

# The Palestinian Arena in the Shadow of the Iran-Israel Crisis

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Risks and Opportunities in the Post-April 13 Middle East](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/risks-and-opportunities-post-april-13-middle-east) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/risks-and-opportunities-post-april-13-middle-east>)

**The crisis has given the United States, Israel, and their partners a unique opportunity to build an international coalition against Iran and show the Palestinians that the “resistance” camp is not their only viable path.**

*Iran’s decision to launch a direct, state-on-state attack against Israel on April 13 increased the risk of overt conventional conflict in the Middle East. This attack was significant in scope, scale, and complexity, employing hundreds of one-way attack drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles. Equally significant was the U.S.-organized effort to defeat Iran’s attack, working with Israel as well as European and Arab allies to integrate capabilities and defend the region’s airspace. Although not publicly claimed, the April 19 Israeli response targeted air defenses protecting Iran’s nuclear program deep inside the country, without damage to civilian infrastructure or civilian casualties. And while the April 2024 escalation cycle appears closed, the region has now crossed the threshold for state-on-state attacks, with Israel and Iran both displaying potent capabilities and resolve.*

*The following article is part of a new series (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/risks-and-opportunities-post-april-13-middle-east>) that aims to shed light on the opportunities and risks of the post-April 13 strategic environment.*

Iran and Israel's latest exchange of attacks elicited varying reactions in Gaza, the West Bank, and abroad, highlighting one of the main challenges in the Palestinian arena: coalescing around a unified order that can advance a singular Palestinian national interest. This challenge stems not only from divergent Palestinian perspectives, but also from divergent Palestinian agendas, with Hamas on one end of the spectrum, the Palestinian Authority on the other, and the Palestinian populace caught in the middle.

## Public Response

**A**cross news reports (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/14/no-one-dared-to-do-anything-palestinians-react-to-irans-attack-on-israel>) and social media posts covering Iran's April 13 drone and missile strikes on Israel, many Palestinians were shown welcoming the attack (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-attack-israel-stirs-admiration-among-gaza-palestinians-2024-04-14/>) with expressions of joy and hope, believing that it might herald the transformation of the Gaza war into a larger regional conflict that culminates in Israel's defeat. Others expressed fear due to the gravity of the attack, the potential for further escalation, and/or the possibility that Palestinians might be hit by wayward drones or missiles.

As the attack's overall operational failure (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/middle-east-perilous-moment-policy-implications-and-escalation-risks>) became clear, the celebratory atmosphere among some Palestinians gave way to feelings of frustration over what they saw as a missed opportunity, coupled with disappointment over the fact that Arab militaries cooperated with Israel in countering the barrage. Many others grew concerned that an ongoing Iran-Israel clash could divert global attention from their cause—particularly the Gaza humanitarian crisis (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/unlike-airdrops-maritime-aid-corridors-can-actually-help-gaza>)—and give Israel a pretext to occupy Rafah (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/will-israel-find-right-type-victory-gaza>).

## Hamas Response

**H**amas leaders have long enjoyed Iranian patronage in all matters related to funding, training, and weapons, so their response merits close attention. Shortly after the April 13 attack, Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh congratulated Tehran on the major operation, while the organization as a whole issued a statement declaring that “the Iranian attack is a natural right for any country that defends itself against Zionist aggression.”

Yet these announcements were surprisingly laconic, hinting at Hamas's disappointment with Iran and its top proxy, Hezbollah, for not escalating the conflict to a degree that compels Israel to fight a full-scale multifront war. The group was also presumably frustrated with subsequent remarks by Iranian military chief of staff Mohammad Bagheri, who noted (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-military-officials-warn-israel-us-against-retaliation-2024-04-14>) that if Israel did not respond to the attack, then Tehran would consider the matter closed. Bagheri's statement did not include any demands regarding a Gaza ceasefire, humanitarian aid, or the return of displaced Palestinians to the north, seemingly clarifying that the April 13 attack was solely a response to Israel's April 1 strike on Iranian military officials in Damascus, and not about the plight of Palestinians.

## PA Response

**I**n Ramallah, PA leaders have refrained from publicly responding to the Iranian attack or Israel's subsequent military response on April 19. Their silence is both deafening and unsurprising. The PA views Iran as a strategic threat because Tehran has repeatedly helped its main rival, Hamas, become stronger and advance the “resistance” agenda while undermining the PA's own power. Most recently, Israeli and PA forces have exposed several secret smuggling routes (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/guns-drugs-and-smugglers-recent-heightened-challenge-israels-borders-jordan-and>) designed to flood the West Bank with Iranian weapons via

neighboring countries—not only light arms such as pistols and rifles, but **also advanced weapons** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jordans-escalating-border-threats-amid-regional-upheaval>) such as antitank missiles and drones. Tehran's top goal in the West Bank is destabilization, which it aims to achieve by undermining the PA, arming more individuals, and moving the population in the direction of militarization.

The PA also has well-founded concerns that Iranian involvement will divert international and regional attention away from the Palestinian cause and toward the broader international issue of countering Iran. In their view, this could leave Israel with a free hand to continue military operations in Gaza without fear of major ramifications.

## Policy Recommendations

**F**or many years now, the Palestinian system has been dealing with bitterly competing agendas due to several factors: the ongoing struggle between Hamas and Fatah; the PA's structural and organizational failures; Israel's unwillingness to provide a political horizon for the Palestinians; and the meddling of Iran's "resistance" camp in internal Palestinian processes. Yet the various players in this system increasingly share at least one concern: that Israel aims to divert attention to Iran so that it can garner more international support and freedom of action in Gaza. Indeed, the U.S. veto of the recent Security Council resolution on full UN membership for Palestine produced a rare instance in which the PA and Hamas found a common adversary.

Fortunately, the United States and its allies are finding more common ground as well. Iran's attack, the cooperative military efforts that thwarted it, and Israel's decision to constrain its response have all created an opportunity to advance a different narrative—one that highlights the effectiveness and depth of the U.S.-built defense architecture in the region, which was so capably and dramatically illustrated on April 13. To take advantage of this opportunity, Washington and Jerusalem should take the following steps.

First, to the extent that recent events represent a new regional balance of power with Iran, U.S. policymakers should push Israel to refrain (for now) from steps that perpetuate the latest escalation with Tehran, instead focusing on its imperatives in Gaza: namely, freeing the hostages, weakening Hamas, and delivering humanitarian aid to civilians. At the same time, the current situation gives Washington and Jerusalem a unique opportunity to make the public more aware of the close partnership between Iran and Hamas. Israel could establish more common ground with the international community by emphasizing Tehran's role as the aggressor, and by highlighting how the regime and its other proxies have repeatedly meddled in internal Palestinian processes—a rap sheet that includes enabling Hamas's rise as the primary political and military power in Gaza in the first place. For their part, U.S. officials should emphasize that the Hamas-Iran relationship needs to be degraded, while also increasing the focus on humanitarian needs and taking other steps to prevent Hamas or Iran from filling Gaza's governance gap during or after the war.

Second, Washington should encourage Israel to take advantage of this strategic opportunity by nurturing and broadening the ad hoc partnerships created by the current threats from Iran. This means working with Arab countries, the United States, and other Western governments in ways that help build a coalition against the "resistance" camp and in favor of normalization. Such efforts should go beyond the realm of diplomatic statements and extend to concrete local initiatives. For instance, Jordan, the PA, Israel, and European partners can cooperate against Iranian smuggling networks, which not only threaten to destabilize the West Bank but could also help Hamas replenish its funds and equipment in Gaza. Joint efforts of this sort would have the added benefit of showing Palestinians that normalization and a regional security architecture serve their interests too. This is especially true after Tehran made clear that its interests do not necessarily match theirs. No one can predict exactly how the Palestinian public might react to U.S.-led initiatives, particularly after Washington's UN membership veto, but it is important to try nonetheless.

Finally, Israel will have to pay for international support against Iran with Palestinian currency—that is, by taking steps toward Palestinian statehood or at least a political horizon. Washington should persuade Israel that this price is worth paying, since it would show Palestinians that Hamas’s violent narrative is not the only path forward while also sending a clear message that Israel is not trying to draw attention away from the Palestinian issue. Toward this end, U.S. officials need to be even more active in engaging Israel on its continued military operations in Gaza, specifically the potential campaign in Rafah. Formulating an agreed plan for the day after the war is of the utmost importance—otherwise, there is little hope that the PA will implement concrete reforms, become the sole civilian address for international engagement in the West Bank and Gaza, or partner with Israel in the struggle against Iran’s “resistance” camp.

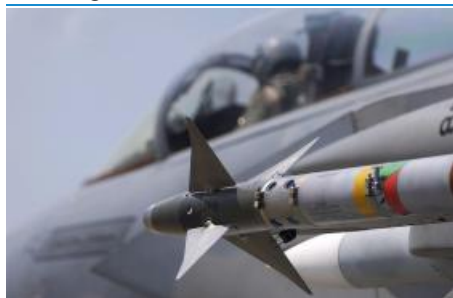
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