

The Islamic Republic and the Question of Palestine

A Look at One of the Key Issues of Conflict Between the US and Iran

By Hooshang Amirahmadi

Of the many problems that trouble Iran's regional policy in the Middle East and its relations with the United States, the Palestine question occupies a central place. Being ostensibly anti-Israel, the policy is naturally disliked by the Israelis and by the United States—who is making a significant investment of time, money, and prestige to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Ironically, Iran's supposedly pro-Arab Palestine policy is also disapproved of by many Arab states including the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Significantly, US-Iran differences over the Palestine question have caused a progressive deterioration of relations between the two states, feeding into an already dangerous conflict.

From the American perspective, Iran's opposition to the peace negotiations between the Israelis and the Arabs is designed to promote radical political Islam and destabilize the pro-American regimes in the region. Some Israeli leaders have even gone so far as to equate Islam with communism and the Islamic Republic with the former USSR. From the perspective of the Islamic Republic, however, its position on the matter is distorted by its foes for their own narrow selfish gains. While the Republic has taken a principled ideological stand against "Israeli oppression," say Iranian officials, it has done

nothing significant to actually disrupt the peace process.

Even if Iran's argument was to be accepted, the blame for the distortion cannot just be directed toward its enemies. One major problem with Iran's Palestine policy is its largely ad hoc nature and confused direction. A coherent policy never been spelled out and the changing phases of Iran's policy have made a bad situation look worse. The only constant theme in Iran's approach to the Palestine question has been the rejection of Israel as a legitimate entity.

This lack of policy is also reflected in Iran's current approach to the Declaration of Principles (DOP). While Iranian officials generally wish a successful outcome to the DOP, they voice a largely rhetorical opposition to it. The Iranian government finds itself trapped by its ideology and a confused policy that has taken many twists and turns over the years.

Shift Toward the Arab Side

In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, the Palestinian embassy was one of the first to open its doors. The significance was that it replaced, both symbolically and physically, the Israeli embassy in Iran. The street where the embassy was located was subsequently renamed "Palestine." Yasser Arafat was the first foreign dignitary that visited the Islamic Republic and its founder, the late Ayatollah Khomeini. Arguably, this was the first formal foreign policy initiative of the Islamic Republic of Iran. From day one, the anti-Israeli position of the Iranian state vis-à-vis the Palestinian question was evident. Indeed, immediately after the victory of the revolutionary forces, Ayatollah Khomeini declared the liberation of Palestine a

principal goal of the new regime's foreign policy.

This was a major development. Under the Shah, there was no Palestinian embassy in Iran. It is widely accepted that the Shah was much more interested in maintaining good relations with Israel and its primary protector, the United States, than in the plight of the Palestinians or peace between Arabs and Israelis. Domestically, this policy led to a significant erosion of the Shah's popular base. The fact that the policy was disliked by many Iranians became evident during the revolution when anti-Israeli slogans began to be increasingly voiced. Regionally, the Shah's Israel policy created a perception of his regime as Persian-nationalist and anti-Arab. After all, three Arab-Israeli wars and the Israeli occupation of Arab lands had corresponded with growing trade relations between Iran and Israel. In 1973, when the Arabs announced the oil embargo against Israeli supporters in the West, Iran did not join and filled the gap by increasing its production. This anti-Arab perception was particularly strong among the Palestinians who viewed the Shah as a principal enemy of their movement. Some Palestinian groups even took an active part in the subversion of the Shah's regime, including the training of certain Iranian groups for urban guerrilla warfare. Therefore, the Shah's ouster was seen as a significant victory for the Palestinian movement and the Arab states.

The fundamental shift toward the Arab side of the equation should have produced closer relations between Arab countries and Iran. But this scenario, as hindsight tells us, did not materialize. With the exception of Syria, South Yemen, Libya, and Algeria, no other Arab state took steps

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to improve relations with the newly established Republic. With the passage of time, even some of these Arab friends, Algeria in particular, developed difficulties in their relations with Iran. While the reasons for Arab-Iran tensions are complex, the Islamic-popular nature of the new regime and its alleged attempts to export its revolution scared many Arab leaders to the point of supporting the Iraqi regime in its war against Iran. Persian Gulf Arab states provided money while others like Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, and Morocco provided equipment and soldiers.

Presently, Iran-Arab relations are at their lowest level since the revolution, this time because of Iran's alleged support for radical Islamic movements and its opposition to the peace process. Some like Egypt, Algeria, and the PLO are openly hostile toward the Islamic Republic, while others, like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, remain uncooperative.

The Islamization of Foreign Policy

Even though the Islamic Republic had remained ideologically committed to the Palestinian cause, the initial intimate relations between the Islamic Republic and the Palestinian Liberation

Organization (PLO) proved to be short-lived. A major factor was the Iran-Iraq war. Initially, the PLO was against the war and did not wish to take sides. The Palestinians argued that the war benefited foreign powers and Israel while weakening the two "revolutionary states." They also feared that it would deflect attention from their struggle for independence. Iran, on the other hand, expected the PLO to reciprocate its position on the Palestinian question by taking a principled stand in acknowledging Iraq as an aggressor, a position the PLO leadership refused to take. While this refusal did not sit well with Tehran, the PLO leadership became frustrated by its failure to end the war. Also faced with pressure from the anti-Iranian rich Arab states—the PLO's primary financial supporters—Yasser Arafat eventually took a pro-Arab stand in the Iran-Iraq war. When differences grew between Arafat and Syrian President Hafez Assad, Palestinian-Iranian relations further suffered because of Iran's alliance with Syria, the only openly anti-Iraq Arab country in the region.

Meanwhile the "Islamic Radicals" prevailed over the "liberals" in Tehran and Iran's foreign policy, including the

Palestine policy, became increasingly Islamized. This shift also coincided with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the intensification of conflict between the PLO and the Islamic forces in Lebanon, and the ensuing relocation of the Palestinian bases from Lebanon to Tunisia. Distance from Palestine and outside pressures forced Arafat and his Fatah faction of the PLO to adopt a moderate position towards Israel, symbolized by their recognition of the Jewish state. Thus, while the Iranian leadership was becoming more radical and anti-secular, the Palestinian leadership increasingly drifted toward moderation and emphasizing the non-Islamic nature of the Palestinian movement. This gap, along with the abridgment of a main pillar of the Islamic Republic's regional policy—that is the recognition of Israel by the PLO—convinced Tehran to develop a new Palestine policy.

The new Islamized Palestine policy stressed fostering and generously supporting groups in and around Palestine whose commitment to the ideals of Islam and rejection of Israel was beyond doubt. Iran found reliable allies in the Hezbollah of Lebanon and the Hamas of the occupied territories. The



Tehran found ready allies in the Hezbollah when they Islamized their policy on Israel; above, Hezbollah funeral

Islamic Republic has used these forces to exert sustained pressure on Israel and on more moderate Palestinians. On the symbolic front, Iran also embarked on a propaganda campaign that sensitizes Muslims against the Jewish state and the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations. Quds (Jerusalem) Day, the last Friday of the Iranian calendar which begins on March 21, for example, is charged with religious and anti-Zionist slogans. Similarly, the so-called Bara'a (disassociation from enemies of Islam) demonstrations during the annual Hajj ritual in Mecca provide another occasion for the Islamic Republic to engage in anti-Zionist and anti-American propaganda.

Ironically, it was during this phase in Iran's Palestine policy that the Islamic Republic is said to have become engaged in a series of deals with the Israelis. It is at first difficult to understand this rather contradictory approach of Iran to Israel, until one recalls that the Islamization of the Palestine policy occurred at the height of the Iran-Iraq war when the Republic was badly in need of military equipment and spare parts. It was during this critical period that the Israelis and Americans appeared on the scene resulting in what became known as the

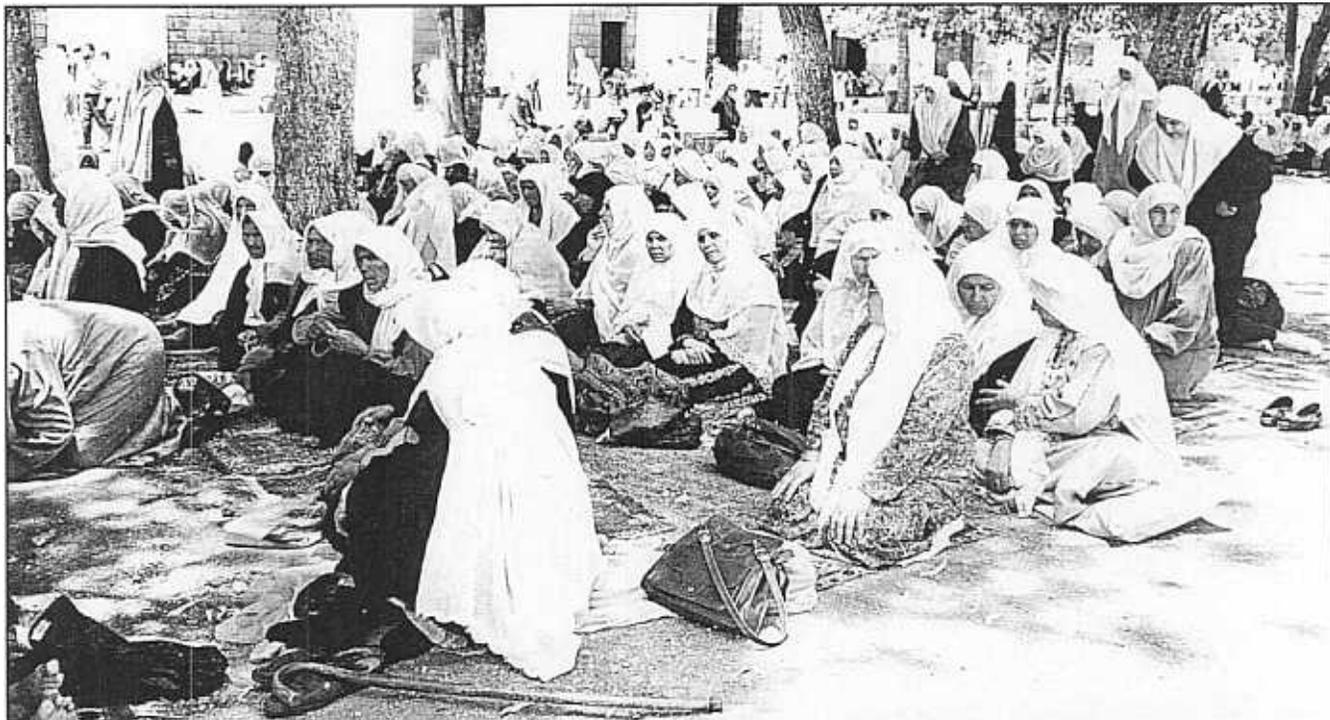
Iran-contra affair. Caught between the rhetoric of their anti-Israeli policy and the need for American-made spare parts and equipment, the so-called radicals in power chose the latter. This was not to be the last time the regime was forced to choose between pragmatism and the interests of the Palestinians, either. Following the invasion of Kuwait, the Islamic Republic rejected Iraq's efforts to link a solution to the crisis to the Palestinian question.

Post-Khomeini Reevaluation

In the post-Khomeini era, as the Islamic Republic focused on economic growth, the Rafsanjani government deemed it necessary to re-evaluate the determinants of its foreign policy. As a result, the ideological orientation was complemented by a renewed emphasis on Iran's national interests. The new policy was set in motion during the Persian Gulf crisis when Iran cooperated with the United Nations and the international coalition against Iraq. Viewing the Persian Gulf as its "backyard," the Islamic Republic was one of the first states to oppose the invasion and warn Iraq of the consequences of any changes in the political geography of the region. Iran also rejected Iraq's proposal to link the Palestine question

to its withdrawal from Kuwait, a position that reflected Iran's national security interests. Moreover, Iran refused to become a center for Islamic radical movements who supported the Iraqi position, and characterized the conflict as one between two evil forces. This position angered the Islamic radicals who have subsequently held their gatherings in Baghdad and portray the Islamic Republic as essentially opportunist, Persian-nationalist, and anti-Arab.

While Rafsanjani's program for a moderate foreign policy ran into some trouble with hardline elements in the government, nowhere was the resistance so fierce as over the Palestinian question. Ayatollah Khomeini's unwavering anti-Zionist and anti-US stand has set a legacy from which the Islamic Republic is finding difficult to extract itself. Compounding this legacy, the previously pragmatist president Ali Khamenei became increasingly ideological when he succeeded the late Khomeini as the Supreme Spiritual Leader of the Islamic Republic. Meanwhile a number of initiatives by the Rafsanjani government were not reciprocated by the United States, making it increasingly difficult for the pragmatists to show goodwill.



Iran approved of the growing religious component of the intifada; above prayer at the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem

Rafsanjani On Foreign Policy

On June 7, Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani held a news conference in Tehran where he outlined major foreign and domestic policy positions for the Islamic Republic.

Rafsanjani stated that while Iran does not approve of the Arab-Israeli peace process, "we do not wish to intervene in practice and physically disrupt the process." Rafsanjani declared that Iranian objection to the process stemmed from the fact that Palestinian rights "were being denied," and he doubted an equitable outcome would be the result: "To give some self rule in only part of the Occupied Territories does not seem to be a suitable process."

Rafsanjani stated that it was doubtful that the Syrians would make the same mistakes as the Palestinians and he felt confident that they would "not sacrifice their own interests or those of the Palestinians." He did admit, however, that while Iran would not cut relations with Arab countries making peace with Israel, they would "necessarily be weaker."

Rafsanjani also discussed relations with the Gulf monarchies and especially the dispute with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) over the islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs in the Persian Gulf. While Rafsanjani stated that "the UAE will gain nothing from such claims and they have to cross a sea of blood in order to reach these islands," he did say Iran was willing to nego-

tiate with UAE over the islands. He said he was convinced that Iran's legal evidence backing up its ownership of the islands was indisputable.

In an important conciliatory statement to the Arab world, however, Rafsanjani said the Islamic Republic would not make any efforts to export the revolution, but would rather concentrate on internal development: "We have said that we would elucidate our ideology and those interested could accept it. We will employ all our potentials for the development of our country."

On relations with the United States, Rafsanjani said there was a "need for a goodwill gesture from the US" such as unfreezing Iranian assets—which are calculated at \$10 billion by the Iranians and \$4 billion by the US. "We showed our goodwill by helping secure the release of American hostages in Lebanon but the Washington government did not keep its promise of releasing our frozen assets."

Another important issue addressed was Iran's alleged attempts to develop nuclear weapons. Rafsanjani denied

this and said that "Iran is against proliferation of nuclear weapons and in favor of global nuclear disarmament. Each and every country should strive for global elimination of atomic weapons." He stressed the consistent good evaluations given Iran by representatives of the International Atomic Energy Agency. □



The moderate leadership in Tehran also sees the peace process as a great deal less than comprehensive and finds it difficult to accept a two-state solution that does not include the majority of Palestinians. Israel's image in Iran as an "oppressive occupier" and a "lackey of the United States" is another factor that makes it difficult for the leadership to contemplate a compromise. Consequently, the moderate leadership in Tehran feels compelled to rhetorically reject Israel and the peace process.

Exacerbating this situation is the political discord in Tehran among the two main factions in the government. One group considers rejection of the Jewish state a fundamental principle of the Islamic revolution and, as such, uncompromisable. The growing Islamization of the *intifada* tended to

strengthen this faction although its position remains largely inconsequential to the official policy of the government which takes an alternative view. In particular, the government considers the Israeli question within the domain of Iran's foreign policy establishment and argues that a more reasonable approach to it should be based on Iran's national security interests in a changing world. The official policy, however, remains ambivalent toward UN Resolutions 242 and 338 and lacks clarity in its direction and focus. As a result, the moderate position has been weakened to a significant degree

After the DOP

Iran's Palestine policy after the DOP continues to be the same old ad hoc approach, with the pragmatists in

the government still pushing for a moderate line. In a major press conference in January 1993, President Hashemi Rafsanjani, while denouncing Israel as "illegitimate," did not call for its destruction. He even went so far as to suggest that the Islamic countries might establish relations with Israel if the Palestinian question was to be resolved in a manner that would ensure the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people. In a subsequent interview with *Time* magazine, the president indicated that an interim autonomy solution to the Palestinian problem would be considered a welcome development. In June 1994, President Rafsanjani underscored the main thrust of the government's Palestine policy, namely that it does not intend to interfere in practice in the peace process and will not take

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any action that will cause a disruption of the Arab-Israeli negotiations.

This more pragmatic position stands in sharp contrast to the view expressed in the mainstream media in the West, which tends to reflect the ideological posture of the radical faction. Even this lopsided portrayal is usually based on largely unsubstantiated reports coming from anonymous sources and is published without a balanced explanation. Iran, however, is also partly to blame for the lack of clarity in its policy and its misrepresentation by the media and foreign policy pundits in the West. For example, while the Madrid Conference was underway, Iran organized the International Conference in Support of the Islamic Revolution in Palestine. The conference voiced support for the Palestinian uprising, criticized the US-sponsored Madrid Peace Conference, and called on the leaders of the Islamic countries to join forces in guaranteeing the rights of the Palestinians. The conference failed, however, to institute any concrete measures to implement the pronounced ideals, thus rendering it useless beyond its propaganda value.

Iran's policy toward the Palestinian question, intentional or otherwise, remains largely rhetorical and, according to a high-level Iranian official, has not even outlined any concrete steps for the regime to take. This policy has led to significant confusion among Iran's friends and foes in the region and glob-

ally. Taking advantage of the situation, a majority of the Arab states and Israel are using their wealth and influence to promote anti-Iranian sentiment in Western public opinion, resulting in burdening pressures and sanctions on Iran. These efforts have to a large extent contributed to the recent deterioration of US-Iran relations. According to certain Iranian officials, under these conditions, if the Arabs and Israelis were to resolve their differences, they could devote the full thrust of their negative campaign towards Iran, in which case the country's national security could be jeopardized. No wonder Iran's Palestine policy has recently become increasingly predicated upon its regional security concerns.

The future of Iran's policy toward Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian question hinges upon recognizing Iran's security interests and assisting the Palestinians regain their legitimate rights. This implies that Iran might be positively influenced if regional states and global powers were to include it in all negotiating regimes that involve regional security matters and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Being a full-fledged member of such international regimes creates interdependencies and responsibilities which regularly forces states towards cooperation. For example, membership in various international financial regimes has obliged Iran to adopt economic pre-

scriptions that are accepted by the IMF and the World Bank. There is no plausible reason to believe that a similar approach would not encourage Iran to adopt a more embracing attitude towards Arab-Israeli peace negotiations.

Finally, the key to an effective policy remains better US-Iran relations. These relations are currently at their lowest point in years. Each side has developed a laundry list of accusations against the other and neither seems ready to separate fact from fiction. The US charges against Iran include international terrorism, support for radical Islamic groups, non-conventional military build-up, and opposition to the DOP. Iran, on the other hand, charges the US with unlawfully freezing its assets, supporting the Iranian opposition in exile, downing an Iranian passenger jet, and supporting Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war. The two governments have let procedural issues for resolving disputes become fixed into inflexible negotiating positions. As a result, neither side seems ready to take the courageous step of initiating a dialogue to resolve the conflict. Yet, neither side benefits from a continuation of the hostilities given their common interests in a stable oil market, regional calm, and economic relations. One can only hope that, like the Arab-Israeli dispute, the two sides will find a way to talk to each other. ■