

**THE POLICY OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF  
IRAN TOWARDS ISRAEL**

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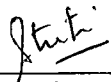
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CERTIFICATE


Certified that dissertation entitled *The Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards Israel* submitted by **Ms. Stuti Bhatnagar** in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the award of the Degree of **Master of Philosophy** has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other university and is my own work.

  
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We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before the examiner for evaluation.



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# **INTRODUCTION**

In an analysis into post revolutionary Iran's policy towards Israel, it is essential to look at the relationship between the two states prior to the revolution in 1979. An examination of Iran-Israel relations since 1948 involves several variables. Since its establishment in 1948, most countries in West Asia have been following a hostile or controversial policy towards Israel. Iran is not an exception to this and has followed a policy that has been controversial both domestically and regionally. Under Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-1979), Iran maintained friendly relations with Israel. The primary reason for this was the pro-western orientation of the Shah and his dependence on the West. Another crucial reason was the traditional Persian-Arab rivalry. The rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt and his pan-Arabist and anti monarchical ideology reinforced the Shah's inclination to seek allies elsewhere. Against the background of the Cold War, Iran was apprehensive of growing Soviet influence in the region and hence aligned itself with the US. Seen in this larger context, relationship with Israel became a factor in the consolidation of Iran's relations with the US.

From its beginnings the foreign policy of Israel attempted to break the wall of political isolation in the region. Shortly after Israel was created Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion articulated a strategy known as 'Peripheral Alliance'.<sup>1</sup> The proposed alliance included non-Arab Turkey, Iran, Christian Ethiopia as well as the Christians of Lebanon, the Kurds in Iraq and the non-Muslim population of Sudan. Such activities, whose main aim was to elicit recognition from the regional actors and to establish diplomatic relations with them, bore, only two achievements: Turkish recognition of Israel and the establishment of diplomatic relations at the end of 1949 and the *de facto* Iranian recognition of Israel in March 1950.<sup>2</sup>

The political ties between Iran and Israel developed on a certain infrastructure of pre-existing contacts. These were related to the activities of the Jewish Agency and its contacts with the authorities and with the local Jewish population. During

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the Peripheral Alliance policy of Israel see, Michael Brecher, *New States in Asia: A Political Analysis* (London, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> For in-depth analyses of Iran-Israel relationship after 1948 see, Uri Bialer, "The Iranian Connection in Israel's Foreign Policy 1948-1951", *Middle East Journal* (Washington D.C) Vol. 39, No.2, Spring 1985.

Israel's formative years, the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with Tehran was motivated primarily by the immediate human and ideological considerations of immigration, *aliya*. In essence this was not related to Persian Jewry who faced no cases of persecution under the regime of the Shah, unlike their counterparts in other Arab states. The condition of the Iraqi Jews continued to deteriorate ever since the creation of Israel and the Jewish Agency was deeply concerned about finding them a route out of Iraq.

Thus it was the problem of *aliya* from Iraq that turned political relations with Iran into an important goal of Israel's foreign policy at that time. In October 1948, the Mossad (Israel's intelligence agency) managed to create an escape channel through Iran for Jews from Iraq. After two small groups had made their way to Israel through Iran a pattern was established that was condoned at least by silence, by the Persian Prime Minister. This method allowed for hundreds of Iraqi Jews to pass through Iran with the authorities' approval.<sup>3</sup> The process of immigration became smoother once Israel was accorded *de facto* recognition on 6 March 1950. Between 1948 and 1952, tens of thousands of Jews fleeing Iraq were allowed to use Iran as a transit point on their way to Israel.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from the immediate concern for the safety of the Jewish population in Iraq, there were a number of other reasons that brought the two states closer to each other. Among these perhaps the most strategic was the prevalent Cold War politics. A principal factor underlying Iran's policy was the perceived political and strategic utility of Israel in the context of Iran's primary objective of forestalling the advance of Soviet power and the influence and the spread of communism in the region. Along with this the close relations with the US was also a common point for both the states. A vital aspect of Iran's foreign policy at the time was aimed at receiving economic and military aid from the US. Some Iranian leaders believed that warm

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<sup>3</sup> Bialer, n.1, p. 299.

<sup>4</sup> Shaul Bakhash, "Iran's Relations with Israel, Syria and Lebanon", in Miron Rezun ed., *Iran at the Crossroads: Global Relations in a Turbulent Decade* (Boulder, Colo., 1990), p. 116.

relations with the Jewish state would protect and promote their interests in Washington.<sup>5</sup>

Another point of convergence between them was the regional Arab Cold War. This undeclared confrontation between the radical and conservative camps within the Arab world ironically contributed to the consolidation of cooperation between Iran and Israel. Nationalist and leftist leaders in Cairo and Baghdad were seen as a threat to both Israel and the Pahlavi regime.<sup>6</sup>

While talking of the Arab world, it is important to mention Iran's position on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although the details of Iran's involvement in the dispute will be highlighted in later chapters, it is worth mentioning here that the Shah followed a policy of ambiguity towards the conflict. Iran was in favour of the Federal Plan pitted against the Partition of Palestine. It subsequently voted against the UN Partition Plan in November 1947. However the point to note here is that even though the Shah seemed to be gravitating towards the Arab position, he refused to become militarily involved. The Shah declined a request by the Arab states in the summer of 1948 for cooperation or at least active assistance in the war against Israel. Again in August 1948, Iran refused to grant entry to some 30,000 Arab refugees from Palestine by pleading domestic difficulties. An illustration of this stance was seen in an article published by the semi-official newspaper *Journal de Tehran*, "Iran's foreign policy is based on the UN and no one among us will challenge or appeal this principle. In the conflict with Israel, we shall in no way hesitate to view our bonds with the Arab states as secondary, for we shall have no part in the creation of a centre of violence in the East."<sup>7</sup>

Thus Israel and Iran developed a strategic alliance of sorts to counter the forces of Arab nationalism and Soviet communism. This alliance continued throughout the period of the Shah. During the 1950s and 1960s, a strong relationship developed

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Gawdat Bahgat, "Iran and Israel: Prospects for Détente", in Bjorn Moller ed., *Oil and Water: Cooperative Security in the Persian Gulf* (London, 2001) p. 182.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Bialer, n. 1, p. 297.



between the two states. Iran drew on Israeli expertise in military, intelligence and agriculture. Israel played an important role in the creation and training of SAVAK (secret police force of Iran). Iran, for its part, provided relief to Israel from the Arab boycott and emerged as Israel's principal supplier of oil. By the mid 1970s, Israeli firms were involved in a variety of enterprises in Iran, particularly in agriculture, construction and trade. "Like the United States, Israel cemented its relationship with Iran by the exchange of arms for oil, which both sides kept alive through the worst of the OPEC oil embargo. The Iranian arms market was worth at least US \$500 million a year to Israel. The Shah bought everything from Gabriel anti-ship missiles to advanced communications equipment. In 1977, Israel arranged a US \$1 billion arms-for-oil deal around Operation Flower, a joint Israeli-Iranian project to build a nuclear-capable surface-to-surface missile."<sup>8</sup> Thus a convergence of interests brought the two states closer. But the relationship did not last, the upheaval caused by the radical policies of the Islamic revolutionaries brought an end to the relationship and completely changed the dynamics of the relationship.

The overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of an Islamic Republic in February 1979 ushered in far-reaching changes in the Iranian power structure as well as its foreign policy. In the initial stages, the revolutionaries led by the clergy even sought to export the revolution to the other Islamic countries in the region. It also brought to power a coalition of forces that were inherently hostile to Israel and other conservative Arab states. The constitution of the Islamic Republic committed Iran to supporting oppressed Muslims and liberation movements everywhere (Article 154) and towards the creation of a single unified Islamic *umma* transcending frontiers. Tehran's customary charges against Israel included the injuries done to Islam by Jews throughout Islamic history, the usurpation of Islamic lands by Israel and the Jewish control over Jerusalem. It also blamed Israel for serving as the 'foster-child' of Western imperialism and the instigator of anti-Iranian policy in Washington. Iran was also critical of Israel's disregard for international conventions and UN Resolutions as well as the Israeli treatment of

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<sup>8</sup> Johnathan Marshall, Peter Dale Scott and Jane Hunter, *The Iran-Contra Connection: Secret Teams and Covert Operations in the Reagan Era* (Boston, Mass., 1987), p. 169.

Palestinians in the occupied territories. The close ties that Israel maintained with the deposed Shah only exasperated the situation. Indeed, hostility towards Israel proved to be a part of the larger policy of the Islamic Republic to repudiate and reverse the policies of the Shah.

Ayatollah Khomeini himself played a crucial role in encouraging open hostility towards the Jews in general and Israel in particular. A striking aspect was the blurring of the Israeli and Jewish identities. Writing from exile Khomeini observed, "From the very beginning the historical movement of Islam has had to contend with the Jews, for it was they who first established anti-Islamic propaganda."<sup>9</sup> He depicted Israel as the foe of Islam and Muslims and perceived Islam as the unifying force and ideology that would permit Muslims to get rid of their own imperialist rulers and result in the defeat of Israel.

Thus began an era of unremitting hostility. The good will and cooperation of Shah's Iran was replaced by mistrust and complete non-recognition and enmity of the Islamic Republic of Iran under the leadership of Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini. However even though Iran under the Islamists wanted to have nothing to do with the Jewish state, the paths of the two states crossed often both at regional and international levels.

The second chapter focuses on the dramatic changes brought about in Iranian politics following the establishment of the Islamic Republic. It looks at the fundamental shift in the foreign policy orientation of Iran and the move to reverse policies formulated by the Shah. More specifically, what has been the place of Israel in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic? Within this broad framework, it focuses on policies formulated by the new regime on the status of the Jewish State and the position of the Iranian Jews in the new Iranian power structure.

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<sup>9</sup> Sohrab Sobhani, 'The course of Iranian-Israeli Relations', *Middle East Insight* (Washington D.C), Vol.14, No. 6, November-December 1999, p. 40.

The chapter also examines how the United States has always been a major link in the relationship between the two states. Both during the rule of the Shah and the Islamic regime, Iran's relationship with the US has been the motivating factor for Israel-Iran relations. It tries to evaluate if the possibility of a US-Iran rapprochement will pave the way for a revival of Iran-Israel ties, especially in the light of the moderate policies of President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami. Focusing primarily on foreign policy, the chapter attempts to highlight that even though the basis of the Islamic state is ideological hostility towards Israel, pressing issues of national interest have taken precedence. This is evident in the secret arms deals between the two during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) popularly referred to as Iran Contra affair. Although the Iranian government shied away from admitting openly to the deals, there seemed to be enough viable evidence that linked Iran to the scandal and pointed to the clear authorization by Khomeini himself.

No discussion on Iran's policy towards Israel is complete without an examination of its role in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the peace process. The third chapter looks at the broad policy of Iran towards the conflict beginning with the positions taken by the Shah and moving on to the Islamic regimes' stance on the issue. It analyses the official stance of the Republic on peace with Israel. It also looks into the Iranian interpretations of the peace process at various stages and will closely examine Iran's support to resistance groups like the Palestine Liberation Organisation, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Iran's position would also be highlighted in the light of the collapse of the peace negotiations at Camp David in 2000 and the outbreak of the *Al Aqsa Intifada*.

Realising that both Iran and Israel are regional powers, the fourth chapter focuses on the interface between their regional aspirations. By focusing on crucial issues like terrorism, WMD, nuclear weapons as well as the significance of regional alliances, the chapter seeks to examine mutual threat perceptions of both the countries. It also looks closely at Iranian support for militant groups primarily the Hizbullah, both as an effort to resist Israel and also to establish its regional presence. While discussing mutual threat perceptions, the chapter would also

highlight how sometimes pragmatic considerations took precedence and guided Iran's policy towards Israel.

Although there is a corpus of literature on the different dynamics of Iran's policy towards Israel, the purpose of this research is to analyse the major issues of intersection of Iran-Israel politics in one comprehensive study. The objectives of this research study are: to analyse the role and importance of Israel in the foreign policy the Islamic Republic of Iran; to examine Iran's policy vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli peace process and its support for groups like Hizbullah and Hamas; to analyse mutual threat perceptions of Iran and Israel. Apart from these basic objectives, this research study seeks to understand the dynamics of Iran's foreign policy making. It's an attempt to understand how ideological considerations form the backbone of Islamic Iran's Policy towards Israel. Above all it seeks to examine the extent to which ideology will continue to matter in Iran's policy towards the Jewish state. Whether there is a possibility of a rapprochement between the two states considering that Iran under the Khatami government reformulated its foreign policy and has succeeded in projecting the image of a more pragmatic and open Iran.

One of the central issues of debate in the analyses of Islamic Iran's foreign policy has been the role and importance of religious beliefs and values in determining the regime's foreign policy. Is Iran's Islamic foreign policy always conducted according to religious inspired parameters or is national interest also given importance? A careful examination of the growing literature on Iran shows a strong tendency to analyse the country's foreign policy by concentrating on the beliefs of the policymakers, often inferring the "Islamicness" of this or that policy from the clerical nature of the government and the official theological rationalizations. However, objections may be raised against the existing interpretations of the role of religion in Iran's foreign policy. Instead of being homogenous, the official ideology of the Islamic Republic has been shown to possess a composite character encompassing other elements such as Third Worldism and Persian nationalism.

Therefore, to understand Iran's foreign policy behaviour at the general level, the study would adopt the realist framework that defines interest in terms of power. Analytical in its nature, the study seeks to examine the centrality of ideology in shaping Iran's policy towards Israel as well as the compulsions of national interest, which at times result in apparent contradictions and aberrations in Iranian policy.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN AND ISRAEL**

The year 1979 was a landmark for both the Iranian nation as well as for the relationship between Israel and Iran. The new Islamic Republic attempted to reverse all the policies of the Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi both at the national and regional levels. Under the leadership of Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini it developed a unique position in the regional arena. Owing to its expansionist agenda<sup>1</sup> in the first decade it earned the scorn of the regional players like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the rest of the Arab world, with Syria being the notable exception. At the international level, Khomeini and his revolution proclaimed the United States as the biggest enemy of Iran and the Muslims and called it the Great Satan. With respect to Israel, Khomeini's proclamations were far more severe. For the Islamic Republic, it was a fabricated state surviving only due to the American tutelage. Shortly after its establishment, the Islamic republic severed all ties with the Jewish state and called for all Muslims to unite against Israel with the aim of destroying this unjust entity.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, while refusing to even acknowledge the Israeli state, it immediately embraced the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) under the leadership of Yasser Arafat.

The new regime made significant changes in the domestic and foreign policy structures. The state was reoriented towards religion, especially the Shia sect of Islam. Thus it was in a way an exclusive club. It made numerous changes at the national level to reiterate this stance.<sup>3</sup> In the foreign policy arena, the regime soon became embroiled in a bloody conflict with neighbouring Iraq. At this stage, Iran was isolated both regionally and internationally owing to sanctions and its perceived hostility towards its neighbours. In the initial years, it seemed that ideological positions would be the backbone of Iranian foreign policy behaviour. The desire to undo the Shah and his anti-people policies were

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<sup>1</sup> Iran's new rulers saw their revolution as a model and catalyst for Islamic Revolutions throughout the region and sought to advance such revolutions throughout the region and the Gulf monarchies in particular.

<sup>2</sup> In an address to the Syrian foreign minister after the Revolution Khomeini said, "If Muslims get together and pour a bucket of water on Israel; a flood would wash away Israel." Also the revolutionary slogan 'Death to Israel' became a central theme in Iranian revolutionary politics. For more details on Iran's revolutionary ideology see, David Menachri, *Post Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power* (London, 2001), R.K. Ramazani, "Khumayni's Islam in Iran's Foreign Policy" in Adeed Dawisha ed., *Islam in Foreign Policy* (London, 1983) and Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran*, (London, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> For example, the Iranian Constitution of 1979 institutionalised clerical rule at the highest level and was intended to perpetuate the rule of the theologian (*wilayat e- Faqih*).

all too powerful. Moving away from his policies thus became a paramount means of distinguishing the Islamic Republic from the Pehlavi region. If Shah's proximity made the Islamic Republic weary of the west, the Afghanistan crisis made the Soviet Union a strategic threat to Iran. Thus, the regime generated concerns and anxieties in both the blocs of the Cold War as well as among the bulk of the neighbouring Arab states.

However, pressures of the protracted war with Iraq and its near total isolation at the regional and international level soon warranted a shift towards pragmatism. This became clear with the much-publicized Iran-Contra affair and the Iranian procurement of arms from Israel, its most avowed enemy. As the war with Iraq ended in July 1988, Iran also began to mend fences with its neighbours. Also with the death of Khomeini in 1989 there appeared to be a gradual softening of postures witnessed in the Hojjat ul-Islam Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and the much welcomed Seyyed Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) periods.

### **The Islamic Republic of Iran**

The creation of the Islamic Republic in February 1979 represented a major landmark in the history of Iran. It paved the way for the establishment of an ideology-driven political system controlled by the religious establishment.<sup>4</sup> The basic objectives of the new regime were to abolish monarchy and all its policies and to erase the distinction between politics and religion. Khomeini himself wrote as early as 1970, "This world is political, adding that the Prophet himself had been a political personality." For him as he often argued, "Islam is political or else nothing."<sup>5</sup> Generally the history of the Islamic Revolution could be divided into three distinct periods. The first period is referred to as the 'first republic' or the period of revolutionary Islam from 1979 to 1988. The Second period from 1988-

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<sup>4</sup> For the political structure of the Islamic Republic see, Wilfried Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Washington D.C, 2000), Bulent Aras, "Transformation of the Iranian Political System: Towards a New Model", *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (Herzliya), Vol. 5, No. 3, September 2001, pp. 12-19; David Menashri, "The Islamic Republic of Iran: The Consolidation Phase", *Orient* (Hamburg), Vol. 25, No. 4, 1984, pp. 499-515.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in David Menashri, 'The Islamic Revolution in Iran: the Consolidation Phase', *Orient* Vol. 25, No. 4, 1984, p. 501.



1997, is referred to as the 'second republic' or the reconstruction period. The Third republic or the reform phase began with the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997.<sup>6</sup>

It is not possible to focus on all the dynamics of the Islamic Republic but the focus here will be primarily on the foreign policy especially its repercussions for Iran's relations with Israel. Though the Islamic regime broke all formal ties with the Jewish state, there have been points when their paths have crossed. While the Iran-Israel policies regarding crucial issues like the Arab-Israeli conflict and the issue of mutual threat perceptions will be addressed in the subsequent chapters, the focus of this chapter is to bring out the dynamics of Iranian foreign policy towards the Jewish state.

Perhaps the most striking Iranian policy vis-à-vis Israel can be observed by the treatment of Jews within Iran and how issues of national interest have overtaken ideological differences. Yet another example of this overbearing need to secure national interest could be seen in the clandestine arms deals between the two during the Iran-Iraq war. The exposure of these deals popularly referred to as the Iran-Contra affair pointed to a clear collusion of both states even though both denied any direct involvement. Last but not the least, one common feature that has remained interlinked with Iran-Israel politics is the overbearing influence of the US in this tumultuous relationship.

After the seizure of power by the revolutionary forces in February 1979, the Islamic leaders under the guidance of Khomeini paved the way for the consolidation of power. As early as March, the monarchy was abolished by a referendum and the Islamic revolution was formally established. In December 1979, an Islamic constitution was ratified. In institutionalising clerical rule at the highest level, the constitution was intended to perpetuate the rule of the theologian (*wilayat e- Faqih*). In July 1989 a referendum approved the revision of the original constitution. The amended version of the constitution gave more power to the President of the Islamic Republic and the position of the Supreme Leader was transformed into a symbolic function.

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<sup>6</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic* (London, 1995) p. 150.

When the Islamic regime took over, one yardstick used to measure its allies and foes was the degree of their closeness to the former regime. Khomeini and his followers sought to reverse the pro-Israeli policies of the Shah. He was extremely critical of Israel's role in training and consolidating the SAVAK.<sup>7</sup> Following the celebrations in 1971 marking the 2,500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Persian monarchy, Khomeini accused the government of asking for Israel's help to prepare for the celebrations. In a message to *hajj* pilgrims in 1971 he portrayed Israel as "the universally recognized enemy of Islam and the Muslims; that with the help of the Shah's government has penetrated all the economic, military and political affairs of Iran."<sup>8</sup>

Khomeini's rhetoric against Israel were also linked with his deep anti-imperialist sentiments. In his words, Israel was created by imperialism in order to suppress and exploit the Muslim peoples and has been supported ever since by all the imperialists. With regards to the Israel-Palestine conflict the Islamic regime demonstrated its position quite early. Within days after its installation, the Islamic Republic invited the PLO to establish an Embassy in the same building, which housed the Israeli mission when the Shah was in power. Consequently, it has opposed any diplomatic recognition of Israel and has vehemently opposed any negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It saw war as the only means to resolving the conflict and has opposed various peace initiatives between Israel and its Arab neighbours. As discussed in Chapter IV Iran lent considerable support to militant organisations like the Hizbullah in Lebanon and the Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian territories in their struggle against Israel.

Iran's unconditional acceptance of the UN Security Council Resolution 598 calling for a ceasefire to the Iran-Iraq War and the death of Khomeini, which brought to power a new leadership, heralded the second phase of the revolution in Iran. This period is often referred to as the 'Second Republic'. It witnessed the appointment of Rafsanjani as the Commander-in-Chief, who was seen as a pragmatic leader. The new leadership now

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<sup>7</sup> A detailed account of the Iran-Israel ties can be found in Uri Bialer, "The Iranian Connection in Israel's Foreign Policy 1948-1951", *Middle East Journal* (Washington D.C), Vol. 39, No. 2, Spring 1985, pp. 292-315. See also *The U.S Supporter of the Occupiers of Qods*, (Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps., 1979)

<sup>8</sup> Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, n.6 p.269.

began to question the idea of exporting the Islamic revolution to the other Islamic states.<sup>9</sup> It pressed for the formulation of a more pragmatic foreign policy that would end the political isolation of Iran. Iran in short, had embarked on the road to recovery by the end of 1989. Under the guidance of a new spiritual and executive leadership, its efforts to rebuild the weakened and exhausted army and to reconstruct the shattered economy were beginning to show positive signs. On the diplomatic front, Tehran managed to reopen channels of communications with most of its former antagonists (including the US, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Egypt), and was taking steps that were aimed at reintegrating Iran fully into the regional and international order.<sup>10</sup>

Yet in spite of these pragmatic approaches in foreign policy there was little change in the Iranian stance against Israel. Iran was extremely critical of the US brokered Middle East peace process initiated in Madrid in 1991. It went to the extent of organising a parallel Palestine Conference in Tehran. The policy of dual containment followed by President Bill Clinton and endorsed by Israel went further in consolidating Iran's hostility towards the Jewish state. The election of Mohammad Khatami in May 1997 was widely welcomed both in terms of reform in the domestic arena as well as greater pragmatism in the foreign policy sphere. Although Khatami also used harsh words like racism and fascism to denounce Israel,<sup>11</sup> there seemed to be some relaxation in Iranian policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict. In an interview with CNN television in January 1998, Khatami continued to express disbelief in the possibility of achieving a real and just peace, but denied any intention to disrupt the efforts to reach such a peace.<sup>12</sup> Adopting a more belligerent tone at the Tehran OIC Summit in December 1997, Khatami reiterated that genuine peace could be established only through the realization of all the legitimate

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<sup>9</sup> Mozaffari, Mehdi, "Changes in the Iranian Political System after Khomeini's Death", *Political Studies* (London), Vol. 41, No. 4, 1993, p. 615.

<sup>10</sup> Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, n. 6, p. 150.

<sup>11</sup> At his address at the UN General Assembly on 11 November 2001, Referring to another type of terrorism now being practiced openly, President Khatami pointed out the racist regime of Israel's aggressive conduct against the real owners of Palestine, particularly in the holy city of Beyt-ul-Muqaddas (Quds). <http://www.president.ir/eng/cronicnews/1380/8008/800820/800820.htm#b1>, accessed on 15 May 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Khatami interview with CNN, 7 January 1998, <http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9801/07/iran/interview.html>, accessed on 30 May 2005

rights of the Palestinian people, including the inalienable right to self determination, return to refugees and liberation of the occupied territories.<sup>13</sup>

In his interview with CNN, Khatami also talked of a “Dialogue among Civilizations” specifically stressing on the need for reappraisal of US-Iran relations. This was followed by tacit Iranian support to the American intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet in his 2002 State of the Union address President George W. Bush categorized Iran as a member of the Axis of Evil along with North Korea and Iraq.<sup>14</sup> This was fuelled by periodic claims by the US and Israel that Iran had been harbouring international terrorism. Questions were also raised on Iran’s nuclear programme, which was seen to be violating the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of which Iran is a signatory. Iran also adopted a very strong stance against these charges. Details of the Iranian-Israel nuclear debate will be dealt with in subsequent chapters.

Over the years the Islamic Republic has demonstrated that irrespective of the nature of the government, the policy towards Israel will be dominated by the ideological influences. Whether it is the revolutionary ideology of the Khomeini period, open door policy of the Rafsanjani years or moderate policy of Khatami,<sup>15</sup> the policy towards the Jewish state had been guided by history and ideology. Yet some initial signs of change could also be discerned. These have so far been restricted mainly to non-official statements and have been made by individuals lacking meaningful political power. While Iran has showed concrete signs of some form of rapprochement even with its sworn enemy, the US, the policy towards Israel still remains hostile. The hostile attitude to Israel had its roots in Khomeini’s dogma and in the view of the Iranian ruling elite there were no sufficient pragmatic consideration to convince Tehran to retreat from this entrenched enmity. In fact this was one of the rare issues on which the revolutionary ideology and national interests as defined by the Islamic regime seem to coincide.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Menashri, n.5 p.289. In Iranian parlance, “occupied territories” implies not just those territories Israel and occupied during the June 1967 war but also the Jewish State itself.

<sup>14</sup> Full text can be found on <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>

<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the various political factions within Iran see; Farhang Rajaae, “A Thermidor of Islamic Yuppies? Conflict and Compromise in Iran’s politics”, *Middle East Journal* Vol. 53, No. 2, Spring 1999, pp. 217-231.

<sup>16</sup> Menashri, n. 5 p. 262.

## The Jews in Iran

Pre-Islamic Persia was a multinational empire with Zoroastrianism as the dominant religion. The Arab invasion in the seventh century AD resulted in the spread of Islam. Contemporary Iran is a heterogeneous polity. Although the majority of the population is Shia, there exist in Iran a diverse number of groups like the Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Bahais and others. It was felt that the creation of such an Islamic state would spell trouble for the various ethnic groups within Iran, including the Jews who numbered about 80,000. The statements and policies of the revolutionary regime were uncompromising in their stance against Israel and the policy of Zionism. Therefore, there were fears that a wave of anti-Semitic attacks would follow in Iran after the consolidation of the new regime. However even though the population of Jews in Iran has reduced since 1979, there have not been many cases of persecution of Jews seen especially if one compares the situation of Iranian Jews with that of the Jews in the Arab world since the creation of Israel in 1948.

The presence of Jews in Persia predates the Christians. At least since the conquest of the Babylonian Empire by Cyrus the Great in 539 B.C Jews lived within the Persian borders. Since then the Jews in Iran have been an integral part of the Iranian political and social system. Although the Jewish community enjoyed little political rights there were hardly any instances of persecution. The Constitutional Revolution of 1906 was viewed by many Jews as a positive development. The new constitution granted one representative to the Jews. In the period of Reza Shah there were a few cases of Jewish persecution. In the 1930s Reza Shah's pro-Nazi sympathies seriously threatened Iranian Jewry, but even then anti- Semitic activity was not present.

The founding of the State of Israel in 1948 prompted the mass emigration of Jews from Iran. Not all those who emigrated were Iranian Jews; Iraqi Jews used Iran as a transit point to Israel to escape the persecution in Iraq. Between 1948-1953 more than one-third of the Jewish population of Iran immigrated to Israel.<sup>17</sup> Mohammad Reza Shah's reign

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<sup>17</sup> Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran*, (London, 2000) p. 47.

was the most prosperous era for Iranian Jewry. Jewish organisations, synagogues and other associations operated freely at both the provincial and national levels. A crucial factor in the dramatic improvement of the Iranian Jews was the close connection between the Shah's regime and the State of Israel. In the 1970s, the number of Jews was estimated to be around 80,000; within one year of the Revolution their numbers declined dramatically to about 50,000-60,000. By the mid-1990s the number of Jews declined to about 35,000.<sup>18</sup>

The establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 laid the foundation for the supreme role of religion for the new regime. It established an Islamic state based on Shia principles and this was embodied in Article 12 of the Iranian Constitution adopted in 1979. It stated: "*The official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Jafari School and this principle will remain eternally immutable...*"<sup>19</sup>

The envisagement of the *Faqih* and Khomeini in particular as a divinely ordained and inspired ruler of the *umma*, continued to pervade the political thought of the new regime. The revolutionaries acknowledged the *Faqih* as the designated deputy of the Twelfth *Imam* during his Occultation. It also views the *Wilayat-al-Faqih* as an extension of the *wilayat* of the Prophet and *Imams* and as such accords it a sacrosanct character. Thus the new regime clearly gave precedence to the Shia school of Islam over others.

In such a scenario many feared that the non-Shia and non-Muslim minorities in Iran would face wide scale persecution by the Islamic rulers.<sup>20</sup> However, it appears that pragmatic concerns were in the minds of the ruling elite and they recognized the futility of alienating the minorities in Iran so explicitly. Moreover committed to an Islamic rule, they were also bound by the Islamic code concerning the minorities. Thus the framers of the Islamic constitution incorporated a few of these groups in the formal document. Article 13 of the constitution thus states:

*Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian Iranians are the only Recognized Religious minorities, who within the limits of the law are free to perform*

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p. 48

<sup>19</sup> Constitution of Iran, 1989

<sup>20</sup> Sanasarian, n. 17 p. 49.

*their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education.*<sup>21</sup>

It is important to mention here the concept of 'People of the Book'. In literal interpretation Islam recognizes only one other group of non-Muslims, the '*Ahl al-Ketab*' (The People of the Book) and they were granted the status of *Ahl al-Dhimma* (the Protected People). These in practice have been Christians, Jews, Sabaeans and Zoroastrians who follow divine books of revelation. Their privileged position was conditional upon their submission to Muslims and the payment of *jazieh* (a special tax paid by the non-Muslims to the Muslim rulers).<sup>22</sup>

It was in continuation of this practice that the Jews were provided with special status by the Islamic republic. The Jews were recognised as 'People of the Book' and allowed to practice their religion freely. They elect their own deputy to the 270-member parliament and enjoy certain rights of self-administration. Jewish burial and divorce laws are accepted by Islamic courts and Jews are also conscripted into the army.<sup>23</sup> As of late 1990s, 27 Synagogues function in Tehran, Jewish schools flourish and the Jewish hospital is among the city's most respected.<sup>24</sup>

However even though the Jews were given legal rights and some amount of political representation, there are several loopholes in the official policy towards the Jews. Looking at the evolution of the Islamic state it is very important to comprehend firstly the views of the Supreme Leader, Khomeini on this issue. In the first phase of revolutionary Iran, the domestic and foreign policy sphere was guided almost without debate by Khomeini's ideological principles. In his pre-revolutionary works addressing Islamic justice, Khomeini argued that, despite the Prophet Mohammad's benevolence and kindness towards thieves and non-Muslims, he was compelled to destroy the Jewish tribe of Bani Quraizah because they were promoting corruption in Islamic society and were

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<sup>21</sup> Constitution of Iran, 1989

<sup>22</sup> Sanasarian, n. 17 p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Theodoulou, 'Jews in Iran describe a life of freedom inspite Anti-Israel actions by Tehran,' *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston, Mass.), 3 February 1998, (Electronic Edition).

<sup>24</sup> John Burns, 'In the Islamic Mideast, Scant place for Jews', *New York Times*, 25 July 1999, (Electronic Edition).

harmful to Islam.<sup>25</sup> The Jews were also the target of his attack against the monarchy in Iran. In his pre-Revolutionary writings he made little distinction between the Jews and Israelis. He said, the Jews and the Israelis were interchangeable entities who had penetrated all facets of life. On the very first page of his *Al- Hukuma al-Islamiyya*, (Islamic Government) Khomeini pointed out,

*Since its inception. the Islamic movement has been afflicted with the Jews, for it was they who first established anti-Islamic propaganda and joined in various stratagems and as you can see, this activity continues down to our present day.*<sup>26</sup>

However, once the revolution had succeeded, there seemed to be a reduction in the anti-Jewish rhetoric by Khomeini and his regime. Immediately after Khomeini's return to Iran some prominent figures of the Jewish community met the ayatollah to affirm their community's allegiance and to make a plea for protection. In one of his messages in November 1979, he declared "*Jews are different from Zionists, if the Muslims overcome the Zionists, they will leave the Jews alone. They (the Jews) are a nation like other nations; their life continues on and they cannot be rejected by Muslims.*"<sup>27</sup>

Even though Khomeini spoke of a distinction between the Zionists and Jews, there was no clear criterion for such a difference. It remained wholly the prerogative of the Islamic regime to decide who is a Zionist and who is not. Within a few months after the return of Khomeini to Iran, the Jewish community was startled by the execution of Habib Elghanian, a multimillionaire Jewish businessman in May 1979. He was a renowned industrialist with close connections with Israel. Although the government denied that he was executed because he was a Jew, the charges brought against him alarmed Iranian Jews. Among others he was accused of: "Friendship with the enemies of God and being an enemy of the Friends of God...warring with God and his emissaries and economic

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<sup>25</sup> Sanasarian, n.17 p. 28

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Menashri, n.5 p. 275

<sup>27</sup> Sanasarian, n.17 p. 111.



imperialism.<sup>28</sup> There were numerous charges brought out against other Jews including spying for Israel and the United States, supporting Zionism, corruption and drug dealing.

At the level of state policy, Jewish families were prevented from travelling abroad in groups, as the government was fearful of mass emigration. However Jews continued to leave Iran even though in small numbers and as result the Jewish population in Iran dropped to 30,000 by 1986 as opposed to 80,000 in 1979. Yet even though the official Iranian stance fell short of Jewish persecution, there was since the revolution an undercurrent of hostility and mistrust towards the Jews. This often manifested in restrictions on Jewish press in Iran and the publication of anti-Semitic literature like *Protocol of the Elders of Zion*<sup>29</sup> under the auspices of the Iranian government.

Even though the death of Khomeini and the establishment of somewhat moderate regimes under Rafsanjani and then Mohammad Khatami brought about a welcome change in Iranian foreign policy, it made little difference to the question of Israel. In the 1980s a new case that came up was the trial in France of Roger Garaudy who was convicted by a Paris court in February 1998 for contesting the view that the Holocaust amounted to a crime against humanity. This was used by Iran to further its opposition to Israel. Garaudy was invited to Tehran and during his meeting on 20 April 1998, Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei pointed to the similarities between Zionism and Nazism.

Even a relatively moderate leader like Khatami regretted that a thinker and believer like Garaudy was brought to trial just for publishing research about the Jews and the Zionists, which was displeasing to the West.<sup>30</sup> Even the Khatami government seemed to be following the same line as his predecessors, The deputy minister of Islamic guidance, Mohammad Ali Tashkiri supported "dialogue among the divine religions." This dialogue could also include Jewish scholars, he said, provided they disassociate themselves from Zionist mentality.<sup>31</sup> Once again the elite was left to make the distinction.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.112.

<sup>29</sup> *Jewish Conspiracy: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Tehran, 1985).

<sup>30</sup> Menashri, n. 5 p.279.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 280.

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The treatment of Jews resurfaced in February 1999 when 13 Jews in Shiraz and Isfahan were arrested on charges of spying for Israel. Among the group were several prominent rabbis, teachers of Hebrew, and their students. The charges centered on alleged acts of espionage on behalf of Israel, an offence punishable by death. The accused were detained for over one year before trial and were kept in solitary confinement, without official charges or access to lawyers. In April 2000, the defendants were appointed lawyers, and a closed trial was held in a revolutionary court in Shiraz. Human rights groups and governments around the world criticized the lack of due process in the proceedings. On 1 July 2000, 10 of the 13, along with two Muslim defendants, were convicted on charges of illegal contact with Israel, conspiracy to form an illegal organization, and recruiting agents. They received prison sentences ranging from 4 to 13 years and the remaining three were acquitted. The lawyers of those convicted filed an appeal and on 21 September 2000, an appeals court overturned the convictions for forming an illegal organization and recruiting agents, but upheld the convictions for illegal contacts with Israel. Their sentences were reduced to between 2 and 9 years' imprisonment. One of the 10 convicted was released in February 2001 upon completion of his prison term. Three additional prisoners were released before the end of their sentences in October 2002. In April 2003, it was announced that the last five were to be released.

Jewish groups outside the country noted that the March 1999 arrest coincided with an increase in anti-Semitic propaganda in newspapers and journals associated with hardline elements within the government. Within the Jewish community a feeling of insecurity began creeping in. As Haroun Yashaya'i, head of the Jewish society in Iran, observed: "... this has been one of the worst things that's happened to the Jewish community here since the Islamic revolution... the accusation of organized espionage has hurt us a lot and it's caused feelings of insecurity within the community... what does spying mean? If I write to my brother in Israel, does that make me a spy?"<sup>32</sup>

Since the beginning of the trial, Jewish businesses in Tehran and Shiraz were targets of vandalism and boycotts, and Jews reportedly suffered personal harassment and

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<sup>32</sup> Jim Muir, 'Trial puts spotlight on Iran's Jews', *BBC*, 13 April 2000, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/711917.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/711917.stm), accessed on 22 February 2005.

intimidation. Human Rights Watch reported the death in May 1998 of Jewish businessman Ruhollah Kakhodah-Zadeh, who was hanged in prison without a public charge or legal proceeding. Reports indicate that Kakhodah-Zadeh might have been killed for assisting Jews to emigrate. As an accountant, Kakhoda-Zadeh provided power-of-attorney services for Jews departing the country.<sup>33</sup>

If one were to make an objective analysis, some important points would come up in context of the Jews in Iran. Looking closely at the status of the Jews since the revolution, the primacy of pragmatic considerations comes to the surface. As indicated, Khomeini seemed to be more anti-Israeli in the pre-revolutionary years and gradually there was a conscious effort to reduce anti-Jewish rhetoric and substitute it with anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli rhetoric. Whether this was because of the plea for protection made by the Jewish community or a calculated move to avoid a backlash against the Jewish community cannot be accurately ascertained. However that there was a difference in the official distinction and actual practice is pretty clear.

Despite parliamentary representations and some form of religious autonomy the situation of the Iranian Jews has not been very comfortable. This is clearly indicated by the migration of Jews to Israel and the US since the revolution. Owing to the regime's stated animosity towards the Jewish state, there has been an undercurrent of mistrust against the local Jews. However there is also another dimension to the issue.

If one looks at the population figures in Iran and compares them with Jewish population in the Arab world, Jewish communities that totalled one million people in 1948 dwindled between the 1950s and 1980s to the point that barely 60,000 including the 50,000 in Iran and Turkey live in the region.<sup>34</sup> Therefore it is safe to say that the fate of the Iranian Jews has been much better than their co-religionists in the Arab world. The Iranian Jewish community still remains the largest in the region outside of Israel.

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<sup>33</sup> U.S. Department of State, 2001 *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom*, Released by the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Washington, D.C, 26 October 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Burns, n. 24

When considering the various espionage charges against the Jews, once again, it needs to be looked at carefully. In the two major cases during Khatami's tenure- the case of the 13 Jews and the Zadeh issue- it should be noted that all the 13 Jews were released over a period of time. This needs to be observed in the light of the overall record of the Islamic state. Since the revolution, the regime had no qualms about publicly executing anyone who they perceive as a threat to Iran's national security- thus the case of Zadeh and Elghanian earlier. Therefore the condition of the Jews is still not too bad. Taking a comparative view, the Jewish community fares much better than the Bahai community in Iran, which constitutes a greater share in the demographics of the state but does not enjoy the benefits granted to the recognised religious minorities.

### **The Iran-Contra Affair**

Moving on from domestic policies to foreign, the analysis of Iranian foreign policy towards Israel indicates that the dynamics of revolutionary Iran were guided more by ideological than pragmatic concerns. It was the ideological position of Khomeini, which played a crucial role in policy formulation, both at the domestic and the foreign policy level. Yet there has been some deviation from this line of thinking by Khomeini himself. By the time the new revolutionary leadership established some kind of roots in the Iranian political system, a new crisis emerged for the nascent Republic. This was the war with Iraq, which was probably the longest war in the history of modern warfare. It slowly transformed from a boundary dispute to a much larger canvas.

The Arab neighbours found in this war a chance to destabilize the revolutionary forces within Iran before Iran destabilized them. Thus the war saw a total isolation of the Islamic Republic at the regional level. Even at the broader international level the radical path followed by Khomeini's regime had not earned many friends; therefore there was little international support for Iran. In fact it is often remarked that it was the US, which had enticed its Arab friend Saddam Hussein to attack Iran in an attempt to repeat the Mossadeq experience of 1953.

Even though Iran was politically and financially isolated in the war, it performed reasonably well in the initial stages of the war. The spirit of nationalism and revolution was still dominant and helped much in the initial victories sought by the Iran. However soon Iran was on the defensive without enough financial and military capabilities and a need was felt to break the wall of isolation for immediate national security concerns. This was the general background in which Israel and the US found an opportunity to re-establish contact with the Iranian regime to secure their own national interests. For Israel, this war proved to be a welcome sight. The entire Arab world was embroiled in a war away from the Israeli border giving Israel the much-needed reprieve. This was also the time that it was consolidating the peace treaty with Egypt at Camp David much against the wishes of the other Arab states. Thus the war not only diverted the Arab attention but also provided an opportunity to realign with the Iranian state with which it had excellent relations before 1979.

This attempt at realignment is what is often referred to as the Iran-Contra affair. This refers to the Israeli arms supply to Iran with the knowledge and support of the US and the subsequent diversion of funds to the Contras in Nicaragua. Two persistent concerns lay behind US participation in arms transfers to Iran. First, the US government anxiously sought the release of seven US citizens abducted in Beirut, Lebanon, in separate incidents between 7 March 1984 and 9 June 1985. They were being held by groups identified with or sympathetic to Iran. Second, it had a latent and unresolved interest in establishing ties with Iran. Few in the US government doubted Iran's strategic importance or the risk of Soviet (then entrenched in Afghanistan) meddling in the succession crisis that might follow the death of Khomeini. For these reasons, some of the senior members of the Reagan Administration were convinced that efforts should be made to open potential channels to Iran. Arms transfers ultimately appeared to offer a means to achieve both the release of the hostages and a strategic opening to Iran. The operation was extremely complicated with a number of players involved and it may not be possible to highlight all the nuances here.

Before going into some of the details of the issue, it is important to point towards the unexpected predicament in which Iran found itself. On the one hand, it regarded itself as

militant opponent of Israel and on the other it desperately needed weapons to counter the Iraqi offensive. The US had imposed an arms embargo on the Islamic Republic but under the Shah the military was almost completely American equipped and trained. Hence, Iran was primarily interested in US-made weapons and spare parts. In the face of these facts, soon Iranian purchasing agents realized that Israel was the only possessor of the armaments they required and that it was both willing and able to bypass the formal US prohibition.

This fact was realized by Khomeini and the rest of the leadership in Iran and there was a debate whether to place pragmatic considerations before ideological dogma. The dilemma however was resolved by Khomeini himself; no one else had the necessary political power and audacity to decide. In early 1981 Khomeini judged that it would be legitimate for the Islamic Republic to purchase Israeli arms so long as the actual sellers were not Israelis. The Ayatollah wanted his agents to be able to claim that they had never bought any weapons from Israel; he needed a 'plausible deniability.'<sup>35</sup> Also the person who, more than any other voiced support for this new tendency towards moderation was Rafsanjani. At a press conference in July 1984, Rafsanjani praised the high quality of American arms and said they were better than Soviet or French equipment. He added that his country did not rule out the possibility of purchasing American arms, directly or indirectly.<sup>36</sup> Thus through a complex network Israel started supplying Khomeini's Iran the much needed weaponry.

Since the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war the Israelis realized the potential of the arms sales to Iran and made repeated attempts to impress upon the US governments its vast potential in terms of political, economic and military advantages. In the early 1980, Prime Minister Menachem Begin approved a shipment of tires for Phantom fighter planes as well as small amounts of weapons for the Iranian army. This shipment was the subject of an angry exchange between Begin and American President Jimmy Carter who insisted that Israel should not ship military equipment to Iran until the American hostages held in

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<sup>35</sup> Mansour Farhang, "The Iran- Israel Connection", *Arab Studies Quarterly* (New York, N.Y.), Vol. 11, No. 1, Winter 1989, p. 88

<sup>36</sup> Samuel Segev, *The Iranian Triangle: The Untold story of Israel's role in the Iran-Contra Affair*, (New York, 1988) p. 131.

Tehran were released.<sup>37</sup> Again in December 1981, Israeli arms merchants connected to European black market began to supply some of Iran's crucial military needs.

With the inauguration of the Ronald Reagan administration in January 1981, the Israelis considered themselves no longer bound by sanctions imposed by the Carter administration. Therefore a channel of communication was initiated to garner US consent to arms supplies to Iran. This clandestine channel was exposed in 1986 and under pressure from the Congress and the media; President Reagan instituted the Tower Commission in December 1986 under the chairmanship of Senator John Tower. The US Congress then on 18 November 1987 issued its final report on the affair. According to the Tower Commission Report, in August 1985, Israel delivered 100 TOW's to Iran. A subsequent delivery of 408 more TOW's occurred in September 1985. In contrast to the August TOW shipment, the US was directly involved in the November transfer of the HAWK missiles.

National Security Advisor John Poindexter and Lt. Col. Oliver North raised a new proposal for an arms-for-hostages deal. It involved the transfer of 3,300 Israeli TOW's and 50 Israeli HAWK's in exchange for release of all the American hostages held in Lebanon. The arms were to be delivered in five instalments, spread over a 24-hour period. Each instalment was to result in the release of one or two hostages, so that in the end all seven US citizens held in Beirut and a French hostage would be freed.

There occurred after the first transfer of arms a number of meetings between the Americans, Israelis and the Iranian go-between Manucher Ghorbanifar. However it is clear that a large number of weapons were provided to Iran by the US through Israel, circumventing the US Congress, which had imposed an arms embargo on Iran. Another angle to this murky deal is the diversion of funds procured by these sales to the contras in Nicaragua. While the intrinsic details are beyond the scope of this study, it is essential to figure out the motivations of the principal players, namely, Iran and Israel.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid p. 5.

It is clear from the Israeli-Iranian collusion that issues of national interest take precedence over ideological positions. For Israel, the realignment with the Islamic Republic as mentioned earlier was an opportunity to keep the Arab world away from its own borders. It was also benefiting economically from the military sales to Iran. In an official statement issued on 25 November 1986, Israel maintained:

The government of Israel confirms that it helped transfer defensive weapons and spare parts from the US to Iran, at the request of the United States government. Payment for this equipment was transferred directly by an Iranian representative to a Swiss bank in accordance with the instructions of American representatives, without the money going through Israel. The government of Israel was surprised by the report that part of this money was transferred to the Contras. This has nothing to do with Israel and the government of Israel had no knowledge of this. It should be understood that Israel was not and will not be willing to serve as a pipeline for such transfers.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the evidence to the contrary, the Iranians they continued to deny their involvement in these deals. But it is also understandable that the Islamic regime shies away from admitting to these deals considering its public hostility towards the Jewish state. Mansour Farhang offered a possible explanation as to why the regime did not see a problem in buying weapons from Israel. According to him, "Ayatollah Khomeini believes he is the one who is exploiting his enemies' greed and shortsightedness to serve the cause of Islam".<sup>39</sup> Therefore once again it is clear that at times issues of national security overcome ideological considerations and it is essential to deal with them in a pragmatic manner.

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Ibid, p.314; See also Statement in the Knesset by Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Peres, 26 November 1986,

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Foreign%20Relations/Israels%20Foreign%20Relations%20since%201947/1984-1988/205%20Statement%20in%20the%20Knesset%20by%20Vice%20Premier%20and%20F>, accessed on 10 July 2005; Interview with Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Peres on Israel Television (Arabic Service), 27 November 1986,

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Foreign%20Relations/Israels%20Foreign%20Relations%20since%201947/1984-1988/206%20Interview%20with%20Vice%20Premier%20and%20Foreign%20Minist>, accessed on July 10, 2005

<sup>39</sup> Farhang, n.35 p. 93.



## The United States and Iran: Is there a rapprochement?

A strategic triangle was formed during the Iran-Iraq war involving Israel, the US and Iran, therefore it is essential to examine the role played by the US in Iran's relations with Israel. During the reign of the Shah, Iran perceived the relations with Israel as the smoothest vehicle to join the American bandwagon. A cordial and close relationship with Israel was seen to be essential to secure American favours, economic as well as political. As mentioned in the introductory chapter the Shah was extremely dependent on the US for his economic and military needs and the new state of Israel acted as his regional link. Israel at the time was following the policy of peripheral diplomacy advocated by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, aimed at securing alliances with the non-Arab countries. American and Israeli involvement in supplying arms to Iran was the result of a policy of cooperation that began during the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration in the 1950s. For more than 25 years, the US, Israel and Iran worked together in an unofficial strategic alliance aimed at halting the Soviet Union's expansion in the region and weakening its allies in the Arab world.

However just as the ties to Israel were snapped with the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the fate of US-Iranian relations went through a similar phase. Khomeini and his revolutionaries were extremely critical of the pro-US policies of the Shah. Khomeini denounced the US as the 'Great Satan'. He did not see why Iran should have any relationship with it. He charged that Iran's relationship with the US was that of a 'tyrant' (*zalem*) with an 'oppressed' (*mazlum*) people, that of a 'plunderer' (*gharat-gar*) with a 'ravaged' victim (*gharat-shodeh*)<sup>40</sup> The hostage crisis when students seized the American embassy in November 1979 enlarged the rift in US-Iran relations. It also isolated Iran in the international system. The estrangement of Iran from the US was intensified as a result of American economic and diplomatic sanctions. On 12 November 1979 President Carter imposed a ban on US imports of Iranian oil and froze Iranian assets in the US estimated at US\$ 8 billion. These were followed by other measures such as the US breaking of

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<sup>40</sup> R. K. Ramazani, 'Khumayni's Islam in Iran's Foreign Policy', in Aheed Dawisha ed., *Islam in Foreign Policy*, (London, 1983) p.10.

diplomatic relations with Iran, the ban on all American exports to Iran (except food and medicine) and all American imports from Iran.

However, as examined elsewhere, despite the open hatred projected at each other, the US-Iran relations remain very complex. The evidence brought forth by the exposure of the Iran-Contra deals shows quite conclusively that Khomeini had himself sanctioned the arms deal with the 'Great Satan'. Even in the hostage crisis Khomeini and his leadership realized the futility of such a prolonged strategy, which had caused enough international outrage. It may well be argued that the Iranian decision to settle the hostage crisis was made purely for political and economic, or other pragmatic reasons. Ideologically it should have been unacceptable for Muslim leaders to compromise with the 'Great Satan'. This pragmatism took precedence in other cases as well. There is evidence of Iranian oil sales to the 'Great Satan' arranged through a Geneva based trading company named Gatoil International.<sup>41</sup>

Even after the death of Khomeini, many felt that Rafsanjani would gradually pave the way for a more pragmatic foreign policy. However though the new leadership made significant advances in improving relations with the European countries and the neighbouring Gulf monarchies, there was little improvement in US-Iran relations. The beginning of the 1990s created a new villain for the US in the region in the shape of Iraq under the leadership of Saddam Hussein much encouraged by the recent victory against Iran. Thus the US under the Clinton administration followed a policy of dual containment vis-à-vis Iran and Iraq. In the late 1990s, the appearance of political liberalization in Iran persuaded the Clinton administration to discontinue the Iranian component of "dual containment." Although the bulk of the sanctions regime was maintained, Washington experimented with the possibility of engaging Tehran through modest unilateral gestures. However this also did not bring any meaningful rapprochement with the Islamic regime.

The beginning of the next decade brought violence and destruction into the streets of New York and Washington in the form of the September 11 attacks. The aftershocks of this attack were felt in the West Asian region especially Iran. The most dramatic

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid.* p. 23.

development in U.S.-Iran relations during this period was President George W. Bush's decision to include Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, in his construct of an "axis of evil". The reference came in response to the discovery of a weapons cache reportedly supplied by Iran en route to the Palestinian Authority,<sup>42</sup> but it undercut several months of tacit cooperation between Washington and Tehran on the war and the post-conflict stabilization of Afghanistan.

The Iranian leadership seems to be divided on the issue of re-establishing ties with the United States. The hard-liners consider themselves the most ardent Khomeini disciples and argue that the revolution was less an anti-monarchical rebellion than as a continued uprising against the forces that once sustained the US presence in Iran: Western imperialism, Zionism, and Arab despotism. Ayatollah Mahmood Hashemi Shahroudi, the Head of Judiciary, said in 2001, "Our national interests lie with antagonizing the Great Satan. We condemn any cowardly stance towards America and any word on compromise with the Great Satan." For ideologues like him, international ostracism is the necessary price for revolutionary affirmation.<sup>43</sup>

The pragmatists among Khomeini's heirs believe that the regime's survival depends on a more judicious international course. These realists gravitate around the influential former President Rafsanjani and occupy key positions throughout the national security establishment. The leadership in Iran also realizes that the economy of the country was in shambles and immediate reforms were needed. Some officials have gone so far as to suggest that Iran's economic difficulties could be redressed if Tehran continues to have such a tense relationship with the United States. The exasperated head of the Management and Planning Organization, Hamid Reza Baradaran Shoraka, has noted that among the major obstacles to the country's development are the economic sanctions

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<sup>42</sup> Commonly known as the *Karine A* Affair, this is discussed in Robert Satloff, "Karine-A: The Strategic Implications of Iranian-Palestinian Collusion", *Policy Watch* (Washington D.C) No. 593, 15 January 2002, (Electronic Edition), [www.washingtoninstitute.org](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org),

<sup>43</sup> Kenneth Pollack and Ray Takeyh, 'Taking on Tehran' *Foreign Affairs* (New York, N.Y), Vol. 84, No. 2, March-April 2005, (Electronic Edition) [www.foreignaffairs.org](http://www.foreignaffairs.org)

imposed by Washington. Continued antagonism towards the United States would hardly ensure that these sanctions are lifted.<sup>44</sup>

There is a gradual reassessment by the US regarding its policy options towards a possible nuclear Islamic Republic. According to a report published by the Council on Foreign Relations in 2004 Washington should propose a compartmentalized process of dialogue, confidence building, and incremental engagement. It advocates that the Bush Administration should identify the discrete set of issues on which critical U.S. and Iranian interests converge and must be prepared to try to make progress along separate tracks, even while considerable differences remain in other areas. Given Iran's pressing economic challenges, the most powerful inducements for Tehran would be economic measures.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore the need for rapprochement seems to be felt by both the states. At present there seems to be an internal struggle within the Islamic regime on a future course with the United States. Significant signals are being given by both parties but substantial policy changes are yet to be operationalised. Coming back to the focus of this study it remains to be seen whether a gradual change in Iran's policy towards the US would bring about a change in its policy towards the Jewish state.

Analysing the evolution of revolutionary Iran over the years, a few similarities in its policies can be observed. Although it may appear that Islamic Iran continues to be guided by ideological principles enshrined by Khomeini, the reality is quite different. The Islamic regime has over the years succumbed to the pressures of national interests. This is noticeable in its changing posture towards the United States and the rest of the Western world and its reconciliation with the monarchical regimes of the Persian Gulf, which once it aimed to undermine. The leadership in Iran has realized over the last 25 years that it is not possible to administer a nation such as Iran by isolating it regionally and internationally. Iran has much to gain economically and politically with renewed relations with the European Union and possibly with the United States.

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski and Robert M. Gates, *Iran: Time for a New Approach* (New York, 2004) p. 42

However one facet of Iranian politics continues to be somewhat frozen in time and that is its complete hostility and non-recognition of the state of Israel. Even though they have negotiated with Israel during the Iran-Contra deals, the official position towards the Jewish state remains the same. Iran's position on Israel is as one Iranian newspaper stated in 1999, even deeper than our opposition to the United States. While the animosity to the latter is due to its 'anti-human politics'; Israel 'is illegitimate by its very basis, foundation and structure. Moreover if the US did, one day, change its policy, it would cease to be a major enemy. But Israel would always remain an enemy, under all circumstances. As long as a 'Zionist regime exists in part of Palestine' it vowed, Iran's struggle against it will continue.<sup>46</sup>

Therefore what are the prospects of reconciliation between Iran and Israel still remain to be seen. It is far from certain whether time or issues of national interest have been able to influence a change in Iran's policy towards Israel.

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<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Menashri, n.5 p. 264

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **IRAN AND THE ARAB ISRAELI PEACE PROCESS**

Although the Arab-Israeli conflict had its roots in the colonial politics of Great Britain and France, international attention was drawn towards it with the United Nations Partition Plan and the subsequent creation of the State of Israel in 1948. The creation of the new state catapulted the region into a long period of violence and armed conflict. This is because the partition of Palestine not only created a state for the Jews but also uprooted the inhabitants of the territory- the Palestinian people. It is this displacement of the people of Palestine, which engulfed the entire region into the conflict, making it more complex and difficult to resolve. Without going into the details of the conflict, this chapter attempts to look at the role played by Iran and its changing positions vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict as well as peace making efforts.

Iran's immediate involvement in the conflict began with its inclusion in the eleven-member United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) in 1947. The Committee was formed in May 1947 to recommend the future of Palestine following the British withdrawal. Siding with India and former Yugoslavia, Iran favoured the minority plan that advocated a federated state of Palestine composed of two autonomous Jewish and Arab states. However this plan was rejected by the UN in favour of the partition plan, which called for the partition of Palestine into two separate states-Palestine and Israel. On 29 November when the partition plan came before the General Assembly, Iran voted against it along with the entire Arab world and a few Third World countries like India.

Iran's decision to support the Arab cause however was short lived. In March 1950, it accorded *de facto* recognition to the State of Israel much against the opposition of the Arab neighbourhood.<sup>1</sup> R.K. Ramazani explained this shift in the Iranian position in the following manner,

Iran's endorsement of the minority plan and its vote against partition was in keeping with the basic tenets and thrust of Iranian nationalism. Gripped by acute anti-British sentiments and a fierce desire for independence, Iran

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<sup>1</sup>For an elaborate analyses of early Iran-Israel relations, see, Uri Bialer, "The Iranian Connection in Israel's Foreign Policy- 1948-1951", *Middle East Journal* (Washington D.C) Vol. 39, No. 2, Spring 1985, pp. 292-315.

favoured Arab nationalism. However once the State of Israel was born Iran began to perceive its relationship with Israel primarily within a larger political and strategic context.<sup>2</sup>

The context at the time was the growing Soviet influence in the region and the pro-American sympathies of the Shah of Iran. Iran was also sceptical of the rise of Egyptian nationalism in 1952 under Gamal Abdel Nasser and its pro-Soviet expressions. Therefore a relationship with Israel was perceived as a matter of national interest for Iran in the existing regional scenario.

Throughout his rule (1941-1979) the Shah followed a very ambivalent policy towards the conflict. While Iran continued to develop a strategic alliance with Israel and the US, it also did not adopt a clear position on the Palestine conflict and continued to moderate its policies based on its national interest. Following the recognition of Israel in 1950 and the reinstatement of the Shah's regime in 1953 after the overthrow of the Mohammad Mossadeq government, Iran clearly identified itself with the US. The cultivation of ties with Israel was seen from Tehran not only as a means of forming a discreet entente against hostile Arab states, but also as a way of creating an effective Irano-Israeli obstacle to the increasing Soviet power and influence in the region.<sup>3</sup>

However after the defeat of the Arab states by Israel in the June 1967 war, Iran welcomed the shift in the Egyptian attitude towards the superpowers. The defeat not only exposed Egypt's military weakness but also diluted the anti-monarchical rhetoric of Nasser. This in effect somewhat minimised Israel's strategic relevance for Iran vis-à-vis the Arab world.

As contrasted with the 1967 war, Iran's sympathies with the Arab world found more concrete expression during the October War in 1973. It not only extended medical aid to the Arab states but also sent pilots and planes to Saudi Arabia,

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<sup>2</sup> R.K. Ramazani, 'Iran and the Arab Israeli Conflict', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 4, Summer 1978, p. 415.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p.416.



permitted the over flight of Soviet civilian planes carrying military equipment to Arab states and disallowed the transfer of Jewish volunteers from Australia to Israel transiting through Tehran.<sup>4</sup> Shah's decision to increase the price of oil in October 1973 eventually culminated in the oil crisis when Arab states led by Iraq instituted an oil embargo against the US and other western countries for their pro-Israeli policies.

In his analyses of Iran's role in the Arab-Israeli conflict, Ramazani pointed out that depending on the circumstances it has ranged from that of a moderator to a peacekeeper but never a mediator. Iran's role as a moderating force has surfaced at times. For example, as soon as the peacemaking process began in the wake of the October War, the Shah stressed that the Arab states must suspend the oil embargo until it was possible to see whether the diplomatic activities then underway would lead to a lasting peace.<sup>5</sup> In line with this policy, the Shah hailed the Camp David Accords signed between Egypt and Israel, the only Middle Eastern leader to do so.<sup>6</sup>

It is also important to highlight Iran's policy towards some of the contentious issues of the conflict. With regard to the status of the occupied territories, the Shah often stressed the need for the Israeli withdrawal as a means to achieve peace. However, Iran believed that the actual drawing of boundary lines should be decided by the parties to the dispute. It was perhaps on the issue of Jerusalem that the Shah expressed a clear opinion. According to Iran, the issue of control over Jerusalem was undebatable and it was not possible that the Muslim holy places be placed under the control of non-Muslims.<sup>7</sup>

Thus it would be safe to say there was no uniform policy that the Shah followed towards the Palestine conflict. Iran's policy was motivated primarily by strategic

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.418.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.423.

<sup>6</sup> After his overthrow from Tehran the deposed Shah was given asylum in Egypt by President Sadat. In March 1979 he shifted to New York for medical treatment with the approval of President Carter. However as a reaction to his presence in the US, Iranian students held the US Embassy in Tehran as hostage on the condition that the Shah be sent back to Iran and executed. Owing to the surmounting pressure, in March 1980, the US asked the Shah to leave and he found permanent asylum in Cairo. He died in Cairo on 27 July 1980 and is buried in the Mosque of ar-Rifai in Cairo.

<sup>7</sup> Ramazani, n. 2, p.425.

and political calculations. The Shah restrained himself from taking a clear position on the issue and essentially tried a balancing act between immediate strategic interests and broader regional sensitivities. Perhaps it is this policy that made it possible for Iran to have a fruitful strategic alliance with Israel as well as maintain a politically correct position on the issue of Palestine. Whatever the internal debate between Iran and Israel on the issue of Palestine, publicly Iran continued to portray an ambiguous policy and disengaging itself effectively from the conflict.

While analysing Iran's position vis-a-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict, it is essential to analyse its relations with principal parties to the conflict. While the previous chapter discussed the Islamic Republic's policy towards the Jewish State, it is also essential to analyse Iran's policy towards other parties to the conflict namely, the Arab community as a whole and Palestinians in particular.

### **Iran and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO)**

Ever since the creation of the Jewish State, Iran has endorsed the notion of the "legitimate rights of the Palestinian people." Iran supported the Federal Plan and voted against the United Nations Partition Plan in 1947. This was followed by its recognition of Israel and the establishment of close but undisclosed and unacknowledged ties that often transcended into a strategic alliance. At the same time, however, the Shah continued to express support for the Palestinians. Regarding the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), Iran followed the trend widely followed by the region as a whole. For a decade after its formation, Iran was lukewarm towards the PLO. Following the Rabat conference of 1974 when the Arab states recognised the PLO as "the sole and legitimate" representative of the Palestinians,<sup>8</sup> Iran also accepted the notion that the PLO's participation was essential to any peace negotiations. Iran's representative to the United Nations endorsed the UN 3210 Resolution of 14 October 1974 that invited the PLO to

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<sup>8</sup> For the complete text of the Rabat conference resolution see, "Seventh Arab League Summit Conference, Resolution on Palestine", Rabat, Morocco 28 October 1974, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, <http://mondediplo.com/focus/mideast/a2287.html>, accessed on 18 July 2005.

participate in the deliberations of the General Assembly on the Palestinian question.

With the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iran's policy towards the PLO and the conflict took a drastic turn. Immediately after its inauguration the Islamic Republic broke all relations with Israel. On 4 March 1979, the PLO leader, Yasser Arafat was given a hero's welcome in Tehran and a Palestinian Embassy was established on the premises of the erstwhile Israeli mission. Arafat met with senior government officials and leading clerics. He was granted the rare privilege of an audience with Khomeini. Next day all national papers carried pictures of Arafat planting a fulsome kiss on Khomeini's cheek. For his part Arafat spoke of the assistance the Palestinians had provided the Iranian revolution, he declared the Iranian revolution to be the beginning of a reversal of the tide in the Middle East.<sup>9</sup>

However the honeymoon between Iran and the PLO did not last. The government soon refused the PLO permission to establish a second representative office in Ahwaz, Khuzestan, the center of Iran's Arab speaking population. There were a number of reasons for this tension. The Islamic government feared the radicalising effect of the PLO on the Arab population of Iran. More importantly during the Iran-Iraq War, the PLO joined other Arab states (except Syria) and refused to condemn the Iraqi aggression. Iran-PLO relations also suffered due to rivalries in Lebanon. With the deterioration of relations between the PLO and the Shia community in Lebanon, Iran-PLO relations also suffered. The Lebanese Shia were critical of the PLO activities against Israel from south Lebanon because the attacks resulted in retaliatory Israeli strikes against the Shias in southern Lebanon. Also it was primarily with the objective of uprooting the PLO from southern Lebanon that Israel invaded Lebanon in June 1982. The attack succeeded in the exile of the PLO functionaries but it significantly increased Iran's stakes in Lebanon. Thus Arafat's pro-Arab stance in the Iran-Iraq war could be described as a major turning point in the Iran-PLO relations.

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<sup>9</sup> Shaul Bakhash, "Iran's Relations with Israel, Syria and Lebanon" in Miron Rezun ed., *Iran at the Crossroads: Global relations in a Turbulent Decade* (Boulder, Colo., 1990) p. 120.

Iran under Khomeini was also severely critical of the PLO's attitude towards the peace process. The Algiers Declaration of November 1988, which proclaimed the State of Palestine, also accepted UN Resolution 181, thereby recognising Israel. This strategic shift was unacceptable to Iran, which declared: "no organization had the right to give away even an inch of the Islamic land of Palestine."<sup>10</sup> Since then Iran assumed patronage of rival Palestinian groups like the Hamas and the Islamic Jihad that are opposed to any reconciliation with or recognition of Israel.

Therefore, Iran persisted with its criticism of the PLO's involvement at various overtures and negotiations with Israel. The election of Rafsanjani as President changed little in the relation between Iran and the PLO. Iran strongly denounced the Oslo agreement between Israel and the Palestinians premised on mutual recognition. Though not explicit, it also envisaged a timetable for the establishment of a Palestinian state. The PLO and Arafat faced severe criticism from both the moderate and extremist leaderships in Iran.<sup>11</sup> Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei vowed that the Palestine issue would not so easily be buried, "Arafat was not the Palestine nation with the right to surrender its land. The Palestine issue was an Islamic affair and the *umma* was not those four treasonous kings and presidents who offered with both hands anything the Americans asked for."<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, since the beginning of the Arab-Israeli peace process formally launched at Madrid in October 1991, Iran shifted its support to PLO to the more extremist groups within the Palestinian territories. These included the Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and allowed them to open separate offices in Tehran. This did not however, imply that Iran had severed all ties with the PLO and its leadership. There are indications that Iran also sought to help the Palestinian National Authority militarily. In January 2002, Israel intercepted and captured the

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<sup>10</sup> Cited in Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a penetrated regional system* (London, 1997) p.184.

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the various political factions within Iran see; Farhang Rajaae, "A Thermidor of Islamic Yuppies? Conflict and Compromise in Iran's politics", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 2, Spring 1999, pp. 217-231.

<sup>12</sup> Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, n.10 p. 188.

*Karine A*, a ship secretly purchased by the Palestinian Authority that was allegedly carrying some 50 tons of weapons and explosives from Iran's Kish Island to Palestine. Israel arrested the ship's captain, Omar Akawi, who later spoke to the press from his prison cell and identified himself as a member of Arafat's Fatah movement and a lieutenant colonel in the PA's naval police.<sup>13</sup> The Palestinians and the Iranians denounced the event as an Israeli set-up but facts of the case however remain unclear.

### Iran and Hamas

Hamas, an abbreviation of *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Resistance Movement) emerged as an Islamic challenge and a potential alternative to the PLO with the outbreak of the *Intifada*, the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation in 1987. Hamas challenged the PLO's status as the exclusive political force and the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. It also opposed the PLO's secular nationalism and political programme for Palestinian statehood and national territory. By invoking an Islamic national vision and community activism, Hamas was able to combine religious doctrine with Palestinian political concerns.<sup>14</sup>

During the *Intifada* Hamas tried to establish its foothold in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. During this consolidation phase Hamas was looking to the neighbourhood for ideological and financial support. Encouraged by Iran's assistance to the Hizbullah in Lebanon after the Israeli invasion of 1982,<sup>15</sup> Hamas tried to put its case before Iran. Reports of its attempts to establish contacts with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in search of arms and training appeared as early as November 1989. Hamas also developed close ties with Syria, the Islamic Movement in Jordan and the Hizbullah in Lebanon.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Gary Sick, "Iran: Confronting Terrorism", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 4, Autumn 2003, p. 91.

<sup>14</sup> Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence* (New York, N.Y., 2000), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p. 87.

<sup>16</sup> Critical of the PLO's involvement in the Madrid Conference in 1991, Hamas aligned itself with Iran and Syria and joined in establishing the Syrian based "ten front" together with other militant Palestinian factions.

Until the early 1990's, Iran and Hamas had relatively cool relations, largely because of doctrinal differences (Hamas is a Sunni Islamic group, while Iran is predominantly Shia). Iran's policy toward Hamas shifted in 1991, however, when the Madrid conference opened a new chapter in the Arab-Israeli peace process-Iran invited Islamist groups, including Hamas, to attend a "counter-conference" in Tehran. A common desire to thwart the peace process brought the two closer together.<sup>17</sup>

Owing to the movement's hostile activities against Israel in December 1992 Israel deported over 400 suspected activists of Hamas and Islamic Jihad to South Lebanon. This came shortly after the movement reached a strategic agreement with Iran, according to which the Islamic Republic would support Hamas politically and materially against Israel and the peace process. In November 1992, a year after Hamas had opened an official office in Tehran, a delegation of the movement headed by spokesman Ibrahim Ghawsha, reportedly arrived in Iran and met with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and with the commander of the Revolutionary Guards, Muhsin Rada'i. The two parties signed a draft agreement providing for a political and military alliance. Under its terms, Iran would give Hamas financial and military assistance, political facilities and a radio station in southern Lebanon. The agreement was apparently confirmed during another visit of Hamas leaders to Tehran in 1992.<sup>18</sup>

Since then Hamas and Iran have enjoyed close relations. Iran has reportedly provided training and funding to the Hamas militants through their network of Revolutionary Guards stationed in Lebanon. With the intensification of the *al-Aqsa Intifada* that broke out in September 2000, there have been more reports pointing to the close cooperation between Hamas and Iran. Even though Hamas is a Sunni organisation, both parties seem to have buried historical animosity to wage an Islamic crusade against the 'Zionist state' in an attempt to achieve Palestinian aspirations for statehood.

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<sup>17</sup> Further details of Hamas-Iran relations have been provided in the third chapter.

<sup>18</sup> Mishal and Sela, n. 14 p. 97.

## Iran and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) was established in 1981 by Fathi Shiqaqi.<sup>19</sup> The ideology of the PIJ blended Palestinian nationalist ideas and themes drawn from the beliefs of the Muslim Brotherhood. It was also heavily influenced by the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini. It adopted a central tenet of Khomeini's interpretation of the new Shia, the constant emphasis on *jihad* as a symbol of activism, thereby contrasting it with the Muslim Brotherhood's approach. It adopted the principle of sacrifice and martyrdom.

Fathi Shiqaqi, leader of the Islamic Jihad, saw Khomeini's greatness in his capacity to illumine the great cultural clash between the Islamic nation with its historical tradition, its faith and civilization, and the satanic forces of the West represented by Israel. Even though the Islamic Jihad is a Sunni organisation it has tried to bridge the discrepancies between Shia and Sunni Islam and forge a fruitful alliance with the Islamic State.

When Fathi Shiqaqi, PIJ's first leader moved to Lebanon, he also enhanced the organization's ties with the Hizbullah.<sup>20</sup> The Israeli deportation of Shiqaqi and others to Lebanon in 1988, and the transfer of the PIJ headquarters to Syria, thereafter, marked a turning point in the development of the Iran-Islamic Jihad relationship. From this point on, direct contact was established between the Islamic Jihad activists and their Iranian sponsors through Iran's embassy in Damascus, Revolutionary Guards stationed in Lebanon, and through Hizbullah.<sup>21</sup> Iran's sponsorship of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad was manifested politically, financially and militarily.

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<sup>19</sup> On 26 October 1995, Shiqaqi was assassinated by Mossad agents in Malta and he was buried in Damascus.

<sup>20</sup> Ely Karmon, "The US Indictment of Palestinian Islamic Jihad militants: The Iranian Connection", *Policy Watch* (Washington D.C) No. 718, 3 March 2003 (Electronic Edition).

<sup>21</sup> More details on Iran's support and encouragement to Hizbullah in Lebanon will be provided in the fourth chapter.

On 20 February 2003 the US Department of Justice announced the indictment of eight leading members of Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The indictment provides a wealth of detail about the close connection between the PIJ and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran was identified at least nine times in the indictment as a major source of funds for PIJ. The Islamic Jihad was also held responsible for a number of suicide attacks against Israeli civilians and was considered to be a major threat to its security. Although there was not enough evidence to substantively prove Iran's support and assistance to these groups, Iran and the Hamas and Islamic Jihad have at various points indicated to some sort of an alliance. By using its organizational base in Lebanon, Iran has sought to establish its presence in the Palestinian territories.

### **Iran and the Peace Process**

With the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the strategic alliance between the Jewish state and the Shah's Iran came to an end. The new regime was opposed to the idea of any sort of recognition of the Jewish state. While Iran severed all political ties with Israel, it also gave a new direction and vocabulary to the Palestinian conflict. Iran's Islamic arguments have put the Arab-Israeli conflict on a totally different footing- a religious crusade as against a political-national conflict. Iran's involvement in Lebanon and its moral, political and material support for the Islamist and Palestinian movements such as Hamas, Hizbullah and the Islamic Jihad have involved Iran more directly in the conflict, presenting a serious challenge to Israel.<sup>22</sup>

Although the Shah of Iran followed a pro-Israeli policy, there were innumerable voices from Iran regarding the Palestine issue. Thus in 1971, Khomeini appealed to pilgrims heading for Mecca to liberate Palestine from the grasp of Zionism, presenting it as the enemy of Islam and humanity.<sup>23</sup> In line with their Arab counterparts, revolutionary Iranians also rejected the Zionists' claim that Palestine

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<sup>22</sup> David Menashri, *Post Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power* (London, 2001) p. 262.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in *ibid*, p. 265.



was the historical home of Jews. Today's Jews, they claimed were not the offspring of Patriarch Abraham and in contrast the Arabs have lived in Palestine throughout history. Arabs are, Iranians argued the descendents of the Canaanites and Phoenicians, who controlled Palestine for 1,500 years. In his 1979 message to *Hajj* pilgrims, the first since the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini made his stance on this issue loud and clear. Since 'the first *qibla* of the Muslims, that is, Jerusalem, has fallen into the grasp of Israel, he said, it was the duty of every Muslim to prepare himself for battle against Israel.'<sup>24</sup>

According to David Menashri,

For Iran, the main aim was not 'to establish peace' (*ijad-e-solh*), but to regain rights (*ehqaq-e-haq*) and to establish justice (*ejra'-ye-'edalat*). Even if Palestinian refugees refrained from returning to their homeland- because they had no choice or had become accustomed to living away from Palestine- and even if the Palestinians who currently live in Israel were forced to acknowledge its existence, the Zionist regime would always remain a 'usurper and illegitimate'. This was not only a Palestinian issue, but a Muslim religious crusade. As one Iranian newspaper put it, 'even if we are more Palestinian than the Palestinians, we are only fulfilling our sacred duty.'<sup>25</sup>

The Islamic Republic's involvement with the issue of Palestine began soon after its establishment. Upon coming to power, Khomeini called on Muslims everywhere to proclaim 17 August 1979- the last Friday of the month of Ramadan in that year- as 'Jerusalem Day', so as to demonstrate solidarity with the rights of the Palestinians. This date is still commemorated in Iran annually, marking a major event.<sup>26</sup>

With the outbreak of the *Intifada* in 1987, Iran became more closely involved in the conflict owing to its alliance with Palestinian groups like the Hamas and the Islamic Jihad. As mentioned earlier these organisations saw in Iran a possible

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 267

<sup>25</sup> ibid.

<sup>26</sup> On the occasion of the first 'Jerusalem Day', Khomeini called for a campaign to liberate Jerusalem by saying, 'If every Muslim was to pour a single bucketful of water on Israel, it would be drowned by an uncontrollable flood', Cited in Menashri, n 22, p. 282.

source of funding and political support as well as a common dislike for the policies of the PLO. In line with these policies, Iran convened the first Islamic Conference on Palestine in December 1990. The popular figures who attended this conference were Islamic Jihad leaders Fathi Shiqaqi and Sheikh Abdul al-Aziz.

Iran viewed the Madrid peace conference as an attempt to get Arab acceptance of Israel without the latter conceding the Palestinian rights and to seek Arab submission to its diktats. Khamenei denounced it as a plot sponsored by the 'Great Satan', the US, the main advocate of the 'Zionist regime'. In response to the proposed Madrid conference, Iran held a parallel Rejectionist conference in Tehran during 19-22 October 1991.

It was attended by 400 delegates from 60 countries including such Lebanese figures as Walid Junblatt, Abbas-al Musawi, Abu Musa and Ahmed Jibril.<sup>27</sup> Khamenei declared that the PLO had sold out Palestinian rights and hence was not representative of the Palestinians. The Tehran conference was supposed to create a Rejectionist/Islamic substitute that would continue the Palestinian struggle. The conference also discussed the idea of a fund to support the *Intifada* and an Islamic army to join it, as well as ways to ensure continuance of the economic boycott of Israel.<sup>28</sup>

Tehran viewed the conference as its Islamic responsibility to lead the anti-peace camp. This policy of Iran was in contrast to the otherwise conciliatory and pragmatic policy being followed by Rafsanjani to bring Iran out of its isolationist mould. According to Shireen Hunter, such an Iranian policy was prompted largely by pressure from the hard-liners. It was also a reaction to Iran's isolation and marginalisation in the region and an effort to show that Iran was a country to be reckoned with and that its pragmatism should not be taken for granted. Further Tehran wished not only to fill the vacuum left by Arab leaders like Syria who

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<sup>27</sup> Walid Junblatt is leader of the Progressive Socialist Party, a leading Druze party in Lebanon; Abbas-al Musawi was the former Secretary General of the Hizbullah; Abu Musa is a senior Palestinian leader and Ahmed Jibril is the founder and leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command.

<sup>28</sup> Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, n. 10, p.185-186.

were seen to be compromising with Israel. It also offered Iran a potential to promote its interests in the Muslim world in the emerging new world order following the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>29</sup>

### **Iran and the Oslo Accords**

In continuation of its erstwhile policy, Iran strongly denounced the Declaration of Principles signed between the Israel and the PLO in September 1993. The basic premise of the Oslo accords was mutual recognition of both Palestinians and Israelis and the establishment of a timetable for future negotiations towards resolving the conflict. Iran opposed the Oslo agreement both for ideological reasons and because it appeared to be a major step in advancing a US-sponsored regional order that excluded Iran. According to Tehran, Muslims had not abandoned their aspirations for the liberation of Palestine: "Those who believe that by obtaining a signature from a handful of Palestinians, the usurpation of this land has attained legitimacy and the Israeli regime has gained acceptance in the region, are labouring under a delusion."<sup>30</sup>

When the Oslo Accords were signed in September 1993, Tehran convened another conference on Palestine, pledging to spare no effort to defeat them and promising limitless support for their opponents. Rafsanjani vowed that "Muslims would not let this treason pass lightly and urged the Islamic states to use their oil wealth and weaponry to revoke the agreement."<sup>31</sup> Iranian officials remained hopeful that the agreement between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat would collapse. In a speech to a group of Revolutionary Guards Commanders, Rafsanjani said, "The PLO-Israel accord is a black page in the history of Palestine which should be cleansed by sacrifice of that nation." Iran was also critical of the Arab community as a whole as they had applauded Arafat and the PLO for reaching an agreement. In an interview with the prominent Egyptian journalist Muhammad Hassanein Heikal broadcast by Lebanese television on 28

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<sup>29</sup> Cited in Menashri, n.22 p. 284.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, n.10, p.188.

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Menashri, n.22 p. 285.

November 1993, Rafsanjani lamented the fact that Egypt could no longer be relied upon to fight for the Palestinian cause.<sup>32</sup>

Iran also attempted to exert pressure on the Gulf countries to refrain from establishing diplomatic relations with Israel. Following Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's visit to Oman in December 1994, Iranian officials said, "There is no place for relations between Israel and the Arab states, whose purpose is to pressure Syria to come to the negotiating table."<sup>33</sup> It was perhaps this concern that resulted in a slight change in the Iranian rhetoric. In spite of their tough stance, Iran was apprehensive of international isolation and there were indications that it was toning down its stance on the issue. In line with this Rafsanjani announced that, while Iran disapproved of the peace process, it would not disrupt it or break relations with Arab states that made peace with Israel. He also said, "Practically speaking, we do not take any action against the peace plan ...when we see the whole process is unjust, we state our opposition to it as a matter of principle, but if the ... substance is just, we shall go along with it."<sup>34</sup>

This was a major departure from its earlier policy of total opposition. What appeared to have weighed on the minds of the Iranian leadership was perhaps the future of its friendship with Syria in case the latter reached an agreement with Israel on the issue of Golan Heights, as well as the reaction of the international community. The signing of the Oslo accords created a sense of euphoria and expectations for the Palestinian community and to go against this trend could put Iran back into isolation.

In spite of the slight change in its stance, Iran's opposition to the peace process continued unabated. Iran's hostility towards Israel became so intense that even the progress made in the peace talks with Syria did not ease the tension. Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayeti reiterated that his country would never recognise the State of Israel and that any peace between Syria and Israel would not cause any

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<sup>32</sup> Jacob Abadi, *Israel's Quest for Recognition and Acceptance in Asia: Garrison State Diplomacy* (London, 2004) p. 55.

<sup>33</sup> Cited in *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Cited in Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, n. 10, p. 189.

change in Iran's policy towards the Jewish State. In an interview to *The Washington Post* in September 1996 Velayeti said that Iran would continue to support the Hamas and the other Palestinian organisations opposed to the peace process. He states that in his view the PLO did not represent the Palestinians in the occupied territories and added that his government repudiated the PLO's autonomy agreement with Israel.<sup>35</sup> When the Israeli-Syrian talks came to a halt in 1996, Iran criticised the peace process more vigorously. Velayeti represented the general view of the government at that time, "The Arab people are resentful, they do not wish to be humiliated by compromising with Israel. Iran does not wish to create tension with any country, but will also not hesitate to defend Islam, Iran and the Islamic values ...and will continue to stand steadfast."<sup>36</sup>

Iran continued its support to the Islamist movements within Palestine. Although there is no clear evidence concerning the extent of the support, however Iranian leadership continued to pledge their support for these movements. In 1999, Velayeti stated "all our friends and enemies know perfectly well that Iran is the main supporter of the Hamas and pin their struggle against Israel."<sup>37</sup>

The election of Mohammad Khatami as President of Iran in 1997 paved the way for a somewhat moderate Iranian stance. Although often publicly Khatami expressed his dislike for Israel and dissent for the peace process, his general stance on the issue was quite different. Reiterating Iran's opposition to the peace process in his first news conference after victory, Khatami pledged not to take action to disrupt it. Iran was "interested in peace and tranquillity" he said, on condition that "the rights of all sides" were observed. In an interview with CNN television in January 1998, Khatami continued to express disbelief in the possibility of achieving a real and just peace, but denied any intention to disrupt the attempt to reach such a peace. Addressing the UN General Assembly in September 1998, Khatami reiterated, "peace and security in the Middle East would be established only through the

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<sup>35</sup> Abadi, n.32 p. 59.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Menashri, n. 22 p. 285.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

recognition of the right of all Palestinians to exercise sovereignty over their ancestral homeland.”<sup>38</sup>

At the Tehran summit meeting of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in December 1997, Iran adopted a more belligerent tone. President Khatami reiterated that genuine peace could be established only through the realisation of all the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, including the inalienable right to self-determination, return to refugees and liberation of all the occupied territories. Yet the “hegemonic, racist, aggressive and violent nature of Israel manifested in the systematic violation of international law, pursuit of state terrorism and development of weapons of mass destruction seriously threatens peace and security in the region”.<sup>39</sup> However, Supreme Leader Khamenei continued to represent the harsher tone of Iranian policy. At the OIC summit, he described the peace process as unjust, arrogant, contemptuous and altogether illogical. In a meeting with Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, Khatami promised Iran’s support and said “Iran would not recognise Israel even for one hour and would continue to struggle against this cancerous growth.”<sup>40</sup>

Iran continued to oppose all peace moves since Oslo, including the Wye Agreement of 1998 and the Camp David Talks of 2000. However even though the official stance on the issue of Palestine was relentless, doubts regarding the advisability of such a policy soon arose among the Iranian intelligentsia. Farhang Raja’i (then professor at Beheshti University) reminded his fellow Iranians that even after 2,000 years the Jews had not ceased to exist. One cannot terminate a nation, and even the Prophet Muhammad did not try to annihilate the Jews, but to incorporate them.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 288-289.

<sup>39</sup> At the Durban Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in September 2001, the Iranian representative reiterated the Islamic Republic’s stance on the issue, “Our message to the Palestinian people is clear and simple. We will never compromise their legitimate rights. We deeply and wholeheartedly sympathize with their cause and suffering. The peoples of the world will not condone the inhumane Israeli policies and practices, which are clear manifestations of racism and discrimination. For more details on this see, Report of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, 31 August 2001-8 September 2001, [http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/e06a5300f90fa0238025668700518ca4/cb95de2388024cc7e1256b4f005369cb/\\$FILE/N0221543.pdf](http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/e06a5300f90fa0238025668700518ca4/cb95de2388024cc7e1256b4f005369cb/$FILE/N0221543.pdf), accessed on 15 May 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Menashri, n.22 p. 290.

Ahmad Naqibzadeh (Professor at Tehran University) said if the Palestinians themselves decide to make peace with Israel, no other state should condemn them. Iran he said, using a well-known Persian phrase, should not be “a bowl that is warmer than the soup” (*kaseh daghtar as ash*)-more Palestinian than the Palestinians.<sup>41</sup>

The events of the 11 September attack placed Iran in a very precarious position. While the Bush administration placed Iran among the Axis of Evil for its support for Hizbullah, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad designated by the US as terrorists, the election of *Likud* leader Ariel Sharon and the failure of the Camp David Talks in July 2000 resulted in overturning the success achieved at Oslo in 1993. The failure of talks at Camp David and the subsequent outbreak of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* derailed the peace process. Both these developments brought with it unprecedented violence to the region further reducing any chances of peace that the Arabs and the Israelis might have had. The failure of Camp David also led to wide scale disillusionment with the PLO and Yasser Arafat in particular.

For Iran, the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* brought with it similar opportunities like the 1987 *Intifada*. It proved in a way that Iran's steadfastness in opposing the peace process was justified and neither Israel nor the PLO could be trusted to preserve the rights of the Palestinian people. Yet another event that placed Iran at the top of the ladder was the Israeli withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in May 2000. Iran's support and the incessant anti-Israeli attacks by the Hizbullah had ensured the removal of Israeli presence and control over sovereign Lebanese territory. The success story of the Hizbullah and its patron Iran were often repeated in the press. On one side there was Hassan Nasrallah praising the determination of the Hizbullah in driving out Israel and on the other was Iran's perceived victory over Israel. The case of Lebanon also demonstrated to the Palestinian population that the key to defeat Israel was Islamic solidarity (in the case of Hizbullah it was Shia solidarity). The Islamic values propagated by Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade and other Islamist organisations suddenly found new voice. Apart from losing to

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 292.

Israel at the negotiating table, the PLO was also criticised for its inefficient and corrupt domestic policies, which had created wide-scale unemployment and poverty within the occupied territories.

Riding the success wave of the Lebanese withdrawal, in April 2001, Iran hosted another conference in support of the Palestinian struggle, aptly titled 'Support for the Palestinian *Intifada*'. This conference was attended by a large delegation from the Palestinian parliament as well as by radical Islamic groups such as the Hizbullah, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad. Ayatollah Khamenei said, "the Oslo peace accords caused divisions among the Palestinians, but this blessed *Intifada* managed to restore Palestinian unity."<sup>42</sup> Another thing that he talked about was a referendum for the Palestinians. In his speech, the Ayatollah held up Hizbullah as the model for how to deal with Israel, calling it a "model and blueprint" and saying that the Palestinian uprising resulted from Hizbullah's efforts to oust the Israelis from Lebanon.<sup>43</sup>

The continuing violence in the region owing to the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* paved the way for yet another American backed initiative for peace. This was the Middle East Road Map set into motion by a speech made by American President George W. Bush in 2002. The roadmap, drawn up by the European Union, Russia, United Nations and United States, was a three-phase plan that called for an end to violence and the creation of an independent Palestinian state by 2005. As with all the other peace plans, Iran has expressed its opposition to this latest attempt at peace. Iran blasted the US-backed roadmap to Middle East peace as an unworkable "new hardship" for Arabs and Palestinians. According to foreign ministry spokesman Hamid-Reza Assefi said "The roadmap is a new hardship for Arab countries and Palestinians, and, considering the Zionist regime's policies, the execution of this plan is not possible," Meanwhile, a hard-line Iranian paper labelled the plan a "Roadmap to nowhere", and called on Palestinians to reject the internationally

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<sup>42</sup> Mahdi Ahouie, "The Middle East Peace Process from the perspective of Revolutionary Iran: Will Tehran ever take part?" *Iran Analysis Quarterly* (Boston, Mass.) Vol.1, No. 4, Fall 2004 (Electronic Edition).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.



sponsored peace plan and continue armed resistance. *Kayhan* newspaper said Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's acceptance of the plan was a "tactical move" to buy time for a state it said was "an illegal entity that ought not to exist on the map of the Middle East... The roadmap has nothing to offer and leads nowhere. All it seeks is to legitimise the occupation of Palestine by the Zionist migrants from Europe."<sup>44</sup>

The demise of Yasser Arafat in November 2004 and the emergence of Mahmoud Abbas as the new leader have hinted at a change in the conflict scenario. President Abbas has been vocally critical of the radical methods used by Hamas and the Islamic Jihad. However Iran continues to be sceptical of any kind of peace agreement with Israel. With rising criticism of Iranian nuclear weapons programme and its support for 'terrorist' organizations in the region, the situation has become more threatening and volatile. While Israel insists that Iran has been the primary threat to its national security, Iran on the other hand continues to oppose all peace attempts and has made it clear that in case of a probable attack on its nuclear sites, it would not shy away from retaliation. Iran stresses that it would continue to provide moral support to any organization in its struggle against the Jewish state and aimed at restoring and preserving the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.

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<sup>44</sup> "Iran sees Middle East peace plan as 'roadmap to nowhere'" *Daily Times* (Lahore) 9 May 2005 (Electronic Edition).

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**IRAN AND ISRAEL: MUTUAL THREAT PERCEPTIONS**

After the US led forces captured Baghdad in April 2003, the two countries that could stake a claim to regional power are Iran and Israel. These are probably two states with some semblance of a democratic structure of government and Iran and Israel are important players in the regional dynamics of West Asia. Yet they have an antagonistic relationship. They perceive each other as a threat to their respective national security.

Under the Shah, Israel saw Iran as a possible ally in an Arab-dominated region but with unremitting Iranian hostility since 1979, it gradually began to project Iran as an important threat to its security and the overall stability of the region. It has portrayed Iran as the key financier and supporter of militant organization like the Hizbullah, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and as the source of several attacks against Israel and the Jews around the world. Israel resents Iran's position on the Arab-Israeli peace process and has claimed that the Iranian contact with militant outfits has contributed to their growth and continued violence against Israel. It is also concerned about the growing military potential and the rapid pace of development of the Iranian nuclear program.

Iran on the other hand views Israel as an enemy of the Islamic state and sees the ongoing peace process as an attempt to marginalise Palestinians and maintain Israeli occupation of lands that Iran considers sacred to Muslims. It refutes the claims regarding the nuclear weapons and justifies expansion of its military technologies as a counter to the threat posed by Israel. It questions the right of Israel of possessing nuclear weapons and is extremely critical of the role of the US in ignoring Israel's nuclear development.

The focus of this chapter is to analyse a few issues of contention between Iran and Israel, which have remained in focus for a long time and would continue to embitter the relationship. Three issues dominate the mutual security concerns.

The foremost among them is Iran's support and assistance to the Hizbullah in Lebanon. Coming under the rubric of its support to Islamic movements

worldwide, Iran's assistance to the militant group in Lebanon has been a major threat to Israeli interests in southern Lebanon and since its withdrawal in May 2000, to northern Israel.

Two, Israel perceives Iran to be a major threat over terrorism and in particular its assistance to militant Palestinian organizations within the Palestinian territories. While Iran's position towards the Arab-Israeli peace process and its official stand towards various Palestinian groups has been highlighted in the third chapter, the focus here will be on the suspected support to terrorist acts outside the region. Finally this chapter will analyse the emerging nuclear debate between Iran and Israel while examining the key aspects of nuclear development and proliferation.

### **Iran and the Hizbullah**

Hizbullah, the Party of God, burst into the Lebanese scene in a whirlwind of violence at the end of 1983. The principal cause of Hizbullah's creation was the Israeli invasion of 1982 aimed at expelling the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) leadership from Lebanon. However another important basis for the creation of Hizbullah was the political mobilization of the Lebanese Shia community, which began, in the late 1960s. Lebanon's confessional political system allocates major political offices and bureaucratic appointments along sectarian lines whereby the Christians gained both political and economic advantages. Over the years the Shia traditionally concentrated in the rural Beqa'a valley and south Lebanon, began to increase in numbers. They were gradually being transformed from a passive and marginal group into a more activist group demanding a greater share in society.<sup>1</sup> The Shia were first mobilized as Shia by Musa al Sadr's Movement of the Dispossessed, later known by the acronym of its militia Amal (*Afwaj al-Muqawama al Lubananiyya*- Lebanese Resistance Detachments or 'Hope').

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<sup>1</sup> Sami Hajjar, *Hizballah: Terrorism, National Liberation or Menace*, (Carlisle, Penn., 2002), p. 4, See also, Martin Kramer ed. *Shi'ism, Resistance and Revolution* (Boulder, Colo., 1987).

Al-Sadr was born in Qom in Iran and was the son of an ayatollah of Lebanese descent. Although al-Sadr mobilized the Shia as a community, he had no desire for an Islamic revolution and merely wanted equality for the Shia in a pluralist Lebanon. He was the principal leader in the emergence of a distinct Shia consciousness and in the creation of a Higher Islamic Shia Council. Amal rose from the crisis facing the Shia community, notably the insecurity and impoverishment in the south. Its base was cross-class, embracing the impoverished peasantry, dispossessed urban migrants and the frustrated Shia bourgeoisie seeking a place in the system. Its enemies were identified as the feudalists, those monopolizing political power in Lebanon and Israel who coveted the land and water of southern Lebanon.<sup>2</sup> In 1978 however, on a visit to Libya, Al-Sadr disappeared without a trace. It was against this background that in the late 1970s critics and opponents emerged and denounced Sadr's moderation, maintaining that the Shia community should widen its goals.

The pre-eminent factor directly responsible for the Hizbullah's birth and hence the Islamisation of the Lebanese Shia was the Israeli invasion of 1982, coming close on the heels of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. Israel's 'iron fist' occupation policy alienated and radicalised the Shia as a whole. The catalyst, which ignited generalized resistance, was the Israeli clash with the participants in the holy *ashura* ceremonies in Nabatiya in 1983.<sup>3</sup> Revolutionary Iran had a major stake in Lebanon. It saw Lebanon as the most promising prospect for spreading the Islamic revolution to the Arab world, allowing it to leap over the wall of containment set up by Iraq and the Arab Gulf states.

In the words of Iran's former ambassador to Lebanon Hojjatoleslam Fakhr Rouhani; "Lebanon is a platform from which different ideas have been directed to the rest of the Arab world, as such an Islamic movement in that country will

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<sup>2</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, (London, 1997) p. 118.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 121.

result in Islamic movements throughout the Arab world.”<sup>4</sup> Iran also saw Lebanon as a front from which Israel and the US, the main enemies of the revolutionary ayatollahs, could be challenged. A foothold closer to Israel also offered Iran an opportunity to pursue a holy war.<sup>5</sup>

Dissatisfied with Amal, and with its leader Musa al-Sadr, Iran played a direct role in founding a rival Shia movement, Hizbullah. Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, Iran’s ambassador to Syria in the 1980s, reputedly directed the effort.<sup>6</sup> The ease with which Iran entrenched itself in Lebanon was due to several factors. Iran used pre-existing connections to the Lebanese Shia clerics to urge their sponsorship to Hizbullah. Traditionally, Lebanese Shia clerics had been trained not only in Najaf in Iraq, but also after 1920 in Qom in Iran as well. These included Musa Sadr and Mohammad Shams al Din as well as leading figures in Hizbullah such as Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, Abbas Musawi and Hasan Nasrallah- the present secretary general.

There were many reasons for Lebanon’s Shia population to respond favourably to Iran’s overtures. Iran claimed to be a champion of the ‘deprived masses’ and this corresponded to the Lebanese Shia perception of their historical experience. For them the Iranian revolution offered a model of how such people could overpower a militarily powerful oppressor. Iran’s impact on the Lebanese Shia was profound. Mohsen Rafiqdoust, Minister for the Islamic Revolutionary Guards stated, “We infused the Lebanese Shia with the spirit of resistance, and if the US intervenes it will be taught a lesson like in Vietnam.”<sup>7</sup>

However, both geography and political realities meant Iran needed the Syrian consent to pursue its goals in Lebanon. Since the outbreak of the civil war in 1975, Lebanon has come under the Syrian influence, control and domination. Needing a strategic ally who could help ward off the Israeli and American

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Ibid, p.123.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid p.123 and Gary Sick, “Iran: Confronting Terrorism”, *The Washington Quarterly* Vol. 26, No.4, Autumn 2003, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, n. 2. p. 124.

threats, Syria facilitated the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' entry into the Beqa'a by granting them direct access to its borders with the region.<sup>8</sup> Syria served as the principal channel for the development of Hizbullah's relationship with Iran.<sup>9</sup> Three key individuals posted to the Iranian Embassy in Damascus coordinated Tehran's efforts; they were identified as Ali Akbar Mohtashemi (Ambassador), Hussein Ahromi Zadeh (military attaché), and Sayyid Ahmed al-Fihri (Ayatollah Khomeini's personal representative).<sup>10</sup> Iran accepted that Syria was the key to its own role in Lebanon.

Apart from receiving military and financial support, the Hizbullah was also deeply influenced by the ideological orientations of the Islamic Republic. From its inception, the status and role of the concept of *Wilayat-al-Faqih* has remained an integral part of the Hizbullah's intellectual foundations. The envisagement of the *Faqih* and Khomeini in particular as a divinely ordained and inspired ruler of the *umma* has continued to pervade its political thought. Like Khomeini the party acknowledges the *Faqih* as the designated deputy of the Twelfth *Imam* during his Occultation. It also views the *Wilayat-al-Faqih* as an extension of the *wilayat* of the Prophet and *Imams* and as such accords it a sacrosanct character.<sup>11</sup> Despite the veneration of Khomeini's revolutionary role and his incomparable stature as *Wali-al-Faqih*, the sanctity of the concept of the *Wilayat* has not been undermined during the post-Khomeini era. Although Khomeini's successor Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei did not occupy the post of *marja at-taqlid*, his *wilayat* is considered as sacrosanct as Khomeini's.

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<sup>8</sup> Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion*, (London, 2002) p. 14

<sup>9</sup> Iran's involvement with Hizbullah has been due to the key support and consent of Syria. For more on Syrian involvement with Hizbullah see; Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, n.2; Yair Hirschfeld, "The Odd Couple: Ba'thist Syria and Khomeini's Iran" in Moshe Maoz and Avner Yaniv eds. *Syria under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks* (New York, N.Y., 1986); Gary C. Gambill and Ziad K. Abdelnour, "Hezbollah: Between Tehran and Damascus", *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* (New York, N.Y.), Vol. 4, No. 2, February 2002 (Electronic Edition).

<sup>10</sup> John Calabrese, *Revolutionary Horizons: Regional Foreign Policy in Post-Khomeini Iran* (London, 1994) p. 149.

<sup>11</sup> Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, n.2, p. 125.

In a 1985 manifesto, the leadership of Hizbullah pledged loyalty to Khomeini and to the goal of establishing an Islamic state in Lebanon. In January 1986 a conference was held in Tehran, which produced a draft of an Islamic Constitution of Lebanon. By 1988, nine Koranic centres had been established in Shia areas of Lebanon. One of them the School of the Prophet Mohammad located in the southern suburbs of Beirut was originally headed by Mohammad Ismail Khaliq personal representative of Grand Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri.<sup>12</sup>

These however were later discouraged by Tehran's main Lebanese ally, Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah. An Iranian style Islamic Republic in Lebanon was unlikely, since the large Christian community was strongly opposed to it and most Sunnis would not accept it. Even Lebanese Shia were divided over the issue. Another important reason for this concern was that Syria was comfortable with a multi-sectarian secular state where it could play a significant role and would not have permitted a radical Islamic Republic on its doorstep.<sup>13</sup>

Magnus Ranstorp pointed out that the establishment of the Hizbullah with Iran's assistance occurred in three phases; the first phase was the initial arrival of *Pasdaran*<sup>14</sup> into Lebanon immediately after the 1982 Israeli invasion. They provided the radical Islamic Amal with military training centres and embarked on the systematic recruitment and ideological indoctrination of radical Shia in the Beqa'a area. During this early phase the founding members of the movement drafted Hizbullah's charter and constitution calling for the establishment of an Iranian style Islamic Republic in Lebanon. The next phase involved Hizbullah's activities in the southern outskirts of the capital city of Beirut. In addition to the party's ability to recruit members it was able to attract Fadlallah a leading Shia

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> *Pasdaran* or Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was formed in May 1979 following the Islamic Revolution in an effort to consolidate several paramilitary forces into a single force loyal to the new regime and to function as a counter to the influence and the power of the regular military. The Constitution of Iran in Article 150 gives the *Pasdaran* the responsibility of preserving the revolution.



personality. The last phase was associated with Hizbullah's expansion into southern Lebanon.<sup>15</sup> Hizbullah's principal objectives in southern Lebanon were: to force Israeli troops to withdraw from southern Lebanon, to protect the physical, intellectual and spiritual well being of the Shia community and to plan for the eventual establishment of an Islamic state.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1980s Iranian funds-as much as US\$ 10 million a year and training led to the rapid growth of Hizbullah's military wing, which devoted itself primarily to the expulsion of the American and European multi-national force (MNF) in Beirut and to the defeat of occupying Israeli forces - objectives which corresponded with both Iranian and Syrian interests. The signing of the 17 May 1983, Accord between Lebanon and Israel was followed by a wave of steadily escalating violence, committed by the Lebanese Shia community. On 18 April 1983, a suicide bomber blew up the American Embassy in Beirut, killing 61 and wounding 120 others. Some months later the headquarters of the US Marines and those of the French forces in Beirut were attacked in a similar manner. Again on 4 November 1983, the Israeli army headquarters in Tyre was similarly hit killing 29 soldiers and members of the intelligence service. These attacks gave further popularity to the Hizbullah among the Shia as it resulted in the Israeli withdrawal from central Lebanon in 1985 and the withdrawal of American marines.

The 1990s brought a change in the domestic character of the Hizbullah. On 22 October 1989, it signed the Taif Agreement, which brought an end to the civil war in Lebanon and laid the foundation for the formation of a new Lebanese order under the Syrian patronage. Aimed at reversing the unequal distribution of power embodied in the National Pact of 1943, the Taif agreement turned out to be once again a Maronite-Sunni compact with little rights for the ever-growing Shia community.

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<sup>15</sup> Cited in Hajjar, n.1, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Calabrese, n. 10, p. 150.

This development was planned by the Maronite and Sunni leadership who had lost their earlier political leverage during the civil war. Over the years the Shia community grew to be the largest in Lebanon constituting approximately 35 percent of the population in early 1995. Second, towards the end of the civil war the Maronites and Sunnis were left without external support and protection. Therefore in order to prevent the Shia community from taking over Lebanon, Sunni and Maronite leaders took action to end the civil war. Beyond the blow to Shia standing, the Taif agreement constituted a concrete threat to the Hizbullah itself. The Taif agreement resuscitated the Lebanese government, giving Amal a clear advantage as it was prepared to come to terms with a centralized authority and thus was more capable of finding a place for itself within it.<sup>17</sup> Thus Hizbullah was clearly opposed to the Taif Agreement.<sup>18</sup>

Taif was only the first step in the gradual tightening of Syrian control over Lebanon. Under the accord Syria would have to enforce the dissolving of the militias, which could bring a clash with Hizbullah and Iran. After Syria invaded east Beirut and ousted interim Prime Minister Michel Aoun in October 1990, eliminating the last remnants of opposition to Syrian authority, Hizbullah agreed to abide by the new rules of the game. Thus Hizbullah took part in the elections to Lebanon's parliament in the summer of 1992. For its part Syria deferred to Iranian pressures, delivered by President Rafsanjani on a visit to Damascus in May 1991, to delay Hizbullah's disarming on the grounds that it was a resistance movement, not a militia and should not be disarmed until the Israeli pulled out from southern Lebanon.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, Iran was also forced to recognize the new political realities in Lebanon and, by 1992 the number of *Pasdaran* stationed in Lebanon had been scaled down from 2,500 to around 200-300.

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<sup>17</sup> Eyal Zisser, 'Hizbullah in Lebanon: At the Crossroads', in Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Efraim Inbar eds., *Religious Radicalism in the Greater Middle East*, (London, 1997) p. 99

<sup>18</sup> As a demonstration of this opposition it is rumoured that Hizbullah was behind the assassination of Lebanese President-elect Rene Mu'awwad on 22 November 1989.

<sup>19</sup> Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, n. 2. p. 137.

On another front, the progress in the Arab-Israeli peace process in the 1990s brought Hizbullah closer to Iran. Iran emerged from these developments as the new leading voice of steadfastness against Israel. Hizbullah, maintaining its links with Tehran and retaining its weapons, emerged as the sole resistance organisation operating against Israel from Lebanon and it profited from a fresh infusion of Iranian financial support.<sup>20</sup> There was therefore an escalation of violence against Israel by Hizbullah in the early 1990s, which was countered by severe retaliation by the Israelis. One of the high points of Israeli operations against Hizbullah was in February 1992 when Israeli combat helicopters killed Hizbullah leader Abbas Musawi as he proceeded in his motorcade. Retaliating to this attack the Hizbullah in collaboration with Iran were suspected of bombing Israel's embassy in Buenos Aires in March 1992.<sup>21</sup>

There also occurred a crucial leadership change both within the Hizbullah and its patron, Iran. In February 1992, Hassan Nasrallah was appointed as the Secretary General of the Hizbullah after the killing of Musawi and in Iran President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani consolidated his position. Tehran sought to consolidate its ties with the new Hizbullah leadership. In March 1992, Nasrallah travelled to Tehran declaring that he planned to make special efforts to facilitate Iran's closer relations with the villages of southern Lebanon. He returned to Lebanon with an Iranian pledge to US\$ 1 million to help rebuild homes destroyed by Israeli attacks.<sup>22</sup> This was followed closely by a visit by Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayeti reaffirming Iranian support to the Lebanese Shia. Following his visit Iran replenished Hizbullah's arms stocks and sent additional consignments of relief supplies to southern Lebanon.

The period also saw a change in the ideological position of Hizbullah. It managed to adapt successfully and accommodate to changing political circumstances, becoming in the process an active player in Lebanon's political

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<sup>20</sup> Calabrese, n. 10, p. 150.

<sup>21</sup> Refer to the fourth chapter for a more detailed discussion on Iran's suspected involvement in these attacks.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

system and an admired symbol of anti-Israeli resistance throughout the Arab and Islamic world.<sup>23</sup> The ability of Hizbullah to adapt successfully and retain its legitimacy with its constituency was also due to its link to Iran. It was primarily the struggle between the moderate and hardliner leadership following the death of Khomeini and the emergence of a pragmatic regime under Rafsanjani that caused a shift in Hizbullah's orientation. Influenced by the new Iranian orientation of openness Sheikh Fadlallah urged Hizbullah to become more open and involved in the Lebanese political system. From 1992 Hassan Nasrallah continued the policy of rapprochement by positioning the party to participate in the Lebanese parliamentary elections and to close the "western hostages" file by completing the releasing all hostages by 1992.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps the most outstanding achievement for the Hizbullah was the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000. By 24 May, all Israeli forces had left Lebanon and on 16 June 2000 United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan confirmed that Israel had fully complied with Resolution 425.<sup>25</sup> He also called on Lebanon to respect the international boundaries between Israel and Lebanon. Hizbullah portrayed this retreat—and rightly so to a certain extent—as an important historical victory in the Arab struggle against Israel. For the first time in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel had pulled out unconditionally from Arab land—without a peace treaty, a cease-fire agreement, or even a tacit understanding that quiet would prevail on its border with Lebanon. However the threat from Hizbullah was far from over for Israel.

The withdrawal of Israel from the 'security zone'<sup>26</sup> provided the Hizbullah with a territorial niche in the areas vacated by Israel. Hizbullah also succeeded in

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<sup>23</sup> A detailed discussion of Hizbullah's integration is provided in, Augustus Richard Norton, "Hizbullah: From Radicalism to Pragmatism?" *Middle East Policy* (Washington D.C), Vol. V, No. 4, January 1998, pp. 147-158.

<sup>24</sup> Hajjar, n. 1, p. 16

<sup>25</sup> Passed on 19 March 1978, Resolution 425 called on Israel to withdraw all its forces from Lebanese territory. For complete text of the Resolution see, <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/368/70/IMG/NR036870.pdf> OpenElement

<sup>26</sup> Following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, in June 1985 Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres ordered a unilateral withdrawal of most of Israel's troops from Lebanon leaving only a small residual

militarising its territorial base. Since it withdrew from south Lebanon, Israel has fortified outposts to resist mortar attacks in northern Israel, built an electrified fence along the border, installed surveillance cameras and heat sensors to detect infiltration attempts, and employed reconnaissance drones to closely monitor enemy activity on the other side for signs of impending attacks. It remains defenceless, however, against the militant Hizbullah's growing arsenal of up to 10,000 short and long-range rockets, including hundreds capable of striking into the civilian and industrial heartland of the Jewish state.

As Israel was preparing for the withdrawal, on 4 May the Lebanese government informed the UN Secretary General that it considered Israel's withdrawal incomplete so long as it remained in a 25 square kilometre area called the Sheb'a Farms on the slopes of Mount Dov, which Lebanon claimed as its territory.<sup>27</sup> Alleging that the occupation continued, the Lebanese government refused to deploy its army along the border and allowed Hizbullah to attack Israeli positions in the Sheb'a area. These predictably triggered Israeli counter attacks. The old practice of tit-for-tat had merely entered another phase, with a collective "testing of the rules" by Syria, Israel and Hizbullah.<sup>28</sup> Hizbullah, Syria, and Lebanon all justified the activity, claiming that Israel's military retention of this area indicated an incomplete IDF withdrawal.

Behind the scenes, the Hizbullah has also steadily increased its military strength. Although sources on Hizbullah's military capability are primarily intelligence estimates, conservative assessments put its standing force at 300 to 400 of highly experienced full-time fighters, supplemented by around 3,000 reservists. Since the 1990s its weaponry mainly of Russian origin and imported from Iran

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Israeli force and an Israeli supported Lebanese militia in a "security zone"- a 15 km wide strip of land paralleling the border.

<sup>27</sup> According to the official Israeli stance, the area is an integral part of the Golan Heights and would be negotiated with Syria, when peace talks were resumed. Lebanon, however, supported by Syria, claims the area is an integral part of South Lebanon, and should have been included when Israel withdrew from Lebanon. For more insight into this dispute see, Asher Kaufman, "Understanding the Sheeba Farms dispute", *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture* (Jerusalem), Vol. 11, No. 1, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> "Old Games, New Rules: Conflict on the Israel-Lebanon Border", *Middle East Report No. 7*, (Brussels, 2002) p. 7.

via Syria, has become increasingly sophisticated. By 2000, its arsenal included short-range Katyushas, Sagger and Strella anti-tank missiles, anti-aircraft guns and anti-aircraft missiles. Independent sources estimate that Hizbullah has enough artillery to inflict damage on northern Israeli towns. There were indications that since May 2000, it has further increased its arsenal.

According to some reports, Hizbullah acquired in 2002 more sophisticated and lethal weaponry- such as Fajr 5 ground-to-ground rockets with a range of 70 kilometres and Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards have been familiarizing its fighters with the new weapons in training camps in Lebanon.<sup>29</sup> Israeli officials have been complaining about massive Iranian airlifts to Hizbullah even after the withdrawal. In late January 2002, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres told the Knesset that Iranian airlifts had expanded Hizbullah's arsenal to 10,000 missiles.<sup>30</sup> In May 2005, days before the parliamentary elections in Lebanon, in a festival held on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the Israeli withdrawal occupation from Lebanon, Secretary General Nasrallah said that the party possessed 12,000 missiles that would make northern Israel a target if Lebanon was exposed to any Israeli aggression.<sup>31</sup>

External pressure on Hizbullah has increased steadily since the 11 September 2001 attacks in the US. Branded by the Bush administration a terrorist organization “with global reach” and therefore a legitimate target in its “war on terrorism”, Hizbullah soon saw itself labelled the “A- team of terrorists”.<sup>32</sup> Since then there appears to be a reduction of attacks by the Hizbullah. Seeking to focus away from the Sheb’a, Hizbullah has been pointing to its repeated actions aimed at Israel’s numerous incursions into Lebanon’s airspace and territorial waters both by highlighting them in public and by deploying additional anti-

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 16

<sup>30</sup> Gary C. Gambill, “Hezbollah's Strategic Rocket Arsenal”, *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol. 4, No. 11, November-December 2002 (Electronic Edition) [www.meib.org](http://www.meib.org).

<sup>31</sup> Arabic News, 26 May 2005, <http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/daily/day/050526/2005052620.html>, Accessed on 14 July 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Sami Hajjar, “Hizbollah: Rebel without a Cause?” *ICG Middle East Briefing*, (Brussels, 2003) p.4

aircraft guns to the south. Instead, resistance has now become deterrence. Hizbullah's self-proclaimed goal is to make it more difficult and costly for Israel to attack Lebanon or Syria.

Commenting on the movement's weapons build-up in southern Lebanon, Hizbullah spokesperson Hassan Izz-ad-Din said, "We have upgraded our combat readiness and we are certain we can repulse any aggression."<sup>33</sup> There are speculations that internal and external pressures on Iran could provoke a strategic shift, leading the country's leadership to rethink its ties with the Lebanese movement. Some Iranian advocates of improved relations with the US see Iran's posture in this regard as a major and unnecessary impediment. In light of worsening economic conditions, material assistance to Hizbullah was also provoking some opposition among the Iranian public. In line with this policy following the September 11 attacks, Iran's Supreme National Security Council reportedly ordered the withdrawal of an unspecified number of IRGC personnel from Lebanon. In November 2001 the Lebanese daily L'Orient Le-Jour quoted "well-informed sources" as saying that about 100 "Iranian experts who assist Hezbollah" had departed the country.<sup>34</sup> This argument could also explain the moderate stance taken by President Mohammad Khatami during his visit to Lebanon during 12-14 May 2003. Despite his praise for Lebanon's resistance in general, Khatami was widely believed to have urged Hizbullah to show restraint.<sup>35</sup>

Israel therefore seems to be accurate in its assumption that Iran has been the key material and ideological support to the Hizbullah. Even by Hizbullah's reckoning, it would have taken an additional 50 years for it to score the same achievements in the absence of Iranian backing.<sup>36</sup> However it is difficult to ascertain if the activities of the Hizbullah against Israeli occupation translate to terrorism. There is enough proof to indicate that Iran's support to the Hizbullah

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p.8.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in Gambill, n. 30.

<sup>35</sup> Hajjar, n. 32, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Ghorayeb, n. 8, p.14.

has waned since the withdrawal was completed in 2000. Hizbullah itself seems to have slowed down its anti-Israeli agenda in the wake of American pressure. Thus what will be the extent of Iranian support to Hizbullah in the future still remains to be seen, as there appears to be a re-examination of strategic calculations by Iran. There are signs that support for Hizbullah is one of the bones of contention between various Iranian factions, with some of the more reformist political leaders questioning whether it was in the national interest.<sup>37</sup> Also with the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in April 2005, its influence on Lebanon's internal politics is bound to reduce and this could also have considerable influence on the Iran-Hizbullah relations.

### **The Issue of Terrorism**

Probably the most prominent discourse in the present times is the one on terrorism. The issue of terrorism has gained unprecedented importance since the 11 September attacks in the US and the subsequent American-led war on Afghanistan and Iraq to dismantle the 'terrorist' network. The US has recognized Iran as yet another sponsor of terrorist activities across the world. Although Iran officially opposed the US attack on Afghanistan, it made no effort to interfere but even cooperated quietly on issues such as humanitarian relief, search and rescue and other practical matters.<sup>38</sup> Speculation emerged among scholars that this would be the beginning of a new US-Iran relationship. Then in his 2002 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush identified Iran as the third member of an axis of evil along with Iraq and North Korea stating,

Terrorism was a major concern. Iran aggressively pursues weapons of mass destruction and exports terror ... they could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred... the United

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<sup>37</sup> Hajjar, n. 32, p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> For more on Iran's cooperation with US Operation in Afghanistan see, Adam Tarock, "Iran between religious hardliners and hawks in America", *Central Asian Survey* (London) Vol. 22, 2-3, July- September 2003, pp. 133-149.



States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons.<sup>39</sup>

The relations between Iran and Israel have also not escaped this debate on terrorism. The primary debate that occurs between the two is the categorization of terrorism. One of the problems in dealing with terrorism is the absence of a commonly accepted definition of it. Since 1983 the US State Department has used the definition of terrorism contained in Title 22 of the United States Code, Section 2656f (d). It says that terrorism means "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience." This definition, furthermore, says that a "terrorist group" is one that practices, or has any subgroups that practice, "international terrorism" (which is defined as "terrorism involving citizens or the territory of more than one country").

In 1987, Ayatollah Muhammad Ali Taskhiri of Iran's Islamic Propagation Organization attempted to define terrorism. He said: "Terrorism is an act carried out to achieve an inhuman and corrupt (mufsid) objective, and involving threat to security of any kind, and violation of rights acknowledged by religion and mankind." According to him, the following did not constitute terrorism:

acts of national resistance exercised against occupying forces, colonizers and usurpers; resistance of peoples against cliques imposed on them by the force of arms; rejection of dictatorships and other forms of despotism and efforts to undermine their institutions; resistance against racial discrimination and attacks on the latter's strongholds; retaliation against any aggression if there is no other alternative.<sup>40</sup>

For Israel, Iran's support and finance of the Hizbullah's struggle against it and its support to other Palestinian groups represent an act of terror while Iran

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<sup>39</sup> Cited in Gary Sick, 'Iran: Confronting Terrorism', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 4, Autumn 2003, p.90.

<sup>40</sup> Cited in A. William Samii, "Teheran, Washington and Terror: No Agreement to Differ", *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (Herzliya), Vol. 6, No. 3, September 2002, p. 54.

considers it to be an armed struggle against Israeli occupation. Iran perceives Israel's treatment of the Palestinians in the occupied territories as a terrorist act. It would not be an exaggeration to say that for Iran, the creation of the Jewish State of Israel was an unpardonable act of terror. This is represented in Iran's rhetoric against Israel and its non-recognition. Thus for years, terrorism has been an issue of concern for both states and it has now become more severe especially in the light of the 11 September attacks on the US and the subsequent war on terror across the world.

Moreover since 1984, the US government has described Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism. For years the US has termed Iran as one of the 'rogue states' and has followed a policy of dual containment with both Iran and Iraq. Iran has faced numerous economic sanctions and political isolation owing to this policy. In spite of implicit Iranian support in its operations in Afghanistan, President George W. Bush rewarded Iran by declaring it a part of the 'Axis of Evil' and began a renewed attack against Iranian terror.

Ever since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran and more so during the 1990s, Israel has projected a threat to its national security from Iran's involvement in terrorism. Two incidents that came into spotlight were the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, in which twenty-nine people were killed and the 1994 bombing of a Jewish Center in Buenos Aires, in which eighty-six people lost their lives. After years of focusing mainly on its Arab adversaries, Israel shifted focus to Iran. The New York Times quoted Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres as saying that "there is no longer the slightest doubt that Iran stands behind the bombings."<sup>41</sup> Israel considered this as an attack against the ongoing peace process with the Arabs.

However Iran refuted all claims of involvement in these incidences and in a June 1994 press conference President Hashemi Rafsanjani stated that Iran

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<sup>41</sup> Cited in Hooshang Amirahmadi, "Terrorist Nation or Scapegoat? Taking a Close look at Iran and the "Islamic Threat" *Middle East Insight* (Washington D.C) Volume 10, No. 6, September-October 1994, p. 23.

disapproves of the peace process but “does not wish to intervene in practice and physically disrupt the process.”<sup>42</sup> Although there is no clear and convincing evidence of Iran’s involvement in the affairs, Israel and the US were convinced that it had a key role to play in the affair.

In another incident, revelations of Iran-Palestine collusion to smuggle a large quantity of weapons into the Palestinian Authority (PA) through the offices of Hizbullah came to light in January 2002. The incident was popularly referred to as the *Karine A* controversy. As discussed in the previous chapter it was seen by Israel as yet another attempt by Iran to hinder the peace process and threaten its national security.

Israel has also often claimed that Iran provides financial and military support to organizations within the occupied territories like Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Iran’s relationship with the two has been discussed in the previous chapter.

There have also been reports of Iran’s involvement in anti-Israeli activities in other states in West Asia. According to a story first reported in the London-based *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Jordan's King Abdullah met with President George W. Bush on 1 February 2002 and presented his hosts with evidence that Iran sponsored no fewer than seventeen attempts to launch rockets and mortars at Israeli targets from Jordan.<sup>43</sup> This was, according to the King, an Iranian plot aimed at undermining the Jordanian regime and opening a new front against Israel. He reportedly said that detained Hizbullah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) terrorists had admitted that Iranian instructors at Hizbullah camps in Lebanon's Beqa'a Valley trained, armed, and funded them.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid, p.24.

<sup>43</sup> Matthew Levitt, “New Arenas For Iranian-Sponsored Terrorism: The Arab-Israeli Heartland”, *Policy Watch* (Washington D.C), No. 605, February 22, 2002 (Electronic Edition).

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

Even though Israel is adamant it has evidence of strong Iranian support to these militant organizations, it is very difficult to prove Iran's involvement. In both the Argentina bombing cases and the *Karine A* controversy, the evidence of Iranian complicity comes from security sources. Even the Argentina government has declared that there was not enough evidence to link Iran to the attacks. Also evidence of Iranian links to the Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad are primarily from the Israeli or American sources and are not authenticated by others. Iran continues to stress that it only provides moral support to these organizations and has no intention of jeopardizing the peace process. Terrorism in itself has become a very ambiguous concept and it is very difficult to categorise terrorist activities as distinct from movements of resistance against occupation. Therefore the debate on terrorism is a very tricky one it is very difficult to examine how real the threat of terrorism is for both Iran and Israel.

### **The Nuclear Debate**

The recent escalation of tension over Iran's nuclear arsenal has emerged as a critical clash-point in the West Asian region. In August 2002 an Iranian exile group, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (a front group for the *Mojahedin-e Khalq*) publicly presented evidence of two nuclear facilities in Iran at Natanz and Arak that had not been previously declared to the IAEA. These revelations and a 9 February 2003 speech by President Khatami stating that Iran had the capability to enrich uranium and had developed a large infrastructure of mines and uranium processing facilities raised disturbing questions.<sup>45</sup>

### **Nuclear programme of Iran**

Iran's quest for nuclear energy was initiated in the pre-revolutionary era. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was responsible for initiating Iran's nuclear programme. He started the project in 1967 with the purchase of a five-megawatt research reactor from the US. In 1974, the Shah established the Atomic Energy

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<sup>45</sup> *Dealing with Iran's Nuclear Program*, ICG, *Middle East Report*, 2003 (Brussels, 2003), p.1

Organization of Iran (AEOI) and as part of its long term development programme announced a plan to build 23 nuclear power plants by 1994. In the early years several western countries like US, France and West Germany supported the Iranian nuclear program.<sup>46</sup>

After the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, initially the nuclear programme was suspended in line with the policy of reversing the programmes of the Shah. However in 1983, Tehran decided to restart the nuclear programme. After the end of the Iran-Iraq war the leadership decided that Iran needed to be self-sufficient in both conventional forces and nuclear weapons. Iran's 1989-1994 five-year plan included funding to construct a "uranium bullion" plant. Iran also entered into a U.S. \$18 million contract with Argentina for construction of the plant.<sup>47</sup>

In 1989 following its costly war with Iraq, Iran initiated a major program to rebuild, expand and modernize its ravaged armed forces. It was motivated by a number of factors. The primary desire for revolutionary Iran was to achieve self-reliance. Under the Shah, Iran depended on the US and Britain for nearly all its arms. Following the 1979 revolution, Tehran was isolated internationally and faced Baghdad virtually alone during the Iran-Iraq War. Tehran's sense of isolation and abandonment was heightened by the apathetic international response to Iraq's use of chemical weapons in the war. In addition, a US-led arms embargo during the war greatly complicated Iran's efforts to replace its losses and sustain its war effort.

Iran thus sought to develop its own military industries, in order to reduce its dependence on foreign arms suppliers, to minimize the potential impact of future embargoes and in order to deal with potential threats.<sup>48</sup> Iran's defence planning

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<sup>46</sup> Chris Quillen, "Iranian Nuclear Weapons Policy: Past, Present and Possible Future", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol.6, No.2, June 2002, p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> Middle East Report, n. 45, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Eisenstadt, "Living with a Nuclear Iran?" in Barry Rubin ed., *Crises in the Contemporary Persian Gulf*, (London, 2002), p. 224.

was also motivated by a desire to enhance its deterrent capability to face perceived threats from Iraq, US, Israel and other regional players.

Increasing domestic energy consumption, a need to preserve oil resources and earn more revenue by exporting power generated by nuclear power stations are some of the other reasons cited to justify the nuclear development programme. Iran has plans of generating 6000-7000 megawatts of electricity by 2020.<sup>49</sup> The centrepiece of Iran's nuclear programme involved construction of the Bushehr nuclear plant on the south-western coast. The project began with West German help in the early 1970s but was halted as a result of the 1979 revolution.

The partially constructed facility was severely damaged by Iraqi air strikes during the 1980-1988 war, and Germany subsequently refused to complete the contract. Russia stepped in, and the Bushehr facility was now scheduled for completion in late 2005 as a light water reactor under the terms of an US\$800 million contract. That contract also called for the training of Iranian scientists and technicians at Russian nuclear facilities, development of a nuclear mine in Iran, construction of a gas centrifuge plant for uranium enrichment and the supply of enriched uranium fuel for Bushehr itself.

Beginning in 2002, previously unknown information concerning the scope of the nuclear programme came to light. This involved sophisticated nuclear facilities and the importation of uranium fluoride compounds used in enrichment facilities and their transfer for further processing. After an Iranian opposition group in exile had revealed the presence of several new, previously undisclosed nuclear facilities, Iran confirmed that it was building a large gas centrifuge uranium enrichment facility near Natanz and that it had completed a heavy water production plant near Arak. Iran also declared its intention to build a heavy water reactor at Arak, a uranium metal conversion facility, a uranium conversion

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<sup>49</sup> Gunmeen Bhasin, "Truth Behind Nuclear Weapons Programme", *Issue Brief*, Observer Research Foundation, Vol.1, No.5, August 2004, p. 2.

centre at Isfahan (declared in 2000) and a fuel manufacturing plant, also at Isfahan, to be commissioned in 2006 and would begin operation in 2007.

Iran also developed simultaneously, advanced missiles and delivery systems. Efforts have focused on solid-fuelled rockets, a SCUD duplication program, a cruise missile program and, most recently, a revived intermediate range ballistic missile (IRBM) program known as the Shahab (“Meteor” or “Shooting Star”) series. The Shahab program, a source of great concern to Israel and the US began in the mid-1990s as an effort to develop domestically a missile with strategic capability – that is, the range to reach beyond Iran’s immediate Gulf neighbours.

### **Iran and the IAEA**

The concern over the Iranian nuclear programme becomes pertinent since Iran is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Since the allegations were made against Iran, it has come under severe scrutiny by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which is trying to investigate if Iran has violated the terms of the treaty. In a statement to the IAEA on 16 September 2002 after the initial accusations were made against Iran, Reza Aghazadeh, President of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran said his country had no intention of focusing on the negative aspects of nuclear energy and all its efforts were directed towards the development of a nuclear power plant. He said Iran had the right to pursue peaceful uses of nuclear energy under Article IV of the NPT, which states, ‘all the parties have the right to participate in the fullest exchange of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.’<sup>50</sup>

Thus began a vigorous interaction between IAEA officials and the Iranian government. IAEA Director General Mohamed Elbaradei made his first trip to Iran in February 2003 on the invitation of the government. Iran assured him that

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<sup>50</sup> Bhasin, n. 49, p.4

it would be transparent in all their dealings with the agency. Elbaradei visited the two recently exposed facilities at Natanz. In a letter dated 5 May 2003, Iran informed the agency they were planning to construct a heavy water research reactor at Arak and fuel manufacturing plant at Isfahan in 2003. However the IAEA resolution passed in June 2003 declared, “Iran has failed to meet its obligations under its Safeguard Agreement with respect to the reporting of nuclear material, the subsequent processing and the use of that material and the declaration of facilities where the material was stored and processed.”<sup>51</sup>

As a follow up Elbaradei went to Iran in July 2003 and asked President Khatami to think conclusively about signing the Additional Protocol. In a resolution adopted in September 2003, the agency wanted a complete list of the imported equipment and components that were said to be contaminated with highly enriched uranium. On 18 December 2003, Iran signed the Additional Protocol under which they would “have to provide an expanded declaration of their nuclear activities and grant the Agency broader rights of access” to sites in the country.<sup>52</sup>

This however was not the end. In February 2004, information regarding Iran’s failure to disclose the designs of the P2 centrifuges in the report submitted in October surfaced. In addition a resolution passed in March 2004 said that even though Iran had signed the Additional Protocol, they still had to ratify it. Iran’s response was that they could not ratify the protocol as the ratification had to endure a political process which involved the approval of the Iranian parliament, government and the Guardian Council.<sup>53</sup> In June 2004, the agency reiterated that questions regarding Iran’s uranium enrichment and origins of the particles of highly enriched and lowly enriched uranium were still unsolved. At its 18 September 2004 meeting, the IAEA acknowledged that the picture remained

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> For text of Additional Protocol see,

<http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Infocircs/1998/infocirc540corrected.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> Cited in Bhasin, n. 49, p. 9.



ambiguous and that it could not "draw definitive conclusions concerning the correctness and completeness of Iran's declarations".<sup>54</sup>

### **Israel's Nuclear Programme**

The extent of Israel's nuclear capability has often been the subject of intelligence estimates and speculations since the 1960s, when the country's nuclear reactor, at Dimona in the Negev desert, came online. The shrouds of secrecy have lifted only once, in the mid-1980s, when a former worker at the plant, Mordechai Vanunu, gave a British newspaper descriptions and photographs of Israeli nuclear warheads. Vanunu's evidence led to a sharp upwards revision of the strength of nuclear warheads and Israel was believed to possess - to at least 100 - and possibly as many as 200.<sup>55</sup>

Shortly after its creation Israel started building its nuclear capabilities. In 1952, the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission was formed and began working closely with the military. By 1953, a process for extracting uranium found in the Negev desert was perfected and a new method of producing heavy water was developed - providing Israel with its own capability to produce some of the most important nuclear materials. For reactor design and construction, Israel sought and received the assistance of France. The complex was variously described as a textile plant, an agricultural station and a metallurgical research facility until 1960, when Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion stated that it was a nuclear research centre built for "peaceful purposes".<sup>56</sup> Besides nuclear weapons Israel is also believed to have a stockpile of chemical weapons and an active biological weapons program that has developed several weapons agents.

While the investigations regarding Iran's nuclear capabilities progressed, Iran urged the world community to focus its attention on the Israeli nuclear programme. Unlike Iran, Israel is not a signatory to the NPT and therefore could

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<sup>54</sup> "Iran: Where next on the Nuclear Standoff?" ICG *Middle East Briefing*, (Brussels, 2004), p.4.

<sup>55</sup> *Israel's Nuclear Programme*, BBC 22 December 2003, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3340639.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3340639.stm), Accessed on 20 January 2005.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

not be subjected to similar kind of inspections. Israel reportedly has the “world’s sixth-largest stockpile of nuclear weapons, including some 300 nuclear warheads.”<sup>57</sup> Israel has however claimed that its nuclear capabilities act as a deterrent to the military capabilities in the neighbourhood. It has resisted over the years pressures to become a part of the NPT. In July 2004, Elbaradei paid a visit to Israel. However Israel tacitly encouraged by the US continues to maintain ambiguity regarding its nuclear status even though it is widely recognised as a nuclear weapons state.

### **Iran and Israel and the Nuclear Debate**

After disarming Iraq the United States has shifted its focus to the nuclear programme of Iran. It has put pressure on the International Atomic Energy Agency to investigate Iranian nuclear development and take appropriate steps for its disarmament. Iran on the other hand justifies the pursuit of nuclear weapons as a way to counter Israel’s capabilities and redress Muslim weakness. In an October 1992 interview, then Deputy President Ataollah Mohajerani stated that, “because the enemy (Israel) has nuclear facilities, the Muslim states too should be equipped with the same capacity.” Subsequently Judiciary chief Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi declared in a June 1998 speech that, “We are living at a time when the United States supports Israel which has the biggest arsenals of mass destruction and nuclear weapons, an atomic power is needed in the world of Islam to create a balance in the region.”<sup>58</sup>

Since 2002, when an Iranian rebel group disclosed new information on its nuclear capabilities, the debate has intensified. After the successful dismantling of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, there was speculation of a probable US and Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear installations. This could be also seen in the light of the Israeli attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor in Osiraq in 1982. Since the creation of the Jewish state, Israeli security policy has been a combination of

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<sup>57</sup> Cited in Bhasin, n. 49, p.10

<sup>58</sup> Cited in Eisenstadt, n. 48, p. 230.

pre-emption and prevention. The attack on Osiraq was in line with such a policy often referred to as the Begin Doctrine. According to this, had Iraq been allowed to develop its nuclear capabilities, the possible target would have been Israel and therefore in order to protect its national interest, Israel had to take such a step.

In the present scenario, strategists are debating the relevance of the Begin Doctrine and its application to Iran case. Iran is alarmed by recent statements of senior Israeli military officials and politicians threatening to attack its missile and nuclear infrastructure. Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz made a statement in December 2003 in which he implied that Israel would destroy Iran's nuclear reactors, as it did with Iraq's in the early 1980s, if it deemed this necessary for Israel's safety.<sup>59</sup>

Israel is in the process of acquiring or developing arms- such as the F-15I strike aircraft, cruise-missile-capable diesel submarines and extended-range Jericho missiles- that could enable it to strike at distant targets within Iran.<sup>60</sup> Recent Israeli weapons purchases could be crucial in a possible strike. In February 2004, Israel received the first of 102 American-built F-16I warplanes; the largest weapons deal in its history. The planes were believed to be specially designed with extra fuel tanks to allow them to reach Iran. In June, it signed a US \$319 million deal to acquire nearly 5,000 US-made smart bombs, including 500 "bunker-busters" that can destroy 1.8-metre concrete walls, such as those that might be found in Iran's nuclear facilities.<sup>61</sup> There is also speculation of a probable American attack on Iran following its operation in Iraq. On 6 May 2003, a US House of Representative resolution "had authorized all appropriate means to end Iranian nuclear weapons development." The resolution still has to be passed by the Senate.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Yossi Melman, "Iran vows reprisal if attacked by Israel", *Ha'aretz* (Tel Aviv), 24 December 2003, (Electronic Edition).

<sup>60</sup> Eisenstadt, n. 48, p. 230.

<sup>61</sup> "Israel won't be able to destroy Iran nukes", *Jordan Times* (Amman), 29 September 2004 (Electronic Edition).

<sup>62</sup> Cited in Bhasin, n. 49, p.10.

In its place Iran has made it clear that if there were an Israeli attack, it would not shy away from a military reaction. The head of the Iran's air force General Seyed Reza Pardis said in December 2003, "The (Zionist) regime knows that the armed forces of the Islamic Republic, in particular our air force, have such high capabilities ... that it would be digging its own grave in the region if it launches military attacks against Iran,"<sup>63</sup>

However it has also been recognized by the Israeli intelligence and other strategic experts that striking Iran's nuclear facilities would not be as easy as the attack on the Osiraq reactor. A growing number of experts now argue that a military option no longer exists because Iran has spread its nuclear facilities across the country and has not concentrated them in one place, as was the case in Iraq. There have also been reports of Tehran setting up dummy nuclear facilities. A single air strike, therefore, would be insufficient to knock out Iran's programme. What is more, Israel is aware that Tehran would respond to such an attack, possibly with long-range missiles.<sup>64</sup> According to Israeli analyst Reuven Pedatzur, Israel would make a great mistake if it tried to eliminate Iran's nuclear program by force. It would have no chance - the nuclear facilities are dispersed, and most buried deep underground.<sup>65</sup> Israel also recognized that attacking Iran would be politically disadvantageous. If Israel acted alone, "we will remain alone," Vice Premier Shimon Peres said. "Everyone knows our potential but we also have to know our limits. As long as there is a possibility that the world will organize to fight against Iran's nuclear option, let the world organize."<sup>66</sup>

For Iran, after Iraq the primary threat to security was Israel and therefore it justifies its military development. It is also severely critical of the US, which has conveniently ignored the Israeli nuclear weapons programme while talking of

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<sup>63</sup> "Israel will 'dig own grave' if it attacks nuclear sites", *Jordan Times*, 23 December 2003 (Electronic Edition).

<sup>64</sup> Peter Hirschberg, "Destroying Iran's nuclear assets won't be a hit-and-run job", *Dawn* (Karachi), 4 February 2005 (Electronic Edition).

<sup>65</sup> Reuven Pedatzur, "The nuclear sum game", *Ha'aretz* (Tel Aviv), 23 September 2004, (Electronic Edition).

<sup>66</sup> Hirschberg, n. 69.

the total disarmament of the region. Iran also favoured of the international community putting pressure on Israel and it's joining the NPT. Iran's Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi said "his country advocates a nuclear arms-free Middle East, but the problem is that Israel has full capability in nuclear weapons (and has) a large arsenal of nuclear weapons as well as other weapons of mass destruction. Every country in the Middle East is feeling insecure because of the capabilities of Israel," Kharrazi told reporters during a visit to Manila in 2004. "I believe the international community has to put pressure on Israel to become a member of NPT and ... eliminate its existing nuclear weapons."<sup>67</sup>

Iran has also been stressing that the entire issue is being politicised by the US and Israel. There were infact two opinions on this issue in the world community. One opinion was that the case should be reported immediately to the Security Council and the IAEA should be kept out of the scene. The Americans and Israel uphold this view. The other opinion wanted the IAEA to analyse the situation thoroughly before taking any steps, a view held by the EU and other Third World countries.

Another angle to the entire debate is the role being played by the European Union in engaging Iran in a 'critical dialogue'. The EU trio successfully revived the talks with Iran in late 2004 in a move that rescued Iran from being 'reported' to the Security Council, which could have brought further international isolation and painful economic sanctions for Tehran.<sup>68</sup> In November Iran agreed with Britain, France and Germany to suspend all uranium enrichment-related activities in return for talks on trade, security and technological bonuses for the Islamic Republic. They wanted Iran to suspend its nuclear programme altogether to prove that it would not be attempting to develop a nuclear weapon. Iran was however opposed to this proposal and insisted it has the right under international treaties to work on the nuclear fuel cycle. Therefore the negotiations were still

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<sup>67</sup> Cited in "Iranian FM Kharrazi wants Israel pressured to join nuclear non-proliferation accord", *Ha'aretz* 27 August 2004 (Electronic Edition).

<sup>68</sup> "Israel breaks silence on EU's deal with Iran", *Dawn*, 14 January 2005 (Electronic Edition).

under process and its result remains to be seen. Israel has voiced serious doubts about this dialogue process. "They (Europeans) achieved an agreement now with Iran. We do not like it very much but still it is much better than it was before," Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom said at a Jerusalem conference in January 2005. "We believe that it should be moved, should be transferred to the (United Nations) Security Council, in order to stop the Iranians from what they are doing," Mr. Shalom said.<sup>69</sup> They stress that the Iran was using the dialogue process to buy time and further develop its nuclear arsenal.

Lack of verifiable evidence and the absence of any kind of relationship between the two states further complicates the political dynamics. Even though both states perceive each other as threats, it is unclear as to who is a threat and to whom. On the issue of Iran's support to organisations like Hizbullah, Islamic Jihad and Hamas, Israel claims that these are terrorist organisations threatening the security and integrity of its people. Iran on the other hand, perceives itself to be the Islamic saviour. It views itself as the Islamic force that can assist these institutions in their struggle against Israeli occupation. Further on the issue of nuclear weapons, there is ambiguity and mistrust. Iran is threatened by the growing Israeli military might and thus offers this as an explanation for its own weapons development. Therefore even though both these states have the potential to become regional powers, so long as there is no meaningful dialogue, their long-standing differences and threat perceptions continue to inhibit the possibility of a working relationship.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid

## **CONCLUSION**

Although no political relationship exists between Iran and Israel, the paths of the two often intersect both regional and international realm. As highlighted by the ties during 1948-1979 under the reign of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, strategic and political considerations led to a convergence of interests between the two and made it possible for both to reap the benefits. The United States was the primary link in this strategic partnership. Iran's desire to gain economic and military benefits from Washington became a crucial gain for Iran-Israel relations.

From the marriage of convenience under the Shah, since 1979, Israel has had to deal with the unrelenting hostility of the Islamic Republic. This is clear from an examination of the basic tenets of Iran's foreign policy since 1979. A crucial aspect of this policy is the status of the Jewish population in Iran and how the animosity towards the Jewish state has had ramifications on the treatment of Jews in Iran. Even though the condition of the Iranian Jews is much better than their counterparts in the Arab countries there exists a general mistrust and suspicion towards the Jewish community and its suspected allegiance to the State of Israel.

The dynamics of Iran's foreign policy have transformed considerably over the last 25 years. There has been a reorientation and re-evaluation of policy making by the regime in order to adapt to the changing regional and international dynamics. It points out how Iran has evolved under the moderate leaderships of Hojjat ul-Islam Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Seyyed Mohammad Khatami and succeeded in reforming its image in the region and beyond. No longer associated with the dogmatic ideology of the revolutionary years Iran is more focused and is able to make decisions based on strategic calculations motivated primarily by national interest.

However this reorientation of foreign policy had little or no impact on its opposition to Israel. Even though scholars were anticipating a reform of Iran's policy towards Israel by Khatami but it seems that owing to domestic opposition and the need to uphold a bit of the revolutionary creed, he has also followed the



same path as the earlier regimes. While there seems to be a possibility of a rapprochement with the US considered as the 'Great Satan' by the revolutionaries, this does not seem to be the case with Israel. Even though during the period of the Shah, a primary motivation for Iran-Israel ties was the link with Washington, for the Islamic regime, no motivation seems to be incentive enough to establish contact with Israel.

While there seems to be a uniform policy of animosity towards Israel, the Iran-Contra affair was an aberration in this policy. Faced with regional and international isolation and a debilitating war with neighbouring Iraq, Iran entered into an arms deal with Israel. This demonstrated that even though ideologically opposed to relations with Israel, crucial national interest calculations compelled Iran to act realistically and interact with Israel. Although officially Iran never accepted its complicity in the scandal, there seems to be substantial evidence to highlight Iran's acquiescence towards these deals.

With regards to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iran has moved from ambiguity to complete rejection of peace. Iran has very close connections with the Islamic movements in the Palestinian territories. It also enjoyed for some time a good relationship with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). However once the PLO began to show signs of reconciliation with Israel, the Iran-PLO relationship suffered a blow. Although evidence of the *Karine A* controversy indicates still prevalent links, Iran is more closely associated with the Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. It has been a key source of financial and ideological support to these groups. This policy has been followed uniformly during the years irrespective of the moderate policy of Khatami. Although Iran has now claimed that it will accept any resolution that is acceptable to the Palestinians, its stand on the issue remains guided by Islamic solidarity and Islamic rights over the Holy Land.

Iran and Israel are both regional powers. Both militarily and strategically they are key players in the region. However both Iran and Israel perceive one another as threats to national security. Iran had a key role to play in the formation and growth

of the Hizbullah in Lebanon. Using its links with the Shia community in Lebanon, Iran managed to establish its presence in southern Lebanon- an opportunity that was provided by the Israeli occupation of Lebanon in 1982. For almost two decades, Iran assisted financially and militarily, Hizbullah's activities against the occupation. The intensity of the anti-Israeli activity led to the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000. For the Hizbullah and its benefactor-Iran, the victory against Israel was hailed as an effective military option against Israeli occupation of Islamic lands and was advocated as the role model for Palestinian resistance.

Moving on from the regional arena, Iran has been criticized for its organisation and support for terrorist attacks. While the evidence regarding this is not very convincing, Israel perceived a major terrorist threat from Iran. Since 2002, international attention has moved to Iran's nuclear weapons programme. The US and Israel have been exerting pressure for the disarmament of Iran according to the provisions of the NPT. There seems to be adequate evidence to suggest that the Iranian nuclear programme is progressing quite actively even though Iran claims to be only interested in nuclear energy. While Israel perceived Iran's nuclear development as a threat, Iran is extremely critical of the neglect and bias towards Israel's nuclear weapons programme. Even though Israel has never acknowledged it, it is a widely known fact that it possesses nuclear capability. Yet the duplicity of the non-proliferation regime and the US in particular had managed to keep Israel away from any international action against its weapons development programme. The nuclear issue is still quite volatile and has the capability of tilting the balance of power in the West Asian region.

Iran-Israel relations since 1979 have certain key elements. Primary among them was that the ideological opposition of Khomeini continues to determine Iran's policy towards Israel. Iran's foreign policy has evolved considerably since the revolution. Over the years Iran has managed to reform its foreign policy in line with regional and international dynamics. The Islamic revolution was initially aimed as being the role model of governance in the West Asian region and possibly

the entire Muslim World. This ideal placed the Islamic Republic in the role of a radical regime and the entire Arab world became wary of its growing influence. However over the years, 'export' of the revolution was identified as an unviable alternative. Iran has now managed to evolve a cordial and growing relationship with its Arab neighbours. The Islamic Republic has also established close ties with the European states in order to garner financial and strategic benefits. The regime has thus proved capable of political pragmatism. It has demonstrated that issues of national interest often take precedence over ideology and that the latter can often be an obstacle to the strategic interests of the state.

Having said that, there is but one aspect where the Islamic Republic has declined to stand back from ideology. This is the relationship it shares or doesn't share with the Jewish State. Successive governments in Iran have demonstrated that the policy towards Israel continues to be driven by ideological considerations as put forward by Khomeini and the Islamic revolution. Iran continues to be the leading voice in the region fundamentally opposed to the very existence of the Jewish State. While national interest and strategic calculations have taken precedence in Iran's policy towards traditional enemies like Iraq and Saudi Arabia and the Arabs in general, the issue of Israel continues to be guided by Islamic ideology. In spite of a precedence of a strategic partnership with Israel during the monarchical rule in Iran, the Islamic regime refuses to have any kind of relationship with Israel.

It appears that the animosity towards Israel remained the main issue over which there seemed to be agreement within both the conservative and moderate factions in Iran. It was felt after the election of Khatami in 1997 that there would be gradual improvement in Iran-US relations, which could be the precedent for Israel-Iran relations. Khatami talked of a "Dialogue among Civilizations", which would include the US. However no official policy was made to initiate such a dialogue and the nuclear debate further exacerbated the relationship. The rhetorical debate that has been going on for the last two years has reignited Iran-US and Iran-Israel hostility.

The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2005 as the new President of Iran has raised fears about a more conservative regime. Ahmadinejad is known for his loyalty to Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran. Khamenei is said to have handpicked the civil engineer to be Tehran's mayor two years ago. During his election campaign Ahmadinejad echoed the rhetoric of the 1979 Islamic revolution, advocating self-reliance and orienting Iran away from the Western economic power. Thus it remains to be seen how the future foreign policy of the Islamic Republic will evolve. However the research indicates that the prospects of détente between Iran and Israel are still very bleak. While possibility of a rapprochement between Iran and the US are likely, there is need for a strong leadership with sufficient domestic support to alter Iran's stated policy towards the Jewish State. Until such time, hostility and animosity would continue to determine, shape and guide the policies of the Islamic republic towards Israel.

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