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International Institute
for Counter-Terrorism
With the Support of Keren Daniel

THE IRAN – PALESTINE LINKAGE

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15/12/2013

ABSTRACT

The controversial Geneva deal brought to the fore the linkage between Israel's peace negotiations with the Palestinians and Teheran's nuclear project.

If in the past U.S and European leaders claimed the lack of progress in the Israeli - Palestinian peace negotiations is the stumbling block in advancing the undoing of the Iranian nuclear project, recently it was Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who warned that the best efforts to achieve peace "will come to naught if Iran achieves a nuclear bomb."

This article presents a historical overview of Teheran regime's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which confirms that there is a linkage between Iran and Palestine: the more successful the strategy of strengthening PA's moderate leaders and advancing the peace negotiations between the Palestinians and Israel, the greater Iran's motivation to sabotage it through violence and terrorism.

The article offers some general recommendations how to transform the linkage into a positive one.

* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

During the last years, when finally more political and economic pressure was put on the Teheran regime, the lack of progress in the Israeli - Palestinian peace negotiations was presented by U.S and European leaders as the stumbling block in advancing the undoing of the Iranian nuclear project.

During their first meeting in the White House in May 2009, President Obama said to PM Netanyahu: “[if] there is a linkage between Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process...[to] the extent that we can make peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis – then I actually think it strengthens our hand in the international community in dealing with a potential Iranian threat.”¹

Netanyahu argued the opposite: "I've always said there's not a policy linkage between pursuing simultaneously peace between Israel and the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world, and to trying to deal with removing the threat of a nuclear bomb...It would help, obviously, unite a broad front against Iran if we had peace between Israel and the Palestinians. And conversely, if Iran went nuclear, it would threaten the progress towards peace and destabilize the entire area, and threaten existing peace agreement."

In an address to Herzliya Conference in February 2011, Britain's Defense Secretary Liam Fox claimed that Israel could bolster the international campaign to forestall Iran's nuclear program by pursuing peace with the Palestinians. "The United Kingdom is pushing for stronger sanctions to influence Iran, but the importance of the Middle East peace process should not be overlooked"²

Asked by *The Forward* journalist J.J. Goldberg if American officials made the connection between Iran and the Palestinians in his talks with the administration, Prof. Uzi Arad, former Chairman of Israel's National Security Council, replied: "That kind of linkage is done at the highest level... Netanyahu did not have to satisfy the Palestinian positions. He needed to satisfy the Americans. It is not useful to have a stalemate on the Palestinian issue while there's a

¹ Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel, *The White House Office of the Press Secretary*, May 18, 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-President-Obama-and-Israeli-Prime-Minister-Netanyahu-in-press-availability

² " Britain: Israel-Palestinian peace could help weaken Iran," *Haaretz citing Reuters*, February 6, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/britain-israel-palestinian-peace-could-help-weaken-iran-1.341672>

stalemate on the [larger regional] process.”³

On the background of the November 2013 Geneva deal between Iran and the P5 + 1, Gary Samore, former White House coordinator for arms control and weapons of mass destruction stressed "the level of distrust and anxiety among Israeli officials over the deal" he felt during his recent visit to Israel.⁴ Veteran Israeli defense commentator Ron Ben-Yishai recently reported that “Israel’s diplomatic-security establishment” believes the Obama administration is leading the Middle East to “catastrophe” by seeking to avoid conflict at all costs and are inclined to let Iran go nuclear.⁵

The controversial Geneva deal brought again to the fore the linkage between Israel's peace negotiations with the Palestinians and Teheran's nuclear project.

This time it was Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who warned on December 8 in his speech to the Saban Forum that the best efforts to achieve peace “will come to naught if Iran achieves a nuclear bomb" and if this happens it could “even undermine the peace deals we have with two of our neighbors – Egypt and Jordan." Netanyahu had always claimed that the Iranian nuclear threat should be kept separate from the conflict with the Palestinians.⁶

The U.S. ambassador to Israel played down the possible “linkage” between the two diplomatic processes. “There is no connection between these two issues,” Dan Shapiro told Army Radio.⁷

A quick historic overview proves that the Tehran regime strived to derail at any cost the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations since their inception.

³ J.J. Goldberg, "Talking Iran, Palestine With Top Hawk Uzi Arad," July 22, 2012, at <http://blogs.forward.com/forward-thinking/159760/talking-iran-palestine-with-top-hawk-uzi-arad/#ixzz2nQuIn5sw>

⁴ Gary Samore, "Israeli angst," *Iran Matters, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, December 5, 2013, at <http://iranmatters.belfercenter.org/blog/israeli-angst>

⁵ J.J. Goldberg, "On Iran, Israeli Intel and Politicos Part Ways," *The Forward*, December 8, 2013.

⁶ Zvi Bar'el, " " Netanyahu using Iran as another excuse to put off peace with Palestinians," *Haaretz*,

⁷ Lazar Berman and Rebecca Shimoni Stoil, "US ambassador rejects talk of Iran-Palestinian ‘linkage’" *Times of Israel*, at <http://www.timesofisrael.com/us-ambassador-rejects-talk-of-iran-palestinian-linkage/> December 9, 2013.

When Washington sponsored the Madrid Conference of October 1991, beginning the Arab-Israeli negotiation process, Iran perceived it as a threat to itself and responded by convening a parallel conference in Tehran. At the closing of the conference, the regime decided to support the "Palestinian resistance" and establish a high-level committee to unite radical organizations hostile to negotiations with Israel and prepared to continue the struggle in an Islamic front under Iranian leadership.⁸

After the Madrid Peace Conference of October 1991, Iran began a spate of deadly attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets.⁹

Iran provided weapons and training for Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Support of the rejectionist and radical Palestinians is one of the few issues where Iran's ideological-revolutionary and national-pragmatic interests coincide.

Hamas' response to the Oslo process has been manifest in the attempted establishment of a broad rejectionist front together with other Palestinian groups and the use of terrorism or - in Hamas terminology – jihad. The attacks that were carried out by Hamas inside Israel in April 1994 coincided with the talks that preceded the signing by Israel and the PLO of the Cairo agreement. Attacks perpetrated in July and August of 1995 coincided with the discussions concerning the conduct of elections in the Territories.¹⁰

Attacks perpetrated by Islamist activists proved crucial in determining the pace and direction of the Israeli-Palestinian political process. The attacks cultivated doubts among Israelis concerning Palestinians' genuine intentions as well as concerning the Palestinian Authority's ability to

⁸ Ely Karmon, "Counterterrorism Policy: Why Tehran Starts and Stops Terrorism?" *Middle East Quarterly*, December 1998, Vol. V, No. 4, pp. 35-44, at <http://www.meforum.org/427/counterterrorism-policy>.

⁹ These included: a failed bazooka attack against an employee of the Israeli consulate in Istanbul (Jan. 1992); the suicide car bomb attack against the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina (Mar. 1992); the assassination of the security officer of the Israeli embassy in Ankara (Mar. 1992); an attempt to bomb the main synagogue in Istanbul (Mar. 1992); the attempt to assassinate a leading member of the Jewish community in Istanbul by bazooka fire (Jan. 1993); an attempt to place a car bomb at the Israeli Embassy in Bangkok, Thailand (Mar. 1994); and the suicide bombing of the Jewish community building in Buenos Aires, Argentina (July 1994).

¹⁰ For an in depth analysis of the Iran-Hamas coalition see Ely Karmon, *Iran-Syria-Hizballah-Hamas: A Coalition against Nature. Why does it Work?* Proteus Monograph Series, Volume 1, Issue 5, May 2008, Center for Strategic Leadership, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA., USA, at <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/proteus/docs/karmon-iran-syria-hizballah.pdf>

control elements opposing the implementation of the agreement, and thus the very ability to advance a solution to the historical conflict.

A 1994 report indicated that Iran provided \$3 million a year to both Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and one thousand families of Palestinian suicide bombers or detainees from both organizations received regular monthly payments from Iran.¹¹

The Second Palestinian Intifada opened since September 2000 a bloody confrontation between the Palestinians and Israel. It brought a steep rise in Hezbollah/Iran's involvement in Palestinian terrorism during this period. In 2002, seven Palestinian groups were operated by the Hezbollah, in 2003, there were fourteen, and in 2004, there were fifty-one such groups. In 2004 sixty eight attacks were initiated by Hezbollah, some 20 percent of the attacks over the Green Line. The peace process between Israel and the Palestinians got practically paralyzed.

Contacts between Palestinian Authority (PA) Chairman Yasser Arafat and the Iranians increased after the Second Intifada was launched. The capture of the merchant ship *Karine-A* in January 2002, carrying 50 tons of Iranian-supplied strategic weapons (antitank missiles and rockets that could reach most cities in Israel) convinced U.S. and Israeli intelligence that Arafat had forged a new alliance with Iran. Arafat colluded with Iran because he assumed that the “peace strategy” used since the 1991 Madrid conference, had outlived its usefulness and run its course and the option of a sharply escalated military conflict with Israel made sense.¹²

After Arafat's death, the January 2006 Palestinian elections were expected to stabilize highly negative domestic dynamics and bring Israelis and Palestinians back to the negotiating table. Instead, Hamas won 44% of the national vote and 56% of the seats of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC).

¹¹ An intelligence report dated December 10, 2000, by Amin al-Hindi, head of the PA's General Intelligence, noted the transfer of funds by Iran to Hamas and other organizations opposed to the Palestinian Authority. The sum of \$400,000 was transferred by Iran to the `Iz Al-Din Al-Qassam Brigades and another \$700,000 to other Islamist organizations opposed to the PA. The money was meant to encourage suicide bombings. Barsky, Yehudit, “The New Leadership of Hamas. A Profile of Khalid Al-Mish'al,” *AJC Series on Terrorism*, The American Jewish Committee, June 2004, p. 6.

¹² Satloff, Robert, “The Peace Process at Sea: The *Karine-A* Affair and the War on 173. Terrorism,” *National Interest*, Spring 2002.

The Hamas-led new government increasingly gravitated towards Iran. The 18-year struggle by Hezbollah in Lebanon provided a model for what Tehran would like to recreate on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh stated during a visit to Iran that Palestinians would never bow to pressure to recognize Israel and would keep fighting, thanks in part to support from Iran. Iran sent over \$120 million in 2006 to the PA to offset the shortfall caused by the Western financial blockade on the Hamas-led government.¹³ Haniyeh stated that the Palestinians have "a strategic depth in the Islamic Republic of Iran."

Yuval Diskin, the then head of Israel's Security Service, informed that Iran was giving advanced military training to members of Hamas, a move he called a "strategic danger" to the Jewish state. Hamas had dispatched "tens" of fighters from the Gaza Strip to Iran for "months, maybe years" of instruction, and Iran had promised to train hundreds more.

The Hamas victory in the elections was seen as a golden opportunity to enhance Iran's influence in the region. In mid-April 2006 Iran organized a three-day conference in Tehran which brought together some 600 Palestinian leaders and their supporters from Muslim countries. On the last day of the conference Iran pledged \$50 million in aid to the Hamas government after the U.S. and the EU froze financing.¹⁴

The price of this support was the escalation campaign against Israel as requested by president Ahmadinejad during his visit to Damascus in late January 2006. He stressed that the *jihad* of the Hezbollah and several Palestinian terrorist organizations, was an important component of a global *jihad* against the U.S.-led West: "Palestine is the center of the final stages of the battle between Islam and Arrogance."¹⁵

Hamas is a crucial element for Iran because it is the only Sunni member of its coalition, a faction of the broader Muslim Brotherhood movement and symbolically represents the Palestinian cause, so dear to the Arabs and Muslims worldwide.

¹³ "Palestinian PM in Tehran nods to Iranian support," *Reuters*, December 8, 2006.

¹⁴ Karmon, Ely, "Palestine, Playground for Islamist Actors," *Palestinian-Israeli crossfire*, bitterlemons-international.org, May 1, 2006, Ed. 17, at <http://www.bitterlemons.org/previous/bl010506ed17.html#isr2>.

¹⁵ *IRNA*, January 20, 2006.

Iran paid Hamas to block a deal with the rival Fatah movement that would have ended a five-year rift between the two main Palestinian factions. "We have information that Iran paid tens of millions of dollars to Hamas leaders Mahmoud al-Zahar and Ismail Haniyeh during their visits to Iran in February 2012 to freeze reconciliation, said Fatah spokesman Ahmed Assaf. "Iran has an interest in the division continuing. Iran realizes the importance of the Palestinian cause from the religious, political and geographic status and, therefore, it wants to control it," Assaf said.

In mid-July 2013, it was reported that a high-level Hamas delegation headed by Musa Abu-Marzuq, Deputy Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau, met with a high-level Iranian delegation and Hezbollah officials in Beirut. The meeting's goal was to mend fences between the three parties since Hamas abandoned the "axis of resistance" and positioned itself in the Sunni coalition against the Assad regime in Syria. *Asharq al-Awsat* quoted Hamas official, Ahmed Yusuf, as saying that Tehran still viewed Hamas as a "strategic partner" and that he anticipated ties with Iran would be restored soon.

The Hamas representative in Lebanon has recently summarized in a frank interview the organization's strategy concerning relations with its former ally. The fact that Hamas and Iran differ in opinions about how best to achieve a peaceful settlement in Syria does not mean they differ on everything else. Hamas shares the same position with Iran on a number of important issues, both standing "against Israel and Zionist actions in the Middle East." The relations and consultations with Iran were maintained throughout the entire Syrian crisis "in pursuit of the peaceful political settlement that [they] unfortunately failed to achieve." Hamas hopes that the Syrian crisis will come to an end and allow the restoration of "the Axis of Resistance" which "was seriously damaged by the Arab Spring."¹⁶

History confirms there is a linkage between Iran and Palestine: the more successful the strategy of strengthening PA's moderate leaders and advancing the peace negotiations between the Palestinians and Israel, the greater Iran's motivation to sabotage it through violence and terrorism.

¹⁶ "Hamas: Syrian regime is 'fully responsible' for internal conflict escalation," *Russian RT TV website*, September 27, 2013, at <http://rt.com/op-edge/assad-responsible-con%ict-escalation-hamas-441/>

Therefore, it can reasonably be evaluated that in case Iran goes nuclear it will greatly enhance its efforts to derail the peace process, at every stage, by manipulating its regional proxies and deterring with its atomic umbrella any attempt to stop the radicals.

This does not exclude the need for a combined Israeli and Palestinian effort to achieve at least a partial advance in the peace negotiations at this sensitive junction in the volatile Middle East.

In this author's opinion there is now no prospect for a final agreement until the regional turmoil will stabilize, at least in Egypt and Syria, and as long as there is no compromise by the Palestinians on the issues of the right of return and Jerusalem. At the same time Israel should compromise on the issues of settlements and long term security prerequisites.

A possible interim agreement on the short term would involve a full freeze of Israeli settlement building and some symbolic territorial modifications in the West Bank; Palestinian cessation of the anti-Israeli incitement and glorification of terrorism and enhanced security activity against potential violent and terrorist elements; a bilateral very general written framework for the future final agreement.

At the same time it is paramount that the P5 +1, under the leadership of the United States, not only will guarantee a final deal which will put an end to the Iranian ambitions of nuclearization but also will halt its negative involvement in the Palestinian – Israeli conflict. This would be a positive linkage.