



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Restearch Paper | 11 June 2021

# Iran's Relations with Palestine: Past, Present, Future

Seyed Ali Alavi

The Iranian Studies Unit

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Series: [Restearch](#)

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## Abstract

This study examines relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and progressive as well as Islamic Palestinian national liberation movements, from the onset of Palestinian dispossession. Providing historical background to Iran's post-revolutionary period, we track the genealogy of pro-Palestinian sentiment prior to the Iranian 1979 revolution and until after the Arab Spring.<sup>1</sup> The study focuses on the roots of an ideological outlook and interests of the post-revolutionary Iranian state in embracing the Palestinian cause. We explore the interconnections of Islamic Republic with the Palestinian Islamic Movements of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Notwithstanding the growing body of literature on the regional impact of the Iranian Revolution, Iran's connections with Palestine have often remained overlooked. This research is a summary of the book *Iran and Palestine, Past Present, Future* (Routledge, 2019) which sought to fill academic gaps and “unpack” the relationship's history in the shared quest for justice, rooted in solidarity.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a summary of the book *Iran and Palestine, Past, Present, Future* published by Routledge in 2019.

## Iran's Pre-Revolutionary Opposition and the Palestine Cause

The notorious overthrow in a 1953 American-British coup of democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh and the restitution of the Shah's absolute monarchy brought coercion, stringent political control and systematic suppression upon Iranian discontents and dissidents. Between 1953 and 1963 opposition groups such as the Tudeh Party and the Mosaddegh-inspired National Front toed the line of the Shah's dictatorship.<sup>2</sup> Some historians consider the 1963 popular uprising under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini sparked the emergence of leftist guerrilla movements in Iran that summer with the Shah's fierce treatment of peaceful opposition protests<sup>3</sup> and Third World revolutionary and guerrilla actions in Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam and Palestine and leading younger members of organizations such as the Tudeh and the National Front to the view that peaceful actions against the Shah's regime were futile, and that guerrilla tactics were a better alternative. Abrahamian's book describes two emerging guerrilla groups as having been particularly active and organised: the *Sazman-i Cherik-ha-yi Feda-i Khalq-i Iran* (The Guerrilla Freedom Fighters of the Iranian People), also known as the "Marxist Faday'an"; and the *Sazman-i Mujahidin-i Khalq-i Iran* (The Organisation of the Freedom Fighters of the Iranian People), the "Islamic Mujahedin."<sup>4</sup>

Post-1963 younger members of the Tudeh Party and the Marxist contingent of the National Front, galled by the failure to confront the Pahlavi regime and vexed by Tudeh's pro-Soviet policies, drew inspiration from Third World anti-imperialist movements and organised new independent groups, with three of these joining together as *Fadayi*, with the core 1963 - 64 Tudeh Party Youth Organisation members Ali Akbar Safa-i Farahani, Mohammad Ashtiyani, Abbas Sourki and Bezhani Jazani and comprising one group,<sup>5</sup> the religious and pro-Marxist socio-political tendencies of Masoud Ahmadzadeh at the fore in a second group, with a third group led by Ashraf Dehqani.<sup>6</sup> Safa-i Farahani's handbook on the period *Ancheh Yek Inqelabi Bayad Bedanad* (*What a Revolutionary Must Know*),<sup>7</sup> details the ideological composition of the *Faday'an*. Safa-i Farahani castigated the Shah for dependence on "global imperialism," pro-American foreign policy with its favouring of Israel against Arab neighbours such as Egypt, igniting political conflicts in South Yemen, Iraq and Syria. His handbook highlights international anti-imperialist movements vital in the ideological struggle against the Shah's pro-western regime.<sup>8</sup> In 1969, Safa-i Farahani ("Abu-Abbas"), Ashtiyani and other *Faday'an* leaders crossed into Iraq to meet up with Palestinian comrades and proceeded to PLO

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2 For more information on the CIA-MI6-led coup of 1953 against Prime Minister Mosaddegh and its aftermath, see Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of the Revolution*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003, chapters 6 and 7.

3 Ervand Abrahamian, "The Guerrilla Movement in Iran, 1963-1977", *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)*, No. 86, The Left Forces in Iran (Mar-Apr 1980), pp. 3-15.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

7 *Ibid.*

8 See Safa-i Farahani, *Ancheh Yek Inqelabi Bayad Bedanad* [What a Revolutionary Must Know], available at: [http://www.adabestanekave.com/book/Anche\\_yek\\_enghelabi\\_bayad\\_bedanad.pdf](http://www.adabestanekave.com/book/Anche_yek_enghelabi_bayad_bedanad.pdf) [Accessed 16 April 2013].



training camps in Jordan, later returning home to mount anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist activities from Iran. In all, according to Houshang Chehabi, about 30 *Faday'an* were trained at camps in Jordan (until 1970), and in Lebanon and Syria.<sup>9</sup>

Another left-leaning guerrilla movement, Mojahedin-e Khalq (MKO), emerged in the late 1960s with an ideology combining Islam and Marxism<sup>10</sup> and virulent anti-monarchist and anti-imperialist fanfare, targeting its nemesis of American imperialism as a cabal leader which had roped the Pahlavi Shah's Iran into complicit parity (and collaboration) with Israel, South Africa, and South Vietnam in something of an early version of an "axis of (*imperialist*) evil" against the Third World - for MKO, most prominently the Vietnamese liberation movement and Arab nations.<sup>11</sup> As the MKO began guerrilla warfare against the Shah's regime, it established contacts with the Palestine Liberation Organisation, and particularly Fatah, with whom it was ideologically closest.<sup>12</sup> The MKO central committee sent prominent members to Qatar and Dubai in March 1970 to meet with Fatah officials. After confirming the MKO's *bona fide* anti-Zionist stance and ideology, Fatah agreed upon further discussions with Iranian activists in Beirut and Amman, with MKO delegates arriving in Jordan from Beirut in spring 1970 for meetings with Fatah's Abu-Hassan, and an agreement was reached for Fatah to provide guerrilla training for MKO members.

In the late 1960s radical cadres of Iran's National Front (NF) moved to Beirut and established close relations with Palestinian activists.<sup>13</sup> Members of the NF in Beirut declared the establishment of *Sazemanha-ye Jebhe-ye Melli-e Iran dar Khavar-e Miyaneh* (Organizations of the National Front of Iran in the Middle East).<sup>14</sup> From 1971 and through the 1970s, NF members published a Farsi newspaper called *Bakhtar-e Emruz* printed by Palestinian publishers in Lebanon and an Arabic language version, *Iran al-Thawra*.<sup>15</sup> These organs promoted Iranian opposition activists' relationships with other revolutionary movements, and particularly Palestinian ones.

Iranian student organisations were notably anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist and pro-Palestinian. In 1962 those in Europe and the United States joined together and established the Confederation of Iranian Students National Union (CISNU), which was particularly supportive of the Palestinian Student movement. CISNU messages of solidarity conveyed strong pro-Palestinian and anti-Zionist sentiments to the Iranian public, encompassing the spectrum of Iranian oppositional groups and members of the clergy.<sup>16</sup>

9 H.E. Chehabi (ed.), *Distant Relations. Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 years*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2006, p. 188.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 92.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

12 The Society of Editors of The Institute of Political Studies and Research, *Sazeman-e Mojahedin Khalq; Peydayee ta Farjam 1344 - 1384* [The Organisation of the People's Mojahedin; Emergence to the End, 1965-2005], Tehran: Moaseseh Motaleaat va Pajooheshhay-e Siyasi [The Institute of Political Studies and Research], 1389 [2010], p. 395.

13 H.E. Chehabi, *Distant Relations; Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, p. 189.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*, p. 132. The CISNU had conveyed a special message addressed to Ayatollah Khomeini, highlighting its supports for the struggle of Iran's clergy against Zionism, colonialism and internal repression.

## Iran's Pre-Revolutionary Islamists and the Palestinian Cause

Islamic revolutionaries interpreted and circumnavigated the Palestinian cause in their discourse. Shortly after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Ayatollah Kashani, a popular religious figure well-known for opposition to British colonialism, denounced its creation and stressed his support for the Palestinians.<sup>17</sup> In the winter of 1947, Ayatollah Kashani delivered his first declaration in relation to the Palestinian question:

The foundation of the Zionist regime will be the source of corruption for Muslims in the Middle East and the whole world. The damage won't be limited to the Palestinian Arabs only, hence, this is a duty for all Muslims to do what they can to stop such tyranny against the Palestinian Muslims.<sup>18</sup>

Ayatollah Kashani subsequently called for popular demonstrations in support of the Palestinians, and in spring 1948 some thirty thousand Iranians gathered at the Sultani Mosque in Tehran (later renamed the Imam Khomeini Mosque) to protest the establishment of the state of Israel. Ayatollah Kashani continuously called on the Iranian public to financially support Palestinian freedom fighters (*fedayeen*) in their struggle against the state of Israel.<sup>19</sup> Shortly after the Iranian government recognized Israel as a de-facto state in March 1950 and opened a consulate in Jerusalem, Ayatollah Kashani denounced the decision: "The Israeli government is supported by American, German and French Jews. Fighting the Jews is compulsory. We Iranians will resist even though the government has recognized Israel; we have created an organization to fight *Israeli* Jews."<sup>20</sup> The protests led and organised by Ayatollah Kashani led to Mossadeq's revocation of recognition of Israel in 1951.<sup>21</sup>

The anti-imperialist rhetoric, socio-political concerns, and active role in mobilizing the Iranian public during the Islamic revolution brought Ayatollah Taleqani, another well-known revolutionary cleric, to prominence. Closely surveilled by SAVAK (*Sāzeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar*), the secret police, domestic security and intelligence service established with CIA help in Iran by Mohammad Reza - the last shah of the Pahlavi dynasty) Ayatollah Taleqani endured periodic imprisonment throughout the 1950s and 1960s, until the triumph of the 1979 revolution. Ayatollah Taleqani's temporary release in 1967 coincided with the Third Arab-Israeli ("Six Day") war and rout of the Arab states in shameful military fiasco. SAVAK documents portray the Ayatollah as becoming increasingly

17 Khair el-Din Hasseb, *Arab-Iranian Relations*, p. 351.

18 Seyed Abbas Razavi, *Ulamay-e Shiie va Hemayat-e Feqhi va Siyasi az Filistin* [The Shia Clergy and the Islamic Jurisprudent and Political Support for Palestine], *Paygah-e Etelea Resaani-e Hawzah, Azaar-e* 1381 (Autum 2002), Tehran, Vol. 78. Also available at: <http://www.hawzah.net/fa/magazine/magart/0/0/23462?SearchText=%d8%b4%d9%8a%d8%b9%d9%87+%d9%88+%d9%81%d9%84%d8%b3%d8%b7%d9%8a%d9%86> [Accessed 8 July 2013].

19 M. Rajabi and Derangi Hassan, *Mojahadat-hay-e Ayatollah Seyed Abul-Qassem Kashani* [A View of Ayatollah Kashani's Struggle], The Islamic Revolution Document Centre, 29/09/1387 (Summer 2008). Also available at <http://www.irdc.ir/fa/content/5878/default.aspx> [Accessed 16 July 2013].

20 Dehghani, "Iran's Role in Opposition to the Partition of Palestine", p. 71.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 71 - 72. With the fall of Mossadeq's Cabinet in 1953, the Shah's regime resumed its relations with Israel and sent a new representative there in 1957.



focused, publicly and privately, on the Palestinian cause. For instance, during the religious festival of Eid al-Fitr in 1967, Ayatollah Taleqani delivered an emotional speech in the Hedayat Mosque in Tehran in support of the Palestinian people, and at the end of his *khutbah*, he took some money out of his pocket and, waving it in front of the congregation, proclaimed “I pay my *Zakat* (the Islamic tax) to the people of Palestine.”<sup>22</sup> This gesture inspired and galvanized the Iranian populace to follow suit and donate their own Islamic taxes to the Palestinian cause.

Ayatollah Taleqani's thinking, favorable to the Palestinian people, spread among other revolutionary clerics and Muslim figures, such as Ayatollah Murteza Mutahhari,<sup>23</sup> an eminent scholar of Islam and key theorist of the Islamic revolution who presented the Palestinian cause to the Iranian public within an Islamic context. For Ayatollah Mutahhari, the unconditional moral obligation of the Iranian people was to aid oppressed peoples, and not least the people of Palestine – from whom no direct plea for help was required.<sup>24</sup>

It was not only the religious clerics in Iran who opposed imperialism and Zionism; non-clerical religious and revolutionary figures like Ali Shariati and Jalal Al-e-Ahmad strongly shared revolutionary commitments. Ali Shariati, one of the most influential intellectuals of the Islamic Revolution, is best known for his advocacy of Third World movements battling against imperialism,<sup>25</sup> and the impact of his teachings continues to be felt throughout Iranian society. Focusing on the Islamic concept of *Amr-e beh ma'ruf va nahy-ye az monkar* as a social responsibility, enjoining good and forbidding evil, Shariati situated Zionism within the domain of evil.<sup>26</sup> By the same token, Shariati maintained that the struggle against international imperialism, dictatorship and colonialism were all manifestations of the Islamic prohibition against evildoing. He identified, in his readings of modern history, the problems of the Third World as emerging from the vested interests of the proponents of “Zionism, along with capitalism, fascism and communism,”<sup>27</sup> who had tarnished liberation or nationalist movements in Europe. According to Ali Rahnema, Shariati believed that the struggle of people in the Third World remained unknown in the rest of the world.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, Ali Shariati parallels Zionism with racism, if not explicitly equating them. In his re-reading of Iranian Islamic identity, Shariati dedicated part of his analysis to discussing nationalism, arguing that the Western understanding of nationalism stemmed from pervasive racism and anti-

22 Ibid., p. 19. Ayatollah Taleqani collected the Iranians' Zakaat and channeled them to the PLO through Egyptian consulate in Tehran.

23 For more on Ayatollah Mutahhari, see Davari T. Mahmood, *The Political Thought of Ayatollah Mutahhari: An Iranian Theoretician of the Islamic State*, London: Routledge Curzon, 2005. Mutahhari was a prominent *Mujtahid* (Jurist) and known as one of the ‘theoretician of Islamic rule’ in Iran, and one of its main architects.

24 Ibid., p. 97.

25 Brad Hanson, “The Westoxication of Iran: Depictions and Reactions of Behrangji, al-e Ahmad, and Shariati”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1, (Feb 1983), p. 14.

26 Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), p. 306.

27 Ibid., p. 112.

28 Ibid., p. 112.



Semitism, and eventually led to a defensive reaction in the emergence of Zionism.<sup>29</sup> Zionism, he argued, instigated ethnic Arab nationalism in Muslim societies.<sup>30</sup> In other words, Shariati perceives Zionism as a foundation for the manufacture of a Western notion of nationalism within Islamic nations. Shariati therefore believed that Western imperialism and Zionism had together formed a “united front” against Muslims.<sup>31</sup>

A discussion of the roots and growth of support for the Palestinian cause in Iran during the pre-revolutionary era is incomplete without a focus on Ayatollah Khomeini. Ayatollah Khomeini rose to prominence in 1963 when he publicly denounced the Shah’s regime. At the outset of his political career, Ayatollah Khomeini had placed great importance on the Palestinian cause and clearly addressed the matter within his public pronouncements. In Ayatollah Khomeini’s reading of the Quran, Palestine is at the core of the Muslim heartland. Khomeini’s description of Palestine as ‘our land’ demonstrates the strong socio-religious connection of Muslim Iran with the Palestinian question, in his view: there are moral obligations for Iranian Muslims to support and defend Palestine.

Ayatollah Khomeini defines and positions the state of Israel as an agent of the United States, Britain, and other foreign powers, and as a settler-colonial tool of imperialism to penetrate the Islamic world, dividing its nations into groups of oppressed and oppressors. He castigates rulers of Muslim nations for their lack of unity in resisting all agents of imperialism, and effectively siding with oppressors.<sup>32</sup> For Ayatollah Khomeini, the Palestinian question transcends national borders, and is thus replete with significance for every individual Muslim whom the Quran instructs accordingly. On 6th February 1971, in his first message to Muslims worldwide, congregating in the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, Ayatollah Khomeini highlighted the significance of the Palestinian question, stating:

[t]urn your attention to the liberation of the Islamic land of Palestine from the grasp of Zionism, the enemy of Islam and humanity. Do not hesitate to assist and cooperate with those men who are struggling to liberate Palestine.<sup>33</sup>

Many Islamic scholars, religious activists and associated groups shared Khomeini’s strong commitment to the plight of Palestine. For instance, in 1967 prominent Shi’a referential authority (*marji*) Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Mar’ashi Najafi proclaimed a *fatwa* banning all Muslims from commerce with Israel and advocating support for Palestine by all means.<sup>34</sup> Pre-revolution pro-Palestinian ideas among Iranian-Islamic groups and prominent religious figures reveal a strong current of faith and religious ideology enjoining support of the people and nation of Palestine and resisting Israeli occupation.

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29 Ibid., p. 204.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid, p. 206.

32 Ibid., pp. 47 - 49.

33 Ibid., pp. 195 - 196.

34 *Asnād-e Inqilāb-e Islāmī* [Islamic Revolution Documents], 1st edition, (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnād-e Inqilāb-e Islāmī [The Islamic Revolution Document Centre], 1374 [1995]), p. 317.



## The Islamic Revolution's First Decade with Palestine

Proceeding from the ideas of the Islamic Shia *marajji* – Ayatollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Kashani, Ayatollah Taleqani – as well as the Third-Worldism of Ali Shariati and Iranian leftist anti-imperialism, a broad range of revolutionary Iranian activists defined the Iranian revolution as being one of the oppressed over their oppressors. Those who resisted the Shah's regime concluded that their predicament was an outcome of wider global phenomena, most notably Zionism and American imperialism. Hence, Iran's revolutionaries thought that the Islamic Revolution would be most substantially safeguarded with the defeat of the twin threats within the region, of Zionism and imperialism. An unwritten consensus convinced Iranian revolutionaries that their triumph would inspire other likeminded movements throughout the region. Iranian revolutionaries, particularly the zealous followers of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Shia *marajji*, drew inspiration from Islamic teachings for their duty of resistance against the oppressors, and particularly those within Muslim nations. That the Palestinian cause became a focal point for revolutionary Iran was not surprise.

A few days after the 17 February 1979 triumph of the revolution in Iran, Yasser Arafat became the first foreign leader to visit Tehran, arriving unannounced.<sup>35</sup> *He was greeted by Iranian revolutionaries as a national hero and was presented with the keys of the Israeli diplomatic mission in Tehran as Iranian revolutionaries raised the Palestinian flag in the premises that still today serves as the Palestinian embassy.* It was still more a significant achievement for the PLO leadership in occurring at the time that Egypt had abandoned its previous anti-Israel stand and signed peace accords in Camp David. As Barry Rubin argues, the triumph of the Iran's Islamic Revolution heightened the PLO's motivation: If Ayatollah Khomeini could rise from obscurity and exile to overcome a seemingly invincible foe allied with and installed by the United States, Arafat believed he could follow the same path. In a similar vein, simply handing the keys to the former Israeli embassy in Tehran to the incoming PLO delegation provided a significant boost to Palestinian morale: "After more than two decades of struggle, this was the first piece of Israeli real estate Arafat had captured."<sup>36</sup>

Ayatollah Khomeini's most vital strategy was to transform the Palestinian struggle into an Islamic cause and internationalise the Palestinian question even beyond the Arab territories, a strategy that was also pursued by earlier Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood established in Egypt in 1928. On 7 August 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini declared the last Friday of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan as the international day of Jerusalem (Quds): *Yom al-Quds*.

The honeymoon between Arafat and the Islamic Republic of Iran was short lived, however. Two major occurrences had a profound impact on the relations between the Islamic Republic and the PLO's leadership: The American Hostage Crisis in November 1979 and Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). The Embassy's takeover triggered an international crisis that lasted for 444 days. At that critical moment for the Carter administration, the PLO leadership contacted U.S. officials expressing their desire to

<sup>35</sup> Bassam Abu Sharif, *Arafat and the Dream of Palestine: An Insider's Account*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 63.

<sup>36</sup> Barry Rubin, *Yasir Arafat: A Political Biography*, London: Continuum, 2003, pp. 83 - 84.

mediate between Tehran and Washington to help free the hostages. According to Leigh Moses, after receiving a green light from Washington, a three-man high level PLO delegation arrived in Tehran to discuss the hostage crisis with Iranian officials.<sup>37</sup> Despite the visit by senior PLO members, including Abu Jihad, to the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, they were not allowed to enter the premises as mediators. According to Ioannides, Khomeini refused to receive the PLO's special delegate Abu-Walid, and the militant students denounced the PLO's mediation attempts.<sup>38</sup> After the failure of Arafat to convince the leadership of the Islamic Revolution to release the hostages, the PLO's leadership abandoned its pursuit of acting as a mediator.

## The Implications for Iran-PLO Relations of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88)

Iraqi armed forces, under the command of its Baathist leadership, conducted a full-scale invasion of Iran in late September 1980. The war would last for eight years. Identifying the potentially devastating impact of the Iran-Iraq war on hopes of broad unified front in the confrontation with the state of Israel, and fearing a consequent relegation of the Palestinian cause to a regional second place, Arafat rushed to mediate between the two sides. According to then minister of Foreign Affairs (and author of *Iran and the Developments of Palestine*) Ali Akbar Velayati, the PLO proposed a roadmap requiring the Iraqi regime to immediately withdraw its armed forces from Iranian territories they had occupied and defer discussion of its territorial dispute with Iran. In return, Iran was required to agree to entering bilateral negotiations with Iraq to resolve the disputes.

Moreover, the proposed bilateral negotiations were to be conducted in a neutral country.<sup>39</sup> Despite intensive discussions, Arafat – unable to persuade Iranians to agree to an immediate ceasefire – left Tehran empty-handed. On the one hand, Arafat's ill-fated mediation efforts led the PLO to shift its policies away from favouring Iran and tilt more towards the Baathist regime. On the other hand, following Arafat's failed mediation efforts, the Islamic Republic's leadership began to lose confidence in the PLO and suspect its intentions. As the war between Iran and Iraq continued, Arafat explicitly turned to side with Baathist Iraq, and conducted regular meetings with Iraqi officials in Baghdad on the war and other inter-Arab issues. In 1984, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein supported Arafat's visits to Egypt, which had been become shunned by Arab states since the Camp David accords. In fact, Baghdad backed Arafat's efforts to bring Egypt back into the 'new Arab-alignment.'<sup>40</sup> Then, in April 1984, Arafat publicly underscored the PLO's support for Iraq in its "just" struggle to "defend" its land and sovereignty and achieve a "just peace."<sup>41</sup>

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37 Ibid., p. 45.

38 Chris P. Ioannides, "The PLO and the Islamic Revolution in Iran", in Augustus R. Norton and Martin Harry Greenberg (eds.), *The International Relations of the Palestine Liberation Organization*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1989, p. 84.

39 Ali Akbar Velayati, *Jumhouri Eslami Iran va Tahavollaat-e Felestin 1357-1385*, p. 42.

40 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, "Saddam Hussein Discusses Arafat Cairo Visit", Baghdad Voice of Masses in Arabic, 7 January 1984, E2.

41 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, "Saddam Hussein Receives Yasser Arafat", Baghdad INA in Arabic, 26 April 1984.



The Iran-Iraq war was effectively a yardstick for measuring Iranian ideological support of the Palestinian cause; Iran's revolutionary leadership depicted the Baathist regime of Iraq as collaborator-in-chief with Zionism and as a tool in the hands of an American imperialism combatting Iran's Islamic Revolution, and it did so in the interest of the Iranian state and rallying the Arab world's support for its regional vision. For Khomeini and his followers, the war was the direct result of collusion between Zionism and the Baath party. From Ayatollah Khomeini's point of view, the war between Iraq and Iran proved a conspiracy of Zionists, imperialists and Baathists against Iran's revolution with her Islamic principles.

Egyptian-American political scientist Gawdat Bahgat considers that disagreements between Iran and the PLO ran deep, with the Islamic Republic always differentiating the broad Palestinian populace from Arafat and his top aides. Moreover, troubled waters between Tehran and Arafat did not yield better relations between Iran and Israel, as the two issues were for all practical purposes detached from one another.<sup>42</sup> Both ideological and strategic considerations informed Iran's strong opposition to Israel; ideologically, the Islamic Republic perceived the Palestinian cause as a struggle between Islam and the primary source of oppressive power in the world – Zionism and US imperialism. Consequently, the Islamic Republic's self-image of political legitimacy is reinforced by antagonism towards Israel and resistance to any peace proposals awarding legitimacy to the Israeli state.

The upshot of this, in the Iranian view, was that neither Arafat nor any other leader has the right to give away "even an inch of the Islamic land of Palestine."<sup>43</sup> Strategically, the Islamic Republic views the assortment of US brokered peace plans as nothing but an array of political tools serving the American government and boosting its presence and quest for hegemony in the region.<sup>44</sup> Research Professor Shireen Hunter highlights the role of Pan-Arabism, and Arafat's financial dependency on Gulf states, as the main vehicles leading the PLO to have supported Iraq against Iran, whilst acknowledging the sustained Iranian differentiation between Arafat and the Palestinian people. In any event and notwithstanding its dismay with Arafat, Tehran permitted the PLO to maintain its embassy in Tehran, established national observance of globally observed *al-Quds Day*, and continued its support for the Palestinian cause.<sup>45</sup> Researcher Elaheh Rostami-Povey also affirms that while Arafat's support for Saddam's regime did undermine Iran's relations with the PLO, the Islamic Republic continued to maintain a pro-Palestinian policy, and explicitly supported Muslim Palestinian groups such as Hamas<sup>46</sup> and Islamic Jihad.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Gawdat Bahgat, *Israel and the Persian Gulf: Retrospect & Prospect*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2008), p. 42.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Shireen Hunter, *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 127.

<sup>46</sup> *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Resistance Movement) is better known by its acronym HAMAS.

<sup>47</sup> Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Iran's Influence*, (London; Zed Books, 2010), p. 159.

## The Post-Iran-Iraq War Era: Iran's Relations with Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a New Page in Palestinian Struggle

The emergence of Palestinian Islamic Jihad has been a compelling subject in Palestinian politics since the organisation of that name was founded by Dr Fathi al-Shiqaqi in the early 1980s. In early life Shiqaqi was greatly influenced by pan-Arab ideas, which by his own account led him away from socialism. Demoralized in the wake of the 1967 defeat, he quite naturally turned to Islam.<sup>48</sup> The period between 1974 - 1981 in which Shiqaqi resided in Egypt was the most important period for the Palestinian Islamic movement. In Egypt, Shiqaqi and his followers moved towards an independent path from the Ikhwan and created the nucleus of what was the Palestinian Islamic movement within the University of Zaqaqiy. By 1980, the first group of students under Shiqaqi's supervision – consisting of 60 Palestinian members across Egypt's universities – laid the cornerstone for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the heart of Gaza and West Bank.<sup>49</sup>

It was against this background of frustration with the Ikhwan and the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran that Shiqaqi authored a book, *al-Khomeini: al-Hall al-Islami wa al-Badil* (*Khomeini: The Islamic Solution and the Alternative*), which was published by the pro-Iranian monthly *al-Mukhtar al-Islami*. According to Meir Hatina, Shiqaqi's book depicted the Islamic Revolution as “a historically unique model of a humane revolution” and praised Ayatollah Khomeini.<sup>50</sup> Shiqaqi authored his second book *al-Sunnah wa al-Shia, Zhajah Moqtaneah* and its first edition was published by *al-Mukhtar al-Islami* in 1982 in Cairo. In his book, Shiqaqi castigated sectarian language and emphasised upon unity of the Muslims in confronting the Israeli occupation of Palestine.<sup>51</sup> Shiqaqi's books became the ideological instruction for many members of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Shiqaqi in 1981 established *Saraya al-Quds* – the al-Quds Brigades – which would be Islamic Jihad's military wing.<sup>52</sup> From the very beginning, *Saraya al-Quds* conducted armed struggles throughout the Occupied Territories, and routinely confronted the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). The Palestinian Islamic Jihad played a significant role in triggering the Palestinian uprising known as Intifada in 1987 - 88.<sup>53</sup>

Following the outbreak of the Intifada, Islamic Jihad's cells became major targets for the Israelis. Key figures and leaders of Islamic Jihad were either imprisoned or forced into exile, and both Shiqaqi and Awda were expatriated to Lebanon in 1988. Although the expulsion of Islamic Jihad's leadership created a vacuum amongst its cadres in the Gaza Strip, it also created a new momentum for its

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48 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, Tel Aviv: The Dayan Centre for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2001, p. 23.

49 Kasra Sadeq-Zadeh, *Shahid Doctor Fathi Shiqaqi* [Martyr Doctor Fathi Shiqaqi], (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnaad-e Enqelab-e Islami [The Centre for Islamic Revolution Documents], 1389 [2010]), pp. 85 - 86.

50 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, (Tel Aviv: The Dayan Centre for Middle Eastern and African Studies), 2001, p. 24.

51 Ibid., p. 323.

52 For more information on al-Quds Brigades, see: <http://saraya.ps/index.php> [Accessed 1 May 2014].

53 For more details see chapter 3 of *Iran and Palestine, Past, Present, Future*, (London: Routledge, 2019).



leadership to become closer with the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hizbullah. According to Hatina, with the move to Lebanon and Syria, the ideological link of Islamic Jihad to Revolutionary Iran was cemented as a close political and organisational bond.<sup>54</sup> Through the Iranian Embassy in Beirut, and through Hizbullah, Islamic Jihad's leadership received logistical support and was able to revitalise its anti-Israeli military activities from Lebanon.

Moving to Lebanon opened a new window of opportunity for Islamic Jihad, which had suffered from Israel's military campaigns. Along with wide support for the Intifada, Iran nurtured political links with the exiled Islamic Jihad leadership.<sup>55</sup> Iran's support became the primary enabling force behind Islamic Jihad and other exiled Palestinians in Lebanon. This support allowed Islamic Jihad to grow an infrastructure in Lebanon and in Syria, and included help to build training camps, develop military capacity, and assistance with publishing the movement's literature.<sup>56</sup> Hebrew University Professor Meir Hatina argues that, like its patron Iran, Hezbollah devoted its full support for the Palestinian cause and placed itself alongside the Palestinians on the frontline of the struggle of Muslims against their oppressors.<sup>57</sup> While in exile, Shiqaqi maintained his loyalty to the Islamic Revolution in Iran, enhancing Islamic Jihad's relations with Hezbollah until his assassination in 1995. Shiqaqi presented a new discursive debate between Palestinian activists through highlighting the revolutionary Islamic resistance as the most reliable alternative to nationalist discourse. Inspired by the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Islamic Jihad appropriated the discourse of resistance and imbued it with Islamic rather than nationalist or secularist values to distinguish it from other forms of resistance. One of the most important outcomes of this process of *Islamicisation* was the formation of *Hamas* (the *Islamic Resistance Movement*, whose moniker in Arabic, *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya*, lends the letters composing the organization's abbreviated name in both Arabic and English). The emergence of additional Islamic Palestinian factions further encouraged the pro-Palestinian stance of the Iranian leadership, groups whose ideological outlook resembled Iran's leadership's far more than that of the PLO.

## Iran and Hamas (1987-2011): Strategic Relations, Shared Values and Ideological Differences

The Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood faced a range of challenges and opportunities within the Occupied Territories between 1979 and 1987. The triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and the subsequent emergence of Shiqaqi's Islamic Jihad led to an overhaul of the group's political strategy. According to activist and scholar Azzam Tamimi, younger members of the *Ikhwan* (Muslim Brotherhood) inside Gaza and the West Bank between 1979 and 1981 were particularly inspired by the activities of Islamic Jihad – manifestly expressed in one tenacious question: “Why are we not

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>55</sup> Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, p. 110.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

involved in the military resistance to the occupation?”<sup>58</sup> As discussed previously, the first Palestinian *Intifada* erupted *after* Islamic Jihad had begun confrontation with the Israeli army, resulting in the deaths of a number of the Islamic Jihad’s members in 1987. After escaping from Gaza’s Central Prison, four out of the six escapee members of Islamic Jihad were killed in an Israeli ambush. On 8 December 1987, mass demonstration broke out and Palestinian public anger spread throughout the Occupied Territories. According to scholar Khaled Hroub, on the following evening, the Political Bureau of the Palestinian Ikhwan in Gaza met and agreed that the reaction of the public to Israeli aggression demonstrated the need to assign a top priority to combatting the Israeli occupation.

In August 1988, Hamas published its Charter, declaring its ideological and political aspirations. The Charter highlights the group’s strategy and specifically underlines that “Palestine is an Islamic trust.” This Charter sheds light on the objectives that Hamas shared, from the outset, in common with the Islamic Republic of Iran. In October 1991, Iran organised a series of conferences in solidarity with the Intifada.<sup>59</sup> According to Hatina, high-ranking religious figures and other delegates of Islamic movements from Arab and Muslim countries participated. The most important of these conferences – attended by Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah and Hamas and delegations from some 40 Muslim countries – took place in Tehran between 14 - 22 October 1991, and were scheduled as preludes to the Madrid peace conference.<sup>60</sup> The presence of Hamas was a significant milestone in furthering dialogue with Iran,<sup>61</sup> and it can be argued that the Iranian initiative was itself a response to the Madrid Peace Treaty between Israel and PLO. Hamas and Islamic Jihad viewed the Madrid conference as an attempt to lend international legitimacy to the existence of Israel.

After the Intifada in 1987, the Islamic Republic directed its attention towards Islamic Jihad and Hamas. It soon established political relations with Hamas, only to be followed by the Oslo Accords between the PLO and Israel in 1993. Despite the propaganda from the PLO favouring the Oslo Accords, average Palestinians were frustrated by the PLO’s recognition of Israel’s occupation, and turned instead towards Hamas and Islamic Jihad. After 1993, Hamas continued its strong electoral showing – beating Fatah in al-Najah student elections in 1996 and again in 1997.<sup>62</sup> In April 1998, the late founder and spiritual leader of Hamas Sheikh Ahmed Ismail Hassan Yassin made a state visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran and was received by its highest leadership.<sup>63</sup> During this landmark visit, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei hailed Sheikh Yassin and praised the Palestinian resistance against Israel. Ayatollah Khamenei regarded Yassin and his followers as “the true representatives of the Palestinian resistance.”<sup>64</sup> The Iranian leadership appreciated Sheikh Yassin’s visit to Iran after

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58 Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2009), p. 44.

59 For more information on the International Conference on Palestinian Intifada, see: The International Conference on Palestinian Intifada <http://icpalestine.parliran.ir/fa> [Accessed 21 October 2015].

60 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine*, pp. 109 - 110.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

62 Are Knudsen, “Crescent and Sword: the Hamas Enigma”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 8, pp. 1373-1388, 2005.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

64 Khamenei.ir, *Didar e Sheikh Ahmad Yassin Rahbar-e Moqavemat-e Felestin* [The Visit of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, The Leader of the Palestinian Resistance], <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=11421> [Accessed 15 January 2016].



his release from jail and perceived this as an indicator of the strong bond between Iran and Islamic movements in Palestine. Since then, the Islamic Republic of Iran intensified its rhetoric in favour of Hamas, describing it as the guardian of the Islamic resistance against Israel.

## The Israeli Withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000, the Second Palestinian Intifada and 2006 Palestinian Election

*The year 2000 was a turning point in the region's history.* After two decades - in compliance with UNSC Resolution 425 – the Israeli army pulled its troops from south Lebanon and dismantled its militias.<sup>65</sup> Some might wish to attribute Israel's defeat in south Lebanon to Iranian and Syrian support for Hezbollah. But according to scholar Lina Khatib, the liberation of southern Lebanon on 25 May 2000 was a watershed because it was *the first time that Israeli troops had been expelled from Arab lands* "at the hands of an Arab paramilitary group" since 1948, when the state of Israel was formed.<sup>66</sup> The jubilation of Arabs and Muslims in the region was however followed by the disappointment with a Camp David summit hosted by US President William Jefferson Clinton with Israeli PM Ehud Barak and PLO leader Yassir Arafat attending but coming to a close on 25 July 2000 without an agreement.<sup>67</sup> Frustration amongst the Palestinian population then skyrocketed with a series of failed summits and revelations of the corruption of the Israel and US - sponsored Ramallah-based Palestine Authority.

Shortly after Hezbollah's triumph in south Lebanon, Israeli provocations ignited a second Palestinian uprising. On 28 September 2000, Ariel Sharon's uninvited visit to *Haram al-Sharif* – Islam's third holiest site – under heavy security protection by Israeli armed force triggered the second intifada and united the Palestinians as never before.<sup>68</sup> The peace negotiations proved to be fruitless for many Palestinians, as the Israelis failed to comply with many of the commitments required by the interim peace accords.<sup>69</sup> Shortly after the second Intifada began, Iran and Hezbollah exhibited their strong moral support for and solidarity with the al-Aqsa Intifada. From 28 - 30 January 2001, the first Quds Conference was held in Beirut. It led to the establishment of the 'Quds Foundation,' with a temporary headquarters in the same city.<sup>70</sup> On 22 March 2004, Sheikh Yassin was assassinated by the Israeli armed forces on the orders of Ariel Sharon. Shortly after, on 17 April, Sharon authorised the assassination of Dr Abd al-Aziz al-Rantisi (Sheikh Yassin's successor). According to Tamimi, the Israeli Prime Minister wanted to be sure that when Israel would eventually withdraw from Gaza, Hamas would not be able to take over.<sup>71</sup> Condemnation of the assassination was widespread amongst all political strata of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

<sup>65</sup> Imad Salamey, *The Government and Politics of Lebanon*, London: Routledge, 2014, p. 98.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>67</sup> Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, London: Hurst & Company, 2009, p. 198.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>70</sup> Joseph Alagha, "Hizbullah, Iran and the Intifada", *Leiden University, ISIM Newsletter*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2002, p. 35.

<sup>71</sup> Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2009), p. 206.



Israel began the withdrawal of its armed forces from Gaza on 15 August 2005, and by 12 September 2005 it had completed this task. After 38 years, the occupation of Gaza had ended. Led by Hamas, the people of Gaza celebrated and attributed the victory to the defeat of Israel's superior military might. Tamimi argues that the failure of repeated peace negotiations – whether the Oslo Accords, Bush's Road Map, or Sharon's disengagement policy – vindicated Hamas' approach.<sup>72</sup> On 26 January 2006 Hamas gained a landslide victory in Gaza's legislative elections. After Hamas won its first democratic election to the legislative, Ismail Haniyeh announced a new government in March 2006. Hamas' electoral victory came as an unpleasant surprise for Israel, the United States, and Fatah.<sup>73</sup> While the American and the Israeli governments alongside PLO refused to recognise Hamas led cabinet, Iran continued to offer its political and financial backing to the newly established government of Hamas, not least to safeguard "access" to Israel as a means of securing its own security. On 8 December 2006, the Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh told thousands of Friday prayer worshippers at Tehran University in Iran that "we will never recognise the usurper Zionist government and will continue our jihad-like movement until the liberation of Jerusalem."<sup>74</sup>

## Israel's War on Gaza (2008–2009) and Iran's Reaction

Since the 2006 elections, Israel increased its systematic military campaign against the Hamas-led government and targeted Gaza routinely. One of the major military assaults on Gaza before the Arab Spring – known as the Gaza massacre – took place between 27 December to 18 January 2009.<sup>75</sup> Some 1,400 Palestinians were killed, and more than 400,000 Gazans were left without running water. In response to Israel's attacks on the Palestinians during the Gaza war in 2009, Hezbollah's supporters conducted three attacks on Israel from south Lebanon.<sup>76</sup> The 2009 war on Gaza is known in Iran as *Jang-e 22 roozeh*: the 22-Day War of Resistance. Iran strongly condemned the killings in Gaza, and criticised conservative Arab states for their inaction. In response to Israel's assault on Gaza in 2009, Iran organised the fourth International Conference in Support of Palestine from 4 - 5 March 2009 in Tehran and named Gaza as the 'symbol of resistance.'<sup>77</sup> Following the Gaza war, the Islamic Assembly of Iran unanimously ratified an Act that established 18 January as "Gaza Day" in the official calendar of the Islamic Republic.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, 2009, pp. 206 - 207.

<sup>73</sup> Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, 2009, p. 224.

<sup>74</sup> "Hamas: We Will Never Recognise Israel", *The Guardian*, 8 December 2006, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/dec/08/iran.israel> [Accessed 21 March 2016].

<sup>75</sup> Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Iran's Influence*, p. 175.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Declaration of the Fourth International Conference on Palestine in Tehran, <http://icpalestine.farhang.gov.ir/en/pastconferences/declaration> [Accessed 19 March 2016].

<sup>78</sup> Seyed Qassem Zakeri, *Hemaayat-e Qanouni* [The Legal Support], Tehran: Markaz e- Motaleaat e-Felestin, 1390 [2011], p. 67.



## Iran and Palestinian Islamic Movements in the post-Arab Spring Era

As the waves of Arab Spring reached Syria and as the Syrian crisis prolonged, the political leadership of Hamas moved from Syria to Egypt and Qatar in February 2012, with Khaled Mashal and his aides moving to Doha and Hamas head Ismail Haniya announcing his support for the anti-Assad uprising.<sup>79</sup> Since 1999, the Syrian government had welcomed and hosted the Hamas political bureau after the Jordanian authorities accused the group of using the country as a base for illegal activities, and briefly detained Khaled Mashal and a key aide.<sup>80</sup> Hamas leadership had been provided with a safe haven, and enjoyed the luxury of receiving financial and logistical support in Damascus from the Syrian government, Iran and Hezbollah. Iran and its allies were caught off guard when Hamas moved its offices from Syria and endorsed the anti-Assad forces. Nevertheless, the Islamic Republic's authorities avoided any direct criticism of Hamas and maintained its channel of communication.

On the other side of the Palestinian political spectrum, Islamic Jihad maintained its position in the resistance front. Following the eruption of the Syria crisis, its leadership refused to cut relations with Damascus and maintained its neutrality. In January 2012, Ramadan Abdullah and his delegation visited Ayatollah Khamenei in Tehran. During the meeting, Khamenei referred to conditions in Syria, stating: "Regarding Syria, if the developments are considered from a broad and comprehensive perspective, it becomes completely clear what plot America has designed for Syria and unfortunately certain countries inside and outside the region are cooperating with America in this plot."<sup>81</sup> Although the Hamas leadership pursued a different path from Iran and its allies in Syria, Tehran nevertheless maintained connections with it. On 10 February 2012, Ismail Haniyeh arrived in Tehran for an official visit, and was received by high-ranking officials of the Iranian government, including the Supreme Leader and the President.

## The Gaza Wars 2012 and 2014: Iran, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad

On 14 November 2012, the Israeli army launched a massive military offensive in Gaza. The operation, dubbed 'Pillar of Defence,' lasted 8 days, and began after the assassination of Ahmad al-Jabari, Chief Commander of Hamas' military wing (al-Qassam Brigade), in a missile strike in Gaza city.<sup>82</sup> The most important repercussion of this Gaza war may have been recognition of the impact of Iran's support for Palestinian Islamic movements on their military capacity and performance. During the eight days of resistance, Palestinian Islamic movements demonstrated an ability to strike back against Israel. During the conflict, Palestinians utilised a rocket – the Fajr-5, developed by Iran and supplied to Hezbollah – with a range of up to 75 km, which allowed them to strike Israel's capital.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>79</sup> "Hamas Political Leaders Leave Syria for Egypt and Qatar", 28 February 2012, *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17192278> [Accessed 19 April 2016].

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> "Leader Meets with Ramadan Abdullah", *Official Website of Ayatollah Khamenei*, 31 January 2012, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1579/Leader-Meets-with-Ramadan-Abdullah> [Accessed 24 March 2016].

<sup>82</sup> Harriet Sherwood, "Hamas Says Gates of Hell Opened as Israel Kills Military Leader in Gaza", *The Guardian*, 15 November 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/14/israel-assassinates-hamas-military-chief> [Accessed 11 April 2016].

<sup>83</sup> Ian Black, "Fajr 5 Missiles Give Palestinians Rare if Short Lived Advantage", 16 November 2016, *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/16/fajr5-missile-gaza-israel-iran> [Accessed 11 April 2016].

Without claiming credit for providing missile technology to the resistance movements, Ayatollah Khamenei praised the Palestinians for their resistance during eight days of war.<sup>84</sup> On the other side of the spectrum, one of the most notable implications of Gaza war in 2012 was the reaction within Gaza towards Iranian support. According to Nidal al-Mughrabi, Gazans offered very public thanks to Iran for helping them fight against Israel on 27 November 2012, as Iranian-manufactured rockets were fired out of the Palestinian enclaves towards Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.<sup>85</sup> Large billboards on three major road junctions in the Gaza Strip bore the message “thank you Iran” in Arabic, English, Hebrew and Farsi. The posters also depicted the Iranian Fajr-5 rockets. It was the first time that there has been such public admission of Iran’s role in the arming of the Islamic fighters in the territory.<sup>86</sup>

Once again in July 2014, Gaza was heavily bombarded by the Israeli Defence Force, and an intensive military campaign ensued. Israel’s aim was to eliminate the Palestinian Islamic movements’ firepower. After 10 days of indiscriminate aerial bombing, Israel launched a ground campaign on 17 July 2014 supported by gunboats, fighter jets and tanks. It is vital to note that the war on Gaza coincided with a period in which Iran was engaged in a series of marathon negotiations with the world powers over its nuclear programme. Tehran was also at the time supporting the Syrian regime, and still faced disagreements with Hamas’ political bureau over the Syria crisis. One of the most notable pro-Palestinian reactions in Iran came from pragmatist Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, elected in August 2013. Rouhani assumed office to fulfil two main election promises: De-escalating tensions with the West over the nuclear “dossier” and conducting economic and political reforms within the government. Rouhani dismissed Israel’s attempted justifications for the massacre of Palestinians and accused Israeli leaders of ethnic cleansing in Gaza. He castigated the global community for its silence and stated: “Global reactions unfortunately reveal that the western governments and many Arab and Muslim governments have kept silent toward the crimes, or their reactions fall short of the extent of the catastrophe underway in Gaza Strip.”<sup>87</sup> Rouhani appealed to western governments to support the oppressed people of Palestine, despite any interests they had in maintaining an alliance with Israel. He stated, “bombardment of schools and killing of children in Gaza is a clear example of genocide in the world today.”<sup>88</sup>

More notably, support for the people of Gaza was most vociferous within the volunteer sections of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC): the *Basij* or “Mobilisation Resistance Force”. Brigadier-General Mohammad Reza Naqdi, the Commander of the *Basij*, announced that there was no limit to Iran’s humanitarian support for the people of Palestine. He announced that “the Iranian nation’s succour to the Palestinian people recognizes no boundary and whatever they may

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<sup>84</sup> “Leader’s Speech to Participants of International Conference on Islamic Awakening”, Official Website of Ayatollah Khamenei, 11 December 2012, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1726/Leader-s-Speech-to-Participants-of-International-Conference-on> [Accessed 17 April 2016].

<sup>85</sup> Nidal al-Mughrabi, “Gazans say Thank You Iran after Israel Conflagration”, Reuters, 27 November 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-palestinians-iran-thanks-idUSBRE8AQ0VZ20121127> [Accessed 19 April 2016].

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.



need, it will be included in our aid packages.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, *the Gaza war overshadowed Iranian politics once again and facilitated a consensus amongst political factions within the regime*. Beyond governmental apparatuses, Iranian non-governmental figures also exhibited their strong sense of solidarity with the people of Gaza. Oscar-winning film director Asghar Farhadi launched a media campaign condemning the killing of the Palestinians and posted a selfie on his Facebook page with a banner that read “stop killing your fellow human beings.”<sup>90</sup> Iran’s legendary actor Izzatollah Entazami delivered a call to the people of Iran to gather outside the UN Office in Tehran in solidarity with the people of Gaza.

*Such statements attest to the genuine solidarity of many Iranian people with the Palestinian nation*. They also show a connection to the Islamic revolutionary ethos of supporting *mazloomin* [suppressed] against *zalemin* [suppressors], narratives that unified the Iranian nation during its 1979 Islamic Revolution. This is not to say that all Iranians are unanimous in expressing sympathy with the Palestinians, and certainly many have criticised the Islamic Republic’s approach towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The wars in Gaza in 2012 and 2014 acted as a litmus tests for Iran’s revolutionary commitment towards the Palestinian cause. The war in Gaza in 2014 occurred at the time when the Iranian regime and Hamas were deeply at odds over the Syrian crisis. At the time of this present writing, the Islamic Republic and Hamas have yet to reach a consensus over the Syrian conflict, and Tehran’s disagreements with Saudi Arabia over Yemen and Lebanon appear far from resolved. And Iran has indeed maintained, and sought to improve, its relations with Palestinian Islamic factions, particularly Hamas and the Islamic Jihad.

## Conclusion

It is perhaps stating the obvious that the Islamic Republic of Iran is a state underpinned and infused by revolutionary values and Islamist politics. Anti-Zionism, suspicion towards the United States, and the Ummah-centric approach of Iran sit comfortably alongside the Islamic Republic’s strategic interests and ideological outlook. In other words, strategic interests compliment the identity of the state. However, the primary reason for Iranian consensus among revolutionaries from diverse political backgrounds in support of the Palestinian cause is a quite universal Iranian recognition of the right and need *to defend a just cause*. The profundity and ubiquitousness of this powerful sentiment throughout Iran was manifested during the Islamic Revolution in the primacy given by its leaders to the introduction of the iconic words *mastazaafeen* (oppressed) and *mostakbereen* (oppressors) into revolutionary discourse and to their incorporation as key concepts within the revolution’s ideology.

At the same time, this study has suggested that non unlike other states, the Islamic Republic of Iran seeks to expand its political and ideological sway throughout the region. The Islamic Republic

<sup>89</sup> “Basij Commander: No Limitations for Iran’s Aid to Palestinians”, *Fars News*, 5 August 2014, <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930514000621> [Accessed 27 April 2016].

<sup>90</sup> Arash Karami, “A Separation director criticized in Iran for Gaza Facebook post”, 17 July 2014, *Al-Monitor*, Available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/iranian-gaza-antiwar-campaign.html> [accessed 1 May 2016].

perceives that it has both the right and the capacity to lead the Islamic *Ummah* in the ideological struggle against what it terms “*global arrogance*,” a somewhat artful term rather routinely deployed in reference to the United States of America. Support for Palestine serves Iran’s strategic interests of projecting its power and expanding its ideological and political influence throughout the Muslim world. The desired expansion of influence and potent struggle for hegemony within the region no doubt complements the Islamic Republic’s beliefs about leadership of the Islamic *Ummah*. By amplifying rhetoric in support of a free Palestine, the Islamic Republic no doubt does seek to extend its reach into the Arab world and the wider Sunni Muslim environment and take on a leadership role in the *Ummah*. The Palestinian cause has thus become *strategically advantageous* to the Islamic Republic for enabling Iran to communicate its political discourse of resistance and emancipation throughout the region, and accentuate Iranian power and influence.

For the Islamic Republic of Iran, then, the Palestinian cause transcends geography and thus sits high among strategic national objectives, reflecting the country’s core revolutionary values. Denunciation of Zionism and struggle against the occupation of Palestine are values that are now embedded in contemporary Iran’s lexicon. Extirpating this discourse from the Islamic Republic of Iran in favour of one more hospitable to Zionism and colonial-settler hegemony in the region will be possible only with a radical makeover of Iranian state identity, essentially necessitating regime change. Support for Palestinians is a vital component of the Islamic Republic’s DNA, notwithstanding the last four turbulent decades of fluctuations presented in this paper.











