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**Is Palestinian Islamic Jihad Trying to Drag the Gaza Strip into a War
against Israel?**

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Over the past year, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) has intensified its independent military action from the Gaza Strip against Israel. Clearly the organization has adopted a bolder and more independent approach toward Israel, and unlike in the past, its activities are not fully coordinated with Hamas and at times are even undertaken contrary to Hamas's position. This conduct by PIJ raises a dual question: will the organization's independent activities and its attempts to define new rules of the game force Israel to respond in a way that will lead to another round of violence in the Gaza Strip, which this time will focus on targeting and deterring Islamic Jihad? And, on an internal level, will PIJ activity spark a violent confrontation with Hamas, as part of Hamas's efforts to curb its domestic rival, due to its desire to reach an arrangement with Israel and avoid another round of fighting against Israel at the present time? For its part, Israel would like Hamas take action to restrain PIJ in order to avoid another round of fighting. However, it is possible that Israel will have no other choice but to take targeted action itself against Islamic Jihad provocations – even at the price of risking another round of fighting in the Gaza Strip.

Over the past year, the Islamic Jihad organization has intensified its independent military actions from the Gaza Strip against Israel. Provocations included rocket fire toward Israeli communities, including toward central Israel, and sniper shots at IDF soldiers along the Gazan border. The organization's involvement in directing activity during the violent civilian incidents along the Israel-Gaza security barrier is also evident. Clearly the organization has adopted a bolder and more independent approach toward Israel, and unlike in the past, its activities are not fully coordinated with Hamas and at times are even undertaken contrary to Hamas's position. Among the reasons for this is Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) leaders want to create a new deterrence equation vis-à-vis Israel. Furthermore, some of the organization's actions are carried out at the initiative of senior local activists, at times against the backdrop of internal conflicts. Indeed, the change in the organization's leadership and the appointment of Ziad al-Nakhla to replace Ramadan Shalah has contributed to the radicalization of PIJ positions and to the implementation of an aggressive policy that challenges Hamas's line in the Gaza Strip.

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The disapproval among Hamas leaders regarding PIJ's operational independence against Israel has intensified, because it works against Hamas interests. For its part, Israel would like Hamas take action to restrain Islamic Jihad in order to avoid another round of fighting. However, it is possible that Israel will have no other choice but to take targeted action itself against Islamic Jihad provocations – even at the price of risking another round of fighting in the Gaza Strip.

An examination of Islamic Jihad's involvement in a series of attacks against Israel reveals a list of causes and explanations for the organization's independent actions. For example, on October 27, 2018, as a result of a local argument between two military commanders prompted by the dismissal of one and the appointment of the other in his place, the dismissed commander sent one of his loyal soldiers to launch rockets toward Israel with the objective of placing his replacement in a difficult position. The explanation of the incident to Israel, whereby the rockets were fired under Iranian orders, proved to be erroneous. Another example of a military attack at the local initiative of senior Islamic Jihad commanders in the Gaza Strip – testimony to their increasing self-confidence about their military power in Gaza – was the sniper shooting of an IDF officer in January 2019 at the order of Abu Bahaa al-Atta, commander of Islamic Jihad's military wing in northern Gaza. The sniper fire was in retaliation for the death of civilians during the demonstrations along the security barrier. The rocket launch on April 28, 2019 toward central Israel, which landed in the sea, was likewise carried out on al-Atta's orders, and he was specifically designated as responsible for the attack in an unusual announcement by an IDF spokesman, who stated that Abu Bahaa al-Atta was behind the intention to commit this terrorist attack against Israel.

The personnel changes in the PIJ leadership contributed to the radicalization of the organization's policy against Israel. In September 2018, Ziad al-Nakhla, who for many years was responsible for the organization's military arm and was in charge of the relations between Islamic Jihad in Syria and Iran, was appointed to head PIJ, replacing Ramadan Shalah. Since his appointment, al-Nakhla has dictated a more hawkish and aggressive policy than his predecessor, and his goal is to achieve a standing for his

organization equal to that of Hamas. Specifically, he aims for PIJ to be seen as the organization that leads the military resistance against Israel, defying Hamas's military policy against Israel, which al-Nakhla considers too soft. In this vein, the organization has increased its military forces in the Gaza Strip, which now total about six thousand combatants, who are deployed in Gaza and are equipped with rockets and advanced Iranian ordnance. Iran and the organization's leadership intend for this situation to enable Islamic Jihad to run an effective campaign and increase its military actions against Israel. Under Ziad al-Nakhla, PIJ wants to create a new equation versus Israel, whereby there will be retaliation in kind not only for injuries and fatalities among its own ranks, but also for any civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip at the hands of Israel, including during demonstrations at the security barrier. This change, besides constituting escalation against Israel, also challenges Hamas's exclusive hegemony as the organization responsible for managing the military campaign in Gaza. From Islamic Jihad's point of view, proving its military "resistance" earns support among Gazans, including among rank-and-file Hamas activists who are in favor of more aggressive tactics. On the other hand, this Islamic Jihad policy sparks tension among members of the military wings of both organizations. It also creates a sense that Hamas is losing control over Islamic Jihad activities, and as far as Hamas is concerned, this tests the limits of the understandings between them with regard to the hierarchy between the organizations in the Gaza Strip in general and against Israel in particular.

PIJ relies completely on Iran, which funds most of its budget and supplies the organization with equipment and combat materiel, and grants it state sponsorship. In exchange, the organization operates according to their common goals. Periodic meetings between top Iranian leaders and Islamic Jihad leaders reflect this closeness, as do the mutual declarations of support, such as the declaration of December 30, 2018, after a meeting between Ali Shamkhani, chairman of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarif, and Ziad al-Nakhla; the meeting ended with a declaration of Iranian support of and commitment to the Palestinian people. Concurrently, Iran is also tightening its ties with Hamas, mainly with its military wing, and is exploiting the fact that today, Hamas is left with almost no other significant allies in the Middle East arena, apart from Egypt and Qatar. Egypt serves as the Gaza Strip's sole opening to the outside world and as its main broker with Israel, while Qatar supplies Hamas with economic assistance. Of the two organizations, it is clear that Iran considers Islamic Jihad a more loyal partner and easier to influence as per Iran's own interests when needed. The current tensions between Iran and the United States in the Gulf have also triggered threats from Nasrallah that, in the event of deterioration into a military conflict between the two, Israel will be attacked by Iran's agents in the region. This implies that the tension in the region increases the possibility of a confrontation from the

Gazan arena, and Islamic Jihad is the key player that is likely to be called upon to respond to such a directive.

Since to date Hamas has not actively restrained intensifying Islamic Jihad military activities in Gaza, Israel faces a dilemma about how it should neutralize PIJ activities and thwart its attempts to dictate new rules of the game, without countermeasures escalating into an all-out confrontation in the Gaza Strip. Such a confrontation can be expected to include Hamas and to disrupt the intensive contacts aimed at promoting an arrangement between Hamas and Israel, which are conducted through Egyptian mediation and with the assistance of United Nations Special Coordinator Nickolay Mladenov. This test may come soon. The question is: will Hamas take preemptive measures to prevent Islamic Jihad's independent activities – even though such action could be damaging to its image as “leading the resistance” – before Israel will be forced to launch a targeted strike against it in the Gaza Strip? And if Israel does act the question is whether Hamas will contain the damage, or act as the leader of “the resistance” and launch a wide scale round of fighting against Israel.

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