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Iranian-Israeli Relations
In Light of the Iranian Revolution

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Iranian-Israeli Relations
In Light of the Iranian Revolution

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Iranian-Israeli Relations

In Light of the Iranian Revolution

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Prior to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iran and Israel were allies who cooperated extensively with one another to promote Western secular Capitalist values in the Middle East while countering Soviet influence and the proliferation of Communism in the greater Middle East. The connection between Israel and Iran ran deeper than geopolitics; it reached back into the depths of Jewish and Persian history. But the overthrow of the pro-Western Iranian king, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and Ayatollah Khomeini's rise to power led to a sudden, dramatic reversal of the Iran's decades-long policy of full cooperation and accommodation of Western interests. Subsequently, Israeli ties were officially severed and the Islamic Republic designated Israel and Zionism as the greatest threat to Iran and the whole of the Islamic world.

After the hostage crisis and the ensuing severance of relations with the United States, a politically unstable Iran was invaded by Iraq. In spite of the constant stream of public denunciations and threats of annihilation, Israel covertly supplied Iran with American made weapons and parts, without which Iran would likely have quickly lost the war. Ultimately, geopolitical and economic concerns trumped any ideological clashes

and potential threat emanating from the Ayatollahs in Tehran. Throughout the 1980's, and specifically during the Iran-Iraq War, Israel refrained from reciprocating the hostile rhetoric emanating from Khomeini and his extremist government.

Following the revolution and Iran's embrace of an extremist interpretation of Islamic resistance to the West, Iran and Israel came to be seen as ideological and political polar opposites. The animosity between the two former allies was presented as a clash of civilizations: a secular, Western democracy against a backwards, theological authoritarian regime. Yet in reality there were striking similarities in geopolitical strategy, national and religious ideology, and domestic social psychology. This thesis will consider the Iranian and Israeli narratives and compare the religious, historical, ideological and psycho-political underpinnings that reveal significant similarities between these two superficially diametrically opposed states, and ultimately shaped the complex and misunderstood Iranian-Israeli relationship.

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Introduction

Contemporary Iran and Israel comprise the two most ostentatiously antagonistic nations in the world. Media outlets regularly highlight Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's calls for the destruction of Israel, which he bitingly refers to as the "Zionist Entity". His denunciations echo those of his ideological progenitor Ayatollah Khomeini, and represent the Islamic Republic's official stance: absolute condemnation of and refusal to recognize Israel as a nation. Ostensibly representing ideological polar opposites, or a "clash of civilizations", it is difficult to imagine that these two inimical nations could have ever been allies. But for the first three decades of Israel's statehood, Iran was Israel's foremost regional and Muslim ally. The two nations were the American superpower's primary Middle Eastern allies and cooperated extensively to promote Western secular Capitalist values in the region while countering Soviet influence and the proliferation of Communism in the greater Middle East. The connection between Israel and Iran ran deeper than geopolitics; it reached back into the depths of Jewish and Persian history. Prior to the Iranian revolution in 1979, Israel was confident that Iran would remain an enduring, dependable ally. It is important to note that Israel coveted its alliance with Iran much more than Iran did with Israel.

Following the revolution and the sudden, dramatic reversal of the Shah's policy of full cooperation and accommodation of Western interests, it became counterintuitive for Israel to maintain its Periphery Doctrine. This foreign policy dictated that Israel needed (non-Arab) allies on the geographic periphery of the Middle East to counter the widespread (Arab) threat from the region's geographic core. Khomeini's ascension to the Iranian leadership heralded the era of explicit, incendiary anti-Israel discourse which continues to this day, but which Israeli leaders largely dismissed throughout the first decade of the Islamic Republic. Ancient Jewish relations with Persia played a part in Israel's reluctance to fully let go of its Iranian ties, but ultimately it was geopolitical and economic concerns that trumped ideological clashes and any potential threat emanating from the Ayatollahs in Tehran.

Taking advantage of the political turmoil that followed the disintegration of the Shah's regime, Iraq invaded Iran, thrusting it into an eight-year war with approximately one million casualties. The hostage crisis at the American embassy in Tehran exacerbated Iran's political and economic isolation and left Iran without a source of arms to defend itself from Iraqi aggression. Israel took advantage of the opportunity and covertly supplied Iran with American made weapons and parts, without which Iran would likely have quickly lost the war. It was in Israel's interests

to weaken Iraq, whom it considered a greater, more immediate threat than Iran. While purchasing Israeli-provided arms for its devastating but domestically unifying war, Iran consistently railed against Israel as part of an attempt to spread its Islamic revolution and position itself as the champion against Western Colonialism and injustice. While Iran vehemently denied cooperation with the "Zionist Entity", Israel continued to maintain ties with Iran in hopes of an eventual regime change. The Periphery Doctrine was finally abandoned in the early 1990's, when Israel emerged as the leading voice of a global anti-Iran crusade.

The bulk of this thesis will focus on Israel's relationship with Iran during Khomeini's reign, which roughly corresponds to the first decade of the Islamic Republic and the entirety of the Iran-Iraq war; a conflict that was particularly formative in the development of this relationship. In order to best understand this turbulent period of Iranian-Israeli ties, it is crucial to consider the significant, controversial alliance that existed between Israel and Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi prior to the revolution. However, bilateral relations in the post-Khomeini period fall beyond the scope of this work.

In addition to chronicling the history of Iranian-Israeli relations, taking into account the Iranian revolution and other geopolitical shifts in the Middle East, I will look below the surface of Iranian-Israeli animosity and

examine the underlying factors that colored this complex relationship. I will explore the Iranian and Israeli narratives and compare the religious, historical, ideological and psycho-political underpinnings that reveal significant similarities between these two superficially diametrically opposed states, and ultimately shaped the Iranian-Israeli relationship. Through these analyses, I also aim to shed light on the power of nationalism in the face of compelling ideological forces. Finally, I will consider the complex politics of identity in each country and the role of its government in framing a particular national identity.

Chapter One

The Iranian Revolution, Khomeini, and the Iran-Iraq War

Anti-Zionism and the Iranian Revolution

The 1979 Iranian Revolution brought decades of a controversial but amicable relationship between Iran and Israel to an abrupt end, or so it seemed. Although Iran had never officially recognized the State of Israel¹, the two nations constituted America's core Middle Eastern allies and were drawn to one another for various cultural, historical, and geostrategic reasons. These two non-Arab, Western-oriented nations engaged in a substantial amount of trade, including the sale of cheap oil to Israel and importation of foodstuffs to Iran. Israel maintained a de facto embassy, called the Israeli Interests Office, in Tehran throughout Reza Shah Pahlavi's reign, while Iran had a consulate general in Jerusalem.² The most unnerving cooperative effort concerned the Shah's brutal secret police, SAVAK, which had been trained by Israel's Mossad³, and was ultimately responsible for the relentless attacks and murders of anti-Shah demonstrators that led up to the overthrow of the Shah.

¹ In 1950, the Shah gave Israel de facto recognition, following Turkey's example.

² Samuel Segev, *Iranian Triangle* (New York: Free Press, 1988) pg. 30

³ Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) pg. 26

The leader in exile of the revolutionary anti-Shah movement, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, had been denouncing the monarch's relations with Israel for years. From the ideological point of view embraced by Khomeini and many of his fellow Shi'a clergymen, as well as much of Iran's religious populous, recognizing (even unofficially) and maintaining relations with Israel undermined the Islamic character and obligations of Iran. Because Israel was widely viewed in the Muslim world as fundamentally illegitimate and Zionism threatening to Islamic civilization, especially according to Khomeini's interpretation, the Shah's relationship with Israel was seen as offensive and traitorous by many Iranians. The bulk of Khomeini's speeches and oral propaganda stressed the idea that Zionism is the enemy of humanity and that Jews want to eradicate Islam and dominate the world. Thus, the rhetoric followed, Israel must be destroyed.

The Shah's close ties to the U.S. and Israel led him to be widely viewed as a puppet of Western Imperialism and Zionism. Khomeini believed that the Shah had sold Iran's independence to Israel. Thus, opposition forces were working to free Iran from Israeli/Jewish domination and *regain* Iranian independence.⁴ The Shah's relationship with Israel was instrumental to his overthrow, and the struggle against Israel and Zionism

⁴ Behrooz Souresrafil, *Khomeini and Israel* (London: I Researchers Inc., 1988) pg. 31

became one of the major platforms of the revolution. The slogan "Death to Israel" was prevalent during the revolution and became a central theme of the Islamic Republic.

Ironically, the Shah had become quite critical of Israel toward the end of his reign. He vocally opposed the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, insisting that the United States force Israel to evacuate the occupied territories and recognize Palestinian rights. The Shah actively supported the Arab states in the Yom Kippur War of 1973 as part of a concerted effort towards improved relations with the Arab nations of the region. Consequently, throughout the 1970's Israeli-Iranian relations grew increasingly fragile. The ascent of the right-wing Likud party in 1977 further strained the relationship.

Nonetheless, the motley assortment of anti-Shah activists⁵ were largely united in condemning the monarchy's perceived obedience to the U.S. and the forces of Western Imperialism and Capitalism. Israel was regarded as the Middle Eastern outpost of the West's Imperialist reach; it symbolized the contemporary manifestation of European Colonialism. The arrogance, racism, deceit, and corruption associated with these

⁵ Anti-Shah activists included Communists, Islamists and those seeking a secular, pluralist democracy. Opponents of the Shah were Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian and Atheist.

invasive forces constituted the basis of the discontent of the Iranian masses toward the Shah, who embodied these despised qualities.

Israel, for its part, proudly considered itself the “emissary of Western civilization in the Middle East”⁶ and empathized with what it considered the Shah’s civilizing mission of bringing – by force if necessary - modernity, capitalism, and secularism to his country. In line with this thinking, military commander Ariel Sharon proposed sending Israeli paratroopers to Iran to rescue the Shah when his overthrow appeared imminent.⁷ Meanwhile, right-wing Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin criticized the Shah and promoted Khomeini.⁸ Begin was not alone among secularists who expressed a naïve optimism for the impending removal of the Shah and the return of the charismatic Ayatollah to Iran.

Iranian Jews and the Revolution

Although Iranian Jews owed their unprecedented legal protections and financial prosperity to the Shah’s tolerant policies regarding minorities, many Jewish groups, including the Jewish Youth Organization and the Organization of Jewish Intellectuals were actively involved in the revolution against the monarchy. Jewish Iranians played an important

⁶ Haggai Ram, *Iranophobia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) pg. 6

⁷ Israel Shahak, *Open Secrets: Israeli Nuclear and Foreign Policies* (Pluto Press, 1997) pg. 61

⁸ Parsi, pg. 91

role in Communist circles, which stressed a heterogeneous membership. They joined their predominantly Muslim compatriots in denouncing Iran's relationship with Israel and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. The unlikely cooperation of these political opponents of Israel and the Shah's domestic policies, with those Iranians whose opposition was based more on morality, ideology and religion is testament to just how widespread Iranian dissatisfaction with the monarchy had become.

Upon returning, Khomeini immediately promised Iran's Jews that they would be able to live and worship freely under the Islamic Republic despite the fact that he despised Israel and Zionism. The day after Khomeini took command, thousands of Iranian Jews marched to the Ayatollah's headquarters in Tehran to express support for his victory and to affirm their opposition to Zionism.⁹ But just a few months later, Khomeini directly ordered the execution of Habib Elghanian, the head of the Tehran Jewish Society and symbolic head of the Iranian Jewish community, on charges of espionage, Zionism, and funding the Israeli Army.¹⁰ Elghanian denied all of the charges against him, but was executed nonetheless, as were numerous other Jews. These symbolic moves sent the unmistakable message that Iran was serious about its anti-

⁹ Henry Paolucci, *Iran, Israel, and the United States* (Whitestone: Griffin House Publishers, 1991) pg. 240

¹⁰ Sohrab Sobhani, *The Pragmatic Entente* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1989) pg. 75

Zionist stand and would not tolerate the presence of Israeli spy networks or Mossad agents in Iran.

Palestine Embraced

Upon Khomeini's triumphant return to Iran on February 11, 1979, the armed forces and police joined the revolutionaries and took over the Israeli Interest Office in Tehran. On February 18, the Islamic Republic received its first foreign dignitary, PLO leader Yasser Arafat. The Israeli compound was immediately transferred to the PLO, ties with Israel were formally severed and all Israelis were expelled from the country. This was an incredibly significant event: a great source of pride for critics of Israel and a great blow to Israel and the West. The wealthiest nation in the Middle East, backed by a formidable, highly advanced military, was now headed by an outspoken adversary of Israel.

Arafat expected financial and military aid to substantiate Khomeini's vocal support. But the Islamic Republic's support of the PLO remained limited to rhetoric. Prime minister Amir Entezam announced that, "Iran has made no decision to arm the Palestinians and is not concerned to use the Palestinian proletariat in the military or military-industrial complex. We will fully support them in international

organizations".¹¹ At this stage, the Khomeini government recognized Iran's need to maintain relations with the United States, even as it was very critical of the legacy of American support for the Shah. Pro-Palestinian, anti-Israeli rhetoric was not necessarily a major hindrance to achieving this end, but funding Arafat and arming the PLO would have amounted to political suicide. Military action against Israel was proposed on several occasions, but was never a serious consideration.

Khomeini gave the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a grandiose religious dimension that superseded its actual scope. Traditionally, opponents of Israel viewed the conflict as a violation of Palestinian sovereignty and an affront to Arab Nationalism. But Khomeini had claimed for years that Zionism represented an attack on all of Islam and even all of humanity, thereby denying it as a human rights issue or a nationalist cause and instead relegating it to an ideological realm. Upon assuming power, Khomeini's previously ideological statements acquired a calculated political aim. Iran would not be able to play a leading role in this cause if it remained an Arab issue. By accusing Zionism of threatening the Islamic world, Khomeini made it an Iranian cause as well. Like his deposed predecessor, Khomeini's main geopolitical aim was to establish Iran as the regional superpower. To legitimately assume this role, it was necessary that

¹¹ Souresrafil, pg. 47

Iran befriend and command the respect of the numerous Arab States in the Middle East. Criticizing Israel was a good way to achieve this, as even the Shah himself had acknowledged. With Iran leading the anti-Zionist crusade, Western-allied Arab governments had to tread carefully not to oppose Iran too harshly, lest they appear in opposition to Iran's pro-Palestinian position. But the Islamic Republic's tactic of incessant verbal provocation of Israel failed to win the support of Arab governments. While the Arab masses may have been roused by Iran's boldness, Sunni Arab governments were deeply concerned by the Shi'a Ayatollah's desire to spread Islamic revolution.

Khomeini went on to mark the last Friday of Ramadan as Quds¹² Day, a call to Muslims around the world to voice their opposition to Israel and to demonstrate in support of Palestinian rights. In his 1979 announcement, the Ayatollah proclaimed, "I have been notifying the Muslims of the danger posed by the usurper, Israel. I ask all the Muslims of the world and the Muslim governments to join together to sever the hand of this usurper and its supporters...and through a ceremony demonstrating the solidarity of Muslims worldwide, announce their support for the legitimate rights of the Muslim people."¹³ Quds Day did not receive the

¹² Quds is the Persianized Arabic name for Jerusalem

¹³ Samii, Bill. "Quds Day Brings out Anti-Israeli Sentiment" Radio Free Europe. www.Rferl.org

positive global response Khomeini had hoped for, and remained a largely Iranian, government orchestrated propaganda tactic. This Iranian display was a mockery of the Palestinian cause, for it merely highlighted Iran's unwillingness to provide material support to the Palestinians.

The honeymoon between Khomeini and Arafat was short-lived, as practical support for the Palestinians did not materialize. Arafat and other Arab leaders were turned off by Khomeini's harsh criticisms of secularism.¹⁴ When Saddam Hussein invaded the Iranian province of Khuzestan (which he referred to as Arabestan) in 1980, Arafat put his support behind Iraq, effectively ending his relationship with Khomeini. Iranian anti-Zionist, pro-Palestinian rhetoric, on the other hand, continued to grow.

Anti-Zionist Propaganda

In addition to describing the fight against Zionism as a "Muslim religious crusade"¹⁵, establishing Quds Day, and delivering countless speeches demonizing Jews, Zionists, and Israel, Khomeini led a massive, multi-faceted propaganda campaign. The Islamic Republic issued Persian translations of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and sponsored an international, children's drawing and writing contest titled "Israel Must

¹⁴ Parsi, pg. 85

¹⁵ David Menashri, *Post-revolutionary Politics in Iran* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001) pg. 266

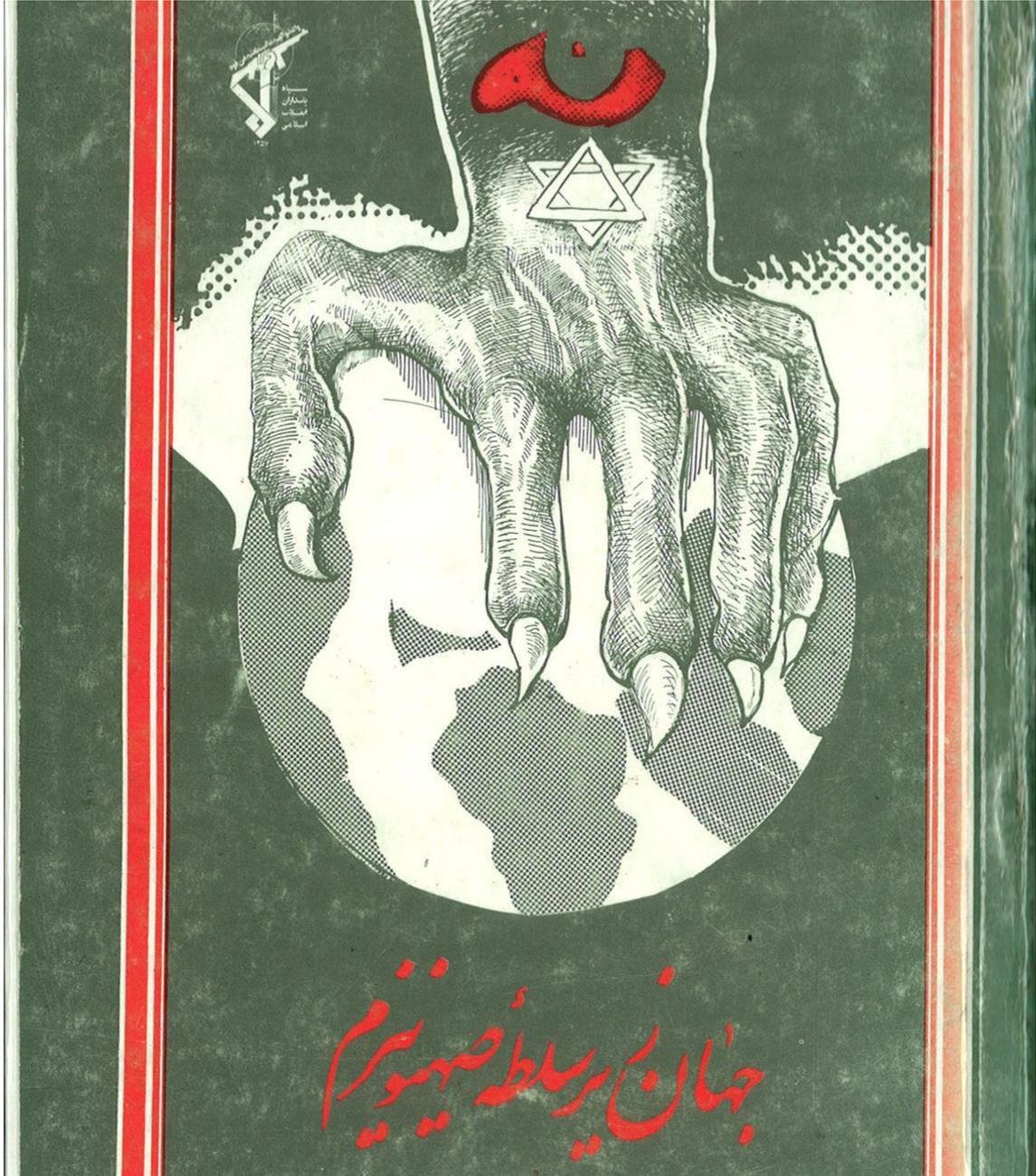
Be Erased from the Earth".¹⁶ Iran also attempted to expel Israel from the United Nations on several occasions, and established monuments and numerous murals within Iran advocating the defeat of Zionism.



Khomeini's government saw the need for the establishment of a revolutionary guard, called Sepah-e Pasdaran, loyal to the regime and its ideals. In addition to its policing and military activities, the Sepah published works of propaganda demonizing Israel, Zionism, Jews, the U.S., Western Imperialism, and even the "Zionist" government of Iraq. One of

¹⁶ Parsi, pg. 101

these publications, *Jahan Zir-e Solteye Sehionism* or *The World under Zionist Domination*, bears on its cover an illustration of a slightly deformed, clawed hand with a Star of David upon it, menacingly gripping the world.



The book's introduction begins by stating that Zionism is the enemy of Islam. It goes on to blame American propaganda for demonizing Muslims and for distorting the image of the Islamic revolution and the Islamic Republic. It refers to Zionists as Satan's children, and claims that Jews intend to take over the world, among other accusations. Another piece of propaganda literature, titled *Iran-e Eslami dar Barabar-e Sehionism* or *Islamic Iran Against Zionism*, claims that Israel tried to undermine the Islamic Republic from the beginning and has designs to establish a "Greater Israel" from the Nile to the Euphrates. The book, written after allegations of Israeli-Iranian arms deals were made public, vehemently (with a liberal usage of exclamation points) denies any claims of collaboration with Israel during the Iran-Iraq War.

War with Iraq

Several serendipitous events, including the student takeover of the American embassy in Tehran, allowed Khomeini to purge the moderate elements of the nascent government of the new Islamic Republic and consolidate power. But the instability of Khomeini's government and the domestic turmoil that ensued encouraged Saddam Hussein to invade Iran in September 1980, paving the way for a devastating confrontation that had worried the Shah for years. In one crucial sense, the Iraqi

invasion was a blessing for Khomeini, whose precarious position stabilized as the nation was forced to put aside internal political concerns and rally behind the government against the Arab aggressor. Separatist uprisings in Khuzestan, Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and Baluchistan were eclipsed by the war with Iraq. By presenting an external enemy, the war with Iraq served to unite Iranians around a common nationalist cause. Accordingly, Jews were among the hundreds of thousands of Iranian men who joined to defend their nation against foreign aggression. Jewish and other minority soldiers were honored as martyrs by Khomeini's regime. The government could not afford to alienate willing fighters or sacrifice national cohesion, and was aware of the importance of promoting a tolerant image of the Islamic Republic. A prominent mural in Tehran stands testament to the Islamic Regime's recognition of war martyrs belonging to religious minorities. The mural, several stories tall, depicts the faces of five fallen Iranian soldiers: two Assyrian Christians, an Armenian Christian, a Zoroastrian and a Jew, each with his name written in Persian as well as in the script of his native language. Looming above the martyrs are the faces of Ayatollah Khomeini and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei along with a quote of Khomeini's that reads, "Religious minorities have a particular respect in Islam... and they stand as one with Muslims in service to the nation."

The war also presented Khomeini with a logistical nightmare. The Shah's massive stockpile of American made weapons now at Khomeini's disposal required American-made spare parts and replacements. But the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and the hostage crisis that ensued had led most Western industrialized nations – the same countries with access to American-made weapons and parts – to impose an economic embargo on Iran. To make matters worse, between 60 and 80% of Iran's military personnel had been purged, executed, or had fled the country due to monarchical or party affiliations which worried Khomeini's paranoid and overwhelmed fledgling government.¹⁷ Faced with international sanctions, Iran was unable to buy the reinforcements it needed to fight Iraq, who was backed and armed by the U.S. and the wealthy Arab Gulf States. Enter Israel, sworn enemy and unlikely benefactor of Khomeini in his time of dire desperation. Conveniently located only several hundred miles from Iran, America's closest ally had nearly unlimited access to American-made weapons and spare parts, and was enthusiastic in accepting the opportunity to enable Iran in its fight against Iraq. In fact, several months *before* the start of the war, Israel

¹⁷ Souresrafil pg. 58

had returned several American-built Iranian tanks that the Shah had sent to Israel to be refurbished.

Initially, Israel openly declared its intention to deliver arms to Iran. Moshe Dayan, Israel's Foreign Affairs Minister, warned the West that Iraq would quickly win the war if Iran did not receive U.S.-made arms and parts.¹⁸ The United States, still reeling from the ongoing hostage crisis, rejected Israel's suggestion of arming Iran to help weaken Iraq. So Israel decided to go it alone. While Khomeini's government continued publicly lambasting Israel and Zionism on political and ideological grounds, Israeli military advisors were reportedly traveling to Iran to train Iranian technicians to repair and alter warplanes to accommodate Israeli made parts and bombs. Secret meetings between Colonel Zarrabi, the director of the Iranian military complex and Israeli colonel Ben-Youssef took place in Zurich while the U.S. was kept in the dark.¹⁹

Furthermore, an influential Iranian cleric, Ahmad Kashani, personally visited Israel in 1980 to discuss arms sales and military cooperation against Iraq's nuclear facility at Osirak.²⁰ Israel bombed Osirak in September 1981, marking the first Israeli-Iranian cooperative effort in the war. Iran reportedly provided plans of the reactor and other directives to help

¹⁸ Souresrafil, pg. 60

¹⁹ Carter had been planning to arrange a deal to sell Iran arms in exchange for the release of American hostages. He was livid when Israel's covert dealings with Iran were discovered.

²⁰ Parsi, pg. 95

Israel successfully bomb the facility. In an effort to boost morale, Iran claimed responsibility for the crippling attack, but both Israel and Iraq stated that Israel was responsible.

By this time in late 1981, the fate of the war and with it Khomeini's regime lay in Israel's hands. Of course Khomeini was in no position to publicly admit that the Islamic Republic, which had tried so hard to market itself as the bastion of Islamic resistance against Israel, was not only purchasing Israeli and American arms and parts, but was actively cooperating with Israel in the war. The bombing of the Osirak nuclear facility gave Saddam an excuse to expose the illicit relationship. Yasser Arafat protested Iran's hypocrisy, but the Islamic Republic was quick to refute any claims of collaboration.²¹ Hashemi Rafsanjani, then leader of the Iranian parliament, stated that, "the Zionist and Imperialist propaganda machines have already so poisoned minds against the Islamic Republic that it is now impossible to change world opinion. Nobody would believe that there is any greater enemy of Israel than the Islamic Republic. Despite the fact that we are still at war, the Military High Command Council decided to release Iraqi prisoners of war so that they could return to fight against Israel, and our revolutionary guards have

²¹ Parsi, pg. 107

said that they are ready to fight with Israel. This is not propaganda but the truth! Don't confuse our people!"

The Iranian denials were rather convincing lies. The regime was confident that these reports could be easily manipulated to seem like poorly formulated enemy propaganda. But Rafsanjani's pleas convey a sense of desperation on the part of the Khomeini government. Ultimately, Iran was counting on the fact that a cooperative relationship between Iran and Israel simply seemed too implausible for much of the populace to believe, since it appeared so contrary to both country's principles.

Unfortunately for the Khomeini government, an incident referred to as "November Tango" further exposed the ongoing relations between the two countries. When an Argentine cargo plane carrying U.S. made arms and Israeli ammunition to Tehran was shot down while flying over Soviet airspace, the Jerusalem Post picked up the story and soon the international media got hold of what appeared to be undeniable evidence of Israeli-Iranian arms transactions. Both Israeli and Iranian officials immediately denied any connection between the crash and any arms deal, although Israel's denial did not seem very genuine.²² Khomeini claimed that the November Tango incident was a fabrication and a plot against the revolution by social imperialists. The Ayatollah publicly

²² Segev, pg. 6

declared, "From the beginning we were against the Zionist tribe. Prior to this revolution, the Pahlavi regime was constantly connected with the corrupt Israeli government and this is why we were always opposed to Pahlavi. Now they accuse us of buying arms from Israel. If we don't regard them as human, how could we deal with them? When we started this movement, one of our major issues was to eradicate Israel from the Earth. Why do they want to prove that we are supporters of Israel? Please brothers, see *with your own eyes* if we are fighting with Israeli arms or with the arms of fate".²³

Repeating the regime's standard tactic, Khomeini appeals to his audience's logic as well as their faith in God. He reiterates the ideology of the Islamic revolution, but also pleads with his audience to "see with their own eyes", manipulating their sense of reason. He is essentially asking them: *does it make any sense that Iran would buy weapons from the Zionist enemy? Of course not! Logic says that this would be ridiculous. Therefore, these are clearly lies.* By suggesting that Iranian soldiers are fighting with "arms of fate" as opposed to Israeli arms, Khomeini alludes to the divine realm, appealing to the people's faith that God is on their side and is surely assisting them in their noble struggle.

²³ Souresrafil, pg. 71

Khomeini's willingness to buy arms from his proclaimed arch-nemesis was so deeply hypocritical that it was sincerely difficult for his followers to acknowledge. In a special message celebrating the month of pilgrimage to Mecca, Khomeini continued his propaganda offensive, claiming that "this ridiculous claim about relations with Israel was created by the propaganda machine of the U.S.", and that "the issue is not Iranian relations with Israel, but the essential problem is imperialism between East and West". Here Khomeini attempts to shift the focus away from what he claims to be distracting propaganda and to instead concentrate on the bigger picture, namely that the Muslim world's fundamental struggle is the fight against Western Imperialism.

The Iranian government stuck with their story, but Khomeini's credibility was badly damaged. Saddam Hussein assured his Arab supporters of the Israeli-Iranian arms deals, and a member of the Israeli government, which remained divided regarding concealment of the arms deals, publicly stated that "Iraq is our first enemy. One of the major reasons for cooperation between the two countries is the likely access of Iraq to the atomic bomb and its unconditional support of the PLO". He added that the Iranian government had expressed its satisfaction with

Israeli support for Shiites in southern Lebanon.²⁴ In reality, Khomeini had little choice but to continue buying arms from Israel, which allowed the Iranian military to achieve otherwise unimaginable victories. In a remarkable example of Iran's duplicitous anti-Israel propaganda, the biggest military victory against Iraq in 1981 was an operation named "The Road to Jerusalem". Ironically, this victory was made possible entirely because of arms and parts provided by Israel.

While Prime Minister Shimon Peres continued to deny claims of an arms deal, Defense Minister Ariel Sharon acknowledged it and reasoned in an interview in 1982 that "everybody knows the Ayatollah is a dictator, but we have no other choice except to keep a window open toward Iran for the day the war would be over and somebody else would take control in Iran. This does not mean we are supporting the Ayatollah." Overshadowing the criticism he received from some members of the government for so bluntly discussing Israel's strategy was the fact that the continuation of the war, with the help of the Israeli arms deals, had greatly reduced Iraq's military capability, significantly decreasing the threat posed to Israel.

The Islamic Republic's campaign of disinformation seemed futile by this point, but it had to persist to maintain a veneer of credibility. In

²⁴ Souresrafil, pg. 72

reaction to Sharon and other Israeli officials' admissions, Khomeini continued denying any arms deal. Yet the international community was well aware of these transactions. In March 1982, the New York Times printed a series of documents indicating that Israel had sold over \$100 million in arms to Iran over the past 18 months, including 45,000 Uzi machine guns. By 1984, the value of the arms deals topped \$500 million. In exchange, Iran was selling Israel oil at a 25% discount.²⁵ The collaborative efforts came to include Syria as well, who assisted its enemy Israel by shipping 40 truckloads of weapons a day to Iran via Turkey.²⁶ Israel claimed that the arms and ammunition it was selling to Iran were only those seized from the PLO in Lebanon, but the exceedingly large quantity of weapons transferred, as well as the fact that it had begun transferring the weapons prior to its invasion of Lebanon suggest that this was not entirely true.

Lebanon

Israel invaded Lebanon in the summer of 1982 in an attempt to oust Arafat and the PLO from the country in which it was based and from which it was coordinating attacks against Israel. Iran immediately

²⁵ Souresrafil, pg. 81

²⁶ Sobhani, pg. 141

announced its condemnation of the Israeli aggression and went so far as to send about 1,500 Iranian volunteer fighters to Lebanon, but the modest effort proved problematic. Several Iranian soldiers were captured by Israeli troops, while 23 were killed in an Israeli air raid on their barracks in Lebanon's Baalbek Valley.²⁷

In light of the Israeli invasion, Saddam offered to make peace with Iran and suggested cooperating in Lebanon against Israel, but Khomeini refused. He viewed the conflict in Lebanon as a distraction from his war with Iraq. In spite of the tens of thousands of Iranian lives lost in the first few years alone, Khomeini depended on the continued struggle against Iraq to ensure his regime's survival. Committed to prolonging the war, he ordered the Iranian troops to return from Lebanon and declared that the road to Quds went through Karbala.²⁸ Furthermore, Khomeini surely understood that fighting Israel directly in the Lebanese theater would jeopardize his access to the Israeli-facilitated weapons and parts on which he relied so greatly.

But Iran's involvement in Lebanon was just beginning. As the Lebanese Shi'a grew increasingly frustrated by the prolonged presence of their Israeli occupiers (whom they had originally welcomed to help rid

²⁷ Sobhani, pg. 156

²⁸ Parsi, pg. 103. This phrase refers to Iran's claim that conquering Karbala (a holy Shi'a city in Iraq) was the first step toward the ultimate goal of conquering Jerusalem.

Lebanon of the PLO presence) they immediately turned to Iran for assistance. Khomeini saw in this marginalized community of coreligionists a great opportunity to realize his goal of exporting the Islamic Revolution. His aim was not so much to use the Shi'a militias as a proxy to fight Israel as it was a way to increase Iranian relevance and potency in the Muslim world. Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister, Hossein Zadeh, became the unofficial "high commissioner" for Lebanon, making frequent trips to Damascus to oversee arms shipments and funds transfers to Shi'a militias in Lebanon.²⁹ Whereas he had been unsuccessful in appealing to the Shi'a majority populations of Bahrain and Iraq, Khomeini's vocal, financial and military support of what came to be Hezbollah succeeded in establishing a lasting Iranian foothold in an Arab country. Indeed, as American, French and British troops left the war-torn country in 1983, only the Syrian army and the Iranian-led Hezbollah remained as the major forces within Lebanon.³⁰

Iranian Rationale

Although driven by ideological zeal, the complex demands of governance led to the compromise of Khomeini's Islamic ideology and a

²⁹ Segev, pg. 128

³⁰ Souresrafil, pg. 88

turn towards pragmatic foreign policy. Simply put, Khomeini was desperate for weapons, but he also saw in Israel a channel through which to revive relations with the United States. Khomeini recognized that reconciling with the “Great Satan”, with whom he had not initially intended to cut diplomatic ties, would be necessary to achieve his ultimate goal: the survival of his regime and ideology. In a 1979 speech, Khomeini declared his intentions to “establish our very ordinary relations with America just as with other countries, provided that our noble country grants permission”.³¹ Israel accepted the role of intermediary, and the head of the Israeli Foreign Ministry David Kimche acknowledged his country’s desire to “serve as a bridge between Iran and the West”³², for Iran served an important strategic interest for Israel. Israel, on the other hand, had never been of primary importance to Iran. Instead, Israel was used as a tool to help Iran get closer to the United States. But missed opportunities and increasingly complex circumstances rendered Khomeini’s hope to eventually reestablish ties with the U.S. insurmountable.

The religious elements of the revolution that had usurped power criticized the Shah’s authoritarianism, corruption, and lack of moral

³¹ Paolucci, pg. 207

³² Parsi, pg. 119

integrity, exemplified by the “Westoxification” of Iran that he facilitated. Khomeini himself had damned the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty and rejected subsequent peace plans that accommodated or acknowledged Israel as a legitimate nation. But upon assuming power, the ideological clerics were faced with the realities of politics. While the Islamic Republic continued its constant rants against the U.S., Israel and Western Imperialism, Iran maintained ties with Hafez Assad of Syria (who was bent on crushing Islamic fundamentalism in his own country), Turkey and Pakistan (two secular Western-allied nations), and Israel, the regime’s ultimate symbol of unjust Western Imperialism and the great enemy of Iran and Islam.

Iran’s strategy of continuing its intense anti-Israeli rhetoric amid its clandestine arms deals with the Jewish State served two purposes. First, it was intended to cover up its dealings with Israel. Second, it was a feeble attempt by Iran to gain Arab support, even as it was fighting a war against a major Arab state that enjoyed broad support from Arab governments and was well funded by the Arab Gulf states. Easing tensions with the Arab States and gaining their admiration was a prerequisite for Khomeini’s goal of regional hegemony. But Khomeini’s government

insisted that its denunciations of Israel were not about geopolitical gains, but rather about Palestinian justice and Islamic honor.³³

An Israeli businessman who had recently traveled to Tehran was anonymously quoted in the Paris-based *La Liberation* in March 1986 explaining the Iranians' justification for trading with their alleged Zionist enemies. According to his account, Khomeini believed that "although Israel is a Satan, at present the circumstances have forced us to sign a contract with the Satan". This justification echoes Israel's claim that although "Khomeini is a dictator" (not to mention that he regularly threatens to annihilate Israel) extenuating circumstances necessitate cooperation with this otherwise reprehensible government.

Another example pertains to Khomeini's position on weapons of mass destruction. Throughout the war with Iraq, Khomeini opposed the development of nuclear weapons, which he associated with the immoral, belligerent (Capitalist) West. As the war drew to a close, the Ayatollah's moral and ideological opposition was overshadowed by the realities of the capabilities of modern warfare. In light of the Iraqis' use of chemical weapons against Iranians during the war, Khomeini came to realize that Iran had no choice but to develop nuclear weapons to serve as a deterrent to potential future attacks.

³³ Parsi, pg. 4

Anti-Semitism, Khomeini, and the Islamic Republic

It is important to note that Iran had been plagued by anti-Semitic sentiment, laws, and conflict for centuries. Anti-Zionist revolutionary rhetoric, while manipulated to appear political, points to an anti-Semitism sentiment that runs deep in the Iranian Shi'a narrative. Well before the revolution, such bigotry was prevalent among Iran's Shi'a clergy and among much of the population. Khomeini himself, in the provocative speeches that compelled the Shah to banish him from Iran, railed against the Zionist threat against Iran and Islam. He declared in a speech in 1963, "I must warn all the Muslims of the world and the nation of Iran that the Koran and Islam are in danger, and the independence of the country and its economy have almost fallen in the hands of the Zionists in the form of the Baha'i Party. It will not take long for them to take over the entire country and rapidly impoverish the Moslem people. Iranian television is the spy center of Jews." At a demonstration in that same year, among shouts of "Death to the Shah" and "Long Live Khomeini", the charismatic cleric expanded on his claim that the Shah was selling Iran to Israel and the Jews. He said, "Mr. Shah, don't obey the Israelis. Israel is no good for you. Israel is very dangerous for Islam and Moslems. SAVAK tells us we should not talk about Israel. Tell me, what is the relationship between you and Israel? What does it mean when SAVAK

warns us not to talk about you or Israel? Does it mean that in the eyes of SAVAK the Shah is Israeli? Does it mean that in the eyes of SAVAK you are a Jew?" In criticizing the Shah's cooperation with Israel, Khomeini attacks the Shah by suggesting that he is a Jew. The implied insult reflects the anti-Jewish sentiment at the core of Khomeini's ideology.

Khomeini's pre-revolution work *Al-Hukuma al-Islamiyya* insists that, "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 to this day." The Ayatollah accused Jews of distorting Islam, manipulating the Quran, taking over Iran's economy, and plotting to take over the world.³⁴ In a 1982 speech, Khomeini commented that Christians are even worse than Jews, even if it was "impossible to say that there is something worse than Jews". He quickly added, "I mean the Jews of Israel".³⁵ Being mindful of the tolerant façade he needed to present to the world, Khomeini was careful not to appear blatantly racist. In this instance, his clarification that *Israeli* Jews were the target of his criticism disguised his racism as political criticism. But in Khomeini's response to the November Tango incident, he stated that, "we oppose the Zionist *tribe*", not the

³⁴ Menashri, pg. 275

³⁵ Menashri, pg. 276

Israeli government or even the Zionist movement. That an element of anti-Semitism drove the Islamic Republic's uncompromising anti-Israeli stance is evident.

Iran had no legitimate basis for political conflict with Israel. Iran was neither an Arab country nor was it geographically affected by the Zionist conquest of Palestine. The idea that Jews were infringing upon holy *Muslim* territory deeply offended much of the religious establishment and its adherents. As discussed earlier, Iran's rants against Israel were ultimately intended to achieve political goals: to increase Arab support for Iran in an effort to legitimize Iran's aim of becoming the regional superpower and to rally the Iranian people behind the regime's revolutionary narrative, which posited the Shah's dealings with Israel as the essence of his corruption and treachery.

Once the revolution was complete, the clerics' anti-Semitic rhetoric gave way to more balanced statements that indicated Zionists, as members of a colonialist political movement, and not Jews as a whole, as the perpetrators of an inexcusable attack on Islam. Jews, they reasoned, constitute a religious group, not a nation. Therefore, Jews were not entitled to a state of their own, and certainly not in the heart of the Islamic World. In any case, Iran needed weapons and parts, and Israel was willing to provide them.

Chapter Two

The Israeli Narrative and the Iranian Revolution

Israeli Rationale for Ties with Khomeini

There are several important reasons why Israel was willing to supply Iran with weapons during its war with Iraq. First and foremost, Israel's most imminent military threat at the end of the 1970's came not from Khomeini, but from Saddam Hussein. Whereas Iranian rhetoric was considered hollow during this period, Israel was genuinely concerned with Iraq's military capability and its role within the greater Arab cause of defeating Israel. Iraq had been a main participant in every Arab-Israeli conflict since 1947 and was actively pursuing nuclear weapons development at its Osirak facility. By facilitating Iran's military effort against Iraq, Israel was able to simultaneously weaken both the established Iraqi threat and the potential Iranian threat. In doing so, Israel effectively eliminated, or at least postponed, the possibility of a major state-led attack against it.³⁶

Secondly, it was in Israel's economic interest to sell arms to Iran. The large-scale sale of weapons was a great boon for Israel's battered

³⁶ Egypt, who had been the voice of Arab resistance and anti-Israeli rhetoric for decades, had just signed the Camp David Peace Accords with Israel, thereby leaving Israel more secure than ever.

economy. International sanctions against Iran meant that Israel would have a monopoly on arms sales to the Islamic Republic, and as the war raged on year after year Israel was guaranteed a steady, substantial flow of income from arms deals.

The third reason concerned Iran's large and prosperous Jewish community. As the self-proclaimed guardian of the world's Jews, Israel viewed relations with the Islamic Republic as a strategic policy. Maintaining contact with Iran, through the sale of arms or otherwise, guaranteed access to Iran's Jewish community and facilitated Israel's ability to safeguard the community. This was especially pressing after widespread confiscations and allegations of espionage plagued Iran's Jewish community after the revolution. These incidents confirmed the Israeli narrative concerning the plight of exilic Jews, according to which Jews in exile (outside of Israel) were necessarily oppressed and unsafe, and could only find redemption and security once they "returned" to Israel.³⁷ Israel's ultimate goal was the transfer of Iran's Jewish community to Israel, whose demographic war with its Arab citizens left it desperate for Jewish immigrants.³⁸ In fact, Khomeini allowed Iranian Jews to emigrate largely as a result of Israel's willingness to provide him invaluable

³⁷ Ram, pg. 98

³⁸ Israel sought to bring as many Jews as possible to Israel to outnumber the Arabs (and to maintain a viable military force) in an effort to legitimize and maintain Jewish authority.

arms.³⁹ In the early 1980's tens of thousands of Iranian Jews left Iran, mainly for North America and Israel, but were forced to leave behind much of their assets and possessions.

Israel benefitted from the continuation of the war in another more nuanced way. Most Arab leaders felt an obligation to support Saddam, a fellow Arab. But opposing Iran, the leading voice of resistance against Israel and Zionism, was a precarious position to take. Nonetheless, Khomeini found an ally in Syrian president Hafez Al-Assad, who despised Saddam, causing great strife within the Arab community. Meanwhile, multiple Arab militias were slaughtering each other in Lebanon, causing further internal discord. Such discord gave the Israelis a sense of security, for it minimized the possibility of any sort of organized Arab attack against the Jewish State.

Israel's justifications for its seemingly traitorous arms deals with Iran are logical in a geopolitical context. Nonetheless, in retrospect it appears rather shortsighted and self-defeating to arm a fundamentalist theocratic regime constantly reiterating its desire to exterminate your country. Israel did not take Iran's incendiary rhetoric seriously at this stage, and rightfully so. The Israelis were well aware that Khomeini's support of Palestinian

³⁹ Parsi, pg. 95

resistance and sovereignty began and ended with rhetoric. Furthermore, although it is easily forgotten today, Israel and much of the world believed Khomeini's regime would soon fall, and the regime itself was well aware of this possibility. Not only was Iran's fundamentalist regime isolated from without, but it also faced multi-faceted opposition from within. In fact, many coup plots were attempted and foiled by the Khomeini regime, which was deeply paranoid and on high alert for such schemes, in the early years after the revolution. It is safe to say that most world leaders hoped for and expected the impending demise of the regime, if not before Khomeini's approaching death – he was 77 when he assumed power - then certainly upon his death.

In accordance with Israel's acute desire to hold on to its Periphery Doctrine, Israel saw benefit in maintaining a logistical connection with the Iranian armed forces, whom it was assumed would remain loyal to a more moderate regime, were one to replace Khomeini's government. An Iranian victory over Iraq was necessary, not only to diminish the Iraqi threat, but also to facilitate an eventual restoration of Israeli-Iranian relations similar to that which existed before the revolution, when Israel could count on a steady flow of cheap Iranian oil and a balance to its

more immediate Arab threat.⁴⁰ Ariel Sharon, one of Israel's more outspoken proponents of maintained relations with Iran, explained to U.S. officials in 1981 that Khomeini's extremist ideology did not negate the importance of Iran as a key country in the region, and that it was to the West's advantage to keep low-key contacts with Khomeini's government, particularly with the military circles.⁴¹ Sharon spoke for many Israeli leaders who did not consider cooperating with Iran a contradiction to their opposition to Khomeini. Likewise, Khomeini's willingness to deal with Israel did not compromise the sincerity of his contempt for Zionism.

The deep irony here is that, without Israeli arms and support, it is very unlikely that Khomeini's regime could have survived in those early days. After the fall of the monarchy, revolutionary militias had destroyed the Shah's military computers that held records of weapons and parts. They had little knowledge of the arms at their disposal or how to operate them due to the fact that so many of the Shah's military leaders had been killed or had fled the country.

Israeli rhetoric regarding the Islamic Republic throughout the 1980's was surprisingly restrained. Israel assumed that an isolated, belligerent,

⁴⁰ Souresrafil pg. 73

⁴¹ Parsi pg. 106

fundamentalist dictatorship simply could not survive long, and would surely be replaced by a more moderate government upon the death of the regime's charismatic octogenarian leader. Furthermore, Israel made no serious attempt to hide its arms sales to Iran, and refrained from excessive criticism of the Islamic Regime. At the time it would have appeared rather hypocritical to demonize Iran, whose war with Iraq was steadily destroying the Arab nation's ability to act upon its own threats to obliterate Israel. Israel had more pressing, established threats to deal with than the nascent Iranian menace. In spite of the remarkable but fragile peace with Egypt, Israel still felt during the 1980's that it was surrounded by enemies, bitter from previous Israeli military defeats, and bent on eliminating the Jewish State. This concern formed the basis and rationale of Israel's Periphery Doctrine.

Israel's Periphery Doctrine

The Periphery Doctrine was the brainchild of Israel's founding father, David Ben Gurion, and came to dominate Israeli foreign policy for the first four decades of statehood. The doctrine was based on the improbability of building peace with Israel's hostile Arab neighbors and was meant to counter the Arab threat which overlapped the great, looming threat of Soviet influence in the region. In light of this, the Jewish State sought to

build alliances with the non-Arab, periphery states of the region; namely Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia, as well as regional minority groups like the Kurds and Lebanese Christians. This outlook assured Israel an important sense of security in the form of regional allies, which it hoped would balance the threat from its more immediate Arab neighbors. The first seeds of doubt regarding this foundation of Israel's regional foreign policy were sown in the late 1970's when the prospect of peace with Egypt, Israel's primary enemy, materialized. As the champion of Arab unity and Nationalism, Gamal Abd-al Nasser's anti-Israel rhetoric was legendary, and his alliance with the Soviets pushed Israel ever closer to the extremely anti-Soviet, Western-allied Shah of Iran. Nasser's death in 1972 and his successor's shift toward the West resulted in an unlikely peace deal in 1979 between Anwar Sadat's new Egypt and Begin's new Israel; a milestone that suddenly and significantly altered the dynamics of the region.

The replacement of the Western-allied Shah with a vehemently anti-Western Cleric in Iran forced Israel to begin rethinking its cherished Periphery Doctrine. The foundation of the doctrine, the assumption that peace with Israel's Arab foes was impossible, had been disproved. Meanwhile, Israel's primary and most powerful Periphery ally was now attempting to spread its Islamic Revolution across the region while regularly calling for the destruction of Israel. But Iran was too strategically

important for Israel to let go of. It's location at the edge of the Arab world, its history of economic and political ties to Israel, its enmity with Iraq and the Soviet Union, and its oil made Iran an irreplaceable ally. With much debate within the Israeli government, throughout the 1980's Israel chose not to abandon its Periphery Doctrine, and therefore maintained limited contact with Iran in hopes of eventually reestablishing a positive relationship.

The demise of Israel's Periphery Doctrine finally came in the early 1990's. A new school of thought was emerging in Israel that viewed the periphery not as a counterweight to the radical inner circle of Arab states, but rather as the perpetrator of radicalism.⁴² Israel, among others, began to recognize the likelihood that the Islamic Republic would endure, even after Khomeini's death. Meanwhile, the core Arab states were becoming increasingly moderate and were unified in their opposition to the stated Iranian goal of spreading the Islamic revolution. Egypt and Israel were at peace, Iraq was forced into a Western alliance against Iran, and the Syrian threat had been largely quelled as a result of the Lebanese conflict. The complete abandonment of the Periphery Doctrine after the Oslo Accords in 1993 and the increasing possibility of peace with the

⁴² Parsi pg. 131

Arabs would significantly alter Israel's foreign policy. Iran's hollow threats would no longer be dismissed, and Israel would come to lead the world in a global anti-Iran crusade.

The Israeli Narrative

During its first 30 years as a nation, Israel maintained a predominantly European Socialist orientation, was ruled almost exclusively by Ashkenazi Jews, and promoted an unapologetic system of assimilation in forming a modern, secular Jewish Israeli society. The millions of Middle Eastern, African, and Asian Jews that made *aliyah* were encouraged to forget their Eastern cultures and identities and become Israeli (read European).

As a secular movement born out of post-Enlightenment Europe, the Zionist project had no intention of culturally being a part of the Middle East. This is one of the great paradoxes of Zionism. While calling for a return to the Middle Eastern “Jewish homeland”, the movement intended from the start to orient itself exclusively toward the West. Zionists overwhelmingly abhorred the backward religiosity of Middle Easterners, regardless of religion, and viewed the state-sanctioned assimilation of Jewish immigrants as a noble civilizing mission. This utopian Zionist vision was a product of the prevailing Colonialist mindset of 19th century Europe, and

rejected any appreciation of Eastern values in its nation-building project. Like Israel, the Shah's Iran was looking to Europe for social, cultural, and political guidance and looked upon its indigenous customs and values with disdain.

It was in this epistemological context that Israelis experienced the Iranian Revolution. The Israeli media and public, along with much of the secular world, were deeply perplexed by what they perceived to be a regressive revolution. As the world progressed toward modernity and secularism, abandoning religiosity for Reason, the Iranian Revolution seemed to defy this logic. Israeli intellectuals and media refused to view the 1979 revolution as an intellectually formative event.⁴³ Israelis treasured their special relationship with Iran, their anti-Arab Western-allied counterpart, and the Shah was widely seen as an innovator in line with the world's march towards secular modernity. Therefore resistance to his rule was seen as little more than Muslim zealotry opposed to progress. The Israeli newspaper *HaTsofeh* stated during the revolution that the Iranians are "simple-minded and ignorant masses" for which "religious slogans are far more powerful than democracy, civil rights and social justice." Many Western observers simply could not fathom such a mass uprising against what they perceived to be a modern, progressive (albeit harsh) secular

⁴³ Ram, pg. 2

ruler in favor of an aging cleric who advocated a return to antiquated Islamic values. This contradicted the basis of Western epistemology in which time moves linearly forward and societal progress is measured in terms of movement away from the archaic and towards the innovative; away from religion and towards science and Reason. In this context, the Iranian Revolution appeared to be fundamentally irrational.

The unprecedented defeat of the dominant secular quasi-Socialist Labor Party in 1977 was significant for Israel not only politically, but also in terms of Israeli identity. With massive support from Orthodox, Ultra-Orthodox, and Mizrahi Jews (those of “Eastern” origin⁴⁴) the right wing Likud Party came to power and for the first time included an Ultra-Orthodox party, Agudat Israel, in its coalition government. This marked a significant shift in the secular Zionist ideology that had prevailed in Israel since 1948. Menachem Begin’s Likud-led government also radically altered the way Israel dealt with the territories occupied in the 1967 war, giving legitimacy to the Gush Emunim settler movement in the West Bank, and unilaterally annexing the Golan Heights. During this period, frustrated Likud supporters began voicing their opposition, violently at times, to the Labor Party and the secular Ashkenazi establishment. Many secular Israelis perceived a disturbing resemblance between these often Mizrahi (dark-

⁴⁴ *Mizrahi* literally means “easterner” in Hebrew

skinned) dissenters and the religious “mobs” in Tehran; in 1979, leftist Knesset member Yossi Sarid referred to Hebron's religious settlers as “Khomeini-style fanatics”. Israeli professor Michael Harsagor also warned of these similarities when he commented that the Ultra-Orthodox and religious Zionist parties' objection to autopsy, abortion, women's rights and even theater plays “puts them in one front with the old man who is turning Iran upside down”.⁴⁵ When right-wing opponents threw tomatoes at Shimon Peres during an election rally, he responded by shouting “You are a Khomeini-like unruly mob! Go back to Persia where your future belongs”.⁴⁶ Throughout the 1980's the rift between secular left-leaning Israelis and the religious-allied right wing grew steadily in favor of the latter.

Some Mizrahi members of the Agudat Israel religious party later defected and established the Shas Party, which was associated specifically with religious and Ultra-Orthodox Mizrahi Jews. The party decried the second-class status of Mizrahi Jews in Israeli society, something most Ashkenazi Jews were not aware of or didn't consider a major concern. Fear of the de-secularization or “Iranization” of Israel fed the reluctance of secular Western-oriented Israelis to appreciate Eastern

⁴⁵ Ram, pg. 64

⁴⁶ “A Mob of Likud Supporters Goes wild at a Rally with Peres” Haaretz, www.haaretz.com June 15, 1981

elements and values within Israeli society, a significant issue given that fact that Israel was, after all, located in the heart of the Middle East and a majority of its populace was of Middle Eastern origin⁴⁷. Anxiety surrounding the emergence of an Ultra-Orthodox Mizrahi party prompted Meretz, a left wing party to coin the simple yet provocative campaign slogan *Kan Lo Iran*, "This is not Iran".⁴⁸

Initially Israel saw little to gain and much to lose from the overthrow of the Shah and what appeared to be an Islamic, and therefore anti-Israeli, revival. Thus it was very difficult for Israelis to sympathize with the anti-Shah revolutionaries, whose actions were set to deprive Israel of its most important regional ally. But Israeli politicians, intellectuals and much of the public were not totally ignorant of the underlying reasons that prompted this unprecedented modern revolution. As late as 1978, Israeli government, academic, and media outlets recognized the Shah's iron fisted rule and the serious problems present in Iranian society, including "a dearth of human resources, severe communication problems, massive and rapid rural to urban migration and a subsequent housing shortage, transportation difficulties, and a rapidly increasing gap between rich and

⁴⁷ In 1990, before the mass immigration of approximately 1,000,000 Soviet Jews, Israel's population was about 60% Mizrahi Jewish and 15% Arab, such that approximately 75% of Israeli citizens were of Middle Eastern descent.

⁴⁸ Ram, pg. 66

poor exacerbated by hyper-inflation".⁴⁹ But as the anti-Shah movement took a decisively Islamist turn, many Israeli observers chose to ignore the concrete historical evidence of widespread injustice and oppression perpetrated by the Shah and SAVAK, as if criticizing the Shah at this stage was tantamount to support for the Islamists. This was especially true after the hostage crisis.

Following the Iranian Revolution and the death of the old Iran that Israel had embraced so warmly, the term "Persia" was largely relinquished in Israeli discourse in favor of "Iran", which undoubtedly carried a very different connotation. The nostalgic, heroic images conjured up by "Persia" were no longer relevant. Indeed the new Iran itself tried hard to repress its pre-Islamic past which both the Shah and Israel had glorified and romanticized. In light of the perplexing Iranian revolution, Israelis began to see Persia as Iran; a backward, deeply religious society hostile to Israel and Jews, just like the rest of the Middle East. The timing of this great shift turned out to be rather serendipitous in that it occurred concurrently with two other major shifts; the rise of the conservatives in Israel, and the Camp David Peace Treaty with Egypt. The concurrence of these three

⁴⁹ Ram, pg. 62

events enabled Israeli leaders to conveniently shift their external enemy from the Arab core to the non-Arab periphery.

Haggai Ram, among other Israeli critics, opines that Israel *needed* an existential threat in order to reign in internal strife and maintain unity within the Israeli populace. In other words, if Khomeini didn't exist, Israel would have had to invent him. In 1979, with U.S. president Jimmy Carter serving as intermediary, Israel and Egypt signed a peace treaty and normalized relations, to the shock of Israelis, Arabs, and much of the rest of the world. Israel agreed to return the occupied Sinai back to its former enemy in exchange for peace, a prospect that only a few years earlier would have seemed nearly impossible. Meanwhile, Iran was experiencing a complete reversal of its political power structure. The new Islamic Republic identified Israel as its primary enemy, and in doing so, helped Israel in an unexpected way.

Over the course of the previous several decades, Israelis had fought several wars and had developed a deep animosity toward their Arab neighbors, elements of which had resorted to terrorist tactics in their struggle against Israeli conquest. Although the various attacks, hostage takings, massacres, and bombings against Israelis were not perpetrated exclusively by Muslims, the connection between Islam and terrorism was well established in the collective mindset of Israeli Jews. The Iranian

Revolution was significant in that it thrust the phenomenon of Islamic terrorism to an entirely new level, to the benefit of Israel. The hostage crisis of 1979-1981, in which a group of Iranian students stormed the American Embassy in Tehran and held its employees hostage for 444 days, created a spectacle for the world and elevated Islamic terrorism⁵⁰ from an obscure Middle Eastern method of guerrilla warfare to a state-level tactic with global implications. Prior to this media-dominating event Islamic terrorism was perpetrated almost exclusively by militias and other non-governmental organizations like the PLO, the Islamic Brotherhood, and various Lebanese militias, but no government had ever directly perpetrated such an attack. At the time of the hostage crisis in 1979, the U.S. was not yet involved in the Lebanese Civil War or in any other Middle Eastern or Muslim conflict; instead the American government and public were preoccupied with Cold War hysteria and were shocked by Khomeini's decision to endorse the embassy takeover.⁵¹ This American awakening to the scope of Islamic anti-Western terrorism played right into the hands of Israel, whose collective victim complex was affirmed by the new, looming Islamic Iranian threat.

⁵⁰ I am using the term "Islamic terrorism" to refer to both terrorism perpetrated in the name of Islam as well as terrorism perpetrated by Muslims.

⁵¹ Members of the nascent revolutionary government were equally surprised by Khomeini's endorsement. In response, several key members of Khomeini's government defected, including Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan and Foreign Minister Ebrahim Yazdi.

The images of angry “Muslim” mobs in the streets of Tehran and the audacious takeover of the embassy of the most powerful nation on Earth confirmed the Israeli government’s belief in the paramount importance of/obsession with national security, as well as the prevalent belief that Muslims (and other Middle Easterners) were irrational and violent. The all-encompassing extremist Islamic nature of the newly formed Islamic Republic was frightening to many Israelis. In spite of the fact that Israel was careful not to exaggerate the Iranian threat throughout the first decade of the Islamic Republic’s reign, it was aware of the power of Messianic fervor within the Iranian leadership’s ideology. According to Shi’a Messianic tradition, an Armageddon-like battle was to usher the return of the Hidden Imam, resulting in the end of days and the salvation of the Shi’a, the true believers. In light of the perceived irrationality of Khomeini’s government, no one was certain to what extent the Iranian ideologues were dedicated to fulfilling this Messianic prophecy.

Direct verbal threats against Israel’s existence in conjunction with the terrifying embrace of martyrdom within the ethos of Islamic resistance presented Israel with an explicit, undeniable threat from their former Persian ally. One major reason that Israel downplayed this seemingly imminent threat was the phenomenal anachronism of the Revolution and the irrationality that the Islamic Republic seemed to espouse. The de facto

Israeli ambassador to pre-revolutionary Iran, Uri Lubrani, among other Israeli officials, was quick to deem the revolutionary government too out of touch to last; it was merely a “historical parenthesis”. He opined confidently, “The dark utopia of Khomeini and his ilk will not withstand the reality test of the late twentieth century. This is a tyrannical, cruel and very dogmatic regime. It will not last long”.⁵² Israelis tried to convince themselves that modern secular logic would prevail.

In his groundbreaking and controversial book *Iranophobia*, Haggai Ram argues that Israeli paranoia of post-revolutionary Iran, which remained just under the surface of Israeli discourse throughout Khomeini's reign and the Iran-Iraq war, was a reflection of internal societal anxieties more than a straightforward reaction to the verbal threats emanating from Iran. One significant effect of the Iranian revolution on the Israeli psyche was the damage it did to Israel's sense of stability in its own secular nature. Prior to the revolution, Israel had looked to Iran as the primary example of a successful Western-allied secular modern nation in the Middle East. That image had shattered, leaving Israel deeply concerned about the repercussions such a shift might have on its own

⁵² “The Escalation of Islam, Davar, Feb 9 1979

precarious secular nature, especially now that an Ultra-Orthodox Party was to take part in policymaking.⁵³

Most Mizrahi Jews were politically right-leaning and more socially conservative than the largely secular Ashkenazi Jews of European descent.⁵⁴ Claims of marginalization and inequality showed the mainstream Ashkenazi populace that decades of attempted assimilation had failed. Subsequently, the secular Ashkenazi ruling class feared that the Eastern identity and values that the Mizrahim refused to abandon would infiltrate and dominate Israeli society, forcing Israel to blend in with the surrounding Middle East. Israeli politician Yosef Lapid stated his fear bluntly when he said that Israelis are “in a corrupt, lazy, backward environment. What keeps us above water is our cultural difference. If our Westernism erodes, we don’t have a chance. If we let the Eastern European ghetto and the North African ghetto take over... we will blend into the Semitic region and be lost within a terrible Levantine dunghill”.⁵⁵

By criticizing Iran, Ram suggests, the secular Israeli populace was projecting its fear of the growing Orthodox and right-leaning Mizrahi influence within Israel. The deep-seated, almost apocalyptic scenario in

⁵³ As part of Begin’s Likud-dominated coalition, Agudat Israel constituted the first Ultra-Orthodox party in Israeli government.

⁵⁴ Except for the rapidly growing Eastern European Ultra-Orthodox population.

⁵⁵ Ari Shavit, “Proud White Bourgeois”, Haaretz Dec. 20, 2002

these secular Israelis' collective imagination posited post-revolutionary Iran as a frightening omen of the future of Israel and presented Israelis with the unfathomable fear of becoming a "Jewish Iran". Ram terms this paranoia a "moral panic": a mass hysteria generated by the exploitation of people's worst fears by government, media or academic sources.⁵⁶ Maintaining an external enemy not only serves to quell internal divisions (such as social, ethnic, political, religious-secular, or separatist conflicts), but was also effective in distracting the world's attention from domestic conflicts; in the case of Israel, the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan, for which Israel received what it believed to be disproportionate and unjust criticism. The mass hysteria aimed at Iran, to whatever extent and with whatever underlying implications it may have existed in Israeli society, remained relatively subdued throughout Israel's cooperation with Iran against Iraq.

As discussed earlier, the Islamic Republic also relied on anti-Israel rhetoric for the purpose of quelling internal divisions and nurturing cohesion. The latent anti-Semitism within the Iranian Shi'a narrative laid the foundation for broad support for government advocated condemnation of Zionism and Israel.

⁵⁶ Ram, pg. 2

Chapter Three

Underlying Connections

Iranian-Israeli Parallels

Iran and Israel shared many political, ideological, and cultural similarities, both pre- and post-Revolution. Prior to the fall of the Shah, Israeli and Iranian foreign policies were very much in line with one another, evidenced by their Periphery alliance. These two non-Arab economic powers relied on Western, specifically American support, were united in their opposition to Soviet influence in the region, and shared a common animosity toward the Arab governments of the Middle East. Iraq was of particular concern. Its megalomaniacal leader, Saddam Hussein, represented both Israel and the Shah's most immediate threat. The dramatic shift in Iran's political orientation following the overthrow of the Shah superficially posited Iran and Israel on opposing ends of the geopolitical and ideological spectrum. In reality, the two enemies shared some striking similarities.

Both Israel and monarchical Iran shared a common quasi-imaginary identity. Both of these Western allied nations sought desperately to distance themselves from the Arab Orient, which they insolently perceived to be uncomfortably close, both geographically and culturally. The

Pahlavi regime propagated the theory that Iranians were “Aryan”, members of an Indo-European race that had historically populated both Iran and Europe. The Aryan theory was well received by the Iranian people, and successfully convinced them of their imagined racial affinity with the *civilized* Europeans whom they had venerated for generations. Aryanism was a powerful force in Iranian nationalism and successfully allowed Iranians to psychologically distance themselves from the *uncivilized* Arabs whom they scorned. Israeli society, traditionally dominated by Ashkenazi Jews of European descent, also embraced the strategic objective of Westernizing its populace, specifically its Mizrahi and Eastern European populations.⁵⁷ Both Iranian and Israeli governments intended to “transform Oriental subjects into deracinated replicas of Europeans”.⁵⁸ Both states implemented colonial ideals of modernization, including coercive secularization and Westernization of cultural signifiers such as clothing and social mores. Gazing firmly toward the West, both Israel and Iran saw themselves and one another as progressive, modernizing forces struggling against backwards, fanatically religious elements in the surrounding Middle East and more importantly, from within their respective societies.

⁵⁷ Ironically, it took a mass exodus from Europe for a European identity to take hold among Ashkenazi Jews, for they were historically stigmatized as foreign elements in Europe.

⁵⁸ Ram, pg. 55

In contrast to the ideological polarity between the State of Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran, pragmatic foreign policies emerged from the two countries in the wake of the Iran-Iraq War that paralleled one another in many respects. Both Iran and Israel believed that their survival was at stake⁵⁹, and therefore had no choice but cooperate to defeat Saddam Hussein, who remained both Israel and Iran's primary foe. Accordingly, both focused their resources and military efforts against Iraq. Deemed immoral to many within the Israeli government and the general public, the perpetuation of military and food trade in light of such harsh rhetoric demonstrated the power of national security and political gain over ideological foundations.

Israel and the Islamic Republic shared a core epistemological outlook; in the words of Dr. Haggai Ram, "Messianism and the interpretation of the sacred and the profane have been crucial in imagining modern Iran and Israel. Both secular Zionists and Islamic Iranians moved salvation from the heavens to the plains".⁶⁰ Both nations, albeit in very different ways, took purely religious ideas and translated them into

⁵⁹ "Israel exaggerating 'Existential Threat' to the Jewish State from Iran" *Rupee News*. www.rupeenews.com September 15, 2009

⁶⁰ Ram, pg. 17

political realities. Modern political Zionism was a secular movement with a theological foundation. This groundbreaking movement took the religious notion of Jewish Messianism, the idea that God will send a messiah to return the Jews to Zion (Israel) and usher in an era of peace and ultimately the salvation of the Jews; and turned it on its head. It transformed the millennia-old concept of ritual longing for Zion⁶¹ into a political movement with the goal of establishing a Jewish nation in the land that was the historical place of provenance for the global Diaspora. But the basis of this political movement, that Jews are the rightful heirs of the land, is Biblical in origin; God promised this land to his Chosen People and sanctioned the Hebrews, the descendants of the Jews, to conquer the land in which the Canaanites lived and to claim it as their own. Whether viewed historically or spiritually, the Jewish Diaspora's connection to the physical "holy" land of Israel was essential to the survival Jewish customs and rituals, Jewish identity, and the Hebrew language. Recited annually for centuries, the universal Jewish prayer to observe the Passover "next year in Jerusalem" was interpreted as a *spiritual*, not physical, return to the Holy Land. Prior the birth of the European political Zionist movement, only a tiny fraction of Diaspora Jews actually migrated to Palestine.

⁶¹ The spiritual belonging and connection of the Jewish Diaspora to Zion (Israel), the land of their forefathers.

Because only God can prompt the return to Zion and the coming of the Messiah, Political Zionism technically “hastened the end”⁶², in violation of Orthodox Jewish tradition (the sole interpretation until the post-Enlightenment European Reform Judaism movement). According to the *Midrash*, a medieval compilation of Biblical interpretations, until the return of the messiah Jews the world over must accept the reign of gentiles. Whereas modern religious Zionists believe that the establishment of Israel is the inception of salvation, many Ultra-Orthodox consider it a rebellion against the divine punishment of exile.⁶³ This Messianic prophecy, whether explicitly acknowledged by political Zionists or not, is “in the air and soil of Israel”.⁶⁴

The theological foundation of the Jewish claim to Israel clashed with the secular and Socialist ideals of the Zionist movement. High immigration and birth rates among European Orthodox and Mizrahi Jews, few of whom were secular, changed the demographics of Israel and threatened the Ashkenazi ethnocracy. These religious Israelis embraced the theological foundation of Zionism and the State of Israel, and by pushing for a more religious Israeli society and political orientation,

⁶² Aliezer Ravitzky, “Ultra-Orthodox and Anti-Zionist” MyJewishLearning.com

⁶³ Ravitzky, pg.1

⁶⁴ Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion* (Princeton University Press) 2005, pg. 24

initiated the transformation of Israel into a more conservative “Middle Eastern” society looking more to the past and less towards the future.

While Israel struggled vehemently to maintain its secular nature, the Islamic Republic was more confident in embracing a religious foundation in forming a national identity. Khomeini's interpretation of *velayat-e-faqih* (jurist's guardianship) was disguised and presented as a fundamentalist movement, whereas in reality the doctrine as proposed by Khomeini was radical and innovative within Shi'a Islam. *Velayat-e-faqih* had been debated by Shi'a scholars for centuries, and historically referred to the clergy's apolitical duties, including guardianship over those who required it, like the poor and the insane; but these Islamic scholars never condoned political rule by the clergy.⁶⁵ Furthermore, these scholars never explicitly condemned secular monarchical rule, whereas Khomeinism stressed precisely this point. In his early speeches and writings, Khomeini claimed that monarchy was un-Islamic.⁶⁶ Numerous clerics opposed Khomeini's interpretation, claiming that it contradicted Islamic law, but in the end Khomeini succeeded in using this apolitical Islamic concept as the foundation of the modern Iranian nation.

⁶⁵ Ervand Ebrahimian, *Khomeinism: essays on the Islamic Republic*. New York, NY 1993

⁶⁶ Ruhollah Khomeini; Algar, Hamid (translator and editor). *Islam and Revolution: Writing and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*. (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981) pg. 22

In this way Khomeinism, like modern Zionism, took a religious ideology and transformed it into a political reality. Both movements “usurped the divine prerogative”⁶⁷, assigning humans a role in what was historically and theologically purely within the realm of the divine. By relegating the task of redemption to human beings, both Zionism and Khomeinism directly contradicted previous Jewish and Shi'a understandings of Messianism, redemption, and civic governance. As a result these theological concepts, fundamental in Israeli and Iranian national identity, have come to underlie the political, economical and social-cultural spheres of contemporary Iranian and Israeli discourse. The two examples differ in that Zionism struggles to maintain a secular nature (a fundamental contradiction) while Khomeini's interpretation of *velayat-e-faqih* unapologetically denounces “Western” secularism and unequivocally posits divine law above human (secular) law. ⁶⁸

Khomeini's Islamist ideology was hostile to the principle of Nationalism. Accordingly, Khomeini saw Iran primarily as one (crucial) part of the greater Islamic world, and his foreign policy aimed to reflect this ideology. But in reality he was ruling a modern nation-state, and he came to espouse the Shah's goal of establishing Iran as the regional

⁶⁷ Ram, pg. 12

⁶⁸ Because humans invented the concept of God and divine law, in reality both notions of law are man-made.

superpower. Israel shared similar aspirations for regional military supremacy, and to this end the two nations often set aside ideology in favor of a “strategic rivalry for military pre-eminence.”⁶⁹ The rivalry has only intensified with time, largely due to recent evidence of nuclear enrichment and the potential for nuclear weapons capability in Iran. “Even before manufacturing a single bomb, Iran has become a regional superpower influencing international policy”⁷⁰ while Israel remains the region’s dominant military power.

Khomeini’s nationalist tendencies showed that ultimately ideology alone cannot guide a nation’s foreign policy. Similarly, Israel is an intensely proud nation struggling to define itself, while simultaneously declaring itself the representative and guardian of all the world’s Jews. Its role and identity transcend its national boundaries, which are both literally and metaphorically ambiguous and unsettled.

Politics of Identity

The national identities of many countries are shaped by ideas of their past greatness, but rarely is a modern nation’s identity drawn in such a calculated manner from a glorified and romanticized past as in the

⁶⁹ Trita Parsi, “Under the Veil of Ideology: the Israeli-Iranian Strategic Rivalry” *Middle East Report Online* June 9, 2006

⁷⁰ Zvi Bar-el “Iran is Regional Superpower Even Without Nukes” *Haaretz*. February 26, 2010

case of Israel and monarchical Iran, and to a lesser extent Islamic Iran. For Israel, this historical grandeur is embodied in the short-lived but legendary ancient Israeli kingdoms of David and Solomon, as well as the Biblical designation of the Jews as God's "Chosen People". Secular, monarchical Iran downplayed its Islamic identity while venerating its pre-Islamic past, whose most distinguished hero and source of pride, Cyrus the Great, founded the first and most expansive Persian Empire, that of the Achaemenids. As the liberator of the exiled Jews in Babylon and benefactor of the Second Temple, Jewish tradition bestows King Cyrus with such high regard that he is honored as the sole gentile messiah in the Jewish Bible. This ancient and deeply meaningful Persian-Jewish friendship served as the foundation of the imagined "natural alliance" which Israel used to justify its relationship with Iran throughout the monarchical and into the post-revolutionary period. Many Israelis believed that "Iran and Israel need each other. These laws have proven themselves to be true from the time of Cyrus to the present time. It has always been this way and will always be the same."⁷¹

The Iranian revolution elicited a major psychological shift in government advocated national identity. With the overthrow of the Shah and the subsequent rejection of its pre-Islamic roots, Iran returned to an

⁷¹ Souresrafil, pg. 115

imagined past dominated by fundamental Islamic values. The Islamic Republic's state-endorsed national identity, like its predecessor's, delegitimized and at times showed hostility toward crucial components of the Iranian people's collective identity. Hence, both regimes succeeded in alienating significant elements of the populace.

These starkly contrasting, narrowly interpreted national identities, based largely on a particular selected historical narrative, were instrumental in defining modern Iran's allies and enemies; most notably Israel. As a Persian nation emphasizing its pre-Islamic identity, Iran's relationship with the Jewish people, and thus Israel, was envisioned as positive, beneficial, and natural. As a Muslim nation focused on its Islamic past, the perceived historical relationship with the Jewish people became more ambiguous. Historically, Jewish-Muslim relations were not especially hostile. As with Jewish-Zoroastrian historical relations, there existed periods of cooperation and periods of conflict.

The relationship between Iran and Israel was not purely viewed through a religious-historical lens. Political orientation was also an essential factor. What ultimately distinguished Islamic Iran's view of Israel from secular Iran's view was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a Persian nation, Iran perceived the conflict as an Israeli-Arab issue, Arabs being the traditional adversaries of Persians. In this context, there was an element of

the “enemy of my enemy is my friend” phenomenon, for Jews did not hold a special place in the collective Iranian mindset in the same way Persians did for Jews. The shift in Iranian identity following the revolution greatly altered the perception of Jews and Israelis, for as a self-perceived Muslim nation, Iran viewed the conflict as a Jewish-Muslim issue; Muslims being the unquestionable allies of Islamic Iran. To this day the Islamic Regime narrative includes “protecting oppressed (Muslim) nations, such as Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan as part of the Iranian-Islamic identity.”⁷²

In spite of the fact that Jews and Muslims share many religious narratives and tenets in common (and in fact Islam is fundamentally based on Judaism), I believe that an underlying hostility toward the “Jewish tribe”, who summarily rejected Mohammad and Islam, has long existed among the Iranian Shi'a. A long history of anti-Semitism in Iran attests to this hostility. This fundamental religious clash based on differences in theological interpretation lies in stark contrast to the older relationship between Judaism and Zoroastrianism, two religions that greatly influenced one another but were fundamentally unrelated.

⁷² “Israel on Iranian Media” *Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*. July 19, 2009
www.terrorism-info.org.il

Subdued at times and exaggerated at others, post-revolutionary Iran and Israel maintained a near-infatuation with one another, often translated into verbal attacks and threats of violence. The relentless confrontational bravado emanating from Iran and more recently Israel indicates an undeniable preoccupation with the other, which I propose points to a latent sense of respect. Both governments feel threatened by one another, suggesting an underlying, largely unconscious admiration. This mutual admiration was acknowledged during the monarchy, but was vehemently rejected following the revolution, first by Iran, and eventually by Israel.

Latent admiration beneath a confrontational veneer is an example of a phenomenon called "reaction formation", well documented in the field of Psychoanalytic theory. This type of behavior, whether manifested in an individual, society, or government, is a type of defense mechanism in which an emotion that is difficult to manage is manifested as a directly opposing emotion, often due to anxiety.⁷³ According to this psychological process it is possible for love to manifest unconsciously as hate, or respect for resentment. A classic example would be a young girl who has a crush on a boy, whom she proceeds to hit, out of frustration. There is a fine line between love and hate, as the saying goes. Post-revolutionary Iran's

⁷³ Laura King, *Experience Psychology* (McGraw-Hill Publishers: New York 2010) pg. 343

relentless preoccupation with Israel, I propose, shows Iran's acknowledgment of Israel's might and power, which in turn suggests that Israel was a worthy enough opponent to deserve the time and energy and, in this case, contempt, that Iran spent denouncing it.

Conclusion

When the Shah departed Iran, Khomeini inherited the world's sixth largest army, foreign currency reserves of over \$25 billion, an oil industry earning over \$100 million a day, the thirteenth highest GNP in the world, and a legacy of close relations with Israel.⁷⁴ True to his convictions, the provocative elderly cleric promptly ended diplomatic relations with the Israel. He now had an impressive platform to advance his campaign to inspire millions of Muslims to fight Israel and what he considered the malicious presence of Zionism across the world, and to spread Islamic revolution across the Muslim World. While no Western allied governments were overthrown, as was Khomeini's hope, "the Iranian model... was a source of inspiration for the rise of Al-Qaeda, for the fortification of the Muslim Brotherhood, and for the rise of Hamas – all of which were different and oftentimes rival movements that share a conception of a revolutionized Muslim world".⁷⁵

The Ayatollah proceeded to eliminate as much of the Shah's establishment as was possible, including a widespread purge of military commanders and personnel, and with it the knowledge needed to manage Iran's military. The pressures of *realpolitik* compromised the

⁷⁴ Sobhani, pg. 142

⁷⁵ Moshe Yalon "We Must Confront Jihadist Iran" *Ynet*, 23 September 2007 <http://www.ynet.co.il>

Islamic Republic's ideological motives, and Iran found itself almost totally dependent upon arms, ammunition and parts from the “Little Satan” Israel, without which it would likely have suffered a swift defeat by Saddam Hussein's formidable military. Israel itself was distraught at the thought of losing its closest regional partner, the “crown in the jewel” of its Periphery allies and thought it wise to maintain a channel to Iran, for they expected Khomeini's regime to collapse before long.

Meanwhile, shifting geopolitical realities were changing the nature of Israel's foreign policy strategy, which had substantiated an enduring alliance between the two nations. Between 1977 and 1980, the Israeli government shifted considerably to the right, Egypt made peace with Israel, Iran experienced a dramatic reversal in political orientation, and Iraq instigated a brutal war with Iran. These developments signaled the beginning of a profound shift in Israel's perception of Iran as a natural, eternal ally. But it was extremely difficult for Israel to let go of Iran and there was much disagreement within the Israeli government about how to proceed with Khomeini's government. Israel generally considered Iran's inflammatory rhetoric a hollow threat, and assumed the Islamic Republic would collapse before long. Accordingly, throughout the 1980's it refrained from reciprocating the hostile rhetoric emanating from Khomeini and his extremist government.

These threats, which continue to echo from the Islamic Republic to this day, however hollow or serious they may actually be, must be considered in light of the national traumas of the Jews of Israel. At best marginalized and at worst collectively annihilated, the Jewish narrative is a proud but grim one. The pogroms of Eastern Europe and the Holocaust, as well as less severe examples of anti-Jewish hostility in Europe and the Middle East elicited a collective paranoia and victim complex remnant in the modern state of Israel, which has been translated in part to what Haggai Ram terms "Iranophobia." This public sense of vulnerability is exploited by the Israeli government and serves as "calculated distraction from what it does not want the United States and does not want the world to pay attention to"⁷⁶; namely the continued settlement building and occupation of the West Bank and the Golan Heights, and the siege of the Gaza Strip.

Likewise, the Iranian backlash against Western hegemony and values, often forced down the throats of unwilling communities, should be understood within the context of Decolonization in the mid-20th century. Although never an outright colony of a European power, Iranians had developed a deep resentment of British and American (and to a much

⁷⁶ Ian Lustick, from an interview titled "U.S policies towards Iran and Israel: What Are the Linkages?" Middle East Policy Council www.MEPC.org July 13, 2010

lesser extent Israeli) interference in Iranian politics, economics and society. The Anglo-American powers facilitated and supported corrupt authoritarian Iranian kings for the bulk of the 20th century. Arguably the pivotal moment in the formation of this resentment came in 1953 with the British-American led coup of Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. His move to nationalize the British-controlled Iranian oil industry did not suit the interests of the avaricious British leaders, who exploited the Eisenhower administration's Cold War Communism-phobia and convinced the U.S. to partake in their coup. The blatant disregard for the democratic aspirations and self-determination of the Iranian populace in favor of the obedient Shah was not forgotten by the Iranian masses and a deep distrust of the United States formed in their collective mindset. Khomeini believed that the "Imperialists" and their agents "want us to remain afflicted and wretched, and our poor to be trapped in their misery ... they and their agents (including Jews and other supporters of the Shah) wish to go on living in huge palaces and enjoying lives of abominable luxury."⁷⁷ This distrust and resentment was instrumental in the attack on the American Embassy, called the "den of spies" because it was the base of the 1953 coup operations.

⁷⁷Hamid Algar. *Islam and Revolution: Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (Mizan Press, Tehran 1981)

The resentment of foreign interference translated to a great extent into anti-Israeli sentiment, for Israel, and Jews, served as a convenient scapegoat. Certainly Israel was guilty of supporting the hated Shah and helping to train SAVAK⁷⁸, but it had committed much less offense against Iran than the U.S. or Britain. Israel was disproportionately targeted because it was both politically *and* spiritually offensive. In addition to its support of the Shah, Israel's nationhood posed a grave threat to Islam in the mind of Khomeini and many of his religious following. Anti-Zionist sentiment was already established among religious elements of the society at the time of the revolution. In addition, some leftists and other secular elements were also very critical of Israel, so gathering popular support for the government's anti-Israel policy was not difficult. Furthermore, the Ayatollah was aware of the folly of alienating the Western superpowers, whereas he deemed Israel a more valuable enemy than ally. The impasse with the United States was not intentional, and ties with Britain have continued uninterrupted to this day.

In the greater context of the tumultuous Middle East of the 1980's, Iran and Israel came to be seen as ideological and political polar

⁷⁸ Taghi Najjari-Raad. *Hamkariye SAVAK va Mossad*. (Tehran: Publishing Center of the Islamic Republic, 2002)

opposites. The animosity between the two former allies was presented as a clash of civilizations: a secular, Western democracy against a backwards, theological authoritarian regime. Yet in reality there were striking similarities in geopolitical strategy, national and religious ideology, and domestic social psychology. Studying the history of Iranian-Israeli relations, specifically focusing on the effects of the Iranian Revolution and the Islamic Republic's rhetoric, reveals a complex and misunderstood relationship, colored by a deep historical-emotional bond and a persevering, if unconscious sense of mutual respect.

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