamic Republic throughout the last decade, particularly during the Arab Spring era. More importantly, the Palestinian Islamic factions hail the restoration of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This is because the Palestinian Islamic factions define their interests beyond Iran's windows and acknowledge their interest to forge close relations with the Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and neighboring Egypt.

Finally, the Palestinian Islamic factions proved that they are able to utilise their ties with Iran as a bargaining-chip in their interactions with the Arab states and the Palestinian Authority in West bank by tilting towards Iran when they are cold-shouldered by their Arab brethren and by the Palestinian Authority governing West Bank. The evidence synthesised above shows that

the nature of Palestinian Islamic factions' interconnections with Iran is further fashioned by how the state of Israel approaches the Palestinian nation in Gaza and West Bank. The incessant Israeli policies against the Palestinians have brought them closer to Iran. The endless military operations in Gaza and the Refugee camps in Jenin in north of West Bank and the continuous expansion of settlements in West Bank on the one hand, and Iran's strident anti-Israel posture and its uncompromising position on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the other, further solidify the Palestinian Islamic Movements' affiliation with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although the Israeli operations are often designed to put pressure on Hamas and PIJ, they further motivate them to consolidate their ties with Iran and its regional allies in the Middle East.

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