

Iran and the Palestinians

Rachel Brandenburg

- After the 1979 revolution, Iran ended its alliance with Israel and started supporting the Palestinians, symbolized by turning over the Israeli embassy in Tehran to the Palestine Liberation Organization.
- As part of its campaign to export the revolution, the theocracy also aided emerging Palestinian Islamic groups, notably Islamic Jihad and Hamas. Both sent representatives to Tehran.
- Iran generally opposed the U.S.-backed Middle East peace process. During the 1997-2005 reform era, however, President Mohammad Khatami indicated that Tehran might accept any decision embraced by the Palestinian majority. But that sentiment was short-lived.
- Tehran has trained many Palestinian militants and provided a significant proportion of the weaponry used against Israel. For Shiite Iran, the Palestinian groups have been among its most important Sunni allies.
- The Syrian civil war has strained Iran's relationship with Palestinian groups, particularly Hamas. Iran backs President Bashar al Assad, an Alawite, and Hamas reportedly supports Sunni rebels seeking to overthrow him.

Overview

Between Israel's birth in 1948 and Iran's revolution in 1979, the two countries had close relations based on common strategic interests, particularly as the two non-Arab countries in the Middle East. Iran became an important source of oil for Israel, and Israel became an important source of weapons for Iran. Thousands of Israeli businessmen and technical experts aided Iranian development projects. But after the shah's ouster, relations deteriorated and envoys went home. Israel remained a source of Western arms during the early years of Iran's 1980-1988 war with Iraq. But by the mid-1980s, even commercial ties had ended.

Tehran's new theocrats refused to recognize Israel as a state or even use its name, instead calling it the "Zionist entity" or the "Little Satan." Leftists opposed Israel because of anti-imperialist sentiment and its relationship with the United States. The religious right viewed Israel as an illegitimate occupier of Muslim land and a threat to Islam and Islamic justice. Shortly after the revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini designated the last Friday of Ramadan as a new national holiday – Qods Day, or Jerusalem Day – to "proclaim the international solidarity of Muslims in support of the

legitimate rights of the Muslim people of Palestine.” Qods Day is honored across the Muslim world.

During the revolution’s first decade, Iran’s primary focus in the Arab-Israeli conflict was aiding and arming its Shiite brethren in Lebanon’s new Hezbollah. But Tehran’s involvement with the Sunni Palestinians deepened progressively with three major turning points: The Palestinian Liberation Organization’s call for peace talks with Israel in 1988, the second intifada – or uprising – in 2000, and the election of Hamas in 2006.

The PLO

During the monarchy, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) had close ties with the Iranian opposition. Many Iranian dissidents trained at PLO camps in Lebanon in the 1970s. The PLO also backed the 1979 revolution. Days after the revolution, PLO chief Yasser Arafat led a 58-member delegation to Tehran. Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan hosted the official welcome ceremony, where the keys to the former Israeli embassy were handed over to the PLO. The road in front of the mission was renamed Palestine Street. Arafat traveled throughout Iran to set up PLO offices, which members of his delegation stayed to manage for more than one year.

Khomeini did not welcome Arafat with open arms, however. During their two-hour meeting on Feb. 18, 1979, the ayatollah criticized the PLO for its nationalist and pan-Arab agenda. He appealed to Arafat to model the PLO on the principles of the Islamic revolution. Arafat was an observant Muslim, but he rebuffed Khomeini. Arafat and Khomeini never met again

Relations between Iran and the PLO eroded further when Arafat joined the Arab world in supporting Iraq during its 1980-1988 war with Iran. In 1988, Tehran also condemned Arafat after he recognized Israel’s right to exist, renounced terrorism, called for peace talks with Israel and began a dialogue with the United States. Iran’s new Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei denounced the PLO chief as a “traitor and an idiot” in 1989. Arafat did not visit Iran again until 1997, when Tehran hosted the Organization of Islamic Conference. The PLO maintained a diplomatic presence in Tehran, but Iran did not actively aid the PLO again until 2000.

In August 2015, however, there were limited signs of a thaw in relations. Top PLO official Ahmed Majdalani visited Tehran and met with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. The discussion focused on the Syria conflict, disagreements between the PLO and Hamas, and improving ties between the PLO and Iran.

Intifada and Karine A

The second Palestinian intifada, or uprising, erupted in September 2000 after the collapse of Middle East peace talks at Camp David and Ariel Sharon's visit to Jerusalem's Temple Mount, or Haram al Sharif in Arabic, home of the Al Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest site in Islam. To support the uprising and heighten pressure on Israel, Arafat released Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants held by the Palestinian Authority. Iran lauded Arafat and his Fatah party for their resistance. In 2001, Iran hosted a second "Support for the Palestinian intifada" conference, attended by Palestinian parliamentarians and representatives from Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Ayatollah Khamenei praised the intifada for restoring Palestinian unity.

Iran's renewed support for Arafat's Palestinian Authority was evident when Israel captured the *Karine A*, a ship reportedly destined for Gaza, in 2002. The ship carried 50 tons of advanced weaponry, including Katyusha rockets, rifles, mortar shells, mines, and anti-tank missiles, that had been loaded in Iranian waters. It was interdicted by an Israeli commando raid in the Red Sea. Arafat denied any involvement; the arms were a clear violation of Palestinian-Israeli agreements. But Israel interpreted the shipment as a sign of Iran's renewed support for the PLO resistance.

Islamic Jihad

Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is the smallest but most violent Palestinian group – and long the closest to Iran. The underground movement was founded by Fathi Shikaki, a young physician and Gaza refugee, in the late 1970s as an off-shoot of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. PIJ endorsed the Iranian revolution. Shikaki shared Khomeini's belief that "Islam was the solution and Jihad was the proper means." The Sunni Muslim group also adopted the suicide tactics used mainly by Shiite militants, justified as martyrdom for the greater cause. Since 1989, it has carried out more than a dozen major suicide attacks against Israeli targets. Unlike other Arab and Sunni groups, Islamic Jihad supported Shiite Iran during its long war with Iraq.

The group's leadership was forced out of Gaza in 1988, first to Lebanon, then to Syria, where it is now based. Ramadan Abdallah Shallah became secretary general after Shikaki's assassination in 1995. He has met frequently with Iranian officials both in Tehran and Damascus, often in meetings with other major Palestinian militant groups. Shallah reportedly attended a meeting in Tehran in 1996, when he coordinated with the Qods Force, an elite wing of the Revolutionary Guards that handles Iran's foreign operations. PIJ maintains a representative in Iran. Iran has armed, trained and funded PIJ, although its aid is reportedly modest compared with support for Hamas or Lebanon's Hezbollah.

In May 2015, PIJ-Iran relations appeared to be strained. Iran reportedly stopped or curtailed its financial support because PIJ refused to denounce the Saudi-led offensive against the Houthis in Yemen. Tehran then shifted its support to the al Sabirin (“the patient”) movement in Gaza. It is headed by Hisham Salem, a former PIJ member. The group is reportedly in total agreement with Iran on regional issues. The status of PIJ funding was not clear as of late 2015. In November, a PIJ leader said that Iran has never stopped supporting Palestine and Palestinian leaders. And Ali Akbar Velayati, a top advisor to Iran’s supreme leader, said that Tehran would never stop helping PIJ, among other groups and allies in the region.

Hamas

Hamas, an acronym in Arabic for “Islamic resistance movement,” emerged out of the first Palestinian intifada, or uprising, in 1987. It was co-founded by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and six others, originally as a local offshoot of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas and Iran both wanted to see Israel replaced by the Islamic state of Palestine. Yet Hamas initially had little connection to Iran due to sectarian differences, Tehran’s ties to Islamic Jihad, and the Hamas desire to be an independent resistance movement.

Relations between Iran and Hamas developed after the PLO called for making peace with Israel. In 1990, Tehran hosted a conference on support for Palestine, which Hamas attended but Arafat did not. In the early 1990s, a Hamas delegation led by Mousa Abu Marzouk held talks in Tehran with key officials, including Ayatollah Khamenei. Iran pledged military and financial support – reportedly \$30 million annually – as well as advanced military training for thousands of Hamas activists at Revolutionary Guard bases in Iran and Lebanon. Hamas also opened an office in Tehran and declared that Iran and Hamas shared an “identical view in the strategic outlook toward the Palestinian cause in its Islamic dimension.”

Tehran continued support for Hamas throughout the intifada. Aid steadily increased after Arafat’s death in 2004 and Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. But Hamas’ surprise victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections dramatically transformed its relations with Iran. Tehran stepped in to rescue the nearly bankrupt Palestinian Authority in Gaza, now under Hamas control, after foreign aid dried up. When Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh visited Tehran in December 2006, Iran reportedly pledged \$250 million in aid.

Iran reportedly provided military aid and training for dozens of men in Hamas’ military wing, the Izz ad-Din al Qassam Brigades. Iran also allegedly supplied much of the military equipment that Hamas used against Israel in the December 2008 Gaza war. Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal visited Tehran in February 2009, after the war ended, to thank Iran for its help during the conflict, citing Iran as a “partner in victory.”

But the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 caused a rift between Tehran and Hamas. Although they had previously overlooked sectarian differences, the relationship became complicated when Tehran backed Syrian President Bashar al Assad, a member of the Shiite Alawite sect, and Hamas aligned with Sunni rebels. In 2012, Hamas began looking to Qatar as an alternative financial backer to Iran. Hamas leaders even relocated to Qatar from Syria.

In November 2012, tit for tat violence between Israel and militants in Gaza reached a boiling point. Israel launched Operation Pillar of Defense, starting with the targeted killing of Ahmed Jabari, the Hamas military chief in Gaza. During the eight-day conflict, at least 150 Palestinians and six Israelis were killed. Iranian officials took credit for supporting Hamas and others during the conflict. "We proudly say we support the Palestinians, military and financially," said Parliamentary Speaker Ali Larijani. Militants fired Iranian-made Fajr 5 rockets at Israeli cities during the conflict. Billboards thanking Iran for the rockets appeared in Gaza shortly after.

The 2014 Gaza war provided another opportunity to repair the relationship between Hama and Iran. Tensions between Israel and Hamas again escalated after Hamas kidnapped and killed two Israeli teenagers. The two sides exchanged airstrikes and rocket attacks for seven weeks. The conflict killed more than 2,000 Palestinians, and Israeli strikes destroyed much of Hamas' underground tunnel network.

In August 2014, Rouhani called Israel's actions "systematic, illegal, and inhumane crimes against the Palestinians." The Revolutionary Guards reportedly sent tens of millions of dollars to Hamas over the next few months to help rebuild its tunnel network.

By early 2015, however, the relationship still faced challenges. In March, Hamas expressed tacit support for the Saudi-led military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen. Iran, however, condemned the intervention.

Saudi Arabia, whose ties with Hamas had previously been strained over the group's links to Iran, hosted a delegation of Hamas leaders in July 2015 - the first such visit in more than three years. The visit angered Iranian officials, who reportedly canceled a Hamas visit to Iran the following month.

The visit held potential benefits for both Hamas and Saudi Arabia. Hamas could push for additional financial backing by playing off the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry. And improved ties with Hamas could help Saudi Arabia consolidate its influence among Sunni groups. At the end of July, Hamas leaders claimed that Iran had cut off its financial support.

In August 2015, Hamas Deputy Foreign Minister Ghazi Hamad said bilateral relations with Iran were “no good at all.” He told *The Washington Post* that the group’s problems with Iran were “well known.” But Hamad also said that the group did not want to lose Iran’s support. The exact status of the relationship was not clear. In November 2015, a top advisor to the supreme leader mentioned that Iran would never stop helping Hamas. In December 2015, a Hamas representative in Tehran, Khaled Ghadoumi, met with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. He highlighted a need to develop the Iran-Hamas relationship. Also in December, the deputy chief of Hamas’ political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, appealed for Iranian support of a new intifada against Israel. In the video message, published by Iranian media outlet Raja News, Haniyeh recalled how important Palestine is to the Islamic Revolution, Iran’s government and the Iranian people. Haniyeh’s request came after knife stabbings by Palestinians killed more than a dozen Israelis and Israeli reprisals resulted in the deaths of more than 100 Palestinians.

Palestinian Authority

The ebbs and flows of relations between Iran and the many Palestinian factions often correlated with the status of peace efforts. After U.S.-orchestrated peace process resumed in Washington in 2010, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad told a rally in Tehran that talks were doomed to fail. He also lambasted Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas a hostage of Israel. Abbas, who was Arafat’s successor, shot back.

In a pointed reference to Ahmadinejad’s disputed win in 2009 elections, Abbas spokesman *Nabil Abu Rudeineh* said, *“He who does not represent the Iranian people, who forged elections and who suppresses the Iranian people and stole the authority, is not entitled to talk about Palestine, or the president of Palestine. We have fought for Palestine and Jerusalem. And the Palestinian leadership has provided thousands of martyrs and tens of thousands wounded and prisoners [and] did not repress their people, as did the system of Iran led by Ahmadinejad.”*

In August 2012, however, Abbas visited Tehran to attend the Non-Aligned Movement summit. He met with Ahmadinejad, who offered to mediate reconciliation talks with Hamas. In February 2013, Abbas met with Ahmadinejad and thanked him for support at the U.N. vote which gave Palestine observer-state status.

Abbas reportedly planned to visit Iran in late 2015 to improve ties amid reports of disagreements between Hamas and Tehran, though some Iranian officials denied that a visit was scheduled. “They’ve [Palestinian Authority officials] asked to visit Iran more than once and we’ve refused and have never yet said yes,” Hossein Sheikholeslam, an adviser to parliament speaker Ali Larijani on international affairs, told Hamas daily *al Resalah*. He emphasized that Tehran supports “the resistance and its fighters,” a reference to hardline armed groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Middle East peace process

Iranian politicians all condemn Israel, and the regime has opposed the peace process since the 1993 Oslo Accords launched sporadic diplomacy. But the language of the leaders has varied, albeit slightly.

Ayatollah Khomeini: In 1981, he said, “To liberate Qods [Jerusalem], Muslims should use faith-dependent machine guns and the power of Islam and keep away from political games which reek of compromise... Muslim nations, especially the Palestinian and Lebanese nations, should punish those who waste time indulging in political maneuvers.”

Former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani: In 2005, he said, “We want all the Palestinians back in their homeland, and then there can be a fair referendum for people to choose the form of state they want. Whoever gets the majority can rule.”

Former President Khatami: In 1998, he said, “The root of tension in the region is the Zionist regime.” He also said Iran “morally and logically” does not recognize Israel but would not interfere in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad: In September 2010, he told a Qods Day rally in Tehran, “Who gave them [Mahmoud Abbas’ negotiating team] the right to sell a piece of Palestinian land? The people of Palestine and the people of the region will not allow them to sell even an inch of Palestinian soil to the enemy. The negotiations are stillborn and doomed.”

President Hassan Rouhani: Rouhani said that “the root cause of problems in the region is the usurping occupation of Palestinian territories” during a meeting with the Jordanian ambassador in January 2015. He also emphasized Iran’s “resolve to stand beside the innocent Palestinian nation and support them continuously.”

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called Israel a “cancerous tumor” and urged Palestinians to unite and model their resistance against Israel on Hezbollah. In 2005, he said, “Palestine belongs to the Palestinians, and the fate of Palestine should be determined by the Palestinian people.” In 2015, the supreme leader’s office published a book compiling Khamenei’s statements on Palestine, entitled “The Most Important Problem of the Islamic World.”

Iran’s Palestinian allies

Ramadan Abdallah Shallah: Islamic Jihad secretary general and British-educated economist who briefly taught at the University of South Florida and took over after

Shikaki was assassinated in 1995. "Our ties with Iran date back to the first days of our movement, just after the Islamic revolution took over in Iran," he once said. In 2014, he praised Iran's support during the Gaza conflict. Shallah is also on the FBI's most wanted terrorist list.

Khalid Mashaal: Hamas leader based in Qatar. After the 2006 Hamas victory, Mashaal visited Tehran and said, "Just as Islamic Iran defends the rights of the Palestinians, we defend the rights of Islamic Iran. We are part of a united front against the enemies of Islam." He relocated from Damascus to Qatar in 2012, after Hamas and Iran backed different actors in the Syrian civil war.

Ismail Haniyeh: Hamas leader who became prime minister of the Gaza half of the Palestinian Authority after Hamas' 2006 election victory. Later that year he visited Tehran, where he told a Friday prayer service, "The world arrogance (US) and Zionists... want us to recognize the usurpation of the Palestinian lands and stop jihad and resistance and accept the agreements reached with the Zionist enemies in the past... We will never recognize the usurper Zionist government and will continue our jihad-like movement until the liberation of Jerusalem." In 2012, he visited Iran and received pledges of support from top Iranian leaders. In 2015, he appealed for Iranian support of an intifada against Israel.

Sheikh Ahmed Yassin: Hamas co-founder and spiritual guide. The quadriplegic cleric was hosted by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Mohammad Khatami during a 1998 visit to Tehran. After meeting the sheikh, Ayatollah Khamenei said, "The Palestinian nation's jihad is a source of honor for Islam and Muslims... God's promises will undoubtedly come true and the Islamic land of Palestine will someday witness the annihilation of the usurper Zionist rule." He died in an Israeli helicopter gunship attack in 2004.

Trendlines

- When it had substantial financial and military support from Iran, Hamas could refuse to work with Fatah and other parties to form a single Palestinian government in the West Bank and Gaza. The split between the two halves of the Palestinian Authority seriously complicates peace efforts since only two of the three parties to the conflict negotiated.
- The fallout between Iran and Hamas is unlikely to be resolved as long as they back different sides in the Syria conflict. Further strain in the relationship may lead Hamas to move closer to its Gulf backers, and possibly even motivate Iran to consider rapprochement with the PLO.

Rachel Brandenburg was a Middle East program specialist at USIP. She wrote the original chapter in 2010.

This chapter was updated in January 2016 by Cameron Glenn, a senior program assistant, and Garrett Nada, a program specialist at the U.S. Institute of Peace.