

# Iran's Ideological Hostility Against Israel

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June 2024

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*Iran, as a key country in the Middle East, has a significant role in shaping the power politics in the region. Tehran's continuing effort to attain nuclear weapons and establish, maintain, and strengthen its alliances in the region by supporting terrorist organizations, are the main characteristics of this struggle. All these actions are directed toward one purpose: to threaten and ultimately eliminate Israel, thereby allowing Iran to become the region's major power. Since the two nations do not share a border and as there is no conflict in strategic economic interest between them, rational claims cannot be used to justify Iran's official hostility against Israel in the post-revolutionary era. Iran's aggressive approach against Israel can only be understood from the ideological hostility developed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder and spiritual leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran.*

## **An external affair: Israel-Iran relations before the Iranian revolution**

*The relationship between Israel and Iran showed a different face before the 1979 Revolution that changed Iran entirely. The words 'special,' 'complex,' and 'sometimes very close' can be used to describe the characteristics of the relationship between the two countries at that time<sup>1</sup>. The close relations between the two countries were part of a geopolitical policy that benefited both countries. The diplomatic ties between Israel and Iran started in 1948, right after the State of Israel was established when Iran opened its doors as thousands of Iraqi Jews fled persecution. After taking this step, Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi established an embassy in Jerusalem and gave Israel de facto recognition in 1950.*

*In the 1960s, the relationship between Israel and Iran became closer when the two countries' common enemies, like Iraq, strengthened. The tightening relations between Jerusalem and Tehran resulted in the establishment of an Israeli embassy and governmental offices, as well as extensive military attachments in Iran. Israel's official representatives at that time, like Chief of Staff Mordechai Gur, were warmly welcomed in Iran. In these years, paratrooper officers from Israel also arrived in Iran as a part of the closer military relations to help the country in several security missions. These actions were mostly related to the northern border of Iran, which is common with Iraq, and where the foremost oil reserves of the Pahlavi dynasty were concentrated. In the security cooperation, the Israeli army people trained Iranian special forces and Kurds, aiming that the Kurds could become a new ally to Tehran against Iraq. This was seemingly because the Kurds' biggest hope was to have independence in their homeland. Israel also contributed to the Shah's first steps taken after ascending the throne, namely establishing the SAVAK (Bureau for Intelligence and Security of the State), whose role it was to act strongly against any manifestation of subversion in Iran. Despite Israel's well-known contribution to strengthening Pahlavi's power, the Iranian anti-Shah and anti-West elite's attitude towards Israel was rather positive. Many Iranians identified Israel with positive development and reconstruction programs, such as the rebuilding of the Qazvin area after it was destroyed by an earthquake in 1962.<sup>2</sup>*

*The Shah, who became a strong and powerful leader, tried to turn the country into a more Westernized one. In the early 1960s, Pahlavi applied the Aryan hypothesis as a theoretical justification for his modernization effort, often known as "The White Revolution." This concept also helped establish a strong strategic partnership with Israel. The idea developed by European philologists in the 19th century states that Iranians originated from Indo-European peoples, namely the Aryans, and thus, their affinities with Europe are natural. Later, based on this idea, Iran expanded her ally system to Turkey and Ethiopia, creating the "Alliance of the Peripheries," the alliance between four non-Arab countries that border Arab nations and are threatened by them.*

*In the 1960s and 1970s, the relationship between Israel and Iran flourished the most in the economic and security sense, and many private companies arrived in Iran. However, a huge change happened in Iranian public opinion regarding the two nations' relationship during the Six-Day War. After 1967, Iran placed Israel in the 'colonial powers' camp. A sports event held by Iran the following year clearly demonstrated the change. The Iranian national soccer team hosted the Israeli team for a match in the Asian Cup finals. Habib Elghanian, a prominent figure in the Iranian Jewish community, bought many tickets for the game and encouraged Iranian Jews to visit the event and cheer for the Israeli team. After play started, the stadium became a place of violent protest against Israel and its policies and against the relations between the Shah and Israel, with Israeli fans and the team being attacked by Iranian fans.*

*The late 1970s proved that the Shah's attempts to Westernize the country did not coincide with the voices of the Iranian people. The demonstrations of the revolution changed Iran-Israel relations entirely. The relationship between the Islamic Republic - established by Ayatollah Khomeini, a Shia leader who was exiled by the Shah to Iraq and led the revolution remotely through films - and Israel, from the 'external affair,' turned into a hostile one. During the revolution, the Iranian public demonstrated its belligerent attitude towards Israel and Zionism more strongly than during the previously mentioned soccer game, and as a last step, Israel's diplomatic delegation was expelled from Iran. Before the revolution, approximately 60,000 Jews lived in Iran<sup>3</sup>, which was home to the largest Jewish community in the Middle East, aside from Israel. Iranian Jews generally chose to remain in Iran and maintain a complex relationship with the State of Israel and the Zionist institutions, but with the revolution, there was no place for them in Iran.*

## Religious bases of the ideological hostility

*The huge change in Israel and Iran's relationship that happened during the Iranian revolution is not surprising, taking into consideration that antisemitism was*

*already present in Islam and, thus, the Middle East before the outbreak of the protests. The birth of Islam was even explained based on hostility against Judaism, claiming that the Jewish religion was not efficient, which necessitated the need for new religions. Islam stated that Judaism and Christianity became idle, and it necessitated the creation of Islam, the only true religion.<sup>4</sup> The Quran, the holy book of Islam, states that "Allah's only way is Islam" and "whoever seeks a way other than Islam, it will never be accepted from them."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in Islam's sacred book, several antisemitic verses can be found. The Quran states that the Jews killed Allah's prophets<sup>6</sup>; they are disgraced apes<sup>7</sup>, stingy<sup>8</sup>, lend at interest and earn a prohibited profit<sup>9</sup>, cowards for life<sup>10</sup>, agreement breakers<sup>11</sup>, cursed<sup>12</sup>, and strive to extinguish the light of Allah in the world<sup>13</sup>.*

*Both Islam and Christianity, in the past, condemned Jews to a life of suffering to show the punishment for the denial of the true faith of the doubters. In this way, Jews both in Arab and Christian countries became the "other," the "different," and the "foreigner" who had a different religion, and different customs, clothing, food, language, appearance, and places of prayer. As strangers, they could be blamed for causing every problem for the nation, starting from epidemics through floods, fires, and even defeats on the battlefield.*

*The anti-Jewish concepts that are common in Islamic culture and history describe hostile relations between Judaism and Islam from the appearance of the Muslim religion and see the establishment of Israel as the last link in a chain of Jewish harassment of Muslims. Islam denies the Jews being a nation and sees them as a collection of religious denominations scattered among the nations, which God condemned to submission and humiliation as proteges of the Muslims after they rejected the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.*

*The establishment of the State of Israel, a Jewish State, in 1948 also meant the return of Judaism to life - as they could practice their faith in the so-called 'promised land' - which posed a theological challenge to Islam that described Jews as a collection of*

*religious groups spread around the world, which God subjected to disgrace. For Muslims, who think not just that Judaism is an idle religion but also that the Land of Israel is an Islamic land, the existence of an independent and sovereign Jewish state is a serious ideological issue.<sup>14</sup>*

## **Iran's hostility against Israel, "the cancerous tumor of the Zionist regime."**

*The 1979 revolution that changed Iran entirely is a recurring element in this paper. Such a revolution requires choosing an external enemy to maintain the revolutionary enthusiasm, reinforce the sense of internal identity among the supporters, and explain the failures of the revolutionary power. In the case of Iran, the best choice was Israel, the presenter of Western imperialism and capitalism in the region. Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder and spiritual leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, made the conflict between Israel (and the West) and Islam a central element of the revolutionary teachings. Israel remained in its position given to it by Iran even after the new regime stabilized, and the hostility against Israel became the most basic element of the new government. Iranian leaders consistently stated that the Zionist regime is the source of the problems in the Middle East, and the destruction of Israel and the removal of the cancerous tumor is the only solution for the region.<sup>15</sup>*

*The Iranian hostility against Israel is quite a complex issue with various basic elements in it. In this paper, from these core features, only anti-Westernism, the denial of the Holocaust, and Iran as the closest ally of the Palestinians will be discussed since these give the bare bones of the Iranian animosity against Israel.*

## **The cooperation of the little (Israel) and the great (the US) Satan: Israel focused anti-Westernism**

*Iran's hostility towards Israel is not an isolated phenomenon; it is deeply connected to the anti-West approach of the Muslim world, the place of Islam in the*

*contemporary world, and the difficulties Muslims face in it. In this light, the confrontation between Iran and Israel is a central element in the larger war between Islam and the imperialist West and the materialistic culture that characterizes it. Obviously, history plays a crucial role in the anti-West attitude since the conquest and exploitation of various regions around the world by Western colonial powers like Britain, France, and Spain caused huge anger and mistrust in the Arab nations. Although Iran was never colonized, it has faced real and imagined external threats by colonizer countries since the late 19th century; thus, anti-Westernism has become an integral part of Iranian political culture.*

*Khomeini, the leader of the revolution and the first spiritual leader of the Islamic Republic, explained colonization as a form of punishment for the Muslims' sins, stating that colonization of the Muslim land would not have happened if Muslim leaders had observed the commandments of God.<sup>16</sup> Using this concept as a central element of the revolution, the consequence is that turning back to Allah's right way and observing all his commandments would indicate the end of punishment. Ayatollah Khomeini used the West in his teachings not just as a tool of Allah to sentence unfaithful Muslim leaders but as the biggest enemy of Islam. According to his perception, Jews and Christians are cooperating to harm and undermine Islam and cause confusion in the hearts of Muslims in modern times. Furthermore, the West, which is made up of Christian and Jewish elements, opposes one of the main goals of Islam, namely, to spread to the four corners of the Earth.*

*The former Supreme Leader described Jews as the agents of the West and the real manifestation of the attack of Islam by the West. The mass Jewish presence in the Middle East as citizens of the State of Israel, which was established on the base of Zionism, is the most prominent expression of the Judeo-Christian conspiracy against Islam. According to Ayatollah Khomeini, Zionism is the latest manifestation of Jewish enmity towards Islam and the most serious symbol of the West's tyranny against it.<sup>17</sup>*

*During the revolutionary times, the leader of the opposition, Khomeini, presented his rivalry, the Shah's (the Israeli king's) fight against the clergy, and his secularization policy as part of the Zionist-Western campaign against Iran. He claimed that with the Shah's help, Israel penetrated all fields of life, including military, economy, and society, thus turning Iran into a military base for Israel (the little Satan) and, therefore, also for the United States (the great Satan). He even caused Israel's machinations, the suppression of the riots of the revolution, adding that Israel does not want the Quran, the clergy, or even one learned person to exist in Iran, and accused it of seeking to steal the wealth of every Iranian.*<sup>18</sup>

## Holocaust denial

*The widespread use of Holocaust denial is one of the most prominent aspects of Iran's ideological hatred towards Israel, a hostility that combines anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. However, in denial, there is inconsistency since Iran rejects the Holocaust's existence, but at the same time, Tehran also accuses Israel of being worse than the Nazis and thus admits the Holocaust's occurrence.*

*Before the Revolution, the application and promotion of antisemitism and anti-Zionism were not limited simply to the clergy in Iran but to radical nationalists who were influenced by race theories in the 19th and 20th centuries and highlighted the link between the Persian people and the Aryan race. Anti-Zionism gained popularity in the writings of intellectuals who were inclined to apply radical ideologies or Islamic ideas in Iran, and it resulted in the acceptance of anti-Jewish attitudes at the same time when Nazis committed genocide against Jews in Europe. During and after the Revolution, the denial of the Holocaust became a powerful tool for the leaders of the new regime.*

*The Supreme Leader, the head of state of Iran, is a major player in the denial of the Holocaust, in contrast to Holocaust deniers in Europe, who are usually members of the extreme political right. The Iranian official media has also been involved in this denial effort, describing the Holocaust as a "big lie" and a "myth." As a result, Iran has*



*made the denial of the Holocaust an official policy, and Iranians are not exposed to alternative viewpoints.*

*The 'myth of the Holocaust' was connected in the Iranian media with the US-Israeli collaboration, which they claimed used their shared effort against the Nazi enemy to achieve unethical political objectives. For instance, it is said that the Zionists' claims of the death of six million Jews served as a misleading tool for convincing the public that a Jewish state was necessary, and the US utilized it to strengthen its position as a superpower by conquering territories across Europe and the rest of the world. According to Khomeini, Jews, and Zionists in particular, exaggerated the scale of the Nazis' crimes against Jews to justify their own crimes against Palestinian people.*

## Iran, the closest ally of the Palestinians

*To start with a larger scale, Iran and other Islamic movements claim that there can be no compromise between absolute good (Islam) and absolute evil (the Jewish state) in the Middle East conflict since it is an existential struggle. Given that Israel represents evil, anyone who stands against it becomes the representative of good, and as Israel opposes Islam inherently, it is every Muslim's religious obligation to stand against it.<sup>19</sup>*

*Both Khomeini and Khamenei declared that the Jewish occupation of Palestine was part of a satanic plot by the Western powers, which was originally headed by Great Britain and is currently led by the United States, with the intention of undermining Muslim unity and creating division among the Muslim community. They claimed that Israel was intended to be used as a sword to crush any attempts to restore Islam again in the Middle East and to undermine the ability of Muslims to oppose Western imperialism.<sup>20</sup> Khomeini, in his plan, explained that since Arab nations' efforts to eliminate Israel on a national level were not successful, it is time to investigate Islam as another option. He urged the Palestinians to fight Israel to the death as a show of trust and dependence on Allah because, according to him, there is no other path to victory.<sup>21</sup>*

*Jerusalem was given more significance and holiness by Khomeini than it ever had in the Shia tradition in the hope of winning Sunni Arabs. In a speech he gave during the first year of the Revolution, he stated that every Muslim had to prepare himself for the war against Israel because Israel had taken control of Jerusalem.<sup>22</sup> Iran established 'Jerusalem Day' in 1979, the last Friday of Ramadan, to commemorate the Palestinian struggle and hold massive demonstrations against Israel nationwide.*

*Iran strongly opposed the peace process between the Palestinians and Israel in particular, as well as between Israel and the Arabs in general. In this instance, pragmatic factors were considered in addition to ideological ones. One of the reasons Iran opposed the peace process was its concern that, in the aftermath of its reconciliation with Israel, the Arab world would focus on Iran and its actions, particularly its annexation of three strategically significant islands in the Persian Gulf under Abu Dhabi's sovereignty. This action might have stimulated protest from the Arabs because of their concern about Iranian hegemony in the Gulf. Furthermore, it is logical to suppose that Iran feared that the peace process would enable Israel to further expand its influence throughout the Arab world and, in the eyes of the Iranians, pose a threat to Iran itself. Brigadier General Tzuri Sagi, who actively participated in the military cooperation between Iran and the Israeli army against Iraq in the 1960s, summed up the core of Teheran's strategy later. According to him, the Iranians' aim is to divert their enemies' attention from their battle with them by drawing them in with other threats. In remembrance, Brigadier Sagi said, "They told me: 'Don't destroy entire Iraqi divisions; we want a small fire for good so that the Iraqis will be busy with them.'" Regarding Iran's Palestinian conflict strategy, he claimed that "Iran seeks to maintain the Israeli-Palestinian conflict rather than destroy Israel to keep the Arabs from joining together against Iran. The primary objective is to maintain the fight, which is why they founded Hezbollah and purchased every organization. Iran wants the same small fire in Israel as it wanted in Iraq because if there is a peace accord between the Jews and the Arabs, the Arabs will have more freedom to pay attention to Iran."<sup>23</sup>*

*Iran strongly condemned the agreements between Israel and the PLO in the 1990s, calling Arafat a vile traitor who lowered himself to the lowest level and describing them as a plot and betrayal of the stolen rights of the Palestinian people and the Arab people. Iran urged the Palestinians to return to the armed struggle for their country's liberation rather than relying solely on diplomatic efforts and warned the Arab nations of the political and economic consequences. He argued that the Arab world would not gain anything with the trust of Zionists and the United States; instead, the Arab leaders must trust in support of the Muslim world if they wish to remove Israel from the map of the Middle East. Furthermore, since its founding in 1984, Iran has emerged as the organization's primary supporter of Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Being the first to see the significance of the Palestine issue for the Islamic world, Khomeini was considered by the organization's founder, Fathi Shaqaqi, as the greatest Islamic leader of his generation.<sup>24</sup>*

*While condemning the Arab nations for their condescending attitude toward Israel, Iran praised the holy war that Islamic groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Islamic Jihad waged against Israel, framing it as the appropriate response to Israeli policies. After Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, Iran was essential in helping Hezbollah and train its members, as well as providing financial and military support throughout Hezbollah's years-long conflict with Israel in southern Lebanon. Iran presented Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 as a major win for the global Islamic movement and for all those who supported the armed struggle against the Zionist enemy. Khamenei claimed that the withdrawal demonstrated that the logic of struggle, jihad, and sacrifice was the best way to address the terrible acts of the Zionist occupiers.*

*The Palestinian issue is the most significant issue facing the Muslim world, according to Khomeini, and the "cancerous tumor of the Zionist regime" at the center of Islam is the cause of many of the problems. Iran utilized the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to present itself as the closest ally of the Palestinians and condemn the Arab nations' apathy to the suffering of the Palestinian people. Furthermore, he argued that*

*Israel's hostility towards Islam extended beyond Palestine to the entire Islamic world, claiming that Israel considers the region from the Nile to the Euphrates as the territory that it wants to annex from Palestine. Khomeini used this strategy to describe Israel as an enemy of all humankind besides Islam.*

## Conclusion

*The Israel-Iran relationship has changed several times in the past. From the time of Cyrus, the Persian king who became a positive figure in Jewish history by practicing grace towards Jewish people, through the 16th century, when Iran became a Shiite country persecuting Jewish communities, to the Revolution in Iran, Iran showed different faces to the Jewish communities living within its borders. The establishment of the State of Israel, which caused a theoretical challenge to the basic teachings of Islam, reinforced the anti-Jewish segments of the Quran and gave a perfect external enemy to the revolutionary powers in Iran. All in all, the hostility towards the Jews and the Jewish state contains several elements, not least that Islam is the only true faith, the imperialist West uses Israel as a non-Arabic country in the Middle East to destroy Islam, the theoretical background that Zionists and the West use to legitimate the existence of the State of Israel is the 'myth' of the Holocaust. Khomeini, the first Supreme Leader of Iran, concluded in his teachings that Jews are God's curse upon them; they oppose the very essence of Islam, and they strive to take over the entire world. According to this, Jews are framed as the enemy of all humankind, and every faithful Muslim should defend Islam against Jews.*

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- <sup>5</sup> The Qur'an 3:19 and 3:85
- <sup>6</sup> The Qur'an 2:91
- <sup>7</sup> The Qur'an 2:65
- <sup>8</sup> The Qur'an 4:53
- <sup>9</sup> The Qur'an 5:62; 9:34; 4:61
- <sup>10</sup> The Qur'an 2:96
- <sup>11</sup> The Qur'an 2:100
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