

A CUFI PRIMER: Palestinian Islamic Jihad

Introduction

Of the world's radical Islamist terror organizations, Gaza-based Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is less well known, but no less driven to violence. The organization is nearly 40 years old and benefits from backing by Iran and Syria and is dedicated to Israel's annihilation.

PIJ's operational arena is the Gaza Strip, and while that territory is controlled by Hamas, the two terror organizations share the goal of destroying Israel. Worse still, PIJ is generally thought of as even more radical than Hamas.



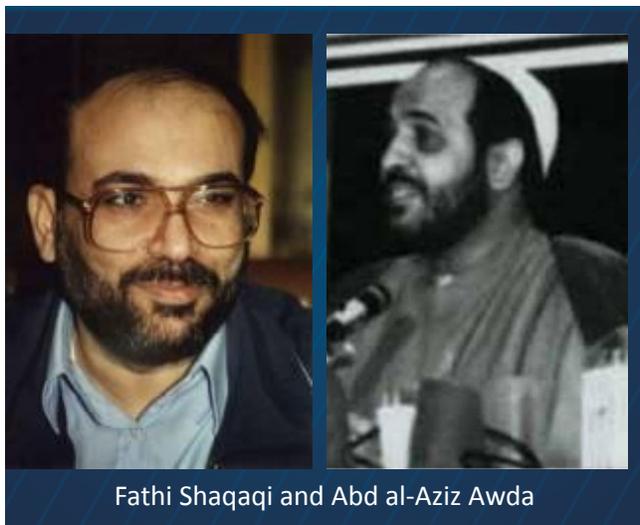
Founding

Fathi Shaqaqi and Abd al-Aziz Awda founded Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) sometime between 1979 and 1981, initially as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. Shaqaqi and Awda studied together in Egypt where they became involved in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. While they had an ideological affinity for the group's general platform, they were "disappointed by the supposed moderation of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and what they considered the neglect by the Egyptian Islamists of the priority that should be given to the Palestinian problem."¹

Both Shaqaqi and Al-Awda would leave the Muslim Brotherhood by the late 1970s and assume a new approach, as Shaqaqi would explain in an interview:

"So we talked about Islam, Palestine and Jihad [holy struggle] - Islam would be the idea we would start with, Palestine the goal to liberate and Jihad would be the way, the method."²

Interestingly, Shaqaqi, a Sunni Muslim who founded a group associated with the Sunni faction, drew great inspiration from the Shia-led Islamic Revolution in Iran that overthrew the Shah. Shaqaqi wrote a book shortly after the revolution titled "Khomeini, The Islamic Solution and the Alternative" praising the methods of Khomeini and sharing Khomeini's belief that "Islam was the solution and Jihad was the proper means."³



After being forced out of Egypt due to his extreme views, he returned to Gaza. There, Palestinian Islamic Jihad would emerge as an independent entity in 1981 with the aim of using violence to establish a Palestinian, theocratic state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.⁴

Leadership

Founder Fathi Shaqaqi led PIJ in its formative years while co-founder Al-Awda became the spiritual head of the organization after they were exiled to Lebanon and later to Damascus where the Syrian regime welcomed PIJ. Shaqaqi would meet his demise on October 1995 while stopping over in Malta on his return to Syria, after meeting Libyan leader Muammar Mohammed. He was assassinated outside the diplomat hotel with many pointing the finger at Israel's foreign intelligence service. Al-Awda remains to this day the spiritual head of PIJ.

Ramadan Shalah, who was born in Gaza city but educated in England at Durham University, would replace Shaqaqi. At the time of his selection as the new secretary general of Palestinian Islamic Jihad in 1995, Shalah was an adjunct professor at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Shalah stepped down from his role with PIJ in 2018 due to health problems and was replaced by Ziya al-Nakhlah who was tasked establishing the group's military wing in the Gaza Strip.⁵ Today the leadership remains based in Damascus with offices in Tehran with the Gaza Strip as its base of terror operations.



Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian with Ziad Nakhleh the Secretary General of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad

What are Palestinian Islamic Jihad's Goals?

PIJ does not participate in the political process like its rivals Fatah and Hamas. According to the "Manifesto of the Islamic Jihad in Palestine," a document that was discovered during the arrest and investigation of members of a PIJ cell in Tampa, Florida⁶, the manifesto rejects "any peaceful solution to the Palestinian cause" and affirms "the Jihad solution and the martyrdom style as the only choice for liberation."⁷ Thus, PIJ has rejected any negotiations with Israel and completely rejects a two-state solution. While Hamas has engaged in indirect talks with Israel (including concerning prisoner exchanges and ceasefires), PIJ refuses to negotiate with Israel (though the group has participated in pan-Palestinian ceasefires negotiated by Egypt).



Palestinian Islamic Jihad terrorists during a rally in Gaza

From the PIJ point-of-view, the Israel-Palestine conflict is not just a territorial dispute; it is a religious conflict because according to PIJ's beliefs, the land of Palestine is consecrated for Islam, and therefore, Israel usurped Palestine. Thus, Israel's very existence is an affront to Islam, and destroying Israel and reconquering Palestine are religious obligations.

PIJ's vision for the region is the establishment of an Islamic State in all the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River—including Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip; this state would be governed by Sharia (Islamic Law).

Who supports Palestinian Islamic Jihad?

According to the US State Department, Iran is PIJ's primary source of financial support.⁸ The relationship was established after the PIJ leadership was exiled to Lebanon in the late 1980s and began cultivating ties with Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps which was providing weapons and training to Hezbollah.⁹ PIJ has been very open about their relationship with Iran, with PIJ leaders making frequent trips to Tehran to meet with the Iranian leadership.¹⁰ Islamic Jihad spokesman Daoud Shihab stated that, "all of the weapons in Gaza are provided by Iran," and "everyone knows that Iran is financing" PIJ.¹¹ In September 2000, Tehran reportedly employed an incentive system that paid PIJ millions of dollars for successful attacks against Israel.¹²

PIJ has also historically enjoyed backing from Iran's client-state Syria, with its main headquarters based in the capital, Damascus.



Palestinian Islamic Jihad leaders with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei

Syrian Civil War

The Syrian Civil war led to tensions between Iran and the terror group ruling Gaza, Hamas. Iran, which has supported the regime of Syria's Assad, was dismayed by Hamas's refusal to support it, prompting Tehran to increase its support for PIJ at the expense of Hamas.

While PIJ does not typically provide aid or social services, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in 2013, Iran tasked PIJ members with the distribution of \$2 million of food aid to Gaza. This aid bore stamps with the Palestinian flag alongside the PIJ logo and the Iranian flag.¹³ This move by the Iranian regime was seen as an additional step to undermine Hamas and to further its own influence. As of 2020, ties between Hamas and Iran have since been restored with Hamas leaders attending the funeral of terrorist mastermind and Iranian general Qassem Solemani.¹⁴ But the regime in Tehran has made it clear that it has a much more loyal and extreme ally in the Gaza Strip that it will support PIJ at Hamas's expense whenever it suits Tehran to do so.

Terrorism Tactics

Tactically, PIJ's approach to terrorism has followed the trends of radical Islamic terror organizations worldwide. In the 1980s and 90s, their primary tactic was bombings. This was followed during the second *Intifada* with their using suicide bombers targeting Israeli busses and high-density civilian areas such as restaurants and markets. In the years since the development of Israel's security fence, terrorist organizations in Gaza have shifted their tactics to primarily using rockets, and PIJ is no different.

A fundamental element of the PIJ doctrine is that violence is the only way to destroy Israel and 'liberate Palestine.' The group has been responsible for numerous terror attacks that have killed or injured hundreds of Israelis. It has used suicide bombings with deadly effect and remained so committed to that tactic that on December 22nd, 2001, PIJ vowed to continue its campaign despite Hamas's decision to halt suicide bombings inside Israel in response to an alleged crackdown by Yasser Arafat. PIJ's representative in Lebanon, Abu



Rockets fired by Palestinian Islamic Jihad from Gaza during the August 2022 escalation

Imad Al-Rifai noted, “Our position is to continue. We have no other choice. We are not willing to compromise.”

With the construction of Israel’s security barrier and enhanced security operations by Israeli forces, the ability to carry out suicide bombings was severely curtailed. Thus, PIJ adopted rocket attacks on Israeli civilian populations like those of their rival Hamas.

Since 2019 there has been an upsurge in violence orchestrated by Palestinian Islamic Jihad. From efforts to disrupt the Israeli elections and attempts to send bombers to the Israel-Gaza border fence, to sustained barrages of rockets at Israeli civilians, PIJ is becoming more prominent in Gaza. While this could be due to numerous factors, no doubt the internal rivalry with Hamas, PIJ’s inclination to violent tendencies and orders from its Iranian masters, all play a role.



Palestinian Islamic Jihad celebrate the release of Islamic Jihad member Tarek al-Mudalal from an Israeli jail

This was never more evident than in August 2022 when Palestinian Islamic Jihad was engaged in a violent skirmish with Israel, firing over 1000 missiles at Israeli population centers until an Egyptian brokered ceasefire ended the 3 intense days of violence.

Hamas, the de-facto ruler of the Gaza Strip, was unable to control PIJ’s violent acts on Israel but, significantly, did not engage in the violence against the Jewish state. While no friend of Israel, as rulers of Gaza they fear retaliation from Israel for attacks from the territory. Hamas has, however, been reluctant to

clamp down on PIJ, anticipating this would damage their jihadist credentials and inadvertently lead to more support from the Palestinian people of PIJ as the true ‘resistance’ to Israel.

Conclusion

As PIJ embraces more frequent confrontation with Israel and refuses to enter any sort of negotiations with the Jewish state, it has abided some pan-Palestinian ceasefires but will not engage in any direct negotiations with Israel. It is unlikely PIJ will ever renounce violence or accept the existence of Israel as the violent eradication of the Jewish state is hardwired into its ideology and sadly, that is unlikely to change.

As Iran looks to exert more influence in the region and to specifically threaten Israel, PIJ has become a central tool on Tehran’s deadly ambitions. In the face of these threatening circumstances, Israel’s ability to defend itself and its citizens remains as important as ever.

¹ "The Palestinian Islamic Jihad" (5 May 2007), International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, <http://www.ict.org.il/organizations/orgdet.cfm?orgid=28>.

² Robert Fisk, "The doctor who finds death a laughing matter" (30 January 1995), *Independent*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/the-doctor-who-finds-death-a-laughing-matter-1570442.html>.

³ Rachel Brandenburg, "Iran and the Palestinians," United States Institute of Peace, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-palestinians>.

⁴ Holly Fletcher, "Palestinian Islamic Jihad" (10 April 2008), Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/background/palestinian-islamic-jihad>.

⁵ Khaled Abu Toameh, "Who is Ziyad al-Nakhalah, the Islamic Jihad's Beirut-based chief?" (14 November 2019), *The Jerusalem Post*, <https://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Ziyad-al-Nakhalah-The-Palestinian-Hassan-Nasrallah-607752>.

⁶ Christopher Collette, "Government: Tampa was Central to Palestinian Islamic Jihad Leadership" (26 May 2005), <https://www.wtsp.com/article/news/local/government-tampa-was-central-to-palestinian-islamic-jihad-leadership/67-396214320>.

⁷ "Statement of the Attorney General Indictments" (20 February 2003), <https://www.justice.gov/archive/ag/speeches/2003/02202003pressconference.htm>.

⁸ Holly Fletcher, "Palestinian Islamic Jihad" (10 April 2008), Council on Foreign Relations, <http://www.cfr.org/israel/palestinian-islamic-jihad/p15984>.

⁹ Daniel Levin, "Iran, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad" (9 July 2018), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/iran-hamas-and-palestinian-islamic-jihad>.

¹⁰ Cassandra Gomes-Hochberg, "Iran's Khamenei meets Islamic Jihad leaders, calls for Israel's downfall" (31 December 2018), *The Jerusalem Post*, <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Iran-News/Irans-leader-meets-Islamic-Jihad-leaders-calls-for-Israel-s-downfall-575951>.

¹¹ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/gaza-islamic-jihad-and-iranian-arms.html>

¹² Matthew Levitt, "Palestinian Islamic Jihad: Getting By with a Little Help from Its Friends" (3 September 2002), The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/palestinian-islamic-jihad-getting-by-with-a-little-help-from-its-friends>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Yoni Ben-Menachem, "Growing Hamas-Iran ties are causing concern in Egypt" (16 January 2020), *Jewish News Syndicate*, <https://www.jns.org/growing-hamas-iran-ties-are-causing-concern-in-egypt/>.