

The Palestinian Resistance Axis Converges with the Iran-Hezbollah Axis

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The escalation in multiple arenas over the course of Passover demonstrated the convergence of the Palestinian resistance axis, which relies on Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, with the Iran-Hezbollah axis. The timing of the escalation is also directly connected to the internal crisis in Israel, and reflects increased temerity by Israel's enemies and their attempt to test whether its resilience has narrowed to the extent that they have an opportunity to change the deterrence equation. In light of the confluence of these elements, the Israeli government must act to reduce the social polarization and tension and calm the Palestinian arena, by upholding in practice its commitment to the status quo on the Temple Mount. Thus will Israel be able to focus on three areas of activity: restoring the rules of the game vis-à-vis Hezbollah in Lebanon, while reexamining the "mutual deterrence equation" that prevents Israel from operating against Hamas's terror infrastructure in Lebanon; stopping Iran's march to a nuclear capability, its consolidation in the northern arena, and its efforts to gain control over the Palestinian struggle in Israel; and undermining Hamas's growing status in the Palestinian arena.

The escalation in the Palestinian arena during Passover and the month of Ramadan in 2023 was sparked by the clashes on April 5 between the Israel Police and violent Palestinians in the al-Aqsa mosque. Graphic photos multiplied online of forced evacuations of the young men – most of whom belonged to the student movement of Hamas and managed to sneak into the Temple Mount without authorization, apparently seeking to fulfill the commandment of *itikaf* (a Ramadan custom of excessive devotion to the spirit of the month of fasting, which requires remaining overnight within mosque walls in order to focus on religious concerns). The response of the

Palestinian “resistance” was a barrage of 34 rockets launched the next day from southern Lebanon – the largest barrage since the Second Lebanon War. In addition, rockets were launched from the Gaza Strip, and terror attacks were carried out on roads in the West Bank. Hamas lauded the launch of rockets from areas controlled by Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, while Hezbollah for its part stated that although it favored the launches, they occurred without its knowledge.

In mid-March, prior to these events, Hamas deputy chairman and West Bank commander Saleh al-Arouri warned Israel about likely scenarios during Ramadan, and hinted there would be an escalation that would include an attack from Lebanon. Hamas prepared its rocket launch infrastructure in Lebanon in advance, and waited for the right timing to strike. Jews visiting the Temple Mount during Ramadan, and incidents between the Israel Police and worshippers at al-Aqsa Mosque can readily ignite action and generate intra-Muslim unity against Israeli policy in the most religiously and nationally sensitive compound.

There are several facts that contradict the narrative that Hezbollah was not a partner to the Hamas decision to launch rockets from southern Lebanon toward northern Israel. It is impossible that Hezbollah would not be aware of rocket launchers positioned and hidden in southern Lebanon; in the same context, it is unlikely that Hamas acted independently in this region without the approval of Hezbollah and the knowledge of Iran. In fact, media outlets that focus on Iran reported that Iran and Hezbollah knew ahead of time about the rocket launches from southern Lebanon and gave advanced guarantees that Hezbollah would support rocket launches from this region in the event of Israel’s “desecration” of al-Aqs. A Lebanese website revealed a meeting at the Iranian Embassy in Beirut on April 6, the evening after the rockets were launched from Lebanon into northern Israel, between the commander of the Iranian Quds Force, Esmail Qaani, the head of the Hamas political bureau Ismail Haniyeh and his deputy Saleh al-Arouri, senior officials from Islamic Jihad, and Lebanese actors closely connected to Hezbollah. It also reported that the parties dined together to break the Ramadan fast and that “the meal became an operations room for

coordinating additional actions.” Two days later Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah met with a delegation of Hamas leaders led by Hamas political bureau head Ismail Haniyeh. The official Hezbollah website reported that the parties discussed recent developments in the Palestinian arena, including the events at al-Aqsa. It is hard to imagine such meetings taking place had Hamas breached negotiated understandings with Hezbollah.

The multi-arena event included terror and violence in Jerusalem, terror against Israeli roads and settlements in the West Bank, rockets and shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles from the Gaza Strip, the salvo from southern Lebanon, and rockets launched from the Syrian Golan Heights. The underlying rationale is the convergence of the axes: the Palestinian resistance axis, led by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, with the Iran-Hezbollah axis. This convergence has several layers:

- a. Hezbollah’s conclusion that it can expand the power equation vis-à-vis Israel by setting new rules of the game on the northern border, while remaining below the threshold of escalation to war, as long as it acts via Palestinian proxies.
- b. Calculations by Hezbollah and Iran that they can act in this manner based on their perception that Israel is not capable of waging war on all fronts simultaneously, due to a faulty assessment of Israeli power, particularly in light of internal developments: a divided nation, refusal (non-volunteering) for reserve military service, and erosion of the image of Prime Minister Netanyahu, from a strong to a weak leader who does not control his government.
- c. The strong desire to make Israel pay a price for the ongoing “campaign between the wars” against Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria (especially after the killing of two Iranian Revolutionary Guard officers, at least two Hezbollah agents, and the assassination of a senior Palestinian Islamic Jihad official in Syria).
- d. A drive to halt normalization processes between Israel and the Arab world, while simultaneously promoting normalization between Iran and its satellite state Syria with the Arab world.

- e. Recoiling of the US administration from considering any confrontation in the Middle East, especially while the war in Ukraine is ongoing, and while its relations with the right wing government in Israel grow increasingly tense.

Hamas has scored several significant achievements in this round of escalation. The organization leveraged events on the Temple Mount to dramatically increase the scope of attacks and took complete control of the Palestinian and regional agenda, while demonstrating the irrelevance of the Palestinian Authority. This advance occurred notwithstanding the summit meetings held recently in Aqaba, Jordan and Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, which aimed to coordinate moves to prevent escalation. The success of Hamas in launching rockets from Lebanon at Israel raises its profile and increases its support in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, while the central stream of the Fatah movement, which remains loyal to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, continues to see its status decline. As such, Hamas, with Hezbollah sponsorship, is entrenching itself in an additional arena beyond the Gaza Strip.

The initiator and leader of the escalated armed struggle against Israel in the last several months is Saleh al-Aroui, who is connected to and even identified with the Iran-Hezbollah axis in Lebanon. The rise in public admiration for him joins the strengthening of the Iran-oriented camp within Hamas against the camp led by Yahya Sinwar, the head of Hamas in Gaza, who advocates reliance on relations with Egypt, and the overseas leadership of the organization, which has a Qatari orientation. Hamas and Islamic Jihad drawing closer to the Iran-Hezbollah axis assumes additional significance in light of regional trends, including rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia based on Chinese mediation, which will likely lead to the end of the war with the Houthis in Yemen; improved Saudi and Egyptian relations with the Assad regime, which are likely to lead to Syria rejoining the Arab League at the summit meeting in Riyadh in May; and the challenges in Israel-Jordan and Israel-Egypt relations resulting from Israeli policy in the Palestinian arena.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The escalation in multiple arenas illustrates the convergence of the Palestinian axis, which relies on Hamas and Islamic Jihad, with the Iran-Hezbollah axis, which seeks to gain control of the Palestinian struggle in Israel, as per its needs, while at the same time expanding its response to Israeli attacks against Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria by encouraging and strengthening Palestinian terror against Israel (by linking the arenas and smuggling arms and money). The timing of the escalation is directly connected to the internal crisis in Israel and reflects increased temerity by its enemies, and their attempt to examine whether Israel's resilience has weakened, creating an opportunity to change the rules of the game.

The convergence of the axes has several aims, including:

- a. Limiting Israel to operations within its own borders by increasing security instability and terror within its territory, in order to allow continued consolidation of the Iran-Hezbollah axis in the northern arena and removal of obstacles from Iran's path to attain nuclear capability and at the same time reducing the concerns about Israeli attempts to prevent it.
- b. Strengthening the Lebanon-based militant wing of Hamas that is establishing a terror infrastructure under the Hezbollah deterrence umbrella, so that it can instigate terror attacks in the West Bank, Jerusalem, and elsewhere in Israel and from southern Lebanon, and overcome the Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip led by Yahya Sinwar, which is focused on reconstruction of Gaza and subject to Egyptian influence.
- c. Expediting the end of the era of the Palestinian Authority in its current form.
- d. Stirring up Arab citizens of Israel regarding the Israeli government's conduct in the al-Aqsa compound, in order to cause upheaval in the Arab street in Israel.
- e. Harming normalization processes between Israel and Arab states and causing fissures in Israel's peace agreements with Jordan and Egypt.

If the Israeli government's policy of containment continues, its enemies will continue to try to dictate the rules of the game. If the agents of chaos within the Israeli government are not restrained and continue to fan tension flames on the Temple Mount and in the Palestinian arena, in parallel with the internal struggle over democracy, the Shiite axis may gain control over the Palestinian resistance axis and lead to provocative and challenging joint actions against Israel.

Accordingly, the Israeli government must reduce polarization and tension within Israeli society, perceived by enemies of Israel as undermining its ability to confront them in all arenas. At the same time, Israel must ease the tension in the Palestinian arena, adhere to the status quo on the Temple Mount, as per the decision reached regarding the last ten days of Ramadan, and continue in the efforts to strengthen the Palestinian Authority and the security coordination. In this way Israel will be able to focus on the three levels, namely: restoring the rules of the game vis-à-vis Hezbollah in Lebanon, while reexamining the "mutual deterrence equation" that prevents Israel from operating against Hamas's terror infrastructure in Lebanon; stopping Iran's march to a nuclear capability, its consolidation in the northern arena, and its efforts to gain control over the Palestinian struggle in Israel; and undermining Hamas's growing status in the Palestinian arena.

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