

Israel Must Target the "Head of the Octopus" - Iran

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 16.01.2024

Israel must take action against Iran as part of its post-Oct. 7 updated doctrine of security. To protect its borders, Israel can no longer be content with fighting Iran's proxies, but rather must target Iran itself, in keeping with that country's critical role in the destabilization of Israel's security.

Since Oct. 7, an ongoing dispute has emerged as to the extent of Iran's involvement in Hamas's fatal attack, with an emphasis on the question of whether Iran knew of the attack in advance and took part in planning it. Even if Tehran was not aware of the attack, its responsibility for the massacre and the horrific terror committed by Hamas is clear to all. In point of fact, Hamas would not have been able to carry out the attack without the systematic assistance it has been receiving from Tehran for decades.

Some of the information disclosed since the attack has served to reveal with greater clarity the extent of Iran's responsibility and involvement. First the heads of Hamas's military wing had been in regular contact with the heads of Iran's security apparatus, sharing with them their plans for taking actions against Israel. In an interview on Iranian media on November 8, Esmail Kowsari, currently a member of the Iranian Majles' Foreign Affairs and Security Committee, and formerly a high-ranking commander in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (among other positions, he served as head of the IRGC forces in Tehran), stressed the part taken by the head of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani (who was eliminated by the U.S. in January 2020), in the planning of Hamas's attacks.

Kowsari stated that the Head of Hamas's military Wing, Mohammad Deif, had planned many of Hamas's operation in concert with Soleimani, and that accordingly, "The capability required for that operation is not a matter of a day or two, but rather goes back several years." Beyond the planning, Kowsari mentioned Tehran's responsibility for building up Hamas's force, saying that "The resistance front empowered Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in Gaza, and as a result Hamas carried out this operation with high capabilities." This intensive collaboration continued even after Soleimani's elimination and survived the crisis

which took place in the Iran-Hamas relationship following Hamas's support of the Syrian insurgents. As may be recalled, in the first few years following the outbreak of the war in Syria, Hamas relocated its command posts from Syria to Qatar, and terrorists from its military wing even took part in the battles, fighting at the side of the rebels against Assad's forces.

Yet Hamas later changed its policy, and did so to an even greater extent once it became clear that Assad had managed to survive thanks to the support he had received from Russia and Iran. The relationship between Assad and Hamas has not been fully restored since (despite the historic meeting held in Damascus between Assad and top Hamas officials Khalil al-Hayya and Osama Hamdan in October 2022). However, it appears that the collaboration between Iran and Hamas's military wing persisted over the years, despite Iran's attempt to undermine Hamas in Gaza, primarily by establishing a competing organization, Al-Sabireen, in 2014.

Thus, in a paper published in December, Leila Seurat, a researcher of the Palestinian sphere from the research institute "The Arab Centre for Research and Political Studies" who had demonstrated her access to Hamas by holding interviews with the heads of the organization in Gaza and Lebanon, explained that the top officials of Hamas's military wing, most notably the wing's deputy commander Marwan Issa, have over the years maintained a strong relationship with Iran, notwithstanding the damage caused to Iran-Hamas relations by the war in Syria. As part of that relationship, she notes, "Issa would regularly visit Tehran whenever he was able."

Moreover, statements issued by Tehran have also helped in better understanding its crucial contribution to the development of Hamas's tunnel system. In an interview with Iranian media in mid-November, Iranian commentator Amir Moussaoui, who is allegedly an IRGC official and is considered one of the regime's principal mouthpieces in the Arab media, recounted that Soleimani had provided Hamas with advanced technologies so that the organization could enhance its subterranean system. According to him, Hamas was able to enhance that system owing to Soleimani's direct supervision of the technological equipment provided to Hamas by the Qods Force, thanks to which Hamas successfully constructed a sophisticated subterranean system across Gaza. In this context, he explained that the Hamas terrorists constructed the tunnels to be resistant to attempts to flood them with either poisonous gases or water.

Furthermore, in early January the IDF revealed terrorism infrastructure and components for the manufacture and development of precision rockets of Hamas, carried out under Iranian guidance in Darj Tufah in the Gaza Strip. This revelation makes it clear that Iran has been smuggling advanced knowledge into the Gaza Strip, in the form of training courses provided by it to Hamas and Islamic Jihad experts in its territory (as publicly stated by the Islamic Jihad's representative in Tehran, Nasser Abu-Sharif, in an interview with the media in November 2018). The training provided in Tehran to Mohammed Zouari (who was eliminated in 2016), one of the significant founders of Hamas's UAV array, also demonstrates Iran's determination to export its knowledge to Hamas in Gaza, with the aim of supplementing the tunnel system, which has been facing certain difficulties after El-Sisi's Egypt has been taking action against it to a certain extent.

The Iran-Hamas relationship is not one of authority, but rather a strategic partnership, in which Tehran equips Hamas with the best of technologies and weaponry available to it. As part of the new security doctrine which Israel is now called upon to formulate, Israel cannot tolerate Iran's subversive influence in the Gaza Strip. Therefore, as a complementary act to Israeli military control of the Gaza Strip and to the establishment of a thwarting array on or near the Philadelphi Route, it must take direct action against Iran. This is due to the fact that Iran forms the "head of the octopus" and the principal supplier which trains, funds, arms and equips Hamas; and past experience has shown that it will soon strive to rebuild Hamas after the war is over.

Accordingly, and in light of Iran's additional responsibility for promoting terrorism on Israel's northern border, Israel must adopt a new and current strategy as self-defense against the activity being promoted by Iran striving to destroy Israel by encircling it and subjecting it to an untenable significant threat. The purpose of that strategy will be to prevent the rise and establishment of a militia backed by Iran on Israel's borders. Within that scope, alongside its ongoing efforts in the Gaza Strip, Israel must also directly strike within Iran, against the capabilities conferred by Iran on its proxies in the region, while also taking further action against the Qods Force. Thus, it must carry out targeted strikes against Iran's UAV capabilities and missile program, on the well-founded assumption that any weaponry currently in Iranian hands will eventually come into the possession of its proxies across the region.

Concurrently with that course of action, Israel can no longer permit Hamas's continued funding by Iran. Therefore, alongside the policy of sanctions, which has proved to be ineffective in completely preventing the continued Iranian financing, Israel must cut off the financial resources used by Iran to remit the funding, including money changers used as intermediaries in Hawala transactions with changers from the Gaza Strip.

The proposed Israeli intensive action against Iran is not expected to bring about a war with Iran; first, because Tehran would fear that such war would be playing into Israel's hands since it would legitimize an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Second, in light of the prolonged crisis of legitimacy suffered by the Iranian regime, it is highly doubtful that it would willingly choose to enter a war which could risk its domestic survival. Third, Tehran understands that, in the scenario of a war with Israel, the U.S. would find it difficult not to intervene and would be forced to join the fray due to Israel's strategic importance for the American policy in the region and due to the shared values forming the foundation of the deeply entrenched alliance between Israel and the U.S.