

American Foreign Policy Council

ISRAEL

QUICK FACTS

Population: 8,174,527 (July 2016 est.)

Area: 20,770 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Jewish 74.8% (of which Israel-born 75.6%, Europe/America/Oceania-born 16.6%, Africa-born 4.9%, Asia-born 2.9%), non-Jewish 25.2%

Religions: Jewish 74.8%, Muslim 17.6%, Christian 2%, Druze 1.6%, other 4%

Government Type: parliamentary democracy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$311.7 billion (2015 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (January 2017)

OVERVIEW

Although there was a strong Islamist current in the Palestinian national movement of the British Mandate Period, the Israeli War of Independence (1947-49) and subsequent policies adopted by the Israeli government kept Islamism largely at bay until the 1970s. Islamism regained popularity in the wake of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, spreading to the Palestinian Territories and even into Israel itself as Israeli Arabs have shown increasing identification with their Palestinian cousins in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in recent years. Israeli preoccupation with secular Arab nationalist groups in the 1970s and 80s enabled Islamism to metastasize unfettered. Today, the phenomenon is manifested most concretely in the Islamic Movement of Israel. Increasingly, Israeli Islamists collaborate with secular Arab Israeli nationalists to undermine the security of the State of Israel and erode its Jewish identity.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Hamas

The Islamist group known by the acronym HAMAS is the premier Islamist faction in the Palestinian Territories, and the principal extremist threat to the state of Israel. Its precursor was an Islamist group known as *Mujama al-Islamiya*. In the 1970s, over the objections of moderate Palestinians,¹ the Israeli government permitted Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gaza Strip, to register *Mujama al-Islamiya*, first as a charity and then, in 1979, as an association.² At first, the group devoted itself primarily to building schools, clinics, and libraries. *Mujama al-Islamiya* refrained from anti-Israel violence in its early years, but when the first *intifada* erupted in December of 1987, Yassin and some of his *Mujama al-Islamiya* colleagues founded Hamas. Hamas (the “Islamic resistance movement” in Arabic) promotes the following of fundamentalist Islamic norms, such as requiring women to wear the *hijab* and allowing polygamous unions. Furthermore, Hamas has committed itself, to waging an armed struggle to obliterate Israel and to establish an Islamic state governed by *sharia* law “from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.”³

Hamas, despite being a Sunni movement, benefits significantly from Iranian support. Iran has provided financial and military assistance to Hamas since the early 1990s. It has also provided both rhetorical and logistical support to the group in its operations. In one well known incident in 2002, Israel captured the *Karine A*, a ship destined for the Gaza Strip and carrying 50 tons of advanced weaponry on board. The ship had been stocked in Iranian waters.⁴

Iran has also provided substantial financial aid to Hamas. In January 1995, former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director James Woolsey testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee that Iran had provided more than \$100 million to Hamas, though he did not specify a timeframe.⁵ In December 2006, Hamas reported on its website that Iran had provided the organization with \$250 million.⁶ After Operation Cast Lead in 2008-2009, Iran provided Hamas with a variety of weapons, including Grad rockets with range of 20-40 KM, anti-tank missiles and others. Along with the military aid, Iran has provided advanced training for Hamas operatives with instructors from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, as well as propaganda support.⁷

The Syrian civil war initially proved detrimental to the relationship between Hamas and Iran. Hamas refused to support Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, one of Iran’s key allies.⁸ In response to this refusal, Tehran cut off Hamas’s funding, which amounted to about \$23 million per month.⁹ This move forced Hamas to seek out alternative sources of funding, including from wealthy Sunni states such as Qatar,¹⁰ and Saudi Arabia. However, Hamas and Iran eventually reconciled, and in 2015 Iran began supplying Hamas with military technology, helping it repair tunnels destroyed in the 2014 conflict with Israel, and hosting Hamas delegations in Iran.¹¹

Like many militant groups, Hamas has secured popular support among Palestinians and pursued recruitment through community service and engagement. Hamas provides schools, hospitals, and other necessary social services. Hamas guarantees

economic assistance to the surviving family of its suicide bombers, including providing education and healthcare, and covering funeral expenses. This financial support—especially in impoverished communities—serves as a continuing recruitment driver.¹²

Though Hamas is more active and powerful in Palestinian communities, Israeli-Arabs have also been involved with the organization. In May 2011, the Haifa District Court sentenced an Israeli Arab to five years in prison for conspiring with his brother-in-law to gather an arms cache in Israel for Hamas.¹³ The same year, Israeli authorities arrested two Arab residents of East Jerusalem holding Israeli citizenship who were planning to attack Jerusalem's Teddy Stadium during a Premier League soccer match. Authorities divulged that the two men had longstanding ties with Hamas.¹⁴

Islamic Movement in Israel

The Islamic Movement in Israel is a Sunni group that advocates for the vital role of Islam in public life in Israel. Abdullah Darwish founded the movement. Much like Hamas, The Islamic Movement courts favor from local populations through providing social services. During the first *intifada*, the Islamic Movement established the "Islamic Relief Committee," the stated purpose of which was to provide assistance to injured Palestinians. In 1993, it split in response to internal discord over the Oslo Accords. Darwish supported accepting the Accords, while more hardline members, such as Sheikh Ra'ed Salah and Sheikh Kemal Khatib, did not support the agreement. The hardline faction became known as the "Northern Branch" (as the majority of its leaders came from Northern Israel.)¹⁵ Darwish led the more moderate Southern Branch. The Northern Branch played a part in inciting the second *intifada* in 2000. Specifically, incitement by the group helped instigate clashes between Israeli-Arabs and police in the Wadi Ara region in October 2000—clashes that left 13 protesters dead.¹⁶

Most of the Islamic Movement's support within Israel comes from the Bedouin community (discussed further below). In November 2015, the Israeli government designated the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement and its 17 affiliated charities illegal, and jailed its leader, Ra'ed Salah. Yet, despite (or perhaps because of) these measures, the organization remains popular among Israeli Arabs.¹⁷

Palestinian Islamic Jihad

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) was founded in 1979 as a branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood¹⁸ by Fathi Shaqaqi and Abd al-Aziz Awda. Until the killing of the Egyptian President, Anwar Sadat, the PIJ operated from Egypt, then its leadership was exiled to Gaza. In 1987 when exiled from Gaza to Lebanon, and in 1989 Shaqaqi decided to relocate the official command to Damascus.¹⁹ According to the U.S. State Department, PIJ's high-ranking leadership is located in Syria while some leaders live in Lebanon, though most of its affiliates live in Gaza.²⁰

After Shaqaqi was killed in 1995, Ramadan Shallah, previously a professor at the University of South Florida, became the head of the organization.²¹ PIJ is much smaller than Hamas and consist of around 1,000 members²² (although in 2011, the

organization was reported to have at least 8,000 fighters in Gaza).²³ The PIJ, like Hamas, is ardently committed to the violent destruction of Israel,²⁴ but in contrast spends little time on social services for Palestinians in the Gaza and the West Bank, where it is active today. The organizations' armed wing is called the "al-Quds Brigades," and is responsible for many suicide attacks during the Second Intifada (2000-2005). In recent years, the organization intensified its rocket launching from Gaza to Israel.²⁵

PIJ has a degree of support from Israeli-Arabs. In August 2008, Israeli authorities arrested a five-man PIJ cell, which included two Israeli-Arabs, accused of planning an attack on an army checkpoint near Ramallah and of planning to assassinate Israeli pilots, scientists and university professors.²⁶ Then, in January 2013, Israeli police detained three members of a PIJ cell at the Eyal Junction in the Sharon region. The men, including two Palestinians from Jenin and an Israeli-Arab from Tira, planned to kidnap an Israeli soldier and trade him for the release of incarcerated Palestinian terrorists.²⁷

Though the group is Sunni, PIJ is nonetheless strongly influenced by the model of Islamic political activism embodied by Iran's 1979 Revolution.²⁸ As a result, Iran has historically provided extensive support to the group via funding, as well as military equipment and training. In 1998 it was revealed that Iran had allocated 2 million dollars to PIJ annual budget. Since then, the Iranian support to the PIJ has been much higher. In 2013 PIJ sources stated that they received from Iran around \$3 million per month.²⁹ According to Ali Nourizadeh, director of the Center for Iranian Studies in London, Iran transferred to the organization \$100-150 million every year.³⁰

However, in 2015, tensions between the group and Iran began to appear, due to PIJ's refusal to condemn the Sunni Gulf state attacks, led by Saudi Arabia, against the Houthi rebels in Yemen.³¹ In 2015, a senior leader at PIJ acknowledged that the organization is suffering from the worst financial catastrophe since its foundation, among other things since Iran had cut back its financial support.³² According to different reports from 2016, Iran cut its support for the organization by 90 percent.³³ However, a report revealed that Iran is planning to restart its financing of PIJ.³⁴

Hezbollah

Hezbollah is a Shia Muslim organization that maintains a terrorist wing and a political/social-welfare wing.³⁵ The organization was founded in 1982 during the destructive Lebanese Civil War, with significant support from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).³⁶ In its founding statement,³⁷ in 1985 expressed its loyalty to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini; called for the establishment of an Islamic regime; and called for the removal of the U.S, France and Israel from Lebanon in addition to the annihilation of Israel.³⁸ Iran regards Hezbollah as a way to achieve its aims indirectly and spread its influence through the region. The Islamic Republic provides financial support, training, and advanced weaponry to Hezbollah.³⁹ In total, Iran's support is estimated at \$100-200 million per year, including

weaponry, training, and logistics support. Since 2002, Iran has established training camps for different terrorist organizations, including Hezbollah, Hamas and PIJ. These camps are run by the IRGC. In addition, Iran funds Hezbollah's propaganda mechanisms including its television channel *Al-Manar*. The station reported that it receives most of its funding from Iran, approximately \$15 million annually.⁴⁰

In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon in Operation Peace for Galilee.⁴¹ In 1985, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) withdrew to the "security belt" in southern Lebanon, and subsequently withdrew out of Lebanon completely in 2000. After the IDF withdrew, Hezbollah quickly became a dominant actor in the region.⁴² Hezbollah officially entered politics in the 1992 parliamentary elections. It has continued to grow in influence and power, and now constitutes a major part of the Lebanese parliament.⁴³

According to Israeli Security Agency (ISA) assessments, following Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah began to focus on penetrating the Israeli-Arab population. Hezbollah sees Israeli-Arabs as advantageous operatives because they have the advantage of being Israeli citizens who enjoy freedom of movement and accessibility to targets.⁴⁴ While the majority of its activities are affiliated with Fatah's *Al Aqsa Martyrs* Brigades, Hezbollah also cooperates with Hamas, the PIJ, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).⁴⁵ Hezbollah uses its global infrastructure to recruit Israeli-Arabs when they travel outside of Israel.⁴⁶

Hezbollah is known for its cross-border operations in addition to extensive terrorist activities abroad, such as the attacks in Argentina against the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992 and the Jewish Community Center in 1994,⁴⁷ as well as the attack against the Israeli tourist bus in Burgas, Bulgaria in 2012. Hezbollah maintains a large presence of supporters and operatives all around the world, including North and South America, Africa, Asia and Europe.⁴⁸ Some of the attacks carried out by the organization were initiated and directed by Iran, such as the Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia in 1996 and the attacks in Argentina.⁴⁹

In 2006, Hezbollah operatives killed eight Israeli soldiers and captured two more, Israel and Hezbollah entered a 33-day war.⁵⁰ During the conflict, Hezbollah launched thousands of rockets into Israel.⁵¹ The war ended in a stalemate,⁵² but given Israel's overwhelming victory in the majority of the military conflicts between it and Arab state, a stalemate was a significant victory in and of itself for Hezbollah. Since 2006, the northern border has seen relatively little terrorist activity.⁵³ In February 2017, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah threatened to attack Israel's nuclear reactor in Dimona, and has previously threatened to attack ammonia supplies in Haifa.⁵⁴

Syria has historically been a key supporter for Hezbollah and a vital ally of Iran's. When the Arab Spring threatened the stability of the Assad dictatorship, both Iran and Hezbollah intervened to support the regime. Hezbollah involved itself gradually. At first, its help was covert and only in advisory capacity. However, the group eventually began sending its own fighters and leaders into battle. The war in Syria has killed a significant number of Hezbollah's fighters. Estimates range from 5,000 to 8,000 death, from a total of 45,000 full and part-time fighters.⁵⁵ Before its involvement in the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah was very popular throughout the Shia community in

Lebanon, Kuwait, Jordan, and Egypt.⁵⁶ Furthermore, Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict is impacting the group significantly, especially as its commitment to the Syrian conflict has pulled it away from its traditional role of focusing on Israel and domestic Lebanese politics.⁵⁷

Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State

Al-Qaeda formed during the later half of the Afghan-Soviet War.⁵⁸ Al-Qaeda's first *emir* was Osama bin Laden, who founded the group based on *Salafi* ideology and believed that *jihad* is a personal obligation for all Muslims.⁵⁹ Bin Laden was captured and killed by U.S. forces in May 2011. The current leader of al-Qaeda is his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁶⁰ Currently, al-Qaeda is embroiled in an ideological battle with the Islamic State. In some ways, the Islamic State has taken over al-Qaeda's role as the "premier" terrorist group of the world, not least in terms of social media and recruitment, and this has prompted self-reflection and rebranding on the part of al-Qaeda.

Israel has more often been a rhetorical target of al-Qaeda, rather than a literal one.⁶¹ In almost every one of his public statements between 1990 and 2011, bin Laden referenced the Palestinian issue. A 2001 Treasury Department report reveals that Zarqawi had received more than \$35,000 for training Jordanian and Palestinian operatives in Afghanistan and enabling their travel to the Levant, with assurances that he would receive more funding for attacks against Israel.⁶² However, nothing came of these attacks, and in general, "al Qaeda's plotting against Israel has never matched its anti-Israel propaganda."⁶³

However, there are some exceptions indicating that rhetoric is translated into actions against Israel in the past years. In 2010, four Israeli-Arabs were among those charged by Israeli authorities with establishing a terror cell and killing a taxi driver.⁶⁴ Two of the plaintiffs had trained at an al-Qaeda camp in Somalia.⁶⁵ More recently, in January 2014 Israeli officials revealed an al-Qaeda plot in Israel with a direct involvement of senior leaders of the organization. According to the reports, an al-Qaeda operative in Gaza run by Zawahiri recruited three men (two from East Jerusalem and one from the West Bank) through Skype and Facebook. All four operators were arrested.⁶⁶

Another threat to Israel has recently emerged in the form of the Islamic State (ISIS). The Islamic State emerged from a branch of al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in Iraq.⁶⁷ Since 2014, ISIS has managed to occupy vast areas in the region of Iraq and Syria and to take control over the population in its territory. However, in recent months, the organization has started losing control in Syria and Iraq due to Coalition efforts, forcing the organization to expand into secondary territories, such as in Libya and the Sinai.⁶⁸

The affiliate that proves most dangerous for Israel is the affiliate formerly known as *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis*. The organization is located in the Sheikh Zweid area in the northern Sinai Peninsula, near the border with Israel,⁶⁹ with an estimation of several

dozen fighters.⁷⁰ Now known as the Sinai Province of the Islamic State,” the group pledged allegiance to ISIS on November 2014 with an emphasis on the importance of fighting the Jews:

After decades...Allah ordered the flag of jihad to be raised in our land and gave us the honor of being the soldiers [Allah] chose to fight the nation's most bitter enemies...the Jews....Our swords will be extended against them until Allah is victorious.⁷¹

The Sinai Province has launched several attacks against Israel over the past few years, including a combined attack that was carried out against a bus in Eilat in August 2011, several rocket attacks on Eilat, and attacks against the gas pipeline between Egypt and Israel in north Sinai.⁷² Israeli-Arabs have not proven immune to ISIS' appeal. According to Israeli Security Agency report, during 2015, 32 Israeli-Arabs left to fight with ISIS in Syria. Also, since the beginning of 2015, 41 Israeli citizens were arrested for supporting ISIS, a number of ISIS networks were exposed in Israel, as well as a number of terror attacks of ISIS supporters in Israel were prevented. In June 2015, the Israeli Security Agency uncovered six Hura residents in the Negev spreading ISIS' ideology in the Israeli school system (since some were teachers) and well as planning to join ISIS in Syria.⁷³

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Israel's population numbers nearly 8.2 million people, 74.8 percent of which is Jewish, and 17.6 percent is Muslim.⁷⁴ Within this body politic, however, deep divisions exist over the future of the state. According to a study conducted by Pew Research Center in 2015, 76 percent of Israeli-Jews believe that Israel can simultaneously be a Jewish state and a democracy, whereas only 27 percent of Israeli-Arabs agree with this sentiment. Furthermore, belief in the two-state solution (that of Israel and an independent Palestinian state living side by side) appears to be declining, at least among Israeli Arabs; according to the Pew poll, approximately half of Israeli-Arab respondents believed that the two state solution was viable, down from 74 percent in 2013.

The tension between Israel and its Arab citizens is also evident in the traditionally nomadic Bedouin community. Official Israeli neglect of the Bedouin communities in the Negev, and the difficulty transitioning from a nomadic to a sedentary lifestyle, has spawned increasing alienation from the state among that community—an alienation that the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement is exploiting. Thus, when the military planned a parade through Rahat, Israel's largest Bedouin town, to celebrate Israel's 63rd independence day in 2011, the town's mayor, Faiz Abu Sahiban, who belongs to the Islamic Movement, objected, preferring to commemorate the 1948 exodus of the Palestinian refugees instead.⁷⁵ This came in the wake of violent resistance to the Israeli government demolishing a mosque built illegally on public land in 2010 by the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement.⁷⁶

Concerns that Bedouin alienation might breed violence increased when two Bedouin from the Negev, Mahmoud Abu Quider, aged 24, and his 21-year-old brother Samah, confessed in January 2013 to planning to fire rockets, mount a suicide bombing at the Beer Sheba Central Bus Station, and launch other attacks. Before their arrest, the brothers built several explosive devices and traded drugs for an IDF soldier's rifle.⁷⁷ In another incident in 2015, Bedouin teachers from the South were suspected of promoting the ideology of the Islamic State in a local school.⁷⁸ The perpetrator of a deadly terrorist attack in Beer Sheba in October 2015 attended the same school.⁷⁹

The Northern Branch is increasingly penetrating the Negev and successfully discouraging Bedouin from joining the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), where a high percentage of Bedouins have historically served, mainly in scouting or tracking capacities. Furthermore, as the Islamic Movement has gained control of more town councils in Bedouin areas, they have been able to use their authority to obstruct the hiring of Bedouin who serve in the military.⁸⁰

In a related concern, there has been a public debate over whether young Israeli-Arabs citizens should be required to join the civilian or military national service. In this case, opinions are significantly divided between Jews and Arab respondents; the majority of the Jews polled support this requirement (74.1%) while the majority of Arabs oppose it (71.8%).⁸¹ The Israeli government has long hoped that Islamist tendencies among Israeli-Arabs would be mitigated by the liberal-democratic culture of the state. Today, that assumption is being sorely tested, as Israeli-Arabs become increasingly receptive to—and involved in—Islamist activities within Israel.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Israel has struggled with Islamism and Islamist sentiment both internally and externally. Officially, Israel sees the issue of the political-legal status of Israeli-Arabs as a purely domestic matter without strategic implications. At the same time, however, it has traditionally refused to recognize Israeli-Arabs as a national minority possessing collective rights apart from specific cases (such as in the education system and family law, each religious community being subject to its own clerical elite). This opening in the education system has enabled Israeli-Arabs to cultivate a separate national identity—and created an ideological space in which Islamism can increasingly take root.

The education system in Israel has emerged as a notable ideological battleground in this regard. The country's Education Ministry has attempted to counter Islamism by banning the teaching of the *Nakba* ("catastrophe," the common Arabic reference for the establishment of Israel in 1948) in schools, by forcing students to sing *Hatikva* (the Israeli national anthem) and by encouraging military and national service as a criterion for rewarding schools and staff. Israeli-Arab leaders have voiced opposition to the campaign to promote Israeli-Arab participation in national service, terming it a veiled attempt by the government to erode the community's sense of unity.⁸²

Externally, Israel's national security was deeply and negatively impacted by the Arab Spring in 2011. First and foremost, the overthrow of the Mubarak regime in Egypt in February 2011 undermined law and order in the Sinai Peninsula, enabling Al-Qaeda to develop a base there. As of May 2011, senior Egyptian security officials estimated that over 400 Al-Qaeda militants were then operating in the Sinai Peninsula.⁸³ The growing Islamist presence in the Sinai has coincided with increasing terrorism originating from the territory. In August 2011, a cross border attack by militants belonging to the "Mujahideen Shoura Council from the Environs of Jerusalem", an Al-Qaeda affiliate founded in 2011 and operational in Gaza and Sinai, killed eight Israelis. The "Mujahideen Shoura Council" has since launched rocket attacks on Sderot in August 2012⁸⁴ and March 2013, during President Obama's visit to Israel,⁸⁵ as well as to Eilat in April 2013.⁸⁶ However, today, the main threat to Israel from its southern border is Sinai Province.

Islamist militants have also attacked key infrastructure that lies outside Israel's borders. As of April 2012, Islamic militants have carried out at least fourteen attacks on the Egyptian pipeline passing through the Sinai that previously provided Israel with 40 percent of its natural gas.⁸⁷ From the end of the Mubarak regime until June 2012, there was a significant increase in the number of attacks against the gas pipelines in the region and terrorist infiltration to Israel.⁸⁸ *Salafi-Jihadists* see the pipelines as an instance of an Islamic resource sold to the Zionist enemy.⁸⁹

Smuggling is another issue of concern to the Israeli security forces. Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip significantly increased the smuggling of weapons, food and fuel to Gaza.⁹⁰ This was much intensified after Hamas takeover of Gaza in 2007.⁹¹ Alongside the smuggling, the organization created an extensive network of tunnels contributing to the Gazan economy 230 million dollars per month.⁹² During Operation Protective Edge in 2014, one of the operation's goals was to terminate cross border tunnels, which were widely used for smuggling arms and people. The IDF destroyed of 32 tunnels. Unfortunately, Israel has not yet fully succeeded in developing technology to deal with the tunnels.⁹³ IDF officials and residents leaving near the Gazan border, have expressed worries that Hamas is reconstructing its destroyed tunnels from 2014.⁹⁴

The Israeli-Egyptian border (around 230 kilometers in length), is also characterized by extensive smuggling of people, drugs, weapons and goods. After the Israeli disengagement, the Israeli-Egyptian border has also become a transit point of two types of terrorists: specialists in the manufacture of weapons and terrorists on their way to attack Israel.⁹⁵ Indeed the Sinai Peninsula has become a main global *jihad* front vis-à-vis Israel.⁹⁶

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