



Iran's Escalation in the West Bank

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Iran is increasingly arming Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) militants in the West Bank via Jordan, as part of its larger yearslong effort to build up proxy groups on multiple fronts against Israel. At low direct cost to Iran, these activities foment instability and violence on the doorstep of Jerusalem and other major Israeli population centers, threaten stability in neighboring Jordan, and place at risk millions of Palestinian and Israeli civilians in the West Bank itself. The United States should enhance security cooperation with Jordan to thwart these smuggling networks, and U.S. officials should publicly emphasize the threat Iran's malign activity in the West Bank represents to Israelis and Palestinians alike.

What Happened?

- On April 9, *The New York Times* [reported](#) that “Iran is operating a clandestine smuggling route across the Middle East, employing intelligence operatives, militants and criminal gangs” to flood the West Bank “with as many weapons as it can.”
 - » The smuggled weapons reportedly include not only handguns but also assault rifles, anti-tank missiles, and rocket-propelled grenades (RPG).
- On March 25, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Israel's Shin Bet internal security agency revealed that they foiled an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF) plot to [smuggle](#) significant amounts of explosives and other weapons into the West Bank.

Why Is It Important?

- Building on its pre-October 7 [efforts](#) in the West Bank, Iran [increasingly](#) is trying to spur Palestinians to [carry out](#) terrorist attacks *en masse* and turn that territory into yet another armed front against Israel – alongside Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen – in order to constrain and divert the IDF's energies away from the rest of its campaign in Gaza, undermine Jordan as a stable U.S. and Israeli partner, and weaken the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank in favor of Iran's proxies Hamas and PIJ.
 - » Since October 7, over a dozen Israelis have been [killed](#) and many others injured in terror attacks across the West Bank, prompting Israeli security forces to [conduct](#) near-nightly raids that have yielded the arrest of more than 3,700 Palestinian terror suspects, of whom over 1,600 were affiliated with Hamas.
 - Hundreds of terror suspects have also been killed in the raids, the vast majority of whom [fired](#) on Israeli authorities during counterterrorism operations.
 - » Last month, Israel's Defense Minister Yoav Gallant [stated](#) that Iran “is linked to everything happening in the West Bank and is trying to push weapons, ammunition, [and] guidance” into the hands of terrorists.

- » In July 2023, Israel [launched](#) a large counterterrorism operation in the West Bank city of Jenin, a longtime PIJ [stronghold](#), following at least 50 terrorist attacks targeting Israeli civilians originating from the city in the preceding few months.
- » Between March 2021 and April 2023, Israeli authorities [foiled](#) at least 35 arms-smuggling attempts from Jordan, seizing more than 800 weapons.
- » U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Kurilla [testified](#) before Congress on March 8 that “in the past six months, we have seen every proxy in the Iranian threat network operationalized in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, [and] the West Bank.”
- Iran’s increased weapons provision to the West Bank was [ordered](#) by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself in June 2023, according to PIJ leader Ziad al-Nakhleh, underscoring the West Bank’s growing centrality to Iran’s “[ring of fire](#)” strategy.
 - » In his role as deputy leader of Hamas, Saleh al-Arouri, whom Israel [killed](#) in a strike in Beirut on January 2, was responsible for Hamas activity in the West Bank and reportedly met with Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Iranian officials—including Ayatollah Khamenei—repeatedly to [plot](#) terrorist activity in the West Bank.
 - At an October 25 meeting in Beirut between Nasrallah, al-Arouri, and al-Nakhleh, the three reportedly agreed to [provide](#) daily updates to one another.
 - The close collaboration between Iran’s West Bank proxies and those active on other fronts, like Hezbollah, underscores the synergistic effect of Iran’s increasingly tight “ring of fire” encircling Israel. By receiving know-how and resources from Hezbollah, Iran’s West Bank proxies seek to perpetrate increasingly lethal attacks.
 - » Hamas’s leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, reportedly had [hoped](#) the October 7 attack would catalyze terrorists in the West Bank to rise up and join the fighting. Another Hamas official [exhorted](#) West Bank Palestinians in October “to summon each other and come together on every road and in every area, and carry out effective, high-quality attacks to teach the enemy a lesson he will never forget.”
- In addition to arms smuggling, Iran [provides](#) vast sums of money to Hamas and PIJ, helping increase terrorist activity through indirect means.
 - » According to an Israeli security [official](#), West Bank-based terror operatives routinely pay Palestinian youths up to \$1,300 in exchange for merely participating in Hamas or PIJ rallies, with the aim of moving them to conduct terrorist attacks.
- Through its meddling in the West Bank, Iran seeks to empower Hamas, PIJ, and its larger “axis of resistance” against relatively moderate Palestinian actors like the PA in Ramallah.
 - » Hamas officials have called for an [uprising](#) by PA officials against their own leadership, and according to IRGC leader Hossein Salami, Iran seeks to use “invisible hands” to [arm](#) its proxies in the West Bank and embolden them to subvert the PA’s authority.
 - » Iran is looking to end the PA’s official control of Palestinian security and political affairs in the West Bank, especially given ongoing U.S. efforts to [fund](#), [strengthen](#) and “[revitalize](#)” the PA for roles in post-war Gaza and in a potential revived two-state peace process.
 - Subverting the PA would send a powerful signal to Palestinians, in both Gaza and the West Bank, that rejectionist Iran-backed extremists are ascendant over the PA. As JINSA has previously [noted](#), if elections were held now, polls [indicate](#) Hamas would likely win an election in the West Bank.
 - Hamas has in recent weeks [threatened](#) Fatah, the party currently controlling the PA, for taking a more active role in Gaza, such as reportedly safeguarding aid shipments.

- Hamas said that on March 30, it detained six PA officials in recent weeks in Gaza, and announced it would seek to detain additional PA officials in Gaza.
- » In response to Iranian involvement in the West Bank, Fatah leadership in the PA issued a rare public statement [rebuking](#) Iran for its malign activities there.
 - The April 3 statement condemned “external interference, particularly by Iran,” designed to “[sow chaos](#) in the Palestinian internal arena.”

What Should the United States Do Next?

- As JINSA previously advocated, Israel must continue to control the territory bordering Jordan, the Jordan Valley – a sparsely populated area representing just 15 percent of the West Bank landmass with unique strategic significance – to [prevent](#) smuggling and other threats.
 - » Preserving control of this territory enables Israel to interdict weapons shipments from Jordan, and allows Israel to maintain freedom of action to conduct counterterrorism raids in PIJ strongholds like Jenin and other West Bank locales.
- Given the sharp rise in Iran-backed smuggling into the West Bank from Jordanian territory, the United States should increase security cooperation with Jordan, including greater border security assistance for the Jordanian government and enhancing, where possible, information-sharing regarding the activities of Iranian smuggling networks in Jordan.
- U.S. officials should highlight the importance of the West Bank and Iran’s malign activities there as part of their warnings about the larger threats posed by Iran to regional stability, and underscore the threat Iran poses to the PA in the West Bank and the safety and wellbeing of Israeli and Palestinian civilians in the West Bank.