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Iran, Israel, and the "Shi'ite Crescent"  
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# Introduction

By: Reuven Pedatzur

Developments in Iran are of great importance to decision-makers not just in Israel, but around the world. The Iranian intention to develop nuclear weapons causes great concern among its neighbors and beyond. Since President Bush included Iran in the "axis of evil" research being conducted on Iran has accumulated great momentum. Research institutes completely dedicated to Iranian issues have been established in universities across the world, and in parallel intelligence organizations in western countries are investing substantial resources to scrutinize the Iranian nuclear program.

Less of an effort has been made in researching Iranian society and culture. At the S. Daniel Abraham Center for Strategic Dialogue at Netanya Academic College, we have come to the conclusion that it is not sufficient to track and study Iran's nuclear program; there is an urgent need to study Iranian society, culture, and the sociological characteristics of the Islamic Republic, in addition to the attitude of both the society and governing authority towards Israel and Zionism, and to its Arab neighbors.

The incitement expressed by the President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmedinijad against Israel and Zionism, denial of the Holocaust, and calls to destroy the state of Israel, which he repeats with increasing frequency, as well as efforts to "export the revolution", necessitate efforts to understand the source of this attitude and the approach taken by the President of Iran, which is supported by governing officials in Teheran.

The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, a foundation that our center has partnered with in a variety of fruitful projects, agreed to support two studies that deal with these topics. We applaud the foundation's readiness to fund a research project, which is not their usual avenue of activity. Apparently, our colleagues at the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung also understood the need to study social and cultural aspects of Iran, a topic that is generally beyond the scope of current research, and can assist Israeli decision-makers and the Israeli public to grasp to a greater extent developments and forecasts in Iran.

Dr. Uzi Rabi's study examines the development of the phenomenon known as the "Shi'ite Crescent", led by Iran, whose purpose is the export of the Iranian Shi'ite Islamic Revolution. He also deals with a subject that until now has not been researched as required – the conflict within the Arab world and the Middle East between Shi'i and Sunni Muslims. This conflict has far-reaching implications on Israel and its neighbors, as has already been illustrated through Iranian influence on Hezbollah in Lebanon and on Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Dr. Rabi complements this topic with an examination of Iranian socio-economic developments within Iran vis-à-vis this changing reality.

Dr. Ronen Cohen's study focuses on the attitude of the former (Khomeini) and current Iranian government, as well as attitudes expressed in Iranian society, towards Israel, Zionism, and Judaism. Dr. Cohen analyzes the outlook developed by the Ayatollah Khomeini, used by his successors as policy vis-à-vis Israel. In addition, the study emphasizes that the younger generation in Iran (a decisive majority, demographically) is capable of deviating from the official ideological approach and formulating a different, more positive view of Israel.

In addition, Dr. David Altman, Deputy-Chair of our Center and Senior Vice President of Netanya Academic College, has contributed a unique postscript that deals with relations between totalitarian rulers and their societies, using contemporary Iran as an example.

As a result of these two studies, our Center held a symposium, also supported by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, in which Dr. Rabi and Dr. Cohen presented their findings and three researchers responded to their presentations. Prof. Moshe Maoz, Dr. Emily Landau, and Meir Javedanfar each responded to the studies presented according to their fields of specialization. Moshe Maoz dealt with the Arab world's response to the Iranian attempt to formulate a "Shi'ite Crescent", Emily Landau spoke of Iran's nuclear project and expected nuclear developments and the regional response to Iranian hegemony, while Meir Javedanfar examined developments in contemporary Iranian society.



We are very thankful to the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung for partnering with our center on this unique project, and hope that this project is only the beginning of a series of future studies and conferences that will deal with Iranian society. This topic is both important and critical, which must be studied in order to better grasp not only internal developments in Iran, but also to

advance appropriate policy responses to Iran.

We hope that this publication contributes to a greater comprehension of contemporary developments in Iran, and will assist students of Iran, its government, and society.

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November, 2008





# Iran and the Changing Middle East

by: Uzi Rabi

In an article published in *The Washington Post* on November 29, 2006, Nawwaf 'Ubayd, a security adviser to the Saudi King, emphasized the urgent need for a "massive Saudi intervention" in Iraq to shield the Sunnis against any Shi'-supported sectarian cleansing should Iraq split-up.<sup>1</sup> Nawwaf's Sunni-Shi'i terminology reflected a new perception that was becoming increasingly common while characterizing the changing social and political dynamics in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> During the past few years, this "Sunni-Shi'i" terminology has become a feature of the Arab political discourse, which has been interlaced with uncharacteristically blunt statements by Sunni Arab rulers expressing their concern regarding the dual loyalty of their Shi'i communities. Egyptian President Husni Mubarak stated that "Shi'is in the Arab states (primarily, Iraq and its Gulf neighbors) are mainly loyal to Iran and not to the states in which they live."<sup>3</sup> Saudi Foreign Minister Sa'ud al-Faisal expressed similar sentiments in various contexts. The most prominent expression of such concerns came in December 2004, when Jordan's King 'Abdallah II warned that a 'Shi'i Crescent' (al-hilal al-shi'i) threatens to split the Arab and Muslim world.<sup>4</sup>

This statement stimulated a lively debate in the Arab media. Vitriolic Sunni rhetoric leveled at the Shi'a has become a prominent issue in the Arab political discourse, with headlines portending "the Shi'i wave," "the Shi'i revival," and "the Shi'i danger," appearing throughout print and electronic media. The Arab press has outlined the Shi'i Crescent as extending from Iran at the head of the Persian Gulf, through, Iraq, where Shi'is constitute approximately 60 percent of the population; and including Bahrain (which is 65 percent Shi'i), Kuwait (30 percent Shi'i) and Saudi Arabia (13 percent Shi'i). This Shi'i crescent also includes Iran's client, Syria, as

well as politically fragmented Lebanon, where Shi'is constitute 40 percent of the population.

The summer 2006 Israeli-Hizballah war fueled growing concerns regarding the Sunni-Shi'i conflict. The volume of anti-Shi'i fatwas (religious rulings) was a sharp manifestation of the conflict. The Saudi ulama (religious scholars), who adhere to Wahhabism, the most extreme school of Sunni Islam, issued numerous fatwas denouncing Shi'i Islam as heresy. The Wahhabi clerics even went so far as to denounce Lebanese Shi'i leader Hasan Nasrallah as an enemy and a 'son of Satan.' The most outspoken Wahhabi cleric was Shaykh 'Abdallah bin Jibrin, a senior Saudi 'alim, who issued a fatwa declaring that supporting Hizballah was a sin.<sup>5</sup>

In the aftermath of the war the Arab acrimony over the Sunni-Shi'i issue intensified. In August 2006, during a speech he delivered in front of the Egyptian Journalists Union, Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradhawi, an Egyptian religious scholar residing in Qatar, triggered a public debate over the status of the Shi'is in Egypt. Qaradhawi warned that the Arab Sunni community should be aware of "...the Shi'i infiltration into the Arab Sunni states. Such an infiltration might ignite a flame and could eliminate every good and pious lot. We could easily witness the recurrence of events in Iraq in other Arab Sunni countries."<sup>6</sup> The Egyptian press cited Qaradhawi's warnings that Shi'is in Egypt were attempting to legitimize and spread the Shi'i message by claiming that the graves of Shi'i holy figures, Sayyid Hussein and Sayyida Zaynab, were located in Egypt.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Qaradhawi warned that "the Shi'a used Sufism as a bridgehead to tashayu' (preaching in praise of Shi'ism and persuading believers to adhere to it), through which they have managed to infiltrate Egypt in the last few years."<sup>8</sup>

1 'Ubayd was subsequently dismissed from his position with the Saudi Kingdom following his public statements. *Washington Post*, 29 November 2006.

2 For example, Iranian-born analyst Vali Nasr's thesis regarding the rise of the Shi'a was described in his recent book, *The Shia Revival* (London and New York: Norton & Company, 2006).

3 An interview given by Husni Mubarak to the Arab satellite television channel of al-Arabiyya, April 8, 2006.

4 An interview given by the King of Jordan, 'Abdallah ibn Hussein, to *The Washington Post*, 18 December 2004; See also al-Hayat, 25 March 2005.

5 Al-Hijaz, 15 August 2006; see also, Ruz al-Yusuf, 18 September 2006.

6 On this see also, Walid Tughan, *Mustaqbal al-Arab bayna al-Sunna wal-Shi'a* ("The Future of the Arabs between Sunnis and Shi'is"), al-Masri al-Yawm, 2 September 2006.

7 Ruz al-Yusuf, 18 September 2006.

8 Al-Masri al-Yawm, 2 September 2006.



Qaradhawi was not the only Sunni voice to raise alarm regarding the Shi'is. An indication of the pervasiveness of Qaradhawi's claims could be seen in many of the Egyptian newspapers and government aligned media outlets, which published reports about supposed conversions of Sunnis to the Shi'i sect.<sup>9</sup> The Egyptian daily, Ruz al-Yusuf, may have taken the notion of a "Shi'i rise" to the extreme when it claimed that the Sunnis should be aware that Shi'is aspire not only to a 'Shi'i Crescent', but to a 'Shi'i Full Moon' (al-badr al-shi'i).<sup>10</sup> The level of alarm in Egypt, where the Shi'i population is relatively insignificant in comparison to Lebanon or Iraq [Egypt's Shi'is constitute only a small fraction (1%) of the total Muslim population in Egypt, approximately 650,000-700,000], suggested the degree of Arab concern regarding the "Shi'i threat."

Saudi King 'Abdallah also expressed concern regarding Sunni conversion to Shi'ism (in Arabic, *tashayu'*), "We are following this matter, and we are fully informed about the extent of this campaign to spread Shi'ism. However, we maintain that this campaign will never achieve its goal, because the overwhelming majority of Muslims, who are Sunni, will never turn away from their creed... Ultimately, the decision is in the hands of the majority of Muslims (i.e. the Sunnis), and other Islamic sects are unable to impinge upon their historical authority..."<sup>11</sup> The Saudi king does not grant interviews very often, and certainly not on sensitive topics such as this, so this statement clearly indicates the serious attention the Arab rulers were giving to the Sunni-Shi'i issue.

It was not just Arab rulers who were expressing their concern regarding sectarianism, but senior religious establishment officials as well. Leading Sunni cleric Shaykh al-Azhar, Muhammad Sayyid al-Tantawi stated that, "The argument between the Sunnis and the Shi'is is focusing on the clauses and not on the essence of faith."<sup>12</sup> Even Shaykh Qaradhawi has articulated a more moderate message from time to time. The more moderate messages from senior figures were a product of a growing realization in the Sunni religious community that harsh sectarian rhetoric would lead to further

escalation. In February 2007, Shaykh Qaradhawi and Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former president of Iran, issued a joint call to end the war in Iraq and ease tensions between Sunnis and Shi'is.<sup>13</sup>

The quiescent dispute between the two factions exploded rather suddenly in Iraq and quickly spread through the streets of Baghdad and southern Iraq. Signs of the struggle are evident everywhere in the Arab world — in speeches, editorials, conversations on the street and in coffee shops, and discussions on the Internet. Arab newspapers were full of headlines, articles, and declarations about Shi'i aggressiveness. In January 2007 the Jordanian newspaper al-Dustur, which is identified with the royal regime, warned about a master plan whose aim was to spread Shi'ism from India to Egypt. An important element on the agenda of the "heretics" (i.e. the Shi'is), it was claimed, was to murder "central Sunni figures."<sup>14</sup> That same day an Algerian newspaper reported that parents had called upon the government to put an end to the preaching of Shi'i beliefs in the schools. In Cairo's famous al-Madbuli bookstore, books with such titles as *The Shi'is*, *The Shi'is in History*, *The Twelfth Shi'a*, and so on were on display in the front showroom window.

The feelings of alienation separating the Shi'is and Sunnis date back to the early days of Islam, and the struggle between 'Ali and Mu'awiyah during the years 656-661 C.E., and certainly influence the way modern Shi'is and Sunnis view one another. The differences between Sunnis and Shi'is have evolved through the ages beyond the early Islamic schism and encompass different social-cultural dimensions. Contemporary Sunni Arab culture in some areas of the Middle East maintains a particularly strong legacy of tribal tradition. The Sunni tribes have always maintained a strong tribal identity which is governed by historical lineage and family genealogy. This tribal identity is imbued with a sense of cultural superiority with respect to the Shi'is. There is no question that Shi'is in the Arab states (despite differences from state to state) were, and still are, second class citizens in many respects. The members of the Sunni elite — landowners, tribal dignitaries, senior military men and bureaucrats — were the power brokers throughout the Ottoman

9 See by way of illustration, Ruz al-Yusuf, 16 January 2007.

10 "Al-Shi'a Yahlumun bil-Badr al-Shi'i" (The Shi'is are dreaming of a Shi'i Full Moon), Ruz al-Yusuf, 16 January 2007.

11 Ibid.

12 Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 2 November 2006.

13 Al-Jazeera, 14 February 2007, Foreign News Program.

14 Al-Dustur, 22 January 2007; al-Watan al-'Arabi, 24 January 2007.



period and the post-World War I Mandate Period and fostered cooperative relations with external powers. Thus, these Sunni elites were able to preserve their status and supremacy from one era to the next. Despite the dynamic changes which engulfed the Middle East during the course of the 20th century and despite the rise and fall of new political ideologies and regimes, the Sunni elites maintained their supremacy while the Shi'is largely remained marginalized. The Shi'is were able to find opportunities in the lower ranks of the labor force (for example, as oil field workers in Saudi Arabia, or mercenaries in certain units of the Iraqi army during the reign of Saddam Hussein), but they seldom, if ever, rose to senior positions of responsibility or authority.<sup>15</sup>

Arab nationalism, which permeated the region during the period after independence, was also primarily a Sunni phenomenon. Therefore, the states that raised the banner of Arab nationalism — Egypt, Syria, and Iraq — granted senior government positions to Sunnis, in the name of the past glory of the Sunni Umayyads (661-750) and 'Abbassids (750-1258). Thus, Arab nationalism, secular and socialist in its roots and Sunni in character, was biased against the Shi'i Arabs. And despite sharing Arabic as their mother tongue, Shi'is were still considered 'second class Arabs.' There has been a widespread popular belief among Sunnis that Arab Shi'is are ethnic Persians who are sympathetic to Iran. The fall of the Shah, the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini, and the efforts of the new regime in Tehran to export the revolution to Arab states transformed a popular Sunni belief into a political calculation that gave rise to the notion that the Shi'is in the Arab states were a "fifth column."

The tension between Sunnis and Shi'is has always been an integral part of the history of this region, however the intensity and nature of recent clashes between Sunnis and Shi'is is unprecedented in the modern history of the region. This paper will address the nature of this new regional dynamic, as well as assess how the label "Shi'i Crescent" or "Shi'i Revival" fits the changing geopolitical environment. Therefore, the paper proposes tackling the question of whether sectarian religious divisions are the proper way to view the changing dynamic in

the region, as well as identify other factors influencing and affecting the way this issue is being discussed in the region.

## **Chapter One: Shi'i Regional Unity: Perceptions and Misperceptions**

What then, is the likelihood that a "Shi'i Crescent" or a greater Shi'i entity is being formed in the heart of the region? It would be a misleading over-simplification to assume that a homogeneous Shi'i framework is coalescing: the story is more complex and nuanced. The Shi'is in the Sunni Arab states are indeed aware of their religious identity, and, it can be assumed, even feel certain solidarity with their co-religionists and believers. However, if past experience is any guide, the various Shi'i communities in the Arab states have exhibited local and particularistic loyalties first, and made use of the 'Shi'i flag' primarily as a means of protest, in order to improve their position in the economic-cultural-political context of their respective states.

The Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988 offers a case in point. Fearing that the Iraqi Shi'is would be a "fifth column," loyal to Iran, President Saddam Hussein tried to use anti-Shi'i rhetoric to gain the support of the Sunni Arab street. However, contrary to the conventional wisdom, the Shi'is of Iraq generally remained loyal to their country, just as the Sunni Arabs of Iran remained loyal to Iran.

Kuwaiti Shi'is also demonstrated loyalty to their state during the 1990-1 Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait, when they participated in the sporadic resistance to Iraqi forces during the initial invasion, while the Sunni ruling family and other elites fled the state. The leading Kuwaiti Shi'i cleric, Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Mahri, recently reiterated this point when he said that when put to the test, Kuwaiti citizens responded to the 1990-1 invasion as Kuwaitis and not as Sunnis or Shi'is. He added that those who raise the issue of sectarian loyalty have a hidden agenda that strives to undermine the foundation of the Kuwaiti nation. Al-Mahri indicated that Shi'is were not proselytizing or trying to convert Sunnis to Shi'ism and the Shi'i popularity following Hizbullah's "victory...over the Zionists" was simply a

<sup>15</sup> Even if there were exceptions, like Sa'id al-Sahhaf, Minister of Information in Saddam Hussein's regime, they do not negate the general rule. Sometimes an appointment like this served as mere lip service paid by rulers trying to make it seem as if Shi'is were also included in senior positions in the society and state.



natural reaction and admiration for the "only group that stood up in the face of Zionism."<sup>16</sup>

This perception that Arab Shi'is throughout the region are working towards the same objectives and sharing a common agenda is misleading, in fact Shi'is across the region do not constitute a single, unified entity. For example, even in Iraq, the first Arab state to be ruled by a Shi'i government, there are differences between Shi'i political and religious figures. The Arab Shi'i cleric Muqtadha al-Sadr (who takes a bellicose position)<sup>17</sup> and Ayatollah Ali Sistani [who is of Iranian origin and who rejects several basic principles of Ayatollah Khomeini's philosophy, including the principle of the velayat-e faqih (rule of the jurist)] exemplify the diversity of Shi'i opinion across the Iraqi Shi'i community. The Shi'is of Iraq also have competing visions regarding Iraq's future in particular and the Shi'is' future in general, and therefore do not share a unified Shi'i vision. In addition, Muhsin Kadivar, an Iranian cleric, in his *Hukumat-e Velayat* (Government of the Guardian), argues that all Shi'is do not necessarily follow the principle of velayat-e faqih, since there are different groups of Shi'i clerics which adhere to various conceptions of religion and government.<sup>18</sup>

Shaykh Ali Salman, the leader of Bahrain's opposition political party, al-Wifaq, in January 2007, appeared on the Dubai-based television network, al-Arabiyya's, "Point of Order" program and discussed Shi'i loyalties to the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamene'i. According to Salman, wilayat al-faqih (the rule of the jurisconsult) does not extend beyond Iran to the people of Bahrain. "The people of Bahrain have their own decision and their own religious authority, and are not tied to Sayyid Khamene'i (the Supreme Leader of Iran)." Salman added, "if there are religious authorities in the Shi'i world, be it Sayyid Sistani in Najaf or Muhammad Husayn Fadhlallah in Lebanon, they (Bahrainis) are linked to him (Sistani or Fadhlallah) within the context of religious authority, which is a different arrangement from wilayat al-faqih." Salman also completely rejected Egyptian President Mubarak's comments suggesting that the Shi'is were

more loyal to Iran than to the Arab state that they lived in,<sup>19</sup> and suggested that Mubarak's comments were aimed at diverting attention away from other kinds of political pressure and "serve[d] the purpose of maintaining corrupt conditions in our (the Arab) countries so that we can say there is a threat called Iran or Israel."<sup>20</sup>

While the possibility of a greater Shi'i entity may be remote, the Sunni leaders of the moderate Arab states are behaving as if the issue of a Shi'i entity in the region is more than a possibility. This is not to say that every Sunni Arab state believes that a "Shi'i empire" is imminent, rather their concerns are primarily based on the assumption that emboldened Shi'i elements in the region might tilt the regional balance of power in favor of Iran. The "Shi'i Crescent" rhetoric should not be perceived solely through sectarian religious principles, but also through the geopolitical prism.

## Chapter Two: Iran and the Arab World - Troubled Relations

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran had far-reaching implications for the Arab states. From its inception, the Khomeini regime represented a threat to the Arab world by communicating directly with their Shi'i communities, many of whose leaders were old acquaintances of the new Islamic government in Iran. In particular, the revolution in Iran marked the opening of a new era for the traditionally passive and cautious Shi'i communities of the Gulf and Lebanon and influenced their political behavior in various ways depending on the particular state, its demographics and the local political culture. Iran targeted three areas to project its revolutionary message beyond its borders: Iraq, the Gulf, and Lebanon.

Khomeini targeted Saddam's dictatorship in Iraq with particularly vitriolic propaganda, which contributed to the atmosphere of hostility that led to the Iran-Iraq War. The birth of Hizballah in Lebanon in 1982, and the ongoing attempt to enhance the Shi'i role in

16 Gulf News, 15 March 2005.

17 Al-Watan (Kuwait), 1 August 2008; New York Times, 14 February 2007. See also, al-Sharq al-Awsat, 18 February 2007.

18 See Kadivar's interview, "Din, Modara va Khoshunat" (Religion, Tolerance and Violence), *Kiyan*, 45 (January-March 1999), pp. 6-19. Others, like Ayatollah Abu'l Qassim Kho'i argue for the establishment of an advisory council of religious law experts rather than the velayat-e faqih.

19 Hosni Mubarak's comments on these grounds cause a wave of anger and concern among regional Shi'i communities and Iran.

20 BBC Worldwide Monitoring Service, al-Arabiyya, 26 January 2007.



Lebanese politics, gave Iran a new foothold in the area, from which it could also harass Israel and assume a position of leadership in the Arab—Israeli conflict. In the Gulf, Khomeini also viewed the Gulf monarchical regimes as corrupt American “puppets” that should be completely uprooted, and he tried to incite the Shi'a inhabiting Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait to rebel. In 1981 and 1989 failed coups that were carried out in Bahrain (where Iran has territorial claims) were aimed at overthrowing the regime of the Sunni al-Khalifa family and establishing an Iranian-style Islamic republic. The removal of Saddam Hussein in April 2003, created a new opportunity for Iran to reassert its regional claim to hegemony.

Following the fall of Saddam's regime, over a million and a half persons, according to some estimates, crossed the border from Iran into Iraq. While many were Shi'is who had immigrated to Iran during the reign of Saddam, many who entered Iraq were operating in the service of the Pasdaran (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps). Others were Iranian activists and clerics seeking to restore Najaf to its eminent position as a center of Shi'i Islamic learning, and to create new points of leverage for Iran inside Iraq. Indeed, the Pasdaran was able to create a power base in Najaf and Karbala and project its influence in the region.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's National Unity government in Iraq is Shi'i-dominated and many of the government ministers have contacts in Iran. Post-Saddam Iraq is setting a precedent: The Shi'is, for the first time in contemporary history, occupy the leadership positions of an Arab state. The US and Iranian involvement in Iraq has altered the historical balance of power between the Sunnis and Shi'is, in favor of the Shi'is.

Against the background of these events, the moderate Arab regimes' anxiety was rising in response to Iran's growing power in the region. This new dynamic is a product of the inter-communal strife in Lebanon, and to a larger extent Iraq, which have become the primary arenas for a bloody inter-religious and inter-communal conflict. The Arab Sunni leaders were viewing the Sunni-Shi'i conflict through the geopolitical lens. An Egyptian diplomat encapsulated Arab concerns when he said, “The Arab allies of the US, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, are very worried by the sweeping influence

Iran has gained in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority. With the help of the Hizballah and Hamas organizations — radical and uncompromising forces on the issue of Israel—Iran is propelling the whole region toward a goal the opposite of that which the allies of America want to reach.”<sup>21</sup>

For many in the Arab world, the Iraqi saga has blurred distinctions between "Shi'i" and "Iranian," and the term "Shi'i" has turned into a way to describe someone who shares Iranian regional ambitions in the Arab Middle East. This rhetoric reached an absurd level when it spread to the Palestinian Authority, where the two rival parties are both Sunni. Fath activists, hostile to Hamas, derided Hamas activists, by calling them 'Shi'is'.<sup>22</sup>

Sunni Salafi groups have also adopted the same logic, and have even taken it to the extreme. In September 2005, Abu Musa'b al-Zarqawi, leader of the al-Qa'ida organization in Iraq, announced in a video clip that “The al-Qa'eda Organization in the Land of Two Rivers (Iraq) is declaring all-out war on the rafidha (heretics: here, the Shi'is), wherever they are in Iraq.” He added a call to the Sunnis: “Wake up from your slumber... the war to exterminate Sunnis will never end.” In a video clip dated July 2, 2006, Osama bin Ladin accused the Iraqi Shi'is of planning to wipe out the Sunnis in Iraq. He called the Shi'is 'traitors' and 'agents of imperialism', and even claimed that Shi'i religious rites contained heretical elements. Bin Ladin concluded that Shi'i heresy would require that Shi'is receive appropriate punishment, in accordance with the Shari'a (Islamic law).<sup>23</sup> In late April 2008, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the number two figure in al-Qa'ida, accused Iran of collaborating with the US in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. He also accused Iran of using Hizbullah's al-Manar television station to spread the idea that Israel was behind the 9/11 attacks rather than al-Qa'ida.<sup>24</sup> “Iran has clear goals, which is the annexation of southern Iraq and the east of the (Arabian) Peninsula, and to expand in order to be able to communicate with its followers in southern Lebanon,” Zawahiri claimed.<sup>25</sup>

Iran views the present circumstances as its hour of

21 Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 17 May 2008.

22 "Fatah Demo Slogan: Hamas are Shi'is," Gulf 2000, 8 January 2007.

23 Al-Jazeera, 17 September 2005, Foreign News Program.

24 BBC News, 22 April 2008.

25 Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 20 April 2008.





opportunity, so to speak, and its chance to establish a firm foothold in the heart of the region. The Islamic Republic of Iran views itself as the regional hegemon and acts accordingly. Iran has exerted its influence in Damascus and Beirut for some time, but now it has expanded into Baghdad as well.

What makes Iran's growing influence all the more evident today, is the fragmented status of the Arab state system. Iran is well aware of the leadership void that has emerged among these states and is capitalizing on it. Iran, a non-Arab, non-Sunni, Muslim actor, is attempting to fill the regional leadership vacuum, and its hard-line president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has attempted to become the regional standard-bearer for the Palestinian cause by calling for the elimination of the state of Israel.

The possibility of a nuclear Iran has become another dimension of the anti-Iranian discourse that has been gathering momentum in the Arab media. "Nuclear Iran Is Reviving the Dream of the Persian Empire," was the title of *al-Sharq al-Awsat's* January 2006 editorial, which claimed that Iran's nuclear program was not intended for an attack on Israel, but was meant to provide Iran with an important tool for further expanding its regional influence. Another claim published by the Arab media is that Iran, facing international sanctions and pressure regarding its controversial nuclear program, is exploiting the Sunni-Shi'i conflict in Iraq and Lebanon for political leverage in its negotiations with the international community.

The anti-Iranian tenor of the discussion of the nuclear question stands at the heart of the Arab public debate. Apart from Syria, which supports the Iranian nuclear program because of its strategic alliance with Tehran, most Arab governments disapprove of Iran's nuclear ambition, believing that Iran is using its civilian nuclear program as a pretext to develop nuclear weapons. In February 2006, Egypt, which has historically called for a de-nuclearized Middle East, has made it clear that it opposes Iran's nuclear program by voting to transfer the Iranian crisis from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors to the UN Security Council. Furthermore, Iran's nuclear activities have stimulated increasing Arab interest in nuclear energy. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Jordan and the UAE have already sought nuclear partnerships with the

US, Russia, and France to acquire nuclear technology.

The moderate Arab states also fear that Iran's nuclear program could lead to a military conflict between Tehran and the US/Israel. The 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), which declared that Iran gave up its nuclear weapons program in 2003, may have decreased the chances of a US military attack. But the option of an Israeli attack similar to its June 1981 attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak remains an option. If Iran refuses to surrender its nuclear program and the US or Israel attacks its facilities, Tehran's retaliation could have a major impact on the stability and security of the Arab world. In Lebanon and Palestine, an attack on Iran would lead Tehran to encourage Hizballah and Hamas to challenge Israel and by extension the US, and in Iraq, Iran could incite Shi'i militants — namely al-Mahdi army and al-Badr brigades — to rise up against the US troops in southern Iraq. These are just two cards Iran could play in order to recreate an uncomfortable scenario for the moderate Arab states in which they might again find themselves caught between the popular expressions of esteem lavished on Iran and its proxies on the Arab street for standing up to the West and Israel, but at the same time secretly fearing a rise in Iranian regional power and influence.<sup>26</sup>

Nor should Tehran's ability to impact the (Arab) oil market be overlooked. Tehran has joint control over the Straits of Hormuz from which nearly 40% of the world's oil is exported. In January 2008, 5 Iranian patrol boats were launched by Tehran's Revolutionary Guards to provoke US ships in the Strait of Hormuz, which held their fire.

The geo-political interpretation of the Sunni-Shi'i issue was further underscored in January 2007, when Saudi Arabia publicly warned Iran that its activity in the Gulf could be perilous. "We advised the [Iranians] not to expose the Gulf Region to dangers," said the Saudi King, 'Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz. Furthermore, he reinforced the Saudi position in a strong statement he made to the Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Siyasa*, "Any country that carries out unwise actions will be held accountable for them by the countries of the region."<sup>27</sup>

26 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 27 January 2006.

27 An interview given by the Saudi King, 'Abdallah bin 'Abd al-'Aziz, to the Kuwaiti *al-Siyasa*, 27 January, 2007.



Al-Ahram's editor, Osama al-Sarayya, put it bluntly while stating that "Iran wants to spread the Shi'i doctrine in Sunni countries. This is not religion: this is politics. Iran doesn't care for the consequences of its actions. It only wants to be number one. Are Iran and the US in cahoots? The claim is preposterous, but their policies seem to be heading in the same direction: that of 'uncreative' chaos. Some say that the Iranians have no ill intentions towards the region. I doubt it. Iran is not just reacting to the Americans. It has always been disruptive in its methods and aims. And yet, a US-Iranian confrontation is the last thing this region needs." Sarayya also said, "...Iran is working actively towards spreading Shi'i doctrine even in countries which do not have a Shi'i minority for reasons... which have political dimensions, paving the way for reviving the dreams of the Safavids." Sarayya was referring to the Safavid dynasty that ruled Iran from the end of the 15th century to 1720, and converted Iran's population to Shi'ism. "That some people defend the Iranian position and deny Iranian ambitions over the Arab region, I see only as naivety and stupidity, coated with hatred for the American presence in the region," explained Sarayya.<sup>28</sup>

### **Chapter Three: Across the Region – A State-by- State Analysis**

In order to get past the rhetoric of generalities such as the "Shi'i Crescent," one has to examine the Shi'i communities on a state-by-state basis, taking into account all of the social, economic, political, and cultural particularities of the local environment. With the increasing anxiety in Sunni Arab states regarding the Iranian regional ambitions, the Shi'i communities in these states came under increased scrutiny and pressure. The current geo-political environment was renewing historical perceptions that the Shi'is in Arab states were indeed "lesser Arabs" who sympathized with Iran.

There is no doubt that a whole series of questions and unresolved issues — primarily having to do with the internal politics of these "mixed" Sunni-Shi'i states — will engage the attention of the region, and the way in

which they unfold will have a formative influence on the whole region in the coming years. This section will focus on examining states where the Sunni-Shi'i tension has been most visible, and assess to what extent Sunni-Shi'i themes, which appear in the Arab political discourse, are applicable to each particular area, such as Iraq, the Arab Gulf states, and the Syrian-Lebanese sphere.

#### **Iraq**

Iraq has been the primary theatre for Sunni-Shi'i violence where it threatens to break the state into pieces. Iraq's long border with Iran, its social-demographic composition, its Shi'i holy sites, the presence of foreign occupying forces, and its oil resources make it the critical arena for the changing dynamics of the region.

As far as the Iraqi Shi'is are concerned, their vision of turning the country into a Shi'i Arab state is materializing. It is no surprise then that Sunni tribal leaders have expressed concern that Iraq's Shi'i dominated government will be a satellite Iranian regime. In 2004, a Sunni tribal leader claimed, "They [Iran] are increasing the number of their agents every day, and they are spending millions of dollars to brainwash the people to establish a Shiite state." He also expressed concern that the new Iraqi state will follow Iran's example and combine religion and politics, "They have different means, offering people money or tempting them with free trips to Iran. They want to convince people about the positive aspects of combining religion and politics."<sup>29</sup>

Writing in 2006, Kayhan Barzegar, an Iranian scholar, painted a picture of Iran's goals in Iraq in geopolitical terms: "Iran's security challenges in the new Iraq is the result of Iran's legitimate concerns in terms of establishing national security on the one hand and creating opportunities for it to walk out of geopolitical isolation and thus consolidate its credit and influence both regionally and internationally on the other."<sup>30</sup> In other words, Iran's foreign policy in Iraq was defined by two primary goals: The first was to prevent the US from attacking Iran, and the second was to prevent Iraq

<sup>28</sup> Al-Ahram, 26 January 2007.

<sup>29</sup> International Crisis Group, "Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?" Middle East Report, No. 38, 21 March 2005, p.2. (hereafter: ICG).

<sup>30</sup> Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran and the New Iraq: Security Challenges and Foreign Problems," Turkish Journal of International Relations," Vol. 5, No. 3 (Fall 2006), p. 77.



from becoming a client state of the US by ensuring a Shi'i dominated government. One might add that a third foreign policy goal of Iran was to maintain a "managed chaos"<sup>31</sup> in Iraq to use as a point of leverage regarding US-led international pressure and sanctions related to Iran's nuclear program. It is clear that for Iran, "...Iraq is the most important country in the world," as the then Iranian minister of intelligence and security, Ali Yunesi, noted in 2004.<sup>32</sup>

Despite widespread Sunni-Shi'i violence in Iraq, Iran's interests in Iraq are guided by geopolitics in conjunction with ideology. Iran has strong national security interests in seeing Iraq succeed as a viable sovereign state. Also, Iran does not want to see Iraq's Kurds establish an independent state that would, by virtue of its very existence, foment separatist unrest among Iran's Kurdish population. Iran would prefer an Iraqi central government that is strong enough to hold the state together but too weak to constitute a threat on its border. Iran supports a Shi'i-led central government in Iraq, in part, because it believes "Shi'is don't fight Shi'is."<sup>33</sup>

Iran is able to extend its influence in Iraq using its soft power and its historical ties to Iraqi political parties which until 2003 were supported by Iran as opposition groups in exile during Saddam's rule. Iraqi political groups such as the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and al-Da'wa may continue to receive assistance from Iranian intelligence.<sup>34</sup> Iran's influence is particularly evident in southern Iraq. One Middle East analyst observed in 2005: "...Iraq now reminds me a lot of the situation in southern Lebanon fifteen years ago. Iranian influence is everywhere. Iranian money is being pumped in, pictures of Khomeini are common, even in government buildings. In many places Persian seems to be the lingua franca rather than Arabic."<sup>35</sup>

Despite Iran's strong geopolitical interests in establishing its influence in Iraq, there is also a strong ideological component that is closely woven into the fabric of its geopolitical interests. Kayhan Barzegar,

who in 2006 characterized Iran's involvement in Iraq in almost entirely defensive national security terms, later in 2008 described Iran's influence in Iraq in broader more ambitious terms, "The advent of new political developments in Iraq counts as a turning point in the strengthening of the Shiite position in the region and the world." Barzegar described Iran's changing regional position along sectarian and ethnic lines, "the empowerment of the Shiite element in new Iraq will play an important role in balancing Iran's relations with... the Arab countries." Iran's geopolitics are intimately linked to its Shi'i identity, according to Barzegar who compared the renewed Shi'i role in the region to the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran: "In fact, the Islamic Revolution encouraged the Shiites of the region to identify themselves and embolden their presence in the region. In the new conditions, the Shiites, as one expert of the Middle East called them the 'Forgotten Muslims' — dramatically enter the Middle East developments as one of the most important effective factors."<sup>36</sup>

In other words, Iran's geopolitical interests converge with its ideological principles in Iraq and provide Iran with an opportunity for an enhanced regional role via its Shi'i influence in the new Shi'i dominated Iraq. For Iran, its Shi'i identity is the tool through which it is using its soft power to advance its geopolitical interests.

It is very important to follow developments in Iraq, although at present more is happening than meets the eye. Various antagonists often manage to reach tacit agreements or ad hoc arrangements. In 2003, Washington did not anticipate Iran as a rival in Iraq. As a matter of fact, the ouster of Saddam was initially seen as a potential spur for change in Iran, too. Today, however, it is difficult to ignore that Washington and Tehran are vying for influence in Iraq and the wider region.

The establishment of a Shi'i-dominated Iraqi government and the strong grip in which Shi'i militias hold southern Iraq up to Baghdad are developments that do not augur well for the moderate Arab regimes. The Jordanians, Saudis, Egyptians, and others are warning about increasing Iranian intervention in the internal affairs of Iraq and view this as a violation of

31 ICG, p. 11, 22.

32 Kamran Taremi, "Iranian Foreign Policy Toward Occupied Iraq, 2003-2005," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XII, No. 4 (Winter 2005), p. 28.

33 ICG, p. 10.

34 Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 19 June 2008.

35 ICG, p. 15.

36 Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran, the New Iraq, and the Persian Gulf Security-Political Architecture," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. XX, No. 1 (Winter 2007-2008), p. 96.



the accepted rules of the game and a real danger to the stability of the region. For their part, the moderate Arab regimes are doing what they can to extend their own influence in Iraq by providing financial support to Sunni political and tribal groups and by donating funds and personnel for infrastructure and aid projects, like hospitals and schools. There have been unsubstantiated rumors that some Sunni regimes have provided support to radical groups in Iraq to combat Iran's militias, but these reports are anecdotal and difficult to verify or confirm. These Arab states have also lobbied the US government in order to avoid a US policy that would result in a premature withdrawal of US forces from Iraq or even worse, a US deal with Iran that would extricate the US from its quagmire in Iraq but also guarantee Iran's influence there.

The question of the future of the American presence in Iraq, and the great number of unanswered questions that linger regarding its future, will compel the Arab moderate states to come together on a joint policy for Iraq whose aim will be to block the influence of Iran. Despite these aims, the Arab moderate states realize there are few good options for limiting Iran's presence in Iraq.

Iran, for its part, has been thwarting US attempts to limit its influence in Iraq, because Iran wants to continue to use its influence in Iraq as leverage in its bid for regional hegemony. There are many developments in Iraq that are difficult to assess, but it may be safe to surmise that, "the Iranians don't want uncontrollable chaos in Iraq...They want a manageable chaos..." as Nassir al-Chadirchi, a leader of the National Democratic Party in Iraq noted.<sup>37</sup>

## The Gulf States

Iran and Iraq are the two Middle Eastern states with the largest Shi'i populations, however Shi'is can also be found in large numbers in many of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf — Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Shi'is in Bahrain constitute 70 percent of the citizen population, while in Kuwait the citizen population is 30 percent Shi'a.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> ICG, p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> Political sensitivities discourage publicly released census statistics, so there is no official way to verify these figures and they should be considered approximate

Saudi Arabia, despite its relatively small population, is the largest Arab Gulf state and the most out-spoken in attacking Iran's expansionist aims in the region. The Saudi press has issued a number of doomsday scenarios portraying what could happen if Iran succeeds in causing instability in the Arab states. For example, the following was written in regard to the Kingdom of Bahrain, where the demographic situation is particularly complex, with an Arab Shi'i community living beside a Persian Shi'i community and the Sunni al-Khalifa royal family ruling over them all: "At a time when the US will soon begin to reduce its presence in Iraq and when all forecasts indicate the outbreak of a civil war there, the Iraqi chaos will give Iran an excuse for strengthening its presence there [in Iraq] and for intervening militarily under the cloak of protecting the Shi'is."<sup>39</sup>

Two case studies, Bahrain and Kuwait, aptly illustrate the similarities, and, more importantly, the serious differences regarding the Sunni-Shi'i dynamic from one Arab state to the next.

**Kuwait:** In Kuwait, Sunnis are the majority, and constitute approximately 70 percent of the citizen population, including the Sunni al Sabah ruling family.<sup>40</sup> Shi'is in Kuwait are not necessarily a cohesive and homogenous socio-religious group.

Shi'is' loyalty to Kuwait has been questioned, especially throughout the 1980s in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, when the Emirate experienced an increasing number of acts of sabotage, the most prominent of which was the Shi'i bombings on 12 December 1983, which killed 5 and wounded eighty-six.<sup>41</sup> This was followed in May 1985 by an unsuccessful assassination attempt on the Kuwaiti ruler, Jabir al-Sabah.<sup>42</sup>

As noted above, during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 the Kuwaiti Shi'is were the only community that actively resisted Saddam's invasion. In Kuwait,

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estimates.

<sup>39</sup> Al-Sharq al-Awsat, January 27, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> U.S. Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices – Kuwait, 2007, released 11 March 2008, accessed at [www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2007/100599.htm](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2007/100599.htm)

<sup>41</sup> R.K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp.43- 44.

<sup>42</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Gulf and the West: Strategic Relations and Military Realities* (Boulder and London: Westview Press and Mansell Publishing, 1988), pp. 168-9.



Shi'is have managed their social marginalization by developing their own formal and informal networks. This social infrastructure enabled them to begin a resistance movement against the Iraqis in the early stages of the 1991 Gulf War while the Kuwaiti Sunni population was relatively disorganized and members of the ruling al Sabah family fled Kuwait for Saudi Arabia. The resistance clearly demonstrated Shi'i loyalty to Kuwait.

The recent Sunni-Shi'i violence in Iraq and Lebanon has not manifested itself in the Arab Gulf states. However, even in Kuwait, where Sunni-Shi'i relations have been relatively tranquil, there have been signs of simmering tension. While relations between Sunnis and Shi'is in Kuwait are generally not characterized by violence, the Salafis (Sunnis who favor a return to an earlier, "purer" form of Islam) are usually hostile to the Shi'is. In March 2007, a Kuwaiti Sunni cleric, 'Uthman al-Khamis, announced plans to launch a new satellite channel to warn Muslims of "the Shi'i threat."<sup>43</sup>

In more recent developments, two Shi'i members of parliament, 'Adnan 'Abd al-Samad and Ahmad Lari, who were members of the parliament's popular bloc, participated in commemorations for the assassinated Lebanese Hizballah commander, 'Imad Mughniyya, who was killed by a car bomb in Damascus on 12 February 2008, and who was believed to have participated in the 1988 hijacking of a Kuwaiti airliner that cost two lives. This public display of Shi'i solidarity by Lari and al-Samad threatened Kuwait's relatively relaxed climate of inter-communal relations. The appearance of hundreds of Shi'is at a rally in Mughniyya's memory provoked widespread Sunni anger. The Thawabit Bloc secretary, Muhammad al-Mutayri, claimed that MP Abd al-Samad, who went as far as to claim that Mughniyya was a "martyr hero ... whose blood will wipe Israel off the map,"<sup>44</sup> had ambitions to become Kuwait's Hasan Nasrallah. Mutayri went on to accuse the Kuwaiti government of ignoring the increasing radicalism of Kuwaiti youth, both Sunnis and Shi'is.

The row over Mughniyya's memorial rally followed a rare outbreak of apparently sectarian violence on the night of 11-12 January 2008, when a dozen Sunni

religious bookshops were attacked by stone-throwing vandals, hinting at hitherto unsuspected sympathy for radical ideas among at least a few young Shi'is. Tension has since been further heightened by a bomb threat against the Kuwaiti Embassy in Beirut. This follows a period when books and audio-visual material insulting Shi'i beliefs have been circulating, serving as a reminder that even in Kuwait, where stability and sectarian tranquility is the norm, Sunni-Shi'i relations remain a delicate issue.

The Shi'i tactics are pragmatic and are conducted within the Kuwaiti tradition of dialogue and compromise. Shi'i cleric al-Mahri's political activism exemplifies the Shi'i *modus operandi*. In March 2005 al-Mahri was warned by the Kuwaiti government for violating "the mosque code of conduct" during his Friday sermons. Al-Mahri's sermons drew the attention of Kuwaiti authorities for two primary issues: (1) he criticized the increasing political participation of women in Kuwait, and (2) he was critical of the head of Egypt's al-Azhar University for not condemning Sunni suicide attacks on Shi'is in Iraq. Al-Mahri responded by pointing out his position of independence in Kuwait. He noted that, "Shi'i mosques do not come under the Ministry of Awqaf. They were built with our money. We are responsible for maintenance work and pay to employees of the mosque. No one in the Ministry of Awqaf can stop us from giving sermons."<sup>45</sup> It is also worth noting that Kuwait University's College of Islamic Law does not offer training in Shi'i jurisprudence, requiring Shi'is to travel to Iran or Iraq for the necessary Shi'i education. Al-Mahri articulates the dual nature of the Shi'i position in Kuwait: the Shi'is feel as if they are independent in the religious realm, but at the same time are constantly seeking to increase their political participation and representation in the Kuwaiti government.

Al-Mahri has been careful to advance the Shi'i agenda in terms that respect the authority of the Kuwaiti political leaders. He has referred to the Kuwaiti government as "just and fair" and stated that the constitution of Kuwait was one of the "best." And yet al-Mahri has supported amending the Kuwaiti constitution (Article 2) to make Shari'a the sole source of law, provided that each sect would be governed by its own school of jurisprudence. He explained: "some sects regard that

43 Augustus Richard Norton, "The Shi'ite Threat Revisited," *Current History*, December 2007, p. 439.

44 Agence France Press, 17 February 2008.

45 Gulf News, 15 March 2005.



[the] penalty for thieving is to cut off the hand; for our part, we [Shi'is] require witnesses and if proved guilty then we cut off the fingers only."<sup>46</sup> Al-Mahri made it clear that he was against a "fanatic" and "Taliban-like culture" but he seemed to be referring to the Taliban's intolerance for other Islamic sects, rather than the Taliban's strict enforcement of Shari'a. He pointed out that the Shi'a have rights in Kuwait, but were seeking equal opportunity in government and he referred to the small number of Shi'i deputy ministers. Al-Mahri characterized Kuwait as a "liberal democratic society" and affirmed that the Shi'is allegiance was to their Kuwaiti homeland and its political leadership.<sup>47</sup>

Since at least 2005, there have been calls from Shi'i leaders to the Ministry of Education to remove references in high school textbooks which refer to Shi'is as unbelievers. Al-Mahri, in July 2008, submitted a letter to the Ministry of Education emphasizing that the takfiri references to Shi'is in the educational system were tearing at the social fabric of Kuwaiti society, and presented obstacles on the road to national unity.<sup>48</sup>

In summary, Kuwait's Shi'is — who account for up to one-third of the Kuwaiti population — are well integrated into society. The multi-layered complexity of the Sunni-Shi'i relationship in Kuwait is different in many respects from its Gulf neighbors. As the Mughniyya incident illustrated, outbursts of intolerance on both sides may be an uncomfortable sign of the pressures and risks for Kuwait as a result of intermittent confrontation between Shi'is and Sunnis in the wider Middle East. However, Kuwait's strong tradition of an open political dialogue combined with a strong sense of national identity should be up to the task of managing the sectarian challenges.

Bahrain: is unique among Gulf states, due to its majority Shi'i population. According to the best available estimates, Shi'is make up 70 percent of the citizen population of 700,000. Moreover, the majority of Bahraini Shi'is are followers of the "twelver" (ithna 'ashariyya) branch of Shi'i Islam.

The Shi'is of Bahrain cannot easily be defined as either rebellious or quietist; the picture is more

complex, particularly against the background of Iran's revolutionary regime. In the first place, unlike other states in the region, Bahrain carries the burden of an ancient Iranian claim to its territory. The Bahraini-Iranian dispute seemed to have settled in 1971, when the Shah relinquished the claim of sovereignty over Bahrain and recognized its independence, following a United Nations sponsored referendum on independence in Bahrain. But the Iranian revolution revived the issue, albeit in a new form.

In contrast to Kuwait, the ruling al-Khalifa family of Bahrain has not considered the Shi'is worthy of inclusion in their system of alliances. The al-Khalifa regime has been accused of discriminating against and oppressing the Shi'is, including sporadic physical attacks by Sunnis. Shi'is were often not allowed to practice their religious ceremonies, particularly the 'ashura festivities. Shi'is have been barred from land ownership, and were not recruited by the military, and could not hold supreme ministerial offices. The Sunni-dominated security forces persecuted them continually as suspects of subversion.

Although deprivation tended to unite them emotionally, the Shi'is of Bahrain are divided along geographic and ethnic lines, by living conditions and even praying styles — all of which have given rise to varied types of political behavior. The al-Baharna, who consider themselves the indigenous inhabitants of Bahrain, make up the largest portion of the island's Shi'i population. There are several prominent Shi'i families, such as the Safar, Sharif, Kanu, Fakhro, that form an integral part of the socio-political establishment. In addition, there is a sizeable community of Shi'is, originating from Saudi Arabia's eastern province, al-Ahsa. Mainly small traders and manual and service workers, they have developed a degree of self-sufficiency. They manage the most important Shi'i mourning house (ma'tam), where Imam Husayn's martyrdom is commemorated in a totally different style from the Baharna processions.

As Bahrain's political blocs followed sectarian lines, Persian Shi'is ('Ajam) remained separate. In the beginning of the 20th century Persians constituted the largest foreign group in Manama, the capital city. The Persian ma'tam was financially supported by leading Persian merchant families, such as the Bushehri family. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, the Persian ma'tam was instrumental in establishing religious

46 BBC Worldwide Monitoring Service of "Elaph" web site February 29, 2008.

47 Ibid.

48 Al-Watan (Kuwait), 27 July 2008.



links with Iran. The merchants often hired respected clergymen from Bushehr, Shiraz and Qom as teachers of Shi'i theology. Until 1970, Bahraini 'Ajams held both Bahraini passports and Iranian identity cards.

During the 1980s and the 1990s Shi'i groups dominated opposition activity. In the earliest clerical bid to export the Islamic Revolution to other Gulf states in 1979, Ayatollah Sadeq Ruhani declared that Bahrain should be annexed to Iran unless its rulers agreed to adopt an Islamic form of government similar to the one established in Iran.<sup>49</sup> Since the summer of 1979, revolutionary Iran has attacked the Bahraini regime with inflammatory rhetoric, fomenting a new wave of demonstrations involving hundreds of people, who were primarily Shi'is demanding treatment befitting their majority status.

Iran's claim to Bahrain is an ongoing saga, which became evident again in July 2007 when Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor of the conservative Iranian daily paper *Kayhan* and an advisor to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, published a controversial editorial claiming that Bahrainis supported reunification with Islamic Iran, and that such a reunification was "an indisputable right for Iran and the people of this province [Bahrain] and should not and cannot be overlooked."<sup>50</sup> Iran may be using its historical claims to sovereignty over Bahrain to entrench its broader regional influence in the Gulf. Meanwhile, it gives the King of Bahrain yet another reason to keep a close eye on Iran's influence on Bahrain's Shi'i population. The al-Khalifa Sunni regime is firmly established in Bahrain, but, similar to other Gulf states and perhaps even more so in Bahrain, much will depend on the wisdom of the al Khalifa socio-political and socio-economic response to sectarian challenges.

Among the more radical groups propagating Islamic resurgence in the Gulf was the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) which was led by the Shi'i cleric, Hojjat al-Islam Hadi al-Mudarresi, an Iranian who fled his country during the reign of the Shah. On 13 December 1981, the Bahraini security forces announced the arrest of 75 members of a group that was bent on toppling the al-Khalifa regime and announcing the

establishment of an Islamic Republic.<sup>51</sup>

The "spiritual father" of Bahrain's Shi'i political and religious movement Shaykh Abd al-Amir al-Jamri died in December 2006. Jamri had served in Bahrain's first parliament from 1973 to 1975, before it was dissolved by Bahrain's Amir. Throughout the 1990s Jamri was a leading Shi'i political activist and was jailed by the Bahraini authorities from 1996 until 1999, when the new King, Hamad bin 'Isa al-Khalifa, pardoned him as part of his new plan of political reform.<sup>52</sup>

Al-Jamri's political activism has set the stage for Shaykh 'Isa Ahmad Qasim to re-emerge as the leading Shi'i cleric in Bahrain and the spiritual leader of Shaykh Ali Salman's political group, al-Wifaq.<sup>53</sup> Considered to be the most prominent popular religious figure in Bahrain,<sup>54</sup> Qasim spent 8 years of exile pursuing religious studies in Qom, Iran, and returned to Bahrain following the new Bahraini King's reform plan in March 2001. Like al-Jamri, Qasim had been a member of Bahrain's parliament when it was dissolved in 1975. Qasim was also the chairman of the Islamic Awareness Society from 1972 until 1984, when the government shut it down. While in exile in Iran, Qasim developed a hard-line towards the Bahraini government and in 1997 went as far as to threaten the Bahraini government with a call to "holy war" if a group of more than 30 Bahraini Shi'is — who were accused of being members of Hizbullah-Bahrain and conspiring to overthrow the government — were sentenced to death. The accused were ultimately sentenced to prison.<sup>55</sup> Upon returning to Bahrain in 2001, Qasim moderated his political rhetoric and said he intended to confine himself to religious matters and guidance, rather than engage in political activities.<sup>56</sup>

Qasim has become one of the main spiritual leaders of the leading Shi'i political organization, al-Wifaq (Islamic National Accord), which is led by Shaykh 'Ali Salman. Al-Wifaq was formed in 2002 and serves as an umbrella organization for several different Shi'i groups, including

49 R. K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East*, p. 49.

50 Agence France Press, 11 July 2007.

51 For more historical background on the Shi'is in Bahrain, see: Uzi Rabi and Joseph Kostiner, "The Shi'is in Bahrain: Class and Religious Protest," in *Minorities and State in the Arab World*, eds. Ofra Bengio and Gabriel Ben-Dor (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), pp. 171-188.

52 "Shaykh Abd al-Amir al-Jamri, Bahrain's leading Shi'ite cleric dies," Associated Press, 16 December 2006.

53 Mohammed Al-mezeel, *Gulf News*, 5 October 2004.

54 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 8 March 2001.

55 Agence France Press, 1 April 1997.

56 *Bahrain Tribune*, 26 and 28 October 2004.



the former al-Da'wa, Hizballah (Bahrain), and the Free Bahrainis Movement (al-Baharna al-ahrar). For Shaykh Salman, who has led the Shi'i opposition since the early 1990s, sectarianism (al-nafas al-ta'ifi) remains the divisive social-political issue in Bahrain. "Let me speak frankly," Salman said, "sectarian prejudice exists in all levels of the government. It strongly exists among influential figures. I can say that most officials are influenced in their programs by sectarianism, which governs Bahrain on political and economic issues."

Shi'i clerics were not the only group that believed that sectarianism was destroying the state from within. A political scandal erupted when Salah al-Bandar — a Sunni, who was employed as an adviser to the Cabinet Affairs Ministry — blew the whistle on a government scheme to marginalize Shi'is in the 2006 elections. Bandar released hundreds of pages that document a scheme to keep the Shi'a politically fragmented and weak, while at the same time restructuring the island's political districts to give Sunnis a demographic advantage they could transform into a political victory in the 2006 parliamentary elections. The documents even suggest there was a program to convert Shi'is into Sunnis.<sup>57</sup> The elections, Bandar warned in his 240-page report, was only part of a five-year plan to give political control of Bahrain to a small group of anti-Shi'i Sunnis. This imbroglia attests to how serious the minority Sunni government views the political challenge posed by the Shi'i majority in Bahrain.

It seems that Sunni-Shi'i tension has extended beyond the political elites and spread to the grassroots of Bahraini culture. Shaykh 'Ali Salman suggests that the Sunni-Shi'i tension is now a widespread popular phenomenon: "Look at the charitable Sunni and Shi'i funds. A Bahraini would not put a single dinar in them until he makes sure that it will go to his sect and not to the other sect. This did not exist in Bahrain before." For Salman the sectarian issue continued to dictate the rhythm of Bahrain's political culture:

"People are being elected in line with their sect and not their election program. People are not hired according to their qualifications but according to the sect which they belong. Anyone who takes a simple survey of Bahrainis will find that the result will not be different

from this view, which divides the Bahrainis according to their sect."<sup>58</sup>

At the same time, however, Salman was quite clear that Iran played no active role in the Shi'i opposition in Bahrain: "I have been involved in political activity since 1992 as a leader of the opposition. I can swear by God's book that from that time until now, we have not received a single dinar from Iran... We are extremely clear in Bahrain. Iran is a neighboring Muslim country, but it is a country and we are a country. We are independent in our decisions and do not allow anyone to interfere in our internal affairs."<sup>59</sup>

### Hizballah-Syria-Iran Axis

Iran has been active in Lebanon since 1979, and gave birth to Hizballah in 1982, which has allowed Iran to export its revolutionary ideology and enhance the Shi'i role in Lebanese politics. With this in mind, it is no surprise that Lebanon would be a central arena for the Sunni-Shi'i violence, the struggle for regional hegemony, and more precisely, the struggle between Iran and a number of Arab states.

Hizballah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, sought to turn the summer 2006 war in Lebanon into "the struggle of the Muslim nation."<sup>60</sup> Hizballah was determined to carry on the fight against Israel, and its success in bringing about Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon has earned it the sympathy of the Arab public throughout the region. There was thus nothing surprising in the fact that large demonstrations showing solidarity with Hizballah's struggle were held on the streets of Cairo, Rabbat and Amman during the summer 2006 war in Lebanon. For the Saudi, Egyptian, and Jordanian regimes, a Hizballah victory, even a partial victory, would have served as a source of inspiration for the regime's domestic opponents.

The moderate Arab states directed severe criticism at Hizballah at the start of the Lebanese crisis. They condemned Hizballah's "adventurous and hasty policy that could bring disaster down on Lebanon's head."<sup>61</sup> On the second day of the war, Saudi Foreign Minister,

57 Hasan M. Fattah, *International Herald Tribune*, 3 October 2006.

58 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 22 May 2007

59 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 22 May, 2007.

60 See, by way of illustration, al-Hilal (Amman), 23-29 November 2006.

61 M. A. Derhally, "Rise of the Shi'is," *Arabian Business*, September 3, 2006.





Sa'ud al-Faisal, declared that, "there is a difference between legitimate resistance and miscalculated adventurism."<sup>62</sup> These critical statements reflect the Arab states' sentiments that Hizballah's defeat could have provided the beneficial effects of weakening their own domestic opposition and exposing the limitations of Iran's power.

A nuanced explanation of what was worrying the Sunni Arabs was not a Hizballah victory against Israel, but rather its success in spreading its ideology throughout the Arab world. The Sunni Arab fear was that a victorious Hizballah would become an instrument through which Khomeini's successors in Iran could expedite the delivery of the Islamic Revolution to the Arab world.<sup>63</sup> In a Middle East where Saddam Hussein has become a thing of the past, and the extent of bin Ladin's influence has been drastically limited, the Arab public continued to seek cultural heroes who would stand firm against the West. Shi'i leaders Hasan Nasrallah and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad could be the new heroes of the Arab street owing to their bold and provocative conduct in defying the West. The increasing sympathy being shown for the values of the "resistance" (al-muqawama), and the pictures of the new cultural hero, Hasan Nasrallah, that were paraded on the streets of Arab cities — not only in Damascus and towns in the Palestinian Authority, but also in Cairo — have become very worrisome phenomena for the moderate Arab regimes.

Lebanon's reconstruction and rehabilitation following the 2006 war also resulted in a competition for influence between Iran and the Arab moderate states. Saudi King Abdullah announced a grant in aid of a billion and a half dollars as an advance for an "Arab and international fund for the reconstruction of Lebanon." The Saudis, it should be remembered, were involved in Lebanon in the past and served as patrons of the Taif Accords of 1989, which brought about a temporary end to the crises that state suffered during the 1980s. The Saudis also invested enormous amounts of money in Lebanon in the past, and they were allies of murdered Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri.

Despite the Saudi contributions to the post-war

reconstruction efforts, the overall regional balance, as presently perceived by the leaders of the moderate Arab states — Egypt, Jordan and the GCC states — is not a cause for joy, to put it mildly. As noted above, it may be surmised that they secretly hoped that a devastating blow would be delivered to Iran's client, Hizballah, and that this development would help weaken their own domestic opponents and expose the limitations of Iran's power. However, matters did not unfold this way. In the aftermath of the Lebanon war, Nasrallah had become a cultural hero in the eyes of many Arabs, which provided domestic opponents belonging to radical camps with the impetus to express a more vociferous public dissatisfaction with the moderate regimes.

The summer 2006 war in Lebanon should not be perceived as merely an additional chapter in the story of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It was also a confrontation between Israel and Iran, via Iran's proxy, Hizballah. Moreover, the war shifted the regional balance of power and paved the way for new alliances. One of the most interesting phenomena to appear during the war was the behavior of the Arab states at the emergency conferences of the Arab League that were convened as the fighting proceeded. For the first time the Arab states did not present themselves as a unified front against Israel in a time of war, which was a departure from a consistent Arab pattern throughout the 20th century. This is an important new development, indicating that the power configurations in the Middle East are being realigned. The main element in this rearrangement is the struggle for regional primacy, with Iran being pitted against the moderate Arab states. In the campaigns of the 20th century, Israel was entirely excluded from the regional coalitions. Now, however, it finds its interests converging with those of the moderate, Sunni Arab states.

The May-June 2008 Lebanese political agreement brokered in Doha by Qatari Shaykh Hamad was instrumental in further solidifying Hizballah and Nasrallah's prominence in the Arab world. Hizballah was able to demonstrate its military strength and defend its political independence from the Lebanese state authority, effectively placing its institutional apparatus on par with the state's. However, the latest round of violence in June/July 2008 has exacted a high-price, and perhaps deepened sectarian divisions in

62 Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 16 July 2006.

63 Shakir al-Nabulsi, "Hal Sayasbah Lubnan al-Jumhuriyya al-Islamiyya al-Lubnaniyya" (Will Lebanon be turned into the Lebanese Islamic Republic), al-Sharq al-Awsat, 17 August 2006.



a fragile and fragmented Lebanese society. The New York Times noted that Lebanese television stations affiliated with the opposing political groups were broadcasting recorded segments underscoring the communal divisions. Sahar Khatib, an anchor for Saad Hariri's television station which was forced off the air during the conflict, addressed Hizballah: "This grudge against us, why?" Khatib shouts, staring angrily at the camera. "I am someone who believes in God, not sects. Now you have awakened this sectarianism in me. Look at your victims, victims like me, one after another."<sup>64</sup>

The Doha agreement may have ended the political deadlock and sectarian street violence in Lebanon, but it undermined Lebanon's government institutions and ensured that Hizballah would not be disarmed, as was stipulated in U.N. Resolution 1701, which was part of the agreement that ended the 2006 Lebanon war with Israel. In May 2008, Ghayth Abd al-'Ahd of the London Guardian reported on the new Shi'i ascendancy in Lebanon, "An air of defeat hung over the Sunni areas. The Shi'a have won," said one young man, in al-Tariq al-Jadida quarter on the Sunni side of Corniche al-Mazra'a in Beirut.

The battle for Lebanon's future following the 2006 war has continued, not only internally among Lebanon's sectarian parties, but also regionally, as the Arab states compete with Iran for local influence. The efforts to prevent Lebanon from being turned into a Shi'i stronghold and to retain it as an integral part of the Sunni Arab expanse were at the heart of the struggle in which former premier Fu'ad Siniora's government was being supported by the moderate Arab states.

At the same time, the Arab moderates, along with Turkey, continue to launch diplomatic initiatives aimed at separating Syria from its "Iranian connection." Motivated by their understanding of the Iranian threat and their efforts to reduce Iran's strategic depth, the moderate Arab states and Turkey are working to advance an Israeli-Syrian dialogue. Until now these efforts have moved forward cautiously and slowly, but the calls for peace coming from Damascus may be signs of a possible change.

The moderate Arab states seem to be applying a similar

strategy in their approach to the question of Palestine. They have been steadfast in their efforts to settle the differences between the clashing sides in the Palestinian Authority, in part, because they view the Palestinian cause as another lever that Iran uses to project its influence and ideology in the region. Iran's support of Hamas is interpreted by many observers as a factor limiting Egypt's room for maneuver in its efforts to mediate among the Palestinian groups. The efforts to form a Palestinian unity government that is more in line with the moderate Arab states in the region proceed without let-up. In February 2007 the Saudis succeeded in bringing the various Palestinian sides to Mecca and to agree upon the establishment of a Palestinian unity government, but the unity government ultimately resulted in renewed fighting and the Saudi efforts came to nothing.

Even if the concerns and worries of the Sunni Arab states over the sensitive issues on the regional agenda have increased greatly, these states still seek a diplomatic political outlet that will allay their concerns. This was evidently the background to the summit meeting held in March 2007 in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, between Saudi King Abdullah and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The two states, standing on either side of the Sunni-Shi'i divide, tried to bridge the gaps and reach agreement on the type of regimes desirable in Lebanon and Syria. They were aware that such an agreement would reduce the friction that has developed between Sunnis and Shi'is, or, in fact, between the moderate Arab states and Iran. For Iran the summit meeting was a means of breaking out of its isolation and an opportunity to identify regional levers that could weaken the pressure being put on it.

## Conclusion

The rise in the status of the Shi'is constitutes a significant change in the Middle East. Even if the idea of one large, cohesive Shi'i entity is not realistic, the Shi'is have gained influence in Middle Eastern politics and shifted the balance of power in mixed states like Iraq, Lebanon, and to a lesser extent in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. This change represents a shift in the Shi'i self-image. The sense of inferiority that characterized the Shi'is' social, economic, and political status and their marginality as a religious minority seem like matters of a distant past.

<sup>64</sup> Robert F. Worth and Nada Bakri, *The New York Times*, 18 May 2008.



The sharp rift dividing the Sunnis and Shi'is, which came to light clearly during and after the summer 2006 war in Lebanon, is certainly not a passing phenomenon. To be sure, Sunni Islam still rules supreme throughout the Muslim world, including the Middle East, and the Sunni leadership — senior clerics as well as rulers, are careful to emphasize their faith's seniority in the Muslim world. However, anyone seeking to characterize the Middle East as being on the eve of 'a Shi'i Era' will almost certainly find an impressive amount of evidence that appears to support such a claim and validate the concept of a 'Shi'i revival'. For the first time, Shi'is have taken over the leadership of an Arab state, Iraq. This development seems to have emboldened Hizballah, which in May 2008 successfully challenged Fu'ad Siniora's government and shifted the delicate balance of power in Lebanon (established by the 1989 Ta'if Accord) in its favor. It is clear that Hizballah's aspirations are closely linked to the rising status of Iran and its growing regional influence. It is safe to assume that Iran is relatively stronger than it has ever been in the modern history of the region.

A number of scholars and analysts would refute the notion of a growing Sunni-Shi'i rift, and instead argue that the decisive factors in the Middle East are essentially political, rather than religious or ideological. Such claims were articulated during the recent "Doha Debates" televised by the BBC. Hisham Hellyer of the Oxford Center for Islamic Studies, for example, referred to the historical co-existence between sects: "Sunnis and Shiites, after all, have learned to 'grudgingly' tolerate each other for centuries, despite doctrinal differences." He concluded that, "those differences have never turned into religious wars like we saw in Europe. They never turned into inquisitions, genocides, or anything like that."<sup>65</sup> Those who examine the region through the Sunni-Shi'i lens, according to this school of thought, are drawing on patronizing colonialist conceptions that tend to view the region as a collection of sects, ethnic communities, and groups of congregations, rather than vibrant and viable national states. A further extension of this argument would be that the Sunni-Shi'i issue has been overblown, suggesting that the Sunni-Shi'i debate has been propagated as part of a hidden agenda to sow dissent within the Muslim world. Another similar claim, asserts that the Sunni-Shi'i rivalry and rhetoric diverts

attention from important fundamental problems in the Middle East, such as the American incursion into Iraq and Israeli policy towards the Palestinians. Shaykh Mohammad Hussein Fadhlallah, the spiritual leader of the Hizballah, for example, allots a special place in his sermons to the Americans' deeds in inflaming Sunni-Shi'i tension. And he claims that the concepts of the Shi'i renaissance and the *tashayu'* are the result of a protracted American effort to deepen the gap between the two Muslim communities. One of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohammed Mahdi 'Akif, has expressed similar views. He accused the 'enemies of Islam' and the 'foreign conquerors' of deepening the split and spreading the culture of hatred between Sunnis and Shi'is "that had developed recently."<sup>66</sup>

The Sunni-Shi'i confrontation in Iraq is influencing developments and perceptions in the Middle East, particularly in the Gulf States and Lebanon. Assessing the tone and mood of events from state to state, rather than referring to a "Shi'i Crescent," one gets the sense that the Sunna and the Shi'a provide a window through which to better understand the changing geopolitical picture across the region. It appears — and this is the central claim of this essay — that the new dimension of the age-old conflict between the Sunna and the Shi'a is less a matter of faith and more of product of geopolitical developments. In January 2007, King 'Abdallah of Jordan explained:

"When I spoke about the 'Shi'i crescent', it was in connection with political coalitions. I had no intention of discussing the term from the sectarian point of view. We relate to things through the lens of regional stability and security, and not from narrow self-seeking considerations. The matter is not one to be understood through slogans, but one that focuses on the immanent challenges and dangers facing the Middle East."<sup>67</sup>

At the beginning of the 21st century it would seem that Iran is emerging as the only regional super-power in the Middle East, and there is no Arab state capable of challenging Iran's supremacy. Iran finds it convenient to view the issue of the Sunni-Shi'i conflict as "a plot concocted by America and the Zionist regime with the

65 Nicholas Blanford, "Is the Sunni-Shiite Rift Mostly Politics and Media Hype," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 1 May 2008.

66 Umayma 'Abd al-Latif, "The Sunni-Shi'i Split: Between Myth and Reality," *al-Ahram*, 1-7 March 2007.

67 An interview given by the King of Jordan, 'Abdallah ibn Hussein, to *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 23 January 2007.



aim of deepening the conflict between Sunni Muslims and Shi'is in order to increase America's ability to exploit the states of the region and their resources."<sup>68</sup> In practice, meanwhile, as it has done for some time, Iran continues to antagonize its Arab neighbors by fomenting divisions in Iraq and Lebanon and by extending material and moral aid to the Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian territories. As a result, on the one hand, Iran's adventurous regime has been very successful in its efforts to gain the sympathy of the Arab public, thanks to its anti-Western declarations and policies. On the other hand, its controversial behavior has deepened the Arab regimes' anxieties.

Despite the moderate Arab states' concern regarding the aforementioned regional sources of conflict, they still seek diplomatic and political means that will lead them out of the morass. The January 2008 Annapolis Conference, which was meant to re-start the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, and which included Israel, the Palestinians, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and other Arab moderate states, and the Europeans, as well as the US, was an indication of the continued concern among both regional and international players regarding the changing geopolitical circumstances and Iran's quest for regional hegemony.

It would not be wrong to say that the region is in the middle of a cold war, one that is being conducted on various battlegrounds, including Baghdad, Beirut, and Gaza, between proxies of Tehran and parties supported by the moderate Arab bloc, Saudi Arabia in particular. In statements regarding the summer 2006 war in Lebanon, US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, observed that a "new Middle East" could be one of the positive results of the war. The Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, responded to this remark by saying, "The people of the region are already living in a new Middle East, under conditions in which the wings of the Zionist and American dominance have been broken."<sup>69</sup>

The phrase, "a new Middle East," turned into a cliché long ago. However, it might be correct to use a less pretentious, but more realistic and practical term, 'the changing Middle East'. This term is broad enough

to encompass the developing tension between Iran and the Arab states, as well as the potential for new alliances in the region. As Iran continues its efforts to gain regional hegemony and develop nuclear capabilities, the moderate Arab states will undoubtedly be pushed more and more into an opposing camp. The lingering question in this 'changing Middle East' is whether and to what extent the Arab camp can restore the balance in the Arab-Iranian power equation.

## **Iran's Internal Dynamics: Politics, Economy, and New Media**

### **Introduction**

In sharp contrast to Iran's performance in the region and beyond there are several acute domestic challenges which have created a unique contrast between the image Iran has been projecting of itself as a rising power and its fragile socio-economic situation. In other words, Iran seems to have reached a critical moment where it is facing difficult domestic issues, which it may be trying to gloss over or circumvent by focusing attention on its ambitious and controversial foreign policy.

Three main fields were chosen in order to better exemplify the changing rhythm and special dynamics of developments in Iran. The first issue is recent developments in Iranian domestic politics. Iran is fast approaching its 2009 presidential election, set for 12 June, which will be an important litmus test for the success and popularity of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's populist policies. The second section deals with the socio-economic sphere where inflation and unemployment have generated widespread discontent which may lead to popular protests against the regime, similar to the riots that erupted in June 2007 following the government's brief attempt to enforce gasoline rationing at the nation's filling stations.

The last section addresses important new trends in Iran's civil society, especially the widely discussed phenomenon of Weblogistan. Weblogs or "blogs" have blurred the social boundaries in Iranian civil society, and provided Iranians both inside Iran and all over the world with a minute-by-minute opportunity to observe, comment, and, to some degree, participate,

68 Iran News Agency, 17 January 2007.

69 Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 17 August 2006.



in the dynamic political and cultural changes taking place in Iran. Despite the government's tight control over traditional media, new media — such as "blogs" and other Internet based outlets — offer an avenue for groups across the Iranian political spectrum, radical and reformist, to express their views. It is hard to measure the precise effect of this new form of political and cultural expression, but it is safe to assume that it has created a new and dynamic lens through which to view and observe Iranian society and culture. Iran's political environment manages a subtle tension between political debate and tight state control and censorship. This tension is an important characteristic of Iran's political culture.

### **The Political Fold: Will Ahmadinejad Survive?**

Iran is fast approaching its 2009 presidential election, set for 12 June, which will be an important measure of the success and popularity of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's populist policies. It is hard to know what Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i really thinks about Ahmadinejad's presidency and the idea of another four years of Ahmadinejad's leadership, but, at least publicly, Khamene'i has extended some measure of support to Ahmadinejad. His most recent statement to Ahmadinejad regarding the forthcoming elections was supportive, but also vague: "In other words, imagine that in addition to this year, another four years will be under your management. Work with this in mind; act and plan accordingly," said Khamene'i.<sup>70</sup>

Khamene'i's backing will be paramount for Ahmadinejad next June, but Ahmadinejad's ability to manage the economy and successfully address the issues that are fueling discontent, such as the rising cost of key foodstuffs, housing, medical care, and shortages of gasoline and heating oil, as well as unemployment will also play a big role in Ahmadinejad's ability to win a second term.

Iran's Majlis continues to be an important forum for political debate. In the run-up to the Spring 2008 Majlis elections there was lively public debate in Iran regarding the country's leadership and direction: in particular this

debate focused on the challenges facing Iran's economy. Most recently there was a controversy during the confirmation hearings for Ahmadinejad's new Interior Minister, Ali Kordan. He claimed that he had received an honorary law degree from Oxford University, but Iranian Majlis figures who attempted to verify the degree discovered otherwise.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, Kordan was able to receive confirmation from the conservative Majlis: 169 representatives approved his confirmation while only 64 opposed it.

The elections for Iran's Eighth Majlis that took place in the spring of 2008 reasserted the Principlists' (Osulgarayan) grip on institutional power. (The Principlists are a loosely defined group of politicians who remain loyal to a strict interpretation of the velayat-e faqih (guardian of the jurisconsult), and the core values of 1979 Islamic Revolution) The Principlist victory illustrated the continued weakness of centrist or reformist political groups in the Iranian government. The increased role of the Principlists is another indication of the ongoing dialectic, managed by Khamene'i, between the practical demands of popular government and loyalty to the revolutionary values of clerical rule. While during Rafsanjani's presidency (1989-1997), it looked as if the state imposed itself on the revolution, (prompting some analysts to label this period the "second republic"), one gets the impression that during Ahmadinejad's presidency, revolutionary values have trumped the practical demands of the state.

The April 2008 Majlis elections were a re-affirmation of the Principlists' grip on power and their emphasis on revolutionary values. The first round of elections took place on 14 March, and the second round of run-off voting for undecided seats was held on 25 April, 2008. Out of 290 seats in the Majlis, the Principlist candidates won approximately 200, the reformist candidates, approximately 50, and the independents, 40.<sup>72</sup> The Principlists also won 29 of 30 seats in the Tehran district. The Turnout for the first part of the election was estimated at 60 percent, but was believed to be much lower, while the turnout for the second round of elections in April was estimated at

70 Meir Javedanfar, "Iran Has A Date With Mahmoud Ahmadinejad," Middle East Analyst, 7 September 2008, accessed at <http://middleeastanalyst.com/2008/09/07/date-ahmadinejad/>

71 See [www.ox.ac.uk/media/news\\_stories/2008/080815.html](http://www.ox.ac.uk/media/news_stories/2008/080815.html); BBC Worldwide Monitoring Service, Aftab-e Yazd website (6 August 2008), 9 August 2008.

72 Raz Zimmt, "Iran's 2008 Parliamentary Elections: A Triumph of the System," Middle East Review of International Affairs, Volume 12, No. 2, June 2008.



only 40 percent.

Many of the prominent Reformist candidates were vetted and disqualified prior to the elections. More than 7,500 candidates registered, including 600 women; however, approximately 3,000 candidates were disqualified by the regime's Interior Ministry Executive Electoral Committees.<sup>73</sup> The disqualified included incumbent MPs, reformists who had served as MPs in the Sixth Majlis, and other former high-ranking officials who were believed to have had ties to the Reformist-linked groups. Following widespread criticism of the mass disqualifications, the Guardian Council<sup>74</sup> was ultimately forced to reinstate more than 1,000 candidates who had previously been disqualified. Nevertheless, many of the prominent Reformist leaders were sidelined by the disqualifications.<sup>75</sup>

The Principlists themselves were divided into factions, which may represent a nuanced opposition on the part of the establishment to Ahmadinejad's populist policies. Important Principlists who opposed Ahmadinejad came together under the banner of The Broad Principlist Coalition (E'telafe Faragir-e Osulgarayan) including powerful figures such as Ali Larijani (the Supreme Leader Khamene'i's former representative to the Supreme National Security Council), Mohsen Reza'i (the former commander of the IRGC), and Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf (the Tehran Mayor). Larijani ultimately was elected the new Speaker of the Majlis by defeating the former Speaker, Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel, who led the Principlist faction (United Principlist Front, Jebhe-ye Mottahed-e Osulgarayan) aligned with Ahmadinejad.<sup>76</sup>

Military officials from the Pasdaran (IRGC) continued to play an active role in rallying support for Conservative Principlist candidates and against Reformist officials and policies. Mohammad Ali Aziz-Ja'fari, the IRGC commander, was reported to have addressed an audience of IRGC and Basij militia members on 31 January 2008, and encouraged them to "control the election process" to make sure that the "Principlists

were saved."<sup>77</sup> The IRGC also reportedly played an important role in engineering Ahmadinejad's surprise victory in the 2005 presidential election.<sup>78</sup>

Despite the broad Principlist victory in the Majlis elections, which surprised few, vigorous campaigning took place in the run-up to the voting. Much of the electioneering and campaigning addressed practical issues, such as economic issues that have been affecting average Iranians and attracting a lot of popular media attention. Ahmadinejad's policies drew a lot of criticism from both Principlists and Reformists in the run-up to the Spring 2008 Majlis elections, and it remains to be seen whether Ahmadinejad will be able to survive the 2009 election campaign. Ahmadinejad will be expected to answer to his critics who will surely question whether he has delivered on his much used 2005 campaign slogan to "channel oil money to the food court of the Iranian people." Ahmadinejad continues to face the major challenge of implementing structural economic reforms while at the same time managing exorbitant government subsidies that have generated inflation and contributed to rising food, housing and medical costs. But perhaps most importantly, Ahmadinejad's ability to maintain the confidence and support of Khamene'i, and his ability to maintain the support of some of the key Conservative institutional power bases, such as the Pasdaran, Basij (para-military volunteers), and the judiciary, may prove decisive in determining Ahmadinejad's future.

## Socio-Economic Developments in Iran

The picture of the Iranian economy is not entirely rosy. The rate of inflation has also doubled, from 10.2 percent in 2005/6 to approximately 22.5 percent in 2007/8. Rising inflation suggests that the government is not managing its oil revenues well, and that it is having limited success implementing much needed structural reforms. In particular, high unemployment (especially among Iranians under 30) indicates that Iran is not creating enough new jobs and that the strong domestic demand that has been a product of oil revenues is uneven, leaving large segments of the Iranian population feeling dissatisfied, despite strong economic

73 Ibid.

74 The Guardian Council is a non-elected constitutional body consisting of six clerics selected by the Supreme Leader and five non-clerical jurists who are selected by the head of the judiciary, who, in turn, is selected by the Supreme Leader. The Guardian Council vets political candidates for office and has veto authority over all legislation that is passed by the Majlis.

75 Zimmt, "Iran's 2008 Parliamentary Elections."

76 David Menashri, "Iran's Majlis Elections: All in the Family," *Iran Pulse* #20, (Center for Iranian Studies, Tel Aviv University), 28 March 2008.

77 Rasool Nafisi, "Iran's Majlis Elections: the Hidden Dynamics," *Open Democracy*, 11 April 2008, accessed at [www.opendemocracy.net/article/democracy\\_power/democracy\\_iran/majlis\\_elections\\_signals\\_of\\_change](http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/democracy_power/democracy_iran/majlis_elections_signals_of_change)

78 Kasra Najji, *Ahmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran's Radical Leader* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), pp. 75-90.



growth numbers.

Inflation has contributed to rising housing and medical costs leading to widespread discontent. There is a serious shortage of affordable housing in the country's urban population centers. There are serious social and cultural implications for the shortage of affordable housing, especially for young people: "...the inability to purchase a home bears influence on the capacity of some young Tehranis to marry and form families. Young women are increasingly reluctant to marry men who cannot afford home ownership or rental. Whereas in traditional Tehrani society it was more acceptable for women to move in with their parents-in-laws, today many young women refuse such arrangements. At the same time, men who are forced to live with their in-laws for financial reasons are referred to by the derogatory Persian term *Daamaade Sare Khoone* (literally: "house-sitting son-in-law"), leading few men to favor this option."<sup>79</sup> Official figures show that housing prices in Tehran, home to 12 million people, have increased 28 percent during the past year, but experts and estate agents say prices have increased by at least 80 per cent over the past two years.<sup>80</sup> President Ahmadinejad has attempted to address this issue by offering government loans for housing, but the magnitude of the problem is beyond the government's short-term piece-meal solutions: at one point in 2007, the government received 2 million applications for 30,000 available housing loans.<sup>81</sup> A Tehran representative, Mohammad Khosh-Chehreh said, "The constitution tasks the government with providing housing for the Iranian people, but governments have abandoned housing and land policies in these years and paved the way for prices getting out of control. They have only given out loans, and this from oil revenues."<sup>82</sup>

Ahmadinejad's populist economic policies have exacerbated these problems. In 2006, Ahmadinejad established the \$1.3 billion Imam Reza Mehr Fund to assist young people with the cost of marriage, housing, and education. However, demand far exceeds the fund's supply, and young people are often unable to do leverage a one time gift. Instead of moderating

its spending and managing the expansion of domestic demand, the Ahmadinejad government has pumped the exploding oil revenues directly into the economy in an attempt to redistribute the wealth, which has led to rapidly rising land, housing, and medical care costs. Ahmadinejad has used the Oil Stabilization Fund (OSF) (which was created by Iran's Central Bank in 2001, to store surplus oil revenue for use in periods of price fluctuation) for haphazard social spending which often consists of populist handouts during his political tours. Ahmadinejad has also battled Iran's private banks and fueled inflation by capping the interest rates for lending and borrowing at 10 percent, when inflation is more than 20 percent.

Large government subsidies for key consumer goods such as gasoline, heating oil, and foodstuffs have contributed to artificially high demand and inflation. In mid-February, Iran's parliament approved a \$3 billion (30 trillion Rials or \$3.2 billion) spending plan to pay for diesel and petrol imports during the coming fiscal year, which begins March 20. One of the reasons Iran has had to import its gasoline is that its oil-refining infrastructure (needed to turn crude oil into gasoline for fuel consumption) has deteriorated due to age and lack of infrastructure maintenance and investment.<sup>83</sup> The erosion of Iran's industrial infrastructure is a sign that it is lacking in domestic and foreign investment.

Gasoline subsidies fuel public consumption, which has forced Iran — one of the world's largest crude oil exporters — to import nearly one-third of its gasoline. Following a 25 per cent increase in the price of subsidized gasoline in May 2007 (from approximately 800 Rials to a little more than 1,000 Rials per liter), the Iranian government abruptly implemented gasoline rationing in late June 2007, limiting private drivers to 3 liters per day or 100 liters per month for four months, and limiting taxis to 800 liters per month at the subsidized rate. The rationing resulted in long lines of cars lining up for fuel, and sporadic riots and violence erupted at more than 15 filling stations, primarily in or near Tehran.

Iran's unemployment problem is being driven both by demographics and by the government's inability to

79 Meir Javedanfar, *Iran-Pulse #8* (Center for Iranian Studies, Tel Aviv University), 9 January 2007.

80 *The Financial Times*, 29 September 2007.

81 Javedanfar, *Iran-Pulse #8*.

82 BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 16 February 2008.

83 Paul Rivlin, *Iran's Energy Vulnerability*, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, December 2006.



create new jobs. Nearly two-thirds of Iran's population is under 35. The government must cope with the 800,000 to 1 million new people who enter the Iranian labor force each year. Iran's recent census data revealed an unemployment rate of 12.8 percent. The IMF rate for the year ending in December 2007 was 9.8 percent. However these numbers may be deceptive, because they are average figures which mask the fact that four out of every five unemployed persons in Iran are under 30. The unemployment rate for young men under 30 is more than 20 percent, and the rate is nearly double for young women.<sup>84</sup> According to the census carried out last year, more than nine million young people between 20 and 24 will soon be looking for a job.<sup>85</sup>

The Iranian economy will remain healthy in the short-term, as long as the price of oil on the world market remains high (\$75 per barrel of oil or more), but any severe fluctuations in the world oil market will expose the economy's lack of diversification and slow rate of structural reform.

The weak institutional underbelly of Iran's economic infrastructure has largely been insulated by exploding energy revenues fueled by the high price of oil on the world market. A recent IMF report estimated real GDP growth in Iran at 6.6 percent for 2007/8, and noted that "Iran's short term growth and external prospects are good."<sup>86</sup> Iran's real GDP growth has averaged more than 6 percent per year during the past 3 years, and gross cash reserves approximately doubled during this period from \$46.8 billion in 2005/6 to \$81.7 billion in 2007/8. Iran's rate of growth is expected to be a healthy 5.9 percent in 2008/9.

Iran faces education challenges as well, which are part of the government's lack of long-term financial planning. Higher education is free in Iran, but many young people cannot afford to take advantage of it. The rising day-to-day cost of living forces many would-be students to work. There is little investment in education or education infrastructure. Ja'far A'inporost, the MP for Mahbad, recently addressed Iran's education crisis:

"Many scholars and researchers seek the root causes of most problems, shortcomings and social crises in the system and process of education. The current system of education in Iran is not adequate to meet the demands, requirements and expectations of our society, and there is a need for serious and fundamental reforms to be carried out in the educational system. Dr Ali-Ahmadi, the proposed minister of education, ought to answer a question as to where the root cause of the calamity affecting the system of education lies. Because of their financial difficulties, many teachers are currently doing other jobs, as well as working as teachers, in order to make ends meet."<sup>87</sup>

This socio-economic picture stands in stark contrast to President Ahmadinejad's 2005 campaign, which was based on promises to improve the lives of the Iranian people. The Iranian economy appears to be growing; however, Ahmadinejad's populist distribution of oil revenues for short-term political gain has obstructed any attempt to implement a reasonable and badly needed long-term economic policy. In fact, by pumping large sums of cash into the economy at a very fast rate and artificially capping the interest rates that banks can charge, Ahmadinejad may have aggravated Iran's growing problem of inflation.

### **Iran's New Media Culture: The Persian "Blogosphere"<sup>88</sup> or "Weblogistan"<sup>89</sup>**

Iranian "blogs," a form of self-published online diary or commentary, have exploded since 2001. Iranian weblogs cover a diverse range of topics including, sports, health, hygiene, history, art, technology, religion, economy, and news. This phenomenon can be traced to the Khatami presidency (1997-2005), during which the regime made a significant investment in Iran's telecommunications infrastructure. Cheap computers from East Asia became available, and businesses providing Internet service began to proliferate as the Internet grew. Between 2000 and 2004, technological advances made with Persian language self-publishing software and blogging

84 Javad Salehi-Isfahani, [www.brookings.edu/speeches/2008/0523\\_iran\\_economy](http://www.brookings.edu/speeches/2008/0523_iran_economy)

85 BBC Worldwide Monitoring, January 28, 2008: Text of article by Ali Mirzakhani headlined: "Where is Iran's Economy Heading for?" published by the Iranian newspaper, Mardom-Salari, website on 27 January.

86 IMF Country Report – Iran, August 2008 ([www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2008/cr08284.pdf](http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2008/cr08284.pdf))

87 BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 22 February 2008.

88 Bruce Eling and John Kelly, "Mapping Iran Online Public: Politics and Culture in the Persian Blogosphere," The Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School, 6 April 2008.

89 For a thorough and enlightening analysis of "Weblogistan," see: Liora Hendelman-Baavur, "Promises and Perils of Weblogistan: Online Personal Journals and The Islamic Republic of Iran," *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 11, No. 2, June 2007.





tools became more available and easier to use.<sup>90</sup>

Blogging is a cyber-space activity that appeals to Iran's under-30 generation, which comprises approximately 40 percent of Iran's 70 million people.<sup>91</sup> There are hundreds of thousands of Persian language blogs contributed primarily by both Iranians living in Iran, and those living in North America and Western Europe. Blogs provide an outlet for relatively anonymous self-expression, entertainment, and connectivity, and have become an important tool for online forums, discussions, and dialogue. Audio, video, and photographic content have become important components, in addition to traditional written material. However, it is important to point out that while blogging is an exploding phenomenon in Iran, many young Iranians still do not own computers or have private access to the Internet. And yet Internet usage has remained high, in large part, due to public computer access at universities and Internet cafes. Between 1999 and 2006, Internet usage in Iran rose from approximately 250,000 users to 11.2 million users. In fact, the Islamic Republic is the country with highest percentage of Internet users (38.6 percent) in the entire Middle East.<sup>92</sup>

The growth of blogs and Internet-based media as a powerful new space for civil society in Iran is due, in part, to the government's crackdown on the traditional media following the student demonstration in the summer of 1999. From April 2000 to April 2001 the Iranian government closed down more than 57 newspapers and publications, putting a lot of working journalists out of jobs. Naturally, many of them looked for alternative means to continue their work and migrated to the Internet. The Iranian government's stranglehold on the mainstream media has simply accelerated the process of the media's migration to the Internet. However, despite an active and vocal anti-regime element within the Persian Weblogistan, there are also large numbers of pro-regime bloggers who have realized the power of the new media to propagate their message and express their views. Therefore, the Iranian blogosphere has become a powerful way to closely follow the balance between "pro-" and "anti-" regime voices in Iran.

90 Hendelman-Baavur, "Promises and Perils of Weblogistan."

91 These figures are approximate and not authoritative. They may vary slightly based on available data.

92 Hendelman-Baavur, "Promises and Perils of Weblogistan."

Given the government's control of the traditional media, blogs remain an important medium for organizing activities and sharing information. In June 2006, a former journalist and blogger Assiyeh Amini was able to take part in a women's rights demonstration in one of the main squares in Tehran to protest legal discrimination against women. The protest was arranged online, because no print publication or other official media outlet was willing to publicize it. The demonstration ended in the arrest of more than 70 people, and five activists were charged with organizing it. Amini described the protest that followed the arrests:

"On the day of their court hearing, several of us went to the revolutionary courts in support of the five women on trial. But our peaceful presence in front of the courthouse was not tolerated and we were violently attacked by police, arrested and taken to prison. Along with 32 other activists, I spent four days in prison. We were released on 8 March 2007, International Women's Day, but were charged with actions against national security. Some of us received prison sentences.

On the day that I was interrogated in prison, sitting blindfolded across from my interrogator, I could still see the stacks of papers on his desk that comprised the case against me. Some of the papers were printed entries from my blog."<sup>93</sup>

Amini's experience was not singular. In 2004, following the Majlis elections, the government attempted to crackdown on the Iranian blogging community. A wave of arrests included Mahboubeh Abbas-Gholizadeh, the editor of the women's rights journal, Farzaneh, and Feresteh Ghazi of the daily, E'temad. The government accused the two women of promoting democracy online and "immoral behavior." They were released on bail, and together with Hanif Mazroi, Masoud Ghoreishi, and Arash Naderpour, filed a formal complaint for being mistreated, tortured, and violently interrogated during their detention.<sup>94</sup> "Reporters Without Borders," an international non-governmental organization, ranked Iran 166 out of 169 countries surveyed in the 2007 World Press Freedom Index: Iran was ranked lower than authoritarian regimes such as Burma and Cuba, and finished ahead of only

93 Assiyeh Amini, "Battle of the Blogs," *The New Statesman*, 11 September 2008.

94 Hendelman-Baavur, "Promises and Perils of Weblogistan."



Turkmenistan, North Korea, and Eritrea.<sup>95</sup>

The Islamic Republic of Iran has recognized the importance of this new media and has actively worked to both clamp down on undesirable bloggers and to co-opt the medium in service of its own political goals. There is an ongoing back-and-forth between the government's attempt to regulate and control Weblogistan, and the flexibility of the Internet as a medium, which allows bloggers to react quickly to perceived censorship from the regime's authority and find other ways to express themselves online. Iran's clerical community has, itself, become a large presence on the Internet: many of the Ayatollahs have their own web sites, which contain biographical notes, speeches, written works, religious opinions, and photos. In 2003, Seyyed Mohammad Ali Abtahi, a popular reformist cleric and vice-president to President Khatami, became the first political blogger when he launched his site, [www.webneveshteha.com](http://www.webneveshteha.com), which became one of the most popular Iranian blogs.<sup>96</sup> Even President Ahmadinejad has a blog ([www.ahmadinejad.ir](http://www.ahmadinejad.ir)), called "Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Personal Memos" (*yad-dastha-ye shakhsi-ye Mahmoud Ahmadinejad*). Ahmadinejad's blog

reflects the regime's traditional revolutionary rhetoric, which vilifies the Pahlavis, attempts to inform the public regarding Iran's legitimate role in the Gulf, and identifies the "criminal" behavior of the "Americans" and their inevitable defeat in Iraq. Ahmadinejad's regime has also taken steps to exercise state authority over the new media content available in Iran. The Information Dissemination Supreme Council (IDSC), which falls under Ahmadinejad's authority, recently expanded its plans to publish religious content on the Internet for the Iranian public and to enforce its morality code on weblogs published in Iran in an attempt to provide "guidance...and advice" regarding content, particularly religious content.

Despite the ongoing cat-and-mouse game between the regime and the public, the Internet and the growth of new media, such as blogs, have made Iranian culture, politics, and society more transparent. As blogs proliferate and the regime expands its engagement with the new media, there will be an increase in the amount of political discourse available to a broader global public.



95 Bruce Etlings and John Kelly, "Mapping Iran Online Public: Politics and Culture in the Persian Blogosphere," *The Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School*, 6 April 2008, p. 41.

96 Assiyeh Amini, "Battle of the Blogs."





# Iran, Israel, and Zionism since the Islamic Revolution - From Rational Relationship to Threat and Disaster

by: Ronen A. Cohen

## Introduction

Due to the Islamic Revolution and the ensuing establishment of the Iranian Islamic Republic that occurred in 1979, Israel lost its only close ally in the region that provided political and economic support. Prior to 1979, Israeli-Iranian relations offered both countries an accessible and resourceful solution to the limitations imposed by the Middle East Islamic-Arabic reality. Israel was able to sell its military technological developments, import foreign currency into its economy and purchase some 60% of its oil consumption from Iran, which in turn created a preferable balance of power within the Middle Eastern framework whilst connected to the Iranian Pahlavi monarchy.<sup>1</sup> Up until the revolution, the military strength of the Iranian monarchy of Mohammed Reza Shah was ranked sixth in the world and first in the Muslim world.

The onset of the Islamic Revolution destroyed years of friendship and strong relations between Iran and Israel. The subsequent unilateral decision made by the Iranian Islamic Republic to cancel all economic and diplomatic relations between the two countries did not surprise Israel. Israel anticipated that its stature in Iran would inevitably change as a result of the new reality that followed the Islamic Revolution. Since the revolution was strongly based upon anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiments, Israel expected the existing fragile Middle East reality to be extremely affected, particularly considering its close ties with the United States.

The Islamic Revolution, headed by Ruhollah Mustafa Musavi Khomeini, spoke against the Zionist entity and its part in corrupting the Iranian state. Israel was proclaimed a satellite state of the United States. These statements portrayed both Israel and the United States as being responsible for the abuse of Iran and its moral corruption. It is important to note that this

propaganda was always anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist in nature, and was never expressed in a Jewish-religious context. Iran's Islamic constitution states that the Jews' place within the Islamic Iran is protected as a result of the Qur'an and its religious interpretation – the Shari'a. According to the constitution, Jews have a right to representation in the Majlis of Iran (the Iranian Parliament) in accordance with the size of their sector. Additional seats in the parliament are reserved for other monotheistic religions, such as Christians and Zoroastrians.<sup>2</sup>

The goal of this study is to examine the relations between Israel and Iran that developed after the Islamic Republic was founded in 1979. The relations between the two countries during the Pahlavi monarchy period will be described for comparative purposes only. The study will examine Iran's perception of Israel with respect to both the Ayatollah Khomeini's fundamentalist interpretation of Islam and Iran's pragmatic, secular politics. In addition, we will focus on attitudes towards Israel within the Iranian society, as well as the Ayatollah Khomeini's views as portrayed in his writings. The study will illustrate the opinion of Iranian people regarding the way in which their regime views Israel. We assume that when concerning Israel there is a considerable gap between the regime's official policy and the attitude of its people. It is important to take into account that the condemnation of the Zionist entity during the Islamic Revolution was directly connected with the United States' condemnation of the revolution. Further questions that we shall ask are: what is left today of the Islamic Revolution? Have the Iranian people been liberated from the revolution's propaganda machine or are they still controlled by it?

Furthermore, the study will examine whether Islamic Iran's current attitude toward Israel is derived from the country's fundamentalist religious principles or whether these sentiments arise from the incessant

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Gage, "Israel is a Target of Shah's Foes," *New York Times*, January 1, 1979, p. 3; Editorial, "U.S. may send oil to Israel," *Chicago Tribune*, January 13, 1979, p. N1; Jonathan Broder, "Israel Big loser in Iran revolt," *Chicago Tribune*, February 25, 1979, p. B8.

<sup>2</sup> Helen Chapin (ed.), *Iran: a Country Study*, Federal Research Division of Congress, Washington, 1989, pp. 64-70.



Arab-Israeli conflict. Another question to be examined is whether Islamic Iran's attitude towards Israel would have been different today had the Arab-Israeli dispute ended before the Islamic Revolution.

With the current international state of affairs it is inescapable to discuss the following issue: in a nuclear reality, would Iran hesitate to use its nuclear weapons against Israel? Does Iran intend to arm itself with nuclear weapons because of its hostile attitude towards Israel? What will be the implications of Iran's attitude towards Israel if it successfully achieves nuclear weapon? Will Iran's arming with nuclear weapons increase or decrease its hostility towards Israel? How is all this connected to the ideological doctrine of the Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Khomeini?

## The Pre-Revolution Period in Iran

Iran was governed almost successively by monarchic dynasties until the Islamic Iranian Revolution in 1979. Our Jewish historic narrative includes the Cyrus Declaration which released the Jews from exile in Babylon and enabled them to return to Israel and eventually build the second Temple. At the time, about 2,700 years ago, there were Jews who chose to ignore King Cyrus' order and consequently a Jewish community remains there to this day. Throughout the period that led up to the Islamic Revolution, the Jews were looked upon as a tolerated minority. The Jewish community in Iran included approximately 100,000 people until the state of Israel was founded. This is assumed to be the average number of the Jews in Iran during the most frequently documented periods. From 1948 to 1978, approximately 70,000 Jews immigrated to Israel. In the years that followed the Islamic Revolution in 1979, there were between 30,000-40,000 Jews in Iran.<sup>3</sup> Today, there are only 25,000 Jewish people in Iran.

Between 1925, when the Pahlavi dynasty officially began its rule, and the Islamic Revolution in February 1979, the Jews held the status of a protected minority and had equal rights to any other Iranian citizen to a certain extent, which was not a customary practice towards

minorities in neighboring Islamic societies.<sup>4</sup> The Jews' situation under the Pahlavi monarchy was slightly improved once the state of Israel was founded, and so the earliest stages towards a relationship between Iran and Israel were made possible. The change in their status did not necessarily result from the establishment of the state of Israel, but rather from a fundamental change in the Pahlavi monarchy, its adoption of a more modern and liberal approach regarding minorities' status, and their integration into the heterogeneous Iranian society.

The diplomatic alliance between Iran and Israel was founded upon their mutual fear of the Soviet Union and of radical Arab states such as Iraq and Syria.<sup>5</sup> Their common interest gradually increased with time, especially when the economic and diplomatic ties between the two countries proliferated. The relationship between the United States and Israel or Iran in either economic-military or political-cultural regards, respectively, served as a support system and common ground for the two countries to affiliate.

When studying the Iranian society's attitude towards the Jewish minority in the 20th century and the reality of the Israeli state in the Middle East, it is necessary to observe that the Iranian society is primarily based upon the clergy, the "poor", and the bazaar people, which constitutes 90% of Iran's population. The other 10% consists of several religious minorities, including the Jews. Approximately 50% of Iran's population consists of minorities such as Kurds, Arabs, Baluch, Turks, Azeri, Luri, Mazandarin, Gilg and Armenians. Several of these groups were associated with monarchic affiliates, senior officials, and high-ranking military officers.

It would be mistaken to assume that the Jews in Iran led a favorable life in terms of their social and religious status. As in other Islamic Middle Eastern countries, the Jews in Iran suffered under the rule of various leaders and from a negative image in the eyes of the public. Unlike other countries in the region, the Iranians expressed their loathing of the Jews on a metaphysical-religious level by upholding the Shi'ite belief that a person who touches a Jew becomes Najes (i.e. impure).

<sup>3</sup> Amnon Netzer, "The Jewish Community in Iran," Selected Articles, Mafha"sh – Intelligence, First Edition, November 1994, pp. 157-159 (in Hebrew).

<sup>4</sup> William Tuohy, "Iran's Jews – a Threatened Community," Los Angeles Times, January 10, 1979, p. B1.

<sup>5</sup> Ray Vicker, "An Islamic Iran Would Portend Trouble for Israel," The Wall Street Journal, January 19, 1979, p. 10.



The Jews suffered greatly from anti-Semitism within the Iranian realm, but social changes taking place in other areas in the attitude towards the Jews took effect in Iran as well. Religious opinions and beliefs concerning the Jews, which were deeply rooted within the Persian society, were neutralized once Iran's intellectual community gained momentum and the Iranian state opened its doors to the west making it more available to the Iranian people. The emulation of the west and secularization process that had begun granted the Jews a feeling of liberation in the beginning of the 1950s, especially during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>6</sup>

During the second half of the 20th century the upper class in Iran was mostly secular, pro-west and corrupt. They were also oriented towards connections with the state in favor of secularization, modernization and westernization, as well as towards nurturing the ties with countries that could help create the desirable changes for the Iranian society. Thus, the United States and its satellite state, Israel, were perceived as the most appropriate allies to provide such change.

The majority of the Iranian people would not have been concerned with the nature of Iran's relations with Israel under the reign of the last Shah, Mohammed Reza, if the Shi'ite clergy Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini had not turned the state attitude towards Israel into a major focal point of the Iranian and Islamic agenda. The economic and cultural changes Mohammed Reza Shah wished to implement in his White Revolution (the attempted regeneration of Iranian society through economic and social reforms) in the 1960s and 1970s, brought about a distinct religious unrest, which was mainly headed by the Ayatollah Khomeini.

The Shah's White Revolution seemed both unnecessary and ostentatious to the Iranian public. The general opinion was that the Shah intended to immortalize his monarchy by creating a secular state and rekindling the pre-Islamic periods of the ancient great Iranian dynasties behind the façade of being a modern western country. Beyond the fact that the Iranian society was not ready for such fast revolutionary reforms, those very changes disturbed the pillar of their way of life – Islam and the Shi'a.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Zand, "The Jews through Iranian Eyes after World War 2: 1945-1979," Selected Articles, Mafha"sh – Intelligence, First Edition, November 1994, pp. 164-169 (in Hebrew).

Ayatollah Khomeini, who was raised and trained upon Shi'ite Islam and later taught religion, found himself in the position of a representative and spokesperson for the oppressed public on every issue concerning the policy of the monarchic government in an attempt to change the situation. Khomeini began his 'crusade' against the Pahlavi monarchy at the time when the White Revolution began in 1963. He had no intentions to broaden his conflict with the Pahlavi monarchy beyond the implications of the White Revolution. At that stage, he began to express his opinion against the West, in general, and against Israel, in particular. In this respect, it is necessary to question why Khomeini was inclined to include his political-religious philosophy in his propaganda against the West and Israel.

Since the United States was regarded by Khomeini's followers as the representative of the "Big Satan", it is clear why he began challenging the Shah and his American supporter. In order to strengthen the Iranian state, i.e., have a large, equipped and strong army, the Shah had to take advantage of the generosity offered by the United States in exchange for the economic benefit to be gained mainly from Iran's oil-rich land. As a result, there was a massive American presence in Iran not only at various military bases but there was also a social, cultural and physical presence in the big cities, which became a phenomenon that many Iranians came to loathe.

Israel, being a Jewish state in the Middle East, represented a nightmare by geographically dividing the Islamic world and having direct control over Islamic holy sites and sanctuaries. Israel was named the "Small Satan" by Khomeini.

Anti-Zionism existed before Khomeini's rise to power but he used these sentiments to rejuvenate extremist Islam in the Middle East. Israel is seen as Islam's enemy and not only as an enemy of the Arab world or of Iran. Its hold over Jerusalem and the Haram al Sharif (i.e., the Wailing Wall and the Temple Mount) is perceived as an act of defiance against the Arab and Islamic world.<sup>7</sup>

During this phase Khomeini concentrated all his ideological and demagogical activities against the Shah and against everything the monarchic reign represented.

<sup>7</sup> Ray Vicker, The Wall Street Journal, January 19, 1979, p. 10.



His propaganda consisted of numerous aspects, such as comparing religious ideological contexts to the socio-economic circumstances in Iran, and connecting it to the country's general situation in the Middle East area. The initial aspect of Khomeini's propaganda was set against the religious persecution led by the Shah and mainly against the Savak (the Iranian secret service). The propaganda accused Israel of founding and training the Savak, implying that Israel was directly responsible for the Iranian people's oppression and the existing religious persecution in Iran executed by the Shah's reign.<sup>8</sup>

Khomeini's propaganda was laden with half truths and outright lies. However, the simple Iranian did not care whether Khomeini's statements were true or not. Khomeini did not lead the campaign of hatred on his own. The partially Islamic movements (such as the Mojahedin) and the communist movements (i.e. the Fedaiyan and the Tude), as well as others, used every opportunity to provoke the Shah on any possible issue. These movements demanded that the Shah end his diplomatic relations with Israel and stop selling it oil.<sup>9</sup>

In time the civilian unrest against the Shah grew and the propaganda by opposition movements headed by Khomeini increased, forcing the Shah to accept the people's rule. This was followed by the appointment of Shahpour Bahtiar to be Prime Minister of Iran. Once appointed, Bahtiar published his government's new platform, which was essentially the king's decree. According to the Prime Minister, once the new government would take office in January 1979, it would end diplomatic relations with Israel, stop selling it oil, and strengthen Iran's relations with Arab countries. The new government's platform was fashioned to appease the public opinion headed by Khomeini and other opposition movements.<sup>10</sup>

Both Israel and the west perceived those declarations to be insincere, and it is quite possible that Khomeini and his supporters did so as well. Not only did

Bahtiar's new declarations fail to appease Khomeini and his supporters, but they pressed their fervor even greater and pushed Khomeini closer to achieving his goals. On the other hand, despite the deterioration of relations with Iran, Israel was reluctant to bring back its diplomatic delegation, fearing that once the delegation left Iran it would be very difficult for it to return. Israel was very confused by the dynamic changes unfolding and skeptical about the Shah's reign, but decided to postpone the decision to evacuate as long as possible.<sup>11</sup>

The Jewish community, which enjoyed cultural, social and economic prosperity during the Pahlavi reign, especially during the reign of the last Shah, felt a sense of ambivalence when the Shah left Iran. The majority of the community thought his leaving of Iran as the end of an era of calm and the beginning of an unclear future, especially in light of Khomeini's remarks against Israel. Many of the Jews were convinced that Khomeini's words referred only to Zionism and not necessarily to Judaism. On the other hand, there were Jews who felt threatened and intimidated by the clergy and religious militias in Iran, which threatened to harm them and were eager for them to leave the country.<sup>12</sup>

Many Jews felt that the threats were harmless and were essentially directed towards all minorities including the Jews. Others wished to make the most of the situation and run away from Iran. The majority of those who left on the eve of the revolution escaped to the USA, while some left for Israel. Many Iranian Jews did not relate to Zionist ideals and decided to stay in Iran when the state of Israel was founded, thus choosing not to take advantage of Israel's Law of Return.<sup>13</sup>

## From Ideology to Action – Exporting the Islamic Revolution

With the onset of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran began to consciously "export the revolution" to Shi'ite communities in surrounding Arab states such as Iraq,

8 Imam Khomeini Message, Sahifeh Noor, Vol. 4, p. 104, December 28, 1978. [www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/imam-books/palestine/pale1.html](http://www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/imam-books/palestine/pale1.html); Nicholas Gage, New York Times, January 1, 1979, p. 3. Jonathan C. Randel, "PLO Chief, in Iran, Hails Shah's Fall," The Washington Post, February 19, 1979, p. A1; Netzer, *ibid*, p. 157.

9 Nicholas Gage, New York Times, January 1, 1979, p. 3.

10 Henry Paolucci, Iran, Israel and the United States: an American foreign policy background study, New York, Griffon House Publications, 1991, p. 208; William Tuohy, "Iran's New Premier Spells Out His Goals," Los Angeles Times, January 12, 1979, p. A1.

11 Interview with Eliezer (Geisi) Tzafrir, who headed the Mossad's branch in Iran prior the Islamic revolution, May 28, 2008; Nicholas Gage, New York Times, January 1, 1979, p. 3.

12 Ray Moseley, "Iran Jews worry about their future," Chicago Tribune, January 30, 1979, p. 1.

13 William Tuohy, Los Angeles Times, January 12, 1979, p. B1; Ray Vicker, The Wall Street Journal, January 19, 1979, p. 10; Ray Moseley, Chicago Tribune, January 30, 1979, p. 1.



Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. These countries disapproved of such actions, eventually causing the bloody Iran-Iraq war, as well as Shi'ite unrest in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. Waves of revolution consumed the political vacuum within Shi'ite communities across the Middle East, creating momentary hope for a radical change in the Shi'ite situation in Arab countries. However, this was a short-lived episode that quickly faded.

Iraq's resolution to initiate war with Iran, which was defined by Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein as an attempt to restrain the "export of the revolution" (described in a formal declaration of Iran's violation of the "Algiers Agreement" of 1975), brought about one of the longest and bloodiest conflicts of the 20th century.<sup>14</sup> In retrospect, Saddam Hussein's fear of the Islamic Revolution spreading to Iraq, which is a country comprised of almost 60% Shi'ite Muslims, is considered his main motivation for starting the war.<sup>15</sup> The violation of the "Algiers Agreement" by Iran was merely a minor reason.

Khomeini hoped that the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran would bring about a similar scenario in neighboring Iraq. However, despite the period of time Khomeini was based in Iraq, he did not succeed to grasp the reality of the Shi'ites there in terms of the local hierarchy, the regime's view of him, and his social weakness. This situation could not foster a religious uprising to "sweep away" the majority of Shi'ites in Iraq. The freedom of religious practice in Iraq was decreased to the minimum possible by the time the Islamic Revolution took place, and the Iraqi regime began to closely monitor Shi'ite institutions and subversive groups within this minority.<sup>16</sup>

Once Iran's true intentions to "export the revolution" were exposed, the surrounding Arab countries felt their political and social agenda was threatened by the Iranian regime. Israel, however, hoped to renew its relations with Iran in light of the situation and assisted in its war effort, as discussed earlier in this study. Arab leaders felt that it was their prerogative to assist Iraq financially and militarily in order to restrain the fundamentalist

wave and prevent the Shi'ite revolution from arriving at their doorstep. This assistance helped Saddam Hussein conduct the war, which was characterized by desperate attempts to end the conflict as quickly as possible in the face of a confusing war strategy, destruction of public morale, and collapse of the economy.<sup>17</sup>

The war exposed not only Iran's declared goal of "exporting the revolution", but also the Iranian public's messianic fervor and readiness for self-sacrifice to achieve this aspiration. The Iranian regime claimed it would sacrifice itself in order to defend its homeland in an "imposed war", while at the same time exploited the notion of self-sacrifice to advance a dual platform: to establish the dictates of the revolution internally and convince the world that the revolution was not a passing trend. This display of strength by Iran during the war instilled a sense of threat on both the international diplomatic level and inner political circuit.

Two decades have passed since the Iran-Iraq war and it seems today as though the war never occurred. Despite ongoing criticism by the international community, the Islamic Republic is stronger than ever, and succeeds in administering its internal policies with few difficulties. The Iranian economy is strong, though largely dedicated to developing conventional and unconventional weapons. Although Iranian citizens' pockets are not overflowing with riches, they feel a sense of national pride. Iran has succeeded in closing the "technology gap" in several fields, and its military power has never been stronger.

As a growing regional power, Iran is attempting to reconstruct a form of the Pahlavi monarchy's regional foreign policy. The United States had viewed the foreign policy of the Shah as essential for advancing American and Western strategic interests during the Cold War. Currently, Islamic Iran's attempt to recreate the policy termed "policeman of the Gulf" is rather interpreted by the West as an attempt to limit American influence in the Middle East. Before the revolution in 1979, Khomeini declared that Iran under his rule would be pro-Arab, anti-Zionist and anti-West.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, with

14 Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, *Saddam Husayn: a political biography*, Tel Aviv, 1991, p. 123 (in Hebrew).

15 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

16 Ofra Bengio, "The Iraqi Shi'ite, Between Religion and State," in Martin Kramer (ed.), *Protest and Revolution in Shi'ite Islam*, pp. 80-82 (in Hebrew).

17 Karsh and Rautsi, *Ibid.*, pp. 143-145.

18 Kenneth Freed, "Iran Breaks Off Ties With Israel, Recalls Envoys," *Los Angeles Times*, February 19, 1979, p. A1; Jonathan C. Randel, "PLO Chief, in Iran, Hails Shah's Fall," *The Washington Post*, February 19, 1979, p. A1; "Iran Turns Israeli Trade Building Over to Arafat," *Los Angeles Times*, February 20, 1979, p. B1; Jonathan Broder, "Israel pondering how to get by with one less





the rise of the fundamentalist regime he carried out his declared policy and Iran severed its relations with Israel, the "Small Satan", and began to nurture its dormant affairs with the Arab world.<sup>19</sup>

## The Source of Hatred of the "Zionist Entity"

Before the founding of the state of Israel, the Arab League attempted to avert the aspirations of the Jewish state before it arose. They aimed to accomplish this goal with a voluntary army led by El-Qauqgi, which suffered many defeats between December 1947 and April 1948. This voluntary army was not duty-bound to any state, but only to the general concept of preventing the establishment of the Jewish state. Following their military setback, the Arab League congregated anew to discuss the issue and legislated that Arab states must send their standing armies to neutralize the founding of a Jewish state.<sup>20</sup>

Military confrontation seemed unavoidable. The Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine,) under the leadership of Ben-Gurion, prepared for the possibility that the armies of surrounding Arab states would attack and attempt to prevent the establishment of the "Third Kingdom of Israel". Inevitably, Ben-Gurion's prediction came to pass, as Arab countries set off a comprehensive attack against Israel. Following the evacuation of British forces from Palestine and declaration of the independence of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel, seven Arab armies invaded the new state. Both the Arab and Jewish populations suffered heavy losses. From February to July 1949, after the war ended in the defeat of the Arab armies, cease-fire agreements were signed between Israel and Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria. In this new reality, the young state of Israel had two requests of its neighbors: the recognition of its right to exist and the transformation of cease-fire agreements

into stable and sustainable peace agreements. The Arab states viewed the situation from a completely opposed perspective and made two basic claims as prerequisites for engaging in negotiations: Israel must retreat to the 1947 United Nations partition lines and Palestinian refugees must be allowed to return to their homes.<sup>21</sup>

The mere existence of the state of Israel within the Middle East area was viewed as a wedge dividing the Arab world. The first Arab-Israeli wars were characterized by the Arab states desire to eliminate the Zionist entity. The declared purpose of later wars was restricted to returning Israeli occupied territories to counter the Israeli strategy of neutralizing the threat of neighboring Arab countries by controlling certain territories (the Golan Heights, the Sinai Peninsula, and the West Bank) and creating a safe distance from them. These wars did not succeed in subduing Israel, as the Jewish state had become stronger and altered the regional balance of power in its favor. Israel's persistence in ensuring its military superiority posed an obstacle for Arab countries in achieving their goals, which, in an opposing process, began to lose their power to peripheral non-Arab Islamic countries like Iran and Turkey. Arab dependence on the Soviet Union proved a liability, as the demise of the Soviet Union weakened Arab countries, and subsequently they lost their source of political and military support. Arab countries emphasized that Israel's existence in the Middle East harms Arab and Muslim unity and poisons the heart of the Arab world. Khomeini joined this chorus, claiming that Israel is essentially an imperialist scheme set on splitting and dividing the Arab and Muslim world.<sup>22</sup>

The weakening of the Arab states alongside the rising power of peripheral states (Iran, Turkey, and Israel) created a lot of resentment. Iran's rising status as a regional power caused fear and stirred the internal politics of Arab countries. In addition, the Arab countries had conventional military power that paled in comparison with Iran's conventional weapons and potential to acquire unconventional arms. In such a reality, Iran posed a real challenge, not just to Israel and the West, but also to Arab states.<sup>23</sup>

friend," Chicago Tribune, February 20, 1979, p. 2; Imam Khomeini's decree concerning the severance of ties with Egypt, *Sahifeh Noor*, Vol. 6, p. 108, May 1, 1979. [www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/imam-books/palestine/pale1.html](http://www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/imam-books/palestine/pale1.html)

19 For further information about the relations between Iran and its neighbors see: Yaniv Gambash, Yivgenia Bistrov, Arnon Sofer (eds.), *Iran 2007, Strategic Analysis*, the Research Center of the National Security Institute, Haifa University, 2008, pp. 62-78.

20 Limor Avonil, "The establishment of the Rescuing Army and nomination of el-Qauqgi as its leader," *Nativ*, Vol. 4-5 (117-118), September 2007, pp. 79-87 (in Hebrew); Ronen Yitzhak, "Beyond the Arab Politics in the Independence War," *Nativ*, Vol. 6 (113), November 2006, pp. 36-42 (in Hebrew).

21 Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, Tel Aviv, Yediot Acharonot, 2005, pp. 61-66 (in Hebrew).

22 Ray Vicker, "An Islamic Iran Would Portend Trouble for Israel," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 19, 1979, p. 10.

23 Hillel Frisch, "The Arab World and the Iranian Bomb," *BESA – The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies*, Ramat Gan, November 2006, p. 32 (in Hebrew).



## Khomeini and the Religious Attitudes towards Israel

After spending a year in Turkey, Khomeini decided in 1964 that if he had to be in exile he preferred to live in Najaf, Iraq, which is one of the Shi'a holy cities. Indeed, Khomeini moved with his followers and settled in Iraq for the following 13 years. It is important to note that up to the 1970s Khomeini thought of the Shi'ite clergy as a consulting body of the government rather than active government personnel. That tradition had been maintained since the Safavi dynasty began its reign in 1501. The clergy gained social status and the Shah received religious legitimacy for his rule. The first time a real integration occurred between the clergy and politicians was in 1501, when Ismail of the Safavi dynasty was in power. Once the Safavi dynasty reign ended in 1722 the Shi'a religion was separated from the government, until the establishment of the Islamic Republic in February 1979.

During the Safavi period, the ruler received religious legitimacy from the U'lama (the clergymen), and they too were given senior offices to run state affairs. A significant weakening of the clergy's grasp on the official administration of the country only took place when the Qajar came into power in 1722. It was at the end of the 19th century when the clergy began to organize and demonstrate against the discrimination they experienced and their removal from governmental institutions. Those organizations and operations against the Qajar and Pahlavi institution in later years eventually overthrew the monarchic institution in Iran and renewed the rise of the Shi'a in the Iranian state.

During the reign of all the dynasties (Safavid, Qajar and Pahlavi), there was one significant principle, concerning Mujtahed economic independence, which was always upheld: every Mujtahed enjoyed economic support and taxation rules that applied to his community. The monarchic governments never interfered with this economic issue, since they wanted to avoid creating any unrest amongst the communities. The economic concept created a type of co-dependence. On the one hand, the believer was committed to the Mujtahed, and on the other, the Mujtahed was committed to the believer. The believer felt obligated to support the Mujtahed because of his religious importance and the Mujtahed

felt obligated towards his believers. In other words, the Mujtahed were not dependent on the institution, which in turn strengthened their independence and ability to sense the community's economic problems.<sup>24</sup>

The clergy acquired religious empowerment as a result of their believers' poor economic situation, which enabled them to confront their various governments. The Mujtahed gained significant power from the sense of tragedy imbedded in the Shi'ite Islam and from the strong identification of the believer with the Imams' suffering. Until the 19th century the Shi'a mourning days symbolized the person's participation in pain and his empathy with the loss of an admired religious leader. However, since then the A'shura days have turned into exhibits of struggle and protest. The Ayatollahs called on the people to resist the various governments' tyranny and exploitation. The Mujtahed's capability to interpret Shi'ite sources to serve their own political needs enabled them to turn the days of mourning into days of struggle, in which the murdered figure of Imam Hussein was transformed from a lobbyist and defender of Allah (i.e. God) into a combative role fighting for justice and Islam. Hussein's readiness to die for the cause encouraged the activist stream that supported fighting, rebellion and revolution, which were all characteristics that had never appeared in the ancient Shi'a lexicon until the 19th century.

Thus, from that point onwards, the leaders of the activist stream (Ayatollah Mirza Shirazi<sup>25</sup> during the Tobacco rebellion and Khomeini during the Islamic Revolution) asked their believers to become Shahids (martyrs who die for a cause) in a Jihad war (a holy war against heretics). The Mujtahed's role (Ayatollah) was to emphasize and glorify the prize the Shahid would receive once he sacrificed himself in the name of the struggle and fight against heretics. The religious centers were spread throughout the country. They were intentionally located close to the bazaars, which were populated by a poor and impressionable population that could be influenced by extreme religious propaganda.

24 David Menashri, "The Islamic Revolution in Iran: The Shi'i Dimension," Martin Kramer (ed.), *Protest and Revolution in Shi'i Islam*, pp. 34-39.

25 Sayyid Muhammad Hasan ibn Sayyid Mahmud al-Hussaini al-Shirazi, was born in 1852 at Shiraz, Iran. At the age of 12, he began attending lessons in jurisprudence and methodology in Shiraz. He also traveled to Isfahan (Iran) and to Karbala and Najaf (Iraq) in order to study under the most prominent scholars of the time, including Shaikh Jawahari and Shaikh Murtadha Ansari. He became one of the most prominent Shi'a scholars at his time and very well-known Ayatollah.



At the same time, the clergymen in Iran experienced a renewed rise in their status following a weakening of the various governments such as the Qajar, which did not enforce its rule upon the clergy. In such a political reality, culminating to a governmental and authoritative vacuum in which the regime was portrayed as corrupt and hedonist while the people suffered a difficult economic condition, it was convenient for the clergy to divert the public attention against the weak Qajar and Pahlavi regimes.

On the other hand, the established religious institutions also had certain weak points. The Islamic revolution would not have been able to occur as early as 1979 if it were not so. One of the serious problems facing the religious institutions was the personal rivalry that existed between the different sects. It is not every generation that has the privilege to witness "bright lights" or "sources for imitation" (Marja'a Taqlid) as did Shirazi or Khomeini. Khomeini had strong opposition amongst the different Mujtaheds, both in Iran and outside the country. However, Khomeini, unlike others, had a strong following and succeeded in gathering the people around common symbols. Another weakening factor of the Iranian religious institutions was that they never stood for their own conflicts, but rather joined with other forces to achieve their goals.

Khomeini, being a Mujtahed and a believer in religious independence, coined the term Velayat-e Faqih – meaning the clergyman's reign. He thus called on all to return to the original Islam that caters to all of life's needs. He referred to an Islam in which the clergy control all aspects of life and run it from 'above'. Khomeini's goal was to "Islamize" all aspects of life. He did not actually establish any religious reality that had never existed in Shi'ite literature or history, but such voices were previously heard only in the margins of the Shi'ite clergy. Khomeini managed to advance those margins towards the mainstream.

Khomeini stressed the importance of a clergy that exercised effective governmental rule, rather than playing a role behind the scenes. As with other Shi'ite ideas, the legitimacy of taking an active governmental role, which was an issue raised ever since the Shi'a existed, was debated during Khomeini's time as well. The Shi'a approach, according to which clergymen should be an integral part of the government, is divided

into two historical periods: a. the initial government of the first and last Khalifs (also known as Caliphs - the civil and religious leader of the Muslims, who is considered to be Allah's representative on earth) b. the government following the disappearance of the 12th Imam – the "Disappearing Imam".

Khomeini emphasized the leadership void created after the disappearance of the "Disappearing Imam". In other words, he incited the Shi'ite community to aspire for a religious leadership that would fill the vacuum until Mahdi's arrival. Mahdi, as the Shi'a believe, is a Shi'ite messiah who will appear at the world's end to establish a reign of peace and righteousness. Any other regime, which is not found under the Velayat-e Faqih, is considered illegitimate. The Shi'a clergy ensured their government was justified, since their economical status was independent of the general rule. In contrast, the Sunni U'lama earned its keep from taking part in the government and had to defend its existence not only through the community but through writings as well. Until Khomeini's arrival and his emphasis on the clergymen's government, the clergy settled for advising the existing regime (at least until the end of the Qajar period), and did not necessarily insist on holding the key governmental positions. Their role as consultants to the government contributed to their status and significance in the eyes of the community.

The philosophy that perceived the clergy as the highest level of society already existed in Iran before the arrival of Khomeini. However, Khomeini emphasized this principle more than any other aspect in the Shi'ite Islam. Until the 1960s, the U'lama opposed the idea of abandoning the Iranian monarchy, since it was Raza Shah's wish to create a republic similar to that of Ataturk's in Turkey. Finding Ataturk's secular republic bound with the term 'republic' made the clergy oppose Raza Shah's notion, particularly in the name of religion. In Khomeini's early writings, *Kashf al-Asrar* (Revealing the Hidden), he expressed his reluctance from establishing a government based solely upon clergy. Essentially, he wanted the government to embody an operating authority, while the clergy would hold all the other offices. However, Khomeini's standpoint changed at the end of the 1960s.

In 1970 Khomeini published another booklet called *Velayat-e Faqih* (the Clergymen's Reign), which



represents a different approach than the previously mentioned. In this publication, he called for the politicization of religious institutions. He also expressed total opposition to the monarchy, no matter what its character, particularly that of Mohammed Raza Shah. Khomeini began to condemn the separation of religion from state affairs, which he described as an attempt to restrict the clergy from taking part in the practical affairs of running the country and to promote imperialistic schemes. Up to that point the U'lama saw politics as a loathsome and impure job, but Khomeini instantaneously purified the occupation and revered it as a target that the clergy must conquer. Still, at that stage, during the 1970s, Khomeini was not followed by all the senior clergy. Many agreed with his philosophy, but claimed that it is only appropriate that clergymen serve as counselors and directors, and not as official political servants.

Even during the Safavid period (an Iranian dynasty that ruled between 1502 and 1722), when the Shi'a was the state's official religion and the clergy had senior functions, the U'lama perceived the Safavid reign as the regime that established Iranian nationality and supported its approach. This is evident from the U'lama leading position in the national movements at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Even Khomeini, until the end of the 1960s, had accepted strong Iranian nationalism while was in exile in Iraq. In exile, Khomeini's opinions turned to the extreme as far as nationality was concerned. He claimed that the notion of a defined state with borders were irrelevant to Islam and Islamic unity with no borders should be implemented. At that point, he declared that Islamic sentiment would overcome the nation-states of Iran, Iraq or any other nationalist entity. Again, Khomeini saw the term "nationality" as a Western scheme attempting to split up and oppress the Islamic nation by making it submissive to Western imperialists.

At that stage, the majority of the U'lama did not accept Khomeini's views only to join his ranks at a later point, particularly following the Islamic revolution in 1979. It is important to note that there were other influential factors which brought Khomeini to take the Shi'a to its extreme, renew it, and even reinvent it. Some of those factors were: the unstable interrelationships between the government offices and the clergy, deprivation and oppression of the Iranian people including the U'lama,

the institutionalized secularity, Khomeini's exile in Iraq, the great distance from holy places for the Shi'a (mainly located in Iraq), and the deterioration of the clergy's status in the eyes of the monarchy and various groups of the general population. However, all of these factors are explained by Khomeini from a religious point of view. The politics of pre-revolution reality introduce a more dynamic and less religious depiction than the commonly accepted scenario.<sup>26</sup>

As mentioned above, Iran under Khomeini's control actually dismissed the term 'nation'. Although this term is used in international and regional circumstances, it ideologically perceived the idea of nationality as a Western invention. The nationalist "invention", according to Khomeini, was intended to split the Muslim world and rule it by using the "divide and conquer" approach. According to Khomeini, Israel was planted in the Middle East by the West to serve as a partition between Islamic countries.

This theory is still used against Arab states that justify their existence as distinct entities and perceive their nationality as unique. During the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, many Islamic and Arab philosophers, such as Muhammad Abduh, Jamal ad-Din and Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, may have served as a spiritual and ideological pre-cursor to this approach. According to these philosophers, the Islamic world was supposed to stay united under an Islamic government and at the same time return to pure Islam. They believed that relations with the West should only be in trade and technological contexts to bring about economic advancement within the Islamic Federation. This approach is different in nature than the pure fundamentalist Islam that the Muslim Brotherhood represents. At that stage, they did not link the term "nationality" with a "Western scheme to separate the Arab and Islamic world into different parts".

On the other hand, other philosophers such as Taha Hussein, Tahtawi, and Najib Azuri, were characterized by secular orientation and thought that there was a need to define each people's national uniqueness in the Middle Eastern realm. According to them, Islam could live side by side with nationality when religion

<sup>26</sup> Martin Kramer, "The Renewed Shi'a," in: Martin Kramer (ed.), *Protest and Revolution in Shi'i Islam*, pp. 146-149.



and state affairs were separated. Their opinion of Arab and Islamic infirmity was derived from studying the historical reality of integration between religion and state affairs. Such integration, according to them, froze the Islamic Middle East's intellectual, economic and technological development. Separating Islam from the political system would lead, they claimed, to technological and economic development alongside the definition of national identity.

Returning to the issue at hand, we understand that Khomeini encouraged the Iranian national identity at least until the 1970s. His doctrine, in which he moved from the dominion of nationality to that of Islam, is a direct result of the perception of the term 'nationality' as a Western invention. Incidentally, during President Wilson's term in office, the United States continually emphasized the importance of the nation and the right for self-definition, as well as the necessity to impose peace among nations. Khomeini's claim stating the United States and West in general are the source of the term "nationalism" has much truth to it. However, the notion of a Western 'scheme' will be considered as a tool for propaganda purposes only, since it is not possible to support the concept with facts.

In May 1979, a few months after the revolution, Khomeini referred to Israel's religious identity. He said that Israel under the rule of Zionists was not a religious people. On the other hand, Khomeini claimed that Jews living under Islam, as did those who lived in Iran, were different from the Zionists because they followed Moses' Law. In contrast, the Zionists, "who called themselves Jews," did not follow the Prophet Moses' religion. Moreover, Khomeini protested the Zionists were receiving assistance from foreign powers such as the USA, and were subsequently guilty of oppressing the weak people in Israel.<sup>27</sup>

## The Islamic Republic and Its Attitude towards Israel and Zionism – the 1980s

According to Khomeini's interpretation of the Shi'a, Israel as a Jewish state is much more dangerous than

secularity or other secular external powers such as the United States or the USSR. Thus, Khomeini's thesis of "No East, Nor West" was born.<sup>28</sup> As said by Khomeini, Islam's pure message was falsified by the Zionists, the Communists, and by Western and Eastern imperialists as well.<sup>29</sup> The essential issues that bothered Khomeini when he started his struggle against the Shah's regime had less to do with agrarian reforms or excessive rights for women, but rather with the Pahlavi dictatorship and its strong relations with the USA and Israel.<sup>30</sup> Obviously, other aspects of the White Revolution served Khomeini's propaganda machine. However, they were less important in his personal crusade against the Shah and his connections with Israel and the USA.

In an interview Khomeini granted to the French newspaper *Le Monde* he explained the fundamental nature of his attitude towards Mohammed Raza Shah. He confirmed his attitude towards the Shah was because of the pro-Israeli mind-set, and based his attitude on the fact that Israel had conquered Muslim land and committed crimes against Islam. According to Khomeini, the Shah's policy of establishing ties with Israel and assisting it economically rebounded against Islam. From a theoretical perspective, the interview explains Khomeini's chief principle and religious doctrine regarding both Israel and the Shah.<sup>31</sup>

Given that situation, Khomeini as the leader of the propaganda and ideological struggle against the Pahlavi monarchy perceived both Zionism and Israel in a very twisted manner, which served his goal to overthrow the Shah. Khomeini tied the fate of Islam as a religion to the political and existential fate of Iran. According to him, the Islamic world was in constant danger since Iran itself was under the influence of imperialism, Christianity, and Zionism.<sup>32</sup> The Shah's relations with Arab states were fragile and unstable. He felt the neighboring countries' envy and hostility, partly due to the ties with Israel. Khomeini knew how to identify and exploit that fragile situation, whereby claiming that the Western world was a growing threat. In other words,

28 Paolucci, *ibid*, p. 217.

29 Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, London, University of California Press, 1993, p. 36.

30 Nikki R. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1981, p. 157.

31 Imam Khomeini Message, *Sahifeh Noor*, Vol. 2, May 6, 1978. <<http://www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/imam-books/palestine/pale1.html>>

32 Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 207.

27 Imam Khomeini Message, *Sahifeh Noor*, Vol. 6, p. 164, May 14, 1979. [www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/imam-books/palestine/pale1.html](http://www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/imam-books/palestine/pale1.html);



Khomeini claimed that the situation in which Iran and Israel share a similar fate under the USA's control is dangerous to the Arab and Islamic world in general, and to Iran in particular.<sup>33</sup>

Such was the state of affairs on the eve of the Islamic Revolution, when Khomeini and his followers (the Revolutionary Council) attempted to reestablish Iran under a new regime of the Islamic Republic. This political change from a secular monarchy to an Islamic Republic was complex and intricate. The conceptual change included replacing the basis of the government at the time with a new set of norms and laws in a new Iranian state. Along with other minorities that enjoyed equal rights under the Pahlavi regime, the Jews' anxieties increased once they witnessed how Khomeini and his supporters spoke against the Jews and Zionism. On the eve of the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini spoke of the Iranian minorities and the Jews in particular, describing them as "depressing" and calling them "traitors", "Zionists" and "Islam's enemies".<sup>34</sup>

However, in December 1978, just before the Islamic revolution, Khomeini wished to send a calming message to the Jewish community. At the time, he explained that the Shah had wished to bring Israeli experts to Iran to assist in stabilizing the military-governmental system, but said that he would not let Israelis enter the country. He clarified that his statements referred only to Israelis (Zionists) and not to Iranian Jews. According to him "...no one has the right to lay a finger on the Jews in Iran, they are under the aegis of Islam and Muslims; no one has the right to attack the Jews or Christians..."<sup>35</sup>

Iran implemented an essential change in its relations with Israel once Khomeini arrived in France on February 1st, 1979. Mehdi Bazargan's government had immediately announced that Iran was cutting off its economic and diplomatic ties with Israel and wished to strengthen its relations with the Arab countries. In addition, Iran under Khomeini's government wished to side with the Arab states that opposed Israel's existence and the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt. Those were to be the building blocks of the new regime's immediate foreign policy, which were essentially a direct result and

decisive implementation of the Pahlavi's monarchy last Prime Minister, Shahpour Bahtiar.<sup>36</sup> Thus, revolutionary Iran stipulated that its future affairs with Arab states depended on those countries' ties with Israel.<sup>37</sup>

Once the Revolution was established, Khomeini's first visitor (an uninvited one) was Yasser Arafat, who was the PLO's chairperson. Upon his arrival on February 19th, 1979, he declared that his organization contributed to the revolution's success. He proclaimed that he hoped the revolution would end with the conquest of Palestine and the raising of Iran and Palestine's flags on Temple Mount. A few hours after Arafat's arrival, the Iranian cabinet declared the termination of its relations with Israel and the Israeli embassy's building was transferred to the PLO. Hani el-Hassan, who was Fatah's representative in the PLO, was appointed Palestine's and the PLO's first ambassador to Iran. Contrary to Arafat's declaration that he brought about Israel's expulsion from Iran, Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan claimed that Iran's policy was determined solely by the Revolutionary Council, which was founded in Paris once Khomeini was deported from Iraq to France.<sup>38</sup>

Israel's Head of Intelligence during the years 1964-1972 and Prime Minister Golda Meir's advisor for terrorism affairs, Aaron Yariv, was deeply disappointed with the severance of Iran-Israel ties. He believed that Israeli relations to Muslim non-Arab states were essential within the Middle East area. His immediate diagnosis after the revolution was that the damage caused by the severance of the ties between Iran and Israel was only political, and that the major negative outcome was the PLO's strengthening as a result of the revolution. In becoming a representative branch of a distinctly anti-Israeli state such as Iran, the PLO would strengthen and become a more versatile organization. Until 1979,

33 Paolucci, *Ibid*, pp. 30-31.

34 *Ibid*, p. 48.

35 Imam Khomeini Message, *Sahifeh Noor*, Vol. 4, p. 79, December 16, 1978. [www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/imam-books/palestine/pale1.html](http://www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/imam-books/palestine/pale1.html)

36 Kenneth Freed, "Iran Breaks Off Ties With Israel, Recalls Envoys," *Los Angeles Times*, February 19, 1979, p. A1; Jonathan C. Randel, "PLO Chief, in Iran, Hails Shah's Fall," *The Washington Post*, February 19, 1979, p. A1; "Iran Turns Israeli Trade Building Over to Arafat," *Los Angeles Times*, February 20, 1979, p. B1; Jonathan Broder, "Israel Pondering How to Get By With One Less Friend," *Chicago Tribune*, February 20, 1979, p. 2; Imam Khomeini's decree concerning the severance of ties with Egypt, *Sahifeh Noor*, Vol. 6, p. 108, May 1, 1979. [www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/imam-books/palestine/pale1.html](http://www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/imam-books/palestine/pale1.html)

37 "The Zionist Entity and Iran". [www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/zionist-entity.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/zionist-entity.htm)

38 Jonathan C. Randel, *The Washington Post*, February 19, 1979, p. A1; Bernard Gwertzman, "Shadow of Khomeini Falls On the Mideast Peace Talks," *The New York Times*, February 25, 1979, p. E2; Jonathan Broder, "Israel Big Loser in Iran Revolt," *Chicago Tribune*, February 25, 1979, p. B8; Ned Temko, "PLO ponders Iran," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 28, 1979, p. 4; Paolucci, *Ibid*, p. 211; Keddie, *Ibid*, p. 267.



the Shah managed to prevent the presence of the PLO in Iran and was forced to deal with the implications of his policy. With the onset of the revolution, the organization felt itself a partner to this turnabout and perceived Islamic Iran as the new political and military supporter of its main goal, which was the destruction of the state of Israel.<sup>39</sup>

In an interview to a Lebanese newspaper on the eve of the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini declared that Iran under a future Islamic government would assist the PLO achieve its goals, which were the extermination of Israel and establishment of a Palestinian state on Israel's land. On January 7th, 1979 Radio Israel intercepted a similar declaration made by Yasser Arafat, who said that his organization intended to use Khomeini supporters' assistance to exterminate the state of Israel. Cooperation between the PLO and members of the resistance movement against the Shah, especially the Mojahedin, had been established in the past. Such connections existed since 1971, when 45 Iranian resistance movement members completed their operational training in one of the PLO's camps in Lebanon and returned to Iran to implement their combat training. Israel, on the other hand, being aware of the collaboration between the PLO, Khomeini and the other resistance movements, understood that the anticipated peace treaty with Egypt would not be enough to bring calm to the Middle East.<sup>40</sup>

In May 1979, the new Iranian regime executed a Jewish businessman, Albert Danielpour, accused of assisting Israel. The Jewish community's delegation asked in a meeting with Khomeini to end the oppression and inciting campaign against the Jews. In response, Khomeini promised that under the new Islamic regime the Jews will be treated fairly. Iran's official reason for the execution was that Danielpour was assisting the establishment of the Zionist state and supporting Israel. In some of the executions cases, the Jewish community did even not attempt to approach Khomeini in rebuttal since they were clearly performed to emphasize that assistance to the Zionist enemy will not be tolerated.<sup>41</sup>

The new regime was busy 'purifying' past and future opposition, as well as spreading its doctrine outside the country to other Middle Eastern states. The first step to be taken in Khomeini's opinion was to export the revolution to the Shi'ite minorities in neighboring countries, thus making Iraq an obvious target. While spreading their propaganda, Khomeini's emissaries continued with the same strategy that succeeded in bringing the Islamic Revolution to Iran. Khomeini augmented the general Islamic affinity and called the Arab states to unite against the Zionist enemy, which was still controlling 'the occupied territories' and destroying Islamic holy places. At the same time, Khomeini presented the Shi'ite populations as poor, oppressed minorities that were persecuted by various regimes, especially in Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

Khomeini's increased use of the religious narrative was an important element in the Islamic revolutionary Shi'ite propaganda. Khomeini wished to make it clear to the Arab states that the very existence of Israel posed a threat to them. He claimed that Israel was not alone, and was supported by the USA. Indeed, Khomeini did not reserve his criticism against the USA. As mentioned previously, while in exile he expressed virulent opinions against the USA. In order to counter the Zionist/American threat, Khomeini's propaganda offered an Islamic alternative to the Christian United States and the Jewish/Zionist Israel.<sup>42</sup>

The Iranian regime attempted first and foremost to reach Shi'ite communities, but actually directed its propaganda towards the Middle Eastern Sunni Arabs. The Shi'ite and Sunni Arabs, as well as non-Arab Muslims, all shared one problem – Israel. The Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry, which was responsible for the propaganda, viewed the implementation of the propaganda against Israel as the regime's most essential priority. According to the Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry, the destruction of Israel would come to pass if it were cut off from its American life line. Thus, Iran asserted that Israel's relations with the United States and the West ought to be broken.

39 Bernard Weinraub, "Israeli Strategist Calls Iran A New Source of Instability," *The New York Times*, February 24, 1979, p. 2.

40 Francis Ofner, "Iran: One More Reason for Israel to Doubt Peace," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 10, 1979, p. 6.

41 Linda Charlton, "American Jew Fear Wave of Anti-Semitism in Iran," *The New York Times*, June 29, 1980, p. 3.

42 BBC, Tehran home service, "Iranian Criticism of Israeli Excavations under Al-Aqsa Mosque," ME/6326/A/3, January 21, 1980; BBC, Tehran in Arabic for abroad, "Khomeyni's Meeting with Amal Movement Delegation," ME/6427/A/4, May 21, 1980; BBC, Tehran home service, "Khomeyni's 6th August Address on Jerusalem Day," ME/6492/A/4, August 6, 1980.



At that stage, the Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry claimed that Iran would fight alongside Arab states to destroy the Zionist entity and would act to restore the rights of the Palestinian people. Under such a decree, the Iranian people would lead the way in accomplishing this mission. The Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry's message was directed at Arab states and called on them to act against the Zionist state. The same message was sent to countries around the world, asking them to stop supporting Israel.<sup>43</sup>

In September 1980, Saddam Hussein declared war against Iran. Iraq's main objective was to overthrow the Iranian religious regime. Increased Iranian propaganda and the regime's amplified attempts to export the revolution to various Middle Eastern Shi'ite communities (in Iraq, Saudi-Arabia and Lebanon) received an explicit reaction from the Iraqi tyrant. Saddam's last hope was that Iran's unstable social, economic and political situation would make it an easy target to conquer. Reality proved otherwise, and the war lasted for eight years ending with about a million casualties and tens of thousands injured on both sides.

In September 1980, a few days after the war broke out, Israel's Deputy Minister of Defense, Mordechai Tzipori, offered Israeli military assistance to Iran. The condition for the military assistance, according to Tzipori, was the renewal of Iranian-Israeli relations. In the Russian press, which served as the Kremlin's mouthpiece, it was cynically noted that while the world was trying to bring calm and a cease-fire between the fighting forces, Israel and Egypt only added more fuel to the fire. In addition, the Russian press claimed that Israel's offer was actually made on behalf of the USA, in order to enable the Americans to return to the area under the pretense of protecting Arab oil.<sup>44</sup> At that stage, it became clear which side the USSR was supporting.

Ali Khamenei, who was Iran's Supreme National Security Council spokesperson and future spiritual leader of the Islamic Republic after Khomeini's death, declared in a radio interview to Radio Teheran that Iran

was attempting to declare war on Israel while fighting against Iraq. According to him, the Iranian Supreme National Security Council of Iran had decided to take advantage of the Iraqi POWs held in Iran for the benefit of a war against Israel. Volunteer soldiers would be sent to the Israeli-Lebanese border and would fight alongside the Palestinian forces against the Zionist enemy. At the same time, Khamenei mentioned that Iraq and Iran need to unify forces against Israel, which was described by him as their real enemy in the Middle East and the enemy of all Arab states and Islam.<sup>45</sup>

Within the Middle Eastern borders, Israel observed with some satisfaction as two of its enemies fought one another. Despite these sentiments, Israel really wished to see Saddam Hussein defeated since it felt that the threat he posed was greater than fundamentalist Iran. Mordechai Tzipori proposed that Israel would assist Iran in its war against Iraq if it agreed to change its anti-Semitic attitude towards Israel.<sup>46</sup>

However, during the war, Israel occasionally assisted Iran in various activities without retribution, since it was acting within an immediate Israeli security-strategic framework. One such activity was the attack on the Osirak nuclear facility. On June 7th, 1981, the Israeli Air Force attacked the nuclear facility "Tamuz" (Osirak), which was located south-west of Baghdad. Consequently, the Iranian President, Abol-hassan Banisadr, criticized Israel for attacking the Iraqi facility. He claimed that Iran was against the attack despite the uncompromising hostility and objection between Iran and Iraq. According to him, such an attack was only possible due to the existence of regimes like Saddam Hussein's, and as long as such regimes existed the Israeli aggressiveness would continue.<sup>47</sup>

Banisadr "forgot" to mention that Iran had previously tried to attack the same Iraqi facility on two occasions. As a result of these unsuccessful attempts, Iran strengthened the anti-aircraft defensive lines positioned by the Iraqis. These Iranian attacks "disturbed" the

43 BBC, Tehran home service, "Iran's Position Regarding a Jihad against Israel," ME/6515/A/10, September 3, 1980; BBC, "Iranian Statement on Iraq and Jerusalem," ME/6499/1, August 16, 1980; BBC, Tehran home service, "Iranian Foreign Ministry Statement of 23rd September," ME/6532/A/6, September 23, 1980.

44 BBC, Tass in English, "Israel's 'Provocative' Offer to Help Iran," SU/6537/A/3, September 29, 1980.

45 BBC, "Khameneh'i on Sending Volunteer Iraqi PoW's Fight against Israel," ME/6743/A/10, June 8, 1981.

46 Dial Torgerson, "Israeli Sees Possible Military Aid for Iran," Los Angeles Times, September 29, 1980, p. B9; New York Times News Service, "Secret Israeli Sale to Iran in 80' Bored," Chicago Tribune, August 22, 1981, p. W1; Bernard Gwertzman, "Israel Is Said to Have Sold Iran F-4 Tires," The New York Times, August 22, 1981, p. 5.

47 BBC, Tehran home service, "Other Reaction to the Israeli Air Strike on Iraqi Nuclear Reactor," ME/6745/A/1, June 9, 1981.





Israeli plan to attack Iraq's nuclear facilities, which led Israel to postpone the operation twice to be eventually executed in June 1981.<sup>48</sup> Iraq's President, Saddam Hussein, also confirmed the failed Iranian attacks on the nuclear facility. He added that Iran's failure forced them to turn to Israel for assistance and strategic-security ties, especially in light of the fact that Israel supplied Iran with weapons and ammunition during the war.<sup>49</sup>

Iran found it difficult to understand the Israeli motives behind the above mentioned attack and sought various justifications so that it could present it as anti-Iranian. Iran claimed, via its Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson, that Israel had attacked the Iraqi facility because of Iran's declarations about sending volunteers (Iraqi POWs) to Israel's northern border.<sup>50</sup>

Both foreign and Israeli experts estimated that Israel would prefer a cease-fire between Iraq and Iran without a distinct winner to preoccupy its major enemies, instead of them unifying against Israel.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, during the first year of the war, neutral Israel had to fend off rumors that it sold and shipped weapons and spare parts to Iran for their war efforts. Needless to say, Israel had signed an agreement with the USA forbidding it to sell or assist a third country by sending American military equipment without the American government approval. The USA is not certain whether Israel violated this agreement, an act which would compromise the Israel-USA relationship.<sup>52</sup>

Iran did not change its militant attitude towards Israel in the 1980s. The unsuccessful Iran-gate deal (1985-1986) added more turmoil to the unstable situation. Iran perceived Israel as a materialistic, lying state that sabotaged its war efforts against Iraq. The source of the blunder at the time was that Israel, with the negotiations of agents Yaacov Nimrodi and Al Schwimmer, committed to selling anti-aircraft Hawk missiles to Iran in exchange for the release of American

hostages. The missiles received by Iran could reach an altitude of only 45-50 thousand feet, while the agents committed to selling an improved Hawk missile that reached an altitude of 70 thousand feet.

Iran was surprised to discover that the missiles were actually the same as the ones they already possessed. Iran felt deceived and accused Israel of destroying their military effort against Iraq. As a result, the Iranian animosity and suspicion increased towards Israel.<sup>53</sup> At the end of 1986, Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was the Iranian president at the time, confirmed the deals with the Americans and Israelis. It seems that internal conflicts within Iranian politics exposed the above described talks.<sup>54</sup>

In the 1980s, Khomeini's approach exhibited a number of new characteristics, and the government changed its attitude towards all minorities, including the Jews. At this point, Khomeini thanked all minorities for their share in bringing about the Islamic Revolution and for making sacrifices in favor of the revolution and against the Shah. Despite his statements, Khomeini still remained hostile towards Israel and Zionism.<sup>55</sup> Later on, he claimed that only if the Jews detached themselves from Zionism would their status in the Islamic republic be improved.<sup>56</sup>

The Iraqi attack upon Iran was interpreted as a crime, especially in light of Khomeini's pre-revolutionary statements regarding his desire to strengthen relations with Arab states. Khomeini's motive was, of course, to prepare the ground for exporting the revolution to Shi'ite communities in the Arab states and to subordinate all Middle Eastern Shi'ite communities under Iran's Islamic reign. That was the first stage of the plan to conquer all other Middle Eastern Sunni states. However, Saddam unexpectedly stopped Khomeini's aspirations to export the revolution.

As previously mentioned, Israel was accused in the early 1980s of selling weapons to Iran. The United States' immediate interest was to see Iraq defeated because it was supported by the USSR. According to

48 Interview with David Ivri, the Israeli Ambassador to the United States from 2000 to 2002, and the ninth commander of the Israeli Air Force, (October 1977 to December 1982.) Date of interview: May 20, 2008.

49 BBC, Iraqi News Agency in Arabic, "Iraqi president Alleges Iranian and Israeli Collusion," ME/8299/A/1, July 1, 1986.

50 BBC, Tehran in Arabic for abroad, "Iranian Foreign Ministry Statement on Israel's Air Strike Inside Iraq," ME/6746/A/3, June 9, 1981.

51 Dial Torgerson, "The Persian Gulf War: Is It Good for Israel?," Los Angeles Times, October 19, 1980, p. F2; Dan Fisher, "Israel's Role in Iran Seen Bolstering Its Image as U.S. Friend, Ally," Los Angeles Times, November 13, 1986, p. A19.

52 Jonathan Broder, "Gulf war aids Israeli propaganda," Chicago Tribune, November 20, 1980, p. 1.

53 Interview with David Ivri, May 20, 2008.

54 Anthony Cordesman, Abraham R. Wagner, The Iran-Iraq war, Tel Aviv, Ma'arachot, 1998, p. 273. (In Hebrew).

55 Abrahamian, *Ibid*, p. 51.

56 Netzer, *Ibid*, pp. 158-159.



the United States, and Israel later on, Iraq's success in its battle against Iran reflected the USSR's success. Such success would attract other Arab states into the warm bosom of the USSR, thereby causing the USA to lose the Middle Eastern arena, which was a situation the United States and Israel hoped to prevent.<sup>57</sup>

Israel's immediate interest in selling weapons to the Iranians, though Israel did not admit to it despite convincing evidence, was obviously weighing down Iraq's power and pushing the USSR out of the Middle East arena. Israel as a Jewish state had, of course, another interest. The estimated size of the Iranian Jewish community at the time was approximately 60,000 people. Israel feared that in light of the Iranian government's anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist remarks, the Jews' rights would be restricted and oppressed.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, there were rumors that Israel unofficially renewed its economic relations with Iran.<sup>59</sup> Despite the USA's mutual economic interest, it asked Israel to end its relations with Iran as long as the Teheran crisis at the American embassy was not resolved.<sup>60</sup>

Numerous Arab states such as Iraq, Saudi-Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait along with the Iranian opposition, which was led by the Mojahedin, were concerned that a strong Iran would lead to the spread of the revolution among Arab countries. In light of this fear, Iraq received significant military and economic support from those countries in order to diminish Iran's power as much as possible. Iran was abandoned by old allies such as the PLO, which began building ties with the Mojahedin. Needless to say, the Mojahedin, as an organization, was the largest opposition to the Islamic Republic.<sup>61</sup>

The PLO's movements from camp to camp bore a disadvantage to both Iran and the PLO. Both parties lost their common interests. Iran lost its ability to politically and economically control the organization whose ideology also called for the destruction of Israel

(Fattah and PLO covenants), while the PLO lost an affluent sponsor that could have been useful to advance its political and military struggle against Israel. Israel saw such a separation as a blessing.

## **Iran and Israel – Was there a Possibility for Joining Forces? Was There a Common Interest?**

It appeared at that stage of the establishment of the Islamic Revolution as though Khomeini's remarks before and after the revolution and the suspicious governmental attitude towards the Iranian Jewish community would lead to the unequivocal conclusion that the two states have nothing in common. It seemed that any reasonable basis for cooperation between them was absent. Ironically, the same factor that led Iran and Israel to cooperate during the Shah's times also led to Israeli-Iranian cooperation after the Islamic Revolution. This factor was "the Arab world".

It is true that Khomeini made many remarks against the Shah and against Pahlavi's hostility towards the Arab states. He also advocated strengthening Iran's ties with the Arab world, and preferred those over having ties with Israel.<sup>62</sup> This fact cannot be denied or called into question. However, an essential question is as follows: did Khomeini and the Supreme National Security Council of Iran hope that the wave of the Shi'a's historical rise and shattering of the state's monarchic regime would resonate and create aftershocks in the Arab states, in which there were Shi'ite minorities (and sometimes a majority)?

Indeed, this was their hope, but its implementation was negligible. As mentioned previously, the Arab states, headed by Iraq, united under the banner calling for the prevention of Shi'a Islam from spanning beyond Iranian borders. Various propaganda alternatives began spreading among Middle Eastern Shi'ite communities such as those in Saudi-Arabia, Iraq, and Lebanon. Each state tried to diminish and neutralize Khomeini's influence within their country.<sup>63</sup>

57 Drew Middleton, "Israelis Press Military Accord With U.S.," *The New York Times*, October 9, 1981, p. A8.

58 Bernard Gwertzman, "Israel Is Said to Have Sold Iran F-4 Tires", *The New York Times*, August 22, 1981, p. 5.

59 Jonathan Broder, "Foreign arms sales crucial for Israel," *Chicago Tribune*, August 29, 1981, p. W2.

60 Gwertzman, *The New York Times*, p. 5. Reuters, "Israel Reveals It Is Aiding Iran in Its War With Iraq," *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 1982, p. A2.

61 Tim McGirk, "Khomeini's allies even PLO – desert him," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 11, 1981, p. 1.

62 Ayatollah Khomeini, "The Start of a Gigantic Explosion," *MERIP Reports* (No. 69, July-August 1978), pp. 19-20; *Imam Khomeini Message*, *Sahifeh Noor*, Vol. 3, p. 103, November 11, 1978. [www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/imam-books/palestine/pale1.html](http://www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/imam-books/palestine/pale1.html)

63 For further information see: Graham E. Fuller, *Rend Rahim Franckle*, *The*



At this stage, Egypt was the only Arab state that had signed a peace treaty with Israel, while many others actively called for Israel's destruction. However, at the time, Israel's situation was better than that of Iran. As a result of the war and its outcome, Iran could not form close relations with any Arab state, excluding Syria. Thus, the common denominator between Iran and Israel was a hostile Arab world. Each state suffered equally from the Arab world's antagonism for different reasons.<sup>64</sup>

In May 1982, Ariel Sharon, who was the Defense Minister in Prime Minister Begin's government, declared in a BBC interview that Israel assisted Iran during its war with Iraq by supplying it with military equipment. Accordingly, Sharon verified the suspicions against Israel. He emphasized the small quantity of weapons and ammunition that the Islamic republic received from Israel, calling it "a symbolic supply". Iraq was the extreme Middle Eastern state as far as Sharon and the government of Israel were concerned.<sup>65</sup> Iran was not considered the most extreme Middle Eastern player, and therefore received assistance to deal with the more extreme element in the area.

Later on, during another visit to the United States in May 1982, Sharon said that Iraq was more dangerous, but that Iran was strategically more important. Furthermore, Sharon said that Israel and the United States shared their abhorrence of the Iranian tyrannical government, but that both Israel and the United States must reserve a small open window of opportunity for Iran. According to Sharon, following the war's conclusion, it was believed that a different regime could rule in Teheran, which would hold a different attitude towards Israel and the West.<sup>66</sup> Sharon explained the geo-political reasons for the way in which the United States and Israel treated the USSR. According to him, Iran, even at its most difficult moments, did not turn to the USSR, while Iraq partnered with the USSR even

when it was not experiencing difficulties. Beyond that, Iran had always been the West's strategic ally and the United States' ally in particular. Taking the future into consideration, Iran was viewed as a much more important asset for Israel and the USA than Iraq.<sup>67</sup>

In addition, the fact that the Jewish minority in Iran was substantial brought the Israeli government to support Iran's war efforts against Iraq. The Israeli government believed Iran's anti-Zionism was insignificant, and claimed that Israel must avoid endangering the Jewish minority in the country. Israel believed that if it did not assist Iran, it would be interpreted as support of Iraq. Iran, which viewed Saddam Hussein's efforts as an attempt to replace Egypt as the Arab World's leader, could eventually undermine the sensitive relationships between Israel and Middle East Arab states.<sup>68</sup>

However, the Israeli naïve approach of the possibility to renew Iran-Israel relations was perceived differently by the Iranians. When visiting Syria in 1982, Ali Akbar Velayati, who was the Iranian Foreign Minister in the beginning of the 1980s, declared that Iran intended to help Syria fight the Zionist enemy. According to him, Iran would give Syria political, economic and military assistance. Moreover, he declared that Iran was strong enough to fight against Iraq and Israel simultaneously.

In any event, Velayati denied Israel's symbolic assistance as well as any assistance from the USSR. On the other hand, quite cynically, he said that Iran's participation in a war against Israel alongside Syria would be more than "symbolic". As far as he was concerned, Iran perceived the war against Israel as a war against Western imperialism, stating there was no difference between the interests of the USA and Israel.<sup>69</sup>

True to that spirit, on June 13, 1982, Khomeini reiterated the essence of the Iranian army and the goals of the war to the military commanders and officials. According to Khomeini, Iran's situation at the time was

Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslim, New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1999, pp. 179-201.

64 Claude Van England, "Does Israel – or Iran – worry the Arabs most?" *Christian Science Monitor*, April 2, 1982, p. 22.

65 Reuters, Los Angeles Times, May 26, 1982, p. A2; Don Oberdorfer, "Israel Told U.S. of Arms Sale To Iran, Defense Minister Say," *The Washington Post*, May 28, 1982, p. A1; AP, "U.S. Bares Objection to Israeli Arms Sales to Iran," *Chicago Tribune*, May 29, 1982, p. B2; BBC, "Iraqi Report About Iran-Israel Arms Deal," ME/6815/i, August 31, 1981; BBC, Iraqi news agency, "Saddam Husayn's 9th September Interview: Relations with Iran and Israel," ME/6825/A/4, Sept 11, 1981.

66 Oberdorfer, *The Washington Post*, May 28, 1982, p. A1.

67 Editorial, "An Interview With Ariel Sharon," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 28, 1982, p. 18; BBC, Riyadh home service, "Comment on Israel's Military Aid to Iran," ME/7039/A/1, May 27, 1982; BBC, "Saudi Comment on 'Treason' of Iranian Regime," ME/7040/A/4, June 1, 1982.

68 David K. Shipler, "Israel Sees Soviet Gain as U.S. Shuns Iran," *The New York Times*, May 29, 1982, p. 3. Cordesman & Wagner, *Ibid*, p. 127, 144.

69 John Maclean, "Iran Says it Will Join Fight Against Israel," *Chicago Tribune*, June 9, 1982, p.6; BBC, "Iranian Foreign Minister's Visit to Yugoslavia," EE/7267/A4/1, February 25, 1983; BBC, Tehran home service, "Iranian Foreign Minister Criticism of Lebanon and Support for Syria," ME/7338/A/1, May 20, 1983.



a result of the Israeli corrupt government's actions and thus Iran was prepared to fight on two fronts. In his words, the war against Iraq meant defending what belonged to Iran, while the war for Palestine was for Iran's future. Khomeini accused Saddam of forcing the war upon Iran instead of exploiting the situation and advancing both Iran and Iraq's troops against Israel.<sup>70</sup>

As a result of the numerous rumors about Iran-Israel relations and the weapons deals between them, Khomeini was forced to address with these claims himself. It was clear from Khomeini's statements that both he and his government were quite frustrated by the commotion the rumors caused in the country. Khomeini, who was trying to recruit the Arab states in any possible way to a religious-ideological war against the United States and the Zionist enemy, was accused of speaking against Zionism only for the purpose of strengthening his own regime. The accusation provoked Khomeini to declare that Israel's religious definition prevented any possible connection between Israel and Islamic Iran.<sup>71</sup>

In June 1981, the Islamic Republic's first Prime Minister, Abol-hassan Banisadr, was dismissed, and together with Massoud Rajavi, who was the Mojahedin Khalq's leader, escaped to France. While in exile, Banisadr confirmed that Iran had indeed negotiated weapons deals with Israel to assist it in its war against Iraq. Radio Egypt, which quoted Banisadr, attacked Iran for its hypocrisy. According to Radio Egypt, Iran, which objected to Egypt's peace treaty with Israel and led the Arab states' struggle against it, initiated relations with Israel, proclaimed to be its major enemy.<sup>72</sup> Needless to say, all suspicions regarding Iran-Israel weapons deal relations had already been raised when Banisadr was still Iran's Prime Minister.

The claims made by the Mojahedin infuriated Khomeini. Khomeini, of course, denied everything and claimed that they were imperialistic schemes whose goal was to weaken Iran's power. According to him, the USA ("Israel's illegitimate mother") and Saddam ("Begin's younger brother") shared the loss of their abilities in the Middle Eastern region and therefore united their

forces to break down the Iranians. Khomeini referred in his statements only to the essence of the propaganda led by those who desired his failure, but not to the actual issues at hand.<sup>73</sup>

During the Iran-Iraq war, Khomeini sent his support and encouragement to the Iranian soldiers on the front. His speeches were also directed to other Arab states in hope that they would fall upon attentive ears. Aside from justifying the war against Saddam Hussein the tyrant, Khomeini called to direct the war against Israel, since it was a direct commandment from the Qur'an. According to his interpretation, the rift among Muslims was a serious problem and that Allah commanded the Islamic community to be complete and united in order to protect itself from heretics, referring to the USA and Zionists. He claimed that the Muslim world was separated and suffered from internal fighting because it had abandoned Allah's commandment.<sup>74</sup>

Khomeini was infuriated once again when Israel invaded Lebanon during the Peace of the Galilee War, also known today as the First Lebanon War. Khomeini began to illustrate a connection between Zionism and Saddam Hussein's "illegitimate" non-Islamic government when he became aware of the Arab world's possible reaction to dealings between Israel and Iran. At that point, Khomeini tied the United States to the "Zionist scheme" in order to gain influence and control over Arab countries. Thus, Khomeini concluded that "Israel must be wiped out".<sup>75</sup>

As threats were not enough for Khomeini, Iran turned to actions. According to Khomeini's distinct ideology, Israel as a Zionist entity had no place on the Middle Eastern map. According to Khomeini, Jews had the right to reside in other places, but not in the Middle East and particularly not on a piece of land which physically prevents the possibility of the Islamic and Arab world uniting into a single Islamic federation under Iranian and Shi'ite rule. Such Iranian threats found support amongst Israel's distinct enemies. In addition, on October 25,

70 Jomhuri-e Islami Ruznameh, June 13, 1982.

71 BBC, Tehran home service, "Khomeini's 9th March Speech to Soliders," ME/6975/A/6, March 11, 1982.

72 BBC, Cairo home service, "Bani Sadr's Allegation of Iranian-Israeli Military Cooperation," ME/6809/A/3, August 21, 1981.

73 Imam Khomeini Message, Sahifeh Noor, Vol. 15, pp. 124-125, September 6, 1981. [www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/imam-books/palestine/pale1.html](http://www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/imam-books/palestine/pale1.html)

74 Imam Khomeini Message, Sahifeh Noor, Vol. 16, p. 39, February 10, 1982. [www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/imam-books/palestine/pale1.html](http://www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/imam-books/palestine/pale1.html)

75 BBC, Tehran home service, "Iranian Joint Communiqué on Departure of Volunteers Against Israel," ME/7052/A/11, June 15, 1982; Ze'ev Maghen, "The Iranian Leadership and its attitude toward Israel," BESA – The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Ramat Gan, November 2006, p. 7.



1982, under the pretensions of being occupied with its bitter war against Iraq, Iran raised the stakes by denying Israel's right to be considered a state at the United Nations headquarters in New York. During a UN conference, Iran proposed a vote to expel Israel from the United Nations.

Thirty-three years earlier, Abba Eben, who was Israel's observer to the UN at the time, had tried to convince the General-Assembly of the importance of accepting Israel to the United Nations. According to Eben, Israel's presence at the UN would emphasize the UN as a unique organization that accepts a newly born state as an equal into the organization, thus implementing the UN constitution regarding self-definition. Arab states adamantly refused to accept Israel into the UN, claiming that Israel's establishment was unjustified due to an illegitimate UN decision. Iran voted against approving the addition of Israel to the UN and thus proved its consistent objection against Israel since the November 29, 1947 UN partition decision as well as the May 11, 1949 decision to accept Israel as a full member.<sup>76</sup>

In the 1980s, George P. Shultz, who was the American Secretary of State, defended Israel by declaring that the United States would never set foot in any United Nations institutions if a decision to exclude Israel from the UN would be accepted. The implication of such a declaration was that the United States would stop its financial support of the UN. Iran, however, was not deterred and offered to raise the money from Arab states in support of such a resolution. Furthermore, Iran expressed its resentment since none of the Arab states, including the Islamic ones, united around this resolution against Israel. The Arab states did not vote in favor of it since they had planned to "thaw" their relationships with Israel and even try to gain political and financial support from the USA.<sup>77</sup> All the resolutions from 1981 to 1985 which were intended to isolate Israel were rejected by a large majority.

This attempt was evidently not enough for Iran, as it proposed in 1983, together with Libya, to expel Israel from the UN. The vote in this case was also defeated, and the motion was taken off the world's agenda. Needless to say, representatives to the UN perceived such a resolution as ridiculous and non-realistic, especially since the USA supported Israel, and in light of Iran's political-diplomatic position following the Islamic Revolution and the war against Iraq.<sup>78</sup>

However, neither the West nor the Arab world understood the Islamic Republic's inner ideological motives. Iran, at a very early stage of its history as an Islamic Republic, began to fabricate propaganda against Israel. According to the Republic, Israel was not just another Western satellite state in the Middle East. It was seen as responsible for the oppression of the Palestinian people, and also as the source of the Islamic world's problems, especially Iran's problems.

However, the average person living in the Middle East would have found it difficult to realize Iran's motives for attacking Israel through its propaganda, since everyone was aware of the reported weapon deals between Israel and Iran during the first half of the 1980s. It had been shown that there were rumors of Israel selling Iran weapons and ammunition approximately four to six weeks after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war.

Again, in synchronic duality, Iran harassed Israel whenever possible and blamed it for its failures in the battlefield against Iraq. During 1984 Israel and Egypt were condemned in the UN by the Iranian Foreign Minister, and once again he proposed banishing Israel from the organization. On the same occasion, Egypt was condemned for developing relations with Israel and allowing the Zionist entity's flag to fly on the Islamic soil of Egypt. The 39th UN session again rejected Iran's request.<sup>79</sup>

Much to their deep regret, the Iranian Jewish community representative and the community's representative at

76 AP, "Partition of Palestine Voted by U.N. Assembly," Los Angeles Times, November 30, 1947, p. 1; Thomas J. Hamilton, "Israel Wins a Seat in U.N. by 37-12 Vote," New York Times, May 12, 1949, p. 1. Abba Eben, Voice of Israel, Tel Aviv, Am Oved, 1959, p. 22; Gawdat Bahgat, "The Islamic Republic and the Jewish State," Israel Affairs, Vol. 11, No. 3, July 2005, p. 517.

77 Bernard Nossiter, "Iran Challenges Israel's Right to Seat at U.N.," The New York Times, October 26, 1982, p. A15; Claude Van England, "Iran Finds its Self-Isolation Gets a Cool Reception Abroad," Christian Science Monitor, October 27, 1982, p. 5; BBC, Tehran home service, "Criticism of Opposition to Israel's Expulsion from the UN," ME/7168/A/3, Oct 28, 1982.

78 Richard Bernstein, "Move to Expel Israel From U.N. Is Defeated," The New York Times, October 21, 1983, p. A11.

79 AP, "Tehran Blames U.S. and Israel for Red Sea Mines," The New York Times, August 9, 1984, p. A5; James Feron, "Iranian Denounces Israel and Egypt in U.N. Speech," The New York Times, October 2, 1984, p. A14; James Feron, "U.N. Rejects Iran's Move to Expel Israel," The New York Times, October 18, 1984, p. A3; BBC, Tehran home service, "Iranian Foreign Minister on Libyan Visit," ME/7744/A/1, September 10, 1984.



the Majlis of Iran (the Iranian Parliament) joined the last attempt in 1984 to expel Israel from the UN. The community Rabbi and the representative published an announcement supporting the Islamic Republic's efforts to expropriate Israel's place in the UN. It is likely that the Jews were forced by the government to publicize their declaration against Israel and express the Jewish community's support of their government's actions.<sup>80</sup>

That same year, the regime was still suspected of maintaining relations with Israel. Even James E. Akins, who was the USA's former ambassador to Saudi Arabia, claimed that relations between Iran and Israel were becoming warmer. In order to prove his point, he mentioned that an American reconnaissance (intelligence) Awacs plane discovered that Israeli planes flew from Israel in a northern direction towards Lebanon and Syria and were later spotted by Iraqis arriving in Iran. The American State Department denied Akins's statement but mentioned that it was likely he had good sources.<sup>81</sup>

In 1985, the request to expel Israel from the UN was proposed by Arab states (excluding Egypt, Jordan and Oman). While the reason for this move was quite clear, the motive was to stop Iran from attempting to do the same. The Arab states were not against Iran's attempt to expel Israel from the UN because they were suddenly pro-Israeli, but rather they simply wanted to prevent Iran from using the Islamic claim as a justification for Israel's expulsion. For the Iranians, the Islamic claim, as well as claims concerning the occupation of Palestine and the oppression of the Palestinians, was of extreme importance, since Khomeini's anti-Zionist ideology was based upon it. Israel's existence in the Middle Eastern arena as a separate independent state was in complete contradiction to Khomeini's Islamic perception.<sup>82</sup>

It should be emphasized at this point that since the Islamic Revolution, Iran made various negative statements, which increased with time, against the United States. Hostility against Israel and the amount of remarks against it also increased as time progressed. Israel was perceived as the United States' imperialist

satellite state representative and as the source of all evil in the Islamic and Arab world. Thus, anti-Israeli propaganda was twice the amount of propaganda set against the United States or other Western countries.

Despite this, Israel continued to transfer weapons and ammunition to Iran via secret channels to assist in its war against Iraq. Israel's immediate interest was, of course, to help the USA in releasing its hostages held in Lebanon by pro-Iranian Shi'ite militants. Nevertheless, there were additional Israeli interests involved. Overall, Israel sought to develop strategic ties with moderate Iranian government and military powers. Another interest was to maintain the status and safety of Iranian Jews.<sup>83</sup>

However, since the onset of the Islamic Revolution, the essence of their relations with Iran was never discussed at Israeli government forums. Israel's strategic perception and decisions were left to those at the head of its security and defense system. Moreover, a serious discussion regarding Israel-Iran relations existed among Israeli academics. Some tended to accept the new norm, while others raised serious doubts about the nature of such relations.

Such a public discussion would not have been required had the Iran-Iraq war not lasted so long without a clear winner in sight. As mentioned previously, Israel and the USA were inclined to see Iraq defeated because of its natural tendency towards the USSR and fear that an Iraqi victory would lead the Arab states into the USSR's grasp. Under such circumstances, the USA would lose its influence within the Arab states' circle and Israel would again be exposed to a renewed Iraqi attack.

The Arab states' concern was in stopping revolutionary Iran at its natural borders. Thus, under the given circumstances, Israel and the Arab world shared a common interest. Israel surely did not want to see Khomeini's fundamental platform spill over Iran's borders. Yet, it was hoping that Iran's religious fanaticism was only temporary, since there was no parallel historical likeness in current times. However,

80 BBC, Tehran home service, "Jewish Community's Support for Expulsion of Israel From UN," ME/7759/A/1, September 27, 1984.

81 David R. Francis, "Mideast Expert Says Israel Steps Up Iran aid," Christian Science Monitor, May 30, 1984, p. 1.

82 Elaine Sciolino, "General Assembly Turns Back Arab-Sponsored Effort to Oust Israel," The New York Times, October 17, 1985, p. A13.

83 Huge Scofield, "Fate of Iran's Jew: Shadowy factor in Israel's role in US-Iran deals," Christian Science Monitor, November 21, 1986, p. 11; Editorial, "The Israeli Connection," The Washington Post, November 18, 1986, p. A18; Mary Curtius, "Israel Plays Down Role in Iran Affair," Christian Science Monitor, November 17, 1986, p. 1; Glenn Frankel, "Israeli Reportedly Set Up First U.S.-Iran Arms Deal," The Washington Post, November 19, 1986, p. A1.



academics and military analysts in Israel, such as Prof. Aaron Klieman (Tel Aviv University), Mark Heller (Tel Aviv University)<sup>84</sup> and Shlomo Baum (a retired Israeli Brigadier General and independent military analyst), concluded that the perception of revolutionary Iran as a passing episode was completely mistaken. They claimed that selling American-Israel weapons to Iran to use against its major enemy, Iraq, was not necessarily wise (i.e. perceiving Iran as "the enemy of my enemy"), since Iraq's enemy was also Israel's enemy in this case. The same analysts opposed Israel's position regarding which side in the war it should take, and which side's victory would be beneficial for Israel. As far as they were concerned, Iranian success would be a strategic threat to Israel.<sup>85</sup>

In that case, Iran's extrication from Iraqi aggression, supported by certain Arab states, would empower Iran not only in the eyes of the Middle East Shi'ite minorities but also among extreme Sunni groups who perceive Islam as a way to gain political control over various regimes.

The same Israeli analysts, whom as early as 1986 realized Iran's desire to export the revolution to armed Lebanese militias such as the Hezbollah, perceived Israel-Iran weapons deals to be severely damaging to Israel. According to them, it was quite possible that the weapons would be handed over to the Lebanese militias. While Iraq does not share a border with Israel, it had nevertheless taken part in all Arab wars against Israel. Conversely, Iran also does not share a border with Israel, but has succeeded in surrounding Israel with numerous representatives armed with the same weapons Israel supplied to it.<sup>86</sup> These analysts' opinions, particularly those of Klieman, Baum and Heller, were not taken seriously by the Israeli authorities. Like a prophecy fulfilled, the Iranian political and practical "export of the re Foreign Affairs Ministry, Mr. David Kimche, to Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was the Iranian Majlis' spokesperson and future Iranian Islamic Republic President.

The moderate Iranians' goal was to bring an end to the war against Iraq. Iran's economy was in a terrible state, as war expenses and various sanctions that were imposed on the country during the war led to its total collapse. Israel and the United States felt that this was an optimal time to reestablish relations. The rationale was that it would be possible for internal political changes to lead to the rise of moderate powers, while Iran was at its weakest point economically and politically. Israel and the USA were preparing for such changes.<sup>87</sup>

However, the outcome of the situation was different than anticipated. In the spring of 1986, Radio Kuwait reported the arrival of approximately one thousand Iranian revolutionary soldiers at the Lebanon valley. Their sole purpose was to assist Palestinian forces in their fight against Israel. The forces were to be under the direct command of the Syrian military in Lebanon. True to their declarations, the Iranian government declared that it could fight battles against Iraq and Israel at the same time. The reinforced forces joined the Shi'ite Hezbollah and other Palestinian factions that fought the Christian militias of South Lebanon, also known as Tzadal, and the IDF.<sup>88</sup>

The political reality in Lebanon created a radical camp as well as an opposing moderate camp in Iran. It is customary to believe that Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was the former Iranian Majlis' spokesperson and former Iranian President, is grouped with the moderates. However, this "moderate" figure spoke sternly against the United States and Israel in June 1986. Loyal to the Khomeini tradition that perceived Israel as a foreign entity, Rafsanjani claimed that Israel was invented by the West in order to divide the Arab world. Moreover, according to him, Israel was invented because the West was trying purging itself of the Jews and the Islamic problem with the Jews was the real 20th century crisis. Thus, he claimed that neither Iran nor the Islamic or Arab world should accept the reality of a Jewish state in the heart of the Islamic and Arab world.<sup>89</sup> Twenty years later, Ahmadinejad would use the very same words.

84 For further information see: Mark A. Heller, *The Iran-Iraq War: Implications for Third Parties*, Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv, 1984; Aaron S. Klieman, *Israel's Global Reach: Arms Sales as Diplomacy*, London and Washington, Brassey's, 1985.

85 Thomas L. Friedman, "Israel Sorts Its Interests In Outcome of Gulf War," *The New York Times*, November 23, 1986, p. E3.

86 Jonathan Broder, "Israel Knew it: Iran Too Good For U.S. to Pass Up," *Chicago Tribune*, November 16, 1986, p. D1; John Tagliabue, "Terrorists Reportedly Trained in Iran," *The New York Times*, December 30, 1985, p.6.

87 Robert S. Greenberger, Andy Paszor, "McFarlane Said to Tell Congress Israel Gave Him Names of 'Moderate' Iranians," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 10, 1986. p. 3; Warren Richey, George D. Moffett III, "Israeli and US Interests Let to Arms Sales," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 11, 1986, p. 10.

88 BBC, "Iranian Deputy Prime Minister's Paris News Conference: Kuwaiti Report," ME/8267/A/1, May 24, 1986.

89 BBC, Tehran home service, "Iran's Hashemi-Rafsanjani's Address on Jerusalem Day," ME/8280/A/1, June 9, 1986.



In essence, the two of them are Ayatollah Khomeini's most dedicated students.

At that stage Iran did not dismiss the possibility of negotiating with the United States, but rejected all American attempts to open discussions. Iran was encouraged by the United States, but it did not cooperate. During that time, Iran still perceived the United States as the "Big Satan". The metaphor and its implications would only change if the United States would stop its support of Israel. In November 1986, Rafsanjani, who was the Majlis' spokesperson, claimed that this was Khomeini's mandate, and since he was the spiritual leader it should be acted upon. He also added that there was no reason for Iran to avoid purchasing American weapons and replacement parts on the open market, though Iran should never directly purchase weapons from the USA or Israel.<sup>90</sup>

Aside from Iran's direct dealings with Israel, it is important to note that Iran was vigilant to stress its hostility towards Israel to the extreme every time Arab leaders expressed their views regarding Israel-Iran relations. Therefore, while Iran condemned Israel and its statements became more extreme as time passed, it was sending the Arab world a message to unite around Iran against their common enemy - Israel.

In 1987, Iraq condemned Iran on several occasions. Manucher Mutaki, who was the Iranian ambassador to Turkey, was accused of negotiating with Israel in order to enable Iranian Jews to immigrate there. Obviously, Iran quickly denied the contacts with Israel, but the Arab world found it difficult to accept after the Iran-Contra incident. At that stage, Iran was at an inferior position as far as the Arab world's agenda. Even the Saudi Arabian monarchy, which was usually hostile to Iraq, was defending Iraq at this point and attacking Iran. Saudi Arabia accused Iran of holding economic and military ties with Israel and deceitfully calling for the extermination of Israel while initiating relations with it at the same time.<sup>91</sup>

Of all states, it was Saudi Arabia that assisted Iraq in its war against Iran, because of its belief in Arab fraternity and fear that the Islamic Revolution would reach its door step. In addition, its propaganda against Iran escalated to the extreme. According to Saudi Arabia, Iran's determination to win the war against Iraq pressed it to seek assistance from the Arab world and Israel, even though it was its worst enemy. Moreover, Saudi Arabia accused Iran of being naive and lacking diplomatic experience because it believed the Zionist enemy could vitalize the Islamic republic in its war against Iraq. According to Saudi Arabia, Israel wanted to prevent an Iraqi victory, yet at the same time it tried to ensure an Iranian and Iraqi equilibrium of forces, weapons and ammunition. Israel did not equip Iran with weapons and ammunition that could end the war, as it simply wanted each party to exhaust the other without a decisive victory.<sup>92</sup>

Israel did not deny having contact with Iran. Yitzhak Rabin, who was Israel's Defense Minister at the time, claimed that Iran was Israel's best friend and that Israel did not intend to change its approach. He also added that Khomeini's regime would not last forever. In contrast, Yossi Beilin, who was the Director-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was more realistic and said that it would be difficult to view Iran as Israel's best friend as long as the Islamic Republic's government retained its attitude.<sup>93</sup> Beilin also claimed that Iran was Israel's ideological enemy. Fundamentalist Iran's export of the revolution succeeded against Israel by way of Hezbollah, which was supported by Iran and stationed on Israel's northern border. Therefore, according to Beilin, Iran was one of Israel's enemies.<sup>94</sup>

The first Intifada, which started in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in December 1987, was encouraged by the Arab and Islamic worlds. Iran led the wave of support and saw the uprising as the first step towards Jerusalem's liberation. Iran requested to assist the Palestinians against the 'Zionist Conqueror' and called upon the Islamic and Arab worlds to unite and help the 'true Islamic fighters' against the Zionist entity. It declared that it did not recognize the Zionist

90 BBC, Tehran home service, "Rafsanjani's Says the USA Is 'Begging' Iran to Resume Dialogue," ME/8412/A/1, November 10, 1986; BBC, Tehran home service, "Rafsanjani at Friday Prayers: Iran Would Assist in Hostage Issue for Return of Assets," ME/8429/A/1, November 29, 1986.

91 BBC, IRNA in English, "Iran Denies Iraqi Claim of Meeting Between Iranian Diplomat and Israelis," ME/8606/A/1, June 29, 1987; BBC, Riyadh home service, "Saudi Radio Says Iran in 'Israel's Arms'," ME/8676/A/1, September 18, 1987.

92 BBC, Riyadh home service, "Saudi Comment on 'New Dimensions' of Relations Between Israel and Iran", ME/8711/A/1, October 29, 1987.

93 BBC, "Israeli Defence Minister Says Iran is 'Israel's Best Friend'", ME/8712/I, October 30, 1987.

94 BBC, IDF Radio, "Israeli Foreign Ministry Official Comments Further on Relations with Iran," ME/8712/I, October 31, 1987.





state, since the Islamic Republic was founded upon a divine commandment and Islamic laws.<sup>95</sup>

Iranian Jewish community leaders were also quick to send supportive messages to the Palestinians. Their meeting with the Ayatollah Montazeri, who was identified with clergy that led the 'Imam Line', forced them to make false statements. In return, Montazeri said that the minorities, including the Jews, lived happily amongst the Islamic community, in contrast to the persecutions and tribulations suffered under the Nazis and other European regimes in Europe. Montazeri implied to the Jewish community to cut off all contact with the "Zionist conquerors" and warned them of being exposed to the Zionist propaganda against the Iranian government.<sup>96</sup>

## From Khomeini's Death until Ahmadinejad – Radicalization or Moderation?

Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, the instigator of the Islamic Revolution and Iran's spiritual leader, died on June 3, 1989. His successor, Khamenei, who was the Republic's president in the years 1981-1989, committed himself to leading Iran in the spirit of Imam Khomeini. Khamenei's replacement was Hashemi Rafsanjani, who used to be the Iranian Majlis' spokesperson during the years 1981-1989.

As a spokesperson, Rafsanjani excelled as a militant when speaking against the "Zionist government". Even before he became president, Rafsanjani pointed out the Islamic community's incompetence given that Israel celebrated its 41st Independence Day. To his amazement, the Islamic world accepted Israel's existence as a fatal judgment and chose not to fight against the Zionist entity. Rafsanjani proclaimed Israel's existence as the exclusive result of the United States' unlimited support of its Middle Eastern Jewish "representative".

The events and international foreign affairs leading the American and Soviet super powers to support the establishment of the Jewish state were rooted, according to Rafsanjani's interpretation, in extreme anti-Semitism. In order to endorse his facts, Rafsanjani analyzed familiar names and events through an anti-Semitic prism. For instance, he claimed that President Truman supported the establishment of the Jewish state because the Jews supported him in the elections.

In addition, Rafsanjani claimed that the Arab leaders were bribed by the United States not to fight the young country of Israel, but neglected to mention all the wars that the Arab states had declared against Israel since its foundation. He went on to say that the money with which the United States bribed the leaders of the Arab states was actually Jewish money donated by the rich American Jews to help strengthen Israel's security. Rafsanjani concluded by saying that Israel was actually an American Middle East military base and that the Muslims' cause was not only against Israel, but against the West in general and the USA in particular. At that stage, Rafsanjani called upon all Arabs and Islamic Muslims to kill American and French citizens, who were dispersed across the globe. Later, Rafsanjani would apologize and claim that he was not appropriately understood and that his words were taken out of context.<sup>97</sup>

Once Iran managed to barely free itself from the bloody war against Iraq, the death of its spiritual leader and redefinition of the state, it began to place more emphasis on the Middle Eastern arena. During the Pahlavi monarchy, Iran was nicknamed "the Persian Gulf Police Officer" as a result of Mohammad Reza Shah's policies. Iran under the Ayatollahs' reign attempted to reconstruct the Shah's strict policing. The Shah's goal was, first and foremost, to turn Iran into a regional power while maintaining productive foreign affairs with Western and Arab states. The objective to stabilize the area was focused on the Iranian oil resources and their transport from the Persian Gulf to the rest of the world.<sup>98</sup>

95 BBC, Tehran home service, "Iranian Statements Condemn any Recognition of Israel and Call For Complete Liberation of Palestinian Territories," ME/0312/A/1, November 18, 1988; BBC, Tehran Television, "Iranian Deputy Minister Reiterates Iran's Stands on PNC Resolutions," ME/0320/A/1, November 28, 1988.

96 BBC, Tehran home service, "Ayatollah Montazeri Addresses Iranian Jews," ME/0060/A/1, January 28, 1988.

97 BBC, Tehran home service, "Iran Rafsanjani Advocates Killing of Westerners, Attacks Against US Interests, Plane Hijackings," ME/0453/A/1, May 8, 1989; BBC, IRNA, "Iran Rafsanjani Responds to West 'Propaganda Ploys' Over Remarks on Killing Westerners," ME/0455/A/1, May 12, 1989.

98 For further information on this issue see: Uzi Rabi, "The Arab World facing Iran Rising," Uzi Rabi (ed.), Iran Time, Tel Aviv, Hakibutz Hameuchad, 2008, pp. 77-98.



In the early 1990s, Iran under the Ayatollahs' control was diplomatically, militarily and economically beaten and preoccupied "licking its wounds". It had to rebuild its army, economy, national morale, and especially its foreign affair policies on a global scale, specifically in the Arab and Islamic worlds. Iran believed that if it had managed to deal with the Zionist issue during its war against Iraq, it would certainly be able to do so in the future.

Iran believed that it was destined to lead the Islamic and Arab worlds' religious and ideological war against Israel and the West. Opinions about the Zionist entity were expressed in every public speech. In particular, following Sheikh Ubayd's kidnapping in July 1989, Iran fought side by side with the Hezbollah in their war against the Zionist enemy, and attempted to avenge the kidnapping.<sup>99</sup>

Furthermore, Iran asked Turkey to avoid establishing ties with Israel, because such relations would be damaging primarily to the Islamic world and also to the dealings between Turkey and Iran. In addition, according to Iran, such a development would enable the USA to widen its circle of influence in the Middle East. In other words, the American forces could position themselves along the Iranian-Turkish border, which was a scenario Iran sought to prevent.<sup>100</sup>

In September 1989, the Hungarian ambassador to Iran was reprimanded by the Iranian Foreign Minister on the initiation of relations between Hungary and the Zionist entity. Iran expressed its disapproval of such a move to the Hungarian ambassador. To emphasize its condemnation, Iran cancelled the Hungarian Industry Minister's visit to Iran and postponed the Hungarian Foreign Minister's visit as well.<sup>101</sup>

Iran's attempt to stop Russian Jews from immigrating to Israel involved demands to stop Israeli building in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, since Iran perceived such

a wave of immigration as a distinct effort to ensure the survival of the Jewish state and a cynical attempt by Russia to rid itself of its Jews. Iran was also a great supporter of the Palestinian "street" against Israel. In addition, from time to time, when Arab states implied Iran was connected to Israel and South Africa by selling them oil, Iran denied these associations.<sup>102</sup>

Thus, in fact, Iran took a bolder stand against Israel. Any global or Middle Eastern event having the slightest relation to Israel received an Islamic-Iranian reaction. Iran not only emphasized its condemnation, but also offered various solutions for minimizing Israel's power and influence. The Islamic Republic's first audience was, of course, the Arab and Islamic world. From time to time it was bombarded with criticism by Iran for its cessation of activity against Israel, consequently securing Israel's position among the nations and strengthening its power in the Middle East.

Rafsanjani's Iran (1989-1997) and Khatami's Iran (1997-2005) were not very different from Iran led by Ayatollah Khomeini or Khamenei, whom were the Islamic Republic founders. Their Iran was the result of a strict Islamic doctrine, which Khomeini upgraded and Khamenei implemented, that perceives Israel as a foreign entity. The doctrine demanded the reconstruction of the Islamic Khalifs' rule, when all Arab and Islamic countries lived under a general Islamic federation. This concept described how the Jews could live within such a federation only as a minority, similar to the times when Jews were minorities under the Islamic religious Ottoman regime.

The early 1990s were diverse in nature for the Islamic Republic. Firstly, normal relations with Iraq began. Secondly, Iran's ties with European countries were renewed, following the lifting of sanctions imposed during the war, enabling the economy stabilize. Thirdly,

99 BBC, IRNA, "Iranian Press and Radio Comment on Ubayd Kidnapping," ME/0523/A/1, Aug 1, 1989; BBC, Voice of the Oppressed, "Iran Mohtashemi Sends Message to Hezbollah on kidnapping of Ubayd, Says Revolutionary Muslims Should 'Not Stand Idle'," ME/0530/A/1, Aug 9, 1989; BBC, IRNA, "Iran press says Israel must pay for abduction of Shaykh Ubayd," ME/0537/A/1, Aug 17, 1989.

100 BBC, IRNA, "Paper warns turkey against 'alliance' with Israel," ME/0549/A/1, Aug 31, 1989.

101 BBC, "Iran calls off visits by Hungarian ministers in Israel protest," ME/0568/1, Sep 22, 1989.

102 BBC, IRNA, "Tehran paper calls for halt to Jewish influx to 'occupied Palestine'," ME/0675/A/1, Jan 30, 1990; BBC, Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, "Iranian President's Remarks about Emigration of Soviet Jews to Israel," ME/0734/A/1, April 9, 1990; BBC, Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, "Iran Khamene'i Message of Support for 'Islamic Uprising of Palestinian nation,'" ME/0739/A/1, April 16, 1990; BBC, Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, "Minister of Islamic Culture and guidance on 'Zionist infiltration' in the West," ME/0745/A/1, April 23, 1990; BBC, Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, "Iran Rafsanjani Says Israel is the Greatest Danger to the Region," ME/0745/A/1, April 23, 1990; BBC, "Iran condemns alleged Jewish desecration of Al-Aqsa mosque," ME/0594/1, Oct 23, 1989; BBC, Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, "Iranian Oil Ministry statement denies sale of oil to Israel or South Africa," ME/0647/A/1, Dec 23, 1989.



the government institutions were strengthened. Another important factor in the Islamic Republic's post war reality was the attempt to export the revolution to Middle Eastern Shi'ite communities, hoping to prepare them for an uprising against the "illegitimate regimes" in which they lived.

Furthermore, the government acted to silence opposition voices inside and outside Iran, and consequently endorsed international terror attacks in the early 1990s to oppress various opposition activists. Towards the end of the 1990s, Iran stopped those activities and was intent on stabilizing its government. During that time, Iran acted to reinforce the world's approval of its existence as a Shi'ite Islamic Republic. At that stage, once the internal and external opposition was subjugated and the Iranian people were orientated towards the Islamic way of life, Iran began to rise as a global and regional force through its nuclear aspirations.

## **Iranian Society and Its Attitude towards the Zionist Entity – Israel**

Before attempting to examine the Iranian society's attitude towards the Zionist entity, it is essential to understand the term "Iranian society" and its complexity, the hierarchy relations within it, and its religious orientation. As is customary to believe, and in light of the above description, our assumption will be that the Iranian regime actually reflects its society. Such an assumption is accurate for democratic regimes in which society elects its leaders and type of government, as well as the values according to which it wishes to live. The question is whether the same is true for Iran, and whether the Iranian government actually reflects its society. Iran, indeed, is not a fully democratic state, but it was the Iranian society in 1979 which brought the Islamic Revolution upon itself, giving rise to the Shi'ite clergy that currently rules the country.

With this assumption in mind, we need to understand that the current Iranian society, at the end of 2008, is essentially the same society that desired the Islamic Revolution and was prepared to accept its religious contexts and entailments, including Iran's attitude towards the Zionist entity. Since then, three decades

have passed and the Iranian society has undergone major changes in attempting to adapt to the new regime from a religious viewpoint. The society was, in a sense, reconstructed from a secular western-oriented society to a religiously obedient society which lacks political self-determination.

As already known, one of the serious problems of an in-depth study in this field is accessibility to official or semi-official religious Iranian sources regarding this issue. For the last 30 years, the Iranian regime has been centralized and theocratic, directly ruling the civilian society, including the media. Under such circumstances, the basic assumption is that any official information produced by the state regarding the Islamic Revolutionary policy, including its attitude towards the Zionist entity, will unequivocally reflect the regime. Thus, how can this be solved?

The relatively small amount of authentic sources giving us insight into Iranian society forces us to seek other means to study these issues. It is plausible that Iranian society has not stagnated since the Islamic Revolution. It should be noted that in time Iran has become receptive and attentive to western values concerning nationalism, parliamentary governmental systems, and legislation, despite the reactionary religious principles with which Ayatollah Khomeini tried to indoctrinate the Iranian society. However, it is essential to remind that these values are only used as models and not as essential features of society. In other words, the regime uses western frameworks but realizes these contexts with distinct Islamic ideas.<sup>103</sup>

We can assume that changes to the Iranian regime would result in changes to Iranian society with respect to its attitude towards the government, relations with the West and with the Zionist entity. Such a change could be positive or negative, but would not remain stable for long.

As described previously, Khomeini incited the crowds in his propaganda against the Shah to oppose the United States and Israel. Khomeini illustrated a connection between the two states and the political, economic and cultural damage they caused Iran. Many

<sup>103</sup> David Menashri, "Iran: from peripheral state to regional power," Mokdeï Mashber Bamizrah Hatichon, The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv, 2004, p. 25.



Iranians absorbed and believed his propaganda, thereby opposing the Shah's partnership with the United States and Israel. Since 1963, Khomeini seasoned his speeches and propaganda against the Shah and monarchy with criticism against Israel and its responsibility for Iran's internal religious and cultural difficulties. Until the revolution in 1979, many Iranians were educated with anti-western and anti-Zionist values, which eventually developed into a general restlessness that helped bring an end to the Pahlavi monarchic government.

The Iranian society, composed mainly of Shi'ite clergy and the poor, was convinced that Israel and the USA were responsible in some way for their international, cultural, social, religious and economic situation. The population was persuaded to believe that the Shah was actually a western puppet government, which executed policies in Iran dictated by the West. Thus, the Iranian society's hatred towards Israel and the United States became a highlight of the Islamic Revolution. At every pro-Khomeini or anti-Shah demonstration there were posters and other propaganda materials condemning Israel and the United States. In addition, all the sermons delivered by Khomeini were flavored with expressions of rage and propaganda against Israel and the USA. What remains of these sentiments 30 years later?

## **The Constitution of Iranian Society following the Islamic Revolution**

As of July 2008, according to the CIA's estimations, Iran's population amounts to 66 million people. The average age is 26.5 years, while the percentage of the population under the age of fourteen is 22%. In addition, only 51% of the population consists of Persians, while 24% are Azaris. The Gilaks and Mazandins make up 8% of the population, and the remainder of the population consists of Kurds (7%), Arabs (3%), Lurs, Baluchs, and Turkemans. However, 98% of the population is comprised of Muslims, being 89% Shi'ite Muslims and 9% Sunni Muslims. The remaining two percent is divided between Zoroastrians, Bahai, Christians, and Jews.<sup>104</sup> The obvious conclusion that can be drawn from these figures is that almost half of Iran's population was born after the Islamic Revolution. This is important to take

into consideration when analyzing Iranian society's relations with Judaism, Israel, and Zionism.

As described previously, the Ayatollah Khomeini emphasized hatred of Zionism in his propaganda, and viewed Zionism, together with the United States, as an infectious disease of Iranian society. Today, almost 30 years later, as nearly half of Iran's population was born after the Islamic Revolution, they did not directly experience the Ayatollah Khomeini's propaganda. With this fact in mind, we would expect the current society in Iran to embrace a more sober and tolerant view of the West, Israel, and Zionism.

In order to prove this assumption, it is necessary to penetrate the depths of contemporary Iranian society, and attempt to discover its opinions of Jews, Zionism, and the state of Israel in general. The tools that we can make use of include the Internet, the media (broadcast and print), as well as remarks made by Iranian expatriots, who can reveal the general attitudes and viewpoints in Iran from first hand sources regarding these issues.

## **The Differences in Attitude between the Iranian Regime and Society towards the Jews, Zionism and Israel as Expressed in Public Opinion Surveys, the Internet and Radio**

### **I. Public Opinion Surveys**

A survey that was held by the "World Public Opinion" survey in Iran at the beginning of 2008, which only published its results in July 2008, illustrates a range of opinions in Iran with respect to the West, in general, and Israel, in particular. The survey shows that Iranians view the West with more tolerance than in the past. Although 75% of the participants believed that the United States has a negative influence on the world, which is a statistic illustrating the acceptance of Khomeini's propaganda, many were convinced that Western and Iranian societies share many common values. The survey showed a great discrepancy between Iranians' attitude towards the American government and their

<sup>104</sup> [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html#People](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html#People).



view of American society. In addition, according to the survey, Iranians have a negative opinion of American foreign policy, and believe that the United States wants to gain control over Middle Eastern countries and their oil resources.

In this survey, Iranians expressed a more resolute viewpoint of Israel, as the attitude of the regime was mostly reflective of the opinions among the people. The survey showed that 74% of Iranians view Israel in negative terms, largely due to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The survey illustrated that an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement lacks support among the Iranians, particularly if such an agreement would lead to recognition of the state of Israel. However, if Iran were to enjoy normalized relations with the United States, then the support for an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord, including recognition of Israel, would grow to 45%.<sup>105</sup>

Other conducted surveys show that the youth of Iranian society, when compared to Iran's older population, have a higher level of approval of basic principles of democracy and express views that resemble a more Western approach, rather than an Islamic one. In such surveys, the youth saw democracy as the favored and most advanced type of governmental system. In their opinion, democracy was the most efficient way of advancing the welfare of citizens within Iran. The youth's faith in democratic values is based on their opinion that a democratic Iran could foster more positive relations with the United States and the West.<sup>106</sup>

## 2. Blogs and Bloggers

Another measure for the Iranian public dialogue is internet blogs. A blog is a kind of personal diary open to a wide audience through Internet publication. A blog enables us to witness a personal dialogue while permitting the reader to react. It is estimated that there are approximately 700,000 bloggers in Iran including Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who is Iran's current President. The regime has attempted to restrain this phenomenon, and succeeds in stopping bloggers who

specifically write against the spiritual leader, Khamenei, or against governmental officials.<sup>107</sup>

According to the CIA's statistics, there are 18 million Internet users in Iran, being approximately one-third of all Iranians.<sup>108</sup> The principle advancement of the Internet in Iran was during 1997-2005, when the previous president of Iran, Khatami, allowed the development and distribution of Internet technologies. With the onset of Ahmadinejad's reign in 2005, he began to persecute Internet users, and specifically bloggers who wrote anti-regime content. By doing this, Iran became one of the thirteen countries that censor and limit Internet usage. The persecution of bloggers sometimes ended in their imprisonment, resulting in a decrease in the number of bloggers to 800,000 bloggers on the eve of the Ahmadinejad election in 2005.<sup>109</sup>

In a study called "Mapping the Public Internet in Iran" conducted by the Harvard Law School, it was shown that in contrast to the widely held opinion that blogs in Iran operate as a democratic tool of the Iranian youth to criticize the regime, the majority of blogs, in fact, are engaged in a wide range of topics. On one hand, the blogs describe official governmental opinions, and on the other hand, they portray secular opinions that are not necessarily oppositional to the government, including poetry, culture, religion, and human rights. A second argument of the study is that, contrary to the belief that the regime censors bloggers in a systematic manner, it is proven that the censorship is primarily of the secular and reformist sectors which specifically write against the government.

The above mentioned study found that the various origins of those who write blogs encompass diverse elements within the Iranian society. The bloggers wish to express their opinions and attitudes about events in the Islamic Republic and beyond. A representative cross-section of bloggers includes youths from large cities, religious figures from Qom, opposition journalists who left Iran, members of the Majlis (Iran's parliament), poets, reformers and others. One of the

<sup>105</sup> [www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/home\\_page/527.php?nid=&id=&pnt=527&lb=](http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/home_page/527.php?nid=&id=&pnt=527&lb=)

<sup>106</sup> Clifford Grammich and C. Christine Fair, "American and Iranian Public Opinion: The Quest for Common Grounds," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. XXX, No. 3, Spring 2007, p. 21.

<sup>107</sup> For further discussion on the blogs' blocking and abilities see: Liora Hendelman-Baavur, "Promises and Perils of Weblogistan: Online Personal Journals and the Islamic Republic of Iran," *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* (Vol. 11, No. 2, June 2007) <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2007/issue2/jv11no2a6.html>.

<sup>108</sup> [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html#Comm](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html#Comm).

<sup>109</sup> [www.pc.co.il/\\_Uploads/DailyMailyPDF/DailyMaily\\_17562.PDF](http://www.pc.co.il/_Uploads/DailyMailyPDF/DailyMaily_17562.PDF).



main questions asked in this study was the following: is this public domain of information and opinions (blogs) an indication of potential democratization in Iran?<sup>110</sup>

The above mentioned study focused on blogs that are written in Persian, as blogs in Persian enable Iranians to express themselves freely and precisely in their mother tongue. The study did not focus on blogs written in English or in other languages. However, it can be assumed that the composition of the blogging community in other languages would not show great differences, as most Iranian bloggers writing in other languages operate outside of Iran.

One of the Iranian bloggers, Hossein Derakhshan, nicknamed by an Israeli reporter as King of the Iranian bloggers, claims that blogs represent the true Iranian dialogue. As a person born into the revolution to live most of his life in Teheran, he thinks that Iran is in fact a very liberal state in comparison to the surrounding countries, and that its negative image is a result of its leaders' actions, especially those of Ahmadinejad.

Derakhshan tries to explain to his readers that Israel is not the "enemy" or the "source of evil" for Iranians or for the world. Derakhshan argues that there are few differences between the Iranian and Israeli people. Both are surrounded by Sunni enemies and both societies want to live without fear. A central aspect in his blog is dedicated to showing the Iranian public that Israel is quite different from the Iranian government's description. For instance, he argues that Israelis do not "drink" Palestinians' blood. In addition, Derakhshan tries to show Israelis that the average Iranian does not desire Israel's annihilation. As far as he is concerned, the Iranian government does not wish to destroy Israel either. He claims that the Iranian government has become open to the younger generation, and that in time many reforms will become possible, especially concerning freedom of expression. Currently, speaking or writing against the spiritual leader is forbidden in Iran. Through his familiarity with Iranian society, Derakhshan claims that the citizens of Iran do not feel hostility towards Israel, but quite possibly the opposite. In his opinion, the Iranians have a strong national memory regarding the eight-year war, in which the

Palestinians supported Iraq and Iran's military efforts were advanced by Israel.<sup>111</sup>

The blog "Free Thoughts on Iran" by Omid Paydar, who claims to be an independent researcher of Middle East issues, provides theoretical content about Iranian-Israeli issues. Paydar conducts a topical discussion about the reality of Iranian-Israeli relations, and predicts the possibility of the development of political ties between Iran and Israel. He claims that the hostility of Iranian society, or at least hostile elements within Iranian society, will decrease given the absence or finding of a solution to the Palestinian issue.

In an intelligent but amateur manner, Paydar lists the benefits of relations with Israel and the common values that the two countries share. According to Paydar, these values and mutual interests can serve as a type of bridge to enable future diplomatic relations. Paydar points to the shared history of the two nations, their mutual economic interests, as well as Iran's interest in exploiting the Israeli and American markets. In addition, he writes of Iran's interest in decreasing the military tension in the region and fear of the strengthening of Arab countries. Unfortunately, he does not deal with the religious elements of the Iranian regime's attitude towards the Zionist entity. Paydar receives serious and relevant responses from other bloggers, as well as from academics, such as Trita Parsi, who often request references to professional sources that deal with his questions. As in other blogs, Paydar's blog serves as a framework for productive discussion, the exchange of opinions, and attempts to present a different possible outline for Iran-Israel relations.<sup>112</sup>

In contrast, a blog such as "The Minority Report", which is operated by Soroya Spahpour-Urlich, presents a patriotic Iranian approach, which states the Middle East is dominated by the United States and Israel. Similar to other blogs, this blog uses Iranian modern history and recent developments to predict the future, urging the Iranian nation to draw certain conclusions regarding the ruling powers in the Middle East. According to Spahpour-Urlich, during the 1950s, the United States and Great Britain acted to overthrow

110 John Kelly and Bruce Etling, Mapping Iran's Online Public: Politics and Culture in the Persian Blogosphere, The Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Research Publication No. 2008-01, Harvard Law School, April 6, 2008, pp. 2-9.

111 Meron Rapoport, "King of the Iranian bloggers", Haaretz, April 21, 2008. [www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/812597.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/812597.html); Abraham Rabinovich, "Iran-Israel interface", The Jerusalem Post, January 18, 2007.

112 <http://freethoughts.org/archives/000768.php>.



Dr. Mohammad Mossadeq, who was Prime Minister of Iran at the time and leader of the National Front Party, because of his so-called anti-West activities. These activities, according to the blogger, brought an end to the attempted establishment of democracy in Iran and perpetuated the Shah regime.

Accordingly, the United States could operate in a similar fashion today, if Israel urges the superpower to take military action against Iran.<sup>113</sup> Despite the patriotic basis of this blog, it cannot be considered a reflection of the fundamentalist-religious viewpoint. Instead, it reflects a patriotic-nationalist approach, in the element of 1950s Iran, when Dr. Mossadeq raised the nationalist flag. If oil served as a momentum for strong nationalist feelings during that time, today Iran's nuclear program serves a similar role in raising Iranian national spirits, irrespective of the type of government that advances the program.

In addition to the above mentioned blog, Soroya Spahpour-Urlich writes in another patriotic-nationalist blog called "Campaign against Sanctions and Military Intervention (CASMI)", expressing opinions against forces that attempt to limit Iran's power. It is unlikely that this blog is private or independent, as it uses a very high level of graphic design and appears in three languages (English, German, and French, but not Persian). Although the writing is attributed exclusively to Soroya Spahpour-Urlich, it appears that his words express views cited by governmental officials, if not the heads of the Iranian regime itself.<sup>114</sup> This blog, similar to other mouthpieces of the government, is updated on a semi-daily basis and discusses ways of leveraging international activities against Israel, as well as mocking Israel's anti-Iranian activities. Although this site does not express explicit anti-Zionist or anti-Semitic views, it is clear that the tone assumed by the author is critical of Israel and the United States.

Another Iranian blog is known as "HUMAN first, then a proud IRANIAN", which is operated by a man named Faramin. In contrast to other blogs, this blog lacks biographical details of the author. Faramin vows to his readers, for better or worse, to write about all issues

related to humanism. This blog includes references to crimes against human rights outside of Iran, while similar issues within Iran are not discussed. Faramin queries the nature of the future American government, and its relations with Israel, including the attempted justification of the continuation of Israel's presence in the Occupied Territories and Israel's lack of humanity in dealing with the Palestinians. Faramin writes, "I am sure we too wouldn't have loved Israelis if we had lived under such a brutal occupation."

Faramin expresses his views on issues related to Israeli and American actions, which violate various human rights in his opinion. As such, he condemns the actions but not the states themselves. His blog does not include anti-Zionist or anti-Semitic content, since such ideas would contradict his basic approach towards universal human rights, whether the person is Israeli, American, or Iranian.<sup>115</sup> Essentially, his blog is dedicated to criticizing incidents of human rights abuse which occur outside of Iran, particularly involving Palestinian victims.

In July 2007, Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched its web site in Persian. The purpose of this initiative was to present a different perspective of Israel to Iranian Internet users, as opposed to its portrayal by the Iranian regime. A large percentage of the writers on the site are comprised of Iranians living in Iran, while another group of writers consists of Iranian ex-patriots living in Europe and North America. Most of the writers discuss current events, and specifically topics related to the nuclear issue. Few writers deal with Iranian society's view of Zionism and Israel.<sup>116</sup>

One of the writers, named Farhamand Ali Pour, discusses the allegedly anti-Semitic proposition that questions why Jews, who only amount to 14 million people worldwide, have taken a leading role in global economics, commerce, politics, and science. Why have the Jews triumphed, while the Muslims, who amount to 400 million people worldwide, have not enjoyed the same success? His detailed answer principally deals with the situation in Arab-Muslim countries, and specifically with Iran. According to Ali Pour, the investment in education in the Western world, and specifically within the Jewish-Zionist framework, is much greater than

113 <http://babaklayeghi.blogspot.com/>. For the detailed story about the Mossadeq's oil nationalization in Iran see: Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*, John Wiley & Sons, 2003.

114 [www.campaigniran.org/casmi/index.php?q=taxonomy/term/973](http://www.campaigniran.org/casmi/index.php?q=taxonomy/term/973).

115 <http://humanfirstthenproudiranian.blogspot.com>.

116 [www.mfa.gov.il/MFAHeb/Spokesman/2007/MFA+launches+Persian+website+080707.htm](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFAHeb/Spokesman/2007/MFA+launches+Persian+website+080707.htm)



the effort put into education in the Muslim world. Ali Pour's comparison between the different outlooks on education serves to criticize the Muslim world.<sup>117</sup>

An anonymous author, in his article "Who Must Countries Fear? Israel or Iran's Government?" (keshvarhay-e arab az key boyad ehyat konnad? Az israil va ya hakumat-e iran?), claims that contemporary Iranian society does not wholeheartedly accept the Iranian regime's declarations regarding Zionism and the United States. The author states that since Iran supports various terror organizations that operate within certain Arab states, the countries fear that these organizations will be used to attack Israeli and American targets from within their borders. Thus, the author claims that Arab countries have more reason to fear Iran than Zionism (Israel) or the United States, as the issue mentioned above weakens their status.<sup>118</sup>

In conclusion, blogs offer a tool that presents available options to provide and search for information that interests the Internet using population. Blogs, despite the regime's ability to censor and block some of them, provide a tool that is more interactive and democratic than the traditional media of radio and television.<sup>119</sup> Despite the small amount of blogs that express anti-Israeli views, the majority of blogs shed light on the current Iranian social reality. In this reality, the anti-Zionist content and attitudes comprise a minor element of the dialogue when compared with the wide range of other topics that interest the Internet community in Iran.

### 3. Radio Broadcasts

Since 1960, Israel has broadcast to Iranian radio in Persian. This policy, which was proposed by former Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, was meant to strengthen relations between Iran and Israel.<sup>120</sup> The broadcasts' goal was to reinforce the common interests between Israel and the non-Arabic states in the Middle Eastern periphery. According to Amir, Radio Israel's broadcast in Persian reaches all parts of Iran and there is solid evidence that a large element of the population

listens to the Israeli radio.

According to Menashe Amir, many Iranians who get a chance to participate in the program complain about the government's character and discuss their frustration with the state of affairs. In expressing their frustration, they also discuss their fondness and sympathy towards the state of Israel and their hope for better relations between the two states, which will come to pass when the present regime is overthrown.

According to Amir, the Iranian society, reflected by the range of people who tune in to the Israeli broadcast, is made up of several layers consisting of peasants, clergy, government officials who conceal their identity, academics, businessmen, students and youth. The listeners' age ranges between 17 and 90, and the estimate is that 10% of the population listens to the program. The apparent support and sympathy for Israel, in a sense, are the result of a type of protest against the pro-Arab, pro-Islamic, anti-West, and anti-Zionist attitude of the government. According to Amir, close to 60% of the Iranians want to replace the current government. Radio Israel's broadcasts in Persian are a unique phenomenon in the Middle East, since other states do not have similar type of broadcasts.<sup>121</sup>

Thus, the Islamic Revolution, which was highlighted by anti-Western and anti-Zionist propaganda and attempted to instill these values in every Iranian citizen, has, in fact, engendered a society that does not wholeheartedly accept institutionalized propaganda. Indeed, we do not have an efficient authentic criterion by which to measure Iranian society's true sentiments, but the long-standing representation through radio broadcasts and the developing medium of blogs portrays a different image to the customary one.

Iranian society is undergoing changes in several aspects, including its relations with western frameworks, with or without governmental agreement. In a global village, in which information availability is soaring and people can verify the difference between government claims and reality, the Iranian citizen is learning to demand authenticity of its information. Another question posed is: although not publicly, can a change in the Iranian

117 [www.hamdami.com/MFAFA/NewsAndReports/230708-Didgah.htm](http://www.hamdami.com/MFAFA/NewsAndReports/230708-Didgah.htm): August 17, 2008.

118 [www.hamdami.com/MFAFA/NewsAndReports/110608-Didgah.htm](http://www.hamdami.com/MFAFA/NewsAndReports/110608-Didgah.htm)

119 Kelly and Etlings, *ibid*, pp. 44-45.

120 Bahgat, "The Islamic Republic and the Jewish State," pp. 522-524; Maghen, "The Iranian Leadership and its attitude toward Israel," p. 3.

121 Telephone Interview with Menashe Amir, August 17, 2008. Israel is in fact not the only state broadcasting to Iran. The American Broadcast Service broadcasts from Washington to Iran through The Voice of America.





citizen's view of Israel be seen as an indicator of internal changes that the Iranian society is undergoing towards its government? If, in fact, Iranian citizens are undergoing a change in their views towards Israel, perhaps similar changes are taking place in the values that the government is attempting to indoctrinate in Iranian society.

It is essential to understand that the Iranian society is nationalist in nature. In the early days of his propaganda rallies, Khomeini used the term "nationality" quite frequently in order to stress the importance of the Iranian nation's significance compared to that of other nations. Between 1963 and 1970, Khomeini changed his attitude and claimed that nationality is a Western invention that attempts to divide both the Arab and Islamic worlds. Iranian society followed Khomeini's guidance, despite its inherent nationalist nature, and tended to accept Khomeini's attitude towards pan-Islamism. Khomeini went to great lengths to clarify Islam's position concerning religious minorities, counting Jews and Christians, and the way Islam perceives the idea of nationalism, including Zionism.

## Iran's Nuclear Weapons and Its Implications upon Iran's Attitude towards Israel<sup>122</sup>

When we consider the possibility that Iran will be armed with unconventional weapons, it poses a substantial threat, especially considering the desire of the Islamic regime leaders, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in particular, to see Israel destroyed. In such a reality, Israel and the entire world will have to prepare for the possibility of Iran being armed with nuclear weapons or alternatively formulate a plan to neutralize the prospect.

In addition, since its establishment, Israel has constructed its strategic framework on the basis of defense and deterrence, thus creating certain security myths and defining the security agenda in the Middle East to a large

extent.<sup>123</sup> However, in facing the growing threat from the Islamic republic, Israel must examine whether the strategy it has built can withstand the Iranian threat.

The relations between the countries of the Middle East in the Arab world and the Islamic world are based on religious ethnology. The Arab world belongs to the subgroup of the Islamic world, but countries of the Islamic world are not necessarily a part of the Arab world. In this situation, the common denominator between the Arab countries and the non-Arab countries is Islam. In international relations of the Middle East, this basic component is necessary and essential. Israel is neither an Arab nor an Islamic state. Within the regional web of international relations that Israel has attempted to establish in the Middle East, the difference between Israel and the Arab and Islamic countries of the region is greater than the similarities.

Surely, there are religious and ethnological differences between Israel and Western and Eastern countries as well, but they share a concept of international relations that is different from the relations existing in the Middle East. The set of values upon which Israel is based, including immigration (Aliya), liberalism, freedom of faith and freedom of expression, all exist in the Western world, but not in the Islamic world. Thus, even when disregarding the roots of the Israeli-Arab conflict, there is a fundamental cultural gap between the Islamic world and Israel.

Edward H. Carr, a British theoretician, laid the foundations of classic realism in international relations. His research challenged the idealistic approach, which was the accepted international relations paradigm of the 1920s and 1930s. Carr's realism claims that international relations are primarily based upon constant conflict between nations. The realism purported in Carr's study,<sup>124</sup> attempts to situate realism opposite the utopian vision. In his opinion, the realist copes with the utopian principles by claiming that they are not axioms, but merely transparent policies that are dependant on the utopian national vision of a specific county. In our case, Western realism confronts the Iranian utopian

<sup>122</sup> This section deals with aspects of the Iranian's goals for building nuclear facilities, as relevant to this specific topic. For further information and details see: Reuven Pedatzur, "The Iranian Nuclear Threat and the Israeli Options," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 28, No. 3, December 2007, pp. 513-541; Reuven Pedatzur, "The Iranian Nuclear Potential – Is it Really so Threatening?" *Nativ – Ariel Center for Policy Research*, Vol. 2 (103), March 2006, pp. 39-47. (in Hebrew).

<sup>123</sup> Aaron Yariv, "Israel's Security Policy Goals," Eitan Gilboa, Mordechai Naor (eds.), *Israel-Arab Conflict*, Tel Aviv, Ministry of Defense Publication, 1981, pp. 295-304. (in Hebrew).

<sup>124</sup> For further information on Carr's study see: Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis 1919-1939: An Introduction to the study of International Relations*, London, Palgrave, 1946.



vision. Carr argues that realism, which is represented by Israel and the West, and the utopia, represented by Iran's vision of "exporting the revolution", are, in fact, two parallel lines that will never meet.

Kalevi J. Holsti's study regarding the power and influence of the international relations is also essential for our case.<sup>125</sup> Holsti provides a psychological analysis of the political leader and of the manner in which he makes decisions. He writes of the thought processes used in political systems, the way in which decision-makers approach reality, and the ways that this approach affects leadership decisions. His theory deals with the way in which leaders process political developments. According to Hostli, power is a relative term and its influence is measured in the ability of a player to set into motion processes in different aspects of the system through the use of power. Power is composed of three levels: the resources available, the activities and modes of operation used based on these resources, and the result of the action itself. We can see that fundamentalist Iran has attempted to:

1. Create a resource.
2. Make vague declarations regarding the activation of the resource.
3. Destroy the state of Israel and continue "exporting the revolution" in the Middle East.

A strong connection exists between Middle East current events and Hostli's theory. At this stage his theory is more relevant to Israel, and also the West, in using strategic tools to prevent Iran's aspirations. The primary aim of Israel is to prevent the nuclear empowerment of Iran, while a secondary aim is to prevent the religious and possible territorial expansion of the Islamic republic.

Israel must ask itself the following questions:

1. What does it want to prevent Iran from doing and what does it want the Arab countries to do?
2. How do we employ actions in order to achieve this objective?
3. What resources is Israel willing to allocate in order to reach this objective?
4. What is the expected reaction from Iran and the Arab countries?

<sup>125</sup> Holsti deals with these influences in: Kalevi, J. Holsti, *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and International Order, 1648-1989*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

5. What are the expected costs, as opposed to the less agreeable alternative from Israel's point of view?

## Iran and the Nuclear Program – Strategic Targets

In his article "The raise of Iran as a regional power", Barry Rubin discusses the different aspects of the goals that Iran aspires to in its attempt to implement the nuclear program. One of the goals is the stabilization of its deteriorated regional position following the Islamic Revolution, as well as an attempt to recreate the regional status that Iran maintained during the period of the last Shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. In addition, Rubin discusses several more strategic goals of fundamentalist Iran, including the promotion of Islamic revolutions in every country that has a Muslim majority, the encouragement of Islamic radicals wherever they are located, the destruction of Israel, and the abolition of the Western influence in the Middle East.<sup>126</sup> These goals raise an indignant response, not only in Israel and the West, but also in the Arab and Islamic world.

### Where did it Begin?

During the period in which Khomeini preached to return to the pure version of Islam, while establishing an Islam-Shi'ite religious regime in Iran, it was possible to infer a fundamental difference from the traditional interpretation of Shi'ite Islam. Since the 7th century, the Shi'ites have adhered a very significant historical event that changed their political perception for the next 1,300 years, which is "the death of the saints" and "the heroic death" of Husain in the battle against Yazd I, the son of Muawia, who was the fourth and last Caliph of Harashidon, Karbala. The commemoration of this event has revealed the Shi'ite aspiration to rule the Islamic world, thus redefining and correcting history by enabling a descendant of the Ali family to reign over the Islamic world.

According to Khomeini, the nationalism of Muslim countries is a Western invention used to weaken the Muslim world, and, as a result, control it. For example, following the Islamic Revolution in February 1979, the

<sup>126</sup> Barry Rubin, "Iran: The Rise of a Regional Power," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 10, No.3, September 2006, p. 151.



Turkmen, Arabs and Kurds living in Iran wanted to implement national self-definition through territorial and cultural autonomy, and separate themselves from the Shi'ite state.<sup>127</sup> At the peak of the chaos that existed at that point in the revolution, Khomeini suppressed this uprising with determination.

With the onset of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Pahlavi monarchy's nuclear program and other weapons programs were suspended. Under Khomeini's rule, Iran stopped its nuclear program not just due to religious Shi'ite dictates but also because of economic reasons, including the use of resources to strengthen the Islamic Revolution. However, the Iran-Iraq war, which was forced upon Iran, changed the Iranian approach. This was long after Saddam Hussein had used unconventional chemical weapons for mass destruction.

In September 2006, former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani publicized a letter written by Khomeini in 1988. The letter, he claimed, was sent by Khomeini to the political leadership of the Islamic regime when the Iran-Iraq war ended. Khomeini stated in the letter that if Iran had a nuclear weapon, he would have used it to end the war with Iraq.<sup>128</sup>

Before Rafsanjani publicized this letter, the former president declared his desire to destroy Israel with nuclear weapons. On December 14, 2001, which is the annual day of recognition of the Palestinian struggle, Al-Quds Day, Rafsanjani spoke in strong terms against the United States, Great Britain, and Israel. According to Rafsanjani, the United States and Britain support the "artificial" state of Israel and its crimes. He also threatened that the day will come when Islam will be able to destroy the Zionist entity with military action. He claimed that after a nuclear attack there would be no survivors or refugees remaining in Israel, but the Islamic world would not be damaged.<sup>129</sup>

Israel responded by submitting a complaint to the United Nations Security Council. Israel's ambassador

to the United Nations at the time, Yehuda Lancry, presented a letter written by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Shimon Peres. In this letter, Peres quoted Rafsanjani's words and stated that Iran's so-called innocent aspiration to achieve nuclear capabilities for peaceful purposes is false, and that Iran really wishes to obtain nuclear weapons to destroy Israel. Peres requested that the Security Council act to prevent Iran's nuclear program.<sup>130</sup>

On January 9, 2002, Iran responded to Israel's statements at the Security Council in a letter that was submitted by Iran's ambassador to the United Nations, Hadi Hejad-Hosseini. The ambassador attacked Israel and Zionism, and justified Rafsanjani's words that were declared on Al-Quds day. According to the ambassador, Rafsanjani's words were misunderstood, claiming that Iran maintains nuclear ambitions for peaceful purposes only, and not for attaining weapons of mass destruction. In addition, the Iranian representative claimed that it is rather Israel that poses a threat, danger, instability, and insecurity to the Middle East.<sup>131</sup>

### **The Link between Iran's Desire for Nuclear Weapons and Israel**

Over the years, we have witnessed the international community, through semi-vigorous, semi-desperate and semi-idle activities, increase its efforts in preventing Iran from arming itself with nuclear weapons. Such a scenario, in which Iran would have nuclear weapons, alongside other powers, is, as far as the West is concerned, a dangerous change both regionally and globally. Simultaneously, Iran continues to attempt, in every possible aspect – diplomatically, religiously, culturally, socially, politically and economically – to set in motion and expedite the wheels of history to bring about a nuclear Iran.

In such a situation, the essential questions regarding Iran's wish to arm itself with nuclear weapons and the expected repercussions of such a scenario for Israel and the West have not been seriously addressed. In this section, we will discuss the scenario of a nuclear Iran becoming a tangible threat to Israel's existence. In

<sup>127</sup> The first time that these minorities emerged as distinct entities was after World War II. This Kurdish autonomy lasted only 11 months, at which point it was defeated by Iranian troops.

<sup>128</sup> [www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/769141.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/769141.html); [www.globalvoicesonline.org/2006/10/10/ayatollah-khomeinis-letter-nuclear-weapon.html](http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/2006/10/10/ayatollah-khomeinis-letter-nuclear-weapon.html).

<sup>129</sup> MEMRI – Special Dispatch Series – No. 325, January 3, 2002. [www.memri.org/bin/printfriendly/pf.cgi](http://www.memri.org/bin/printfriendly/pf.cgi); [www.iran-press-service.com/articles\\_2001/dec\\_2001/rafsanjani\\_nuke\\_threats\\_141.html](http://www.iran-press-service.com/articles_2001/dec_2001/rafsanjani_nuke_threats_141.html); [www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/iran/nuke2.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/iran/nuke2.htm).

<sup>130</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, Security Council, A/56/758/S/2001/1262, December 27, 2001.

<sup>131</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, Security Council, General, S/2002/37, January 9, 2002.



addition, we will ask why the Iranian regime requires nuclear arms and whether this desire is derived from Israel's nuclear capabilities. In other words, we will ask whether Iran perceives itself as a state that has economic and scientific abilities to challenge the state of Israel and position itself on the same level and beyond it, or whether the aspiration to achieve nuclear Iran arms is derived first and foremost from Iran's desire to see Israel destroyed politically and physically.

As of today, there are no records of any direct accounts from the Iranian government stating that if and when Iran develops nuclear weapons, it will use them to destroy the state of Israel. However, there are records of quite a number of remarks that have been made by many of Iran's Islamic leaders over many years, expressing their wish to see Israel annihilated. President Ahmadinejad has taken this rhetoric to a new level.<sup>132</sup> Some of the reasons for this rhetoric have been discussed in the first part of this paper. From this assumption, we can conclude that a nuclear Iran will be motivated to realize that possibility or at least potentially realize it. Iran has caused many in Israel and around the world to be anxious after witnessing the test launch of Shihab missiles turned into media events and the glorifying statements of its flight and ballistic abilities.

Another issue is the connection between Iran's technological advancement concerning nuclear weapons and the increase in its militant and anti-Zionist rhetoric against Israel. Does the increase in the leaders' technological confidence enable it to express itself so more boldly about the day on which Israel will be destroyed? Is there a link between these remarks and others made against other Western or Arab countries, regardless of whether they are friendly or not towards Israel? Does Iran attempt to create a smoke-screen with Holocaust denial rhetoric, an issue extremely sensitive to Jews globally, in order to distract attention from the real issue at hand – the question of a nuclear Iran? Does this attempt to distract the world public opinion actually expose the Islamic government's old urges regarding Israel? On the surface, these questions cannot lead to a clear conclusion, since Iran mocks the whole world and blinds it from seeing the truth – its attempt to build a nuclear weapon.

There is no doubt that having nuclear capabilities would make it easier for Iran in the future to realize its goal of "exporting the revolution". In such a situation, assuming that the Western states will avoid confrontation with a fundamentalist "crazy" state that has already proven that it is willing to make sacrifices in the name of religion, Iran will be able to achieve its goal quite easily. The extermination of the Zionist entity, as far as Iran is concerned, is only a matter of time. Thus, we see Iran's leaders express themselves in a manner reflecting their wish that the state of Israel be destroyed.

Despite the intricate dialectics of Islamic Iran, we can examine it by its own criteria: The "thesis" – the Islamic Revolution, the "anti-thesis" – nuclear ability, and the "synthesis" – exporting the revolution. Such a change, similar to the times after the French Revolution, will come to pass in the form of "political terror" imposed by Iran with its immense power as a nuclear state. Such a "synthesis" will be implemented only via an "anti-thesis". At this stage, Israel would be the last in a series of states that would seemingly surrender to the rising super power of Iran.

The Iranian apologetics seemingly justify the notion of achieving nuclear weapons and its national necessity for nuclear capabilities as a regular religious matter. Using this claim, the Iranian regime exploits all its available tools – political, demagogical, and economic – to justify the purposes of the nuclear project. Iran relies upon the claim that the nuclear project began even during the Shah's reign in order to create an Iranian hegemony in the Persian Gulf and become a regional power.<sup>133</sup>

This vision is dependent upon various strategic considerations. The reality of a nuclear war in the Middle East or in the world is subject to a specific power balance in the international arena. A war which causes chaos and destruction is always possible, but is not part of the Western world's frame of reference. However, it could certainly happen due to Iran's clear, yet undeclared vision of a regional Shi'ite Islamic reign. The different camps contemplating the possibility of a nuclear war have discussed various modes of operation in a crisis and the existing nuclear options of these states. Some claim that such weapons will not be used, while others claim that it is a strong possibility and

<sup>132</sup> Barry Rubin, "Iran: The Rise of the Regional Power," p. 147.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. p. 142.



that everything depends upon the exhaustion of the parties' military goals. There is an absence of profound discussion regarding the possibility that such weapons will exist in the arsenal of a fundamentalist superpower, and the strategic options that such a superpower will have.<sup>134</sup>

Iran's physical position at a junction between East and West certainly constitutes a strategic consideration in acquiring nuclear weapons. The slogan "Not East, Nor West", which was coined on the eve of the revolution as well as many later slogans, entails an essential hint of Iran's position between the communist East and the capitalist West. A close examination of Iran's relationships with the Arab and Muslim states preceding the Islamic Revolution shows that Iran aspired to export the revolution's phenomenal success to the other Middle Eastern Shi'ite communities. That aspiration was blocked by Saddam Hussein, but was well received in Lebanon with the founding of Hezbollah. The "export of the revolution" was intercepted by a neighboring state, Iraq, rather than by the West, which at the time did not comprehend the actual threat emanating from the powerful will to "export" the revolution.

After thirty years, it seems that the vision to "export" the revolution has indeed weakened. Iran's strategic consideration to hide its desired goal, in light of the fact that it was exposed to an all-inclusive war with Iraq, assisted in stabilizing its economic and diplomatic relations with the neighboring Arab states and even with the West. Iran is now more pro-Arab than Khomeini and his successors declared, as well as more anti-Zionist and more anti-West. Iran's request to see itself as the Islamic and Arab states' "big sister" is much more significant and decisive when nuclear abilities are taken into account. In such a situation, Iran will be able to guarantee the Arab states' safety and provide them with what the west has been trying to provide for the last six decades – strategic support.<sup>135</sup>

Iran's strengthening in the regional arena is a direct result of the spread of fundamentalism that began while Khatami was president. Iran's insistence on that strategic

component caused many states to relentlessly pursue their relations with the growing superpower. Khatami's successor, Ahmadinejad, has used the same strategy.<sup>136</sup> Our natural assumption, based on our acquaintance with Iran, is that these goals would not be declared openly, as they would raise regional objections due to fear of international and regional conflicts, a lesson based on the results of the Iran-Iraq war.

In the same element, Islamic Iran has already called for the destruction of Israel, when Rafsanjani declared intentions to destroy the Zionist entity using unconventional measures. The regime then saw that clearly spelling out such a declaration posed an international diplomatic crisis. In addition, we have seen that such a declaration is not strongly supported by the entire Iranian society.

Thus, linking Iran's nuclear vision to its vision of a "World without Zionism" or 'a world with the Jews but without the Zionist entity', can be declared without specifically speaking of nuclear destruction. Accumulating regional power in the form of nuclear power constitutes a counterweight against neighboring states to the East and West, including Israel.

The Iranian nuclear project constitutes a way for Iran to gain regional power. Iran feels that it needs nuclear arms, as it is surrounded by enemies, and therefore must build up its military potential. Possibly, Iran's regime believes that it would be cheaper to construct deterrent nuclear capabilities, rather than rebuilding a conventional army which could be fatigued in a potential regional war.<sup>137</sup> Similar to Israel's strategy in the 1950s, when it found itself isolated in the Middle East, it is possible that Iran, seeing itself as being surrounded by the Sunni enemy, is attempting to arm itself with deterrent nuclear weapons, and to establish itself as a strategic threat and regional power, when confronting its Arab neighbors.

In his book, *A Nuclear Iran: Analysis and Implications*, Ephraim Kam inquires how the future will look if and when Iran will indeed become a nuclear power. Kam argues that a nuclear Iran constitutes an existential

134 For further information and discussions see, Lawrence Freedman, *The Price of Peace, Living with the Nuclear Dilemma*, New York, Henry Holt & Co., 1986, Chapter 11 (Nuclear Weapons and Strategy), pp. 268-283.

135 For Iran geo-strategic relations with her neighbors see, Yaniv Gambash, Yivgenia Bistrov, Arnon Sofer (eds.), *Iran 2007- Geo-strategic Analysis*, pp. 62-78. (in Hebrew).

136 *Ibid.* p. 78.

137 Barry Rubin, "Iran: The Rise of regional Power,"; F. Gregory Gause III, "Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran, the Regional Power Balance, and the Sectararian Question," *Strategic Insight*, Vol. VI, Issue 2, March 2007, pp. 3-8.



threat for Israel and for the West, even though it is far from acquiring nuclear capabilities that Israel or the USA possess. Kam discusses the reason that Iran actually needs nuclear weapons, assuming that it requires such deterring-defensive weapons in the face of its neighbors, Israel, and the USA.<sup>138</sup> Kam does not discuss the extent to which the regime links the nuclear issue with its political survival. In other words, does the regime want to achieve nuclear capabilities in order to immortalize itself, so that it will be able to spread its revolutionary ideas without difficulty?

Essentially, the Iranian regime is conditioning its political and economic fate on the success of nuclear development. Iran's economy has been intimately connected with the nuclear issue as well as conventional armament, as resources that could be used for social welfare of the Iranian nation are invested in nuclear capabilities instead, since it is regarded as the supreme interest of the Islamic regime. The regime's gamble in investing in nuclear infrastructure to such an extent, given immaturity of the Iranian nation, may cause Iran's economy to collapse under the weight of the nuclear project.<sup>139</sup>

Indeed, a nuclear Iran and the Zionist entity are intimately linked. Iran's aspiration to have strategic regional power comes, of course, at Israel's expense. The religious issue is discussed in this context because it provides the background to the process of the strengthening of Iran. On the other hand, the Iranian regime, through impressive political maneuvers, has successfully distracted the world's attention from the nuclear issue to more sensitive issues such as the European Holocaust. It is possible that the Iranian government is examining the world's "pulse" when including this issue in the world's agenda, and checking how seriously the world takes its threats. At the same time, Iran's statements about the Holocaust raises questions about the world's attitude towards the Holocaust in general and towards Israel in particular.<sup>140</sup>

The Persians (Iranians), since the early days of Islam and as a result of the Shi'ite development, have adopted a system called Taqia, i.e., the necessity to hide your origin and religion. This conduct has proven itself, as the world has found out about the Iranian nuclear project at quite a late stage and has done very little about it. Similarly, Iran's treatment of the Zionist entity and its wish to destroy it should be examined by looking beyond its actual declarations.

## Conclusions

When examining Iran's attitude towards Israel, it appears as though it has completely changed since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The two states did not have full diplomatic relations in the past due to regional sensitive issues, but the two countries enjoyed the many advantages of establishing a peripheral covenant within a suspicious, hostile Arab region. The revolution's onset immediately changed the diplomatic and economic relations between Iran and Israel, as Iran chose to hold a decisive hostile posture, and almost completely cut off its diplomatic and economic connections with Israel.

The end of relations between Israel and Iran did not come as a shocking surprise, since there were many early signs expressed by the revolution's organizers and their leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. As early as 1963, when the Shah began implementing his 'White Revolution', Khomeini expressed his objection to the Pahlavi monarchy, the USA and Israel. His activities led to his exile from Iran to Turkey, but he later moved to Iraq and then to France, where he continued spreading his propaganda. As time passed, Khomeini accumulated significant support among the clergy and the Iranian people. On the other hand, the more support he gained the more extreme his propaganda became. He accused the USA and Israel for being directly responsible for the 'White Revolution' and its cultural and secular changes.

The Khomeinistic ideology, which instigated the Islamic Revolution, drastically altered Iran's governmental institutions after the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy. A significant change in Iran's foreign affairs involved cutting off economic and diplomatic ties with Israel. Furthermore, fundamentalist Iran began implementing

138 Ephraim Kam, A Nuclear Iran: Analysis and Implications, The Institute for National Security Studies, No. 87, January 2007, Tel Aviv, pp. 42-59.

139 International Monetary Fund, Article IV, Consultation with the Islamic Republic of Iran, Public Information Notice (PIN) No. 07/29, March 5, 2007, [www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pn/2007/pn0729.htm](http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pn/2007/pn0729.htm).

140 Rubin, *ibid*, p. 148; For specific details see: Justus Reid Weiner, ESQ., Referral of Iranian President Ahmadinejad on the charge of Incitement to Commit Genocide, The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Jerusalem, 2007.



its pre-revolutionary goals and attempted to upgrade its frozen diplomatic relations with Arab states. Despite the fact that Iran had good foreign relations in the Persian Gulf, it received a "cold shoulder" from the Arab states, since they feared its growing power. Up until the Islamic Revolution, Iran was nicknamed the "The Gulf's Police Officer".

Iran's desire to strengthen its ties with Arab states at the expense of its relations with the USA and Israel derived from a distinct Khomeinistic ideology and will to lead the entire Islamic world in a comprehensive battle against the Zionist entity. According to Khomeini, and other familiar propaganda in the Arab world, Israel's presence in the Middle East is an imperialistic American scheme to split and divide the Muslim and Arab world. As said by Khomeini, the West feared the strengthening of the Islamic and Arab world as a counter-power to the West.

Hatred towards Israel in Iran is deeply rooted and institutionalized. The Iranian citizen's speech, when demonstrating against problems caused by the government, is generally embedded with such slogans as "Death to America" and "Death to Israel". However, it is doubtful whether the Iranian citizen links his protest claims to a basic desire to see the death of the USA and Israel. This internalized habit operates, as far as the West is concerned, as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, there is complacency and an acceptance of governmental convention of the need to demonstrate against Israel and the USA, without any connection to the content of the protest itself. On the other hand, the average citizen does not have the ability to rationally link the relevant protest with anything connected to the USA and Israel. In other words, the Iranian society is brainwashed and accustomed to an unfathomable hatred towards Israel.

However, the study will not be sincere if we include all of Iranian society under the anti-Zionist or anti-Western rubric. On the other hand, a substantial element of Iranian society is not fond of Zionism. We have little ability to truly estimate the size of the rift within Iranian society between those who support the government and those who completely oppose it. Similarly, we are unable to quantify the percentage of the population that supports the Iranian government's calls to destroy Israel.

Iranian society has learned, during the last three decades since the Islamic Revolution, to appease the regime's will concerning anti-Zionist and anti-Western propaganda. On the other hand, it has developed a manner of indifference regarding anti-Zionist propaganda. Visions of burning flags and slogans such as "Death to Israel" are seen in almost every rally, as Israel is cynically blamed for all that is wrong with the Islamic society in general, and the Iranian nation in particular. It is important not to forget that such visions are seen in all Arab states in which the government controls the rallies and public sentiments.

Our ability to measure the Iranian society's level of sympathy towards Israel via blogs, radio broadcasts and surveys conducted by international agencies is an important but limited resource. It is important to bear in mind that the percentage of radio listeners, and people who operate blogs or are exposed to them, is still very small within a population of 70 million people. However, the dialogue of those exposed to these media and the belief that their percentage is actually much higher than that calculated, gives us insight of the fraction of Iranian society that might passively support Israel, or at the very least, exhibit a neutral opinion of Israel.

It is important to note that Iranian society has always operated unreasonably when it came to its relations towards the West. For instance, the nationalization of Iranian oil in the beginning of the 1950s led to social unrest and economic downfall. The logical assumption was that the same society would protest and demonstrate against the regime that nationalized oil, yet the opposite happened when Iranian nationality escalated and Mossadeq was widely supported by Iranian society. Another example is the many allowances that the Shah's government granted people who followed the social protest against him, during the years 1977-1979. It appeared, on the surface, that the social, political and economic allowances would change society's anti-monarchic status into a less passive movement, if not into a militant one under the Shah's reign. It is important to remember that Iranian society follows an "upside down" psychology, according to which the society will tend to support and sympathize with that which is hated by the government, especially if that same society is hostile towards its own government. In our case, it is possible that Iranian society's sympathy towards Israel



needs to be appreciated in terms of social exhaustion with the Islamic law imposed by the government.

The development of Iran's nuclear power is not necessarily directed at exterminating the Zionist entity. Iran has many reasons for its nuclear project, and we can assume that Israel's geographic position in the heart of an Islamic region is one of them. Iran's nuclear program existed during the Shah's reign, despite the fact that at that time Iran and Israel had positive relations. The nuclear program was not originally initiated to serve as a counter-balance to Israel. Once Khomeini founded the Islamic Revolution, he opposed the nuclear program and included religious dictates in his speeches against weapons of mass destruction. However, the continuation and deterioration on the Iran-Iraq front, and the religious elites ability to convince him that nuclear capabilities could save the Islamic Revolution from collapsing caused Khomeini to support the renewal of the nuclear development and even to express his desire to use it against the Iraqis if he had the capabilities.

Iran is not developing nuclear power to devastate Israel. Though Iran desires Israel's destruction, it wishes to use political, rather than physical means. Although Iran theoretically wishes for Israel's physical annihilation, they have abandoned this method since severe damage would be caused to Islamic land and populations in such

a scenario. Israel is a stranger in the Islamic Middle East. Islamic Iran wishes to create an Islamic hegemony, which will include Palestine as part of it. Such hegemony will be achieved when Iran's nuclear and regional power will equal that of Israel and the West.

Iran's ambitions as a regional power are based primarily upon their fear and anxiety of being surrounded by Arab Sunni states. Iran's efforts to achieve this goal are combined with other causes such as fortification of its religious regime and the preservation of the historical success of the Shi'a. Other important ambitions, which will be reserved for a later stage, are their wish to export the revolution and to spread the Shi'a all across the Middle East.

Nevertheless, Iran will be in no hurry to exercise its nuclear abilities if and when it will attain them. The Qur'an says that Allah ma'a al-sabarin, i.e. God is with the patient and sufferers. Based upon this belief, Iran will wait for a convenient time to permeate into Middle East Islamic states and subjugate other Arab countries, while gaining strength through nuclear and other military means. At such a stage, the international powers' dialectics will act in favor of Iran. The destruction of Israel does not constitute an ultimate goal – it is merely the means towards reaching Islamic hegemony in the Middle East.









## Postscript: The Developmental Stages of Iranian Society

by: David Altman

Iranian society, comprised of a Shi'ite Muslim majority and a number of prominent minorities, can be studied as a representative model of the changes that a society undergoes when it is transformed into a society ruled by religious fundamentalist leadership.

Mohammad Mossadeq,<sup>1</sup> who served as Prime Minister of Iran from 1951-1953, only to be deposed by the Shah, was a socialist who attempted to forge a society based on civilian equality and cooperation, while marginalizing and minimizing the religious aspect of society.

The return of the Shah to power, following Mossadeq's brief rule, empowered secular elements of Iranian society. Iranian society enjoyed many of the features of western society including theater, restaurants, entertainment centers, which operated as central aspects of the citizens' lifestyle. During this period, the Jewish community, although a small minority, enjoyed substantial influence. In addition, the Baha'i community, a slightly larger minority, enjoyed prominent social status, including advanced military posts and involvement in governmental affairs. The Baha'i community's loyalty to the Shah was complete, and they enjoyed a wide variety of governmental positions. This period also enjoyed academic successes, as Iran's research and development advanced during this period. Thus, the secular basis of Iranian society developed.

Throughout this period, the Shi'ite majority continuously exerted its influence over Iranian society. However,

when they adopted an oppositional stance to the regime, due, in part, to general social dissatisfaction, an ideological foundation was created, upon which Khomeini, the exiled Shi'ite leader, could exert his influence. Khomeini's tragic life story, including the assassination of his father for ideological reasons, was a vital aspect of his impassioned personality, and propelled him to political heights.

The relatively pluralistic Iran, which allowed for the expression of a range of opinions and faiths, easily fell into the hands of a fundamentalist religious leader, who attempted to control not only the government mechanisms in Teheran, but also the social life of the entire nation.

Like a well-known recipe that repeats itself in ideological-totalitarian societies, the most important body in the country became the revolutionary guard, the Iranian parallel to the NKVD and later the KGB in the Soviet Union. This body, which dominated the early years following the Islamic Revolution negated freedom of expression, restricted dress codes, censored arts and entertainment, and took full control of the media. The Ayatollahs exerted total control over the lives of citizens within the Islamic Republic. As in every totalitarian society, the regime developed an advanced system for oppressing freedom of expression or any other activities of independent social movements, according to the dictates of a leader who claims to represent absolute truth.

There is no question that the death of Khomeini brought upon a different phase in Iranian society, as occurs in any totalitarian society, when the leader of the revolution is replaced (aside from the example of North Korea, which immediately replaced their revolutionary leader, when Kim-Jong-Il immediately stepped into his father's shoes and continued his path). In Iran, the death of Khomeini transferred the leadership to the Ayatollahs who followed him. However, power was transferred to individuals, who, though fundamentalist Ayatollahs,

<sup>1</sup> Mohammad Mossadeq was a major figure in modern Iranian history who served as the Prime Minister of Iran from 1951 to 1953 when he was removed from power by a coup d'état. From an aristocratic background, Mossadeq was passionately opposed to foreign intervention in Iran. An author, administrator, lawyer, prominent parliamentarian, and statesman, he is most famous as the architect of the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry, which had been under British control through the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), today known as British Petroleum (BP).

Mossadeq was removed from power on August 19, 1953, in a coup d'état, supported and funded by the British and U.S. governments and led by General Fazlollah Zahedi. The American operation came to be known as Operation Ajax in America, after its CIA cryptonym, and as the "28 Mordad 1332" coup in Iran, after its date on the Iranian calendar. Mossadeq was imprisoned for three years and subsequently put under house arrest until his death.



were, in essence, technocrats who were subject to different influences than Khomeini.

The iron fist of fundamentalist doctrine slightly loosened its grip, and enabled the Islamic Republic to devise political and strategic goals, in order to increase its status and influence on the regional and world stage.

When studying societies with totalitarian leaders, we can see a number of social models that develop according to the specific ideology of the leadership, and the grip of its totalitarian regime on citizens. The level of freedom expressed in society is influenced by the method, means, and strength of control exhibited by the regime. Totalitarian societies that have a less stringent grip on their citizens enable a certain amount of freedom of expression, at least in the private realm, which in turn can influence the regime, and even, in some cases, bring about regime change. The leadership in contemporary Iran, which has to a certain

extent loosened its direct ideological grip on citizens, enables a relatively more diverse and individualistic society than that which existed in the days of Khomeini. Thus, Iranian society has a certain measure of influence on the regime.

In essence, while unbending fundamentalist totalitarian societies enjoy the enforced support of the nation resulting in the total empowerment of the leadership, "looser" totalitarian regimes enable room for social and political change. Such was the conclusion drawn by the Communist regime in China, which at the time chose to crush with an iron fist the 1989 rallies in Tiananmen Square, rather than allowing for expanded freedom of expression and protest.

The relationship between regime and society is essential when studying a totalitarian state such as Iran, and is thus a central feature in each of the studies presented in this volume.





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