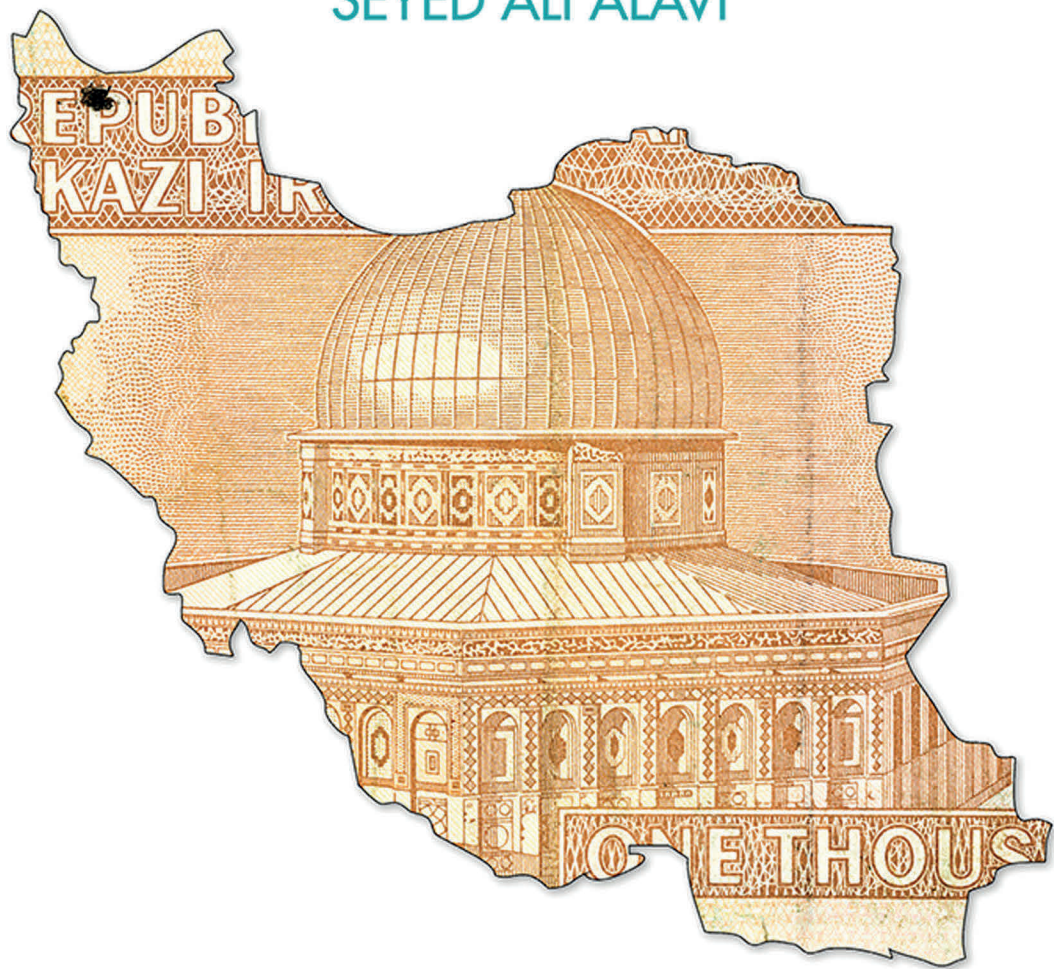


IRAN AND PALESTINE

Past, Present, Future

SEYED ALI ALAVI



FOREWORD BY ARSHIN ADIB-MOGHADDAM

Iranian Studies



IRAN AND PALESTINE

Examining the nature of relations between Iran and Palestine, this book investigates the relationship between state and authorities in the Middle East.

Analysing the connections of the Iranian revolutionary movements, both the Left's and the Islamic camps' perspectives are scrutinized. To provide a historical background to the post-revolutionary period, the genealogy of pro-Palestinian sentiments before 1979 are traced additionally.

Demonstrating the pro-Palestinian stance of post-revolutionary Iran, the study focuses on the roots of the ideological outlook and the interest of the state. Despite a growing body of literature on the Iranian Revolution and its impacts on the region, Iran's connection with Palestine has been overlooked. This new volume fills the gap in the literature and enables readers to unpack the history of the two states.

This unique and comprehensive coverage of Iran and Palestine's relationship is a key resource for scholars and students interested in international relations, politics, Islamic and Middle East studies.

Seyed Ali Alavi is a Teaching Fellow at SOAS, University of London. He holds a PhD in International Studies. He completed his master's degree in Middle East Politics and his undergraduate studies in International Politics of Europe and America in London.

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Past, Present, Future

Seyed Ali Alavi

Foreword by Arshin Adib-Moghaddam

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*For my late grandfather, Seyed Jalal, and for my father,
Seyed Khaled, with honour*



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FOREWORD

When a jubilant Yasser Arafat came to Tehran in February 1979 as the first foreign leader after the Iranian revolution, the late chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was jubilant, even jolly. “Every Iranian freedom fighter is represented in the Iranian revolution”, Arafat proclaimed. The region, he concluded “has been turned upside down”.¹ Subsequently, the Iranian revolutionaries handed the key of the huge Israeli compound in Tehran to the Palestinians in a highly symbolic gesture. This was the first territory that the Palestinians gained after the establishment of Israel in 1948. Arafat said “thank you” and supported Saddam Hussein in his monstrous invasion of revolutionary Iran. Since then, the relations of Iran with the PLO have been fractured.

Over three decades after the revolution, there continues to be a lot of talk about Iranian influence in the region, including in Palestine. From Iraq to Syria to Lebanon, Iran has managed to cultivate close relations with the governments in power. The Palestinian question continues to be salient, even if far less radically articulated than during the heyday of the revolution, in the discourse of both Iranian leaders and the actors within the country’s powerful civil society. As Alavi demonstrates superbly in this important and unique study, Palestine has been a part of the Iranian imagination for quite some time now. In the romantic articulation of the revolutionary discourse that engulfed the country in the late 1960s and 1970s, Palestine became a symbol of oppression of a victimised nation on the one hand and resistance to injustice on the other. There was almost a metaphysical emphasis on the just cause that the Palestinians pursued against all odds, in the face of Goliath, the state of Israel with its overwhelming military force. The Iranian support of Palestine has been informed by those romantic yearnings of the revolutionaries, which have been turned into Machiavellian calculations by the post-revolutionary state: for successive Iranian governments, the emotive issue of Palestine serves as a Trojan horse to appeal to civil societies throughout the region and beyond. At the same

time, influence in Palestine is a part of a regional strategy to contain the power of the Israeli state in order to gain strategic depth and defend Iran if necessary. To the mind of Iranian decisionmakers, this essentially defensive disposition is necessary in the face of repeated threats by the Israeli state to attack Iran and its allies.

A second factor needs to be added here. When it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian equation, there exists a “cultural” dilemma for a country such as Iran. The Jewish foundation of the Israeli state, once divested from its psycho-nationalist hysteria, chimes with the cultural and ethical constitution of the meaning of Iran since ancient times. In short – and I am aware that this is a hotly debated topic – Iran or Persia has carried a distinctly Jewish narrative thousands of years before the state of Israel was invented with so much anger embedded within its political culture. This angry attitude permeating Israeli politics manifests itself repeatedly in the rather comical presentations of the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his allegations about an Iranian nuclear bomb. For example, in order to accentuate this fear, Netanyahu presented President Barack Obama with the Book of Esther at a meeting in the White House in March 2012. The Book of Esther entails a biblical story in which the Jews of Persia were threatened with massslaughter by the Persian king Xerxes. What Netanyahu failed to add is that at the end of the story, the Jews are not actually killed. In fact, the reverse is said to have happened: Esther was the Jewish wife of King Xerxes, and when she pleads with him that his Vizier Haman plans to destroy the empire’s Jews, Xerxes allows them to defend themselves, leading to the killing of 75,000 Persians and the slaughter of Haman’s ten sons. Thereafter, Esther institutes a festival of redemption, the holiday of Purim, which is celebrated throughout the world today.

But for Netanyahu’s distinctly ideological reading of this story, it is during Purim when “we will read how some 2,500 years ago, a Persian anti-Semite tried to annihilate the Jewish people”.² Netanyahu is evasive, of course. He fails to add that it was the Persians who were killed, not Persia’s Jews. Iran is certainly not famed for its intolerance towards the Jews of the Persian empire: indeed, it is almost common knowledge by now that the Persian king Cyrus is mentioned in the Torah as a “saviour” and “saint” of the Jewish people, and the Old Testament describes him as God’s “anointed” and “chosen ruler” because he gave refuge to the Jews when they were persecuted by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in the sixth century BCE. The tomb of Esther is in Hamedan (ancient Ecbatana), in the north-west of today’s Islamic Republic of Iran. The tomb draws pilgrims from all over Iran, especially during Purim. The walls of the building explain the origins of Esther in Hebrew, and they are not desecrated by swastikas or neo-Nazi slogans, as some of the Jewish cemeteries elsewhere continue to be.

Moreover, at a time when Nazi Germany was busy implementing the *Endlösung*, Iranian diplomats offered hundreds of Iranian passports to European Jews in order to facilitate their exodus, especially from Poland (there continues to be a sizeable Polish-Jewish minority in Iran to this date). After the abdication of Reza Shah in favour of his son, which was forced upon him by the Allied Forces, the Iranian monarchy continued with pro-Jewish policies. For instance, the so-called Iranian Schindler, Abdol-Hassan Sardari, who was in charge of the Iranian consular office

when Paris was under Nazi occupation in 1942, facilitated the transfer of many European Jews to Iran – an amazingly courageous act under the circumstances of Nazi-dominated Europe. This support for European Jews was the topic of a series sponsored by the Iranian state TV in 2007. It is based on the story of Sardari and traces the life of an Iranian student played by Shahab Hosseini, who also stars in the Oscar-winning movie *A Separation*, directed by Asghar Farhadi. Hosseini plays the role of an Iranian student who travels to Nazi-occupied Paris, where he falls in love with a French Jewish woman.

Stars of David are publicly displayed in Tehran, of course, for instance on the walls and signs of Beheshtieh Jewish cemetery, where dozens of Holocaust victims are buried.³ In Tehran today, there are 18 synagogues, several kosher butchers, Jewish schools, and a Jewish hospital. Comparable conditions exist in other cities with a sizeable Jewish community. The situation for all minorities in Iran is far from perfect, but the Islamic Republic guarantees the political representation of the Jewish community in the Iranian parliament, a political right that is codified in the Iranian constitution. The Jewish communities of Tehran, Shiraz, Isfahan, Boroujerd and Yazd continue to be the largest in western Asia outside of Israel. In fact, the 30,000–60,000 Iranian Jews can party harder than the country's majority Muslim population, given that they're exempt from prohibitions on alcohol and attending mixed gender parties. Of course, there are forms of discrimination as there are for other minorities in the Islamic Republic, but my point is that the Jewish presence in Iranian culture has been undeniably central.

My emphasis on the Iranian–Jewish dialectic in this foreword has a dual purpose. First, it is meant to add a minor complementary note to the main focus of the book, i.e., Iranian–Palestinian relations. The second reason is directed towards the future: This dual legacy of Palestinian and Jewish affinity that is embedded in Iranian culture puts the country in an enviable position to contribute to solving the conundrum of Israeli–Palestinian relations in general and the creation of a Palestinian state in particular. As Alavi demonstrates: Many voices in Iran are in favour of a less raucous approach towards the question of Palestine. The point is that the discourse about Palestine fluctuates in Iranian politics, but the support continues to be strong at the time of writing.

The question of Palestine, then, and the Iranian role in it continues to be one of the most important factors in the contemporary international politics of West Asia and North Africa. This was my point when the author came into my office at SOAS in search of a good PhD topic – for despite this centrality and the propaganda being cultivated by the well-oiled media machine allied to the right wing in Israel, there is no systematic analysis of Iranian–Palestinian relations out there.⁴ As a fluent speaker of four regional languages including Arabic, I couldn't think of anyone better placed to pursue this research. With this book, Alavi pioneers an important start to a new debate about Iranian–Palestinian relations, which is necessary both in terms of scholarship and the wider public discourse. All of these factors taken together make this study a central and overwhelmingly acute one.

Arshin Adib-Moghaddam

London and Cambridge, December 2018

Notes

- 1 “Arafat in Iran, Reports Khomeini Pledges Aid for Victory over Israel”, *New York Times*, 19 February 1979. Available at www.nytimes.com/1979/02/19/archives/arafat-in-iran-reports-khomeini-pledges-aid-for-victory-over-israel.html (Accessed 28 December 2018).
- 2 “Netanyahu’s speech at AIPAC”, *The Times of Israel*, 6 March 2012. Available at www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahus-speech-at-aipac-full-text/ (Accessed 27 December 2018).
- 3 See further www.beheshtieh.com/behesthieh.html (Accessed 28 December 2018).
- 4 Two of my other PhDs have tackled sensitive topics in this field: Tahani Mustafa has written a superb critique of security sector reform in the occupied territories, and Jonathan Leslie has covered Iranian-Israeli relations from an empirically comprehensive and theoretically sophisticated perspective.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is an honour to have the opportunity to begin with extending my immeasurable gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, without whom this research would not have been possible. I will be forever wholeheartedly thankful to my father, Seyed Khaled, for all his support. Words are unable to express my gratitude. I owe special thanks to Dr. Hussein Royvaran and his colleague Mr. Mohammad Amaanollah-zad for supporting me in Iran to conduct valuable interviews. I would like to thank the Palestinian delegates in Tehran, Mr. Nasser Abu Sharif and Mr. Khaled Al-Qadoumi, for their time and words.

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INTRODUCTION

The 1979 Islamic revolution dramatically transformed Iran's foreign policy behaviour. This transformation included a change of official Iranian attitudes towards Palestine – from antagonism to cordial relations, at least on the surface. This Iranian-Palestinian relationship has become a vital part of the political puzzle in the Middle East. Yet there is a lack of research on the dynamics of contemporary political relations between Iran and Palestine. This book attempts to fill a lacuna in existing academic literature and increase the understanding of relations between Iran and Palestine. The principal question of this book focuses on the roots of Iranian-Palestinian relations and aims to answer the question of why the Islamic Republic of Iran has pursued pro-Palestinian policies since the Islamic revolution in 1979. What is the rationale behind Iran's attitude towards Palestine? How does revolutionary Iran view the Palestinian question? And how have Iranian-Palestinian relations developed within the Islamic Republic?

My main argument is that Iranian-Palestinian relations are guided by ideational and normative structures rather than solely by the materialist ones. Although I do not deny the significance of material factors in helping guide Iran's policies towards the Palestinian question, my assessment is that material factors are themselves created by a self-imposed social context. In other words, I believe that interests are constituted by ideas and belief systems. As such, I argue that the Islamic revolutionary identity of Iran plays a central role in shaping Iranian attitudes towards Palestine, as well as helping define the Islamic Republic's national interests.

Since my main concern is the nature of Iran-Palestine relations after 1979, this book will not focus on a discussion of Iran's broader foreign policy, which will, however, be referred to in order to enhance my argument and within the framework of primary research questions. The book will also touch upon Iran's engagement with the Palestinian cause in the pre-revolutionary era in the literature review. This is

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done not in order to compare two historical periods but purely in order to analyse and present the roots of Iranian involvement in the Palestine question.

This book begins by evaluating the history of Iranian engagement with the Palestinian issue since its beginning in 1948 and identify the roots of Iran's behaviour towards Palestine, even before the establishment of Israel in 1948. I introduce my main argument, which is divided into two parts. First, I emphasise the pan-Islamic rhetoric behind Iran's foreign policies. Second, I highlight the significance of material factors in constituting Iran's pro-Palestinian policy. A preliminary assessment of the roots of Iranian-Palestinian relations is offered in the conclusion. The outline of the research plan, the methodological framework, and the fieldwork plan is offered in the final section.

Islamic agenda

Shortly after the triumph of the revolution in 1979, the state designated itself an "Islamic Republic" in order to represent a new identity at the regional and global levels. This could imply that Iran's revolutionary state is rhetorically destined to bear some responsibility for advocating the Islamic agenda, promoting the idea of "Islamic unity", and lending support to fellow Muslims internationally, particularly those who need protection and the "oppressed". As Ayatollah Khomeini stated, "We support the oppressed. We support whoever is oppressed wherever they may be, and the Palestinians are oppressed, the Israelis oppress them. For this reason, we support them".¹ The new revolutionary constitution embedded Islamic principles and institutionalised Islamic values within its context. According to Ali Akbar Alikhani, the Islamic principles that stem from the Quran, the Prophet Mohammad's way of life (*sunnah*), and narrated traditions (*ahadith*), deemed authentic by the Shia, served as the basis of the Islamic Republic's constitution.² The constitution emphasises the necessity of supporting the rights of all Muslims and directing Iran's foreign policy towards promoting friendship amongst Muslim countries.³ The Quran contains a number of verses that clearly recommend Muslims to unite and act in harmony to support their fellow Muslims and to protect the "oppressed".⁴ To that end, Ayatollah Khomeini's⁵ vision of *mustazafan* versus *mustakberan* (oppressed versus oppressor) created a central structure for revolutionary Iran's foreign policy. According to Adib-Moghaddam, the ideal of the millenarian conflict between oppressed and oppressor was a fundamental part of Iran's presentation of its revolutionary creed and its new character as an Islamic state.⁶ From a comparable point of view, Asghar Eftekhary argues that the Islamic revolution – in accordance with Khomeini's Islamic theory – was to act as the supporter of the oppressed and to rise up against all world oppressors.⁷

We are permitted to ask what the status of Palestine is in Iran's Islamic and revolutionary rhetoric. It is clear that Palestine occupies an especially lofty status in the Islamic world, given that its land contains Islamic Muslim's first *Qibla* (direction of prayer), the Mosque of al-Aqsa, and that it has been "occupied" by the Zionist state of Israel. Certainly, this is the view held by Iran, with Ahmed El-Dajani observing

that “Iran and the Arab nation fall within the Islamic dominion; Israel invaded Palestine which occupies an important place in the Islamic dominion”.⁸ For the Islamic revolution, Palestine represented the “oppressed” of the world. Ayatollah Khomeini lent a special significance to the Palestinian question in his speeches and revolutionary rhetoric since the beginning of his movement. In a statement in December 1978, Khomeini said that:

we have always spoken of Israel and the fact that it is a usurper. Our intention has always been to stand by our Palestinian brothers, and whenever we gain power, we will join them in defending their rights like brothers standing as equals in the same line of battle as them. Beit ul-Moqaddas must be returned to the Muslims, the Israelis are usurpers.⁹

According to Khomeini, Israel had occupied the distinctly Muslim land of Palestine, and the Shah had acted in ways that threatened the Islamic identity of Iran – notably by recognising the occupation of Palestine and supporting the Zionist regime.¹⁰ There is a consensus amongst the leaders of various factions of the Islamic revolution that Iran’s support of Palestine cannot be compromised due to its importance to the Islamic world and its synonymity with the identity of the Islamic revolution.¹¹ After the triumph of the revolution, Iran’s leaders desired to represent their state as the *Umm al-Qura* (The Mother of the Cities in Islamic Terms),¹² and this ideological tendency demanded that Iran focus its attention on the most vital challenge facing the Muslim world: the question of Palestine.

One tends to agree with Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp’s point of view that “[n]o cause has greater symbolic appeal in the Islamic world than the plight of the Palestinians. Iranian leaders see it as an Islamic issue, giving them the right to be involved”.¹³ In fact, support for Palestine has become a primary source of legitimacy for Iran’s Islamic revolutionary state. Iran’s revolutionary leaders had championed the Palestinian cause in their rhetoric prior to the Iranian revolution and continue to emphasise its importance up until the contemporary period. According to Chubin and Tripp, the Islamic Republic deems it a duty to pursue a pro-Palestinian policy because

Iran as the Islamic republic claiming to be a role-model, could scarcely be indifferent to Islamic issues. Recognition of Israel, for example, was unthinkable. The Islamic republic would have to change its name if it wanted to do such a thing. It cannot be a Muslim community and concede such an injustice.¹⁴

According to Adib-Moghaddam, the Islamic Republic set a foundation for future foreign policy given that most ideological elements of the Islamic revolution could agree upon its core principles. Moreover, Adib-Moghaddam argues:

Pro-Palestinian sentiments, anti-Zionism and anti-Imperialism, Islamic communitarianism, third-worldism, and cultural and political independence [all]

4 Introduction

functioned as the ideational point of fixation reconstituting the Iranian self during the revolutionary process of the 1960s and 1970s and are not easy to discard.¹⁵

According to Hossein Salimi, support for Islamic movements and opposing the illegitimacy of Israel are both common elements of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy.¹⁶ It is true to argue, as Adib-Moghaddam does, that there is a connecting junction of "Iran's foreign policy culture" where different factions within the Islamic revolution could reach consensus due to their shared interests and values.¹⁷ From my point of view, Palestine has been at the heart of Iran's grand-strategic preferences because it has a special place within the revolutionary Islamic identity.

Material factors

To argue that the Islamic identity of revolutionary Iran is the primary force behind Iran's support of Palestinian movements is not an attempt to deny the importance of material factors and the Islamic Republic's national interests in influencing its support of the Palestinians. The "material" reality of Iranian-Palestinian relations as they have emerged out of ideational preferences has been institutionalised as norms that permeate the "national interest" of the Iranian state, but they have also derived from the preferences of prominent stakeholders within Iran's powerful civil society.

The Islamic Republic likely views its pro-Palestinian approach as a useful tool serving its regional interests, allowing it to play a key role in the Islamic world. As such, support for Sunni-Arab Palestine could provide the Islamic Republic with an entry point to gain influence in the Islamic world and within Sunni-Arab neighbouring countries in particular.

The Islamic Republic is currently the only predominantly Shia state with Islamic-universalist aspirations, and hence it does not wish to be isolated within a majority of Sunni-Arab states. In order to avoid potential isolation, Iran needs to appeal to the broader Islamic world as a way of serving its Islamic-universalist objectives, as advocated throughout the revolution by the country's leaders. It was logical for the Islamic Republic to explicitly define itself as the supporter of the *mostazafan* in order to carry its voice to the rest of the Islamic world, particularly to its neighbours. According to Mahmood Sariohghalam, "[B]y warmly embracing the Palestinian cause in its domestic and foreign policy, Iran wanted to demonstrate its readiness for cooperation with the surrounding Arab states".¹⁸ Chubin and Tripp agree that the Islamic Republic "did not want to limit its potential constituency to the Shi'ite world, a minority in Islam, instead, it pursued its revolutionary objective of Islamic universalism, pitting a populist Islam of the oppressed against the oppressor".¹⁹

Chubin and Tripp make a valid point that the Islamic revolutionary rhetoric of "carrying the banner of Islam, supporting oppressed against oppressors, anti-imperialist tendency and its desire to be a leading country in the Islamic world" was seen as a pellucid challenge by Iran's neighbouring Arab Sunni states, particularly Saudi Arabia who sees its own authority deriving from its role as the "protector" of

the Holy Places of Mecca and Medina.²⁰ As such, Tehran has entered a competition for regional influence that requires it to expand its influence to the wider Islamic world. In accordance with its Islamic identity and grand-strategic ideology, it has been in the Islamic Republic's regional interest to lead an "Islamic campaign" against imperialism, Zionism, and hegemonic powers. As Manouchehr Mohammadi argues:

Under the title of its anti-imperialist campaign and support for the oppressed inspired by the teaching of Islam and as it is stipulated within its constitution, the Islamic republic of Iran has the potential and actually has in its possession the required mechanism to lead such a campaign against the present hegemonic system.²¹

According to Suzanne Maloney, "Iran believes it has the historical, cultural, even moral weight to powerfully shape the region".²² In other words, Iran's aspirations of leading its ideological campaign required Tehran to expand its influence beyond its borders and confront pro-Western regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia by reaching out to the Sunni-Arab majority of the region. The Islamic Republic's leadership had been aware of the significance of the Palestinian issue since its beginning and have always been staunch believers that championing the Palestinian cause could facilitate the spread of Iranian revolutionary influence across the region, paving the way for its "spiritual hegemony" over Muslim populations. Consequently, Iran's position on Palestine could send a message to the Sunni world that Iran's revolutionary agenda was not confined to Shia communities. The Islamic Republic's leadership has therefore realised that it could foster its version of "Islamic universalism" in the Arab and Sunni worlds by maintaining a pro-Palestinian stance. This stance would allow Tehran to Islamise the Palestinian cause and transform it from being an Arab issue to one that was Muslim and therefore of immediate concern to Iran. Having confronted the Pan-Arab Baathist regime in Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq war on the one hand and Yasser Arafat's pro-Saddam and pro-Western position on the other, the Iranian leadership had realised that supporting explicitly Islamic movements (such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad) in Palestine could both prevent Saddam from using the Palestinian cause as a means to mobilise the Arab street against Iran, and weaken Arafat's pro-Western position.

Iran's pro-Palestinian stance can also help illuminate the salience of its pan-Islamic outlook domestically and how the state uses this stance to enhance the legitimacy of its revolutionary status among the local population, particularly amongst the rather more politically radical strata of society. Moreover, oppositional factions within the Islamic Republic have realised that by emphasising their pro-Palestinian credentials, they are better able to represent themselves as the "supporters of the revolutionary principles" domestically and therefore gain more support amongst clerics and members of the Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) for their political campaigns. As Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri argue, "Ahmadinejad's followers are more religious, traditional and idealistic in terms of the lofty goals of the Islamic revolution".²³ Therefore it is not difficult to realise that Ahmadinejad's

continued reference to Palestine was part of his government strategy to build “on his populist rhetoric to advance his neoconservative-inspired hard line at home and abroad”.²⁴ In regard to advancing a neoconservative-inspired hard-line policy abroad, Ehteshami and Zweiri clarify:

Ahmadinejad’s support for the Palestinian cause places Iran in the Arab heart-land, an area Iran had not fully accessed in the past. In a region that requires leadership and a solution to the conflict in Palestine Ahmadinejad, through his invocations of justice and connections with Palestinian groups, was creating a role for himself though at the expense of other Arab leaders who had failed to address the Palestine issue.²⁵

In sum, one could argue that the Islamic Republic’s support for Sunni-Arab Palestine could counter potential criticism amongst the Arab Sunni states that the Islamic Republic is pursuing only “Shia-Persian” interests and underline its self-professed status as the champion of Islamic universalism.

A number of scholars argue that Iran’s position towards the Palestinian issue stem from its ideological tendencies and do not conflict with the “pragmatic interests of the state”.²⁶ To this end, my perception is that Iran’s pro-Palestinian position stems from its Islamic identity while going hand in hand with the Islamic Republic’s national interests. Thus, Revolutionary Iran has been keen to develop and institutionalise its relations with Palestinian factions. Despite factional differences in Iranian politics, we can discern a common stance on the Palestinian issue, as well as patterns of facilitating close relations with Palestinian factions that have closer ideological positions to the Islamic Republic.

An overview of chapters

This study offers a discursive interpretation of Iranian solidarity towards the Palestinian cause in the post-revolutionary era. Two key questions about Iranian-Palestinian relations are explored in detail throughout the book. First, what are the roots of Iranian-Palestinian relations, and how is the Palestinian question viewed by the Iranian authorities post-1979? Second, how were Iranian-Palestinian relations institutionalised and developed after the triumph of the 1979 revolution? The questions posed here form the backbone of this study and the key to understanding Iran’s approach towards the Arab world. In my quest for the answers, I looked into Iranian governmental publications, Farsi and Arabic sources, and I also conducted interviews with officials and delegates of Palestinian groups such as Islamic Jihad and Hamas in Tehran. I have translated these interviews from Arabic and Farsi into English for the purpose of this book.

This study begins with a chapter contextualising pre-revolutionary Iranian activists’ solidarity with the Palestinians. Chapter 2 examines the institutionalisation of Iran’s pro-Palestinian, anti-Zionism and -Ummah-centric ideas during the post-revolutionary era, exploring Iran’s relation with the PLO before and after

the Iran-Iraq war. Chapter 3 explores the impact of the Islamic revolution on the Palestinian streets, focusing on Fathi Shaqaqi, the founder of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Chapter 4 explores the Islamic Republic's relations with Hamas since its establishment by Sheikh Ahmad Yassin. Chapter 5 follows the same path but offers a discussion of changes and continuities in the post-Arab Spring era. This final chapter explores the impact of the Syrian crisis on Iran's relations with Hamas and traces Iran's reactions towards the 2012 and 2014 wars in the Gaza Strip as litmus tests for the Islamic Republic's commitment towards the Palestinian cause. Chapter 6 concludes the study.

Notes

- 1 Rouhollah. *Felestin az Didgahe Emam Khomeini* [Palestine from Viewpoint of Imam Khomeini], Tehran: Moaseseh Nashr va Athaar-e Emam Khomeini, 1382 [2003], p. 112.
- 2 Ali Akbar Alikhani, "Iran's Religious Fundaments and Principles in Interaction with the International System", in *Iran and the International System*, edited by Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Reza Molavi, London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 3–4.
- 3 Article 152 of Iran's constitution states that "[t]he foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based upon the rejection of all forms of domination, both the exertion of it and submission to it, the preservation of the independence of the country in all respects and its territorial integrity, the defence of the rights of all Muslims, non-alignment with respect to the hegemonic superpowers, and the maintenance of mutually peaceful relations with all non-belligerent States". Article 11 demonstrates that in accordance with the sacred verse of the Quran ("This your community is a single community, and I am your Lord, so worship Me" [21:92]), all Muslims form a single nation, and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has the duty of formulating its general policies with a view to cultivating the friendship and unity of all Muslim peoples, and it must constantly strive to bring about the political, economic and cultural unity of the Islamic world. Available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/constitution-of-the-islamic-republic> [Accessed 8 April 2019].
- 4 Chapter 4, verse 75 of the Quran states: "what is [the matter] with you that you fight not in the cause of Allah and [for] the oppressed among men, women, and children who say, 'Our Lord, take us out of this city of oppressive people and appoint for us from Yourself a protector and appoint for us from yourself a helper?'" Chapter 49, verse 10 states that "[t]he believers are but brothers, so make settlement between your brothers. And fear God that you may receive mercy". Available at <http://quran.com> [Accessed 8 April 2019].
- 5 Ayatollah Ruouhullah Khomeini was the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the first leader of the 1979 Revolution in Iran. For more information on Khomeini, see: <http://en.imam-khomeini.ir> [Accessed 8 April 2019].
- 6 Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic*, London: Hurst Publishers, 2005, p. 56. Moreover, from Suzanne Maloney's point of view, Ali Shariati depicted a worldwide struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor and argued that the true Islam was vested in the struggle of the oppressed. See Suzanne Maloney, "Identity and Change in Iran's Foreign Policy", in *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, edited by Shibley Telhami et al., Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002, p. 99.
- 7 Asghar Eftekhary, "Peace and Security in the International System", in *Iran and the International System*, p. 79.
- 8 Ahmad Sudki El-Dajani, "The Palestine Question in Arab-Iranian Relations", in *Arab-Iranian Relations: Present Trends and Future Prospects*, edited by Khair el-Din Hasseb, Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1998, p. 352.
- 9 Rouhollah Khomeini, *Felestin az Didgahe Emam Khomeini* [Palestine from Viewpoint of Imam Khomeini], Tehran: Moaseseh Nashr va Athaar-e Emam Khomeini, 1382 [2003], pp. 109–110.

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- 10 Ibid., p. 41. Ayatollah Khomeini stated in May 1979 that “[b]ecause Israel has occupied an Islamic land and committed crimes, the Shah’s policy of having relations with Israel and supporting its regime was against Islamic interests and therefore the interests of all Muslims”.
- 11 Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, stated that “[r]esisting against the occupiers of the Land of Palestine is not a responsibility of the Palestinians alone but all the Islamic and Arabic states”. Ayatollah Khamenei, quoted in Yusuf Mohammad Bajouq, *Īrān-Lubnān: ‘arḍ tawthīqī li-abraz al-mawāqif al-īrānīyah ḥiyāl Lubnān min ‘ām 1977–1993* [The Presentation of Documentary Evidence of Iran’s Most Prominent Positions About Lebanon 1977–1993], Beirut, 1995, p. 55. In a statement, Hashemi Rafsanjani urged both Shia and Sunnis to unite and struggle against the enemy of Islam, the Israeli state (Ibid., p. 86). Mehdi Karubi, in a similar statement, congratulated the Lebanese people for their struggle against Israel and declared his hopes that one day all would be free to pray at the scene of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Palestine (Ibid., pp. 118–119).
- 12 Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini, Iran Under His Successors*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 134. According to the theory of the “Mother of the Cities”, the defence of the Islamic Umma as a unified community is essentially engrained in the prestige of the Mother of the Cities.
- 13 Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 57.
- 14 Ibid., p. 48. Ayatollah Jannati is a prominent conservative Shia cleric and a key figure in the Guardian Council of the Islamic Republic.
- 15 Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics*, pp. 71–72.
- 16 Hossien Salimi, “Foreign Policy as Social Construction”, in *Iran and the International System*, p. 147.
- 17 Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics*, p. 72. Adib-Moghaddam clarifies that seven institutions are involved in processing Iran’s foreign policy, including the Foreign Ministry, the Office of the Supreme Leader, the Head of the Expediency Council, the Presidential Office, Parliament, the Strategic Council for Foreign Relations and the Supreme National Security Council. These institutions follow different agendas. However, there is a culturally constituted consensus about the country’s role in global affairs that functions as the protector of identity, stands for a net of shared ideas, norms and institutions that provides a framework in which the foreign policy elites can conduct their policies.
- 18 Mahmood Sariolghalam, “Conceptual Sources of Post-Revolutionary Iranian Behaviour Toward the Arab World”, in *Iran and the Arab World*, edited by Hooshang Amirahmadi and Nader Entessar, London: Macmillan Press, 1993, p. 23.
- 19 Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran-Saudi Arabia*, 1996, p. 15. Available at <https://library.soas.ac.uk/Record/484776>.
- 20 Ibid., p. 4.
- 21 Manouchehr Mohammadi, “Peace and Security in the International System”, in *Iran and the International System*, p. 82.
- 22 Suzanne Maloney, “Identity and Change in Iran’s Foreign Policy”, p. 97.
- 23 Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of Its Neoconservatives: The Politics of Tehran’s Silent Revolution*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2007, p. 65.
- 24 Ibid., p. 105.
- 25 Ibid., p. 108.
- 26 Efraim Karsh and P.R. Kummaraswamy, *Islamic Attitude to Israel*, London: Routledge, 2008, p. 111.

1

IRAN'S PRE-REVOLUTIONARY OPPOSITION AND THE PALESTINE CAUSE

At this stage it is essential to provide context for how Iranian opposition groups in the pre-revolutionary era engaged with the Palestinian cause. This chapter does not provide an exhaustive overview of secondary literature examining the role of left-wing forces in Iran from the early 1960s up to the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran or of their differences and strategies in toppling the Shah's regime. Instead, this chapter focuses on the attitudes of Iranian dissidents towards Palestine up until the 1979 Islamic revolution. As this chapter comprises the first narrative of the historical development of relations between Iranian opposition groups and the Palestinian cause, it may appear more descriptive than analytical. However, my discovery, selection, translation and evaluation of dispersed sources, as well as the presentation of this data within a relevant framework alongside a comprehensive assessment, in itself presents a major analytical challenge to understand the Iranian-Palestinian dialectic.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section looks into historical relations between left-wing Iranian guerrilla forces – such as the People's Mojahedin of Iran [Mojahedin e Khalq] (MKO), the Iranian People's Faday'an and the Palestine Group, as well as organised student opposition to the Shah, such as the Confederation of Iranian Students National Union (CISNU) – and Palestine. The second section analyses the attitude of some of the most prominent revolutionary and distinguished Muslim figures, such as Ayatollah Kashani, Navab Safavi, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleqani, Mustafa Chamran, Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Mortaza Mottahari and others, towards the Palestinian question. In order to better understand the origin of relations between pre-revolutionary Iranians and the Palestinian cause, it is necessary to gain an understanding of these figures' political ideas and activities. I conclude the chapter with an assessment of this history and emphasise that Iran's pre-revolutionary oppositions' sociopolitical tendencies – which included stances of anti-imperialism, anti-monarchy, anti-Zionism and, with

regard to Islamic figures, pro-Muslim preferences – guided their attitudes towards the Palestinian cause. In this account, I assess that material factors played a secondary role in determining the relationship between these groups and the Palestinian cause.

The Iranian pre-revolutionary “left-wing” guerrilla movements and Palestine (1963–1979)

After the overthrow of Iran’s democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq in the 1953 coup and the reinstatement of the Shah’s absolute monarchy, not least due to American and British intelligence support, Iranian dissidents began to face suppression and systematic coercion. Due to coercion and political closeness, the period between 1953 and 1963 can be characterised as an era in which opposition groups such as the Tudeh party and the Mossadeqist National Front pursued less confrontational policies against the dictatorship of the Shah.¹ Some historians and academics agree that the 1963 popular uprising under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini was a turning point, becoming a catalyst for emerging “left-wing” guerrilla movements in Iran. From Abrahamian’s point of view, the roots of the guerrilla movements date back to the summer of 1963, when the Shah’s regime fiercely dealt with peaceful protests organised by the opposition.² The brutal suppression during 1963 coincided with increasing activities by revolutionary and guerrilla movements in Third World countries, notably in Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam and Palestine. Influenced and inspired by guerrilla movements in other Third World countries, it was natural that younger members of traditional oppositional organisations such as the Tudeh and the National Front came to the conclusion that peaceful actions against the Shah’s regime was a dead end and that guerrilla conflict represented a better alternative. Of the emerging guerrilla groups, Abrahamian categorises them into two groups as being more active and organised: the *Sazman-i Cherik-ha-yi Feda-i Khalq-i Iran* (Guerrilla Freedom Fighters of the Iranian People), known as the Marxist Faday’an; and the *Sazman-i Mujahidin-i Khalq-i Iran* (Organisation of the Freedom Fighters of the Iranian People), generally referred to as the Islamic Mojahedin.³

Post-1963, younger members of the Tudeh party and the Marxist contingent of the National Front were left frustrated by the perceived failure of the Tudeh party to confront the Pahlavi regime. Many were inspired by anti-imperialist movements across the Third World and – critical of pro-Soviet Tudeh policies – began to organise independent groups. The Fadayi, according to Abrahamian, adopted its name in 1971, and came into existence through the merging of three politically active groups. The first group was founded during 1963–1964 by Ali Akbar Safa-i Farahani, Mohammad Ashtiyani, Abbas Sourki and Bezhan Jazani, all of them active members of the Tudeh Party’s Youth Organisation.⁴ The second group was led by Masoud Ahmadzadeh, who bore religious and pro-Marxist sociopolitical tendencies. The third group was led by Ashraf Dehqani.⁵ Safa-i Farahani wrote a handbook titled *Ancheh Yek Inqelabi Bayad Bedanad* (What a Revolutionary Must Know),⁶ in which he drew up the ideological composition of the Faday’an. In his

handbook, Safa-i Farahani castigated the Shah's regime for being dependent on "global imperialism", criticising the Pahlavi regime's pro-American foreign policy and particularly its "collaboration" with Israel against Arab neighbours such as Egypt, which was causing other political conflicts in South Yemen, Iraq and Syria. His handbook highlighted the importance of supporting international anti-imperialist movements as a vital part of the Faday'an's ideological struggle against the Shah's pro-Western regime.⁷

According to Sepehr Zabih, the Faday'an was ideologically influenced by Marxism-Leninism and pursued it as their official ideology. In particular, Latin American revolutionary writings became attractive to the Faday'an, and its members were inspired heavily by the Cuban Revolution and "anti-Imperialism guerrilla movements" throughout the Third World.⁸ The Cuban Revolution, the Tupamaros in Uruguay, and the growth of guerrilla warfare in Palestine and Vietnam greatly influenced their leadership.⁹ In 1967, a few years after the foundation of Jazani's group, most of its leadership were arrested by SAVAK (Sāzemān-e Ettelā'āt va Amniyat-e Keshvar, literally Organization of National Intelligence and Security of the Nation). Two prominent members, Safa-i Farahani and Ashtiyani, escaped to Lebanon, joining their Palestinian counterparts in Fatah and receiving guerrilla training for two years. Upon their return to Iran in 1969, they continued their struggle alongside their fellow guerrillas.¹⁰ Safa-i Farahani and Ashtiyani managed to cross the border into Iraq by using forged documents. Although SAVAK deported two Iraqi Marxist dissidents to Baghdad as a goodwill gesture,¹¹ the Iranian foreign office failed to persuade its Iraqi counterparts to extradite the Faday'an.

Safa-i Farahani and Ashtiyani requested permission from the Iraqi authorities to cross the border in order to join up with their fellow freedom fighters in Palestine. After spending a month in Iraqi jails, they were allowed to cross into Syria. Initially interrogated in Damascus, they were subsequently allowed to cross the border into Jordan so long as they managed to convince the Syrians that they would fight alongside Palestinian guerrillas. After meeting and engaging in an ideological discourse with Fatah delegates on the Jordanian border, they were accepted and sent to Palestinian camps in Jordan. Safa-i Farahani received the nickname Abu-Abbas from his Palestinian comrades and became one of the commanders of the Palestinian camp, while Ashtiyani was appointed as the keyholder of the camp's warehouse. Both received support and training until they decided to return to Iran in winter 1969 in an effort to continue their anti-imperialist struggle at home.¹² Upon their return, the military training of these two proved invaluable in improving the guerrilla warfare capabilities of the Faday'an. Meanwhile, a group of their fellow fighters gathered in northern Iran preparing for an armed struggle against the monarchy. This culminated in an open battle on the 8th of February 1971, known as the Siyahkal insurgency, under the command of Safa-i Farahani. Most of the Faday'an fighters were either killed in the Siyahkal battle or arrested and subsequently executed.¹³

According to Abrahamian, Safa-i Farahani was captured and tortured to death. He died after refusing to reveal information about other members of the Faday'an.¹⁴

After the failed Siyahkal insurgency, the Pahlavi state mounted a massive propaganda war against the guerrillas, accusing them of being “tools of the PLO”, Baghdad and Arab imperialism.¹⁵

The connection between the Faday'an guerrillas and Palestinian fighters was not monopolised by the Faday'an's leadership, however. Iraj Sepehri, a sympathiser and later low-ranking member of the Faday'an, travelled across the Iran-Iraq border alone in order to join up with Ahmad Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command in autumn 1971. In a memoir written by Sepehri, published by the Faday'an in 1977, he described his fascination and attraction to the Palestinian cause, arguing that the Palestinians were in fact fighting the same enemy as he was: “global Zionism” and international imperialism. He strongly believed that there was a close link between the Shah's regime and the state of Israel's oppression of the people of Palestine. According to the memoir, Sepehri fought alongside the Palestinians during a number of guerrilla insurgencies in the Golan Heights, alongside Ahmad Jibril's group in 1972. During his time in the Golan, Sepehri used the name Mohammad Abdul-Qader and was later nicknamed Abu-Saeed Irani by his Palestinian comrades.¹⁶

Abrahamian clarifies that, although the Faday'an suffered setbacks after Siyahkal, its new members continued carrying out a number of armed operations mainly targeting the Iran-American Society, embassies of the United Kingdom, Oman and the United States, and the Iranian police headquarters in Tehran.¹⁷ In examining the Faday'an's pamphlets and handbooks such as the ones mentioned here, one can discern that the group had been eager to underline their connections with the Palestinian fighters, as well as their sympathies with the Third World guerrilla movements throughout their armed struggle against the Shah's regime. In all, according to Houshang Chehabi, about 30 Faday'an were trained at camps in Jordan (until 1970), Lebanon and Syria.¹⁸

Another leftist guerrilla movement that emerged during the 1960s to early 1970s was the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MKO), who proclaimed to be both anti-monarchy and anti-imperialist. Abrahamian and Zabih agree that the roots of the Mojahedin can be traced back to the religious wing of the National Front, particularly the *Nehzat-i Azadi Iran* (Liberation Movement of Iran).¹⁹ The Liberation Movement of Iran (LMI) was established in 1961 by Mehdi Bazargan and Ayatollah Taleqani, two loyal supporters of Mossadeq. The movement was well-known for its radical anti-imperialist stance.²⁰ According to Abrahamian, the 1963 uprising, together with the revolutions in Algeria, Cuba and Vietnam, had radicalised a group of younger members of the LMI. This prompted them to form a small discussion group that became the nucleus of the Mojahedin.²¹

In the late 1960s, the Mojahedin's study group set up a central committee and an ideological team, tasking them with producing the organisation's theological pamphlets.²² In the early days, the Mojahedin focused its efforts mainly at targeted “imperialism”, especially what it regarded as American imperialism, and viewed the Shah's monarchical regime as being complicit. In condemning U.S. imperialism and its “global collaborators”, the Mojahedin publicly began to denounce the Pahlavi's

regime for allying with the West, Israel and other reactionary regimes such as those of South Africa and South Vietnam. For the Mojahedin, these regimes had allied themselves against the Third World, including Arab nations and the Vietnamese liberation movement.²³ According to Abrahamian, the ideology of the Mojahedin combined Islam with Marxism.²⁴ The group's leadership attempted to avoid being directly associated with Marxism and instead painted itself as being more religiously inclined. Yet the Mojahedin's main aim was to highlight commonalities between Islam and Marxism through the shared language of anti-imperialism. Indeed, the Mojahedin were certainly aware that denying the validity or importance of religion in a society where the masses were religious would send the message that the group was out of touch and subsequently make it more difficult for them to mobilise them against the pro-Western Shah's regime.²⁵

As the Mojahedin began their guerrilla war against the Shah's regime, its leadership established contacts with the PLO, particularly Fatah, which in addition to being militarily capable was closer ideologically to the Mojahedin.²⁶ The leadership of the Mojahedin were already familiar with Fatah's ideological tendencies through listening to their radio channel, al-Asefah. In autumn 1969, the MKO decided to establish formal contacts with Fatah by sending Hussein Ruhani to their office in Paris. Ruhani's meetings with Fatah's official, Mahmud Al-Hamshari, ended with no tangible results. The MKO central committee made another attempt at establishing relations with Fatah by sending some of its prominent members, including Rasoul Meshkinfam and Torab Haqshenas, to Qatar and Dubai in March 1970.²⁷ There they managed to meet with Fatah officials and hold ideological discussions. After clarifying their anti-Zionist stance and ideological beliefs, Fatah agreed to hold more discussions with Iranian activists in Beirut and Amman. Mojahedin delegates arrived in Jordan from Beirut in spring 1970 and held a number of meetings with Fatah official Abu-Hassan. Both sides came to an agreement and arranged for Fatah to provide guerrilla training for members of the Mojahedin.

Following their meetings, members of the central committee of the Mojahedin travelled to Jordan and Fatah training camps in Lebanon and Syria following the so-called Black September.²⁸ While the first group of the Mojahedin attended Fatah training camps in Beirut and Amman, another group of six people – including Musa Khiabani – were sent to Dubai with forged documents in order to join their fellow fighters. As the group attempted to purchase the necessary items for their journey to Beirut, they were detained on suspicion of traveling with false documents by a British officer tasked with training Dubai's local police. After spending a few months in custody, they were due to be extradited to Iran.²⁹ The Mojahedin leadership sent Meshkinfam, Ruhani and Sadat-Darbandi to Dubai with a mission to investigate the situation, and upon their arrival they received moral support from Yasser Arafat. They subsequently obtained intelligence through a Palestinian judge who happened to be a PLO sympathiser in Dubai. Using this intelligence, they boarded the same flight as the extradited members of the Mojahedin and hijacked the plane, flying it to Iraq.

In Baghdad, the group of nine Mojahedin were imprisoned and tortured by the Iraqi authorities on suspicion of being SAVAK agents. Finally, Fatah officials in Iraq intervened and convinced the Iraqis to release and permit them to join Fatah camps in Syria and Lebanon.³⁰ Meanwhile, Morteza Haqshenas, a prominent member of the Mojahedin, travelled to Iraq and requested that Ayatollah Khomeini, who was in exile in Iraq, intervene on their behalf. However, Ayatollah Khomeini refused to intervene knowing that the Iraqi regime would request his collaboration in return, which he wanted to avoid.³¹ While the group spent a week recuperating in a Baghdad hospital, they refused to accept Iraqi offers to remain in Baghdad and continue their anti-Shah activities. According to Ruhani's interview, the Mojahedin wanted to leave Iraq because they were aware that SAVAK would use their presence there in its anti-Mojahedin propaganda.³² The Mojahedin were trained in Fatah's Hassan-Sallameh camp in Jordan and then transferred to Tartus in Syria and to Sheikh Zenad in Lebanon after Black September.³³

According to Chehabi, Mojahedin trainees at the Palestinian camps were provided with Fatah identity documents and enjoyed a certain amount of immunity and freedom of movement in Lebanon.³⁴ Having improved their military capabilities in the Palestinian camps, the Mojahedin planned to return and organise guerrilla activities in Iran. However, most of its leadership and active membership were rounded up and arrested by SAVAK in August 1971.³⁵ The captured members of the Mojahedin were tried by military tribunals, all charged with hijacking the plane from Dubai, arms smuggling and being agents of the PLO. The Shah's regime also accused them of being Marxist-Islamist saboteurs.³⁶ Those members who were not in the dock, Ruhani and Haqshenas, travelled extensively in order to maintain and fortify the Mojahedin's connection with the PLO, the governments of Libya and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, and other Iranian dissidents in exile.³⁷ Meanwhile, Mohsen Nejjathoseini remained in Lebanon and acted as the Mojahedin's delegate in the Sabra refugee camp, publishing the Mojahedin's statements and maintaining its international networks.³⁸

From August 1971, the Mojahedin began to publish pamphlets that highlighted its connection with Palestinian fighters. In a statement published by the MKO in winter 1972 entitled *The Defence Statement of Martyr Said Mohsen in the Military Tribunal*, the Mojahedin explicitly stated their anti-imperialist and pro-Palestinian stance. In Said Mohsen's words:

We have started our uprising to build a world where there is no exploitation. This goal does not recognize geographical borders; it can be in Iran, Palestine, Vietnam or Africa. For us, martyrdom alongside the Palestinian freedom fighters or Vietnamese guerrillas has one meaning. To do so, we have been confronting American imperialism and the Shah's pro-capitalist puppet regime. To obtain our goal, we continue our armed struggle and are ready to sacrifice our lives.³⁹

Mohammad Hanifnezhad's statements during his trial and SAVAK interrogations were also publicised. During interrogations, he clarified the influence of the Palestinian cause on the Mojahedin's ideology:

We were mainly concentrating on studying Quran and religious books until 1967 when Israeli aggression and occupation of the Palestinian lands intensified. Hearing that how the oppressed people of Palestine became victims of international imperialism and the fact that the Shah's regime had close relations with Israel, the main enemy of the Muslims, prompted us to intensify our struggle. We decided to fight against the enemies of Islam and follow the fatwa of Islamic clerics including Ayatollah Khomeini and send our fighters to Palestine.⁴⁰

In an effort to refute the state's accusation that the Mojahedin were disguising Marxist ideology in religious garb, the group's propaganda wing attempted to underline the organisation's anti-Zionist stance as the main unifying factor between Islam and Marxism. In 1975, the Mojahedin published a handout entitled *Pasokh be Etehamate Akhir-e Regime* (Answer to the Regime's Latest Insults):

The regime is trying hard to place a wedge between Marxism and Muslims. In our view, there is only one major enemy: imperialism and its local collaborators. Of course Islam and Marxism are not identical. Nevertheless Islam is definitely closer to Marxism than to Pahlavism. Islam and Marxism teach the same lesson, for they both fight against injustice. Islam and Marxism contain the same message, for they both inspire martyrdom, struggle and self-sacrifice. Who is closer to Islam; the Vietnamese who fight American imperialism or the Shah who collaborates with Zionism and imperialism?⁴¹

As mentioned, the Mojahedin during its early stages were influenced and inspired by Third World revolutions and organisations, including the Algerian revolution and particularly the Palestinian liberation movement. The Mojahedin believed that the Palestinians were fighting at the heart of the Islamic world and in an area where most of the regimes were conservative and pro-American. The Palestinian movement also served as an inspiration to the Mojahedin because it continued to operate despite a series of political and military setbacks, such as the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and Black September. The Mojahedin were aware that the Iranian public sympathised with the Palestinian cause and consequently pushed the view that the fate of the Shah's regime was inextricably tied to that of Zionism.⁴² The Mojahedin's political cadres translated some of al-Asifah's radio programmes into Farsi and published transcripts in their pamphlets.

Two years after being re-established in 1961, following the June 1963 popular uprisings, the Mossdeqist National Front (NF) terminated its political activities inside Iran. Nevertheless, in the late 1960s, some of its more radical cadres moved

to Beirut and established close relations with Palestinian activists.⁴³ Members of the NF in Beirut declared the establishment of *Sazemanha-ye Jebhe-ye Melli-e Iran dar Khavar-e Miyaneh* (Organizations of the National Front of Iran in the Middle East).⁴⁴ From 1971, NF members published a Farsi newspaper called *Bakhtar-e Emruz*, as well as an Arabic language version titled *Iran al-Thawra*.⁴⁵ *Bakhtar-e Emruz* had been printed in the Palestinian printing houses in Lebanon during the 1970s. The main activities of these newspapers and pamphlets were to publicise relations between the Iranian opposition with other revolutionary movements, particularly Palestinian activists. The organisers of *Bakhtar-e Emruz* mainly conducted interviews with Palestinian activists, published joint statements and publicised Ayatollah Khomeini's pronouncements on the Palestinian issue. The primary printed slogan of these newspapers was *Pirooz baad Khalq-e Felestin, Pishqaravol-e Enqelab-e mardom-e Khavar-e Miyaneh* (Victory for the people of Palestine, the vanguards of the Middle Eastern peoples' revolution).⁴⁶

Further highlighting the methods of *Bakhtar-e Emruz* in publicising the connection between Iran's pre-revolutionary dissidents with the Palestinian question are some of its short statements and interviews. In an interview with *Bakhtar-e Emruz*, published in February 1976, Ahmad Jibril, secretary of the PFLP-GC (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command), praised the solid desire of the Iranian revolutionaries in resisting imperialism and highlighted the strong historical ties between the Arabs and the Iranians:

The Iranian regime, the reactionary Arab states, the Zionists and the Imperialism from any type that they might be, create one unified unit. This unified unit is our natural enemy. The relations of the Arab home-land with Iran is not just about neighbouring state to state relations. But our relations have historical, economical, cultural and even a national basis. Therefore, we can neither exclude Iran from the Arab home-land nor the Arab home-land from Iran. In Iran, there are the Arab minorities and in Iraq and the (Persian) Gulf states, there are the Persian minorities. The ethnic Kurds also create a common cultural ground between Iran and Iraq. We have a similar historical background. I mean the Islamic common history. The Iranian and the Arab people have more than ten centuries of common history.⁴⁷

In a similar interview with *Bakhtar-e Emruz*, George Habash, general secretary of the PFLP, stated:

Any victory obtained by the Iranian revolutionary movements is the triumph for all the anti-imperialistic revolutionary movements in the region. In fact, such organic relations between the revolutionary movements have mutual and positive reflections on one another. Hence, when the Iranian masses manage to shake the pillars of imperialism in that part of the region, the pillars of imperialism will be shaken in this part of the region.⁴⁸

In October 1971, in response to Black September and the conflict between the Jordanian military forces and the Palestinian fighters, the NF issued a public statement in *Bakhtar-e Emruz*:

Once again, King Hussein, the puppet of imperialism and the collaborator of Zionism has attacked the freedom fighters of Palestine. The National Front of Iran conveys the Iranian people's deep sorrow on the killing of the Palestinian fighters. We strongly believe that the weapons of those martyrs will not remain on the ground as our people will not rest until the imperialism and Zionism are removed from our region.⁴⁹

Bakhtar-e Emruz also played a crucial role as a communication channel between Palestinian activists, Iranian revolutionaries, and the Iranian public. In October 1973, a public statement from Ayatollah Khomeini calling on the people of the region to support the Palestinian cause was published:

The leaders of Islamic states should understand that this germinal source of corruption (Israel) that is implanted within the heart of the Islamic land, is not just for suppressing the Arab, but a hazard for all the people of the region. The purpose of Zionism is to dominate the rich natural resources of the Islamic countries. The only way to remove this imperialistic nightmare is through unity between the Islamic countries.⁵⁰

The NF described the reasons and the roots of Iranian dissidents' strong moral connection to the Palestinian cause:

Today, the validity of our old idea of the necessity to form strong ties between the revolutionary movements of the region is proven. The global revolutions view the Middle East as a unified organic unit. The path to the salvation of the nations within the region is through unity and not discord. The revolutionary struggle of the people of Palestine, Iran, Turkey and the [Persian] Gulf states are the prime pillars of this revolutionary union. The tie that has been formed between the revolutionary movements within the region during these years, itself proves the validity of our ideas.⁵¹

Another major activity of *Bakhtar-e Emruz* was to translate articles produced by members of other Third World revolutionary movements – particularly from Palestinian groups – and publish informative articles about these movements.

Subscribing to the ideas of anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism and holding a pro-Palestinian stance were by no means limited to larger left-wing organisations. A smaller leftist circle calling itself *Grouh-e Felestin* (Palestine Group) received public attention particularly when its members led by Shokrollah Paknezhad were arrested in December 1970 as they attempted to cross the border into Iraq in order to join

the fight alongside guerrillas in Palestine.⁵² After being arrested by SAVAK, the commander of the Palestine Group made no secret of his support for the Palestinian people and of the inspiration that the Palestinian struggle provided for the militants in Iran.⁵³ Shokrollah Paknezhad, in his defence statement titled *Akharin Defa'e Grouh-e Felestin* (Last Defence Testimony of the Palestine Group), stated:

It is vital to clarify that most people being arrested and tried in this court have no fault other than being sympathizers with the Palestinian cause. By putting us on trial, the Iranian ruling regime is denouncing the solidarity of the Iranian nation with the people of Palestine and that the whole world with the Palestinian people, a unity for emancipation of the Palestinian land from the oppression of imperialism and Zionism. Of course our solidarity with the Palestinian people is not separated from our anti-imperialistic ideas. In fact, our anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist belief has been a motivational force in our struggle against the [Shah's] regime. Imperialism has chained not only the people of Palestine but the Iranian people and the people of the whole world. Israel is a tool in the hands of imperialism, exploiting and enslaving the people of the region. We are being tried by the Shah's regime because this [the Shah's] regime is a puppet of American imperialism.⁵⁴

In addition to the leftist guerrilla movements, a number of Iranian student organisations were notably anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist and pro-Palestinian. In 1962, Iranian student organisations in Europe and the United States joined together and established the Confederation of Iranian Students National Union (CISNU). According to Afshin Matin-Asgari, the CISNU created an organisational framework for cooperation among communists, socialists, secular nationalists and pro-Islamic activists that shared common ideas about anti-imperialism, anti-monarchy and anti-Zionism.⁵⁵ Iranian students in the United States, even before merging with their fellow students in Europe, began to criticise the Shah's pro-Western foreign policy, calling on the regime to improve relations with Third World countries and respect the sentiments of Arab and Muslim nations.⁵⁶ The CISNU supported various Third World causes and advocated numerous students' anti-imperialist and national liberation movements in the Third World, particularly the Palestinian Student movement. CISNU messages and declarations conveyed strong pro-Palestinian and anti-Zionist sentiments to the Iranian public, including Iranian oppositional groups and members of the clergy.⁵⁷

From the early stages of the 1963 religious uprising onward, Ayatollah Khomeini focused on anti-Israel themes in his speeches and strongly castigated the Shah's pro-Western foreign policy. On the other hand, the CISNU intensified its anti-monarchical and anti-imperialistic activities. In 1968, the CISNU held its seventh congress in Frankfurt where it formulated and publicised its "Policy Guideline", announcing the Confederation's disposition and anti-imperialistic goals:

Unpatriotic and puppet governments, such as the present Iranian regime, cannot truly respond to the Iranian students' demands, which are directly linked

with those of the masses. Therefore the student strata, as part of the people, along with the toiling masses, is in conflict with the regime and has created a movement that is democratic, anti-imperialist, and popular. Students participating in this movement face the principal contradiction of society which is the one between the toiling masses of Iran and imperialism. Our organization proceeds from an anti-imperialist position and takes a part in the popular struggle aiming to resolve the above mentioned principal contradiction.⁵⁸

Having declared the CISNU as an organised anti-imperialist student circle, its members published a number of pamphlets entitled *Shanzdahom-e Azar*, which publicised its international activities abroad. In August 1969, CISNU secretaries Mahmud Rafi and Majid Zarbakhsh travelled to Jordan to participate in the congress of the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS). Subsequently, they visited Ayatollah Khomeini in Najaf to clarify the CISNU's anti-imperialistic and anti-Zionist positions. In their meeting, it was agreed that the CISNU would consider publishing more about the Islamic aspects of the struggle in Iran.⁵⁹

The CISNU established a close connection with GUPS and held regular joint meetings. The Confederation publicised the defence statements of the captured members of the *Grouh-e Felestin* in Iran, denouncing the military trial and lobbying for their release. The Confederation members held a number of hunger strikes throughout Europe and communicated with a number of organisations including Amnesty International. After meeting with Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, he agreed to send a letter to the Shah requesting that Shokrollah Paknezhad's life be spared. Following CISNU activities and international pressure, representatives from the International Federation of Human Rights and journalists were given permission to attend Paknezhad's trial.⁶⁰

In January 1972, over 1,000 CISNU members attended the organisation's 13th conference in Frankfurt, which publicised the Confederation's resolution. The resolution strongly denounced the role of the Shah's regime as the "gendarme of imperialism" in the region. The intervention of the Shah's regime against Palestinian and Omani revolutionary movements, alongside its anti-Arab propaganda, was also denounced and rebuked.⁶¹ CISNU solidarity with Palestinian activists was put into practice and received global attention in March 1972 during the Munich Olympics, at which Israeli athletes were taken hostage by the Black September Organisation.⁶² After this event, the German authorities declared that Palestinian organisations including GUPS were illegal and arrested their associate members for deportation to Jordan and Israel. The CISNU announced that it would defend its fellow Palestinian students and consider any attack on GUPS as an assault on the CISNU itself. Among the actions it took, the Confederation rescued Palestinian students taking refuge in the embassy of the Arab League in Bonn. To do so, CISNU activists secretly helped the Palestinians leave the embassy and go into hiding. The Iranian students took enormous risks during the mission, swapped their clothes with the Palestinians after entering the embassy, who would then depart without being recognised by the German police. Meanwhile, a number of Iranian

and German students went on hunger strikes in Bonn, and others joined them in London, demanding the release of all Palestinians arrested in Germany.⁶³

Iranian left-wing activists had reached an unwritten consensus that Iran's sociopolitical problems (under the Pahlavi's regime) were the results of larger international dynamics – namely, imperialism and Zionism. Based on these ideas, the destruction of the Pahlavi's regime demanded a stronger and more vigorous international revolutionary movement, and it was this reason that led left-wing activists towards supporting Palestine. One may, however, argue that the left-wing activists' pro-Palestinian rhetoric was primarily due to the fact that they recognised the need to obtain the use of PLO training facilities. Yet the fact that Iranian left-wing activists would so heavily criticise Zionism and glorify Third World movements and – more importantly – pro-Palestinian ideas demonstrates the importance of Palestine and Third Worldism to left-wing forces, as well as to the Iranian public. Iranian left-wing activists no doubt aimed to gain some benefit from PLO training camps, but this could be interpreted as merely a material factor guided by anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist ideas and therefore of secondary significance. It is vital to mention that anti-imperialism, anti-monarchism and anti-Zionism credentials were crucial elements that left-wing activists tried to adhere to (at least in spirit) in order to qualify as anti-Shah opposition forces. To understand and recognise the importance of the Palestinian cause within the Iranian public, particularly within the revolutionary strata, I will analyse and discuss the attitude of some of prominent Islamic figures in Iran towards the Palestine question during the pre-revolutionary period.

Iran's pre-revolutionary Islamists and the Palestinian cause

Before investigating relations between pre-revolutionary Islamic figures and the question of Palestine, I intend to show how some of the Islamic revolutionaries interpreted and navigated the Palestinian cause within their discourse. Shortly after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, Ayatollah Kashani, a popular religious figure who was well-known for his opposition to British colonialism, denounced it and emphasised his support for the Palestinians.⁶⁴ In the winter of 1947, Ayatollah Kashani issued his first statement in relation to the Palestinian question:

The foundation of the Zionist regime will be the source of corruption for Muslims in the Middle East and the whole world. The damage won't be limited to the Palestinian Arabs only, hence, this is a duty for all Muslims to do what they can to stop such tyranny against the Palestinian Muslims.⁶⁵

Ayatollah Kashani subsequently called for popular demonstrations in support of the Palestinians. In spring 1948, responding to Ayatollah Kashani's calls, around thirty thousand Iranians gathered in Sultani Mosque in Tehran (later renamed the Imam Khomeini Mosque) and protested against the establishment of the state of Israel. Ayatollah Kashani continuously called on the Iranian public to financially

support the Palestinian fighters in their struggle against the state of Israel.⁶⁶ Shortly after the Iranian government recognised Israel as a defacto state in March 1950 and opened a consulate in Jerusalem, Ayatollah Kashani denounced the decision: "The Israeli government is supported by American, German and French Jews. Fighting the Jews is compulsory. We Iranians will rebel even though the government recognized Israel and we have created an organization to fight Israeli Jews".⁶⁷ The protests led and organised by Ayatollah Kashani ended with the revocation of the recognition of Israel by Mossadeq in 1951.⁶⁸

Having encouraged the Mossadeq government to renounce Iran's recognition of the Israeli state, Ayatollah Kashani began to send sympathising messages to the Arab world. In a meeting with delegates of the Syrian Islamic Affairs Assembly, Ayatollah Kashani stated:

We have reversed the decision to recognize Israel. The previous cabinet recognized Israel, because it was a puppet of British colonialism. Now, all the Muslim and Arab states should coordinate their efforts to ensure that the land of Palestine is returned to its lawful and legitimate owners, the Palestinian people.⁶⁹

Ayatollah Kashani continued his support for anti-colonial movements across the region, such as Jamal Abdul-Nasser's attempts to nationalise the Suez Canal and the Tunisian struggle against France. Kashani saw this as part of his Islamic duty, and he tried to convey sympathetic messages to the Islamic and the Arab world while confronting the Shah's repression at home.⁷⁰

While Ayatollah Kashani helped draw Iran's attention to the Palestinian cause, a group of young Iranians established the *Jamiyat Fadaeeyan-i Islam* (Society of Devotees of Islam). This association was a Shia militant group active between 1945 and 1955. The foundation of this association was announced in 1945 with a document entitled "Religion and Revenge", written by the group's founder Navaab Safavi, which argued that Islam had come under attack and required followers to "avenge" the faith.⁷¹ The Fadaeeyan-i Islam considered the issue of supporting the Palestinian cause amongst their sociopolitical activities. Protesting against the government's "pro-Western" policies, the Fadaeeyan-i-Islam advocated enrolling volunteers to fight in Palestine. Ali Rahnema provides a brief biography of Navab Safavi. According to him, Navab Safavi (1924–1956) was born in Tehran, he was briefly employed the British-managed Iranian Oil Company before going to Najaf in Iraq in 1943 to pursue his religious studies at the seminary school.⁷² On his return, Navab Safavi founded an organisation of Fadaeeyan-i Islam (Devotees of Islam). His organisation was committed to the application of the Shari'a, the restoration of an Islamic Government and the cleansing of evildoers and enemies of Islam.⁷³ According to Rahnema, from 1945 to 1951, Navab Safavi threw the full weight of his organisation behind Ayatollah Kashani's political objectives. The organisation accepted the responsibility for the assassination of a number of the Shah's governmental officials, including Prime Minister Razmara (March 1951), and in November 1956, Navab

Safavi and seven of his followers were arrested and were sentenced to death and executed.⁷⁴

According to Taghavi, the only comprehensive ideological treatise for Fadaeeyan-i Islam was a book written by Navab Safavi, entitled *Ettelaitti az Barnameh Enqelabi-i Fadaeeyan-i Islam (Rahnamai-i Haqaeq)* (An Announcement of the Revolutionary Programme of Fadaeeyan-i Islam). In this book, Navab-Safavi called on Muslims to “rethink their religion and their surrounding world”.⁷⁵

For Navab Safavi, Muslim unity could not be compromised. He suggested that there should be an organisation consisting of delegates from Muslim states designed to settle their disagreements and to support their economic prosperity and military development.⁷⁶ On a visit to Egypt, Navab Safavi advocated Islamic unity and recommended abandoning pan-Arabism, which he regarded as part of an enemy plot against Muslims.⁷⁷ Taghavi argues that the Fadaeeyan-i Islam viewed the domination of Westerners over Muslim societies as the main factor influencing the “decline of Muslims”. From the Fadaeeyan-i Islam’s point of view, following the Muslim triumph during the Crusades, Jewish and Christian freemasonry conspired to deny Muslims of their superiority.⁷⁸ It was therefore not difficult for the Fadaeeyani-i Islam and their zealous followers to have a sense of sympathy with Palestinian Muslims and view the Palestinian question as a matter that the Muslim world simply could not allow to be compromised.

Navab Safavi, in coordination with Ayatollah Kashani, organised popular protests supporting the Palestinians. In spring 1948, he orchestrated the enrolment of 5,000 volunteers in Tehran to fight for the cause of Palestine. In this regard, Fadaeeyan-i Islam issued a statement:

The bloods of brave devotees of Islam boil in support of the Palestinian brothers. Five thousand sympathizers of *Fadaeeyan-i Islam* are ready to join their Palestinian brothers to liberate Palestine and to this end, we demand the government to immediately give us permission to move towards Palestine.⁷⁹

Navab Safavi visited Lebanon and attended the Islamic Conference in Egypt in 1948, publicly stressing the importance of supporting the Palestinians in their struggle for freedom. Navab Safavi travelled to Jerusalem in 1953 and attended the Islamic conference of Beit al-Moqaddas for six days. While attending the conference in Jerusalem, Navab Safavi advocated that the only practical method of liberating Palestine was through martyrdom, given that its occupiers were unwilling to tolerate peaceful means. For Navab Safavi, the Palestinian cause was a concern for all Muslims, and Muslims bore a duty to support them by any means necessary.⁸⁰ Navab Safavi held talks with King Hussein of Jordan during his visits in Lebanon and Egypt. He also met with Yasser Arafat, who was a young student at the time, and encouraged him to take up arms for the liberation of the Islamic land of Palestine.⁸¹ Years later, Yasser Arafat revealed during his visit in Tehran in 1979 that he was motivated and inspired by Navab Safavi.⁸² During his visits to Egypt, Navab Safavi advocated close spiritual relations with the Muslim Brotherhood and

voiced his admiration for their activities against imperialism and regional puppets.⁸³ After he was arrested, prosecuted and executed by the Shah's regime in 1955, many younger members of Fadaeeyan-i Islam later joined Heyat-hai Moetalefe-h Islami (Coalition of Islamic Groups), which is considered to be the core hardline religious group in post-revolutionary Iran.⁸⁴

Ayatollah Taleqani was another well-known revolutionary cleric. His anti-imperialist rhetoric, sociopolitical concerns and active role in mobilising the Iranian public during the Islamic revolution brought him to prominence. Ayatollah Taleqani believed that in Islam, *Jihad fi sabil Allah* (Struggle in the Way of God) represents a divine commandment and can even be considered a form of *Ibadat* (worship). If those who die while trying to serve God may be considered martyrs, and their acts of defending land or prosperity deemed Islamically legitimate.⁸⁵ From his point of view,

the people of the world are divided into two types: the ones who believe and therefore strive in the direction of God, and those who disbelieve and strive in the way of *taghut*, there is just one way beside the way of God that is the way of *taghut*.⁸⁶

Ayatollah Taleqani defines *taghut*, which is repeated in the Quran almost eight times, as "the one who overflows from his rightful social limits. He tramples social limits under his feet".⁸⁷ He furthermore argues that war is a consequence of human instincts and that Islam recognises this fact. According to Ayatollah Taleqani:

This instinct is within you; but do not use it for murdering, theft, lustful purposes, or military expansionism. Use it in its proper way. Defend your rights. Defend your dignity. Defend your religion. Defend human rights. By and by you have to channel this instinct into this proper path.⁸⁸

Clarifying the concepts of *Jihad* and *taghut* and arguing that they were necessary to defend dignity, land and religion in Islam, Ayatollah Taleqani criticised the Pahlavi regime for its linkage with global-Zionism. When referring to the government, he states:

On one side they push Muslim masses into the desserts and rape the boundaries of Islam; and on the other hand, they take Muslim properties by different means. [. . .] If a government opens an embassy [referring to the Israeli representative office in Tehran] for them without naming it as such, what is the duty of the people towards such a government? Let me tell you, today Zionism is the second cover of Colonialism. Colonialism is the hide of Zionism. Zionism has crept into the hide of Israel.⁸⁹

One can observe a linkage between *taghut* and Zionism in Ayatollah Taleqani's reading of the Quran: with those who establish relations with Zionism considered guilty

of *taghut* and those who resist it considered as striving *fi sabil Allah*. To elaborate on this in depth, I will now examine the history of Ayatollah Taleqani's spiritual support for the Palestinian cause.

Ayatollah Taleqani participated in a number of conferences, including the Islamic Conferences during the 1940s and 1950s. He subsequently visited Egypt and held discussions with the clerics of al-Azhar University in Cairo. Regarding his participation in an Islamic Conference held in Jordan, and his visits to Egypt, Ayatollah Taleqani states:

In 1949 when we attended the Islamic conference in Palestine, we met with a number of representatives from various Islamic countries. Many of them were just talking and pretending to be supportive, they were not proposing any tangible solutions to the question of Palestine. During our trip from *Beit-el-Moqaddas* to *el-Khalil*, we could see the Palestinian refugees behind barbed wire, waving hands and communicating with their friends and relatives on the other side of the barriers, under severe security measures implemented by the Zionist guards. We hope that one day the land of Palestine will be liberated by the people of Palestine and the al-Aqsa Mosque will return to its rightful and legitimate people. The legitimate owners of the al-Aqsa Mosque are the indigenous people of Palestine, including Muslims, Jews and Christians and not the Zionist regime that claims Jerusalem. Today we are not allowed to hold a single meeting to voice our moral support for Palestine in Iran; here, we can freely have a joint voice with the Palestinian people for a common goal. We hope our youth study more about the cause of Palestine that itself is a great historical lesson in our century. We hope that our youth improve their relations with Palestine and make their efforts so God willingly and with the support of the other nations, we can accomplish this revolution that has occurred in two sensitive areas of the world [Iran and Palestine] victoriously.⁹⁰

Due to his revolutionary activities, Ayatollah Taleqani remained under SAVAK surveillance in the 1950s and 1960s, facing the threat of imprisonment up to the triumph of the 1979 revolution. Ayatollah Taleqani's temporary release in 1967 coincided with the Arab-Israeli war in which the Arab states were handed a frustrating military failure. According to SAVAK documents, Ayatollah Taleqani increasingly focused his attention on the Palestinian cause, voicing his support in both public and private. For instance, during the religious festival of Eid al-Fitr in 1967, Ayatollah Taleqani delivered an emotional speech in the Hedayat Mosque in Tehran in support of the Palestinian people. In a symbolic gesture at the end of his *khutbah*, he took some money out of his pocket and, addressing the crowd, stated, "I pay my *Zakat* [the Islamic tax] to the people of Palestine".⁹¹ This gesture inspired and galvanised the Iranian crowd to follow suit and donate their own Islamic taxes to the Palestinian cause.

It is fair to say that Ayatollah Taleqani had aimed to clarify the importance of Palestine in the contemporary Islamic context. He wanted to emphasise Palestine

as being primarily a Muslim issue and that therefore Muslims had a duty to support it by any possible means, including paying religious taxes and speaking out against Zionism. SAVAK documents point to Ayatollah Taleqani's enthusiasm for supporting the Palestinian people, and their concern that he was making the Iranian public aware of their struggle. One classified report indicated that Ayatollah Taleqani delivered an inspiring speech in the Hedayat Mosque in autumn 1969 that urged Muslims to go beyond simply cursing Israel and praying for the well-being of Palestinians, instead uniting and finding a solution for this vital issue.⁹² In a private meeting with other clerics and anti-Shah activists in 1969, he stated:

While I was attending the World Muslim Congress in Jordan in 1959, I was asked by *Akram Za'atar*, the delegate of Palestine and Jordan, why is Iran maintaining close relations with the Israelis? To which I responded, the people of Iran and their desire are separate from the regime, I am representing the people of Iran who are supporting Palestine.⁹³

The SAVAK documents indicate that the Iranian public – particularly among the more revolutionary strata – had sympathy for the Palestinians. Furthermore, alms were frequently collected at mosques in support of the Palestinians, particularly during Muslim festivals. In 1970, Ayatollah Taleqani delivered a speech in front of almost 2,000 worshippers at the Hedayat Mosque in Tehran in which he recommended that religious taxes should be paid to those fighting and sacrificing themselves for the sake of Islam. The year 1970 coincided with a natural disaster in Pakistan, and after Ayatollah Taleqani had asked worshippers to pay their *Zakat* to the Muslim people of either Pakistan or Palestine by choosing one of two designated boxes, many chose the box for Palestine. According to SAVAK reports, many Iranians even questioned and castigated that “why Ayatollah Taleqani recommends Palestine beside Pakistan? The world helps Pakistan and he should have just called for supporting helpless Palestinians”.⁹⁴ On the night, 16,500 tomans were collected for the Palestinians, but only 1,600 tomans for the affected people of Pakistan. The collected sum for Palestine was sent to the Egyptian embassy and handed to Yahya Raafat to be sent to Palestine.⁹⁵

The Iranian public's sympathy for Palestine and particularly Ayatollah Taleqani's endeavour of supporting the Palestinian cause were well received in Palestine, and this was reflected in Palestinian pamphlets. SAVAK reports show that a biography of Ayatollah Taleqani was published by *al-Thawra* magazine (the political publication of the PLO) in January 1978. The article was entitled “A Biography of a Great Imprisoned Revolutionary Ayatollah Taleqani” and was published in the 25th edition of the magazine, translated into Farsi and distributed in Iran. The article provided a brief biography of Ayatollah Taleqani, praising him for his support for the struggle against imperialism. It stated that he was imprisoned by the Shah's regime because of his unwavering defence of Islam and his fight against imperialism and support for the Palestinians.⁹⁶ The article painted Ayatollah Taleqani as one of the first clerics to support the Palestinian cause and detailed that the

cleric maintained close relations with Palestinian representatives when attending the World Muslim Conference in Jerusalem. The article concludes that from the Palestinian point of view, the “bourgeois regime of the Shah did not manage to silence Ayatollah Taleqani and his followers because they struggle for the sake of the oppressed people and for the sake of their revolutionary ideas”.⁹⁷ Shortly before the triumph of the Islamic revolution in 1978, Ayatollah Taleqani commented on the Palestinian question, stating:

The people of Iran have never neglected the cause of Palestine. My purpose of attending the Islamic Conferences in Karachi, Cairo and Jerusalem was in fact for the sake of defending the Palestinians, because the enemy of the Palestinians is not just their enemy but the enemy of the whole Islamic world.⁹⁸

Ayatollah Taleqani’s pro-Palestinian ideas became diffused to other revolutionary clerics and Muslim figures. Ayatollah Murteza Mutahhari,⁹⁹ an eminent scholar of Islam and key theorist of the Islamic revolution, also situated the Palestinian cause within an Islamic context and presented the issue to the Iranian public as such. According to Mohammad Legenhausen and Mehdi Abedi, Ayatollah Mutahhari linked his Islamic conceptualisation of peace, Jihad and “duty” to a broader moral obligation for the Iranian public to support the Palestinian cause.¹⁰⁰ According to Ayatollah Mutahhari’s reading and analysis of the Quran, “Islam never gives permission to be humiliated, while at the same time strongly advocates peace”.¹⁰¹ In clarifying the conditions for Jihad and peace, Ayatollah Mutahhari again refers to the Quran and argues that one of the conditions for Jihad was that “the adversary must be in the state of aggression”.¹⁰² Ayatollah Mutahhari clarifies what is meant by aggression and injustice, particularly in the context of Muslim suffering, and considers it incumbent on all Muslims to act and support the oppressed:

We may be in a situation whereby a party has not transgressed against us but has committed injustice against a group from another people, who may or may not be Muslims. If they are Muslims as in today’s plight of the Palestinians who have been exiled from their homes, whose wealth has been seized, and who have been subjected to all kinds of transgression whereas for the moment the transgressor has no intention against us, it is permissible for us to give assistance to those oppressed Muslims and deliver them. This is not only permissible, but obligatory, because they are Muslims.¹⁰³

According to Ayatollah Mutahhari, the moral obligation on the Iranian people to render aid to oppressed peoples – particularly the people of Palestine – was unconditional and did not require a plea for help from the oppressed to be incumbent.¹⁰⁴ In clarifying the concept of Jihadin Islam, Ayatollah Mutahhari clarifies that defence is the essence of Jihad and ultimately a duty for all people whose land, property, wealth and religion were assaulted by another nation.¹⁰⁵ He links the defence of land and religion with the concept of martyrdom, stating that “Islam says, whoever

is killed for his property or principles is a martyr".¹⁰⁶ In his view, "the value of fighting in defence lies not in defending one's self, but in defending the right",¹⁰⁷ and he elaborates further that the most sacred form of Jihad or defence is "neither one's personal freedom nor that of the one's country, but freedom in another corner of the world".¹⁰⁸ In order to earn the respect of other nations, one has to demonstrate his or her strong conviction to defend the rights of oppressed people around the world rather than merely his or her individual rights or the rights of fellow citizens. Ayatollah Mutahhari adds to this debate by stating that "if they were ever to transcend the use of the tongue, the pen, letter and lectures, and actually go to the battlefield and fight, for the Palestinians for example, then the world would consider them to be even more sacred".¹⁰⁹ Ayatollah Mutahhari's arguments communicated three things to the Iranian public: First, defending the Palestinians was the concern of all Muslims. Second, one could defend the Palestinian cause using a multitude of methods, including voicing verbal and spiritual support through the delivery of lectures and statements, giving financial support and fighting on the battlefield. Third, defending the cause of Palestine is sacred even beyond the Islamic context, and it demonstrates the free spirit of the defender.

Ayatollah Mutahhari did not limit his pro-Palestinian sentiment to his theoretical lectures, however, and instead endeavoured to put his ideas into practice via his political activities. Ayatollah Mutahhari collected the monetary aid for the Palestinians, organised public gatherings and confronted the coercion of the Shah's regime head-on. In 1970, Ayatollah Mutahhari was summoned by SAVAK because he had made statements in coordination with Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Hussein Tabatabai and Ayatollah Asadollah Bayat Zanjani that urged the Iranian public to provide financial aid for Palestinian refugees. According to SAVAK documents dated 2nd May 1970, Ayatollah Mutahhari delivered an inspirational speech in the mosque of Husseini-eh-Ershad:

Europe talks about human rights and peace but is not willing to act accordingly. We Muslims on the other hand talk about Islam but we are not real Muslims too, sitting in silence and doing nothing. Isn't it true that the Palestinians are Muslims? So why are we sympathizing with them but not acting accordingly?¹¹⁰

SAVAK subsequently reported that a number of pamphlets were distributed within the Tehran Bazaar and the University of Tehran, indicating that Ayatollah Mutahhari, Ayatollah Tabatabai¹¹¹ and Ayatollah Zanjani had opened three bank accounts at the Meli Bank, the Bank of Saderat and the Bank of Bazargani-Markaz, the Bazaar branch, in order for the public to render financial aid to the Palestinians. The distributed pamphlets were titled with a quotation from the Prophet Mohammed saying, "If a Muslim Hears a Plea for Help from Other Muslims and Does Not Respond, He Is Not a Muslim".¹¹²

The local SAVAK coordinator in the Shemiranat region had reported that due to the high level of local sympathy towards the Palestinian cause and the fact that

there were a large numbers of pamphlets and adverts throughout the city in regard to support for the Palestinians, his local office had hesitated to confront Ayatollah Mutahhari and his followers.¹¹³

Consequently, in November 1970, Ayatollah Mutahhari was summoned by SAVAK, and his phone line and home were both put under surveillance. Ayatollah Mutahhari reportedly had refused to stop collecting financial aid for the Palestinians and had rejected SAVAK's proposal that it receive all funds first and then hand them over to the Iranian Red Sun and Lion Society – rather than the Palestinian Red Crescent – to be used inside of Iran. In a written statement while in SAVAK custody dated 24 November 1970, Ayatollah Mutahhari expressed the following:

When I went on a pilgrimage to Mecca, I had a meeting with the Palestinian Red Crescent Association in Menna and expressed that we in Iran are willing to publicly render financial aid for Palestinian refugees. Hence, they recommended that we send our financial aid to the Association of Supporters of Palestinian Refugees in Mecca. Therefore I was in touch with the ambassador of Saudi Arabia in Tehran and expressed our willingness to send our financial aid through the Saudi embassy. We have explained to the Iranian people that their collected financial help is due to be sent to the Palestinians as they desire and we are due to provide the Iranian public with the receipt from the Palestinian Red Crescent. Hence, we cannot act against what we have promised to the Iranian public, thus we cannot accept the SAVAK proposals.¹¹⁴

Ayatollah Mutahhari underlined that it was his religious duty to channel the collected financial support to the Palestinians. He argued that he had managed to mobilise financial aid only because the Iranian people held a strong desire to do so and that if he were to accept SAVAK's coercive suggestion, he would have betrayed both the country and his own Muslim duties and morality.¹¹⁵

For Ayatollah Mutahhari, the differences between Sunni and Shi'ite communities were limited to the minor religious principles. To this end, he had emphasised that supporting Palestine should not be overshadowed by sectarian debates because it was the unity of Muslims that helped the Palestinian cause. There are reports from SAVAK reinforcing this fact. For instance, a classified report from SAVAK dated 19 July 1972 highlights that in one public lecture, Ayatollah Mutahhari – in response to rumours that Palestinians did not share the Shi'ite view of Imam Ali's succeeding the Prophet Mohammed – stated, "The Jews are the enemies of Imam Ali bin Abi-Talib, the first Imam of the Shi'ites not the Sunnis. The only difference between the Shi'ite and Sunnis is that the Sunnis recognise Imam Ali as the forth Caliph but they do respect and have faith in Ali".¹¹⁶ Thus, for Ayatollah Mutahhari, the Palestinian cause was far more important than the Shi'ite-Sunni debate over the succession to the Prophet.

In the eyes of Iran's revolutionaries, the Palestinian cause overshadowed all other issues in the region and the Islamic world. In another recorded report by SAVAK, during a meeting entitled the Heiaat-i Ansar el-Hussein, organised by Ayatollah

Mutahhari on the 14th of May 1970, one of the companions proposed that some financial aid be collected for the people in need in Algeria. This had been requested by the Algerian president, Houari Boumedienne, and the ambassador of Algeria in Tehran, Ahmed Towfiq el-Maddani, was set to receive financial support in the form of charitable donations. In response, Seyed Ali Khamenei¹¹⁷ had emphasised that the Palestinian cause represented the foremost priority in the Muslim world and that financial support should be channelled for the Palestinians in that regard.¹¹⁸ Ayatollah Mutahhari continued to confront SAVAK, and his public activities were under close surveillance. Nevertheless, his outspoken desire to publicly endorse the Palestinian cause remained the same until his assassination in May 1979, and his influence on his followers and students became evident in the post-revolutionary era, which will be discussed and analysed in the following chapters.

It was not only the clerics that opposed imperialism and Zionism among those who were religiously inclined in Iran. Non-clerical religious and revolutionary figures like Ali Shariati and Jalal Al-e-Ahmad strongly shared such revolutionary commitments. Ali Shariati is best known as an advocate of the Third World movements in their battle against imperialism.¹¹⁹ He was one of the most influential intellectuals of the Islamic revolution. His teachings continued to be felt throughout Iranian society. Focusing on the Islamic concept of *Amr-e beh ma'ruf va nahy-ye az monkar* [Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice] as a social responsibility, commanding people to do good and forbid evil, Shariati equated Zionism with evil.¹²⁰ In a similar vein, Shariati maintained that the struggle against international imperialism, dictatorship and colonialism were all manifestations of the Islamic command to forbid evil.¹²¹ In his reading of modern history, particularly in identifying the problems of the Third World, Shariati argues that information on liberation or nationalist movements in Europe was blemished by the vested interests of the proponents of "Zionism alongside Capitalism, Fascism and Communism".¹²² Hence, according to Ali Rahnama, Shariati believed that the struggle of people in the Third World remained unknown in the rest of the world.¹²³

According to Mahdi Ahouie, one of Shariati's first commentaries on the Palestinian question dates back to July 1967, a few weeks after the Six Day War. In response to an article written by Daryoush Ashouri in the monthly *Ferdowsi*¹²⁴ in which he had revealed his support for Israel, Shariati strongly castigated some Iranian intellectuals for not condemning the Israeli aggression against the Palestinians:

Whoever feels sympathetic for the Palestinian refugees who have been expelled from their home cities and houses and lands into the burning deserts of Jordan [. . .] their sympathy derives from the bourgeoisie! [. . .] Whoever feels hatred and revengeful for seeing that after all those [Muslims] glorious conquests in history, Jerusalem has now fallen to the hands of [Zionist] Jews and that the Muslims have become defenceless victims of a Jewish-Christian[alliance] and are being expelled from that sacred land in the most brutal way, has been affected by the lowest bourgeois feelings.¹²⁵

According to Mahdi Ahouie, the reasons for Ali Shariati's hostility towards Zionism can be summarised as follows: (1) Israel is a Western creation in the Middle East; (2) Israel treats the Arab people unjustly and brutally; and finally (3) Palestine is an inseparable part of the Muslim world.¹²⁶ On the combination of anti-Zionism and anti-imperialism in the Middle East, Ahouie highlights that Ali Shariati argued that such a combination was quite natural and understandable because of the omnipresence of imperialism. Israel was seen as an extension of this oppressive world order.¹²⁷ Shariati added that imperialism is always unmasked through a façade, a Trojan horse, so to say, like the former (British) Oil Company in Iran, the East Indian Company and Zionism in the Arab countries.¹²⁸ From my perspective, it is crucial to note that Shariati believes there are strong ties between colonialism, imperialism and Zionism and not least by using an emotive historical analogy, that is the example of the Anglo Iranian Oil Company that filled Iranians with bitter memories because of its role with the MI6 (and CIA) in the removal of the democratically elected Prime Minister Mosaddeq in 1953. So Palestine was pasted into the wider narrative of anti-imperial resistance. The historical context that Shariati was embedded in lent itself to a new Third Worldism, with socialist-Islamic colourings. This was the heyday of anti-colonial agitation all over the world.

Furthermore, Ali Shariati draws parallel lines between Zionism and racism, according to Ahouie, in his rereading of the Iranian-Islamic identity, Shariati dedicated one part of his analysis to the discussion of nationalism. He argued that Western understandings of nationalism stemmed from a pervasive racism and anti-Semitism, which eventually led to the emergence of Zionism as a defensive reaction.¹²⁹ Zionism he argued, instigated ethnic Arab nationalism in the Muslim societies.¹³⁰ In other words, Shariati perceives Zionism as a source for creating a Western notion of nationalism within the Islamic nations. Shariati believed Western imperialism and Zionism had formed a "united front" against Muslims:¹³¹

Our enemies in this time include imperialism, materialism and capitalism, the spirit of bourgeoisie, exploitation, machinism, class differences, fascism, Zionism, nihilism, greediness for welfare, madness of consumption, cultural colonialism, self-alienation, permissiveness, historical disintegration, cultural metamorphosis, decline of moral values, and rule of money.¹³²

It is vital to note that Ali Shariati also regards "world Zionism", "international imperialism", "old and new colonialism", together with "tyranny", "racism" and "Westoxication" as the biggest troubles of his time.¹³³ Allow me to highlight Ahouie's argument because it sheds light on the importance of the Palestinian cause within the Iranian revolutionary discourse. According to him throughout the 1960s and 1970s, many new concepts such as anti-imperialism were introduced into the Iranian religious discourse. After 1967, Iranian religious thinkers began to use a line of reasoning as reflected in Shariati's discourse that held that Israel was the representative of Western colonialism and imperialism in

the Middle East. A suitable ground was maintained for substantiating religious opposition to Israel on the basis of such modern concepts as “freedom-seeking” and in the context of a general global clash between “oppressors” and the “oppressed”. In the 1960s and 1970s, when several Third World nations in Asia and Africa were struggling for independence from Western colonialism, such a delineation of the world as being split between the oppressors and the oppressed appealed to many religious thinkers in Iran, who were opposed to the Shah’s foreign external and internal policies on the one hand and to the intervention of Western powers in Iran on the other.¹³⁴

In this context, Ahouie argues that Palestinian resistance against Israel was taken by many Iranian-Islamic revolutionaries as a sacred symbol and as an example of the struggle against suppression both domestically and internationally. The question of Palestine was an issue over which leftists and Shia notions of justice-seeking and opposition to suppression impeccably matched.¹³⁵ Shariati contributed to the Iranian political discourse on Zionism by linking the outlooks of the earlier anti-Israeli religious figures such as Ayatollah Kashani and those of the Iranian socialists such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad. By underlining a type of leftist translation of Islam, they adopted the idea of “Israel as the puppet of imperialism” from the left and the concept of “standing for justice” from the Shia perspective.¹³⁶ Shariati’s emphasis on the Palestinian question can be epitomised in the following phrase of his own design: “We are not hostile to the Jews, but we are hostile to Israel. And that is not because of its religion, but because it is fascist and because it is a basis for Western colonialism and imperialism”.¹³⁷

Alongside Ali Shariati, Jalal Al-e Ahmad was a well-known author and outspoken critic of imperialism. In *Gharbzadegi* (variously translated as West-toxification, Westitis, or Weststruckness), Jalal Al-e Ahmad harshly criticises the economic and cultural dependency of the Third World in general and particularly Iran’s dependency on the West.¹³⁸ In other words, *Gharbzadegi* represented a precursor to discussions of North-versus-South during the 1960s and 1970s. In developing his theory, Jalal Al-e Ahmad saw Islam as an integral non-Western and native component of Iranian identity and as a conceivable route to delivering Iran from the plight of *gharbzadegi*.¹³⁹ According to Adib-Moghaddam, the anti-dependency theory of Jalal Al-e Ahmad (reflected in *Gharbzadegi*) and anti-imperialistic ideas of Ali Shariati (reflected in writings such as *Bazgasht beh-khish*) symbolised the deification of the “Third-Worldist”, socialist and revolutionary-Islamic zeitgeist in Iranian society during the 1970s.¹⁴⁰ Although there may not be considerable direct references to Palestine within the works of Ali Shariati and Jalal Al-e Ahmad, their anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist and anti-colonialist ideas have created a comprehensive pro-Palestinian framework. In other words, having identified Ali Shariati with anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism and Jalal Al-e Ahmad with anti-colonialism and Third Worldism, it is easy to envision the Palestinian cause as representing a “cosmic” struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors. According to SAVAK documents, Musa Sadr,¹⁴¹ alongside representatives of Fatah and the delegate of the Grand Mufti of Syria, participated in Ali Shariati’s burial ceremony in Damascus in

1977. In his speech at the burial ceremony, Musa Sadr highlighted the moral connection between Ali Shariati and the Palestinian cause by stating that “Shariati was always thinking of Palestine and the pains of Palestinians during his life, hence, God wanted him to be buried in this cemetery in Damascus, near Palestine”¹⁴² Nikki Keddie highlights this sociopolitical atmosphere of the pre-revolutionary era by arguing that the preceding survey of Iranian political thought since the late twentieth century proposes the frequent reappearance of certain parallels often found in the writings of both religious and secular thinkers. One of the most crucial is anti-imperialism, accompanied by a determination to free Iran from Western economic and cultural dominance.¹⁴³ Palestine became a major factor within that salient discourse, as indicated.

A discussion of the roots and development of support for the Palestinian cause in Iran during the pre-revolutionary era is incomplete without a focus on Ayatollah Khomeini. From Ervand Abrahamian’s point of view, Ayatollah Khomeini began his political career in 1943 with the publication of *Kashf al-Asrar* (Unveiling of Secrets), which castigated the sociopolitical conditions of Iran.¹⁴⁴ Ayatollah Khomeini rose to prominence in 1963 when he publicly denounced the Shah’s regime. At the outset of his political career, Ayatollah Khomeini had placed great importance on the Palestinian cause and conspicuously addressed the matter within his public pronouncements. According to Abrahamian, while Ayatollah Khomeini had been developing his ideas in *Velayat-e Faqih: Hokumat-e Islami* (The Jurist Guardianship: Islamic Government), he had noticeably developed his sociopolitical castigations of the Shah’s regime by denouncing it as an “unwitting tool of the imperialist-Jewish conspiracy” and for its “anti-Arab” and “anti-Palestinian” political stance.¹⁴⁵

Before analysing the origin of Ayatollah Khomeini’s pro-Palestinian stance, it is necessary to gain an understanding of how he viewed the state of Israel. Hamid Algar argues that Ayatollah Khomeini’s best known work focuses on three major points: the necessity of establishing Islamic political institutions, the doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih* and the duty of religious scholars to bring about an Islamic state and programme of action for the foundation of an Islamic government.¹⁴⁶ Ayatollah Khomeini offered a number of arguments in support of an Islamic government. He had developed his argument while highlighting the significance of the Quran’s verses that command believers to protect the Islamic domain from non-Muslim “aggressors”. According to Algar, Ayatollah Khomeini’s reference to the Quran’s verse 8:60, “prepare against them whatever force you can muster and horses tethered”, is an attempt to substantiate the indispensability of defending the territorial integrity of the Muslim nations.¹⁴⁷ Pointing to the Quran, Ayatollah Khomeini stated:

If the Muslims had acted in accordance with this command and, after forming a government, made the necessary extensive preparation to be in a state of full readiness for war, a handful of Jews would never have dared to occupy our lands, and to burn and destroy the Masjid al-Aqsa.¹⁴⁸

It is safe to argue that in Ayatollah Khomeini's reading of the Quran, there is a particular place designated to Palestine as the Muslim heartland. Khomeini's description of Palestine as "our land" implies a strong socio-religious tie between the Palestinian question and Muslim Iran. In other words, there are moral obligations for Iranian Muslims to support and defend Palestine.

On one hand, Ayatollah Khomeini defines the state of Israel as an agent of the United States, Britain and other foreign powers and as a tool of imperialism used to penetrate the Islamic world and divide its nations into two groups (oppressed and oppressors). On the other hand, he castigates the rulers of Muslim nations for their lack of unity in resisting the agents of imperialism and therefore being on the side of oppressors.¹⁴⁹ For Ayatollah Khomeini, the Palestinian question transcends national borders and is thus an issue with relevance to every individual Muslim as instructed by the Quran. On 6 February 1971, in his first message to the Muslims of the world congregating on the occasion of the pilgrimage to Mecca, Ayatollah Khomeini highlighted the significance of the Palestinian question:

Turn your attention to the liberation of the Islamic land of Palestine from the grasp of Zionism, the enemy of Islam and humanity. Do not hesitate to assist and cooperate with those men who are struggling to liberate Palestine.¹⁵⁰

In his ideological critique of imperialism, Ayatollah Khomeini warned the Iranian public as well as the Muslim nations of "the expansionism of imperialism through Zionism":

One must know that the purpose of the imperialist powers in establishing Israel is not just about occupying Palestine. However, if they find any opportunity, all the Arab states will face the same fate as Palestine (God forbid). Now that we see a group of freedom fighters who are struggling to liberate the occupied land of Palestine, we witness the puppets of imperialism in Jordan and elsewhere, are suppressing them.¹⁵¹

Defining the occupiers of Palestine as the "servants of imperialism",¹⁵² Ayatollah Khomeini maintained that Muslims in Iran and Palestine struggle on a single front-line against common enemies: Zionism as the enemy of Islam and its "collaborator", the Shah's regime.

Israel, the universally recognized enemy of Islam and the Muslims, has been at war with the Muslim people for years, with the assistance of the despicable government of Iran, penetrated all the economic, military, and political affairs of the country; it must be said that Iran has become a military base for Israel, which means, by extension, for America.¹⁵³

In emphasising the necessity of resisting Zionism and American imperialism, Ayatollah Khomeini expanded his harsh criticism to include the communist bloc also,

lambasting it as being guilty of left-wing imperialism. In his account, the creation of the state of Israel was a joint action by the oppressors of both East and West:

Israel was born out of the collusion and agreement of the imperialist states of the East and West. It was created in order to suppress and exploit Muslim people and it is being supported today by all the imperialists of Britain and the U.S. They are strengthening Israel militarily and politically, supplying it with lethal weapons, encouraging Israel to undertake repeated aggression against the Arabs and the Muslims and to continue the occupation of Palestine and other Islamic lands. The Soviet Union, by preventing the Muslims from arming themselves adequately, by its conciliatory policy is guaranteeing the existence of Israel.¹⁵⁴

Ayatollah Khomeini had expanded his criticism towards the Shah's regime in two dimensions, both internally and externally. In appealing to Iranian Muslims, he attacked the Pahlavi authorities for maintaining relations with Israel and prohibiting people from voicing anti-Israeli and anti-imperialist opinions:

In this current condition, Muslims are sacrificing for the sake of the liberation of Palestine. The Shah is suppressing, imprisoning and exiling a number of *ulama* and other scholars and dissidents. The [Shah] regime has begun to do this in order to divert our attention from the war between Muslim nations and Israel. This is because the Shah's regime is fearful of the solidarity between the Iranian people and the Arab world in their rightful struggle against Israel.¹⁵⁵

In appealing to the wider Arab and Muslim world, Ayatollah Khomeini denounced the Shah's "pro-Israeli" stance. In a statement on 7 April 1964, he stated:

I pronounce to all Islamic states and Muslim nations around the world that the dear Shia people abominates Israel, its agents and all governments that collaborate with that state [Israel]. This is not the Iranian nation that collaborates with Israel, the Iranian nation is blameless. There are the regimes that do not have the approval of the people. Submitting ourselves to holy Islamic laws, nothing is more important than defending Islam by sacrificing our possessions and even our lives. When we witness our Palestinian brothers and sisters being killed in the holy land of Palestine, and when we witness that our lands are occupied and our homes are destroyed by the Zionists. Hence, this is obligatory for all Muslims to support the Palestinians financially and morally.¹⁵⁶

Having established that the Israeli state was an aggressor and oppressor, and with his declaration that financial and moral support for the Palestinians was an obligation according to Islamic teachings, Ayatollah Khomeini referred to Quranic verses

2:192 and 2:193 to further argue that there exists an obligation for Muslims to resist a common enemy.¹⁵⁷ As such, he stated on 7 November 1973 that:

[t]he leaders of the Islamic world should understand that they [imperialist powers] have created this source of corruption [Israel] in the heart of the Islamic land, not only to suppress the Arab nations, but, to dominate the whole region. The only way to solve this nightmare is through unity within Muslim nations. If there was any regime that neglected such a vital obligation, it becomes a duty for other states to pressurize that regime.¹⁵⁸

A large number of Islamic scholars, religious activists and associated groups shared Khomeini's strong commitment to the plight of Palestine. For instance, the Union of Islamic Students' Associations (UISA) in Europe, founded in 1964, was one major vocal association advocating the plight of Palestine in Europe and North America.¹⁵⁹ Having a close connection with Ayatollah Khomeini in Najaf, UISA members designated their sociopolitical activities towards supporting the plight of Palestine. In 1967, the UISA began publishing *Eslam: maktab-e mobarez*, a quarterly that looked into current Islamic issues, particularly the Palestinian cause and Muslim affairs in Africa. Moreover, it aimed to maintain a communicating network with other Muslim students in Europe and North America. In its fifth general meeting in May 1969, the UISA announced the formation of the Committee of Palestine. Its aim was to coordinate financial and political aid for Palestinians abroad and to establish relations with Palestinian organisations in Europe.¹⁶⁰ UISA statements publicly denounced the state of Israel for occupying Palestine, and voiced solidarity with Palestinian activists.¹⁶¹ The Committee of Palestine became the most active body of the UISA, and the blueprint of its activities were reported during its sixth meeting in May 1970 as follows:

- Establishing relations with the Central Committee of Palestinian Students Abroad
- Forming a joint meeting with Palestinian students and organising an archive of the articles related to the Palestinian question
- Rendering financial and medical aid, including sending the most needed medicines to Palestinian refugees and rebels
- Publishing a booklet entitled *Majmoo-e Kerameh*,¹⁶² which was a collection of translated articles concerning the activities of the Palestinian organisations such as Fatah, the life of the Palestinian refugees, as well as pro-Palestinian writings specifically aimed at Iranian readers¹⁶³

In 1971, Mostafa Chamran, a key member of the Liberation Movement of Iran, travelled to Lebanon.¹⁶⁴ Chamran's prime focus was to train the local Shia youth in guerrilla warfare. To this end, Chamran played a key role in supporting Musa Sadr to form *Harakat al-Mahroomin* (The Movement of the Deprived) in 1973 and *Afivaj al-Moqawamah al-Lobnaniyah* (also known as Amal).¹⁶⁵ According to Chehabi,

the relations between Chamran and the PLO were lukewarm. While a whole-hearted supporter of the Palestinian struggle against Israel, he nevertheless criticised PLO tactics, such as its repeated raids into northern Israel, which left the local people of southern Lebanon vulnerable to Israeli retaliation in the form of harsh bombardments.¹⁶⁶

Chamran elucidated his pro-Palestinian stance in his memoir *Lobnan*. From Chamran's point of view, since moving to Lebanon from Jordan in 1970,¹⁶⁷ some Palestinian fighters became preoccupied with engaging in Lebanon's political scene. This deflected their attention away from the real cause of the struggle against Israel and the liberation of Palestine.¹⁶⁸ Chamran was rather critical of the radical left-wing Marxist-communist Palestinians who had penetrated the Palestinian frontline against Israel, particularly among the PLO. Chamran believed that Yasser Arafat was too weak to prevent Marxist elements from directing PLO's policy-making apparatus towards the strategic aims of the Soviet Union. In addition to his criticism of the pro-Soviet stance of Palestinian communists, Chamran criticised the absence of an Islamic ideology within the Palestinian factions in Lebanon.¹⁶⁹ Nevertheless, according to Chamran, the Palestinian struggle represented a just cause. Quoting Musa Sadr on the importance of the Palestinian cause, Chamran wrote that "Palestinian resistance is a sanctimonious flame that we will preserve with our souls and hearts"¹⁷⁰ In 1973, when the Lebanese Army decided to force the Palestinian fighters out of Lebanon, Musa Sadr and his followers intervened in order to defuse the situation and to protect the Palestinians. Musa Sadr made a public declaration, stating "we do not allow you [the Lebanese Army] to destroy the Palestinian resistance. We do not permit anyone to repeat another Black September".¹⁷¹

While residing in Lebanon in the 1970s, Chamran maintained close relations with Fatah. Chamran and his troops within the *Harakat al-Mahroomin* coordinated a number of joint operations with Fatah, resisting the Israeli army and its affiliated militias that were attacking the town of Bint Jbeil in February 1977 and Taiba and Rob-Thalatheen in southern Lebanon in March 1977.¹⁷² For Chamran, the pro-Moscow political activities of the left-wing members of Fatah and other Marxist Palestinian factions threatened the independence and unity of the anti-Zionist groups in Lebanon. However, in both Chamran's and Musa Sadr's views, supporting Fatah represented a means to an end of supporting the Palestinian cause.¹⁷³ Chamran concluded his memoir with a supplication:

O' Lord, you are aware that we adore Palestine, the birthplace of the prophets and we see the liberation of Palestine from the domination of Zionism as our sacrosanct cause. To this end, we have never neglected to support the Palestinian Liberation Organization and we shall always support the Palestinian cause wholeheartedly.¹⁷⁴

Two other well-known Muslim activists who were active in supporting the Palestinians before the revolution were Seyed Ali Akbar Mohtashamipur and Mohammad Muntazeri. Mohtashamipur was a student of Ayatollah Khomeini and accompanied

him in his exile in Najaf. According to Chehabi, Mohtashamipur also played an active role as Ayatollah Khomeini's delegate in Lebanon, tasked with providing information about the problems that Palestinian activists faced when confronting the Israelis.¹⁷⁵ In July 1972, Mohtashamipur concluded that harsh criticism from some local Shia clerics in Lebanon towards the Palestinian militants, blaming them for Israeli retaliations, were damaging the Palestinian cause. Having briefed Ayatollah Khomeini, he issued a formal declaration that all Muslims, particularly local residents of southern Lebanon, back the Palestinian fighting against Israel, warning that "agents of Colonialism" were attempting to divide the Muslim campaign against the Zionism.¹⁷⁶ Mohammad Muntazeri, the son of Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Muntazeri,¹⁷⁷ was a leading Muslim activist who had travelled to Lebanon, Pakistan and Iraq before the revolution with an aim to form a unified Muslim front against imperialism. According to Chehabi, Mohammad Muntazeri maintained close relations with the PLO and attended Palestinian training camps.¹⁷⁸ Mohammad Muntazeri's main goal went beyond toppling the Shah's regime, instead extending to setting up an "Islamist international".¹⁷⁹

Other prominent high-ranking Shia clerics amongst the *Marajii*'¹⁸⁰ were particularly vocal in expressing their religiously motivated solidarity with the Palestinian cause. To further highlight the significance of the religious dimension of supporting Palestine from the *Marajii*'s point of view, some of the religious statements during the pre-revolutionary period are quoted here.

Grand Ayatollah Seyed Abdullah Shirazi (1892–1984), in an open telegram to the Iranian Prime Minister Abbas Hoveyda,¹⁸¹ dated 9 June 1967, stated:

Dear Mr. Hoveyda, At this very moment that all Islamic states are in war against the occupiers of the holy-land of Palestine. This is a religious obligation for Iran which is a crucial part of the Islamic world and always has been in the frontline of Islamic affairs to support the Palestinians and sever its relations with the artificial state of Israel.¹⁸²

Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Mar'ashi Najafi (1897–1990) also issued a number of statements in support of the Palestinian cause. In June 1967, Ayatollah Mar'ashi Najafi issued a public announcement stating:

The Iranian clerics unanimously denounce the tyranny of Israel against our Muslim brothers. We pray to Lord to return their [the Israeli government] cruelty back to them and protect the Muslim nations. Our religious brothers are expected not to develop relations with the Jews and not to neglect supporting the Palestinian Muslims financially and morally.¹⁸³

In November 1967, Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Hussain Mar'ashi Najafi acknowledged and thanked his followers for collecting charitable donations. The Ayatollah's office had purchased 2,600 blankets and passed them onto the Jordanian embassy, to be distributed among Palestinian refugees. The Jordanian

ambassador in Tehran sent a reply to Grand Ayatollah Mar'ashi Najafi, confirming the receipt of the money and stating, "Your holiness Grand Ayatollah Mar'ashi Najafi, I confirm that the Jordanian authorities have received your financial support for the Palestinian refugees in the West Bank. We are thankful to you and the people [of Iran] beyond words".¹⁸⁴

In June 1967, Grand Ayatollah Seyed Hadi Milani issued a fatwa stating:

All Muslims are expected to avoid having any financial or friendly relations with the Israelis and not to neglect providing financial supports for their Palestinian brothers. As the Prophet Mohammed said, if a Muslim does not pay attention to the affairs of other Muslim brothers, he is not a Muslim. Hence, it is recommended to pay special tribute to those Palestinians who sacrificed their lives and possessions in defending Masjid- al-Aqsa.¹⁸⁵

Grand Ayatollah Seyed Mohammad Reza Golpayegani on 19 June 1967 issued a statement in relation to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war:

We in Iran, *Marajii*, religious scholars and students and all our Iranian people publicly denounce the brutal activities of the Israeli regime, the enemy of God, against our Muslim Brothers. We do not neglect supporting the Palestinian people financially and morally. We pray to Lord to bless the spirit of those heroes that sacrificed their lives in defending their land.¹⁸⁶

On August 24 1969, after the al-Aqsa Mosque was set on fire, Grand Ayatollah Golpayegani issued another statement:

You will surely find the most intense of the people in animosity toward the believers [to be] the Jews and those who associate others with Allah (5:82). The community of Shia clerics and the *Hawzah* of Qom condemn the tragedy of burning the *al-Aqsa* Mosque and convey its condolences to the Islamic world. To this end there will be public gatherings and mourning ceremonies across Iran. We do invite the Iranian Muslims to attend these gatherings and denounce the crimes of the Zionist regime.¹⁸⁷

It should be mentioned that shortly after the burning of the al-Aqsa Mosque, the Shah had publicly announced that "the Shah and the people like other Muslims are volunteering to repair the al-Aqsa Mosque and to this end, proudly pay for renovating the site of al-Aqsa".¹⁸⁸ Ayatollah Khomeini subsequently lambasted the Shah's regime for issuing the statement, arguing that the Shah wanted to cover up the crimes of the "Zionists" and neglect their anti-Muslim intentions. Ayatollah Khomeini recommended that "the burnt site of al-Aqsa should not be renovated so the world can see what the Zionists have been doing to the Muslim Palestinians".¹⁸⁹

Unanimously, other *Marajii* like the Grand Ayatollahs Seyed Kazim Shariatmadari,¹⁹⁰ Seyed Mohammed Sadeq Rowhani,¹⁹¹ Seyed Abulqasem Khoei¹⁹² and

Seyed Mohsen Tabatabaei Hakim¹⁹³ all issued their own religious statements that denounced the Israeli aggression against the Palestinians and called for Muslims – particularly Iranian Muslims – to provide financial and moral support for the Palestinians. Based on the statements issued by the *Marajii* previously listed, it is safe to say that their Islamic opinions were a reaction to Israeli aggression (such as the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the 1969 al-Aqsa fire and the 1973 Ramadan war). Hence, they saw it as a religious duty to communicate to their followers across the country the need to support the Palestinian cause and to donate financially.

The pro-Palestinian ideas of Iranian-Islamic groups and prominent religious figures before the revolution manifest the interrelationship of four concerns. First, they consider the state of Israel a pedestal of imperialism in the heart of the Muslim heartland. Second, Israel has occupied a crucial part of the Islamic realm that includes the al-Aqsa Mosque and is systematically oppressing a Muslim people while in a state of aggression against other Muslim states. Given these circumstances, Muslims are obliged to defend their land and beliefs. Third, because the state of Israel had developed and maintained close relations with the Shah's regime, it was therefore also guilty of participating in the oppression of Muslims in Iran as well as Palestine. Fourth and finally, in the eyes of Iranian Muslims, the Palestine struggle represented a just cause. In the following chapter, I will examine how these trends developed after the revolution of 1979.

Notes

- 1 For more information on the CIA-MI6-led coup of 1953 against Prime Minister Mossadeq and its aftermath, see Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of the Revolution*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003, chapters 6 and 7.
- 2 Ervand Abrahamian, "The Guerrilla Movement in Iran, 1963–1977", *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)*, No. 86: The Left Forces in Iran (March–April 1980), pp. 3–15.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 See Safa-i Farahani, *Ancheh Yek Inqelabi Bayad Bedanad* [What a Revolutionary Must Know]. Available at www.adabestanekave.com/book/Anche_yek_enghelabi_bayad_bedanad.pdf [Accessed 16 April 2013].
- 8 Sepehr Zabih, *The Left in Contemporary Iran: Ideology, Organisation and the Soviet Connection*, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1986, pp. 113–114.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 10 Ervand Abrahamian, "The Guerrilla Movement in Iran, 1963–1977", p. 6.
- 11 Mahmood Naderi, *Cherikhay-e Fedayee Khal, Az Nokhostin Koneshha ta Bahman 1357* [The Organisation of Iranian People's Fedayeen Guerrillas, From Early Action to February 1979], Tehran: Moaseseh-e Motaleaat va Pajooheshay-e Siyasi [The Institutes for Political Research and Studies], 1387 [2008], pp. 134. According to Naderi, Iran's Home Secretary expatriated two Iraqi Marxists named Seyed Idris al-Jobouri and Kamal al-Kamali (who had escaped from al-Hellah prison and took refuge in Iran) to Baghdad in order to convince the Iraqi counterpart to deport Saf-i Farahani to Iran.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 132–136.
- 13 For more information on the Siyahkal insurgency, see Sepehr Zabih, *The Left in Contemporary Iran*, chapter 5.

- 14 Ervand Abrahamian, "The Guerrilla Movement in Iran, 1963–1977", p. 8.
- 15 Ibid., p. 8.
- 16 For more information on Iraj Sepehri's journey to Palestine, see Iraj Sepehri, "Az Jebhe Nabard-e Felestin, Khatera'at Iraj Sepehri" [From the Battlefield of Palestine, the Memoir of Comrade Iraj Sepehri], *Sazman Cherikhay-e Fedayeen Khalq*, 1977. Available at www.iran-archiv.com/sites/default/files/sanad/cherikha_ta_1357-felestin_sepehri.pdf [Accessed 18 April 2013]. Iraj Sepehri was ambushed and killed in an open battle with the Iranian border forces upon his return from Palestine in 1974.
- 17 Ervand Abrahamian, "The Guerrilla Movement in Iran, 1963–1977", p. 8.
- 18 Houshang E. Chehabi (ed.), *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2006, p. 188.
- 19 Ervand Abrahamian, "The Guerrilla Movement in Iran, 1963–1977", pp. 8–9 and Sepehr Zabih, *The Left in Contemporary Iran*, pp. 71–73.
- 20 Sepehr Zabih, *The Left in Contemporary Iran*, pp. 70–74. According to Zabih, the National Front (NF) was the major pro-Mossadeq political force. After the 1953 coup against the democratically elected Prime Minister Mossadeq, its members were imprisoned or retired. The NF was recreated in 1954 under the name Nehzate Moghavemate Melli (National Resistance Movement) and included leftists, nationalists and Islamist activists. The split in the leadership of the movement resulted in the formation of a number of political groups including the Liberation Movement of Iran. Due to its relatively more radical positions and more vigorous anti-imperialistic and anti-monarchical stance, the LMI attracted highly motivated younger people to its ranks.
- 21 Ervand Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojahedin*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989, pp. 85–86.
- 22 Ibid., p. 89. According to Abrahamian, the central ideological committee included Mohammad Hanifnezhad, Said Mohsen, Ali-Asghar Badizadegan, Mahmud Asgarizadeh, Abdel-Rasul Meshkinfam, Ahmad Rezai, Ali Mihandust, Naser Sadeq, Ali Bakeri, Mohammad and Bahman Bazargani and Masoud Rajavi. The majority of its leadership cadre were the sons of traditional and religious-minded bazaar middle-classes. For more information on the composition of the committee, see Ervand Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojahedin*, chapter 3.
- 23 Ibid., p. 99.
- 24 Ibid., p. 92.
- 25 Ibid., p. 101.
- 26 The Society of Editors of the Institute of Political Studies and Research, *Sazman-e Mojahedin Khalq; Peydayee ta Farjam 1344–1384* [The Organisation of the People's Mojahedin; Emergence to the End, 1965–2005], Tehran: Moaseseh Motaleaat va Pajooheshhay-e Siyasi [The Institute of Political Studies and Research], 1389 [2010], p. 395.
- 27 Ibid., p. 397.
- 28 Houshang E. Chehabi (ed.), *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, p. 185. According to Chehabi, the Mojahedin were sent to Syria and Lebanon by Fatah when the Jordanian army put a bloody end to the Palestinian military presence in Jordan in September 1970.
- 29 The Society of Editors of The Institute of Political Studies and Research, *Sazman-e Mojahedin Khalq; Peydayee ta Farjam 1344–1384*, p. 400. According to the document, after searching their accommodation, the Dubai police recovered a number of revolutionary pamphlets about Palestine and guerrilla movements in Venezuela, and a number of false travel documents. While in custody, the Mojahedin managed to send a letter to their fellow members in Iran via an Iranian prisoner and inform their central committee in Beirut about their arrests in Dubai.
- 30 Ibid., p. 403. In an interview in 1980, Hussein Ruhani admitted that upon their arrival in Baghdad, the group of nine Mojahedin were subjected to torture and systematic interrogation until Fatah intervened.
- 31 Ibid., pp. 404–406.

- 32 Ibid., p. 404.
- 33 Ibid., p. 407. According to the document, the Mojahedin's organisation claimed that the Camp of Hassan-Sallameh was named after Meshkinfam's nickname.
- 34 Houshang E. Chehabi (ed.), *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, pp. 186–187.
- 35 Ervand Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojahedin*, p. 128. According to Abrahamian, the Mojahedin had planned to sabotage celebrations of the anniversary of 2,500 years of monarchy. However, SAVAK infiltrated the group and arrested 30 members of the Mojahedin a few days before the scheduled bombing.
- 36 Ibid., pp. 128–129.
- 37 Ibid., p. 137.
- 38 Houshang E. Chehabi, *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, pp. 186–187.
- 39 Said Mohsen, *Matn-e Defaayie Mojahed-e Shahid Said Mohsen dar dadgah-e Nezami* [The Defense Statement of Martyr Said Mohsen in the Military Tribunal], The Mojahedin's Publication, Winter 1972. Available at www.iran-archive.com/sites/default/files/sanad/mojahedine_khalgh-defaaiate_said_mohsen.pdf [Accessed 26 April 2013].
- 40 The Society of Editors of the Institute of Political Studies and Research, *Sazeman-e Mojahedin Khalq; Peydayee ta Farjam 1344–1384*, p. 667. For the full statement, see pp. 665–677.
- 41 Ervand Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojahedin*, p. 102.
- 42 The Society of Editors of The Institute of Political Studies and Research, *Sazeman-e Mojahedin Khalq; Peydayee ta Farjam 1344–1384*, pp. 373–377.
- 43 Houshang E. Chehabi, *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, p. 189.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 The various editions of *Bakhtar-e Emruz* can be found at www.peykarandeesh.org/Niruhaye-Digar/bakhtare-emrooz.html [Accessed 3 May 2013].
- 47 *Bakhtar-e Emruz*, February 1976 edition. Available at <http://peykarandeesh.org/Niruhaye-Digar/bakhtare-emrooz/bakhtare-emrooz-70.pdf> [Accessed 3 May 2013].
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 *Bakhtar-e Emruz*, October 1971 edition. Available at <http://peykarandeesh.org/Niruhaye-Digar/bakhtare-emrooz/bakhtare-emrooz-17.pdf> [Accessed 4 May 2013].
- 50 *Bakhtar-e Emruz*, October 1973 edition. Available at <http://peykarandeesh.org/Niruhaye-Digar/bakhtare-emrooz/bakhtare-emrooz-46.pdf> [Accessed 5 May 2013].
- 51 *Bakhtar-e Emruz*, February 1976 edition. Available at <http://peykarandeesh.org/Niruhaye-Digar/bakhtare-emrooz/bakhtare-emrooz-70.pdf> [Accessed 5 May 2013].
- 52 Ali Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals in the 20th Century*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998, p. 192.
- 53 Fred Haliday, *Arabia Without Sultans*, London: Saqi Books, 2002, p. 488.
- 54 For full context of Shokrollah Paknezhad's last testimony, see Shokrollah Paknezhad, *Akharin Defa'e Grouh-e Felestin dar Dadgah-e Nezami* [The Last Defence Testimony of the Palestine Group in the Military Tribunal]. Available at www.iran-archive.com/sites/default/files/sanad/defaaiate_taregol.pdf [Accessed 6 May 2013].
- 55 Afshin Matin-Asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, Santa Ana, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2002, p. 163.
- 56 Ibid., p. 39.
- 57 Ibid., p. 132. The CISNU had conveyed a special message addressed to Ayatollah Khomeini, highlighting its supports for the struggle of Iran's clergy against Zionism, colonialism and internal repression.
- 58 Ibid., p. 104.
- 59 Ibid., pp. 110–111.
- 60 For more detail on this, see Afshin Matin-Asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, pp. 120–123.

- 61 Ibid., p. 123. According to Matin-Asgari, the CISNU resolution also denounced the Iraqi regime's attempts to expel Iranians and claim that Khuzestan and the Persian Gulf were Arab.
- 62 Ibid., p. 135.
- 63 Ibid., pp. 135–136.
- 64 Khair el-Din Hasseb, *Arab-Iranian Relations*, p. 351.
- 65 Seyed Abbas Razavi, "Ulamay-e Shiie va Hemayat-e Feqhi va Siyasi az Filistin" [The Shia Clergy and the Islamic Jurisprudent and Political Support for Palestine], *Paygaah-e Ete-laa Resaani-e Hawzah*, Azaar-e 1381 (Autum 2002), Tehran, Vol. 78. Available at www.hawzah.net/fa/magazine/magart/0/0/23462?SearchText=%d8%b4%d9%8a%d8%b9%d9%87+%d9%88+%d9%81%d9%84%d8%b3%d8%b7%d9%8a%d9%86 [Accessed 8 July 2013].
- 66 Mohammad Rajabi and Hassan Derangi, *Mojahadat-hay-e Ayatollah Seyed Abul-Qassem Kashani* [A View of Ayatollah Kashani's Struggle], The Islamic Revolution Document Centre, 29/09/1387 (Summer 2008). Available at www.irdc.ir/fa/content/5878/default.aspx [Accessed 16 July 2013].
- 67 Hamidreza Dehghani, "Iran's Role in Opposition to the Partition of Palestine", *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. XXI, No. 3, Tehran (Summer 2009), p. 71.
- 68 Ibid., pp. 71–72. With the fall of Mossadeq's cabinet in 1953, the Shah's regime resumed its relations with Israel and sent a new representative there in 1957.
- 69 M. Rajabi and Derangi Hassan, *Mojahadat-hay-e Ayatollah Seyed Abul-Qassem Kashani*.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Seyed Mohammad Ali Taghavi, "Fadaeeyan-i Islam: The Prototype of Islamic Hard-Liners in Iran", *Middle East Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (January 2004), p. 153.
- 72 Ali Rahnama, *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran: Thugs, Turncoats, Soldiers, and Spooks*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 307.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 Ibid.
- 75 Ibid., p. 156.
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 Ibid., p. 159.
- 78 Ibid.
- 79 Seyed Abbas Razavi, "Ulamay-e Shiie va Hemayat-e Feqhi va Siyasi az Filistin," p. 4. The Iranian Government did not approve Fadaeeyan-i Islam's demand for going to Palestine and joining the Palestinian fighters. Available at www.hawzah.net/fa/magazine/magart/0/0/23462?SearchText=%d8%b4%d9%8a%d8%b9%d9%87+%d9%88+%d9%81%d9%84%d8%b3%d8%b7%d9%8a%d9%86 [Accessed 25 July 2013].
- 80 Ibid.
- 81 Ibid.
- 82 See Ayatollah Taleqani, *Yārān-e Imām beh Revāyat-e Asnād-e Sāvāk* [Ayatollah Taleqani, Imam Khomeini's Companions According to the Documents of SAVAK], Tehran: Markaz-e Barresi-e Asnād-e Tārikhī-e Vezārat-e Eṭṭ elāāt, Vol. 29, Part 2, 1382 [2003], p. 362.
- 83 Seyed Mohammad Ali Taghavi, "Fadaeeyan-i Islam: The Prototype of Islamic Hard-Liners in Iran", p. 162.
- 84 Ibid., p. 151.
- 85 Gary Legenhausen and Mehdi Abedi (eds.), *Jihad and Shahadat, Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, Washington, DC: Institute for Research and Islamic Studies, 1986, pp. 50–51.
- 86 Ibid., p. 51.
- 87 Ibid.
- 88 Ibid., p. 53.
- 89 Ibid., p. 59.
- 90 See Ayatollah Taleqani, *Yārān-e Imām beh Revāyat-e Asnād-e Sāvāk*, p. 10.
- 91 Ibid., p. 19. Ayatollah Taleqani collected the Iranians' *Zakat* and channelled them to the PLO through Egyptian consulate in Tehran.

- 92 Ibid., p. 615.
- 93 Ibid., p. 612.
- 94 See Ayatollah Taleqani, *Yārān-e Imām beh Revāyat-e Asnād-e Sāvāk*, pp. 67–68.
- 95 Ibid., 108.
- 96 Ibid., pp. 592–594.
- 97 Ibid., p. 594.
- 98 Ibid.
- 99 For more on Ayatollah Mutahhari, see Davari T. Mahmood, *The Political Thought of Ayatollah Mutahhari: An Iranian Theoretician of the Islamic State*, London: Routledge Curzon, 2005. Mutahhari was a prominent *Mujtahid* (Jurist) and known as one of the “theoreticians of Islamic rule” in Iran and as one of its main architects.
- 100 Gary Legenhausen and Mehdi Abedi (eds.), *Jihad and Shahadat*, p. 96.
- 101 Ibid., p. 94.
- 102 Ibid., p. 96.
- 103 Ibid.
- 104 Ibid., p. 97.
- 105 Ibid.
- 106 Ibid.
- 107 Ibid., p. 104.
- 108 Ibid., p. 105.
- 109 Ibid.
- 110 See *Alem-e Javidan*, *Ostad-e Shahid Murteza Mutahhari, Yārān-e Imām bih Revāyat-e Asnād-e Sāvāk* [The Martyr Mutahhari, Imam Khomeini’s Companion According to the Documents of SAVAK], Tehran: Markaz-e Barresi-e Asnād-e Tārikhī-e Vezārat-e Eṭṭ ilāāt, 1382 [2003], p. 219.
- 111 Ibid., p. 221. Ayatollah Tabatabai – also known as Alameh [Erudite] Tabatabai – was a prominent Shia cleric and Muslim thinker. He was born in 1902 in Tabriz and studied in Najaf in Iraq and in the city of Qom. He had lectured a number of prominent Islamic revolutionary figures, including Ayatollah Mutahhari, Ayatollah Beheshti, Dr. Mofatteh and Ayatollah Javadi-Amoli. Ayatollah Tabatabai’s books and theses were well-known, including his *Tafsir-al-Mizan*, *Principles of Philosophy and Realism* and *Haashiyeh bar Kifayat-al-Osuul*.
- 112 Ibid., p. 221 and p. 234. According to the SAVAK reports, the three sets of bank account details for supporting the PLO and the Palestinian refugees were (1) Meli Bank, account number: 77388, (2) Bank of Bazargani-e Markaz, account number: 45600, and (3) Bank of Saderat, Bazaar branch, account number: 9595.
- 113 Ibid., p. 224.
- 114 Ibid., pp. 290, 304.
- 115 Ibid., p. 137.
- 116 Ibid., p. 397. Ayatollah Mutahhari had delivered a speech in defence of unity between Sunnis and Shi’ites against the Jews at the El-Jawaad Mosque in Tehran on July 1972.
- 117 Ibid., pp. 231–232. Seyed Ali Khamenei was one of the companions of Ayatollah Khomeini and was close to Ayatollah Mutahhari. Khamenei was born in 1939 in the city of Mashhad and began engaging in political activities after 1963 when Ayatollah Khomeini intensified his anti-Shah and anti-imperialist activities. He actively participated in the revolutionary government and, after being elected as an MP for Tehran, served as president of the Islamic Republic. He was pronounced the Supreme Leader of the Revolution after Khomeini died.
- 118 Ibid., pp. 104–105.
- 119 Brad Hanson, “The Westoxication of Iran: Depictions and Reactions of Behrangi, al-e Ahmad, and Shariati”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (February 1983), p. 14.
- 120 Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1997, p. 306.
- 121 Ibid., p. 306.

- 122 Ibid., p. 112.
- 123 Ibid.
- 124 For Ashouri's article see Daryush Ashouri, "Zedde Sahyunism va Zedde Amperialism dar Sgarq", *Ferdowsi*, Issue 820 (11 July 1967), pp. 6–7.
- 125 Mahdi Ahoûie, "Ali Shariati on the Question of Palestine: Making a Sacred Symbol for Uprising Against Injustice and Domination," in *Ali Shariati and the Future of Social Theory: Religion, Revolution, and the Role of the Intellectual*, edited by Dustin J. Byrd, Olivet College, and Seyed Javad Miri, Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, NV, 2017, chapter 11, p. 201.
- 126 Ibid.
- 127 Ibid., p. 202.
- 128 Ibid.
- 129 Ibid., p. 204.
- 130 Ibid.
- 131 Ibid., p. 206.
- 132 Ibid.
- 133 Ibid.
- 134 Ibid., p. 210.
- 135 Ibid.
- 136 Ibid., p. 211.
- 137 Ibid.
- 138 Brad Hanson, "The Westoxication of Iran: Depictions and Reactions of Behrangi, al-e Ahmad, and Shariati", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (February 1983), p. 8.
- 139 Ibid., p. 12. A few years before his death, Jalal Al-e Ahmad recognised Islam as a route to salvation. His well-known book, *Khasi dar Miqaat*, was written after his pilgrimage to Mecca in which he demonstrates the significance of Islam from his point of view.
- 140 Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics*, p. 52.
- 141 Musa Sadr, a well-known high-ranking Shi'ite cleric, was born in 1928 in Cheharmardan, on the outskirts of Qom in Iran. He left Iran for Lebanon in 1959 and played a significant role in supporting the Shia community of south Lebanon until his mysterious disappearance in 1978. For more on Musa Sadr, see Houshang E. Chehabi (ed.), *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, chapter 6.
- 142 *Shahid Ayatollah Dr. Mofatteh, Yārān-e Imām beh Revāyat-e Asnād-e Sāvāk* [The Martyr Doctor Ayatollah Mofatteh: Imam Khomeini's Companions According to the Documents of SAVAK], Tehran: Markaz-e Barresi-e Asnād-e Tārikhī-e Vezārat-e Eṭṭ ilāāt, Part 6, 1382 [2003], p. 372.
- 143 Nikki R. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981, p. 229.
- 144 Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 1993, p. 21.
- 145 Ibid., pp. 21, 24.
- 146 Hamid Algar (ed.), *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press, 1981, p. 25.
- 147 Ibid., p. 46.
- 148 Ibid. Masjid al-Aqsa is the site in Jerusalem where the Prophet Mohammed is believed to have ascended to heaven (Quran 17:1), but it also encompasses the complex of mosques and buildings erected on the site.
- 149 Ibid., pp. 47–49.
- 150 Ibid., pp. 195–196.
- 151 Rouhollah Khomeini, *Felestin az Didgahe Emam Khomeini* [Palestine from Viewpoint of Imam Khomeini], Tehran: Moaseseh Nashr va Athaar-e Emam Khomeini, 1382 [2003], p. 7.
- 152 Hamid Algar (ed.), *Islam and Revolution*, p. 196.
- 153 Ibid., p. 197.

- 154 "Message of Ayatollah Khomeini to the Muslim Students in North America, July 10, 1972", in *ibid.*, p. 210.
- 155 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 156 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 157 Quran 2:191 states: "And kill them wherever you overtake them and expel them from wherever they have expelled you, and *fitnah* is worse than killing. And do not fight them at *al-Masjid al-Haram* until they fight you there. But if they fight you, then kill them. Such is the recompense of the disbelievers". Quran 2:193 also states that: "Fight them until there is no [more] *fitnah* and [until] worship is [acknowledged to be] for Allah. But if they cease, then there is to be no aggression except against the oppressors".
- 158 *Felestin az Didgah-e Imam Khomeini*, pp. 57–59.
- 159 Afshin Matin-Asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, p. 73. The Union of Islamic Students' Associations in Europe began publishing *Eslam: Maktab-e Mobarez* in 1967, which later became the joint organ of the European and the North American Islamic Student Association. The latter organisation was formed by Mustafa Chamran, and joined the Muslim Student Association (MSA) of the United States and Canada as its "Persian Speaking group". Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Beheshti, Sadeq Qotbzadeh and Abolhassan Banisadr were well-known figures who had advocated the formation of the Union of the Islamic Students in Europe and the United States.
- 160 Mujtaba Baqernejad, *Tarikhch-e Mobarezaat-e Eslami Daneshjooyan-e Irani dar kharej az keshvar 1344–1360* [A History of Islamic Struggle of the Iranian Students Abroad 1965–1981], Tehran: Entesharat-e Etelaat, 1386 [2007], p. 133.
- 161 *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- 162 *Ibid.*, pp. 164–165, 200.
- 163 *Ibid.*, pp. 164–166.
- 164 Houshang E. Chehabi, *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, p. 184.
- 165 Mostafa Chamran, *Lobnan* [Lebanon], Tehran: Bonyaad-e Shahid Chamran, 1389 [2011], p. 91.
- 166 Houshang E. Chehabi, *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, pp. 184–185.
- 167 The Palestinian fighters moved from Jordan after being militarily coerced by the Jordanian government in September 1970 – an episode known as Black September.
- 168 Mostafa Chamran, *Lobnan* [Lebanon], pp. 115–116.
- 169 *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- 170 *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- 171 *Ibid.*, p. 125. After Musa Sadr had lent strong support for the Palestinians, Lebanese President Suleiman Faranjiieh ordered the Army to cease its military operations against Palestinian fighters.
- 172 *Ibid.*, pp. 276, 282. Bint Jbeil is the second largest town in the Nabatiyeh Governorate, which borders with Israel. Chamran, his followers and Amal, in coordination with Fatah, had managed to prevent Israeli troops from entering Bint Jbeil. In his book, Chamran praises Amal and the Fatah fighters for their bravery.
- 173 *Ibid.*, p. 313.
- 174 *Ibid.*, p. 381.
- 175 Houshang E. Chehabi, *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, pp. 190–191.
- 176 *Ibid.*, p. 193.
- 177 *Ibid.* Ayatollah Muntazeri was one of the most prominent followers of Ayatollah Khomeini. Assigned as the deputy to the Supreme Leader in 1985, he was subsequently discharged from his position in 1989 due to his disapproval of some of the internal policies of the Islamic Republic.
- 178 Houshang E. Chehabi, *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, p. 193.
- 179 *Ibid.*
- 180 The rank of marja' al-taqlid represents the highest religious authority in Shiism. In Arabic, the plural is Marajii.

- 181 Amir Abbas Hoveyda, the Iranian Prime Minister (1965–1977).
- 182 *Asnād-e Inqilāb-e Islāmī* [Islamic Revolution Documents], 1st edition, Tehran: Markaz-e Asnād-e Inqilāb-e Islāmī [The Islamic Revolution Document Centre], 1374 [1995], p. 307.
- 183 *Ibid.*, pp. 308–309.
- 184 *Ibid.*, p. 325.
- 185 *Ibid.*, p. 314.
- 186 *Ibid.*, p. 317.
- 187 *Ibid.*, p. 334.
- 188 *Shahid Ayatollah Dr. Mofatteh, Yārān-e Imām beh Revāyat-e Asnād-e Sāvāk*, p. 241.
- 189 *Ibid.*, p. 242.
- 190 *Asnād-e inqilāb-e Islāmī* [Documents of the Islamic Revolution], Vol. 5, Tehran: Markaz-e Asnād-e Inqilāb-e-Islāmī [the Islamic Revolution Document Centre], 1374 [1995], pp. 126–127. Grand Ayatollah Shariatmadari (1905–1986) issued a *fatwa* in June 1967 denouncing the Israeli regime and clarified that there existed an obligation for the Muslims to support the Palestinians financially and morally.
- 191 *Ibid.*, p. 155. In October 1973, Grand Ayatollah Seyed Mohammed Sadeq Rowhani issued an open letter to President Sadat of Egypt, President Assad of Syria, and President Hassan al-Baker of Iraq, stating that Iranian Muslims supported their Arab Muslim brothers wholeheartedly in their holy struggle against the Zionist regime and Western imperialism.
- 192 *Asnād-i inqilāb-i Islāmī*, Vol. 1, p. 361. On 9 October 9 1973, Grand Ayatollah Abulqasem al-Khoei issued a statement regarding the Arab-Israeli War of that year. Ayatollah Khoei clarified that Iranian Muslims supported the Arabs in this conflict and denounced Israeli aggression. He called on Muslims to unite and defend the holyland of Palestine.
- 193 *Ibid.*, p. 305. In June 1967, Grand Ayatollah Mohsen Tabatabaei Hakim (1889–1970) issued a *fatwa* stating that “[n]ow the *Jihad* against the Zionist regime has begun all Muslims must unite and coordinate in order to not allow the Zionists to kill the Palestinians and loot their possessions”.

2

IRAN'S RELATIONS WITH PALESTINE DURING THE FIRST DECADE OF THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

Emerging from the Islamic ideas of the Shia *Marajii* – Ayatollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Kashani, Ayatollah Taleqani, and the Third-Worldism of Ali Shariati and the anti-imperialism of Iranian leftists, a broad range of revolutionary Iranian activists have defined the revolution as the revolution of oppressed over the oppressors. Those who resisted the Shah's regime concluded that their predicament was an outcome of wider global phenomena, most notably Zionism and American imperialism. Hence, Iran's revolutionaries thought that the Islamic revolution would be concretely safeguarded by defeating the twin threats of Zionism and imperialism, particularly within the region. There was an unwritten consensus amongst the Iranian revolutionaries that their triumph would motivate other like-minded movements throughout the region. Iranian revolutionaries, particularly the zealous followers of Ayatollah Khomeini and Shia *Marajii*, were inspired by Islamic teachings that it was their duty to lead a resistance against the oppressors, particularly those in Muslim nations. It was therefore not surprising that the Palestinian cause became a focal point for revolutionary Iran. In the aftermath of the revolution in Iran, many Iranian activists believed that it was the time for the country's officials to put into play a new pro-Palestinian foreign policy.

This chapter will examine the Islamic Republic of Iran's relations with the PLO after 1979. Through its course, I will look at two episodes in particular: the Iranian hostage crisis and the Iran-Iraq war. I suggest that during these episodes, certain ideological differences between Iran's Islamic leadership and the PLO surfaced. My intention is not to repeat the history of these episodes as this is beyond the scope of this book. However, I offer a fresh analysis and argue that Iran's ideological differences with the PLO's leadership guided the relations between the two sides from a revolutionary engagement to an ideological estrangement. Nevertheless, revolutionary Iran maintained its strong support for the Palestinian cause because of an ideological lineage it shared with the activism of Iranians before the revolution.

Iran's relations with the PLO, 1979–1988: from revolutionary engagement to ideological estrangement

A few days after the triumph of the revolution in Iran, on 17 February 1979, Yasser Arafat became the first foreign leader to visit Tehran – unannounced.¹ According to Arafat's personal advisor Bassam Abu Sharif, as soon as news of Ayatollah Khomeini's return reached Arafat, he asked his pilot to prepare his private jet to fly to Iran. Although, the Lebanese civil aviation officials informed him of Iran's airspace closure, Arafat ignored their warnings, stating impatiently, "I assume all responsibilities, let us take off immediately".² Upon entering Iranian airspace, Arafat's plane was surrounded by Iranian fighter jets warning the pilot to head back. Onboard, Arafat signalled to the Iranian fighter jet pilots from a window. As Abu Sharif describes, Arafat took off his iconic Palestinian black and white head dress and waved it at the fighter jets' pilots, aiming to show them that his jet contained the leader of the PLO. After a while, as the pilots seemingly contacted Tehran, Arafat's plane was given permission to land and escorted to Tehran's Mehrabad Airport. After landing, Arafat announced:

When one comes to one's home, one does not need permission. [. . .] The Iranian revolution was a major revolution and an important victory for Palestine. [. . .] When I approached Mehrabad Airport, I felt as if I was landing in Jerusalem. [. . .] The Iranian revolution proved that Islam and the Muslims will not bow to oppression and bullying. [. . .] The Iranian revolution released the Palestinians from the barriers surrounding them.³

Upon their arrival, the Palestinian delegates were received and warmly embraced by a number of high-ranking revolutionaries, and the Palestinian convoy immediately moved towards Ayatollah Khomeini's temporary quarters. Holding the pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini, they chanted, "Today Iran, tomorrow Palestine".

The Palestinian delegation accompanying Arafat consisted of 59 high-ranking members. Importantly, all of them were from Fatah. According to Chris Ioannides, the leaders of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the Marxist and Christian PFLP, were not represented.⁴ We may interpret this absence as a deliberate tactic on the part of Arafat to demonstrate the "Islamic side" of his solidarity with Ayatollah Khomeini and Iran's revolution. According to Abu Sharif, Arafat was warmly welcomed and spent an hour with Ayatollah Khomeini discussing the Palestinian cause.⁵ Shortly after visiting Ayatollah Khomeini, Arafat, in a symbolic gesture, accompanied by a Palestinian woman who had lost three of her sons during the war with Israel, paid homage to the martyrs of the Iranian revolution by visiting Behesht-e Zahracemetery. The Palestinian delegates were greeted by a large number of Iranians chanting pro-Palestinian slogans. Choking back tears, Arafat spoke with intensity about the need for Muslim solidarity.⁶ Arafat and his delegates also met with members of the Provisional Government's cabinet. During his visit, Arafat was routinely accompanied by high-profile Iranian revolutionaries,

most notably Hojjatoleslam Seyed Ahmad Khomeini (Ayatollah Khomeini's son) and deputy prime minister of the provisional government, Ibrahim Yazdi. Having established good connections with other revolutionary figures prior to 1979, Arafat conducted private meetings with Ayatollah Taleqani and a number of left-wing revolutionaries, including the Mojahedin and Fadaye'en.⁷

Two days after first arriving in Tehran, Arafat, along with Ahmad Khomeini and Yazdi and a number of members of the Mojahedin and Fadaye'en, arrived at the former Israeli consulate in Tehran and accepted the premises as the official embassy of the PLO in Iran. Arafat appointed Hani al-Hassan as ambassador of Palestine to Tehran. From the rooftop of the embassy, the chairman of PLO delivered a speech in front of a large crowd:

In these sensitive moments, in the name of revolutionaries and Palestinian fighters, I pledge myself that, under the leadership of the great Imam Khomeini, we will liberate the Palestinian homeland together. The path we have chosen is identical; we are moving forward on the same path; we are fighting the same struggle, the same revolution; our nation is one, [. . .] we are all Muslims; we are all Islamic revolutionaries; all fighting for the establishment of one body of Islamic believers. We will continue our struggle against Zionism and move towards Palestine alongside Iranian Islamic revolutionaries.⁸

Accompanied by his PLO delegation, Arafat also held meetings at the Foreign Ministry of the provisional government, stating:

I tell you that I am with you, [. . .] we are living in an era of the people's triumph against imperialism and Zionism. [. . .] We promise to work with this revolution, with all its humane and civilised content, in order to build this new era together – an era which dawned to us in this area with the launching of your revolution under Ayatollah Khomeini. [. . .] We will proceed two revolutions in one and two people in one. [. . .] Together we will proceed towards victory. [. . .] In the name of Khomeini, we opened the PLO office today.⁹

Arafat also visited a number of Iran's larger cities that had become famous for their anti-Shah demonstrations, such as Mashhad, Tabriz and Ahvaz. In Mashhad, Arafat was greeted by local *ulama* and revolutionary fighters. Ayatollah Tiffi, who commanded the revolutionary council in Mashhad, welcomed him and stated that revolutionary airforce personnel in Mashhad were in full support of their brothers in Palestine, ready to fight against the "Zionist enemy". Arafat thanked the people of Mashhad and chanted that "it is a revolution until victory".¹⁰ In Ahvaz, Arafat was welcomed by thousands of Iranians gathered at Ahvaz Sports Stadium. Addressing the crowd, Arafat said, "Let Carter know that this link between the two revolutions will direct and move the convoys and armies to Palestine to liberate it from Zionist invaders".¹¹

On 23 February 1979, at the end of his historic six-day visit to Iran, Arafat headed to Abu Dhabi to meet with the United Arab Emirates' authorities. Before leaving Iran, Arafat presented a model of the Jerusalem Dome of the Rock as gift to Ayatollah Khomeini. Accompanied by Abu Mazin and Hani al-Hassan, Arafat met with the Islamic revolutionary Council and spoke on Iranian radio stations. Speaking about Iran's relations with Palestine, Arafat stated:

Iranian-Palestinian relations started 18 years ago. [. . .] [S]everal Iranian brothers fought among our ranks. The rest of the story about Iranian-Palestinian relations I will leave for the history to tell. While you [Iranian people] were struggling against the imperialist regime, you were also fighting with us, [. . .] [T]his revolution under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, has changed the circumstances in the area. Kissinger will have to get a new computer because his old one did not predict the eruption of the glorious Iranian revolution.¹²

Shortly after Arafat's visit to Iran, people throughout the region – attracted to its pro-Palestinian stance – demonstrated in solidarity with Iran's revolution. In Bahrain, a large number of people, gathering around the Iranian embassy in support of Iran's revolution, carried portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini and Arafat.¹³ Once in Abu Dhabi, Arafat in an interview spoke about the impressions he gained during his visit to Iran. In response to a question regarding Iran's stance on the Arab situation, Arafat stated:

The faithful Iranian Islamic revolution is linked to the Arab nation with the deepest bond, The Almighty God's holy Koran. This relation will be further consolidated as we proceed from our one creed, one faith and our common existence. [. . .] Everything I saw in Iran was above my material expectations and within my spiritual expectations. The new regime in Iran has rectified relations with the PLO.¹⁴

There was almost excessive coverage of Arafat, wearing his iconic Palestinian headscarf, embracing Ayatollah Khomeini, and making his emotional statements in Iran's media. The Palestinian flag beside Iran's revolutionary's banner could be seen painted on the walls of the Palestinian embassy and Iranian governmental buildings. All these metaphorical momentary developments were not simply allegorical gestures but rather represented the rapid invalidation and dismantling of Pahlavi's relations with Israel. It was a reversal of policies as new revolutionary and Islamic beliefs came to shape Iran's global image. To understand the foundation of Iran's relation with the PLO, it is vital to address two fundamental questions. First, how did the Palestinians perceive the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran? Second, how did the leadership of the Islamic revolution envision the future of Iranian-Palestinian relations?

The PLO's perception of the Islamic revolution in Iran

The Iranian revolution of 1979 marked a turning point in the contemporary history of the region. It had triumphed at a propitious time for the Palestinians, who were encountering an ostensibly unbeatable enemy in their battle against Israel. Egypt, the most populated and militarily powerful Arab state that had engaged in direct military hostilities against Israel since 1948, was negotiating the Camp David peace accords with Israel. According to Ioannides, the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement was seen as a most serious blow to the Palestinian movement, for it detached Cairo from the line of resistance against Israel. At this time, the Iranian Revolution served to boost the morale of the Palestinians and compensated for the loss of Egypt.¹⁵ In regard to the loss of Egypt and the triumph of the Iranian revolution, Arafat stated:

The [Iranian revolution] has reversed the strategic balance in the Middle East against Israel and the United States. The Camp David document will be merely ink on paper following the basic changes brought by the Iranian revolution, both in the region and our Islamic nation and in world strategy.¹⁶

Yet the Palestinian perception of the Iranian Revolution is rooted in a history that goes back further than the Camp David Accords and the subsequent loss of Egypt. The failure of the Arab states, which had adopted a pan-Arab ideology in confronting Israel, had sent a clear and bitter message for the Palestinian people that Arab nationalism had encountered a dead end. For the Palestinians, the failure of the Arab states during the 1967 war and the brutal coercion of Palestinian guerrillas by the Royal Jordanian Army during Black September in 1970 became precedents for the humiliation and failure caused by the Camp David peace accords between Israel and Egypt. In fact, one can argue that Palestinian movements became frustrated with the incompetence of Arab states in changing the strategic balance of power that had favoured Israel in the post-1967 era.

Adeed Dawisha argues that before the triumph of the Iranian revolution, Arab nationalism met its Waterloo in June 1967, where it was put to the test and found wanting.¹⁷ On one of the most crucial issues on the agenda for Arab nationalism – the rights of Palestinians – it could not deliver. To the mass Arab Muslim public, the victories of the Ayatollah during 1979 and 1980 over the “enemies of Islam”, embodied by the West and its enfeebled lackeys in the Muslim world, represented the advent of a new heroic age of Islamic assertion and power.¹⁸ The Iranian revolution, with its leadership's commitment to the Palestinian cause and their anti-Zionist ideological tendencies, were viewed positively by the Palestinian Liberation Movement as a valuable asset and a reliable power capable of enlarging the circle of hostility around Israel. As Barry Rubin argues, the triumph of Iran's Islamic revolution provided motivation for the PLO: If Ayatollah Khomeini could rise from obscurity and exile to conquer a seemingly invincible foe allied to and installed by the United States, Arafat believed he could follow the same path. In a similar vein, simply

handing the keys to the former Israeli embassy in Tehran to the PLO delegation handed a significant boost to Palestinian morale: “[A]fter more than two decades of struggle, this was the first piece of Israeli real estate Arafat had captured”.¹⁹

According to Babak Ganji, the PLO considered the Iranian Revolution as a major victory for the Palestinian cause, with Arafat hoping that revolutionary Iran would replace Egypt.²⁰ This assessment is plausible given that the PLO leadership aimed to build a new anti-Israeli bloc centred on Syria-Iraq and Lebanon, with Iran acting as a “strategic rear” for this coalition.²¹ Ganji adds that Arafat hoped the alliance would be empowered by the economic and political backing of Saudi Arabia. In other words, one can convincingly argue that Arafat aimed to draw a crescent consisting of conservative Arab states, pan-Arab regimes and the Islamic Republic around the Jewish state in order for them to gain an upperhand post-Camp David. In this regard, the PLO ambassador in Tehran, Hani al-Hassan, argued that the Iranian revolution had empowered the PLO to encircle Israel and possibly to defeat it.²² The PLO leadership therefore shaped and constructed its relations with revolutionary Iran from the very beginning of the Islamic revolution.

The perception of the Islamic revolution's leadership of the Palestinian cause

As noted and argued in the previous chapter, Iran's pre-revolutionary opposition established a historical connection to the Palestinian cause mainly based upon their anti-Zionist and anti-Imperialist ideologies. In the case of the country's religious leaders in general and Ayatollah Khomeini in particular, as noted, the Islamic teachings supporting the Islamic Ummah (Islamic community) and his opposition to the imperial powers became the foundation of his popular uprising and ultimately of his pro-Palestinian stance, not least because it solidified one of the main goals of the revolutionaries, that is, to change the regional status quo and to establish Iran as a regional power. Throughout his years in exile, Ayatollah Khomeini was an active supporter of the Palestinian cause. At quite an early stage of the revolution, he explicitly authorised Shi'ite religious taxes to be channelled towards supporting Palestinian fighters and refugees.²³ In a statement, he announced:

Today it is incumbent upon all Muslims in general and upon the Arab governments and administrations in particular to safeguard their own independence, to commit themselves to support and assist this valiant group. They should not spare any effort in arming, feeding, and supplying material for these fighters. It is also incumbent upon the valiant fighters [themselves] to trust in God, be bound by the teachings of the Quran, and with steadfastness and determination persist in their sacred objective.²⁴

Hamid Dabashi is of the opinion that Ayatollah Khomeini, from the very inception of his struggle against the Shah's regime, explicitly focused on the Palestinian cause. While advising his student followers to rally around the banner of Islam as the only banner of unity, what rekindled Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary

zeal in the 1970s were events related to the Palestinians in Lebanon rather than in Iran.²⁵ In order to understand how the leadership of the revolution in Iran aimed to construct Iran's relations with the PLO, one conversation in particular between Ayatollah Khomeini and Arafat merits being highlighted. During the first meeting between Ayatollah Khomeini and Arafat on 18 February 1979, both leaders highlighted their strong desire to strengthen their relationship. Ayatollah Khomeini focused on advising the PLO leadership so as to guide its struggle according to Islamic values. He specifically highlighted the Islamic dimension of the Palestinian cause as the most influential vehicle for the liberation of Palestinian land, stating:

I ask of God the Blessed and Exalted that our brethren nation of Palestine will overcome their difficulties. We are their brothers. From this movement's inception more than fifteen years ago, I have always, in my writings and speeches, spoken of Palestine and called attention to the crimes that Israel has perpetrated there. God willing, after we are freed from these fetters then to the same degree that we stood with you at that time and are now standing with you, I hope that we will confront the problems together like brothers. I beseech God the Blessed and Exalted to exalt Islam and the Muslims and to return Quds [Jerusalem] to our brothers.²⁶

Arafat, addressing Khomeini, expressed that:

[a]n earthquake is now in the offing and may have even arrived. "When thou throwest a spear, it was not thy act but God's". (Quran 8:17). In reply to Dayan and Begin, I told them they could go and choose a patron and rely on America, but I too could find support and indeed have done so: I rely on the Iranian nation under the leadership of His Holiness the Grand Āyatullāh Mūsawī al-Khomeini.²⁷

Ayatollah Khomeini responded by emphasising and recommending to Arafat that hereinafter the Islamic faith within his liberation movement's strategy:

The Shah too relied on America, Britain, China, Israel and the others, but these refuges are powerless. That refuge which is not powerless, but powerful, is God. God is our refuge. I advise you, my own people and your people, to always turn to God, not to these powers. Do not rely on material things but on the spiritual. The power of God is greater than all these powers, thus it was that we saw a nation which was weak and empty-handed prevail over all the powers, and, God willing, will continue to do so. When we are with God, we are not afraid of anything, for if we are slain in the way of God, we are blessed, and if we stay in the way of God, we are also blessed. [. . .] We place our hopes in God and do not despair of Him. God willing, we will overcome our problems, but we don't believe we will overcome them through material means, victory is attained through spiritual means. As long as our people

put their trust in God the Blessed and Exalted, they will progress, and if, God forbid, there is any deviation, then it will be the end for us all.²⁸

Elsewhere, in a statement aimed at Muslim nations on 25 November 1979, Khomeini expressed the following:

Oh Muslims of the world! Oh you Muslims who have risen up! Oh endless sea of humanity! Rise up and defend your national and Islamic existence. Israel has taken Bayt al-Muqaddas from the Muslims and has met only tolerance from the [Muslim] governments. Apparently America and its corrupt appendage Israel now intend to seize the holy mosque and the mosque of the Prophet. Still the Muslims sit back, indifferent onlookers. Rise up and defend Islam and the centre of revelation. Do not be afraid of this ballyhoo, for today Islam needs you and you are responsible before God Almighty. Trust in God Almighty and march forth united.²⁹

A textual analysis of Ayatollah Khomeini's discourse highlights his own Islamic sentiments, and ultimately an emphasis on the religious dimension of the Palestinian cause. He was a cleric sitting on top of a partially theocratic state, after all. This material interest was closely married to the ideational context that I have set out, in that Palestine was both a mission these revolutionaries believed in and a convenient vehicle to claim Iranian suzerainty in the Muslim world. The ideological strategy is clear here: Khomeini's focus on the Shah's reliance on the United States and on other major powers as being the root cause for his failures served as a vehicle for castigating Arafat himself for having taken sides during the Cold War era. By stating, "I advise you and my people and your people not to rely on other powers but God", Khomeini clearly voiced his ideological-religious motivations, revealing how they had shaped his expectations of the PLO leadership. In other words, Khomeini highlighted the religious significance of the Palestinian cause and its proximity at the heart of the Islamic world. Furthermore, he urged Arafat to follow the "Islamic route" and in the process underline the Islamic character of the Palestinian struggle rather than its pan-Arab dimensions. This was convenient for the new leader of a self-processed Islamic state. Additional speeches of Khomeini on the Palestinian cause will be examined throughout this chapter in order to develop my argument further. In what follows, I investigate how the Islamic Republic of Iran began to implement its commitment to the Palestinian cause from the very beginning of the revolution.

Implementing pro-Palestinian slogans as policy: institutionalising Iran's relations with Palestine from the early stages of the Islamic revolution

One of the major tasks of the revolution was to reverse the foreign policies of the previous regime and in the process to implement the interests of the state. In October 1979, Ibrahim Yazdi, the foreign minister of Iran's revolutionary

government, took the opportunity to clarify revolutionary Iran's policies at one of the most important international stages: the United Nations. This was the first time the new government had communicated their aims and new policies on a world stage. In his statement to the General Assembly, Yazdi described the Shah's regime as a "puppet of imperialism and Zionism" and voiced Iran's solidarity with liberation movements throughout the world.³⁰ According to Yazdi, the Shah's delegation at the UN had sided with "American imperialism", racism and Zionism.³¹ Criticising Zionism and expressing strong support for the Palestinians, Yazdi described the former as "one of the most vicious forms of racism in recorded history"³² and sharply rebuked Western states for turning a blind eye toward Israeli aggression against the Palestinians. Yazdi expressed Iran's revolutionary opinion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, stating:

When Israeli bombers killed impoverished Palestinians and Lebanese, their Western media apologists described this genocide aggression as defensive aerial attack on Palestinian military bases. When the Palestinians blew up a bus in occupied Jerusalem or assassinated an Israeli secret agent, they were described as "terrorists".³³

The process of institutionalising anti-Zionism began with the immediate effect at the outset of the Islamic revolution. On both the international and regional levels, the Pahlavi attachment to Israel was entirely dismantled by the revolutionaries. According to R.K. Ramazani, Iran's relations with no other state in the world – including the United States – were so rapidly and radically subverted as its relations with Israel. In addition to Israel, Iran had severed relations with Egypt primarily due to Cairo's signing of the Camp David Accords.³⁴ The PLO was officially recognised and endorsed by the revolutionary government in Iran. Its delegation in Tehran was recognised as the ambassadorial representation of Palestine in Iran. The combination of Iran's severing its ties with Egypt and cutting off oil supplies to Israel is estimated to have cost Iran approximately \$700 million in annual revenue.³⁵ From an economic point of view, forfeiting such an amount in annual trade with Israel and Egypt at the early stage of the revolution meant that Iran would suffer severe economic setbacks, a choice that could not be explained with reference to purely cost-benefit or material analyses. Episodes such as this therefore highlight the importance of the beliefs and ideas in the foundation of Iran's anti-Zionist and pro-Palestinian stance.

As noted in the previous chapter, the process of institutionalising a pro-Palestinian stance began even before the triumph of the Islamic revolution through non-governmental and religious channels. In this regard, religious ceremonies were a factor in mobilising support for the Palestinian cause. We have seen previously that Khomeini and other Shia *Marajii*, as well as religious scholars like Ayatollah Kashani, Muttahari and Taleqani, designated religious taxes for supporting Palestinian activists. After 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers gained an opportunity to incorporate their position on Palestine into state agencies such

as the Foreign Ministry and to sever relations with Israel and recognise the PLO. Nevertheless, the revolutionary leadership continued to combine its new access to state apparatuses with its traditional approach of mobilising support using religious channels. Khomeini's most vital strategy was to transform the Palestinian struggle into an Islamic cause and internationalise the Palestinian question even beyond Arab territories, a strategy that was also pursued by earlier Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood established in Egypt in 1928. On 7 August 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini declared the last Friday of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan as the international day of Jerusalem (Quds): *Yom al-Quds*. In his announcement, Ayatollah Khomeini stated:

I ask all the Muslims of the world and the Muslim governments to join together to sever the hand of this usurper [Israel] and its supporters. I call on all the Muslims of the world to select as Quds Day the last Friday in the holy month of Ramadan which is itself a determining period and can also be the determiner of the Palestinian people's fate and through a ceremony demonstrating the solidarity of Muslims world-wide, announce their support for the legitimate rights of the Muslim people.³⁶

In order to outline the global implications and ideological reasoning of his announcing Quds day, Ayatollah Khomeini designated it as "the day for the weak and oppressed" to confront their oppressors, stating:

Quds Day is an international day, it is not a day devoted to Quds alone. It is the day for the weak and oppressed to confront the arrogant powers, the day for those nations suffering under the pressure of American oppression and oppression by other powers to confront the superpowers; [. . .] Quds Day is the day when the fate of the oppressed nations should be determined. The oppressed nations should announce their existence against the oppressors and just as Iran rose up and rubbed the noses of the oppressors in the dirt, and will continue to do so, so too all the nations should rise up and throw these germs of corruption into the rubbish bin. Quds Day is the day when the superpowers should be warned to stay at home and leave the oppressed alone. Israel, the enemy of mankind, the enemy of humanity, which is creating disturbances every day and is attacking our brothers in south Lebanon, must realise that its masters are no longer accepted in the world and must retreat. They must give up their ambitious designs on Iran, their hands must be severed from all the Islamic countries and their agents in these countries must step down. Quds Day is the day for announcing such things, for announcing such things to the satans who want to push the Islamic nations aside and bring the superpowers into the arena. Quds Day is the day to dash their hopes and warn them that those days are gone.³⁷

The leadership of the Islamic revolution was therefore very determined to put its pro-Palestinian ideas, tailored mainly on religious solidarity during the

pre-revolutionary period, into practice. This was the beginning of a new chapter in Iran's relations with the Palestinians. In what follows and throughout the next chapter, the ideological importance of declaring Quds day and Palestine's place in Iran's foreign policy will be examined further.

Before continuing to discuss the importance of ideology in revolutionary Iran's pro-Palestinian policies, our attention should return briefly to the history of Iran's relations with the PLO. At the beginning of the Islamic revolution in Iran, all indications pointed to a promising relationship between the new government and the PLO. On the surface, it seemed that Iran had compensated Arafat for the loss of Egypt and that the future of relations between Iran and the PLO was bright. However, the blue skies of Iranian-PLO relations became clouded shortly after the triumph of the Islamic revolution. In the light of this study, I suggest that two periods in particular – the Iranian Hostage Crisis, and the Iran-Iraq war –acted as catalysts in widening the ideological gap between the Islamic revolution and the PLO. However, the confines of this study do not allow me to examine the impact of these events on Iran's relations with the PLO in all its facets.

The takeover of the American embassy in Tehran, and the PLO's attempt at mediation

On 4 November 1979, a group of Iranian students calling themselves the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line occupied the American embassy in Tehran, holding 52 embassy staff hostage. This takeover triggered an international crisis that lasted for 444 days. The militant students, morally equipped with anti-imperialist ideas, demanded that the Shah be extradited to Iran immediately, and that Washington cease interfering in Iran's domestic policies. The seizure of American diplomats became a great concern for the White House. In desperation, the Carter administration sent a special envoy to Tehran to meet with Ayatollah Khomeini and to negotiate the release of hostages. According to Russell Leigh Moses, the Oval Office nominated former Attorney General Ramsey Clark and former Foreign Service Officer William Miller, staff director of the Senate Intelligent Committee, to be dispatched to conduct meetings with Iranian officials and resolve the hostage crisis.³⁸

Having received messages that Ayatollah Khomeini and the students refused any negotiations with American officials, the aircraft carrying Clark and Miller landed in Istanbul. These nominated American delegates attempted to contact Iranian officials from Istanbul. However, given the political dangers in Iran associated with communicating in even a minor fashion with U.S. officials, this dialogue was limited to third parties and did not yield tangible results. As Leigh Moses noted, it became evident to American officials that any plans that would rely on a direct channel of communication between the White House and Ayatollah Khomeini would be doomed to failure.³⁹ Director of the U.S. Iran Desk Henry Precht concluded that "the Iranians were simply not going to knuckle under to that old American pressure".⁴⁰ In fact, Clark and Miller's mission from its very beginning failed to materialise its objective of negotiating the release of the hostages.

At this critical moment for the Carter administration, the PLO leadership contacted U.S. officials expressing their desire to mediate between Tehran and Washington in order to help free the hostages. In fact, before Clark and Miller began to prepare for their mission, PLO representatives had already communicated with members of the American Congress expressing the PLO's willingness to intervene as a mediator. According to Leigh Moses, after receiving a green light from Washington, a three-man high-level PLO delegation arrived in Tehran to discuss the hostage crisis with Iranian officials, including Banisadr and Sadegh Ghotbzadeh – both high-profile members of the revolutionary government.⁴¹ Babak Ganji elaborates that on the same day of the embassy takeover, the PLO contacted the White House, and PLO mediation began promptly after the hostages were seized.⁴² It is vital to mention that the PLO had close ties with the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution (MIR), who played an instrumental role in the Iranian Revolution and formed the backbone of the Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), the most crucial armed force after 1979. Through MIR, which were close to the leaders of the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line – including Mohsen Mirdamadi, Abbas Abdi, Ibrahim Asgharzadeh and Ma'sumeh Ebtekar – the PLO aimed to facilitate the release of the American hostages.⁴³

In clarifying the ideological reasons for the embassy takeover, the hostagetakers highlighted their anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist beliefs as the main motivations for their action. As Ramazani notes, the student leaders emphasised repeatedly that their action aimed at “forestalling the return of both Israel and the U.S. to Iran through the back door”.⁴⁴ In other words, Israel was perceived by the Iranian revolutionaries as the illegitimate progeny of American imperialism. Ramazani argues that from the very moment of the embassy takeover, the Iranian revolutionaries concluded that under no circumstances could Iran compromise with Israel and that it was hence necessary to stand against any state backing Israel. The most often repeated rationale was that “Israel will never make any concessions to the Arabs”.⁴⁵

After the seizure of the U.S. Embassy, the student hostage-takers published a number of documents recovered from the embassy in a series of booklets named *Documents from the U.S. Espionage Den*. Some of these documents are especially revealing and demonstrate the anti-Zionist motives of the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line. Booklet no. 19, entitled *Israel, Foreign Intelligence and Security Services*, specifically focuses on the links between the Shah's government and Tel Aviv. Booklet no. 42, entitled *U.S. Intervention in the Islamic Countries, Palestine*, concentrates on the activities of the U.S. embassy in spying on Palestinian activists throughout the region. In the introduction of this particular booklet, the students state:

A lot has been told about Palestine, and the Palestinians. The story of oppression on this nation is an old and distressing one. Palestinian refugees, usurped lands, Deir Yasin, Kafr-Ghassem, Sabra and Shatila Massacres, Palestinians imprisoned in Zionist camps and all the oppression borne on this heroic and resistant nation, are all countless crimes committed by Zionists and their

Imperialist supporters. Our Muslim nation is aware of Palestine problem, having declared our support for this homeless nation, before and after the Islamic revolution. Our nation has firmly decided to take revenge on Zionist enemies in the occupied lands. This nation's most fundamental and strategic goal is to liberate Quds. [. . .] The Palestinian nation can liberate Quds only under the banner of Islam. [. . .] Nationalism and other schools of thought will not solve the problems of Palestine. [. . .] The Palestinian nation will hopefully be able to liberate Quds, and the Muslim Iranian nation will keep being on their side.⁴⁶

According to the documents seized from the U.S. Embassy, the American government monitored with great concern Palestinian connections to the Iranian revolutionary state. According to classified documents, the Qatari Foreign Minister Ahmed bin Seif al-Thani raised his concern that, although the PLO was heavily dependent on the financial support from the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, financial support from revolutionary Iran could sway the PLO's leadership. Their concern was that revolutionary Iran's enthusiasm for the liberation of the Mosque of al-Aqsa could influence Palestinian activists and therefore reduce the influence of Arab states over the PLO.⁴⁷ Other documents also showed that during a discussion between American diplomats and Ibrahim Yazdi, he clarified the religious dimension of Iran's pro-Palestinian stance. They stated:

Iranians wanted the PLO to inject greater use of Islamic solidarity in its appeal. If the PLO continued its secular approach, victory was not assured. If the PLO created a Palestinian state on purely secular lines, the Marxists and radical-left Palestinians would move quickly to take over.⁴⁸

The document concludes that Yazdi made Iran's commitment to the Palestinian cause quite clear, as he stated, "We have helped them and we will help them in the future".⁴⁹

In another classified paper titled *Palestinian Activity in Iran*, the U.S. Embassy reports that efforts by the Palestinian Fadaye'en to obtain influence in revolutionary Iran reflected the rivalry between more moderate elements led by Arafat and other radical groups led by the PFLP under the command of George Habash. The report concludes that Arafat's PLO seemingly had succeeded in having Fatah dominate Palestinian activities in Iran. On the other hand, the documents also conclude that the PFLP held strong ties with left-wing Iranian revolutionaries, particularly the Mojahedin and dissidents in Khuzestan province.⁵⁰

The discovery of such specific documents from the U.S. Embassy that showed the close observation by American officials in Iran of Iranian connections to the Palestinian cause had a profound moral impact on the students who had seized the embassy. As noted in the introduction of the pamphlets, the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's line perceived the American actions as animosity of a "united front of imperialism-Zionism" against the Islamic revolution and the Palestinian

cause. For the student activists as well as revolutionary Iranians, these documents confirmed the strong link between the fate of the Islamic revolution and the Palestinian cause. This issue further tempered their anti-Zionist tendencies. What is crucial to note is that the PLO's offer to mediate between the revolutionary Iranians and the White House happened at a time when anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist sentiments were at their highest on the streets of Iran.

In her memoirs, Ma'sumeh Ebtekar – one of the leading figures of the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line – mentions the PLO's attempts for mediation: "Next in line [after the Clark-Miller mission] was a delegation from the PLO. That prospect presented us with a much more serious dilemma".⁵¹ According to her, from the earliest days of the hostage crisis, the Palestinians in Tehran had contacted Iranian officials in the hope of mediating. They then decided to send a senior delegation in an attempt to resolve the issue.⁵² Despite the visit by senior PLO members, including Abu Jihad, to the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, they were not allowed to enter the premises as mediators. Ebtekar expresses the gravity of the situation and the disappointment amongst the revolutionary Iranians, stating:

At the time the PLO had a reputable image. [. . .] The issue of Palestine and the liberation of Quds [Jerusalem] was a vital issue for Iranians, and had become one of the unwavering positions of the Islamic revolution. We saw the Palestinian cause as a sister revolution to our own. Some people even hoped that the PLO could put pressure on the U.S. They were to be disappointed.⁵³

After the failure of the PLO's leadership efforts to mediate between Iranian officials and the White House, PLO officials promptly denied that there had been any efforts to mediate. Hani al-Hassan, the director of the PLO bureau in Tehran, in a speech in Beirut stated:

The PLO is not an intermediary between Iran and America, Palestinians are on the same side as the Iranian revolution. [. . .] The Palestinian revolution and the Iranian revolution are in the same position, that is, both revolutions have attempted equally to fight imperialism. [. . .] The Palestinian revolution position is clear. This position is uncompromising. We are one side of the issue, not an intermediary. Any victory by the Iranian nation over the influence of American imperialism in the region should be considered a victory for the PLO.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, Bassam Abu Sharif, senior advisor to Arafat, describes the PLO as the closest political party to the Iranian revolution (at the time of the hostage crisis) and clarifies the PLO's strategy to mediate during the hostage crisis:

No one had made a move to contact the PLO, however, until a few representatives of the European countries unofficially asked president Arafat to test

the waters of negotiation with Khomeini. Arafat agreed. This was an excellent opportunity for him. If the PLO was successful in getting the hostages released, it would improve the PLO's status as a strong power in the Middle East, especially after Menachem Begin had rejected the participation of PLO in the peace talks at Camp David that eventually led to a signed peace treaty between Egypt and Israel on September 1978.⁵⁵

According to Ioannides, Khomeini refused to receive the PLO's special delegate Abu-Walid, and the militant students denounced the PLO's mediation attempts.⁵⁶ Both Khomeini and the militant students were incensed, the more so when Hani al-Hassan claimed credit for the 17 November release of black and female hostages.⁵⁷ Ayatollah Khomeini promptly castigated the PLO for "telling lies in order to get close to the United States".⁵⁸ To this end, Khomeini's office issued a strong rebuke to Hani al-Hassan for claiming credit for this decision:

If a representative of any organisation other than the PLO has said such things, we would not have been surprised, but it is highly questionable that the representative of an organisation that fights against Israel and knows that it is the U.S. that has forced Israel on dear Palestine and other Arab countries, should tell these lies in order to get closer to the United States. Mr. Hani al-Hassan knows very well that the Imam did not receive Mr. Abu-Walid, Mr. Arafat's envoy, solely because he had pro-American proposals; this office strongly denies the reports in the newspapers [. . .] and asks the Palestinian brothers, relying on the exalted God to stand against the United States to achieve the victory. They should be assured that only reliance on God can achieve victory.⁵⁹

Almost as soon as the PLO's efforts at mediation begun, they backfired. Ioannides elaborates that Arafat's mediation attempts not only angered the Iranians but also caused disagreements within the PLO. A number of the PLO's internal bodies – including the PFLP, the Sai'qa, the DFLP and even Arafat's own Fatah – announced solidarity with Iran and backed the embassy's takeover.⁶⁰ Arafat appeared to the Iranians as acting on behalf of the American government against the interests of Khomeini and ultimately against a revolution that undermined U.S. and Israeli interests in the region. Ioannides describes Arafat's mediation attempt as counter-productive, arguing that in the eyes of revolutionary Iranians and anti-imperialist Palestinians, Arafat appeared willing and ready to aid the Americans in recovering from Khomeini's humiliating blow by seeking the release of hostages.⁶¹ Fearing the loss of his anti-imperialist image, Arafat not only denied that the PLO had made attempts to mediate but also offered his unconditional support for Khomeini's stance. On 7 December 1979, Arafat in Beirut announced: "Tell our great Imam to give the order and we will all obey and move to strike imperialism at any time and in any place. The day will come when we will all say along with Imam Khomeini: join the *jihad* to liberate Jerusalem".⁶²

After the failure of Arafat to convince the leadership of the Islamic revolution to release the hostages, the PLO's leadership abandoned its pursuit of acting as a mediator. According to Barry Rubin, although Arafat exaggerated his role, he undoubtedly did – unsuccessfully – discuss freeing the American hostages with the Iranian officials and passed on information to Washington about developments on the ground during the crisis.⁶³ Rubin also argues that Arafat was eager to please the Iranians, as he believed the revolution offered him the opportunity to coordinate a regional alliance of Soviet-backed Arabs and Iran to confront Israel and the United States.⁶⁴ Yet, as Babak Ganji has shown, the Soviets were instrumental in changing Arafat's position. Ganji argues that the Soviet Foreign Minister Andre Gromyko strongly discouraged Arafat from pursuing mediation efforts, expressing that Moscow did not wish to protect American interests. Shortly afterwards, Arafat changed his position.⁶⁵ Ironically, a few years later in 1986, in an exclusive interview with the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Arafat confirmed that he attempted to help release the hostages:

I received an official request from high-level, official American sources asking me to help them, and I agreed. I sent a high level delegation to Iran that succeeded, on the first day, in releasing the first thirteen hostages. Later we engaged in mediation. [. . .] I was going to continue my efforts but too many people had gotten involved, and I told the American government that too many cooks spoil the broth, but no one listened. We did receive official thanks for what we did in Iran for them [them Americans] in Iran.⁶⁶

Khomeini, always also the Machiavellian politician, was aware of Arafat's manoeuvring. Arafat returned to Tehran on 11 February 1980 to attend the celebrations of the first anniversary of the revolution, visiting Ayatollah Khomeini in hospital as he recovered from a mild heart ailment. This time Arafat's presence received little attention from Iran's state media.⁶⁷ There was a tension at the heart of the PLO's priorities. On the one hand, its leadership endeavoured to gain recognition from the Americans and alter its image among U.S. allies – especially Western European states. If successful, this would enable Arafat to play a role within any possible future developments and negotiations orchestrated by the White House, such as the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel. On the other hand, it was vital for the PLO to maintain its alliance with Iran: a vital, energetic non-Arab and revolutionary Islamic state that could compensate the loss of Egypt and play a major role in the anti-Israeli front. The PLO's approach to the Tehran hostage crisis showed that its leadership failed to consider the significance of the role of religious and revolutionary ideologies as a driving force behind Iran's pro-Palestinian stance. Equally, the leadership of the Islamic revolution seemed unwilling to digest the rationale behind Arafat's mediation attempts. In other words, regardless of the nature of reasoning behind the PLO's mediation efforts, an ideological gap between the two sides became apparent during this episode. As noted previously, Iran's perception of the PLO as the legitimate representative of the people of Palestine was shattered during

the PLO's attempts at mediating between Iran and the "American empire". Nevertheless, the Islamic revolution did not publicly denounce the PLO and continued its strong support until a second regional development – the Iran-Iraq war – widened the ideological gap between the two sides even further.

The Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) and its implications for Iran-PLO relations

Iraqi armed forces, under the command of its Baathist leadership, conducted a full-scale invasion of Iran in late September 1980. The war would last for eight years. Almost immediately identifying the potentially devastating impact of the Iran-Iraq war on the "anti-Israeli front" and the possible relegation of the Palestinian cause to second place in the region, Arafat rushed to mediate between the two sides. According to Ali Akbar Velayati, the Iran-Iraq war was perceived by the PLO leadership as a spoiler for the Palestinian cause for the following reasons:⁶⁸ First, the war between two Muslim nations would divert attention away from Palestine and consequently pave the way for Israeli aggression (as Tel Aviv did by invading southern Lebanon in the summer of 1982). Second, the economic and military powers of these two nations were likewise being diverted away from defending Palestine towards a war waged by Saddam Hussein against Iran. Third, the war between Iran and Iraq threatened unity amongst the anti-Israeli camp of Arab states. The Arab states were divided into two lines: Syria, Libya and South Yemen backed Iran, and the other "conservative" Arab states supported Iraq.⁶⁹

Arafat audaciously began his intense mediation efforts as soon as the war erupted between Iran and Iraq. From the early stages of the conflict, Arafat attempted to remain impartial. On the day of the Iraqi invasion, Arafat cut short his visit to Bulgaria and sent a cable to the Iranian president Banisadr and Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein expressing his concerns:

With good intentions everything can be solved, and with will and faith we can find a solution for everything. Jerusalem is calling you, Palestine needs you and our nation wants your safety and its own. From my committed position, I appeal to you through your principled and responsible stands, filled with hope that this appeal which comes from my conscience, heart and faith will mend the rift, stem the deterioration and stop the tragedy.⁷⁰

On 24 September 1980, Arafat left Beirut for Baghdad and Tehran to meet with leaders of both states involved in the war. Accompanied by Hani al-Hassan and Abu Mayzar – the latter in charge of Fatah's foreign relations – Arafat arrived in the northern Iranian city of Rasht from Baghdad by way of Baku in the Soviet Union. The PLO delegation had talked earlier with Saddam Hussein and was due to meet Iranian officials in an attempt to end the war.⁷¹ Arafat conducted separate meetings with Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, speaker of the Islamic Consultative Assembly,⁷² Banisadr, and Prime Minister Mohammad Ali Raja'i to

discuss the Iraqi invasion of Iran and related developments.⁷³ According to Ban-isadr, Saddam Hussein assured Arafat of the outcome of his war against Iran and peremptorily informed him:

Do not concern yourself about that, it will last only a few days; it will be a simple exercise. The Palestinians will be the first to benefit from this war because a victory this quick will frighten the Israelis.⁷⁴

According to Velayati, the PLO proposed a roadmap in which the Iraqi regime was required to withdraw its armed forces from occupied Iranian territories immediately and postpone its land dispute with Iran. In return, Iran was required to accept bilateral negotiations with Iraq to resolve their disputes. Moreover, the proposed bilateral negotiations were to be conducted in a neutral country.⁷⁵ Despite intensive discussions, Arafat – unable to persuade Iranians to agree to an immediate cease-fire – left Tehran empty-handed. On the one hand, the ill-fated mediation efforts of Arafat caused the PLO to shift its policies away from favouring Iran and tilt more towards the Baathist regime. On the other hand, following Arafat's mediation efforts, the Islamic Republic's leadership lost even greater confidence in the intentions of the PLO.

It is necessary to take into consideration two factors before proceeding to conclusions: the main roots of the PLO's shift from favouring Iran to favouring Iraq and the reasons that the Islamic Republic rejected mediation efforts and the proposed "ceasefire". I suggest that ideology was pivotal in Iran's denunciation of mediation attempts. Equally, Arafat's pivot away from Iran towards Baathist Iraq had its roots in pan-Arabism. To this end, some related announcements and speeches of the leadership of the Islamic revolution are worthy of attention. From the very beginning of his first tour visiting Iran since the start of Iran-Iraq war, Arafat was confronted with Iran's uncompromising and ideologically driven position. On 29 September 1980, Ayatollah Khomeini's son, Seyed Ahmad Khomeini, in a joint public interview with Arafat, elaborated on Iran's position by announcing:

The main issue we are facing now is the issue of war. We are determined to continue this war. [. . .] Of course, we are not fighting with Iraq; infact we are fighting with America. [. . .] What matters to us is to say "no" to the superpowers, saying "no" to force and oppression. [. . .] Our position against Israel and the issue of occupied Palestine comes first. Twenty years ago, when there was not much mention of Israel's danger and even the heads of the Islamic countries were almost all quiet, the Imam talked about this danger. Secondly, Iran after the victory of the revolution cut all its relations with Israel, cut the oil, and recognised the PLO as the sole representative of the nation of Palestine and changed the equation throughout the world in the interest of the nation of Palestine. What country has changed its position like this after its victory? Thirdly, the issue of Palestine is a holy issue in Iran and Palestine is as important to Iranians as Iran is.⁷⁶

Seyed Ahmad Khomeini explicitly clarified Iran's expectation from the PLO's leadership on the issue of the Iran-Iraq war:

I told brother Yasser Arafat; What I expect of you is that you clearly define your stance in regard to the issue of Iran-Iraq without any political confrontation, because our people and we acted in the same way in our relationship with you. In no way is it in your interest to talk about negotiation and other things that I am sure you will not. I hope you are successful. To sum up in a word, be certain that we will not make the slightest change in our direction because what is important to us is the essence of Islam.⁷⁷

Arafat continued his restless efforts to mediate a conclusive ceasefire between Iran and Iraq by actively working with the Organisation of Islamic Conference (ICO). The ICO formed a special committee on 26 September 1981, and two days later, Arafat, along with Pakistani President Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq and Habib Chatty (the general secretary of ICO), visited Baghdad and Tehran.⁷⁸ On 21 October 1981, Arafat and other members of the ICO committee visited Ayatollah Khomeini to discuss the peace initiative with the Iraqi regime. Ayatollah Khomeini invited the heads of ICO member states to conduct investigations on the Iran-Iraq conflict, and denounce the "aggressor".⁷⁹

As the ICO's "Peace Committee" expanded its membership, Arafat remained among the highest-level and most active of participants. The ICO committee continued its efforts, conducting a number of visits to the capitals of states involved in the mediation efforts throughout the 1980s. Working hard to accomplish a ceasefire, Arafat expanded his efforts beyond the ICO and worked through the channels of the Non-Aligned Movements (NAM). In the winter of 1980, NAM formed a committee consisting of delegates from Cuba, Yugoslavia, India, Algeria, Pakistan and the PLO and established an operative office in New York in December 1980.⁸⁰ To this end, Arafat played a diligent role in political networking and conducted meetings with the members of the ICO and NAM to put political pressure on Iran's leadership to accept the proposed ceasefire and enter into bilateral negotiations with Baghdad. Still, Arafat's intensive mediation efforts failed to yield fruit. The war between Iran and Iraq became a bitter dilemma for the PLO's chairmanship. Iran's position remained firm and truculent, and they unanimously expected Arafat to explicitly denounce Iraq's aggression and stand beside the Islamic revolution in its campaign against the invader.⁸¹

Following Iran's refusal of a ceasefire with the Baathist regime, the PLO's relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran entered a downward spiral and subsequently cooled. Shireen Hunter argues that given the imperatives of the Arab nationalist ethos, Arafat and the PLO could not condemn Iraq. Moreover, material factors, such as the PLO's financial dependency on the pro-Iraqi Arab sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf, were a catalyst in PLO choosing the Baathist regime of Iraq as its regional ally.⁸² According to Ioannides, Arafat could not go so far as to denounce a brother Arab nation at war with a non-Arab country.⁸³ He adds that the other

factor influencing the PLO's pro-Iraqi position related to a new Arab alignment, formed around Jordan-Iraq and Saudi Arabia against the Islamic revolution of Iran. The new Arab alignment was based on the common idea that the Islamic revolution undermined the legitimacy of their ruling elite and therefore must be stopped. Arafat could not ignore this new axis, which had strong support amongst the majority of Arab regimes with the exception of Syria.⁸⁴

As the war between Iran and Iraq continued, Arafat explicitly sided with Baathist Iraq. Arafat conducted regular meetings with Iraqi officials in Baghdad on the war and inter-Arab issues. In 1984, Saddam Hussein supported Arafat's visits to Egypt, which had been isolated since the Camp David Accords. In fact, Baghdad backed Arafat's efforts to bring Egypt back into the "new Arab-alignment".⁸⁵ Egypt was received by Jordan and Iraq as a vital part of the pan-Arab alliance against revolutionary Iran. Revolutionary Iranian officials perceived Arafat's political closeness to "pro-American" King Hussein of Jordan and the Egyptian government as being incompatible with its anti-imperialist rhetoric and ideology. In October 1982, Mir Hussein-Musavi, Iran's prime minister, expressed regret saying, "In recent months, certain moves by the PLO leadership, which have been observed, are not congruent with the course of an all-encompassing, revolutionary and ideological organisation".⁸⁶

In April 1984, Arafat publically stressed the PLO's support for Iraq in its "just" struggle to "defend" its land and sovereignty and to achieve a "just peace".⁸⁷ Moreover, Baghdad provided the PLO with facilities to run a broadcasting station inside Iraq called the *Voice of Palestine Radio*.⁸⁸ In November 1984, addressing the Palestinian National Conference held in Amman, Arafat clarified his perception of the Palestinian struggle as ideologically pan-Arab, and publically announced his pro-Jordanian and pro-Iraqi positions:

When we demand independent national Palestinian decision making, we do not mean to be regional, [. . .] we say this because of our Pan-Arab position in all its dimensions, ramifications and roots; [. . .] this revolution is Palestinian in character, Arab at heart. [. . .] I thank His Majesty King Hussein, his government, his army and all those worked with us to make this session successful. [. . .] I send my gratitude to my brother the knight, Saddam Hussein. I tell him that this war will end with the efforts of the Muslims and non-aligned states so that we will move together with the Iraqi army, God willing to Jerusalem. I thank him because when I went to him in Baghdad before coming to His Majesty King Hussein [. . .] he said: Baghdad, Iraq and the Iraqi people are the Palestinian people's brother. Do not ask me, decide and impose on us, on our people, brother Abu-Ammar.⁸⁹

Meanwhile, PLO officials conducted meetings with the MKO, who by this point opposed the Islamic Republic and its revolutionary leadership. The PLO-MKO meetings occurred at a time that Arafat conducted intensive mediation efforts between Tehran and Baghdad. In August 1981, Hani al-Hasan left Tehran, and

a month later in Paris he visited the leader of MKO, Masoud Rajavi, who began an open war against clerics that supported Ayatollah Khomeini. Although the PLO issued a statement expressing that the meeting between Hani al-Hassan and Masoud Rajavi was not authorised by the PLO's leadership, this meeting did not help Arafat in regaining Iran's trust.⁹⁰ Another vital element that contributed to Iran's ideological estrangement with the PLO was Arafat's willingness to accept a peace plan proposed by Saudi Crown Prince Fahd in August 1981. In this regard, Arafat's willingness to engage with pro-Western Arab states was perceived by the Islamic Republic of Iran as an indication that it had transitioned from a revolutionary movement to being a "moderate" political force.

The road to Jerusalem passes through Karbala: battling Baathists all the way to resist against Zionism

The Iran-Iraq war was a yardstick for measuring Iran's ideological support of the Palestinian cause. There is a sizeable literature concerning the Iran-Iraq war. However, little attention has been paid to the ideological impact of the Palestinian cause on Iran during the Iran-Iraq war.⁹¹ It is worth evaluating two questions here: First, how did the Islamic Republic continue to perceive the Palestinian question while engaged in an imposed war with an Arab state and as it observed the PLO getting closer with Iraq? Second, what was the rationale for Iran to refuse mediation with the Baathist regime? Without constructing a narrative of the Iran-Iraq war, I argue briefly that the Islamic revolution maintained its support for Palestine even as it was deeply engaged in war with Iraq. Moreover, the Islamic Republic's leadership refused to accept mediation and ceasefires because it misperceived its own abilities. Khomeini had to be persuaded by his generals that victory was impossible before he took the chalice of poison, as he put it. At the same time and indicative of this hubris was the attitude that the Khomeini seemed to truly believe that the liberation of Palestine was contingent on battling the Baathist regime of Iraq.

In their official propaganda, Iran's revolutionary leadership depicted the Baathist regime of Iraq as the collaborator with Zionism and a tool in the hands of American imperialism in countering the Islamic revolution. Khomeini and his followers presented the war as the direct result of collusion between Zionism and the Baath party. This was in the interest of the state and its desperate efforts to rally support in the Arab world for its regional vision. In his speeches, Khomeini explicitly elaborated on Iran's ideological perspective of the Iran-Iraq war and its connection to the Palestinian cause:

What we find most regretful about this imposed war is that the forces which should be used to put an end to Israel and save the great Beit-al Muqaddas, have, through the collusion of the great Satan and the international Zionism with the Iraqi Baath party, been continued to be used to attack the stubborn enemy of Israel and America.⁹²

Khomeini described the Iran-Iraq war as an opportunity for Israel to weaken the Islamic revolution of Iran and to expand its domination of Palestine, stating:

What is most regrettable is that the superpowers, America in particular, by deceiving Saddam into attacking our country, have kept the powerful government of Iran busy with defending its land in order to give the usurper and criminal Israel an opportunity to push forward its evil plan to create a greater Israel from the Nile to the Euphrates.⁹³

Hence, Arafat's urging of the Islamic Republic to accept the ceasefire and combine its forces with Iraq to combat Israel was dismissed by the Islamic Republic's leadership. In Ayatollah Khomeini's point of view, such proposals were attempted to seek a bribe from revolutionary Iran to fight against Israel. He expressed that:

[t]hese people in the Iraqi government are using the issue of Israel as an excuse to escape the grip of divine revenge and justice. They are using it as an excuse saying: "If you want us to give permission to go and save us who are drowning, you must first overlook the crimes we have committed against you". [. . .] The path Saddam wants to lay before us is one that (he hopes) will lead to him being saved, not one that will lead to Israel. [. . .] [I]f we accept, then peace will be established and people like Saddam in this world will be saved and if we refuse, then, it will be clear that we do not really want to embark on a holy war. [. . .] We are telling them that we accept. You move aside and let the experts come to assess what you have done to this country. [. . .] But for us to condone the crimes because we want to do something for you, this is one of the absurdities that will remain in the annals of history.⁹⁴

The Islamic Republic's leadership explicitly disapproved of Arafat's efforts at communicating with conservative Arab states and the superpowers of the Western and Eastern blocs. In its arrogance, the revolutionary state expected the PLO to maintain a "revolutionary stance" and tilt more towards Islamic ideas in its campaign against Israel. As indicated, it can only be in the interest of a self-proclaimed Islamic state to "Islamicise" a conflict like this. Ayatollah Khomeini clarified his position on PLO policies from the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war and publically announced:

I advise the Palestinian leaders to stop shuttling to and from, and with the reliance on God the exalted, the people of Palestine and their own weapons fight Israel to the death. For these comings and goings will cause the combatant nations to lose faith in you. Rest assured that neither the East will be of use to you nor the West.⁹⁵

In Khomeini's point of view, the war between Iraq and Iran was the result of a conspiracy of Zionists, imperialists and Baathists against the Islamic principles of the

revolution in Iran. He truly believed in this, and this belief was also transmuted into the strategic preference of the state. In his view, it was propagated that the Quran clearly urged Muslims to battle against the oppressors and support the oppressed. In his speeches during the war, he called on the “oppressed” to rise up against the superpowers of East and West and their agents and to view the Iranian people as the means for resisting and overthrowing the agents of the superpowers (e.g., the Shah’s regime). He thus claimed leadership of a whole host of movements and events. From that rather self-indulging perspective, Islam had come under attack by the unified “Zionism-imperialist front”, and the laws of the Quran were being ignored. Emphasising the Quran’s verses (3:103) that state “hold fast all together to the rope which God stretches out for you, and be not divided amongst yourselves” and (8:46) “[f]all into no disputes, lest ye lose heart and your power departs”, he interpreted such messages as progressive political decrees that— if acted upon — could bring the Muslims prosperity and global supremacy.⁹⁶

In order to discredit Saddam Hussein, Khomeini represented Zionism and Baathism as two sides of the same coin: Both were invaders against whom Muslims had a religious duty to fight. Ironically, it was not Saddam Hussein who received weapons from Israel during the war with Iran but the Iranians, which led to the so-called Iran-Contra affair. Of course, Saddam Hussein also used the Palestinian cause for purposes of his state with all its disastrous pan-Arab ambitions. But Khomeini and his supporters were adamant in continuing their propaganda. Perceiving the Baathists and Zionists as a united front against the Muslim nations, Ayatollah Khomeini stated:

We must rise up together. We are all duty bound to rise up for God, to rise up to protect the Islamic countries against these two cancerous tumours, one of which is the corrupt Baath party of Iraq, and the other Israel, and both of which issue from America.⁹⁷

In this propaganda, the final defeat of Baathist Iraq would pave the way for the final destruction of Zionism and the victory of the Palestinians. In other words, he believed that the road to Jerusalem ran through Karbala.

While Iran was involved in an all-out war with Iraq, the leadership of the Islamic Republic continued to emphasise the importance of supporting the Palestinian cause. Khomeini viewed Saddam’s regime as the enfeeblener of Islamic fronts against Zionism.⁹⁸ On 14 April 1982, at a time when Iran began to gain an upper hand in its war against Iraq, he delivered a speech that re-emphasised his support for the Palestinian uprisings:

The Quds problem is not a personal one, nor is it a problem peculiar to just one country or to Muslims of the world in the present age. Rather it is a matter which has concerned the monotheists of the world [. . .] and will continue to concern them in the future. [. . .] Now that the revolutionary and brave Muslims of Palestine are, with great determination, roaring out

from the place of ascension of the last messenger with the divine call to the Muslims to rise up and unite against global unbelief, what excuse does one have before God almighty and the aware human conscience for remaining indifference to this Islamic ordinance? [. . .] Blessings upon Quds and the al-Aqsa mosque. Blessings upon the people who have risen up against Israel the criminal and the Muslims and oppressed of the world.⁹⁹

On the battlefield, Iran's armed forces conducted a series of offensive operations. One of the largest military operations during the early stages of the war was symbolically code-named *Tariq-al-Quds* (Road to Jerusalem) and conducted on 29 November 1981, in which Iranian armed forces liberated key strategic areas.¹⁰⁰ Subsequently, Iran's military leadership conducted a series of chained operations – code-named *Beit-al-Moqaddas* (Grand Mosque of al-Aqsa in Jerusalem) – in May 1982, in which it forced the Iraqi army to retreat. These operations resulted in Iranian fighters liberating important strategic areas, including the city of Khoramshahr, which changed the military balance of the war in favour of Iran.¹⁰¹ Through emphasising the idea that the road to Jerusalem passed through Karbala, Khomeini tried to appeal directly to the Islamist-revolutionary strata of Iranian society, particularly those within the revolutionary forces on the frontline fighting the Baathist regime. By naming key military operations on the battleground Quds and Beit al-Muqaddas, Iran's leadership exhibited the moral importance of Palestine to Iranian soldiers in order to boost the war effort.¹⁰² The propaganda implied that the war possessed a sacred aim, namely, to liberate Jerusalem and Baghdad.

Since the war began, the Iranian officials mainly used the designation *Doshman-e Baathi-Sehyounisti* (Zionist-Baathist enemy) when referring to the Iraqi regime. In this regard, the issue of Palestine was not marginalised as some may expect. Rather, the religious and sacred dimensions of the liberation of Quds became a motivational vehicle for mobilising Iran's fighters against the Iraqi regime. In other words, by emphasising the liberation of Quds, the Islamic Republic demonstrated the importance of the religious dimension of Quds for the Iranian fighters on the ground. Palestine became a tool to boost Iran's war efforts. The propaganda partially worked. According to Mohammad Aamanollah-zad, the Iran-Iraq war was perceived by veterans and revolutionary Iranians as a foreign-imposed conflict designed to prevent Iran from exporting its Islamic ideology and revolution abroad.¹⁰³ In his words:

The Iranian veterans wholeheartedly regarded the Palestinian cause as the “just cause”. The moral support for the Palestinian cause was not exhibited solely in the post-revolutionary era, but it did exist in the hearts of people during the Pahlavi regime. The invasion of Iran and the occupation of Palestine were all regarded by the Iranian veterans as interconnected matters concerning the Islamic *Umma*. This is a moral duty to act and maintain the revolutionary ideas and fight against the invaders.¹⁰⁴

The importance of Quds is reflected in the wills left by a number of Iranian veterans who lost their lives during the Iran-Iraq war, regarded as *shahid* (martyrs) by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Here, I indicate a few of these to demonstrate the prominence of Palestine in their worldviews. For instance, Shahid Hassan Binayian in his will states, "O, youth! You have the accountability to support the oppressed people of Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq; rise up and support them to become liberated from tyranny".¹⁰⁵ Shahid Ahmad Akbari in his will expressed that "I hope not only that we will root out the corrupt Baathist regime of Iraq, but also that we root out the occupiers of Quds in the future".¹⁰⁶ Shahid Hassan-Quli Tarahomi called on Iranian parents to permit their sons to participate on the battlefield against the Baathist and Zionist regimes. He stated, "Send your sons to the frontline to support the Muslim fighters and to liberate Karbala, and from there liberate dear Quds. That is the first Islamic *Qibla* [Noble Sanctuary], and this dear Qudsis under occupation of criminal Zionists who are creating tragedies against the Muslims every day".¹⁰⁷ Shahid Mehdi Budaghi urged his brothers in his will to rise up and fight against Israel and liberate Quds.¹⁰⁸ It is needless to mention that, as noted in the previous chapter, many of these Iranian fighters were involved in the struggle against the Shah's regime and were motivated by anti-Zionism and anti-imperialist ideas of the period. They were a ready-made object of Khomeinism and its ideological precepts.

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the Fahd peace plan and the Islamic Republic's response

Israeli armed forces invaded Lebanon in early June 1982. Seemingly, the invasion was triggered by an attempt to assassinate the Israeli ambassador to the UK on the night of 3 June 1982. According to Dilip Hiro, the assassination attempt was masterminded by an Iraqi intelligence officer named Nawal al-Rosan, which would lend credence to a theory that the Iraqi regime orchestrated the killing in order to provoke the Israelis to invade Lebanon and create the conditions suitable for an immediate ceasefire in the Persian Gulf.¹⁰⁹ As previously noted, the invasion of Lebanon came at a time when Iran had had a sequence of strategic victories on the battlefield against Iraq.

According to Chehabi, in early June 1982, the news of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon reached Tehran as the Pasdaran's Unit for Liberation Movements hosted a conference entitled *World Dispossessed (Mostaz'afan) Day*.¹¹⁰ Lebanese delegates participating in the conference asked for Iranian support, and the governments of both Syria and Lebanon urged the world to intervene. The Iranian government duly responded. In this regard, Velayati elaborates on the Islamic Republic's foreign policies in support of the Palestinian and Lebanese peoples facing Israeli aggressions. According to him, by invading Lebanon, Israeli hardliners pursued two major objectives: first, to destroy the PLO's military capabilities and force its army out of Lebanon and, second, to create a buffer zone in southern Lebanon and undermine any resistance within its immediate neighbourhood.¹¹¹ Castigating the Arab states'

“silence” during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Ayatollah Khomeini called on the Muslim governments to form a unified front against Israel:

We hope that by defeating America's recent plot for preserving Saddam and the Aflaqite Party [Baathist-Party of Iraq], our brave forces will, with the final defeat of the Iraqi government, pave the way for an advance towards Beit-al Muqaddas. [. . .] Today beloved Lebanon is being put into the gullet of these world-devourers and their vassals, and the same will happen to the other dear countries in the near future. For the umpteenth time we turn to the Muslim governments [. . .] and ask them, indeed advise them [. . .] to unite with us, the Syrian government and the Palestinians and present a single front to defend the glory and honour of Islam and the Arabs; and to sever for evermore the hands of these criminals from their rich countries.¹¹²

On the battleground, the Islamic Republic sent a high-level delegation, including the minister of defence and commander of the Pasdaran, to Syria to investigate how Iran could help and subsequently strengthen its ties with Damascus.¹¹³ According to Brigadier General Moin-Vaziri from the Defensive Science Research Centre in Iran, on 7 June 1982, two groups of special forces – the 58th Commando Brigade and the 27th Special Brigade of *Mohammad Rasoul-o-Allah* (named after the Prophet Mohammed) – were designated to support Palestinian and Lebanese fighters.¹¹⁴ These special brigades formed a combined force named *Niroohay-e Quds* (Quds Forces) and were sent to Syria.¹¹⁵ According to Ramazani, as early as December 1979, Hojatolislam Mohammad Montazeri had already sent between 200 and 300 Iranian volunteers stationed in Syria to support the Palestinians in their fight against Israel. However, they were stationed in a Fatah military compound about 15 miles from Damascus and not permitted to engage on the battlefield.¹¹⁶

According to Chehabi, six days after the invasion of Lebanon, the High Defence Council, chaired by then President Ali Khamenei, appointed the commanding officer Ahmad Motevasselian to lead the combined special forces.¹¹⁷ On 11 June 1982, the Iranian brigades arrived in Syria and were greeted by the Iranian ambassador Ali Akbar Mohtashami and Syrian officials. The Iranian troops were assigned in Zebdani to the Lebanese border and were greeted by the local residents. Shortly after arriving in Zebdani, the Iranian commanders held a number of meetings with Syrian officials to decide on how Iranian troops could help the Palestinians and Lebanese against Israel. However, when President Assad's brother, Rifaat al-Assad, visited the Iranian troops and repeatedly drew attention to the proclaimed Israeli “ceasefire” on 11 June, the Iranian commanders realised that the Syrian authorities would not facilitate their departure to the battlefield against Israel. In fact, the Syrian authorities seemed content to merely use the presence of the Iranian troops for propaganda purposes.¹¹⁸ This occurred at a critical moment for the Iranians, when the frontline required as many troops as possible, and it became obvious that there was no direct role for them to play in Lebanon. The commanders sought advice from the Islamic Republic's leadership. Ayatollah Khomeini portrayed the Israeli invasion

of Lebanon as a Zionist plot to divert Iran's attention on the battlefield away from Iraq. As Chehabi rightly argues: Khomeini viewed Israel and Saddam's regime as the two "illegitimate offspring" of American imperialism.¹¹⁹

The invasion of Lebanon resulted in the PLO moving its forces out of Lebanon, splitting them across the region and – more importantly – relocating its headquarter to Tunisia. As Iran's foreign minister, Velayati attended the UN's General Assembly meeting and the OIC, announcing Iran's strong condemnation of the invasion of Lebanon. The Islamic Republic also condemned regional states' silence and disapproved of the PLO withdrawing its forces from Lebanon.¹²⁰ Iran's Foreign Ministry announced:

Because of the treacherous acts of some regional governments, the Zionist-imperialist front succeeds in forcing the Palestinian fighters out of Lebanon and spreading them throughout the region. The massacres committed by Israel against the defenceless Palestinian people in west Beirut proves that our position against the conspiracies to force the Palestinian fighters out of Lebanon was right.¹²¹

The Islamic Republic also directly denounced the PLO leadership's "compromising" gesture of withdrawing from southern Lebanon. In particular, Iran believed that Arafat was responsible for abandoning the PLO's foundational revolutionary principles of fighting Zionism and disapproved of the PLO having left Palestinian refugees defenceless in Lebanon. As speaker of Iran's Parliament (Majles), Rafsanjani criticised the PLO's stance in his meeting with the PLO ambassador in Tehran, stating, "We do not see our duty of fighting against Zionism as having ended with the PLO retreating from southern Lebanon, we believed that the PLO should have maintained its forces and resisted".¹²² There was widespread condemnation from Iranian officials of a diverse political spectrum against the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the PLO's decision to withdraw from the south of the country. The members of the Islamic Republic's Majles unanimously issued a statement denouncing Israel and the U.S. government for pressurising the Palestinian fighters in southern Lebanon and viewed the Israeli invasion as a part of a larger conspiracy to undermine and destroy resistance against Zionism. In an interview, Iran's ambassador in Damascus, Ali Akbar Mohtashami, stated that "the U.S. and Israel have no fear from PLO, because in the past, they [the PLO] have signed everything that would guarantee Israel's security and now we see no action from PLO in fighting against Israel or American interests".¹²³

Many critics would cite the so-called Iran-Contra affair as an instance when Iran compromised its support for the Palestinians. Inevitably, my argument brings up the question about Iranian conduct during this period. As Said Amir Arjomand rightly argues, during the early 1980s, Iran had secret arms deals with the United States and Israel.¹²⁴ After American National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane's visit to Iran in 1986, the deal came to be known as the Iran-Contra affair, or "Irangate".¹²⁵ During 1985–1986, Iran traded over 200 spare parts of HAWK missile batteries for three American hostages held in Lebanon.¹²⁶ During the visit of the U.S. delegate to Tehran, Majles Speaker Hashemi Rafsanjani refused to hold a meeting with Robert McFarlane.¹²⁷

But the weapons deal has to be seen within the context of the Iran-Iraq war and the Islamic Republic's desperate need for weaponry. There have been periods in Iran's foreign policy when short-term, pragmatic, tactical manoeuvres were meant to serve long-term, strategic goals. In this case, the Iranian leadership accepted the deal in order to make advances on the battlefield. Khomeini was a Machiavellian politician, no doubt. But obviously, the weapons trade was not meant to cosy up to Israel and the United States but to bring the country closer to victory in Iraq, which was seen as a stepping stone towards supporting Palestine as well. In an interview with me, Hussein Royvaran explained:

The Islamic Republic of Iran urgently needed weapon spare parts during the war with Saddam Hussein. Unlike Iraq that was well-equipped by the Soviets, most of the arms used by Iran during the war were bought by the pre-revolutionary government from the U.S. and Israel. The Islamic Republic needed to re-equip its revolutionary armed forces and to do so such limited trade was not against the Islamic Republic's principles. During early Islam, the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) signed a number of agreements with the hostile non-Muslim tribes, such as the Al-Hudaybiyah treaty. However, this did not mean that the Prophet compromised on its sacred mission and on Islam. Conversely, the Prophet permitted this because at that moment it was in the interest of the Islamic community. This did not mean that the Prophet was changing his course. The same rationality appeals to the Islamic Republic under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. The Islamic Republic did not and will not compromise on its ideological and strategic values and did not and will not recognise the occupation of the Palestinian land.¹²⁸

From this point of view, the Iran-Contra affair did not alter Iran's ideological outlook. It was a tactical manoeuvre that fed into a larger strategy, that is, supporting Palestinian movements in their quest for independence. After more than three decades since the Iran-Contra affair, the Iran and the U.S. remain at odds over the Islamic Republic's continued support for HAMAS, Islamic Jihad (and Hizbullah), and Iran has not fundamentally altered its approach to Israel. Iran continues to present itself as one the major supporters of the Palestinian Islamic movements because it is in the interest of the ruling elites to do so. One can conclude that beliefs inside the Islamic Republic help formulate the state's strategic actions. Thus, each governmental cabinet within the Islamic Republic may utilise a different narrative but nevertheless remains supportive of the Palestinians, at least at this moment in history.

The Fahd Peace Plan

The Islamic Republic's disapproval of the PLO's stance during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon was followed by Tehran's strong rejection of peace proposals such the Fahd Peace Plan and criticism of the PLO's leadership for its willingness to accept it. In August 1981, Saudi Arabia proposed a peace plan known as the Fahd Plan.

The Saudis produced an eight-point agenda in the plan, of which the seventh clause drew most attention as it confirmed “the rights of the states of the region to live in peace”.¹²⁹ From Dawisha's point of view, the seventh clause of the Fahd Plan was seen by many Arabs as an implicit recognition of Israel. This divided opinion within the PLO's leadership. On the one hand, Arafat was willing to discuss and consider the plan further. On the other hand, Farouq Qaddoumi, head of the organisation's political department, was more critical towards the proposed plan.¹³⁰ According to Ioannides, the Fahd Plan was endorsed by six nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and – more importantly – Arafat appeared willing to discuss it.¹³¹ Despite Arafat's posturing, the plan was opposed mainly from within the PLO and Syria and subsequently collapsed during the Arab Summit in Fez in November 1981.¹³² The Islamic Republic reacted strongly against the Plan. Ayatollah Khomeini described it as an attempt by the “imperialist Americans” to prevent the people of the region from taking control of their own affairs and believed that it was incumbent upon Muslims of the region to condemn all peace plans in the same vein as the Fahd Plan. He specifically elaborated his opposition to the “American-backed” peace proposals, stating:

Do you expect us to remain indifferent towards America, Israel and other superpowers who want to devour the region? No, we will compromise with none of these superpowers or powers. We are Muslims and intend to live as Muslims. We prefer a poor life if it means that we are free and independent. We do not want this progress and civilisation which calls for us to stretch out our hands to foreigners. We want a civilisation which stands firmly on the foundation of dignity and humanity, and it is on this basis that we want peace preserved. The superpowers wish to control the humanity of human beings and you and I are duty bound to resist, to refuse compromise and reject such plans as those of Sadat and Fahd, as indeed is any Muslim.¹³³

The Islamic Republic's officials unanimously criticised Arafat's willingness to undermine and alter the anti-Zionist foundation of the PLO. Iran's acting Prime Minister Mir Hussein-Mousavi acknowledged the divisions inside the PLO on the matter of considering peace plans, clarifying that “the Islamic Republic condemns the compromising policies of some of the PLO's leadership and stands with those that understand the danger of the Fahd Plan”.¹³⁴ Ayatollah Khamenei, acting president, declared:

We view the Palestinian cause as an essential part of our revolution. Hence, we do not accept any peace-proposal that does not recognise and serve the Palestinian cause. Anyone that thinks to compromise with Israel is perceived by us as traitors to the Palestinian cause even if that person is Palestinian.¹³⁵

Less than a year later at the reconvened Arab summit in Fez, the Fahd Plan with some amendments was accepted as a set of proposals that constituted the Arab

conditions for peace with Israel.¹³⁶ In response to the outcome of the Fez summit and Arafat's "compromising" policy, Rafsanjani proposed during Friday prayers on 27 November 1981 that an active force named the Liberation Army of Quds be established to fight Zionism.¹³⁷ He suggested that Arab states needed to act economically, politically and militarily to fight Zionist expansion. From his point of view, the only solution left for the Arab states was to consider the Islamic Republic's advice on cutting their supply of crude oil, severing political relations with Israel's supporters and asking other Muslim nations to demonstrate their sympathy with the Palestinian cause.¹³⁸ The Islamic Republic's Foreign Ministry condemned the outcome of the Fez summit and declared that "accepting any proposal that recognises the Israeli state will serve Israeli and American interests and it will undermine the Palestinian cause".¹³⁹ In fact, the presence of Arafat at the Arab summit in Fez and approving the outcome of the summit was resented by the Islamic Republic of Iran and further widened the gap between two sides. On the basis of this assertion, the Islamic Republic opposed every peace initiative, including the Camp David Accords, the Reagan plan, the Fahd Plan and the Fez Plan.¹⁴⁰

There are some suggestions in the scholarly literature for evaluating how Iran's relations with the PLO cooled down. According to Aburish, the Iranians began to doubt Arafat's motives at the time they held the U.S. embassy staff as hostages. He believes that Arafat was blind to everything except Palestinian consideration, misjudging the depth of anti-U.S. feeling in Iran, and that Arafat hoped to gain recognition from the American administration. At the same time, the PLO's "money men" – Kuwait and Saudi Arabia – played a vital role in Arafat's policies towards Iran. Aburish concludes that the contradictions in Arafat's behaviour, playing both the peacemaker and the revolutionary leader at the same time, tripped him up. In this instance, he was convinced to sever relations with Iran despite the pro-Iranian sentiment of the Palestinian people and most of the guerrilla groups.¹⁴¹ Bahgat believes that the disagreement between Iran and the PLO proved to be deep. He draws two valid conclusions: First, the Islamic Republic has always distinguished between the broad Palestinian population on one side and Arafat and his top aides on the other. Second, the troubled relations between Tehran and Arafat did not lead to better relations between Iran and Israel (and thus the two issues were detached from each other).¹⁴² Bahgat views Iran's strong opposition to Israel as being based on both ideological and strategic considerations. Ideologically, the Islamic Republic perceives the Palestinian cause as a struggle between Islam and the oppressive powers of the world – namely, Zionism and U.S. imperialism. This perception implies two things. First, the political legitimacy of the Islamic Republic is strengthened by its antagonism towards Israel and resistance to any peace proposals that recognise Israel's legitimacy. To this end, neither Arafat nor any other leader has the right to give away "even an inch of the Islamic land of Palestine".¹⁴³ Strategically, the Islamic Republic views the peace plans as political tools that serve the American government by boosting its hegemony in the region.¹⁴⁴ Shireen Hunter highlights the role of Pan-Arabism and Arafat's financial dependency on the Gulf States as the main vehicle that led the PLO to support Iraq against Iran. However, she acknowledges that Iran differentiated between Arafat and the Palestinian people. Despite the actions of

the PLO, Tehran permitted the movement to maintain its embassy in Tehran, established Quds day and continued its support for the Palestinian cause.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, Elaheh Rostami-Povey also argues that while Arafat's support for Saddam's regime undermined Iran's relation with PLO, the Islamic Republic continued to maintain its pro-Palestinian policy, openly supporting Muslim Palestinian groups such as Hamas¹⁴⁶ and Islamic Jihad.¹⁴⁷

I suggest that the ideological differences between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the PLO's leadership was the pivotal cause of Iran's estrangement with the PLO's chairmanship. Yet the Iran-Iraq war did not prevent the Islamic Republic from continuing its support for the Palestinian cause. Rather, Iran's clerical leadership perceived and conceptualised the Iran-Iraq war as one front in the Muslim world's wider battle against the influence of Zionism and imperialism, not least to mobilise Iranians for the war and to claim the leadership of the Islamic world. In fact, support for the Palestinian cause remained the central theme even at a time when Iran was heavily bogged down in the war with Saddam Hussein's Ba'thist state. I agree with Michael Barnett's argument that shared values and common identity are the foundation of alliance formation or of maintaining partnerships.¹⁴⁸ In the case of Iran's relations with PLO, the incompatibility between the clerics' ideology of Islamic universalism and Arafat's pan-Arabism and pro-Baathist ideas – as well as the PLO's shift away from militancy – undermined ties between revolutionary Iran and the PLO. However, and as we will see in the following chapters, this shift strengthened Tehran's connection with Islamist Palestinian groups.

In the upcoming chapters, I examine two factors more closely: the ideological and strategic position of the Palestinian cause within Iran's foreign policy following the Iran-Iraq war and Iran's relations with Hamas and Islamic Jihad. In doing this, I concur with Zamel Saeedi that the Iran-Iraq war unveiled a bitter relationship between Iran and the PLO. Indeed, many Iranians were disappointed by the PLO's policies but chose to keep their frustrations in check. For Iran's leadership, Palestine remained a Muslim territory that had been occupied and subjected to aggression. From this perspective, the Islamic Republic opposed any debate on the core of the matter or the principles associated with the Palestinian cause.¹⁴⁹ One of these principles was the need to repel Zionism from what was perceived to be the Islamic Holy Land. To this end, Tehran began to strengthen its relations with Muslim Palestinian factions that subscribed to Iran's Islamic shared principles.¹⁵⁰ Palestine was cut and pasted into the interest of this Iranian state because it rallied public opinion behind the revolution and it boosted the morale of Iranian soldiers at the battlefield. This shows that the material interests of the state were cultivated in an ideational context that was pro-Palestinian: Iranian society genuinely felt for Palestine, and the post-revolutionary state readily tapped into these sentiments.

Notes

- 1 Bassam Abu Sharif, *Arafat and the Dream of Palestine: An Insider's Account*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 63.

- 2 Ibid., p. 63.
- 3 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, "Arafat Arrival Statement", *Tehran Domestic Service in Persian*, 17 February 1979, R8–R9.
- 4 Chris P. Ioannides, "The PLO and the Islamic Revolution in Iran", in *The International Relations of the Palestine Liberation Organization*, edited by Augustus R. Norton and Martin Harry Greenberg, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989, p. 74.
- 5 Bassam Abu Sharif, *Arafat and the Dream of Palestine*, pp. 62–63. According to Abu Sharif, Ayatollah Khomeini cherished Iran's ties with the Palestinians even while in exile in France. Though he had often refused to give press interviews, in 1978 he granted *Al-Hadaf* – the PFLP's magazine – a lengthy interview in which he outlined his plans for a revolution against the Shah.
- 6 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, "Arafat Speaks at the Cemetery", *Tehran Domestic Service in Persian*, 18 February 1979, R10.
- 7 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, "Arafat Visits Taleqani", *Tehran Domestic Service in Persian*, R23.
- 8 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, "Arafat Opens PLO Office", *Tehran Domestic Service in Persian*, R17.
- 9 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, "Arafat Press Conference", *Voice of Palestine in Arabic to the Arab World*, 20 February 1979, R29.
- 10 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, "Arafat Holds Press Conference", *Voice of Palestine in Arabic to the Arab World*, 22 February 1979, R6.
- 11 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, "Arafat, Dr. Yazdi, Ahmad Khomeini Address Ahvaz Rally", *Voice of Palestine in Arabic to the Arab World*, 22 February 1979, R9.
- 12 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, "Arafat to Abu Dhabi With Message From Khomeini", *Voice of Palestine in Arabic to the Arab World*, 23 February 1979, R11.
- 13 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, "March in Bahrain", *Tehran Domestic Service in Persian*, 24 February 1979, R7.
- 14 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, "Arafat Chairs Meetings, Comments on Iran, Arab Situation", *Abu Dhabi Emirates News Agency*, 23 February 1979, A1.
- 15 Chris P. Ioannides, "The PLO and the Islamic Revolution in Iran", in *The International Relations of the Palestine Liberation Organization*, p. 74.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Adeed Dawisha, "Iran's Mullahs and the Arab Masses," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (1983), pp. 162–168.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Barry Rubin, *Yasser Arafat: A Political Biography*, London: Continuum, 2003, pp. 83–84.
- 20 Babak Ganji, *Politics of Confrontation: The Foreign Policy of the USA and Revolutionary Iran*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2005, p. 118.
- 21 Ibid., p. 126.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2006, p. 458.
- 24 Ibid., p. 458.
- 25 Ibid., pp. 472–473.
- 26 Rouhollah Khomeini, *Felestin az Didgahe Emam Khomeini* [Palestine from Viewpoint of Imam Khomeini], Tehran: Moaseseh Nashr va Athaar-e Emam Khomeini, 1382 [2003], pp. 117–123.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid., pp. 131–132.
- 30 Quoted in Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Manshour Varasteh (eds.), *Iran and the International Community*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 10.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid., p. 11.

- 34 Ruhi K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, p. 151.
- 35 Chris P. Ioannides, "The PLO and the Islamic Revolution in Iran", in *The International Relations of the Palestine Liberation Organization*, p. 75.
- 36 *Felestine az didgah-e Imam Khomeini*, pp. 156–157.
- 37 Ibid., pp. 157–160.
- 38 Russell Leigh Moses, *Freeing the Hostages: Re-examining U.S.-Iranian Negotiations and Soviet Policy, 1979–1981*, Pitt Series in Policy and Institutional Studies, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996, p. 43.
- 39 Ibid., p. 45.
- 40 Quoted in Ibid.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Babak Ganji, *Politics of Confrontation: The Foreign Policy of the USA and Revolutionary Iran*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2005, pp. 157–159.
- 43 Ibid., pp. 153–154.
- 44 Ruhi K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East*, p. 153.
- 45 Ibid., p. 154.
- 46 U.S. Intervention in the Islamic Countries: Palestine, *Documents from the U.S. Espionage Den: Vol. 42*, Tehran: Enteshaaraat-e chapkhaneh Vezarat-e Ershad Eslami, 1979, Introduction. Available at <https://archive.org/stream/DocumentsFromTheUSEspionageDen/Documents%20from%20the%20U.S.%20Espionage%20Den%20v42#page/n1/mode/2up> [Accessed 24 November 2013], and http://basij.aut.ac.ir/usemb/english2/v42_text.pdf [Accessed 24 November 2013].
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Massoumeh Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran: the Inside Story of the 1979 U.S. Embassy Capture*, Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2000, p. 121.
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- 53 Ibid., p. 122.
- 54 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, "PLO's al-Hassan Remarks", *Tehran Domestic Service in Persian*, 9 November 1979, R6.
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- 56 Chris P. Ioannides, "The PLO and the Islamic Revolution in Iran", in *The International Relations of the Palestine Liberation Organization*, 1989, p. 84.
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- 58 Ibid.
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- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Ibid., p. 85.
- 63 Barry Rubin, *Yasser Arafat*, p. 84.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 Babak Ganji, *Politics of Confrontation: The Foreign Policy of the USA and Revolutionary Iran*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2005, p. 163.
- 66 Yasser Arafat and Zahid Mahmood, "Interview 2, Yasser Arafat: The U.S., the PLO and the Three Formulas", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Summer 1986), p. 18.
- 67 Chris P. Ioannides, "The PLO and the Islamic Revolution in Iran", in *The International Relations of the Palestine Liberation Organization*, 1989, p. 85.
- 68 Ali Akbar Velayati was Iran's Foreign Minister 1981–1997 and then an advisor on foreign affairs to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei – a post he occupies today.

- 69 Ali Akbar Velayati, *Jumhouri Eslami Iran va Tahavollaat-e Felestin 1357–1385* [Islamic Republic of Iran and Palestine Development 1979–2006], Tehran: Centre for Documents and Diplomatic History of the Foreign Ministry of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1386 [2007], pp. 41–42.
- 70 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, “Arafat Message”, *Voice of Palestine in Arabic to the Arab World*, 23 September 1980, A1.
- 71 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, “Arafat Arrival”, *Paris AFP in English*, 27 September 1980, I, 16.
- 72 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, “Arafat, Rafsanjani Meeting”, *Tehran Domestic Service in Persian*, 28 September 1980, I, 17.
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- 74 Abol Hassan Banisadr, *My Turn to Speak: Iran, the Revolution & Secret Deals with the U.S.*, Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 1991, p. 70.
- 75 Ali Akbar Velayati, *Jumhouri Eslami Iran va Tahavollaat-e Felestin 1357–1385*, p. 42.
- 76 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, “Ahmad Khomeini on Talks with Arafat”, *Tehran Domestic Service in Persian*, I, 17–I, 18.
- 77 Ibid.
- 78 Ali Akbar Velayati, *Tārikh-e Siyāsī-I Jang-I Tahmīlī-e ‘Irāq ‘alayhi Jumhūrī-e Islāmī-I Īrān* [The Political History of the Iraqi Imposed War Against Iran], Tehran: Daftar-i Nashr-e Farhang-i-e Islāmī, 1376 [1997], p. 80.
- 79 Ibid., p. 81.
- 80 Ibid., p. 90.
- 81 Chris P. Ioannides, “The PLO and the Islamic Revolution in Iran”, in *The International Relations of the Palestine Liberation Organization*, 1989, p. 87.
- 82 Shireen Hunter, *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 127.
- 83 Chris P. Ioannides, “The PLO and the Islamic Revolution in Iran”, in *The International Relations of the Palestine Liberation Organization*, 1989, p. 87.
- 84 Ibid., p. 88.
- 85 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, “Saddam Hussein Discusses Arafat Cairo Visit”, *Baghdad Voice of Masses in Arabic*, 7 January 1984, E2.
- 86 Foreign Broadcast Information Service, “Musavi on Economic Issues, Arafat-Hussein Talks”, *Tehran Domestic Service in Persian*, 13 October 1982, I3.
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- 88 Dilip Hiro, *Iran Under the Ayatollahs*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, p. 348.
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- 90 Ibid.
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- 92 *Felestin az didgah-e Imam Khomeini*, pp. 187–188.
- 93 Ibid., p. 188.
- 94 Ibid., pp. 189–191.
- 95 Ibid., pp. 148–149.
- 96 Ibid., pp. 141–142.
- 97 Ibid., p. 148.
- 98 Ibid., p. 187.
- 99 Ibid., pp. 145–146.

- 100 During the *Tariq al-Quds* (Road to Jerusalem) military offensive, Iranian fighters forced the Iraqi army to retreat and consequently liberated 650 square kilometres of Iran's Khuzestan province. For more information on this operation, see the Defensive Science Research Centre website: <http://dsrc.ir/Contents/view.aspx?id=8837> [Accessed 31 December 2013].
- 101 For more details on the *Beit-al-Muqaddas* military operation, see <http://dsrc.ir/View/article.aspx?id=897> [Accessed 4 January 2014].
- 102 During the Iran-Iraq war, military operations were coded using religious names and Islamic symbols in order to motivate Iranian fighters and to reiterate the ideology of the Islamic revolution. For more information, see the Defensive Science Research Centre website: <http://dsrc.ir/> [Accessed 20 January 2017].
- 103 Mohammad Amaanollah-zad is an Iranian veteran of the Iran-Iraq war and currently an academic member of the Society for the Defence of the Palestinian Nation, based in Tehran. Interviewed in Tehran on 23 September 2013.
- 104 Ruhullahzad, interviewed in Tehran on 23 September 2013.
- 105 Defensive Science Research Centre, *Towsiye-hay-e Shahidan dar Morede Felestin* [The Wills of Martyrs About Palestine]. Available at <http://dsrc.ir/contents/view.aspx?id=9985> [Accessed 4 January 2014].
- 106 Ibid.
- 107 Ibid.
- 108 Ibid.
- 109 Dilip Hiro, *Iran Under the Ayatollahs*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, p. 211.
- 110 Houshang E. Chehabi (ed.), *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2006, p. 212.
- 111 Ali Akbar Velayati, *Tārikh-e Siyāsī-e Jang-I Tāhmīlī-e 'Irāq 'alayhi Jumhūrī-I Islāmī-I Īrān*, p. 58.
- 112 *Felestin az Didgah-e Imam Khomeini*, pp. 191–192.
- 113 Houshang E. Chehabi, *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, p. 212.
- 114 See Sartip Nosratollah Moin-Vaziri, "The International Implications of the Biet-al Muqadas Military Operation". Available at <http://dsrc.ir/View/article.aspx?id=1224> [Accessed 5 January 2014].
- 115 Ibid. According to Brigadier Moin-Vaziri, the Iraqi regime declared a 10-day ceasefire and withdrew its forces from the majority of occupied Iranian territory. However, the invasion of Lebanon was perceived by Iranian military experts as an excuse to divert Iran's attention from the battlefield. Iranian intelligence identified that the Iraqi regime was withdrawing its forces for tactical reasons, and in the process of fortifying its positions behind the border and maintaining its position in some part of occupied strategic areas.
- 116 Ruhi K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East*, 1987, p. 156.
- 117 Houshang E. Chehabi, *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, p. 214.
- 118 Ibid., p. 215.
- 119 Ibid., p. 213.
- 120 Ali Akbar Velayati, *Jumhuri Eslami Iran va Tahavvulat-e Felestin 1357–1385*, pp. 60–61.
- 121 Ibid., p. 61.
- 122 Ibid., p. 62.
- 123 Quoted in Ali Akbar Velayati, *Jumhuri Eslami Iran va Tahavvulat-e Felestin 1357–1385*, p. 62.
- 124 Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini, Iran Under His Successors*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 135.
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- 127 Ibid.
- 128 Interviewed on 26 September 2015.

- 129 For more information on the Fahd Plan's eight points, see Adeed Dawisha, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: The Ups and Downs of Pragmatic Moderation", *Canadian International Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 4: The Middle East after Lebanon (Autumn 1983), p. 681. According to Darwisha, the Saudis hoped to produce a positive response to the Camp-David Accord and strengthen the position of the United States' allies in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict.
- 130 Ibid., pp. 681–682.
- 131 Chris P. Ioannides, "The PLO and the Islamic Revolution in Iran", *The International Relations of the Palestine Liberation Organization*, 1989, p. 90.
- 132 Ibid.
- 133 *Felestin az didgah-e Imam Khomeini*, pp. 90–91. Ayatollah Khomeini delivered his speech on 28 October 1981.
- 134 Ali Akbar Velayati, *Tārīkh-e Siyāsī-I Jang-I Tāh mīlī-e 'Irāq 'alayhi Jumhūrī-e Islāmī-I Īrān*, p. 78.
- 135 Ibid.
- 136 Adeed Dawisha, "Iran's Mullahs and the Arab Masses," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (1983), p. 684.
- 137 Ali Akbar Velayati, *Jumhouri Eslami Iran va Tahavollaat-e Felestin 1357–1385*, p. 81.
- 138 Ibid.
- 139 Ibid.
- 140 Ruhi K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East*, pp. 154–155.
- 141 Saïd K. Aburish, *Arafat: From Defender to Dictator*, London: Bloomsbury, 1998, pp. 164–165.
- 142 Gawdat Bahgat, *Israel and the Persian Gulf: Retrospect & Prospect*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008, p. 42.
- 143 Ibid., p. 43.
- 144 Ibid.
- 145 Shireen Hunter, *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 127.
- 146 *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Resistance Movement) is better known by its acronym HAMAS.
- 147 Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Iran's Influence*, London: Zed Books, 2010, p. 159.
- 148 Michael Barnett, "Identity and Alliances in the Middle East", in Peter Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 445.
- 149 Zamel Saeedi, "The Palestinian Question in Arab-Iranian Relations", in *Arab-Iranian Relations: Present Trends and Future Prospects*, edited by Khair el-Din Hasseb, Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1998, p. 374.
- 150 Ali Akbar Velayati, *Jumhouri Eslami Iran va Tahavollaat-e Felestin*, p. 43.

3

IRAN'S RELATIONS WITH PALESTINIAN ISLAMIC JIHAD

This chapter provides an insight into the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's ideological relations with the revolutionary state in Iran. Here I provide an introduction to the ideological outlook of Islamic Jihad's founder, Fathi Shaqaqi. I will argue that the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran and its pro-Palestinian stance from its inception profoundly inspired Palestinian activists and in the process revitalised the Islamic dimension of the Palestinian cause. To this end, I will also suggest that the Islamic Republic of Iran became the principal enabler of Palestinian Islamic Jihad's growth and development beyond the Occupied Territories. Before discussing Iran's relations with the Islamic Jihad movement, it is important to also grasp how Islamic Jihad likewise perceived the Islamic Republic of Iran. I suggest that the leaders of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad were motivated by the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran. In what follows, I show how revolutionary messages of Khomeini and others were absorbed with great enthusiasm by Fathi Shaqaqi, who highlighted the Islamic discourse of the Palestinian cause after 1967.

Islamic Jihad: a new page in the Palestinian struggle

The emergence of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and its ideology is a compelling subject, particularly given its influence on Palestinian politics since its emergence in early 1980s. When it comes to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, we are faced with a lack of comprehensive academic sources. This can often lead to an over-reliance on selective media reports. Palestinian Islamic Jihad was established in the early 1980s by Dr. Fathi al-Shaqaqi. Shaqaqi was born in the Fara'a refugee camp to a large and poor family originating in the village of Zarnuqa in the Ramala district. In his early life, Shaqaqi was greatly influenced by pan-Arab ideas, which by his own account precluded him from being influenced by socialism. Grasped by a feeling of destitution in the wake of the 1967 defeat, he quite naturally turned to Islam.¹ The 1967

defeat was later characterised by Shafaqi as “more difficult than the fall of Baghdad by the Tatars, Andalusia to the Spanish Christians, or Jerusalem to the Crusaders”.² In 1974, Shafaqi travelled to Egypt to study medicine at Zaqqaziq University. While studying in Egypt, Shafaqi came into contact with a group of Palestinian students, established ties with Egyptian students from the Islamic associations and shared these students’ incisive critique of the Ikhwan’s³ (Muslim Brothers) for their reformist orientation and disregard for other Islamic groups.⁴ At the early stages of their comradeship in Cairo, Shafaqi and his student comrades thoroughly studied the works of modern Islamic thinkers such as Jamal al-Din Afghani (1838–1897), Sayyid Qutb (1900–1966), Hassan al-Banna (1906–1949), Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr (1935–1980) and Ali Shariati (1933–1975). Each of these thinkers brought about a specific message. For instance, Ali Shariati’s ideas provided a model of “Just Muslim society”.⁵ Hassan al-Banna endeavoured to bring Sunnis and Shias together as one united *umma*. Afghani had shown how Muslims could internalise modern sciences and still preserve their identities; Qutb had set out the prerequisites for the coalescence of an Islamic movement.⁶ Meir Hatina suggests that Qutb’s book, *Ma’alim fi al-Tariq* (Signposts Along the Road, 1966) was depicted by Shafaqi as “one of the important works in modern Islamic literature”.⁷

According to Kasra Sadeqi-Zadeh, the period 1974–1981, in which Shafaqi resided in Egypt, was the most important period for the Palestinian Islamic movement. In Egypt, Shafaqi and his followers moved towards an independent path from the Ikhwan and created the nucleus of what was the Palestinian Islamic movement within the University of Zaqqaziq. By 1980, the first group of students under Shafaqi’s supervision – consisting of 60 Palestinian members across Egypt’s universities – laid the cornerstone for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the heart of Gaza and the West Bank.⁸ It was against this background of frustration with the Ikhwan and the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran that Shafaqi authored a book, *al-Khomeini: al-Hall al-Islami wa al-Badil* (Khomeini: The Islamic Solution and the Alternative), which was published by the pro-Iranian monthly *al-Mukhtar al-Islami*. According to Meir Hatina, Shafaqi’s book depicted the Islamic revolution as “a historically unique model of a humane revolution” and praised Ayatollah Khomeini.⁹ The book’s pro-Iranian orientation was to become the identifying tag of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad several years later.¹⁰

Shafaqi’s book *al-Khomeini* was authored and published on 16 February 1979 and was the first written book in Arabic on the Islamic revolution in Iran.¹¹ It is believed that all its copies were distributed and sold shortly after its publication in Egypt.¹² According to Azzam Tamimi, despite receiving an order from the Ikhwan’s leadership to not write a book about the Islamic revolution, he refused to obey. Consequently Shafaqi was expelled from the Ikhwan while studying in Cairo in 1979, ostensibly because he had published writings on Ayatollah Khomeini and praised the Iranian revolutionary leadership.¹³ Tamimi argues that the Ikhwan’s actions against Shafaqi were chiefly due to his critique of the organisation’s lack of a comprehensive strategy for armed struggle to liberate Palestine, not his pro-Khomeini rhetoric.¹⁴

The Palestinian cause was not the major priority of the Ikhwan during the late 1970s, as their attention focused more on other Islamic issues such as the provision of social welfare and education for the poor.¹⁵ Shaqaqi strongly believed in prioritising the Palestinian cause as the mother of all causes.¹⁶ This brought Shaqaqi and his friends into an ideological confrontation with the Ikhwan, and as a result Shaqaqi set up a new Islamic-oriented organisation that recruited members from within and beyond the Ikhwan. Shaqaqi's disappointment with the Ikhwan's lethargy towards the Palestinian question coincided with the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran. Inspired by Khomeini's pan-Islamic ideas, *al-Khomeini* represented Shaqaqi's ideological manifesto. His main aim was to introduce and present his beliefs to the Arab and the Palestinian street.

Following the publication of the book *al-Khomeini*, Shaqaqi was detained in Egypt for four days. He was rearrested in July 1979 and detained in the al-Qalaa prison for four months. *Al-Khomeini* was subsequently banned by the Egyptian authorities in an attempt to prevent the spread of its revolutionary message.¹⁷ Upon his release, Shaqaqi authored a number of editorials for *al-Mukhtar al-Islami*, mainly focusing on the Palestinian question, signing his articles with the pseudonym Izz al-Din Faris.¹⁸ During his residence in Cairo, Shaqaqi continued his critical debate on Ikhwan's inaction over the Palestinian question and began writing for *al-Forsan* (Horse-Riders) in response to the communists' propaganda pamphlet *al-Jiyad* (Horses). Here he criticised their left-wing policies and castigated the absence of religious-rhetoric in their political agendas.¹⁹ Shaqaqi's political activities further exposed him and his circle of friends to the suppressive excesses of the Egyptian government, particularly at the time of Sadat's assassination in 1981. Nevertheless, Shaqaqi evaded the authorities and left Egypt in November 1981 for the Occupied Territories.²⁰

After returning to Gaza from Egypt, Shaqaqi worked as a physician at Augusta Hospital in East Jerusalem and later opened his own private clinic.²¹ In Gaza, Shaqaqi was particularly active in organising an Islamic movement that was ideologically influenced by Ayatollah Khomeini's pan-Islamic rhetoric. The majority of recruits were largely students who had been expelled from Egypt for their activism against the regime. Among the most prominent members of Shaqaqi's movement were Sheikh Abd-al Aziz Awda, and Ramadan Abdullah Shalah – the latter one of the group's first recruits outside the Ikhwan and eventual successor to Shaqaqi after his assassination in 1995. Like Shaqaqi, Sheikh Awda came from a disfranchised Palestinian family that had migrated to the Jabaliyya refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. After completing a bachelor's degree in Arabic language and Islamic studies at Dar-al-Ulum College in Cairo and a master's degree in Islamic law at the University of Zaqqiyya, he was expelled from Egypt for membership in a "radical Islamic society" in 1975. After returning to Gaza in 1981 from the UAE, Awda served as Imam in the Sheikh Izz al-Din Mosque in Bayt Lahina, where he was able to attract and recruit new members.²² Shaqaqi actively recruited new members for the purpose of fighting Israeli forces and soon clashed with the Ikhwan. According to Tamimi, Shaqaqi was not specifically interested in competing with the Ikhwan in the areas of

social welfare and education. Where he did wish to compete with them was in an area he always believed they had abandoned as one of their prime responsibilities: “the jihad to liberate Palestine”.²³ Milton-Edwards elaborates that Islamic Jihad was the first group to emerge in the early 1980s led by two Palestinians from Gaza (Shaqaqi and Sheikh Awda).²⁴ The faction is described as the largest of Islamic Jihad groups in the 1980s with its central bases in the Gaza Strip. The armed sections of this faction, as Milton-Edwards characterises them, were “the catalyst for the Palestinian uprising in December 1987”.²⁵

Due to his noticeable success in recruiting new members, Shaqaqi was identified by the Israelis as a potential threat. He was subsequently imprisoned in 1983 for 11 months.²⁶ According to Tamimi, during his first brief detention, he became acquainted with a number of Palestinian activists possessing various operational backgrounds that were of potential use to Shaqaqi’s movement.²⁷ In the meantime, Shaqaqi successfully forged an alliance with a group of Islamic-oriented members of Fatah – *Saraya al-Jihad al-Islami* – that were independently operating against Israeli targets in the West Bank.²⁸

Shaqaqi’s books: the ideological manifesto of Palestinian Islamic Jihad

It is necessary to evaluate Shiqaqi’s ideas in order to better understand the fabric of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad’s ideological outlook, as well as the nature of its connections with the Islamic revolution in Iran. Besides writing various articles for the monthly *al-Mukhtar al-Islami* and publishing and distributing pamphlets, Shaqaqi authored three major books that specifically echoed his appreciation of the Islamic revolution in Iran. As previously mentioned, his first book was *al-Khomeini*. The second book was entitled *al-Sunnah wa al-Shia, Zhajjah Moqtaneah* (The Sunnah and the Shia: An Artificial Noise), and the third was *Muqadamah Hawl Markaziyyah Filastin wa al-Mashro’a al-Islami al-Muaser* (An Introduction to the Centrality of the Palestinian Cause and the Contemporary Islamic Project).²⁹

Al-Khomeini is organised along three principal themes: a history of Iranian uprisings since the Constitutional Revolution in 1906, Ayatollah Khomeini’s ideas and the Shias ideological outlook, and the internal politics of Iran. The last theme is cross-cutting, discusses the contemporary history of Islamic movements in the region and analyses the challenges ahead for them. Shaqaqi begins by critically evaluating postcolonial Muslim states’ suppression of Islamic movements. He argues that after the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the colonial powers realised that controlling the region by direct military involvement was too costly and impractical. The colonial powers accordingly divided the region into smaller states and supported local agents that would grab power and rule in the newly established states. Their main aim was to prevent Islamic unity amongst the nations in order to maintain their hegemony in the region.³⁰ He specifically refers to the role of military juntas in coercing the Muslim nations. To this end, he argues that military figures like Kamal Ataturk in Turkey and Muammar Qadafi in Libya were brought to

power by the colonialists in order to suppress the Islamic identity of their nations.³¹ From Shafaqi's point of view, the Arab revolts against the Ottoman Empire were engineered by the British colonial rulers in order to undermine Muslim unity. In his view, Islamic groups were the most effective opposition to the colonial powers in the region, and he pointed to a number of Islamic movements as examples – such as the Sheikh Izzadin-Qassam movement in Palestine, and Algerian revolutionaries that were the champions of emancipation from colonialism and foreign invasions. In contrast, he argues that the “westernised thinkers” within the Muslim and Arab worlds became instruments of the colonial powers, and paved the way for foreign domination.³² Shafaqi goes further and argues that Arab and Muslim nations were left disillusioned with liberals and nationalists after their failure to defend Palestine. According to him, the colonial powers masterminded a number of military coups in the postcolonial Arab states in order to prevent the Islamic movements from gaining power. Shafaqi argues that socialist and left-wing activists also failed to understand the importance of ideas and identity in history by devaluing the role of religion in combating colonialism in Muslim lands.³³

Having introduced the anti-colonialist role of Islamic movements in the region, he expresses strong disappointment with the agendas of secularist and liberal movements. It was against this disappointment that Shafaqi began to evaluate the Islamic revolution in Iran and study Khomeini's ideas. In structuring his book, Shafaqi provides a historical account for his readers on Iran's sociopolitical situation since the 1906 Constitutional Revolution right up to the 1979 Islamic revolution. According to Shafaqi, Iran's Muslim clerics played the most prominent role in Iran's Constitutional Revolution. In his rather partial narration of Iranian history, he draws a parallel between Pahlavi's attempts to modernise Iran and Ataturk's anti-Islamic and secular tendencies, architected by the Western powers in order to deprive these nations from achieving independence.³⁴ Shafaqi describes the social policies of the Shah of Iran as endeavours to de-Islamise society and divorce the nation from its religious identity.³⁵ Shafaqi describes two main pillars of power in the Pahlavi regime: its army, backed by the West, and its notorious intelligence agency SAVAK. He underlines the connection between Israel and SAVAK, reminding Arab readers that Israeli intelligence services were the major source of training and support for it. In analysing pre-revolutionary opposition groups, Shafaqi shows an appreciation for the powerful influence of the Shia *Marajii* and their uncompromising stance in upholding Islamic values. He specifically castigates secular and nationalist factions for their lack of understanding of Islam.

In his book, Shafaqi also examines the international reaction to the Islamic revolution in Iran, in particular from the United States, Israel and the Soviet Union. By doing this, Shafaqi attempts to show a link between foreign interventions in Iran and the foreign occupation of Palestine. He argues that the main priority in the region for the United States is to safeguard the state of Israel and also to maintain a pro-American equilibrium. He also criticised the Soviets' anti-Islamic propaganda during the Islamic revolution in Iran and praised Ayatollah Khomeini's independence from foreign influence. Saudi Arabia's regime is described by Shafaqi as the

closest ally of Washington in the region – even more than the Shah’s regime. He further argues that the charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini significantly troubled the White House and its regional allies, such as the House of Saud.³⁶ In evaluating Israel’s stance on the Islamic revolution in Iran, Shaqaqi goes further to argue that the animosity between Shia Muslims and the Jews has roots in Islam’s history, dating back to when the Jews were accused of attempting to assassinate the Shia’s first Imam, Ali ibn Abi Taleb.³⁷

It is clear that Shaqaqi was influenced by the Shia clerics in the Holy Cities of Qom and Najaf – specifically Ayatollah Khomeini – in their support for the Palestinian cause. In his book, Shaqaqi echoes Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwas and religious decrees, which denounced Israel and called on Iranians and Muslims to support the cause of Palestine as their own. In this narrative, the Shah’s regime represented the only vital ally of Israel in the region and a vital element on the frontline that opposed the emancipation of Palestinian land from Israeli occupation. From his point of view, the demise of the Shah’s regime was the crucial step towards the liberation of Palestine under the banner of Islam and proof that resistance was the only solution to the Palestinian predicament.

What is central in Shaqaqi’s writings is the influence of Khomeini on his own ideological outlook. In *al-Khomeini*, Shaqaqi categorises the Shia clergy into two groups: “traditionalist” –also referred to as “isolationists” – who believed in the separation of religion from politics, and “activists”, who under the charismatic leadership of Khomeini advocated that religion and politics were inseparable.³⁸ Shaqaqi saw in Khomeini a figure that was calling on Muslims to actively seek justice, and unafraid to state that Islam belonged to those proactively seeking freedom, independence and justice.³⁹ In sum, he believed that Khomeini’s understanding of Islam was wider than most: inspirational, unique and admirable. Shaqaqi praises Khomeini for his criticism of traditionalist clerics that interpreted Islam only as a spiritual religion, with no relevance to the political life of the Muslims. In this regard, Shaqaqi is particularly inspired by the fact that Khomeini believed such *ulama* prevented Muslims from progressing politically and neglecting the sociopolitical and economic dimensions of their faith.⁴⁰ In fact, Khomeini’s critical approach inspired Shaqaqi to criticise the Ikhwan’s inaction towards the Palestinian issue. According to Meir Hatina, Shaqaqi concluded that such traditionalist clerics – in contrast to figures like Izza al-Din al-Qassam who rebelled against the British and the Jews in Palestine in the 1920s and Ayatollah Khomeini who led the struggle against imperialism and formed the Islamic revolution in 1979 –were unsuited to lead believers.⁴¹ In portraying Islam as the faith of emancipation from foreign intervention, Khomeini deeply inspired Shaqaqi to react against the inactivity of conservative Sunni Muslim clerics on the issue of armed struggle in Palestine. Furthermore, Shaqaqi highlights Khomeini’s emphasis upon Islamic unity in the *umma* as the key liberating element against imperialism and colonialism. Panegyricising Khomeini the most for his uncompromising stance against the invaders of Palestine, it is no wonder Shaqaqi believed that Iran’s relations with Palestine stemmed from religious and revolutionary ideas that were being advocated by prominent Iranian Shia clerics. In order to

draw his readers' attention to the roots of Iranian pro-Palestinian activism, Shafaqi underlines the pre-revolutionary history of Iranian support for the Palestinian cause, citing a number of religious decrees issued by Khomeini during the 1960s and 1970s. Shafaqi concludes his argument by defining the Islamic revolution in Iran as "purely Islamic", compatible with the Quran's teachings, and belonging to all revolutionary Muslims who believe in freedom and justice regardless of their sect or faction.⁴²

Shafaqi authored his second book *al-Sunnah wa al-Shia, Zhajah Moqtaneah* under the pseudonym Dr. Islam Mahmood, and its first edition was published by *al-Mukhtar al-Islami* in 1982 in Cairo.⁴³ Shafaqi's endeavour was to respond to some of the radical Sunni clerics who were criticising the Islamic revolution in Iran, dismissing it as a purely sectarian-based uprising with no transcendent agenda beyond its Shia constituents. Conversely, in his book, the Islamic revolution in Iran is presented as the vanguard of Islamic unity. Shafaqi begins his argument by reprimanding regional powers for joining the "imperialist campaign" against the revolution in Iran. In doing so, some conservative regional states exaggerated and incited sectarian divisions in the Muslim world.⁴⁴ Reviewing the history of Muslim nations since the demise of the Ottoman Empire, Shafaqi argues that the Islamic revolution in Iran triumphed at a time when the Muslim nations had lost almost all hope of regaining their past glory.⁴⁵ From his perception, the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran made Muslim nations less fearful by proving that imperialism could be defeated and that justice could be restored through resistance and unity.

Shafaqi goes on to argue that sectarianism was the most powerful instrument of imperialism and colonialism against the unity and independence of the Muslim nations. Here, imperialism and its agents were believed to be tirelessly attempting to incite a division between Sunnis and Shias in order to prevent the ideological expansion of the Islamic revolution amongst the majority Sunni populations of regional states. In his view, the aim of imperialism was to safeguard Israel against the unity of the Muslim neighbouring states and to regain its foothold in the region.⁴⁶ Shafaqi is specifically critical about some radical Sunni clerics who incited sectarian hatred by using language in line with that of the imperialist powers and those who were blind to the commonality between Sunni and Shia teachings. Shafaqi structures his argument by referring to various historical religious decrees issued by prominent Sunni clerics in support of unity between Sunnis and Shias. In a similar vein, Shafaqi highlights historical relations between the Ikhwan and various Shia clerics and thinkers. Shafaqi underlines Abdul-Karim Shirazi's book *Wahdat Islami* (Islamic Unity), which defined a true Muslim as a person who believes in almighty God, in his last messenger the Prophet Mohammed and in the holy book of the Quran and the day of resurrection.⁴⁷ In other words, Shafaqi was convinced that there were significant commonalities between Sunnis and Shias that would overshadow their disagreements.

In underlining the historical relations between the Ikhwan and the Shia clerics, Shafaqi is specifically fascinated by Navab Safavi's pan-Islamic ideas, support for the Palestinian cause from its inception and historical visits to Syria and Egypt.⁴⁸

Shaqaqi refers to the prominent Sunni scholar, Fathi Yakan,⁴⁹ who regarded Navab Safavi as a great martyr sacrificing his life for the sake of the Islamic *umma*.⁵⁰ Shaqaqi quotes Yakan's sentiments that the Arabs needed to search for Navab Safavi's ideological brothers in Iran in order to unify the Islamic *umma*. However, according to Yakan, Arab states failed to understand that the only reliable force capable of supporting the Palestinians from beyond the Arab world were Islamic movements.⁵¹ Appealing to his Arab readers, Shaqaqi then raises the following question: For what reason, given that Khomeini (who possessed the same ideology as Navab Safavi) have some in the Arab world been reluctant to consolidate a relationship with revolutionary Iran? Shaqaqi also cites Sheykh Mahmud Shaltut, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar who encouraged harmonious interactions between the Sunni and the Shia and recognised the Shia as one of the main legitimate Islamic schools besides the Sunnis.⁵²

Furthering his pro-*umma* argument and challenge to those advocating sectarianism, Shaqaqi goes beyond the al-Azhar institution by referring to another eminent Sunni scholar, Mohammed al-Ghazali.⁵³ Shaqaqi specifically highlights al-Ghazali's reference to the Quran's verse that states:

Indeed, those who have divided their religion and become sects – you, [O Muhammad], are not [associated] with them in anything. Their affair is only [left] to Allah; then He will inform them about what they used to do.⁵⁴

According to Shaqaqi, al-Ghazali effectively argued that the differences between the Shia and Sunnis were over minor issues and that both schools were in agreement on the core principles of Islam. In other words, all Islamic schools were equal although they possessed diverse methodologies for interpreting Islamic contexts.⁵⁵ Shaqaqi also refers to Sunni scholars with a broader perspective, such as the prominent Sunni jurist Sheikh Abdul-Wahab Khalaf (1888–1956), Muhammad Abu-Zahra (1898–1974) and Anwar al-Jundi (1917–2002) who all recognised the Shia as a legitimate sect and likewise emphasised the necessity of consolidating unity between both branches of Islam.

After concluding his argument that no major differences existed between the Shia and Sunni schools, Shaqaqi describes the Islamic revolution in Iran as a contemporary Islamic revival. In particular, he believed that it was the duty of every Muslim who has faith in the unity of *umma* to condemn Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran.⁵⁶ Shaqaqi argues that many activists in the Muslim world, including the Ikhwan could see a link between Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran and the desire of the major powers to attack the unity of the Islamic *umma*. Shaqaqi praised the Islamic movements' and Ikhwan's anti-Saddam's positions towards the Iran-Iraq war. He argues that supporting the Islamic revolution against Saddam Hussein's invasion was the equivalent of supporting the Palestinians in their struggle against the Israeli invaders.⁵⁷ Shaqaqi concludes his book by citing Khomeini's idea that those advocating sectarianism within Islam were neither Sunni nor Shia but in fact agents of imperialism aiming to pave the way for the imperialists to dominate the region.⁵⁸

My point is that the aim of Islamic Jihad movement is to avoid entering the historical aspects of the Sunni-Shia divisions by mainly concentrating on their essential commonalities. To this end, Shaqaqi encouraged his followers to downplay inter-religious disputes and to emphasise Khomeini's pan-Islamic messages and some prominent Sunni scholars' unionist ideas. Meir Hatina is right to state that, from Shaqaqi's perception, efforts by Arab regimes to batter the Iranian Revolution by inflaming the hostilities between Shia and Sunna distort the historic truth and only serve Western imperialism.⁵⁹ In fact, Shaqaqi in his book demonstrates that he was a prolific opponent of sectarian divisions as he repeatedly calls for unity amongst the Muslims in confronting the state of Israel.

The last book by Shaqaqi, entitled *Muqadamah Hawl Markaziyyah Filastin wa al-Mashro'a al-Islami al-Muaser*, was published in 1989 in Beirut. Shaqaqi began writing this book in June 1985 while imprisoned in an Israeli jail cell. The book provided ideological guidance for Palestinians on the vital role of Islam in confronting Israel.⁶⁰ In this book, Shaqaqi divides his narrative into three interlinked sections. In the first section, Shaqaqi analyses the Palestinian question through a religious lens, highlighting the importance of the Palestinian question in contemporary Islamic history. Shaqaqi begins his argument by asserting that the Palestinian question is the most crucial contemporary issue for the Islamic world. Yet Arab regimes had in fact used the Palestinian cause to manipulate their Arab and Muslim constituencies and to gain legitimacy without taking concrete steps in unifying the *umma* and combating Israel.⁶¹ He is also critical in this book of Arab regimes for having joined the capitalist and communist camps and ultimately neglecting the potential unifying power of Islam. Shaqaqi castigates postcolonial pan-Arab regimes for abandoning the Palestinians and surrendering the holy mosque of al-Aqsa to the Jewish state without solid resistance. In his view, nationalist regimes in the Arab world attempted to disconnect the Palestinian struggle from its Islamic core in order to suppress Islamic movements. In highlighting the Islamic dimension of the Palestinian question, he accentuates the importance of Jerusalem in Islam. Shaqaqi refers to the Holy Quran and underlines *Surat al-Asra* (the chapter "Night Journey") as it states:

Exalted is He who took His Servant by night from al-Masjid al-Haram to al-Masjid al-Aqsa, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him of Our signs. Indeed, He is the Hearing, the Seeing.⁶²

Shaqaqi argues that this verse emphasises the importance of the land of Palestine in Islam as a link between the most holy mosques in Islam: Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. In his view, the verse implies that all three mosques are equally sacred.⁶³ In his book, Shaqaqi continues referring to the Quran and highlights two more verses that state:

And We conveyed to the Children of Israel in the Scripture that, "You will surely cause corruption on the earth twice, and you will surely reach [a degree

of] great haughtiness.⁶⁴ So when the [time of] promise came for the first of them, We sent against you servants of Ours – those of great military might, and they probed [even] into the homes, and it was a promise fulfilled.⁶⁵

By referring to this verse, Shaqqaqi argues that Jewish animosity against Muslims has its roots in history and that there subsequently is a link between the current predicament in Palestine and historical antagonisms. Shaqqaqi refers to various Muslim narratives of the Jewish presence in the Arabian Peninsula during the Prophet Mohammed's era and revises the history of the first years of Islam.⁶⁶ Shaqqaqi highlights that the Jews took advantage of the compassion shown by the Muslims by uniting with pagan Arab tribes against the Muslims. He was certainly fascinated with early Islamic history that focused on how the Jews and the pagan Arabs – despite their power and wealth – were eventually defeated by a small number of Muslims. This was because the latter had faith in God and in his messenger, the Prophet Mohammed.⁶⁷ Shaqqaqi believes that the history of Islam is particularly inspiring for the Palestinians, who had faith in religion and freedom from occupation and discrimination. Shaqqaqi therefore believes that the Palestinian question has a special status in contemporary Islamic history and could not be compromised or neglected.

Elsewhere in his book, Shaqqaqi examines the contemporary history of the region. He identified that colonialism and imperialism had waged a war against the Muslims since the beginning of the nineteenth century. He argues that the Muslim world faces attempts to spread consumerism and to undermine the foundation of Islamic values through spreading liberal principles in societies. In doing so, Shaqqaqi argues that secular pan-Arab regimes and pro-Western activists act as agents of the foreign powers. In his book, imperialism and Zionism are presented as two sides of the same coin and the secular Arab regimes as a fifth column acting against the interests of Muslims. He believes that the failure of the Arabs in the 1967 war with Israel was caused by the apathy of the secular Arab regimes. Zionism is considered an equal partner of imperialism.⁶⁸

Shaqqaqi's books are best read as discursive tracts between him and the "Arab street", particularly with his fellow Palestinian countrymen. With these texts, Shaqqaqi initiated a new inter-Palestinian dialectic about the potential role of Islam in liberating Palestine and the centrality of the Palestinian cause in contemporary Muslim affairs. For him, there was no room for sectarianism and ethnic divisions. One can argue that he shared many of his ideas about the centrality of Palestine in Islam with Khomeini, producing a kind of hermetic sense of identity. Shaqqaqi's writings also became ideological charters for Islamic Jihad activists and to this day remain the roadmap for his followers. In this sense, Shaqqaqi's pro-Iranian orientation formed the ideological backbone of Islamic Jihad several years later.⁶⁹

The impact of the Islamic revolution was not limited to Shaqqaqi and his immediate circle. A number of other Palestinians who had no direct contact with Shaqqaqi were also influenced by Khomeini's ideas. Loren Lybarger provides an account of the ideological influence of the Islamic revolution on the Palestinian streets⁷⁰ and

specifically highlights the biography of Ibn Fadlallah – a Palestinian activist who began in the secular Fatah movement in the early 1980s.⁷¹ Ibn Fadlallah's strong desire to fight against the occupation motivated him to join Fatah and undertake military training in its camps. After being imprisoned for 15 years, Ibn Fadlallah began to distance himself from the secular movement as he came to believe that Fatah's members were not "fully committed to Islam".⁷² Expelled to southern Lebanon in 1992 by the Israeli army, he came into contact with Iranian advisors and members of Hizbullah. Having met Ibn Fadlallah for an interview, Lybarger found posters and photographs of Ayatollah Khomeini plastered across his doors and walls.⁷³

Ibn Fadlallah was disappointed by a number of characteristics of the secular resistance: endemic corruption, disregard for Islam and in particular the PLO's desire to enter into negotiations with Israel. According to Lybarger, Ibn Fadlallah's ideological metamorphosis coincided with a reassessment of the situation among Maoist-oriented leaders in Fatah's so-called Student Brigades in the wake of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the expulsion of the PLO from Beirut three years later.⁷⁴ Those activists – led by a Christian, Munir Shafiq – argued that against the backdrop of the striking triumph of the cleric-led Iranian revolution, their efforts at using leftist ideology as a catalyst for leading and winning the Palestinian struggle for liberation had ended in failure.⁷⁵ Inspired by the Islamic revolution, these activists argued that Islam could provide the essential symbols and language for reigniting the Palestinian struggle on a much wider level.⁷⁶ By this time, the PLO had lost credibility in the eyes of some Palestinians due to its corruption and authoritarianism and, more importantly, for abandoning its armed struggle against Israel.⁷⁷ Ibn Fadlallah's revolutionary rededication to the struggle was passed on instead through the militancy of Iran and Hizbullah, the core symbols of that militancy.⁷⁸ Iran's and Hizbullah's successes gave legitimacy to those symbols, and Ibn Fadlallah adopted them in order to redefine the aspirations and approaches of the Palestinian cause.⁷⁹ Ibn Fadlallah's admiration for Iran and Hizbullah drove him not only to downplay Shia-Sunni divisions but also to learn from the symbols of martyrdom in the form of the Twelve Shia Imams. For Ibn Fadlallah, Palestine demanded the revolutionary spirit that he thought the Iranians and Hizbullah commanders had:

Their action spoke louder than any words. They brought us [. . .] better tents and wood to build beds. The [Iranian] Revolutionary Guards brought these things to us over a distance of eight kilometres over steep mountains and under cover of darkness to avoid detection by the Israelis. They also brought us an electrical generator, TVs with satellite reception, special videos about the resistance. [. . .] They also gave each of us five hundred dollars for our personal expenses. If anyone needed medical care, they took us to Imam Hospital in Ba'labakk [Baalbek] or to the American University's Beirut Hospital. The Iranians were completely selfless.⁸⁰

Lybarger is right to hypothesise that the emergence of Islamism in Palestinian society epitomised a generational transfer in the political identities of the activists who,

in earlier periods, would have allied with one of the PLO factions.⁸¹ Lybarger argues that the foundation of this alteration lay in occurrences that radicalised the Islamist milieu – specially the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the invasion of Lebanon by Israel and the First Intifada of 1987–1993.⁸²

The importance of Iran and the centrality of the Palestinian cause in the ideas of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad

Let me return to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's moral connections with revolutionary Iran. As I have argued, the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran inspired Shafaqi to establish Palestinian Islamic Jihad. According to Meir Hatina, Palestinian Islamic Jihad views the Islamic revolution of Iran as the major historic turning point in the Muslim struggle against the domination of the Western powers.⁸³ The removal of the pro-Western regime of the Shah – one of Israel's closest regional allies – proved to Palestinians like Shafaqi that the change was achievable. Palestinian Islamic Jihad expressed frustration with Sunni-Arab states' suspicions and antagonistic reactions against the Islamic revolution, viewing this opposition to Iran as being orchestrated by the imperialists. In the eyes of Islamic Jihad, such political campaigns aimed to prevent the *umma* from uniting. According to Meir Hatina, the leadership of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad aimed to construct a wider Sunni consensus around the Islamic revolution by means of highlighting the prominence of Palestine in Iran's policy.⁸⁴

Islamic Jihad's founding leaders appreciated that despite the geographical distance, Khomeini treated the Palestinian question as an internal problem.⁸⁵ Their appreciation of the Islamic revolution surfaced during the Iran-Iraq war, as they felt that the liberation of Palestine should be the first and foremost priority for all Arab states, including Iraq.⁸⁶ Shafaqi believed that the Western powers had supported Saddam Hussein in order to prevent the Islamic revolution from expanding its influence throughout the region.⁸⁷ Palestinian Islamic Jihad just viewed the invasion of Iran by Iraq as resembling – at least morally – the invasion of Palestine, with both events interlinked in a wider conspiracy against Islamic movements. Islamic Jihad leaders criticised Saddam Hussein for repressing Muslim activists in Iraq, such as Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr, and for his secular discourse. According to Meir Hatina, the Islamic Jihad's leadership accused the Iraqi regime of recruiting Arab and Western states to help him protect his oil resources and take revenge against Khomeini for overthrowing the Shah.⁸⁸

It is vital to note that in contrast to the PLO (which turned its back on Iran during the Iran-Iraq war by supporting Baghdad), Islamic Jihad remained staunchly pro-Iranian. This was due to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's ideology having motivated its leadership further to stand by the Islamic revolution. Here, transnational ideas of Islamic solidarity were the main vehicles behind Islamic Jihad's decision to denounce Saddam Hussein and support Iran. Not only did the Iran-Iraq war fail to undermine the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's ideological ties with the Islamic

revolution – it in fact inspired it all the more. According to Islamic Jihad, Islamic Iran stood on one side as it confronted the arrogance of Israel and pro-American Arab conservative states. Islamic Jihad saw itself as an accompaniment to the Islamic revolution. The fact that Iran's military forces demonstrated strong resistance against the well equipped Iraqi army motivated the Palestinian Islamic Jihad to follow the same path and to conduct armed struggles within the Occupied Territories. Meir Hatina argues that Shafaqi observed and admired Khomeini and Iran's unwavering resistance against a superior military power that was nourished by a powerful faith in the triumph of Islam.⁸⁹ In other words, Iranian resistance – similar to Hizbullah's successful campaigns against Israel's invasion of Lebanon – awakened the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and encouraged the outbreak of the Intifada in 1987.⁹⁰

The Intifada of 1987: the Islamic dimension of the Palestinian struggle

Shafaqi was inspired not only by Khomeini's ideas to establish an Islamic state but also by Iran's resistance against its adversaries. Inspired by the formation of the Islamic revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Iran, and Hizbullah's popular mobilisation in Lebanon, Shafaqi in 1981 established *Saraya al-Quds* (al-Quds Brigades), which would be Islamic Jihad's military wing.⁹¹ From the very beginning, *Saraya al-Quds* conducted armed struggles throughout the Occupied Territories and routinely confronted the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF).

The word "Intifada" (uprising in Arabic) entered the political discourse and academia in 1987 following a popular uprising in Palestine. In May 1987, six members of Islamic Jihad succeeded in escaping from Gaza Central Prison. According to Khaled Hroub, the six remained in the Gaza Strip and carried out a series of audacious attacks on Israeli armed forces. Four of these individuals were killed by the Israeli army during an ambush in October of that year. Following the wounding of dozens of students at the Islamic University campus by the Israeli Army – where students had gathered for prayers dedicated to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's members who were killed by the Israeli armed forces⁹² – Palestinians erupted in anger. On 6 December, a member of Islamic Jihad engaged in an armed confrontation with Israeli settlers, and two days later an Israeli truck crashed into a number of Palestinian labourers on their way home – injuring nine and killing four. On the same day, mass protests erupted and spontaneously spread to other areas. The 8th of December is now considered the official start of the Intifada.⁹³ There was a strong sense of solidarity among young members of Islamic Jihad and their imprisoned mentor, Shafaqi, whose imprisonment galvanised them to increase their armed activities prior to the Intifada. As Shafaqi was imprisoned, his followers intensified their armed operations. In October 1986, three young followers – Tareq al-Hallis, Abdul-Nasser al-Hallis and Ibrahim Aliyan – attacked a group of Israeli soldiers.⁹⁴

Meir Hatina argues that although the Intifada was principally a public uprising incited by nationalist motivations and socio-economic grievances, it drew its validity from Islam as an integral element of Palestinian cultural identity.⁹⁵ According to

Meir Hatina, the Intifada was characterised in Islamic Jihad literature as a “revolution” (*thawra*) rather than an impetuous revolt, perceived by the movement as yet another stage of an Islamic struggle against the Zionist presence in Palestine.⁹⁶ Henceforth, the year preceding the Intifada was declared by Shafaqi as “the year of Islam”.⁹⁷

Indeed, from the earliest stages of the Intifada, the role of Islamic Jihad was visible. The Islamic Jihad’s underground printing houses actively published and distributed pamphlets throughout the Occupied Territories and in the process incited protests. On 11 December 1987, it was Islamic Jihad that first published a leaflet calling for the Palestinians to hold a general strike.⁹⁸ Such pamphlets during the early stages of the Intifada demonstrated Islamic Jihad’s widespread activism. At the same time, I do not intend to imply that the Intifada was monopolised by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Indeed, even Shafaqi stated that the “Intifada broke out with the bloodshed by Islamic Jihad’s martyrs. Later, other forces joined in”.⁹⁹ Shafaqi thus never claimed that Islamic Jihad was the only vehicle behind the Intifada and recognised that other Palestinian factions – including the PLO and the Muslim Brotherhood – took part.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, Azzam Tamimi argues that the Intifada caught the PLO leadership in Tunis off guard.¹⁰¹ Although Yasser Arafat and his advisors were active in promoting the image of the PLO image to the world as a peacemaker, they recognised a great opportunity in supporting the Intifada. According to Tamimi, the PLO aimed to seize control of the Intifada in order to gain recognition by the United States as “the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, with whom alone peace was to be negotiated”.¹⁰² To do so, the PLO began competing with Islamic groups and mobilising its members and supporters to help fuel the Intifada – transforming the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank into a daily nightmare for the Israelis.¹⁰³

The Islamic Jihad expressed frustration with the inaction and lack of support from regional leaders in supporting the Intifada. Strong support for the Intifada was shown by only two states – Lebanon and Iran. Here, the people were free to exhibit their solidarity without fear of being reprimanded by the authorities.¹⁰⁴ Mass rallies held frequently in Tehran and Beirut exhibited an awareness of both populations that “it was the fighters in Palestine who defended the last Islamic wall – Jerusalem and its surroundings”.¹⁰⁵ For Islamic Jihad, the failure of Arab leaders’ to express strong sympathy towards the Intifada was because they feared the spread of the transnational Islamic message of the Intifada.¹⁰⁶

Following the outbreak of the Intifada, Islamic Jihad’s cells became major targets for the Israelis. Key figures and leaders of Islamic Jihad were either imprisoned or forced into exile, and both Shafaqi and Awda were expatriated to Lebanon in 1988. Although the expulsion of Islamic Jihad’s leadership created a vacuum amongst its cadres in the Gaza Strip, it also created a new momentum for its leadership to become closer with the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hizbullah. According to Hatina, with the move to Lebanon and Syria, the ideological link of Islamic Jihad to Revolutionary Iran was cemented as a close political and organisational bond.¹⁰⁷ Through the Iranian Embassy in Beirut and through Hizbullah, Islamic Jihad’s

leadership received logistical support and was able to revitalise its anti-Israeli military activities from Lebanon. As Nasser Abu Sharif, the high representative of the Leadership of Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Iran, stated:

From the very beginning of the formation of Islamic Jihad and during the first Intifada there was no official connection between Islamic Jihad and the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the view of Islamic Jihad, the Islamic revolution was a successful example that the Palestinian Muslims could follow in liberating their Islamic Land. Nevertheless, there were no institutionalised relations between Islamic Jihad and Iran at a diplomatic level. The official relations between both sides began after Shiqaqi and other high ranking figures of Islamic Jihad were expatriated to Lebanon in 1988. The Islamic Jihad leadership contacted Iranian officials in Lebanon and strengthened Islamic Jihad's connection with revolutionary Iran. Islamic Jihad also officialised its connections with Hizbullah's leadership as it viewed the Hizbullah's liberation project similar to its own. Nevertheless, the relations between Islamic Jihad and the Islamic Republic of Iran began officially by establishing the Islamic Jihad's representative office in Tehran in 1991 which operates at a very high level.¹⁰⁸

Moving to Lebanon opened a new window of opportunity for Islamic Jihad, which had suffered from Israel's military campaigns. Along with wide support for the Intifada, Iran nurtured political links with the exiled Islamic Jihad leadership.¹⁰⁹ Iran's support became the primary enabling force behind Islamic Jihad and other exiled Palestinians in Lebanon. This support allowed Islamic Jihad to grow an infrastructure in Lebanon and in Syria, and included help to build training camps, develop military capacity and assist with publishing the movement's literature.¹¹⁰ Meir Hatina argues that, like its patron Iran, Hizbullah devoted its full support for the Palestinian cause and placed itself alongside the Palestinians on the frontline of the struggle of Muslims against their oppressors.¹¹¹ Meir Litvak is also of the opinion that moving to Lebanon enhanced Islamic Jihad's ties with Iran and Hizbullah, with Iran the main financial sponsor and Hizbullah the provider of logistical aid and military training. Thanks to Iran and Hizbullah, Islamic Jihad was able to expand its network in the Palestinian refugee camps of Lebanon.¹¹²

Islamic Jihad's proximity to Hizbullah transformed the movement into a quasi-military organisation, complete with a military hierarchy and even a military spokesman. The centrality of the Palestinian cause galvanised Islamic Jihad and Hizbullah to conduct joint military operations in southern Lebanon against Israel. In April 1992, Islamic Jihad and Hizbullah conducted a joint military attack on the Israeli army in southern Lebanon, followed by the issuance of a collective statement announcing: "We made an alliance with Allah, the Imam Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic nation al-Sayyid Khamene'i [. . .] to continue jihad, despite the great sacrifices which may be required".¹¹³ Returning briefly to the beginning of this chapter, which assessed the impact of the Islamic revolution of Iran on the

Palestinian struggle and Islamic Jihad, the sentiments expressed by Nasser Abu Sharif are noteworthy:

From Islamic Jihad's perception, the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran had profound effects on the Islamic World in general and the Palestinian cause in particular. Islamic Jihad perceives the victory of the Islamic revolution as the victory for the Palestinian cause. Iran (during the Pahlavi era) was one of Israel's friendly states and turned out to become one of the major supporters of the Palestinian nation. Such transformation not only altered Iran but also the Islamic nations. Within a year after the triumph of the Islamic revolution, the Palestinian Islamists won the Student elections within the Universities and became the major popular rivals for the Palestinian mainstream nationalists. Also, in the early eighties, the Palestinian Islamic groups began adopting the revolutionary Islamic discourse into the Palestinian struggle against the Zionists. Islamic Jihad also began to adopt the idea of revolutionary Islam as a method for changing the Arab home land. When the book of *Al-Khomeini: Al-Hall al-Islami wa al-Badil* (Khomeini: The Islamic Solution and Alternative) was authored by Fathi Shirqi in Egypt, the ideological links between Islamic Jihad and the Islamic revolution of Iran were shaped based on their common Islamic identity.¹¹⁴

Shirqi and his followers were thus certainly fascinated with and imbued by the revolution, the radical ideas of Khomeini in particular, and with the history of Iranian support for the Palestinian cause. Hatina highlights that Islamic Jihad viewed itself as a promoter of Iran's pan-Islamic and anti-imperialistic vision, with Iran providing both ideological inspiration and political backing.¹¹⁵ Yet this does not mean that Islamic Jihad was totally dependent on Iran; instead, the movement sees itself as independent.

While in exile, Shirqi maintained his loyalty to the Islamic revolution in Iran, enhancing Islamic Jihad's relations with Hizbullah until his assassination in 1995. The assassination is widely believed to have been the work of Israel's intelligence services (Mossad).¹¹⁶ According to al-Quds Brigade, Mossad agents were well aware of the fact that Shirqi visited Iran frequently via direct flights from Syria. Due to the fact that Iran and Syria had protected Shirqi, the Mossad planned to assassinate Shirqi outside Damascus. In October 1995, Shirqi travelled to Libya via Malta in order to attend an international conference on guerrilla warfare. On 26 October 1995, Shirqi – while carrying a Libyan passport bearing the name Ibrahim Al-Shawesh – was assassinated by two Mossad gunmen outside a seaside hotel in the town of Sliema in Malta.¹¹⁷ Shortly after the assassination, Iran's Supreme Leader Seyyed Ali Khamenei denounced Israel's "crimes against the Palestinian people" and praised Shirqi for achieving martyrdom. He issued a public message of condolence: "I offer my congratulations and condolences over the great martyrdom to dear Islamic Jihad and his respected family as well as his prideful companions and the overall

Palestinian nation".¹¹⁸ Khamenei's condolences were followed by similar messages from Hizbullah's leadership and Shia clerics and public figures in Iran and Lebanon. A day after his assassination, posters and photographs of Shafaqi and the Palestinian flags were plastered across the walls of schools and public buildings in Tehran. In addition, Tehran's municipality named a street close to the Palestinian Embassy after Fathi Shafaqi.

The killing of Fathi Shafaqi was neither the end of Islamic Jihad's war against Israel, nor the end of its close relations with Iran. Shortly after Shafaqi's assassination, the Islamic Jihad's committee nominated and selected Ramadan Abdullah Shallah, Shafaqi's loyal companion, as its General Secretary. Like Shafaqi, Ramadan Shallah believes that military resistance is the only avenue for the liberation of Palestine. He is specifically critical of PLO's "soft" approach towards Israel. As I will argue in the following chapter, Ramadan Shallah continues Shafaqi's path by placing Islamic Jihad's relations with Iran and Hizbullah as the top priority for the movement.¹¹⁹

Shafaqi was a singularly crucial character in Palestinian political history, and not merely because he established the Islamic Jihad movement. I have suggested that Shafaqi lambasted the passivity of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic scholars. Shafaqi presented a new discursive debate among Palestinian activists by highlighting the revolutionary Islamic resistance as the most reliable alternative to nationalist discourse. Inspired by the Islamic revolution in Iran, Islamic Jihad appropriated the discourse of resistance and imbued it with Islamic rather than nationalist or secularist values in order to distinguish it from other forms of resistance. The triumph of the revolution in Iran served as evidence for Shafaqi and his followers that revolutionary Islam was the only alternative to the passive Muslim Brotherhood and to the pan-Arabism of the PLO. What is central to my reading of the First Intifada is that it marked a new page in the history of the Palestinian struggle. Unlike previous conflicts and rebellions against the occupation of Palestine, the Intifada was not dominated by nationalist or secular discourses and thus marked the end of their total hegemony on the Palestinian political stage. In fact, the Intifada reflected the Islamic dimension of the Palestinian movements and projected it as part of a wider context. By championing the Intifada, Islamic factions highlighted a powerful religious discourse that was hidden under the veneer of nationalism since the beginning of the Palestinian struggle.

One of the most important outcomes of this process of Islamicisation was the formation of the Islamic Resistance Movement, known in Arabic as *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya*: Hamas. The emergence of Islamic Palestinian factions further encouraged the Iranian leadership to deepen its pro-Palestinian stance. The Islamic Republic viewed Palestinian Islamic factions as being closer to its own ideological outlook than the PLO. To this end, Tehran did not hesitate to try to deepen and institutionalise its relations with exiled Palestinian leaders whom it viewed as better alternatives compared to the PLO. In the following chapter, I will discuss the foundation of Hamas and further analyse the Islamic Republic's relations with Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas during the post-Intifada period.

Notes

- 1 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, Tel Aviv: The Dayan Centre for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2001, p. 23.
- 2 Ibid., p. 23.
- 3 For more information on *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin* (Muslim Brothers) see <http://ikhwanweb.com> [Accessed 12 2016].
- 4 Ibid., p. 24.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid., p. 23.
- 8 Kasra Sadeq-Zadeh, *Shahid Doctor Fathi Shaqaqi* [Martyr Doctor Fathi Shaqaqi], Tehran: Markaz-e Asnaad-e Enqelab-e Islami [Centre for Islamic Revolution Documents], 1389 [2010], pp. 85–86.
- 9 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, p. 24.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Kasra Sadeq-Zadeh, *Shahid Doctor Fathi Shaqaqi*, p. 86.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, London: Hurst & Company, 2009, p. 43.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Kasra Sadeq-Zadeh, *Shahid Doctor Fathi Shaqaqi*, p. 87.
- 18 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, p. 25.
- 19 Kasra Sadeq-Zadeh, *Shahid Doctor Fathi Shaqaqi*, p. 86.
- 20 Ibid., p. 87.
- 21 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, p. 25.
- 22 Ibid., pp. 25–26.
- 23 Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, pp. 43–44.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Beverley Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine*, London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996, pp. 116–117.
- 26 Kasra Sadeq-Zadeh, *Shahid Doctor Fathi Shaqaqi*, p. 87.
- 27 Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, p. 44.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Translated by Seyed Hadi Khosroshahi, Tehran: Entesharaat-e Etelaa'at, Second Edition, 1384 (2005). Seyed Hadi Khosroshahi collected three books of Fathi Shaqaqi and translated them from Arabic into Farsi and published them as a single volume.
- 30 Ibid., p. 36.
- 31 Ibid., pp. 29–30.
- 32 Ibid., pp. 37–38.
- 33 Ibid., pp. 40–41.
- 34 Ibid., p. 85.
- 35 Ibid., pp. 86–87.
- 36 Ibid., pp. 125–126.
- 37 Ibid., p. 128. Shiqaqi highlights that Imam Ali had defeated the Jews in Madina during the Battle of Khaybar.
- 38 Ibid., pp. 50–51. Shiqaqi castigated Sunni clerics as well as some Shia clerics in Iraq, such as Ayatollah Khomeini, for displaying 'traditionalist' and 'isolationist' tendencies and as such not advocating the participation of clerics in political affairs.
- 39 Ibid., p. 51.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, 2001, p. 28.
- 42 Shiqaqi, Fathi Abdul-Aziz, Translated by Hadi Khosroshahi, 1384 (2005), p. 63.
- 43 Ibid., p. 323.

- 44 Ibid., pp. 160–165.
- 45 Ibid., p. 160.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Ibid., p. 166.
- 48 Navab Safavi (1923–1955) was the founder of Iran's Fadayeean-e Islam. For more analysis on Navab Safavi's relations with the Palestinian cause, see Chapter 1.
- 49 Fathi Yakan (1933–2009) was among the pioneers of the Islamic movement in the 1950s and the head of the Islamic Action Front (Lebanon).
- 50 Fathi Abdul-Aziz Shiqaqi, *Emam Khomeini, Tanha Gozineh* [Khomeini: The Only Solution], Translated by Hadi Khosroshahi, Tehran: Entesharat e Etelaat, 1384 (2005), pp. 168–170.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Ibid., p. 173.
- 53 Sheikh Mohammed al-Ghazali (1917–1996) was a well-known Egyptian Sunni scholar whose writings influenced Egypt's Islamist scene.
- 54 Fathi Abdul-Aziz Shiqaqi, Translated by Hadi Khosroshahi, 1384 (2005), p. 174; Quranic verse 6: 159.
- 55 Ibid., pp. 174–175.
- 56 Ibid., p. 188.
- 57 Ibid., pp. 194–195.
- 58 Ibid., p. 197.
- 59 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, p. 54.
- 60 Fathi Abdul-Aziz Shiqaqi, Translated by Hadi Khosroshahi, 1384 (2005), pp. 204–206.
- 61 Ibid., pp. 207–208.
- 62 *Surat-al-Asra* (the chapter “Night Journey”), Quran 17:1.
- 63 Fathi Abdul-Aziz Shiqaqi, Translated by Hadi Khosroshahi, 1384 (2005), p. 220.
- 64 *Surat al-Asra* (the chapter “Night Journey”) Quran 17:4.
- 65 *Surat al-Asra* (the chapter “Night Journey”) Quran 17:5.
- 66 Fathi Abdul-Aziz Shiqaqi, Translated by Hadi Khosroshahi, 1384 (2005), p. 233. For more on this narrative of the Jews living in the Arabian Peninsula during the time of the Prophet Mohammed, see Seyed Hadi Alizadeh, “Amaaliyaat-e Yahud baray-e Moqabeleh ba Payambar” [The Jewish Operation for Confronting the Prophet], *Religious Anthropology*, Institution of Shahid Mahalati Higher Education, Vol. 6, No. 19 (Summer and Autumn 2009), pp. 3–25.
- 67 Fathi Abdul-Aziz Shiqaqi, Translated by Hadi Khosroshahi, 1384 (2005), pp. 239–240.
- 68 Ibid., pp. 253–256.
- 69 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, p. 24.
- 70 Loren D. Lybarger, *Identity and Religion in Palestine: The Struggle Between Islamism and Secularism in the Occupied Territories*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007, chapter 3.
- 71 Ibid., p. 95.
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 Ibid., p. 98.
- 74 Ibid.
- 75 Ibid.
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 Ibid.
- 78 Ibid.
- 79 Ibid., p. 116.
- 80 Ibid., p. 118.
- 81 Ibid., p. 119.
- 82 Ibid.
- 83 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, p. 53.
- 84 Ibid., p. 56.

- 85 Ibid., pp. 56–57.
- 86 Iyad Barghouthi and Lisa Hajjar, “The Islamist Movements in the Occupied Territories: An Interview with Iyad Barghouthi”, *The Middle East Report*, No. 183. Political Islam (July–August 1993), p. 10.
- 87 Kasra Sadeq-Zadeh, *Shahid Doctor Fathi Shaqaqi*, pp. 120–121.
- 88 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, p. 57.
- 89 Ibid.
- 90 Ibid.
- 91 For more information on al-Quds Brigades, see: <http://saraya.ps/index.php> [Accessed 1 May 2014].
- 92 Khaled Hroub, *HAMAS: Political Thought and Practice*, Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000, p. 39.
- 93 Ibid.
- 94 Kasra Sadeq-Zadeh, *Shahid Doctor Fathi Shaqaqi*, p. 90.
- 95 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, p. 38.
- 96 Ibid., p. 58.
- 97 Ibid.
- 98 Ibid., p. 39.
- 99 In Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, p. 59.
- 100 Ibid.
- 101 Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, p. 53.
- 102 Ibid., p. 54.
- 103 Ibid.
- 104 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, p. 59.
- 105 Ibid.
- 106 Ibid.
- 107 Ibid., p. 41.
- 108 Interviewed in Tehran on 5 April 2014.
- 109 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, p. 110.
- 110 Ibid.
- 111 Ibid.
- 112 Meir Litvak, “The Palestinian Islamic Jihad: Background Information”, *The Moshe Dayan Centre for Middle Eastern and African Studies*, No. 56, 28 November 2002. Available at <http://d6.dayan.org/sites/default/files/taunotes56.pdf> [Accessed 2 May 2014].
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- 114 Interviewed in Tehran on 5 April 2014.
- 115 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, p. 111.
- 116 Joel Greenberg, “Islamic Group Vows Revenge for Slaying of its Leader”, *New York Times*, 30 October 1995. Available at www.nytimes.com/1995/10/30/world/islamic-group-vows-revenge-for-slaying-of-its-leader.html [Accessed 19 June 2015].
- 117 “Al-Quds Brigades, The Military Wing of the Islamic Jihad in Palestine”, 7 February 2015. Available at <http://saraya.ps/post/38793/> [Accessed 20 June 2015].
- 118 Khamenei.ir, *Payaam e Tasliyat Dar Peye Shahadat e Doctor Fathi Shaqaqi Rahbar e Jahad e Eslami Felestin* [The Message of Condolences Following the Martyrdom of Dr. Fathi Shaqaqi, The Leader of Palestinian Islamic Jihad]. Available at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=2771> [Accessed 29 June 2015].
- 119 For a biography of Ramadan Abdullah Shallah’s, see Ahmad Soroush-Nejad, *Faa’lan Siyasi Felestinii* [Palestinian Political Activists], Tehran: Moaseseh-e Tahqiqaat va Pajooheshha Elmi-Siyasi-e Neda, 1389 [2010], pp. 215–222.

4

RELATIONS BETWEEN IRAN AND HAMAS (1987–2011): STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP, SHARED VALUES AND IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

Hamas has rapidly emerged to be the leading Muslim group active in Palestinian political life. While much attention has been given to Hamas's political structure, military activities and political disagreements with the PLO, far less is known about its relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran – one of its staunchest supporters. This chapter provides an overview of Iran's relations with Hamas and examines this relationship within a strategic and ideological context. It begins with an analysis of Hamas's emergence in the 1980s, before moving on to address the main dimensions of its relations with the Islamic Republic and Iran's own behaviour towards Hamas. Using a political and historical analytical framework, this chapter traces Iran's relations with Hamas within two historical periods: first, from the establishment of Hamas during the First Intifada up until Hamas's electoral victory in 2006 and, second, from its 2006 electoral victory through the eruption of the Arab Spring in 2011 and during the subsequent crisis in Syria.¹ I contend that, despite several ups and downs, Hamas seeks to consolidate its ties with Iran as Tehran proves to be a reliable regional ally for Muslim factions in Palestine. At the same time, drawing on fieldwork in Iran and formal interviews with Hamas high representatives in Tehran and Iranian officials active in the field in Palestine, I argue that the discourse of "Muslim solidarity and common values" are the ideational foundation of Iran's support for Hamas.

The First Intifada and the emergence of Hamas

The Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood faced a range of challenges and opportunities within the Occupied Territories between 1979 and 1987. The triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 and the subsequent emergence of Shafaqi's Islamic Jihad led to an overhaul of the group's political strategy. The

Muslim Brotherhood chose to engage more actively in resistance, including armed struggle, as a way of deterring the occupation and restoring the rights of Palestinians. According to Azzam Tamimi, from 1979 to 1981, the Ikhwan's younger members inside Gaza and the West Bank – inspired by the activities of Islamic Jihad – expressed one tenacious question: “Why are we not involved in the military resistance to the occupation?”² Pressured from within their own ranks and subject to an increasing criticism from ordinary Palestinians of the Ikhwan's inaction, the leadership of the Palestinian Ikhwan attempted to recapture public trust. Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, the spiritual leader of the Palestinian Ikhwan, planned to arm some of his supporters and conduct their first military activities in 1982. According to Tamimi, only Yassin and a very close circle of his followers were aware of the plans, and other members of the Ikhwan remained strongly opposed to military action within the Occupied Territories.³ Yet Sheikh Yassin's military plans failed to achieve its goals, and his followers were stopped by Israeli agents while attempting to obtain weapons. Sheikh Yassin was subsequently arrested and imprisoned. Although sentenced to a long-term prison sentence, Sheikh Yassin was released as part of a prisoner swap between Israel and the PFLP-GC in May 1985.⁴

Azzam Tamimi explains that from 1982 onwards, two groups dominated the Palestinian Ikhwan's political strata. The first group was comprised mostly of older members of the Ikhwan, thus consisting of a generation influenced by a school of thought prevalent in Jordan which believed in awaiting for the appearance of an Islamic government which would then lead to the liberation of Palestine.⁵ The second group included younger affiliates of the Ikhwan – who had debated against leftist and nationalist tendencies among students on campus – that were inspired and invigorated by the Iranian revolution.⁶ These younger members were frustrated by the Ikhwan's inaction and, more than anything else, dismayed by the incongruity between theory and practice. Meanwhile, Shaqaqi's Islamic Jihad captured the imagination of the Palestinians by taking the initiative in fulfilling the responsibility of Jihad against Israel.⁷ It appeared to these young affiliates of the Ikhwan that Islamic Jihad was winning the credibility and respect of Palestinian Muslims and that all groups were now espousing the cause of Jihad.⁸ The Ikhwan's traditional position of Messianic fatalism had thus become indefensible and ineffective.

As discussed previously, the First Intifada erupted after Islamic Jihad had begun its confrontation with the Israeli Army and the deaths of a number of Islamic Jihad's members in 1987. After escaping from Gaza's Central Prison, four of the six escapee members of Islamic Jihad were killed in an Israeli ambush. On 8 December 1987, mass demonstrations broke out, and Palestinian public anger spread throughout the Occupied Territories. According to Khaled Hroub, on the following evening, the Political Bureau of the Palestinian Ikhwan in Gaza met and agreed that the reaction of the public to Israeli aggression demonstrated the need to assign a top priority to the battle against the Israeli occupation. At the meeting, the first communiqué of Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyya (Hamas)

was written, and those present – Sheikh Yassin, Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi, Salah Shehadeh, Muhammad Sham'ah, Isa al-Nashar, Abdel Fatah Dukhan and Ibrahim al-Yazuri – became its founders.⁹

In August 1988, Hamas published its Charter, declaring its ideological and political aspirations. The Charter highlights the group's strategy and specifically underlines that "Palestine is an Islamic trust". This charter sheds a light on common objectives between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hamas from its very beginning. Article 11, for instance, states:

The Islamic Resistance Movement (firmly) believes that the land of Palestine is an Islamic *Waqf* (Trust) upon all Muslim generations till the day of Resurrection. It is not right to give it up nor any part of it. Neither a single Arab state nor all the Arab states, neither a King nor a leader, nor all the Kings or leaders, nor any organisation – Palestinian or Arab – have such authority because the land of Palestine is an Islamic Trust upon all Muslim generations until the day of Resurrection.¹⁰

In Article 14 of Chapter three, the group states:

The problem of liberating Palestine is related to three spheres; the Palestinian sphere, the Arab sphere, and the Islamic sphere. Every one of them has a role to play in the struggle against Zionism. Each has obligations to fulfil. It is a grave error, and extreme ignorance, to ignore any of these spheres, because Palestine is an Islamic land accommodating the first *Qibla*, the third Holy Sanctuary, the [place where the] ascent of the Messenger took place.¹¹

In regard to its outlook towards secularism, Article 27 of Chapter Two states:

Secularist ideology is a total contradiction to religious ideologies, and it is upon ideology that positions, actions, and decisions are made. From here, with our respect for the Palestinian Liberation Organization and what it might become, and not understanding its role in the Arab-Israeli struggle, we cannot exchange the current and future of Islam in Palestine to adopt the secular ideology because the Islamic nature of the Palestinian issue is part and parcel of our *din* (ideology and way of life) and whosoever neglects part of his *din* is surely lost.¹²

Article 10 of Chapter Two also elaborates upon the movement's path:

While the Islamic Resistance Movement is forging its path, it will be a support to the weak, a victor to the oppressed; while all its might, using all of its energy, to realise the truth and defeat the falsehood, by words and action, here and everywhere it can reach and effect a change.¹³

Article 32 calls upon all Arab and Muslim peoples to work seriously and constructively in order to prevent “world Zionism and Imperialist powers” from taking over Muslim nations one by one. The Article states that:

Today it is Palestine and tomorrow it will be another country, and another, the Zionist plan has no bounds, and after Palestine they wish to expand from the Nile River to the Euphrates. When they totally occupy it they look towards another, and such is their plan in the “Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion.” Their present is the best witness on what is said. Withdrawal from the circle of struggle is high treason and a curse on the doer.¹⁴

What is most interesting in the Hamas Charter is the language used in expressing the group's ideological aspirations. It emphasises the land of Palestine as an Islamic *waqf* and thus allows the Palestinian cause to transcend the boundaries of Arab nationalism. The chapter calls on Muslims and the oppressed to unify in order to liberate Palestine and leaves no room for compromise with Zionism and imperialism. The Charter highlights the commonality between Hamas and the Islamic revolution in Iran. As I have argued in previous chapters, Khomeini constantly emphasised the Islamic dimension of the Palestinian cause and called on all Muslims and the oppressed to salvage the land of Palestine from its occupiers. Both the Charter of Hamas and Shaqaqi's Islamic Jihad brought Iran closer to the Muslim factions in Palestine and opened a window for the Islamic Republic to view them as credible alternatives to PLO.

The Charter of Hamas also opened a new window of opportunity for Israel to suppress politicised Islamic factions. In August 1988, Israel initiated its first mass detention against Hamas's leadership. Mass detentions in late 1988 and early 1989 decapitated Hamas, with all of its first- and second-ranking officials and activists arrested.¹⁵ The Israeli campaign of mass detention and systematic suppression continued annually, and the incarceration campaigns of 1990, 1991 and 1992 were on a large scale.¹⁶ Meanwhile, in December 1988, Yasser Arafat announced that the PLO accepted Israel's right to exist, thus paving the way for peace negotiations with Israel. According to Tamimi, Arafat's compromise represented the forfeiture of the right of return for Palestinian refugees. Consequently, although the PLO obtained recognition by the United States and Western powers, it lost credibility in the eyes of Palestinian refugees inside and outside of Palestine. As Azzam Tamimi puts it, the PLO's loss was Hamas's gain.¹⁷

Iran's strategic alliance with Hamas from 1987 to 2006: a new page in the Palestinian struggle

Following the PLO's declaration accepting the right of Israel to exist, Palestinian factions were divided into two camps: “resistance movements” opposed to any concessions with Israel and “concessioners” under the umbrella of the PLO that were open to direct negotiations with Israel. Resistance movements were mainly from

Islamic factions (Hamas and Islamic Jihad) and smaller left-wing groups such as the PFLP-GC. Iran was determined to institutionalise its connection with the Islamist factions. To this end, the Committee of Support for the Palestinian Islamic Revolution was formed in 1990, and in May 1990, the Iranian Parliament ratified a bill entitled Law to Support the Islamic Revolution of the Palestinian People. In the following paragraphs, I discuss various rules and articles ratified by the Parliament in relation to Iran's relations with Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The first law consists of eight articles. Article One of the bill states:

The land of Palestine has belonged and does belong to the Palestinian people. The Quds-occupying regime and the usurper regime of Zionists which has dominated the land and the Beit ul-Moqaddas through bullying, usurpation, and massacre is condemned as usurper and oppressor so that all truth-seeking nations and people of the world, the people and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran in particular, are required to support and defend the wronged, homeless and combatant Palestinian people through any way possible until they realise their inalienable rights.¹⁸

Articles 3, 4 and 6 of the bill provide guidance for governmental institutions and agencies:

The Islamic revolution Martyrs Foundation and the Islamic revolution Underprivileged and War Disabled Foundations, after receiving approval of the Islamic revolution Leader, as well as the Red Crescent Society of the Islamic Republic of Iran are obliged to give support, within their material and spiritual capacity, to the families of martyrs, war disabled, captives and the missing of the occupied territories as well as other martyrs in other corners of the world who have given their lives in the path of liberation of Palestine.¹⁹ The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Ministry of Higher Education and Ministry of Health, Treatment and Medical Education are required to offer specified scholarship grants to Palestinian students in universities across the country on an annual basis.²⁰ The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Islamic Republic Broadcasting Organisation (IRIB) are obliged to keep Palestine at the top of their international agenda and to champion the Palestinian-Islamic revolution.²¹

The bill emphasises Beit ul-Moqaddas as the “centre of the Palestinian Islamic Government in exile” and urges all Muslim countries to recognise the city as the “capital of the Palestinian Islamic Government in Exile”.²² The bill concludes by prohibiting any economic or commercial relations with Israeli corporations or institutions and requests the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to identify and make a list of all corporations and companies worldwide related to Israel. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was legally obliged to submit the list to the Cabinet and Islamic Consultative Assembly.²³ The bill forbids individuals and agencies from making any investments,

directly or indirectly, that would profit from the occupation of Palestine. It also bans the import and export of any commodities or services that are manufactured or rendered in the Occupied Territories or by legal entities affiliated to or nationals of Israel.²⁴ The bill remains a legal blueprint of Khomeini's pro-Palestinian ideas. The language of the bill is important as it emphasises the "Islamic revolution" in Palestine. In other words, since the First Intifada, the Islamic Republic began institutionalising its connection with Muslim factions in Palestine, particularly Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Following the ratification of the Law to Support the Islamic revolution of the Palestinian People, Iran organised a series of conferences in solidarity with the Intifada. The first conference was organised in October 1991.²⁵ According to Hatina, high-ranking religious figures and other delegates of Islamic movements from Arab and Muslim countries participated. The most important of these conferences – attended by Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hizbullah and Hamas and delegations from some 40 Muslim countries – took place in Tehran on 14–22 October 1991, scheduled in order to precede the Madrid peace conference.²⁶ The presence of Hamas was a significant milestone in furthering its dialogue with Iran.²⁷

On 30 October 1991, the Middle East peace conference convened in Madrid. According to Iyad Barghouti, while the attitude of secular Palestinian factions towards the Madrid conference was by no means homogeneous, there was unity among Muslim factions such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. All of Palestine's Muslim factions rejected the Madrid conference, labelling it the "conference for selling Palestine and Jerusalem".²⁸ Hamas and Islamic Jihad viewed the Madrid conference as an attempt to lend international legitimacy to the existence of Israel. Inspired by Iran's anti-Zionist message, Hamas sent greetings to Iran and participated in the Tehran conference. The event in Tehran also brought Hamas closer to Islamic Jihad. Both were motivated by their opposition towards the Madrid conference.²⁹ The first event, hosted by the Iranian Parliament, took place in Tehran in October 1991 and was named the International Conference on Palestinian Intifada.³⁰ High-ranking delegates and figures from various Muslim countries were invited – including Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Inviting delegates from Palestinian Islamic movements was a turning point in Iran's relations with Hamas. It paved a way for the institutionalisation of mutual diplomatic ties.

Certain statements made by the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic in 1991 are worthy of attention, as they shed light on Iran's ideological stance towards the peace negotiations during the post-Intifada era. In a meeting with the participants of the first Islamic Conference on Palestine, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated:

Regarding the issue of Palestine, the goal is to liberate Palestine and wipe out the Israeli government. There is no difference between territories occupied before and after the year 1967. Every inch of Palestinian lands is part of Muslims' homeland. Any non-Muslim and non-Palestinian rule over Palestine is an illegitimate ruler. As our magnanimous Imam Khomeini said, "Israel must disappear". If Palestinian Jews accept Islamic rule, they will live in Palestine.

It is not a matter of anti-Semitism. The problem is that a Muslim homeland has been occupied. If the heads of Muslim countries were not under the influence of global powers, they could achieve this. Unfortunately they failed to do so.³¹

Prior to the Tehran conference, Khamenei – as a part of his message on April 1990 on Quds Day, highlighted the responsibility of the Islamic Ummah towards the Palestinian Intifada, stating:

The Islamic uprising of the people of Palestine has provided everybody with the ultimate proof and it has shown that in spite of the comprehensive pressure by the enemy and in spite of the deception and treachery of the friends, the sapling of resistance is not dead; rather, it has developed more roots and produced more fruit. Therefore, it is necessary for all people and governments to sincerely consider the Islamic issue of Palestine among their primary concerns and make as many contributions as they can.³²

In response to American efforts in organising the Madrid Conference, Khamenei highlighted the ideological importance of rejecting concessions and announced that responding to the Palestinian cries for help was a precondition for being a “true” Muslim. In October 1991, as a part of his message to Muslim nations’ religious scholars, writers and intellectuals and students, he stated:

At this historical juncture, Muslims of the world should feel responsible. They should understand the duties that their Islamic faith has placed on their shoulders. On one hand, they have a duty to safeguard Islamic territories, which is necessary in Islamic jurisprudence. On the other hand, they have a duty to respond to an oppressed nation’s cries for help. [. . .] The Holy Prophet said, “A person who hears a Muslim’s cries for help but fails to respond, is not a Muslim”. [. . .] And today it is not just a single individual who is crying for help; it is an entire nation.³³

Ayatollah Khamenei clarified the Islamic Republic’s position towards the Arab leaders who were participating in the peace conferences and declared that any negotiations with Israel were forbidden. As a part of his message on 31 May 1991, on the occasion of the second anniversary of Ayatollah Khomeini’s death, he declared:

The Palestinian nation should not, and cannot, seek its freedom and rights in conferences that are arranged by leaders of the Arab countries. These conferences, if not inauspicious – are useless and futile for the oppressed Palestinians. These leaders who have come together these days in the name of Palestine – if they were sincerely thinking about saving Palestine, they should have adopted a decisive and firm position against the hypocritical proposal by the American President and they should have decided to immediately provide weapons

and financial and political assistance for the combatants who are fighting inside occupied Palestine. [. . .] And if this does not happen – which has not happened yet and will not happen in the future either [. . .] Palestinian combatants should rely on God and their popular and Islamic forces.³⁴

From the very beginning of the Palestinian Intifada and following the Madrid Peace Conference, Iran committed its efforts to being head of the camp against “concessions” with Israel. Hatina argues that Iran’s stance against the peace negotiations with Israel galvanised Hamas to perceive Iran as an ally.³⁵ In an interview, Khaled al-Qadoumi, the high representative of Hamas’s leadership in Tehran, stated to me:

One of the major elements within the Islamic Ummah is the Islamic Republic of Iran. Keeping in mind that Hamas is an independent movement and that it pursues balanced relations with the Muslim Ummah, Hamas moved towards establishing and consolidating relations with Iran. Hamas from its very beginning began studying the Islamic revolution. The experience of the Iranian revolution has its own input in Hamas’ ideas. The pro-Palestinian literature sponsored by the late Ayatollah Khomeini inspired us to get closer to Iran. We in Hamas view the Islamic Republic as one of the leading countries in the region. We remember when the first embassy of Palestine was established in Tehran and then the Israeli diplomats were removed. We also view our relations with the Islamic Republic based on our major policy of mobilising and gaining solidarity for the Palestinian cause. To this end, we officially started our relations with Iran a year before the Madrid Conference. But, Hamas officially opened its office in Tehran in February 1992, two years after the accreditation of the Hamas representative. Since that time, our office is active at different levels of media awareness, political relations with high ranking officials within the Iranian government and institutions and also with NGOs and civil society.³⁶

By 1992 – a time described by Elaheh Rostami-Povey as one of mass detention and deportation of Palestinian academics, clergy, engineers, doctors and activists to southern Lebanon (where many were killed by the Israelis) – Hamas had emerged as a strong resistance movement. At this time, Hamas developed a closer connection with Hizbullah and consequently with Iran.³⁷ In 1992, Israel expatriated 415 Palestinians (most of them associated with Islamist movements, mainly Hamas) to southern Lebanon.³⁸ Although 100 of these deportees were permitted to return, some remained for additional months. During their exile, these Palestinians came into contact with members of Hizbullah who imparted to them “techniques of resistance” including suicide terror attacks.³⁹ Hamas had fostered the idea of the suicide mission four years earlier, after its high-ranking officials became attracted to the tactic in 1989. According to Rola el-Husseini, “in leaflet no.68 [of Hamas] [. . .] there was an invitation to the movement’s loyalists to start engaging in suicide

missions against Israeli targets". Yet no suicide operations had been conducted during this period. The time spent in southern Lebanon by Hamas associates is a likely reason for the group's eventual adoption of suicide bombings.⁴⁰

The importance of Palestine for Hizbullah, Iran's closest ideological ally in Lebanon, should also not be understated. Dina Matar and Lina Khatib rightly argue that commitment to Palestine is one of the vital pillars in the construction of Hizbullah's identity.⁴¹ To this end, Hizbullah greatly emphasised the importance of Quds Day, the day announced by Ayatollah Khomeini during the first days of the Iranian Revolution. Hizbullah offered its moral support from the very beginning of the Palestinian Intifada. These narratives were captured in powerful metaphor or iconography. For instance, in October 1990, an *al-Ahd* report depicted a blood-spattered wall against a black background, with a banner reading: "Massacre of al-Aqsa . . . the siege of resistance . . . O where are the Muslims?"⁴²

While resistance groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad have used the symbolism of al-Aqsa due to their constant battles with Israel in Jerusalem, it was Hizbullah that appropriated Jerusalem as the centre point of Muslim strugglers, defining its emancipation as the decisive Jihad. This hence provided coherent pan-Islamist imagery to compensate for the competing imageries of Jerusalem that had to that point been represented by many Arabs and Muslims up to the mid-1980s.⁴³ Hizbullah portrayed Israel as an aggressive, racist and expansionist entity, and the slogan "today Iran, tomorrow Palestine" emerged in Hizbullah's narrative to establish that the success of the Islamic revolution would be liberation of Palestine.⁴⁴ It was against the background of such pro-Palestinian ideas that during the early 1990s, Hizbullah received exiled members of Hamas in southern Lebanon and that Hamas subsequently expanded its relations with Hizbullah and the Iranian government. What is key to remember is that Hizbullah's pro-Palestinian stance is derived from the ideologies of the Islamic revolution in Iran, particularly as Hizbullah views Ayatollah Khomeini's ideas as its main ideological reference point.

After the Intifada in 1987, the Islamic Republic directed its attention towards Islamic Jihad and Hamas. It soon established political relations with Hamas, only to be followed by the Oslo Accords between the PLO and Israel in 1993. Despite the propaganda from the PLO favouring the Oslo Accords, average Palestinians were frustrated by the PLO's recognition of Israel's occupation and turned instead towards Hamas and Islamic Jihad. After 1993, Hamas continued its strong electoral showing – beating Fatah in al-Najah student elections in 1996 and again in 1997.⁴⁵

According to Rostamy-Povey, the Oslo Agreement legitimised Israel's seizure of Palestinian land and denied 5 million Palestinian refugees the right to return to their homeland.⁴⁶ Following the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority (PA) was established and was subsequently dominated by the PLO under the leadership of Arafat. The PA took control of the Gaza Strip and some parts of the West Bank. The Oslo Accords brought Iran, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hizbullah closer together. The Islamic Republic questioned the credibility of the Oslo agreement and deepened

its connection with Islamic movements in Palestine. Rostamy-Povey argues that Hamas had risen in popularity for its stance against Israel, while the PLO's popularity had shrunk.⁴⁷ Throughout 1995 and 1996, Hamas (supported by Iran and inspired by Hizbullah) used suicide bombings as a tactic to deter Israeli attacks on the Palestinian population, in what it believed was a last resort.⁴⁸ The first suicide operation took place in Palestine in the aftermath of a massacre in 1993 in which 29 Palestinian worshippers were killed by an Israeli-American settler and army reservist, Baruch Goldstein.⁴⁹ The strong relationship between Hamas, Iran, Hizbullah and Islamic Jihad continued into the 1990s and developed as a response to the creation of the PA. From the very beginning of the establishment of the PA, the PLO led media campaigns against Hamas, lambasting it for maintaining relations with Iran. According to Khaled Hroub, in late 1992, Arafat accused Hamas of receiving as much as \$30 million annually in support from Iran, a claim that Hamas dismissed as being exaggerated.⁵⁰ These allegations were nevertheless covered in depth by Arab and Western media outlets.

Sheikh Yassin's historic visit to Iran

In October 1997, the spiritual leader of Hamas, Sheikh Yassin, was released from jail by the Israeli authorities.⁵¹ Sheikh Yassin returned to Gaza to find that he was widely regarded as a symbol of resistance and defiance for millions of Palestinians who felt betrayed by the PLO leadership.⁵² In April 1998, Sheikh Yassin made a state visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran and was received by its highest leadership.⁵³ During this historical visit, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei received Sheikh Yassin and praised the Palestinian resistance against Israel. Khamenei regarded Yassin and his followers as "the true representatives of the Palestinian resistance".⁵⁴ Ayatollah Khamenei announced that "the Iranian nation is determined to maintain its righteous position in supporting the Palestinian struggle and it also perceives the consequences of supporting the Palestine nation as God's given glory".⁵⁵ He stressed that the spirit of the Palestinian resistance had to be maintained, adding that "the American government and the Zionist authorities aim to force the world to forget about the Palestinian cause by any means".⁵⁶ During his visit, Sheikh Yassin praised Iran's support for the Palestinian struggle against Israel, and emphasised that Palestine belonged to all Muslims. No government or party would decide its fate.⁵⁷ Upon his arrival in Tehran, Sheikh Yassin stated, "I would not have been here if I did not know this Islamic Republic and its supportive position towards our cause".⁵⁸ Following his visit to Iran, Sheikh Yassin travelled to the city of Qum and was warmly received by high-ranking Shia clerics at the *Hawza*, including Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi and Ayatollah Seyed Kazem Haeri.⁵⁹ All of this happened within a context of heightened U.S. penetration of the Persian Gulf area after Operation Desert Storm, the absence of the Soviet Union as a Balancing power and military installations in Iran's geostrategic neighbourhood. For Iran, creating strategic depth in the Arab world was a rational response to those developments, and the issue of Palestine always came in rather handy to that end.

Sheikh Yassin's historical visit to Iran went beyond a mere diplomatic state visit. Sheikh Yassin was received and regarded by the Iranian leadership and clergy as the champion of the Palestinian resistance. Appearing in his wheelchair with his grey beard, he was embraced by many Iranians as a strong-minded individual that in spite of his physical suffering and imprisonment by the Israelis continued to defend the Palestinian cause. The Iranian leadership appreciated Sheikh Yassin's visit to Iran after his release from jail and perceived this as an indicator of the strong bond between Iran and Islamic movements in Palestine. Since then, the Islamic Republic of Iran intensified its rhetoric in favour of Hamas, describing it as the guardian of the Islamic resistance against Israel.

The Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon and the Second Palestinian Intifada

The year 2000 was a turning point in the region's history. After two decades – in compliance with UNSC Resolution 425 – the Israeli army pulled its troops from southern Lebanon and dismantled its militias.⁶⁰ Some have attributed Israel's defeat in southern Lebanon to Iranian and Syrian support for Hizbullah. According to Lina Khatib, the liberation of southern Lebanon on 25 May 2000 was a watershed because it was the first time that Israeli troops had been expelled from Arab lands “at the hands of an Arab paramilitary group” since 1948, when the state of Israel was formed.⁶¹ In May 2000, Hizbullah's leader Hassan Nasrallah directly addressed the Palestinian people:

We grant this victory to our oppressed people in Palestine in occupied Palestine and to the peoples of our Muslim and Arab Nations. Our people in Palestine [. . .] you can regain your land without any negotiations over a village or a street, you can return with your families to your villages and territories without begging and humiliation. [. . .] Leave and discard all these pretexts and negotiations. The real intifada and resistance are the ones which restore your rights completely as in Lebanon, [. . .] We give this ideal Lebanese pattern to our people in Palestine as a gift, an example to follow.⁶²

Israel's retreat from southern Lebanon was widely covered by Arab media. Al-Manar TV repeatedly broadcasted images of Israeli troops leaving southern Lebanon and of thousands of displaced Lebanese refugees returning to their homes and land after years of occupation.⁶³ The jubilation of the Arabs and Muslims in the region followed by the disappointment with the Camp David summit, which – hosted by U.S. President Bill Clinton and attended by Israeli PM Ehud Barak and PLO's leader Yasser Arafat – ended on 25 July 2000 without agreement.⁶⁴ Frustration amongst the Palestinian population grew significantly due to the failed summits and the corruption of the PA.

Shortly after Hizbullah's triumph in southern Lebanon, Israeli provocations ignited a second Palestinian uprising. On 28 September 2000, Ariel Sharon's

uninvited visit to *Haram al-Sharif* – Islam's third holiest site – under heavy security protection by Israeli armed force triggered the Second Intifada and united the Palestinians as never before.⁶⁵ The peace negotiations proved to be fruitless for many Palestinians, as the Israelis failed to comply with many of the commitments required by the interim peace accords.⁶⁶ At this point, the triumph of Iran's main ally, Hizbullah, in southern Lebanon galvanised the frustrated Palestinian masses to follow the same path of resistance against the occupation. In other words, the idea that Israel could be forced to retreat the same way they retreated from southern Lebanon led to a popular uprising in the Occupied Territories. Here, the discourse of Islamic resistance championed by Iran and Hizbullah gained momentum even further during the Second Intifada. According to Laleh Khalili, Palestinian activists certainly consider Hizbullah a model of comrade in arms.⁶⁷ Shortly after the Second Intifada began, Marwan Barghuti, the respected and popular Fatah activist in the West Bank, stated admiringly of Hizbullah that "the thinking of entire new Palestinian generation is influence by the experience of our brothers in Hizbullah and by Israel's retreat from Lebanon".⁶⁸

Iran and Hizbullah exhibited their strong moral support for and solidarity with the al-Aqsa Intifada. The first Quds Conference was held in Beirut on 28–30 January 2001. It led to the establishment of the Quds Foundation, with a temporary headquarters in the same city.⁶⁹ The final resolutions included the following:

- Severing any engagement with the Middle East Peace process
- Calling for resistance as well as political, economic, diplomatic and media support for the Intifada
- Boycotting American goods and using oil as part of a "carrot and stick" policy
- Stopping all normalisation procedures with Israel
- Affirming that Jerusalem was the capital of Palestine and finally
- Lobbying in order to revive the UN Resolution 3379 that stipulates that Zionism is a form of racism.⁷⁰

The primary speakers at the conference were Nasrallah, and Ali Muhtashami (an Iranian reformist and ally of Iranian President Mohammad Khatami).⁷¹ Muhtashami, the secretary general of the International Committee for the Support of Intifada, urged all regional countries to supply the Palestinians with arms to enable them to defend their "legitimate" rights.⁷² According to Joseph Alagha, Muhtashami reiterated Iran's solution to the Palestinian crisis, namely, a general referendum that includes the "indigenous Palestinian people", composed of adherents of the three Abrahamic faiths worldwide to determine their future and the type of the government that they would adopt.⁷³ In support of the Second Intifada, the Islamic Republic of Iran hosted the Second International Conference on Palestinian Intifada in Tehran in April 2001.⁷⁴ According to Ali Akbar Velayati, representatives of more than 30 Muslim and Arab states as well representatives of the Palestinian opposition groups and 350 members of the Iranian parliament and high-ranking religious figures participated in this conference.⁷⁵ The Second International Conference on

Palestinian Intifada began with a speech by Ayatollah Khamenei and also featured speeches from Mahdi Karrubi (speaker of the Iranian Parliament), then President Mohammad Khatami, Ramadan Abdullah (the leader of Islamic Jihad) and Khaled Mashal.

According to Velayati, the Second Conference was dominated by the reformists by virtue of its being organised and hosted by Iran's sixth parliament. Velayati argues that this fact demonstrated that there existed a strong consensus amongst all Iranian political strata over support for the Palestinian cause.⁷⁶ From Velayati's point of view, locating the International Conference on Palestinian Intifada in Tehran and enlisting the participation of non-Arab Muslim countries and organisations, furthered the message that the Palestinian cause was an Islamic rather than merely an Arab cause. The Islamic Republic of Iran further reiterated that the fate of Palestine was intertwined with the fate of other Muslim nations.⁷⁷ The Second Conference unanimously condemned Israel's aggressive actions and meticulous plans to alter the demography of Palestine, as well as attempts at destroying Christian and Muslim sites in Jerusalem. The Conference emphasised supporting the Palestinian people in their struggle for liberation and freedom.⁷⁸

Certain statements by Khamenei are worthy of attention, as they shed light on the Islamic Republic's perception of the Second Intifada. Shortly before eruption of the Second Intifada in December 1999, Ayatollah Khamenei detailed his outlook on the notion of peace talks between Israel and the PA and in the process also sent a message to the Palestinian people. He stated:

One of the issues that is apparent today in order to erase the issue of Palestine from memories and prevent it from being raised by public opinion of the Islamic Ummah, is the so-called peace talks that are held between a group of Palestinians – namely Arafat and his gang and the Israelis: the issue of negotiations, the Palestinian “Authority” and other such things. This is one of the most reprehensible tricks designed by the Israelis and unfortunately, certain Muslims and certain Palestinians have fallen into this trap.⁷⁹

Ayatollah Khamenei described the peace negotiations as “Israel's peace-plot” and appealed to Muslims and Arabs to support the Palestinians in their struggle. In December 1999, he stated:

Of course, today mentioning the appealing word “Peace” is the trick that is used by the Zionists and their supporters –and America is their most important supporter. [. . .] [A]ggression is [part of this regime's nature [Israel]]. Basically, the Zionist regime is founded on coercion, violence and cruelty and it is moving forward on the basis of these characteristics. It could not and will not, make any progress without cruelty and coercion, and yet you say Palestinians should make peace with this regime? What peace? No one would fight them if they were not greedy, that is to say, if they returned Palestine to its real owners and went away or if they asked the Palestinian government

to let some of them or all of them stay in Palestine. The war started when they forced their way into the Palestinian homes. [. . .] They are a threat to all nations now. Therefore they want to make peace and use it as a stepping-stone for further oppression. If a kind of peace is established, it is just a break to prepare for another kind of aggression and transgression later on.⁸⁰

After the outbreak of the Second Intifada, Iran's leadership offered its solidarity with and support to the Palestinian uprising and highlighted the Islamic nature of the al-Aqsa Intifada. As part of his inaugural speech delivered on 24 April 2001 at the International Conference on the Palestinian Intifada in Tehran, the Supreme Leader stated:

The main pivot of the al-Aqsa intifada is Beit ul-Moqaddas [Jerusalem]. In other words, the spark that provoked the anger of the Palestinian people was the Zionists' affront to the al-Aqsa mosque. Having realised their great mission to safeguard the sanctity of one of the most sacred Islamic sites, the Palestinian people entered the arena of struggle against Zionists. And relying on self-sacrifice, they started the sacred fire of struggle and resistance against the Zionist occupiers.⁸¹

From Khamenei's point of view, there is a direct link between the fate of Palestinians and non-Palestinians. In this regard, the threat of Israel is not confined and limited to the Palestinians. In November 2001, in a meeting with government officials on the occasion of the religious day of Eid ul-Fitr, he expressed that:

the issue of Palestine is the most fundamental issue of the world of Islam and it is intertwined with the destiny of non-Palestinians throughout the world of Islam. Government officials of Islamic countries should not think that if they leave the people of Palestine in the brutal clutches of their enemies, Israel would leave Muslim governments alone after it swallows up Palestine. Of course, such a thing will never happen.⁸²

Ayatollah Khamenei in particular criticised the idea of Western liberal democracy and those in Iran and the region who advocated it. He highlighted the failure of humanism and democracy to recognise the predicament of the Palestinian people. This was directed against the United States at a time when there was more and more talk about liberal interventionism in the name of democracy and human rights – themes that also underlined the so-called wars on terror in Afghanistan and Iraq at a later stage in 2003. In a speech delivered in November 2001, Khamenei stated:

There was a time when liberal democracy was claimed to be the highest point of perfection that human thought and action could ever achieve. It was claimed that nothing could be better than liberal democracy. I believe these claims are a sign of being narrow-minded. It is wrong to claim that it is not

possible for human beings to go beyond a certain achievement. [. . .] This liberalism is what has given rise to the issue of Afghanistan and the issue of Palestine. This fake humanism of the west is what has ignored the Palestinian nation for fifty years and is determined to wipe it out. They do not ask themselves whether Palestine existed in the world or it is just a myth.⁸³

As a part of the solution to the Palestinian predicament, Khamenei called on all Muslim countries, intellectuals and NGOs to accomplish their “duty” in supporting the Palestinian nation. He stated:

This is the duty of all governments. Today the Palestinian nation has certain legitimate expectations of the Islamic Ummah as well as Muslim governments. Today the great Islamic Ummah expects Islamic governments, especially the Arab governments, to cut off their relations with the usurping, oppressive and insolent Zionists. Today this is our duty and we hope we will be able to fulfil it. Today Islamic governments have a duty to assist them [Palestinians] and provide them with political, financial and propaganda assistance.⁸⁴ Everybody is responsible in this regard. Muslim intellectuals, politicians, poets, writers, artists and academia are responsible. They are influential people. They can feed the media in an appropriate way.⁸⁵

At the conclusion of the Conference, Ayatollah Khamenei proposed general guidance for resisting against Israel:

The following should be the general guidance for fighting the usurper regime: a) Containing the usurper regime within the borders of occupied Palestinian lands, constraining its economic and political breathing space and severing its links with its surrounding environment. b) Helping the Palestinian people resist and struggle within their own homeland and providing them with whatever they need until they achieve ultimate victory.⁸⁶

Khamenei's general guidance for Islamic countries were also perceived as a religious and political decree by the Islamic Republic – the blueprint of its foreign policy and an ideological and strategic recipe for its approach towards Palestinian factions after the Second Intifada. Velayati argues that one of the major achievements of the Second International Conference on Palestinian Intifada was that it empowered and harmonised the idea of resistance against the policies of “compromise and negotiations”.⁸⁷ In other words, it is safe to argue that the resistance narrative was now formally institutionalised. The representatives of Hamas and Islamic Jihad were greeted by the Iranian leadership, including the reformists and the conservatives, and they were free to liaise with the leaders and representatives of Muslim countries that participated at the Conference.

On 22 March 2004, Sheikh Yassin was assassinated by the Israeli armed forces on the orders of Ariel Sharon. Shortly after, on 17 April, Sharon authorised the

assassination of Dr. Abd al-Aziz al-Rantisi (Sheikh Yassin's successor). According to Tamimi, the Israeli prime minister wanted to be sure that when Israel would eventually withdraw from Gaza, Hamas would not be in a position to take over.⁸⁸ Condemnation of the assassination was widespread amongst all political strata of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Ayatollah Khamenei issued an announcement:

I was informed that the hands of the occupying Zionist regime have committed the abominable crime of shedding the blood of Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. Certainly, martyrdom was what this pious man aspired but this cannot play down the gravity of the crime the criminal Zionist occupiers committed. The blood of Ahmed Yassin will feed the Islamic resistance and will further flare up the wrath of the Palestinians. The spirit of Sheikh Yassin is alive and his thoughts will be a source of the inspiration for Palestinian youth.⁸⁹

On 19 June 2005, the Iranian Parliament amended Article 1 of the “Law to Support the Islamic revolution of Palestinian People”. According to the amendment, the presiding board of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Parliament) was now required to deepen and expand its support for Palestine and – in due course – convene a conference of representatives of Islamic countries and other experts to that effect.⁹⁰ The amended article stated that a permanent secretariat of international Palestinian conferences would be established, with the aim of convening these conferences and following up the suggestions of the Islamic Consultative Assembly regarding Palestine.⁹¹ The aim of this amendment was to intensify and further institutionalise Iran's support for Palestinian movements such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Hamas government: anew page in Iran's relations with the Islamic resistance movement

Israel began the withdrawal of its armed forces from Gaza on 15 August 2005, and by 12 September 2005 it had completed this task. After 38 years, the occupation of Gaza had ended. Led by Hamas, the people of Gaza celebrated and attributed the victory to the defeat of Israel's superior military might. Tamimi argues that the failure of repeated peace negotiations – whether the Oslo Accords, Bush's Road Map or Sharon's disengagement policy – vindicated Hamas's approach.⁹² On 26 January 2006, Hamas gained a landslide victory in Gaza's legislative elections. Running under the name “Change and Reform”, Hamas won 74 seats in a 132-seat chamber (56% of the seats), with Fatah coming in at second place with 45 (34%).⁹³ After Hamas won its first democratic election to the legislative, Ismail Haniyeh announced a new government in March 2006. Hamas's electoral victory came as an unpleasant surprise for Israel, the United States and Fatah.⁹⁴ U.S. President George W. Bush refused to recognise the Hamas-led government until it satisfied three demands: that Hamas recognised Israel, that it disarmed and renounced violence, and that it accepted all previous agreements between the PLO and Israel.⁹⁵ Tamimi

claims that Fatah's leadership put pressure on its members not to join the Hamas unity government and insisted on Hamas accepting all preconditions laid down by the United States if they wish for Fatah to join their cabinet.⁹⁶ The Fatah leadership in essence formed a parallel government to that of Hamas, maintaining policies diametrically opposed to those of Hamas.⁹⁷ The most painful measures taken against Hamas were economic sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union (EU). A freeze on aid from the United States and the EU was followed by the blockade of the delivery of money to the government. Fatah's leadership encouraged protests, escalating its opposition into acts of sabotage and armed clashes with Israel's security apparatuses.⁹⁸

A poll conducted by the Mustaqbal Research Centre in early May 2006 revealed that almost 84% of the Palestinians in Gaza opposed the idea that the Hamas-led government should bow to the demands of the United States, EU and Israel.⁹⁹ While the conflict between Hamas and Fatah continued for many weeks, Israel fired shells into Gaza allegedly taking pre-emptive measures against Palestinian rocket attacks. Subsequently, Israel invaded Gaza on 24 June and kidnapped two members of Hamas.¹⁰⁰ It is safe to say that Israel intervened in the Hamas-Fatah conflict in order to support Fatah and undermine Hamas's democratically elected government due to the ideological stance of the latter against Israel. Tamimi argues that there was little doubt that the Israelis sought to accomplish what their allies in Fatah had not been able to do. However, the world's attention was soon diverted from Gaza towards southern Lebanon, as Hizbullah conducted what Tamimi believes was an operation aimed at supporting Gaza.¹⁰¹ During this operation, Hizbullah carried out rocket attacks and for the first time hit the port city of Haifa.

Throughout this period, Iran continued to offer its political and financial backing to the newly established government of Hamas, not least in order to safeguard "access" to Israel as a means to establish its own security. On 8 December 2006, the Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh told thousands of Friday prayer worshippers at Tehran University in Iran that "[w]e will never recognise the usurper Zionist government and will continue our jihad-like movement until the liberation of Jerusalem". He also stated that "they [the Israelis] assume the Palestinian nation is alone. This is an illusion. [. . .] We have a strategic depth in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This country (Iran) is our powerful, dynamic and stable depth".¹⁰² Following an international economic boycott, which plunged the Occupied Territories into economic crisis in late 2006, Iran provided the Palestinian government with \$120million (£61.2million) of aid.¹⁰³ Although talks on a unity government with Fatah failed to achieve its goals in late 2006, Hamas appeared increasingly confident that its government could stay afloat without Western aid, mainly due to the help it received from countries such as Iran.¹⁰⁴ In an interview, Hussein Royvaran, director of the Society for the Defence of Palestinian Nation and former high representative of Iran's Political Bureau in southern Lebanon explained Iran's relations with Hamas:

Fathi Shiqaqi absorbed Iran's revolutionary message of resistance against global arrogance. Following the establishment of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the

Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, that was mainly focusing on social activities, changed its name to Hamas. To some extent, Hamas followed the model of active resistance from the Islamic revolution in Iran although it mainly has its roots in the Muslim Brotherhood. Since its very beginning the Islamic Republic offered its moral and political support to Hamas. When Hamas won the election and maintained its hegemony in Gaza in 2006, Iran's relations with Hamas improved considerably. The Islamic Republic recognised that Hamas has considerable support in the occupied territories and welcomed its electoral triumph. The victory of Hamas demonstrated that the Palestinian public endorsed the narrative of resistance and rejected the discourse of compromise and failed negotiations. Based on its religious and revolutionary duties Iran welcomed the Hamas-led government.¹⁰⁵

Royvaran also argued that the messages of the Islamic revolution of Iran was echoed by Hizbullah for the Lebanese and Palestinian publics:

Hizbullah translated the Islamic revolution of Iran into a narrative that was easy and accessible for the local Palestinians to absorb. When Hizbullah demonstrated its military capability in the 1980s, Palestinians championed the first intifada. When Hizbullah continued its resistance and gained victories, the Palestinians conducted the al-Aqsa intifada. When Hizbullah used martyrdom operations, it spread to Palestine. When Hizbullah began using short ranged rockets against Israel, Palestinian Islamic movements followed the same tactics and fought back against Israel. When Hizbullah entered the political process in Lebanon and demonstrated its willingness to be a part of the government, Hamas entered the general elections and institutionalised its presence within the government. Hence, this shows that the Islamic Republic has been influential in supporting the Palestinian resistance movements through Hizbullah.¹⁰⁶

The electoral victory of Hamas was important for Iran because it allowed Tehran to upgrade its relations with Hamas to a government-to-government level. According to Abdullah Karami, Iran's political, moral and financial support for Hamas ensured that the West and the United States in particular would continue to label Iran as a supporter of "international terrorism". He argues that the Islamic Republic of Iran faced enormous pressure from the West to stop supporting Hamas and the Palestinian resistance movements. However, Hamas's electoral victory exhibited to the Iranians and the Arab streets that Iran was on the right side of history.¹⁰⁷ Karami is certainly correct to identify that Hamas's electoral victory legitimised the group's discourse of resistance and demonstrated that Iran supported a movement endorsed by the people of Palestine. In other words, the people of Palestine endorsed the discourse of resistance against Israel.¹⁰⁸ Karami argues that the electoral victories of Hamas and Hizbullah, along with the fall of the Taliban and Saddam's regime, all boosted Iran's political influence in the region.¹⁰⁹

Rostami-Povey similarly argues that Iran's relations with Hizbullah, Hamas and the Iraqi and Syrian governments comprise a strong bloc of resistance against U.S. and Israeli policies in the region.¹¹⁰ From her point of view, this support, together with grassroots' support for Iran's policies against the United States and Israel, put Iran in a strong position to defend itself against possible attacks from these two countries. Hamas also benefited from Iran's support. It is also important to acknowledge that for the Islamic Republic, the Syrian government remained a vital element in the camp against Israel due to its support for Hizbullah and the Palestinian Islamic movement. I shall return to this topic in the next chapter as I analyse Iran's relations with Hamas after the Arab Spring.

Israel's war on Gaza (2008–2009) and Iran's reaction

Since the 2006 elections, Israel increased its systematic military campaign against the Hamas-led government and targeted Gaza routinely. One of the major military assaults on Gaza before the Arab Spring – known as the Gaza massacre – took place between 27 December and 18 January 2009.¹¹¹ Some 1,400 Palestinians were killed, and more than 400,000 Gazans were left without running water. Furthermore, 4,000 homes were destroyed or badly damaged, leaving tens of thousands of people homeless.¹¹² In response to Israel's attacks on the Palestinians during the Gaza war in 2009, Hizbullah's supporters conducted three attacks on Israel from southern Lebanon.¹¹³ The 2009 war on Gaza is known in Iran as *Jang-e 22 roozeh*: the 22-Day War of Resistance. Iran strongly condemned the killings in Gaza and criticised conservative Arab states for their inaction. Iran's supreme leader, in a letter to Ismail Haniyeh on 15 January 2009, stated:

Dear mujahid brother, Mr Haniyeh, we salute you for your patience. The patience that you and the brave and selfless people and mujahids of Gaza showed during the past twenty days in the face of one of the most tragic war crimes in history has raised the flag of grandeur in the Muslim world. [. . .] Today, not only Muslim nations, but many European and American nations sincerely acknowledge your righteousness. [. . .] Remember that “Your Lord has not forsaken you, nor is He displeased” [the Holy Quran, 93:3]. [. . .] [T]he bloody and tragic events which are happening in Gaza, especially the killing of Palestinian civilians and the innocent children of Gaza, have caused our hearts to bleed. [. . .] The nations of the world support the people and mujahids of Gaza and those governments that do not support the people of Gaza only widen the rift between themselves and their people and their destiny is already clear. [. . .] I salute you and those that fight in Gaza, as well as your oppressed and resisting people. Besides all efforts made by the Islamic Republic of Iran to support you, we pray for you day and night and we ask all the Exalted to bestow patience and victory on you.¹¹⁴

In response to Israel's assault on Gaza in 2009, Iran organised the fourth International Conference in Support of Palestine on 4–5 March 2009 in Tehran and named Gaza as the “symbol of resistance”.¹¹⁵ The conference organisers issued a formal declaration. The participants agreed on 27 articles in support of the Palestinian people, and a declaration at the Conference condemned Israel's “war crimes” against the people of Gaza. The Conference announced that the Palestinian issue was the most far-reaching issue the Islamic Ummah faced, and on this basis all Muslims, Arabs and freedom-loving individuals of the world had a duty to prioritise the issue and refrain from taking courses of action that could potentially damage the Palestinian cause.¹¹⁶ Crucially, the conference recognised Israel as “a racist regime” and strongly condemned its brutal treatment of the Palestinians.¹¹⁷ The Gaza war in 2009 was defined by the declaration as genocide against the people of Gaza, and it called upon the entire Muslim Ummah to unify in supporting the people of Palestine.¹¹⁸ The Conference organised a committee to follow up on the actions contained in the declaration. The conference in Tehran also called upon this committee to organise a series of annual political, cultural and promotional events and activities that would help facilitate conditions for the return of all Palestinian refugees.¹¹⁹ The Conference was important for giving publicity to the Gaza war and in the process drew attention to the crisis in Gaza. The Conference received considerable media attention within Iran and the region. More than 700 delegates – including representatives from Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hizbullah – were in attendance.

Following the Gaza war, the Islamic Assembly of Iran unanimously ratified an Act that established 18 January as Gaza Day in the official calendar of the Islamic Republic.¹²⁰ In the following year, the Islamic Assembly approved a law amending the Act of Supporting the Islamic Revolution of Palestine, which had been ratified in 1990. According to the amendment, Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs was now obliged to present the case for sanctioning goods from the Zionist regime at world forums and international conferences, such as the OIC and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Moreover, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) was prohibited from airing advertisements for any goods manufactured by Israel according to a list submitted by a specialist committee.¹²¹

Finally, we should return briefly to Iran's main ally, Hizbullah, and its connection to the Palestinians. With regard to the relations between Hizbullah and Muslim movements such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, Laleh Khalili provides a comprehensive account. Khalili accurately classifies Hizbullah's relationship with the Palestinians as a “relation of solidarity”.¹²² From Khalili's point of view, the extent and intensity of Hizbullah's support vis-à-vis the Palestinians has as much to do with solidarity on the basis of shared aspirations and ideologies as it does with finely tuned politics (whether these politics are Hizbullah's relations with local Palestinian political actors, Lebanese politics or Islamist and anti-imperialist mobilisation).¹²³ Khalili argues that Hizbullah has, on the basis of ideological considerations but also out of a genuine sense of identification, acted in solidarity with various Palestinian actors.¹²⁴ She adds that it would be analytically reductive and politically naive to conceive that, in its relationship with the Palestinians,

ideological commitment and human sympathy are not affected by shifts in Hizbullah's role nationally, regionally and beyond.¹²⁵ To this end, Khalili examines factors that place limits on Hizbullah–Palestinian solidarity and emphasises that such factors that “limit” solidarity demonstrate that ideological solidarity can be affected but not completely extinguished. In other words, solidarity and shared aspirations provide guidance for actors to shape their relations: “identities, interests and strategies of two actors in solidarity must be sufficiently compatible as to allow action in concert”.¹²⁶

In the context of this book, it is shared Islamic values with a radical content, anti-Zionist tendencies and common Islamist identities that are the foundation of Iran's alliance with the Palestinian Islamic movements. In the following chapter, I examine Iran's solidarity with the Palestinians against the background of the Syrian crisis and will highlight some factors that have acted as spoilers in Iran's relations with Hamas, not least in order to balance the analysis presented in this chapter.

Notes

- 1 I will discuss Iran's relations with Palestinian Islamic movements in the post–Arab Spring era more exclusively in Chapter 5.
- 2 Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, London: Hurst & Company, 2009, p. 44.
- 3 Ibid., p. 45.
- 4 Ibid., p. 47.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., p. 48.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Khaled Hroub, *HAMAS: Political Thought and Practice*, Washington, DC: The Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000, p. 39.
- 10 Muhammad Maqdsi, “Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) of Palestine”, *The Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Summer 1993), pp. 122–134.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, p. 59.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid., p. 61.
- 18 Seyed Qassem Zakeri, *Hemaayat-e Qanouni* [The Legal Support], Tehran: Markaz e-Motaleaat e-Felestin, 1390 [2011], p. 13.
- 19 Ibid., Article 3, p. 14.
- 20 Ibid., Article 4.
- 21 Ibid., Article 6.
- 22 Ibid., Article 7.
- 23 Ibid., Article 8.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 For more information on the International Conference on Palestinian Intifada, see The International Conference on Palestinian Intifada. Available at <http://icpalestine.parliran.ir/fa> [Accessed 21 October 2015].
- 26 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine: The Islamic Jihad Movement*, Tel Aviv: Dayan Centre for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2001, pp. 109–110.
- 27 Ibid., p. 110.

- 28 Iyad Barghouti, "Palestinian Islamists and the Middle East Peace Conference", *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2008), pp. 61–73.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 For more details on the Conferences' programmes, see <https://icpalestine.parliran.ir/> [Accessed 22 October 2015].
- 31 Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, *The Most Important Problem of the Islamic World: Selected Statements by Ayatollah Khamenei About Palestine (in English)*, Tehran: Moasseseh Pajooheshi Farhangi Enqelab Eslami, 1391 [2012], p. 12.
- 32 Ibid., p. 59.
- 33 Ibid., p. 64.
- 34 Ibid., p. 93.
- 35 Meir Hatina, *Islam and Salvation in Palestine*, p. 114.
- 36 Interviewed in Tehran on 9 November 2015.
- 37 Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Iran's Influence*, London: Zed Books, 2010, p. 160.
- 38 Rola el-Husseini, Resistance, "Jihad and Martyrdom in Contemporary Lebanese Shia Discourse", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Summer 2008), pp. 399–414.
- 39 Ibid., p. 410.
- 40 Ibid., p. 411.
- 41 Lina Khatib, Dina Matar and Atef Alshaer, *The Hizbullah Phenomenon, Politics and Communication*, London: Hurst & Co., 2014, pp. 45–46.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid., p. 47.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Are Knudsen, "Crescent and Sword: The Hamas Enigma", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 8 (2005), pp. 1373–1388.
- 46 Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Iran's Influence*, p. 161.
- 47 Ibid., p. 162.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Khaled Hroub, *HAMAS: Political Thought and Practice*, p. 178.
- 51 Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, pp. 109–110. According to Tamimi, Sheikh Yassin was released in an exchange for two imprisoned Israeli agents who were attempting to assassinate Khalid Mashal in Jordan.
- 52 Ibid., p. 111.
- 53 Ibid., p. 113.
- 54 Khamenei.ir, *Didar e Sheikh Ahmad Yassin Rahbar e Moqavemat e Felestin* [The Visit of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, The Leader of the Palestinian Resistance]. Available at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=11421> [Accessed 15 January 2016].
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Al-Hayat Newspaper, 29 April 1998, *Wassala Ila Tehran wa Dafaa Aan Mowqif Iran Min Amaliya Al-Salam, Al-Sheikh Yassin Li Al-Hayat; Owlawiya Hamas Tashdid Zarabat Zid Aadou Al-Mohtal* [Arrived in Tehran and Defended Iran's Position over the Peace Process, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin Told Al-Hayat; HAMAS Priority Is to Increase Attacks on Usurping Enemy]. Available at <http://www.alhayat.com/article/954845> [Accessed 16 January 2016].
- 59 Jahannews, *Tasavir e Dideh Nashodeh Az Bonyangozar e Jonbesh e Hamas Zir e Parcham e Aba Abdallah Hussein* [Unseen Photos from the Founder of HAMAS Movement Under the Banner of Imam Hussein]. Available at www.jahannews.com/fa/doc/news/303433 [Accessed 16 January 2016].
- 60 Imad Salamey, *The Government and Politics of Lebanon*, London: Routledge, 2014, p. 98.
- 61 Ibid., p. 73.
- 62 Laleh Khalili, "Standing With My Brothers: Hizbullah, Palestinians and Limits of Solidarity", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 49, No. 2, 2007, pp. 276–303.

- 63 Lina Khatib, Dina Matar and Atef Alshaer, *The Hizbullah Phenomenon, Politics and Communication*, p. 74.
- 64 Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, p. 198.
- 65 Ibid., p. 199.
- 66 Ibid., p. 200.
- 67 Laleh Khalili, "Standing with My Brothers: Hizbullah, Palestinians and Limits of Solidarity", p. 289.
- 68 Ibid.
- 69 Joseph Alagha, "Hizbullah, Iran and the Intifada", Leiden University, *ISIM Newsletter*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2002), p. 35.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Mohamad Khatami served as the fifth President of the Islamic Republic of Iran between 1997 and 2005.
- 72 Joseph Alagha, "Hizbullah, Iran and the Intifada", p. 35.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 For more details on the Conferences programmes, see <http://icpalestine.parliran.ir/fa> [Accessed 21 January 2016].
- 75 Ali Akbar Velayati, *Jomhuri Islami-e Iran va Tahavolat-e Felestine 1357–1385*, p. 192.
- 76 Ibid., p. 196.
- 77 Ibid.
- 78 Ibid.
- 79 Ali Khamenei, *Selected Statements by Ayatollah Khamenei About Palestine* (in English), p. 11.
- 80 Ibid., p. 20.
- 81 Ibid., p. 11.
- 82 Ibid., pp. 12–13.
- 83 Ibid., p. 34.
- 84 Ibid., p. 70.
- 85 Ibid., p. 77.
- 86 Ibid., p. 95.
- 87 Ali Akbar Velayati, *Jumhouri Eslami Iran va Tahavollaat-e Felestin 1357–1385* [Islamic Republic of Iran and Palestine Development 1979–2006], Tehran: Centre for Documents and Diplomatic History of the Foreign Ministry of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1386 [2007], p. 196.
- 88 Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, p. 206.
- 89 "Leader Condemns Sheikh Yassin's Assassination", *Official Website of Ayatollah Khamenei*, 23 March 2004. Available at <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/287/Leader-Condemns-Sheikh-Yassin-s-Assassination> [Accessed 4 February 2016].
- 90 Seyed Qassem Zakeri, *Hemaayyat-e Qanouni*, p. 53.
- 91 Ibid., p. 54. According to the amended Article, the secretariat would comprise of five members: one individual chosen by the speaker of the parliament, two individuals from amongst the deputies of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, and two individuals from the Parliamentary Commission of Security and Foreign Policy.
- 92 Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, pp. 206–207.
- 93 For more information on the Palestinian election result, see Research Paper 06/17, Library of House of Commons, 15 March 2006. Available at <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/RP06-17/RP06-17.pdf> [Accessed 15 February 2016].
- 94 Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, p. 224.
- 95 Ibid., p. 225.
- 96 Ibid., p. 228.
- 97 Ibid.
- 98 Ibid., p. 230.
- 99 Ibid., p. 231.
- 100 Ibid. For more details on Israel's military action in 2006, see Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters*, pp. 239–245.

- 101 Ibid., p. 245.
- 102 “Hamas: We Will Never Recognise Israel”, *The Guardian*, 8 December 2006. Available at www.theguardian.com/world/2006/dec/08/iran.israel [Accessed 21 March 2016].
- 103 Ibid.
- 104 Ibid.
- 105 Interviewed in Tehran on 9 September 2015. The Society for the Defence of Palestinian Nation (SDPN) is an active research centre with a headquarters in Tehran.
- 106 Ibid.
- 107 Abdulah Karami, *Piroozi-e-2006 Hamas va Cheshmanzaaz-e Ayandeh* [The Victory of Hamas in 2006 and the Outlook for It], Tehran: Bustan-e Ketab Publishers, 1387 [2009], pp. 140–143.
- 108 Ibid., p. 141.
- 109 Ibid., pp. 142–143.
- 110 Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Iran's Influence*, p. 184.
- 111 Ibid., p. 175.
- 112 Ibid.
- 113 Ibid.
- 114 Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, “The Most Important Problem of the Islamic World”, pp. 52–54.
- 115 Declaration of the Fourth International Conference on Palestine in Tehran. Available at <http://icpalestine.farhang.gov.ir/en/pastconferences/declaration> [Accessed 19 March 2016].
- 116 Article 1 of the Declaration of the Fourth International Conference on Palestine in Tehran. Ibid.
- 117 Ibid., Articles 3 and 4.
- 118 Ibid., Articles 18 and 21.
- 119 Ibid., Article 24.
- 120 Seyed Qassem Zakeri, *Hemaayat-e Qanouni*, p. 67.
- 121 Ibid. For more information, see Seyed Qassem Zakeri, *Hemaayat-e Qanouni*, pp. 71–72.
- 122 Laleh Khalili, “Standing with My Brothers: Hizbullah, Palestinians and Limits of Solidarity”, p. 278.
- 123 Ibid., p. 296.
- 124 Ibid.
- 125 Ibid.
- 126 Ibid., p. 301.

5

IRAN AND PALESTINIAN ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS IN THE POST-ARAB SPRING ERA

At the tail end of 2010, widespread protests broke out in a number of Arab countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and Yemen. These waves of unrest were referred to as the Arab Spring and subsequently spread into Syria, resulting in an enormous humanitarian catastrophe. The uprising in Syria against President Bashar al-Assad swiftly developed towards a mixture of civil war, armed clashes and street protests. This chapter examines the impacts of the Syrian crisis on Iran's relations with Palestinian Islamic movements, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad. It is vital to note that this chapter will not explore the *modus operandi* of Iranian military involvement in Syria, which is beyond the scope of this discussion. Furthermore, regional developments such as the Iranian nuclear negotiations and sectarian tensions in the region likewise are not the topics of this chapter. By examining the relationship between Iran and Hamas and Islamic Jihad during the Syrian conflict, I hope to contribute to our understanding of what motivates Iran's approach towards the Palestinian cause. To this end, I will highlight Iran's political behaviour during the Gaza wars in 2012 and in 2014 as an empirical case study. I believe that these wars after the Arab Spring acted as a litmus test for Iran's solidarity with the Palestinians. Drawing on the basis of fieldwork in Iran and formal interviews with representatives of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, as well as Iranian officials, and the analysis of the speeches of Iranian high-profile authorities, I argue that Iran continues to support the Palestinian Islamic movement. I argue that Iran perceives its relations with Hamas as both strategic and tactical, while it views its relations with Islamic Jihad as more ideological. However, within the framework of its pro-Palestinian stance, the revolutionary rhetoric changed to something more pragmatic, especially during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami and Hassan Rouhani because for the reformers and their ambition to open up Iran's international relations, it was not conducive to being radical about the issue of Palestine.

Despite of this and quite similar to the Presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), Rouhani has not divorced his administration from the Islamic Republic's traditional pro-Palestinian policies. In a meeting with the chairman of the Palestinian National Council, Salim Zanoun, in February 2017, Rouhani stated, "The people of Iran have paid a heavy price supporting the Palestinian nation and opposing the Zionist Regime but is still determined to continue its support".¹ Speaking at the meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in May 2018 in Istanbul, Rouhani called on Muslim nations to lend unanimous support to the resistance movement against Israel.² Only recently in December 2018, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif hosted a high-ranking delegation of Palestinian Islamic Jihad and emphasised that supporting Palestine is a fundamental principle of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy.³

Iran and Syria: a history of alliances and champions of the Axis of Resistance

As the crisis in Syria divided the population itself, it also dragged regional players into a pool of disagreements. A number of regional states including Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia joined the United States and EU in demanding that Bashar al-Assad stand down and likewise supported anti-government forces in Syria. Despite growing pressures within the region, Iran and Hizbullah stood behind their Syrian ally. One of the most important implications of this divide between those opposing and those supporting Assad's government concerned Iran's relations with the Palestinian Islamic movements. Both Iran and Hizbullah were caught off guard when their Palestinian ally, Hamas, joined the anti-Syrian coalition and turned its back on Damascus. Yet before discussing the impact of the Syrian crisis on Iran's relations with Hamas, allow me first to shed light on the essence of Iran's historical alliance with Syria's Assad and then to evaluate the approaches of Iran and Hamas towards the Syrian conflict.

Nadia von Maltzhan provides a comprehensive historical account of the roots of Iran's alliance with Syria. Maltzhan argues that during the first decade of the revolution, Iran's change of strategy towards Israel and its commitment to the Palestinian cause and anti-Zionism naturally brought it ideologically closer to Syria. Both countries shared not only an antagonism towards Zionism but also an anti-imperialist ideology primarily directed against U.S. foreign policy in the region.⁴ During Iraq's invasion of Iran, Hafez al-Assad made the regionally unpopular decision of siding with Iran. Damascus portrayed Iran as a "committed force in the general struggle against Israel".⁵ Strategically, it viewed its support for Iran against Saddam as a way for the Muslim world to concentrate all its forces against combatting "Zionism and Imperialism".⁶ Syria's Assad remained a loyal ally and supporter of Iran throughout the 1980s. For instance, in November 1981 and September 1982, during the Arab Summits in Fez, Syria could not be persuaded to drop its support for Tehran.⁷ Assad continued to condemn Saddam's war as the wrong war against the wrong enemy. To fight Iran was a folly, as it would inevitably

exhaust the Arabs, fragment their ranks and divert them from “the holy battle in Palestine”.⁸

Iran’s strategic alliance with Syria was further cemented in the Lebanese political arena. In the aftermath of Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Iran strongly declared its support for Lebanon and dispatched military consultants to the Syrian border with Damascus’s consent. With Syria’s blessing, Iran played a leading role in the creation of Hizbullah in southern Lebanon, and both Iran and Syria played key roles in reconciling Shia factions in Lebanon. With the initial goal of ending Israel’s invasion, Hizbullah developed as a Shia resistance movement, remaining ideologically, spiritually and financially supported by Iran.⁹ For its part, Damascus used its alliance with Iran to mobilise support against the Israeli military presence in Lebanon.¹⁰ In other words, there have been mutual interests and shared values between Tehran and Damascus in containing Israel and empowering anti-Israeli forces.

After Khomeini’s death, the Iranian-Syrian alliance remained strong and developed further as both sides cooperated in the region. In the aftermath of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, Hafez al-Assad visited President Rafsanjani in Tehran, where both leaders announced the creation of a Syrian-Iranian Higher Cooperation Committee in November 1990, jointly condemned Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait and rejected foreign intervention in the region.¹¹ Both Palestine and Lebanon were at the core of Iran’s alliance with Syria, as both states opposed Israel. In 1991, following arbitration from Washington, Syria agreed to join peace negotiations with Tel Aviv, which ended with little success. Although the Islamic Republic declared its opposition to negotiations with Israel, Syria’s participation did not undermine its relations with Tehran. Although Washington pushed Assad to turn away from Iran in return for peace and financial support, Damascus sustained its relations with Iran. According to von Maltzhan, “US Secretary of State Warren Christopher tried hard to persuade Assad to distance himself from Iran and sign a peace treaty with Israel, but in the end it all came to nothing”.¹² President George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq in 2003 brought Iran and Syria even closer as both states opposed foreign interventions in the region. After the invasion, U.S. attempts at breaking the Iranian-Syrian alliance backfired and drew the two allies even closer to each other.¹³ Under Ahmadinejad’s presidency, Tehran’s relations with Damascus grew stronger, and Ahmadinejad’s strong support of the resistance against Israel was viewed positively in Syria by its government and people, turning him into a popular figure in Damascus.¹⁴

Mutual support for Hizbullah and Palestinian resistance movements strengthened Iran-Syria ties. Iran in particular used “good relations with Syria to further support anti-Israeli resistance, using the frequent trips to Damascus of its high officials to meet also with Hamas leader Khaled Mashal”.¹⁵ The Islamic Republic of Iran’s policies towards Palestine and Lebanon were mainly conducted through its embassy in Damascus. In other words, Damascus became a platform for Iran’s anti-Zionist activities in the Levant. Von Maltzhan is of the opinion that fostering solidarity amongst resistance groups remains one of the priorities of the Islamic Republic – an issue repeatedly highlighted during bilateral visits in Syria.¹⁶ In other words, Syria

played a major role as a bridge between Iran and Palestinian resistance movements and Hizbullah.

During Israel's ground-assault on Gaza in January 2009, Saeed Jalili – a senior member of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) – travelled to Damascus to visit Hamas's political leaders (including Khaled Mashal) and Islamic Jihad leader Ramadan Abdullah. During his visit, Jalili emphasised Iran's strong support for the Palestinian resistance movements and condemned Israel for its assaults on Gaza.¹⁷ On 7 January 2009, Ali Larijani, speaker of Iran's Parliament, met several high-level officials from Hamas at the Iranian embassy in Damascus, including Khaled Mashal, as well as leaders of Islamic Jihad, to discuss the situation in Gaza, and offered Iran's strong support. According to Khaled al-Hariri,¹⁸ Iran and Syria played key roles as the primary backers of Hamas, and Syria hosted members of Hamas's exiled leadership, including Khaled Mashal, in Damascus.¹⁹ During a visit to Damascus in late 2010, SNSC Deputy Secretary Ali Baqeri referred to Iran and Syria as "strong pillars of resistance in the region".²⁰ In Damascus, Syrian and Iranian officials accused the Americans of attempting to dominate the region and promoting instability. During his visit in 2010, Ahmadinejad stated that "the Americans want to dominate the region but they feel Iran and Syria are preventing that".²¹ He added, "We tell them that instead of interfering in the region's affairs to pack their things and leave. If the Zionist entity wants to repeats its past errors, its death will be inevitable".²² In October 2010, Ahmadinejad awarded the Grand National Order of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for his support for Palestine and Lebanon.²³

Hussein Ajorloo has delved into Iran's perception of Assad. He argues that Iran views the Syrian government as a crucial element within the "Axis of Resistance" due to its history of anti-Zionist activities and support for Lebanese and Palestinian movements. Ajorloo believes that Syria occupies a crucial place within the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy for five reasons. First, Syria has been one the closest strategic allies of Iran in the region. Second, Iran and Syria foster common values based on common discourses of anti-Zionism and anti-imperialism. Third, Syria is geopolitically important in the region due to it sharing borders with Israel, and hence Syria allows Iran to contain and limit Israel's expansion closely from its borders. Fourth, Syria has a vital role in maintaining the political equilibrium in Lebanon, which is valuable for the Islamic Republic's leadership. Fifth and finally, Syria has historically played a key role in supporting the Palestinian cause with "no compromise".²⁴ In other words, in order to preserve its identity and national interests, Syria has played a considerable role in providing logistical and intelligence support for anti-Israeli factions in the region. Organically, it became a close ally to Israel's archenemy, the Islamic Republic of Iran.²⁵ Von Maltzhan also makes a point that opposition to Israel's occupation of Palestine is one of the cornerstones of the Syrian regime's foreign policy. According to her, "the issue of Palestine is certainly a point of convergence in official Syrian and Iranian values and outlook, both see themselves as part of resistance front –the Axis of Resistance".²⁶ She furthermore argues that whilst Syria's pan-Arab secular ideas are at odds with Iran's pan-Islamic

ideology, both states share anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist views that facilitate their close alignment.²⁷

What is central to my reading of Iran's foreign policy behaviour towards Syria is that both regimes pursue the unifying discourse of anti-imperialism and resistance against Israeli occupation. It is necessary to gain an even deeper understanding of the roots of Iran's alignment with Syria before evaluating the impact of the Syrian uprising on Tehran's relations with Palestinian factions, particularly Hamas. The point I wish to underline is that it was against such a background of anti-Zionism that the Iranian leadership pursued a supportive policy towards the Syrian regime and backed Damascus during the Syria crisis.

Political turbulence within the Axis of Resistance: the Syrian uprising

In October 2010, shortly before the beginning of the Syrian uprising, in a meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Ayatollah Khamenei commented on the stability and continuous good relations between Iran and Syria over the previous 30 years. The Leader of the Islamic revolution reiterated: "There are no two other countries in the region that have enjoyed such firm and excellent bilateral relations for thirty years".²⁸ Ayatollah Khamenei further stated that "America is the main opponent of the axis of resistance in the region".²⁹ Referring to the efforts by U.S. officials to break this resistance, he commented that their "efforts [would] not achieve any results, just as they did not in the past".³⁰ In that meeting, Assad stressed that "Syria and the Islamic Republic of Iran are in the same camp and have the same goals".³¹ It is vital to recognise that throughout three decades of alliance with Syria, the Iranian leadership has routinely emphasised the two states' common values against a common enemy. With this in mind, Iran's leadership were cautious prior to the Arab Spring about plots by the United States and Israel to weaken the so-called Axis of Resistance and thus undermine the Iran-Syria alliance.

In March 2011, the turbulent waves of Arab uprisings hit Syrian shores and spread throughout the country, jeopardising the very existence of the Syrian state. The trajectory of the Syrian uprising swiftly turned towards violence and factional militancy, dragging in regional and global actors. From the very beginning of the Syrian uprising, the Islamic Republic of Iran cautiously navigated regional and international approaches towards the Syrian crisis. From Tehran's point of view, the Western and pro-Western states supporting anti-Assad forces were an indication of a "Zionist plan" masterminded by the Americans to eliminate the Syrian government because of its anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist stance.³²

According to von Maltzhan, Iran initially ignored the growing tensions in Syria but nevertheless stood by it and supported the Syrian regime's reform initiatives, stressing the need for a political solution to the crisis.³³ Criticising the United States and conservative Arab states (including Saudi Arabia) for supporting anti-Assad forces, Iran from the very beginning of the Syria crisis pledged its support for the Assad government. The Syrian crisis, however, presented a direct threat to Iran's

grand-strategic ideas of anti-Zionism and pro-Palestinian and pro-Resistance movements. In other words, one may safely argue that the collapse of the Syrian regime weakens Iran and Hizbullah's standing against their ideological enemy, Israel. The Iranian leadership is convinced that the fall of Assad's regime would incite hardliners in Tel Aviv to conduct military operations against Hizbullah and the resistance in Gaza and subsequently damage the Axis of Resistance tangibly.³⁴ The support for Syria was therefore aimed at sustaining the pro-Palestinian, pro-Hizbullah and anti-Israeli camps and at maintaining Iran's foothold in the Levant. In an interview, Mohammad Amaanollah-zad, a high-ranking official in the IRGC and a member of the Society for the Defence of the Palestinian Nation, stated:

The Islamic Republic's support for the Axis of Resistance is based on its Ummah-centric approach. We decided to support the Syrian government not to salvage Bashar al-Assad as an individual, but to sustain and save the anti-Zionism factions in the region. Of course, supporting the Syrian government and resistance movements also serves our national interests. Our national interests are defined by our revolutionary and theological ideas. To this end we need to be in the position to lead the Islamic Ummah against global arrogance of Zionists and Imperialists. In doing so, we are obviously paying heavy costs as our efforts are labelled as sectarian-driven policies. We are accused by the conservative states and the West of interfering in the internal affairs of Syria and Palestine and Lebanon. However, we continue our efforts to help anti-Zionist forces in order to end the occupation of al-Aqsa. We shall support anyone that acts in this direction. History proves to us that Syria's Assad constructively supported anti-Zionism in the region. We witnessed how Americans and pro-American regimes in the region began arming and supporting Takfiri-Salafi groups such as Al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra Front and the ISIS, hence, we have no doubt that the Zionists are attempting to undermine and to neutralise the Axis of Resistance. Therefore, we act according to our grand strategy of anti-Zionism and act accordingly to undermine their plans. We cannot simply sit and witness how Zionists are destroying the Axis of Resistance and expanding their hegemony in the region.³⁵

Despite the fact that Tehran was engaged in heated debates over the Syrian crisis in 2011, the Islamic Republic scheduled the Fifth International Conference for Supporting the Palestinian Intifada for 1–2 October 2011 in Tehran. The main motto of "Palestine: The Homeland of Palestinians" was chosen for the Conference.³⁶ Parliamentary representatives of over 70 states joined the Conference after receiving invitations from the Islamic Shura Council of Iran. Both Khaled Mashal and Ramadan Abdullah Shalah, along with Ismail Haniyeh (the prime minister of the Hamas-led government), Mahmoud al-Zahar (a high-ranking official from Hamas), and Nasrullah were amongst the participants at the conference. Khaled Mashal delivered a speech in which he asked whether the Palestinians would continue to seek recognition from the UN without making efforts to liberate the Occupied

Territories.³⁷ He stated, “Even if we become a member of the United Nations, we see that the territory where we want to establish a state is occupied and full of settlements.” During his speech, Khaled Mashal thanked Iran’s Supreme Leader for his “courageous” support for Palestine.³⁸ These were efforts by Iran to position itself prominently during a time of serious upheaval and to capitalise on its support of Palestine to that end.

Some of Khamenei’s comments at the inauguration of the Fifth Conference of Intifada shed light on the Iranian leadership’s proposed solutions for the Palestinian predicament and also demonstrate Iran’s intention to bring all anti-Zionist factions onto a unified frontline of the so-called Axis of Resistance. He stated:

Among all the issues that deserve to be discussed by religious and political figures from across the world of Islam, the issue of Palestine enjoys special importance. Palestine is the primary issue among all common issues of Islamic countries. This issue has unique characteristics. The first characteristic is that a Muslim country has been taken away from its people and entrusted to foreigners who have come together from different countries and formed a fake and mosaic-like society. The second characteristic is that this historically unprecedented event has been accompanied by constant killings, crimes, oppression and humiliation. The third characteristic is that Muslims’ original *Qiblah* and many respected religious centres which exist in that country have been threatened with destruction, sacrilege and decline. The fourth characteristic is that at the most sensitive spot of the world of Islam, this fake government and society have played the role of a military, security and political base for the arrogant governments since the beginning up until today.

The solution of the Islamic Republic to the issue of Palestine and this old wound is a clear. [. . .] We propose a referendum among the Palestinian people. Just like any other nation, the Palestinian nation has the right to determine its own destiny and to elect its own government. All the original people of Palestine – including Muslims, Christians and Jews and not foreign immigrants – should take part in a general and orderly referendum. [. . .] What is threatening the Zionist regime is not the missiles of Iran or resistance groups, so they can build a missile shield here and there in order to confront it. The real and inescapable threat is the firm determination of men, women and youth in Islamic countries who do not want America, Europe and their puppet rulers, to dominate and humiliate them any longer.³⁹

Ayatollah Khamenei’s speech is important because it explains how the Islamic Republic continued to highlight the importance of the Palestinian cause during the Arab Spring era, as the Palestinian question received less attention in the Arab world. In other words, the Fifth Intifada Conference was a political and social attempt to remind Muslims and the Arab world not to marginalise the Palestinian issue due to heated debates over the Arab Spring and internal disagreements. This

has been central to the strategy to claim regional leadership and to position Iran as a strong regional power at a time of upheaval.

Iran, Hamas and Islamic Jihad: a crossroad approach to the Syrian crisis

As the Syrian crisis became prolonged, the political leadership of Hamas moved from Syria to Egypt and Qatar in February 2012, with Khaled Mashal and his aides moving to Doha and Ismail Haniya announcing his support for the anti-Assad uprising.⁴⁰ Since 1999, the Syrian government had welcomed and hosted the Hamas political bureau after the Jordanian authorities accused the group of using the country as a base for illegal activities and briefly detained Khaled Mashal and a key aide.⁴¹ Hamas leadership had been provided with a safe haven and enjoyed the luxury of receiving financial and logistical support in Damascus from the Syrian government, Iran and Hizbullah.

Iran and its allies were caught off guard when Hamas moved its offices from Syria and endorsed the anti-Assad's forces. Nevertheless, the Islamic Republic's authorities avoided any direct criticism of Hamas and maintained its channel of communication. In an interview, Hussein Royvaran explained the situation in which Hamas's leadership decided to pursue a different approach towards its traditional ally, the Syrian government, in 2012. He stated:

Disagreement and differences between the Islamic Republic and Hamas began during the beginning of the Syrian Crisis. Iran believes that the Syrian Crisis was an American-Zionist plot against the Axis of Resistance. In fact, Hamas felt nostalgic and therefore celebrated the victory of Mohammed Mursi in Egypt. Because the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood acted against the Syrian government, hence, Hamas decided to stand in the line of Muslim Brotherhood and moved its mission from Damascus. From the Hamas political leadership point of view, if the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and other Arab states could gain governmental positions as they did in Egypt, Hamas could forge its own close circle of alliance. The triumph of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region could bring about a new bloc in the region and therefore, Hamas could reduce its dependency on Iran.

The common goal between the Axis of Resistance and Hamas is their anti-Zionist ideas whereas the common goal between Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood is about the organisation's ideology. During the Syrian Crisis, Hamas political leaders prioritised their common goals with their fellow Muslim Brotherhood over their common goal with the Axis of Resistance. The Hamas political leadership calculated that standing against the Syrian government will also open doors within the Gulf States, especially the wealthy state of Qatar. However, it is vital to note that the members of the Hamas leadership did not simply pursue such changes of policies homogeneously. In fact, Khaled Mashal's faction within the Hamas political bureau used its influence

to persuade its leadership to change its tactics. However, the Islamic Republic of Iran prioritised its anti-Zionist ideas and stood with the Axis of Resistance. On the other hand, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad pursued a pragmatic and neutral stance and did not turn its back on its traditional allies. It is vital to say that it was the Hamas political leadership that turned its back on the Axis of Resistance and not the Islamic Republic. In fact, Iran did not cut its relations with Hamas and remained open to Hamas as before.⁴²

In relation to Hamas moving its political bureau to Doha from Damascus, Mohammad Zarei argues that Khaled Mashal's decision was linked to his negotiations with the emir of Qatar in September 2011. According to Zarei, Khaled Mashal influenced Hamas's political bureau to tilt towards Qatar and benefit from Doha's financial and political support.⁴³ According to Mehdi Lazar, the emirate of Qatar became aware of the unique opportunity that the Arab Spring presented in redistributing power across the region. He argues that Doha realised that the political climate of the Arab Spring would not last and that it therefore attempted to gain as much political clout as possible through supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in the region and its offshoot in Palestine in particular, in order to expand its influence.⁴⁴ Hamas's leader Khaled Mashal lived in Qatar in the early 2000s and resided there continuously after leaving Damascus in early 2012. In February 2012, Doha promised \$250 million to Hamas – a sum that increased to \$400 million. Lazar makes a valid point that Qatar's policy towards Hamas is mainly designed to counter Iran's increasing influence in the region. Iran still maintained strong influence over Lebanese and Palestinian resistance movements, particularly after Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. Since Hamas's political leadership left Damascus for Doha in 2012, Qatar seized an opportunity to separate Iran from Gaza by strengthening ties with Hamas. From Lazar's point of view, Qatar's policy towards Gaza should be viewed through the wider prism of Doha's regional policy, namely to strengthen the power of Sunnis in the Middle East and to counter Iran's foreign policy.⁴⁵ The same policy is also implemented in Syria, where Qatar has backed the insurgency against Assad, the key ally of Iran, from the very beginning of the Syrian uprising. According to Lazar, there is an added layer to Qatar's attempts at separating Hamas from Iran's point of view that goes beyond ideology. According to him, Qatar and Iran share the world's largest deposit of non-associated gas that lies between the waters of the two countries. Qatar's close relations with the United States and the presence of a major American military base in al-Udeid (the largest outside of U.S. soil), in addition to the political situation in Gaza after the Syrian crisis, all help Qatar to protract its "Sunni-policy" and isolate the Islamic Republic.⁴⁶

In October 2012, the Emir of Qatar paid a surprise visit to Gaza and pledged \$400million in investment in Gaza's infrastructure. Travelling to Gaza through Egypt under the Muslim Brotherhood government, the Emir seemed to confirm that "Qatar is the principal supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood's takeover in Egypt and elsewhere".⁴⁷ One can argue that "Qatar was using the Muslim Brotherhood to

replace Iran as the major player in the Palestinian issue".⁴⁸ The emir's visit to Gaza in 2012 was seen in part by observers in the region as a "reward to Hamas for ending its support to Assad".⁴⁹ Qatar had opposed Assad since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, aiming to gain a foothold in the region and expand its influence through Jihadist forces on the ground.⁵⁰

On the other side of the Palestinian political spectrum, Islamic Jihad maintained its position within the Axis of Resistance. Following the eruption of the Syria crisis, Islamic Jihad's leadership refused to cut relations with Damascus and maintained its neutrality. In January 2012, Ramadan Abdullah and his delegation visited Ayatollah Khamenei in Tehran. During the meeting, Khamenei referred to conditions in Syria, stating: "Regarding Syria, if the developments are considered from a broad and comprehensive perspective, it becomes completely clear what plot America has designed for Syria and unfortunately certain countries inside and outside the region are cooperating with America in this plot".⁵¹ The Supreme Leader added that "if the Syrian government promises the Americans that it will stop supporting the Islamic resistance of Palestinian and Lebanese groups, all issues will come to an end. Supporting resistance groups is the only crime that Syria has committed".⁵² He reiterated: "The position of the Islamic Republic regarding Syria is to support any kind of reforms that would benefit the Syrian people and to oppose the interference of America and its followers in the internal affairs of Syria".⁵³ In the meeting, Ramadan Abdullah clarified the position of Islamic Jihad, stating that the "Islamic Awakening and the regional developments are a very valuable opportunity for Muslim nations, particularly for the people of Palestine, and everybody should watch out for the enemies' efforts to cause sedition". He also referred specifically to developments in Syria and expressed that "Westerners are trying to take Syria – which is a base for resistance in the region – away from the camp of resistance".⁵⁴ Ramadan Abdullah's meeting with Khamenei in early 2012 was important as both sides were able to underline the importance of their alliance during an especially turbulent period. Ayatollah Khamenei's discussion with Ramadan Abdullah was aimed at appealing directly to the Palestinian streets and at explaining the Islamic Republic's rationale for supporting the Syrian government. Ramadan Abdullah's statement in Tehran likewise was aimed at assuring the Iranian leadership that Islamic Jihad would remain an important pillar of the so-called Axis of Resistance. In an interview, Nasser Abu Sharif, the high representative of Islamic Jihad who had accompanied Ramadan Abdullah during the 2012 meeting, stated:

We in the Palestinian Islamic Jihad understood Iran's concerns over the Syrian Crisis. Our only priority is to liberate the land of Palestine and to this end we value Iran's anti-Zionism ideology and its historical pro-Palestinian stance. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad rejects and denounces sectarian discourse within the Islamic Ummah. We also believe that Takfiri extremists' activities in Syria were not serving our interests as they pursue divisive policies within the Ummah. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad's leadership values the

Axis of Resistance and therefore we maintain our neutrality from the very beginning of the Syrian Crisis.⁵⁵

Although the Hamas leadership pursued a different path from Iran and its allies in Syria, Tehran nevertheless maintained the channel of communication with it. On 10 February 2012, Ismail Haniyeh arrived in Tehran for an official visit and was received by high-ranking officials of the Iranian government, including the supreme leader and the president. In a meeting with Ismail Haniyeh, Iran's Vice President Mohamad-Reza Rahimi described Iran's support for the Palestinian nation as a "lofty aspiration" pursued since the victory of the 1979 Islamic revolution, noting that the Iranian nation was still committed to this ideal. Rahimi highlighted that Iran's backing of "oppressed peoples" around the world, especially those of the Palestinian nation, and opposition to the Zionist regime all formed a dominant ideological principle of the Islamic Republic. Haniyeh for his part expressed "Iran has stood beside the Palestinian nation since the victory of the 1979 Islamic revolution and we have witnessed the Iranian nation's strong support for the oppressed Palestinians".⁵⁶ In a symbolic gesture, during a rally to mark the 33rd anniversary of the Islamic revolution at Azadi (Liberty) Square in Tehran in February 2012, Haniyeh stood beside Ahmadinejad. Addressing the crowd, Haniyeh congratulated the Iranian nation and government on the occasion of the 33rd anniversary of the victory of the Islamic revolution and said that "Iranians play a role in constructing a bright future for the Palestinians".⁵⁷ Khaled al-Qadoumi, the high representative of Hamas who had accompanied Haniyeh in Tehran, described the moment as follows:

On the eve of commemoration of the Islamic revolution in 2012, Ismail Haniyeh stood in Azadi Square and delivered a speech to the Iranian audience who were cherishing the Palestinian struggle and were praying for the liberation of Palestine and al-Aqsa. He flew over the large crowd beside the Iranian president and saw a brave nation that was gathering to welcome him.⁵⁸

Despite disagreements over the Syria crisis, Iran maintained its connections with Hamas's leadership through Hamas representatives in Tehran during 2012. At the NAM Summit, held in Tehran in August 2012, Haniyeh and Mahmoud Abbass announced that they both received and accepted invitations from Iran. However, President Abbas – leader of Fatah – threatened to boycott the summit if Hamas were in attendance. Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Malki proclaimed that "President Abbas will not take part in the Non-Aligned summit if Ismail Haniyeh is present, no matter what form his attendance takes".⁵⁹ The Iranian authorities later made the following statement: "Up to now, no official invitation from the Islamic Republic of Iran and the person of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been sent to Hamas' popular Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh".⁶⁰ Hamas later announced that its political bureau received an invitation from the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic and that Mahmoud al-Zahar and Marwan Issa from al-Qassam brigades visited Iran.⁶¹

The 2012 Gaza war: Iran, Hamas and Islamic Jihad

On 14 November 2012, the Israeli army launched a massive military offensive in Gaza. The operation, dubbed Pillar of Defence, lasted eight days and began after the assassination of Ahmad al-Jabari, chief commander of Hamas's military wing (al-Qassam Brigade), in a missile strike in Gaza city.⁶² Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood president, Mohammad Morsi, was reported to have pressured Hamas to agree to a ceasefire.⁶³ During the operation, the Israeli army bombarded Gaza indiscriminately, and its targets included civilian buildings and governmental institutions. In response, Palestinian Islamic movements launched rocket attacks against the Israeli heartland with Fajr-5 missiles. Its targets included Tel Aviv.⁶⁴ After eight days of war, which destroyed Gaza's civilian infrastructure, a ceasefire was successfully mediated by Egypt's Morsi and U.S. authorities on 21 November 2012.

The most important implication of the Gaza war was the impact of Iran's support for Palestinian Islamic movements on their military performance. During the eight days of resistance, the Palestinian Islamic movements demonstrated their ability to strike back against Israel. During the conflict, Palestinians utilised a rocket – the Fajr-5, developed by Iran and supplied to Hizbullah – with a range of up to 75 kilometres, which allowed them to strike Israel's capital.⁶⁵ In an interview with Al-Alam, Ziad Nakhleh, deputy leader of Islamic Jihad, stated:

Thanks to our generous brothers in Iran, we have Fajr 3 and Fajr 5 missiles. Our Iranian brothers helped us to obtain these missiles. Iranian technology helped us considerably to change the equilibrium of power. For the first time we were able to strike back and we proved to the Israelis that we can target their towns the way they target ours. The Palestinian resistance forced the Israelis to accept a ceasefire. We continue our resistance despite intense pressure from the world powers. No one could dream that we can return the enemy's fire and target Israel's heartland.⁶⁶

Major-General Mohammad Jafari, head of the IRGC, confirmed in November 2012 that Iran supplied military assistance to Hamas and to other resistance movements in Gaza, including technology needed to manufacture long-range Fajr-5 rockets. Jafari stated that "Gaza is under siege, so we cannot help them. The Fajr-5 missiles have not been shipped from Iran. Its technology has been transferred and [the missiles are] being produced quickly".⁶⁷ He clarified the ideological reasoning for Iran supplying the technology of manufacturing rockets to Hamas: "We offer all Muslims technological aid to help them stand up against arrogant powers and we offer to give them our experiences to defend their people".⁶⁸ The Iranian commander added that "Iran supports a ceasefire between Gaza and the Israeli regime if such a truce is to the interest of Palestinians".⁶⁹

Iran's Parliamentary Speaker, Ali Larijani, echoed Iran's concern and support for the Palestinians during the Gaza war. In November 2012, Larijani called for immediate international and regional action to support the people of Gaza. To this

end, Larijani called on the Arab countries to show their support for the people in Gaza strip, and asked the representative of the Egyptian embassy to provide assistance with sending Iran's parliamentarians to Gaza strip.⁷⁰ Addressing MPs, Larijani expressed solidarity with the people of Gaza, stating: "Iran is proud of defending the Palestinian people and will continue to help Palestine at difficult times [. . .] we are proud that our assistance was material and military in nature".⁷¹ Addressing the Arab countries, the Iranian Majles speaker stated, "The Palestinian people do not need speeches and meetings, rather they are in need of a serious support".⁷²

Without claiming credit for providing missile technology to the resistance movements, Ayatollah Khamenei praised the Palestinians for their resistance during the eight days of war:

An 8-day war broke out between the people of Gaza and the Zionist regime which claims to have the strongest army in the region. [. . .] Would anybody have believed ten years ago that one day there would be a war between the Palestinians – not all Palestinians, a group of them in Gaza – and the Zionist regime and it would be the Palestinians who set conditions for a ceasefire? Well done to the Palestinians. Well done! Well done to Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the soldiers who fought in Palestine and Gaza for their outstanding courage. What they did is a perfect example of courage. I want to express my gratitude to the Palestinian soldiers for their sacrifices, their efforts and their patience. They saw that "Verily, with every difficulty there is relief" [The Holy Quran, 94: 6].⁷³

Such sentiments towards the Gaza war in 2012 were not limited to the government, however, and the Shia *Marajii* also made separate statements aimed at the Iranian public. Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi delivered a statement praising the Muslim fighters for defending the defenceless people of Gaza during the eight days of war. In his statement, he castigated the conservative regimes of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, praised Iran for supporting Gaza with weaponry, and emphasised that the Islamic Republic of Iran was honoured to be the main supporter of the Palestinians during their darkest days and would continue its duty to support the Palestinian people.⁷⁴ This was obvious propaganda to buttress Iran's claim to regional leadership at a time of increasing escalation of the Saudi-Iranian Cold War. Palestine, as I have repeatedly stated, was also a Trojan horse for Iran's strategic preferences and national interests.

On the other side of the spectrum, one of the most notable implications of the Gaza war in 2012 was the reaction within Gaza towards Iranian support. According to Nidal al-Mughrabi, Gazans offered very public thanks to Iran for helping them fight against Israel on 27 November 2012, as Iranian-manufactured rockets were fired out of the Palestinian enclaves towards Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.⁷⁵ Large billboards on three major road junctions in the Gaza Strip bore the message, "Thank you Iran" in Arabic, English, Hebrew and Farsi. The posters also depicted the Iranian Fajr-5 rockets. It was the first time that there has been such public admission of Iran's role in the arming of the Islamic fighters in the territory.⁷⁶ Khader Habib, a

senior official in Islamic Jihad, stated that it was “natural to show gratitude for Iran’s role in the conflict”.⁷⁷ He told Reuters that “Iranian rockets struck at Tel Aviv, they reached out to Jerusalem. Therefore it was our duty to thank those who helped our people”.⁷⁸ He added that “We have distinctive, good relations with Iran and such a relationship will continue as long as Iran supports the Palestinian people and backs up the resistance”.⁷⁹

Asmaa al-Ghoul highlights some other reactions in Gaza among Islamic movements who benefitted from Iran’s support. According to her, Daud Shihab (media spokesman for Islamic Jihad) did not conceal that Iran is the movement’s major supporter. He acknowledged that “[a]ll of the weapons in Gaza are provided by Iran, be they weapons intended for the *Hamas* movement or for the PIJ [Palestinian Islamic Jihad]. Perhaps Hamas even has more Iranian weapons than us; and everyone knows that Iran is financing us”. Shihab states that “the PIJ is a resistance movement, and while there are many parties in the Arab and Muslim world offering support for the resistance, the largest share of this financial and military support is coming from Iran”.⁸⁰ Shihab downplays allegations concerning Islamic Jihad’s inclinations towards Shi’ism and that it acts according to Iranian guidance. Specifically, he highlights Islamic Jihad’s neutrality on Syria as an example of the group’s independence from Iran. Shihab states that the pivotal element that defines Islamic Jihad’s relationship with various states is the extent to which these states are close to the Palestinian cause. Hence, Iran supports the Palestinian people and the resistance and is not ashamed of this support but nonetheless confronts a lot of pressure because of it. Therefore, he adds, the relationship between Iran and Islamic Jihad is solid and strong.⁸¹

The fall of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt and Hamas’s dilemma

After the Muslim Brotherhood came to dominate the government in Egypt, Hamas’s political bureau under Khaled Mashal saw an opportunity to break its regional isolation. As I suggested, Hamas’s political leadership began to prioritise its ideological ties with the circle of Muslim Brotherhood in the region and distance itself from Iran over the Syria crisis. Under Mashal, Hamas’s political leadership hoped that a new alliance under the umbrella of the Muslim Brotherhood could provide Hamas with more power to achieve its goals. However, on 3 July 2013, Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood was toppled and replaced with a government dominated by the military. Henceforth, General Fatah al-Sisi, the new head of government in Egypt, put pressure on Hamas by isolating it economically and politically in an effort to purge the country of the Muslim Brotherhood. Due to its own differences with the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia supported al-Sisi’s government, which put Hamas under further regional pressure. Shortly after Morsi was toppled, the Egyptian army destroyed many of the smuggling tunnels that ran under the Egypt-Gaza border, which had provided the cramped coastal enclave with commercial goods as well as weaponry, damaging Gaza’s fragile economy in the process.⁸² Losing its strong

base in Syria after moving its offices from Damascus and having caused disagreements with its traditional ally Iran, Hamas seemed more isolated than ever. Shortly after the removal of Morsi, the campaign against Gaza's tunnels caused Hamas to be unable to cover its payroll in Gaza. Hamas was reportedly hit by a downturn in its relations with its main backer Iran, which had previously provided the organisation with arms and funds in a rather systematic and strategic manner.⁸³ The situation in Egypt and Hamas's isolation caused the Hamas leadership to reconsider its approach towards its allies Iran, Hizbullah and Syria. Hence, the discourse of "Islamic solidarity" reappeared.

In October 2013, the Deputy Chief of Hamas Musa Abu-Marzouk stated that "Khaled Mashal was wrong to have raised the flag of the Syrian revolution on his historic return to Gaza at the end of last year".⁸⁴ Nasrin Akhtar argues that Abu-Marzouk's statement suggested a conspicuous change of policy for Hamas. According to her:

[C]oming as it did in the wake of a reconciliation agreement with Hezbollah in July 2013 at a meeting hosted at the residence of the Iranian ambassador to Beirut, the first visit by a Hamas representative there in some two years, Hamas appears to be reaching out to its erstwhile resistance allies.⁸⁵

In an additional blow, Hamas's close connection with Qatar was also dented during the summer of 2013. The Emir of Qatar, who visited Gaza and promised millions of dollars in donations, abdicated in June 2013, and "his heir has shown much less interest in Hamas".⁸⁶

With regard to Hamas's perception of its foreign policies, Hussein Royvaran explained to me:

Hamas is the biggest Islamic Movement in Palestine and it has a complex structure and therefore it is not a homogeneous movement. Hamas leadership's decision to turn its back on its traditional allies was not a homogeneous decision based on an absolute consensus. There are different trends within Hamas. Khaled Mashal's trend is more pro-Qatari and intent to tilt towards the Sunni-conservative Arab states, Muslim Brotherhood and even Turkey's Erdogan who has pro-Muslim Brotherhood tendencies. However, some prominent figures within the movement like Emad al-Elmi and Mahmoud al-Zahar and more importantly, al-Qassam brigade are closer towards Iran's Axis of Resistance. It seems that Hamas' political bureau succeeded in persuading the Hamas leadership to move from Damascus and publically support the anti-Assad forces. However, the military-backed coup against Mohammed Mursi and increasing economic and political hardship and the subsequent isolation of Hamas in late 2013 inspired the other factions within Hamas to voice their disagreement with Khaled Mashal and to try to reconcile with their traditional allies, particularly with Iran.⁸⁷

Due to these factors, Hamas aimed to repair its ties with its allies, particularly with Iran. According to Mohammad Zarei, during the second half of 2013, Hamas demonstrated its willingness to return to the Axis of Resistance. After the Gaza war in 2012 and the fall of Morsi in Egypt, Hamas witnessed internal disagreements over its regional policies. He argues that the pro-Iranian trend within Hamas actively lobbied within the movement to repair its political ties with Iran and that such attempts highlight their commitment to maintaining resistance as the most effective option for the liberation of Palestine. To this end, pro-Iranian members liaised with Iranian and Hizbullah officials to restore ties. Throughout the rapprochement, relations between Iran and Islamic Jihad remained as strong as before, although Islamic Jihad's headquarters did move to Lebanon for security reasons. Between 2012 and 2013, Islamic Jihad continued to receive aid from Iran, which it distributed amongst Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.⁸⁸

Gaza war of 2014: a litmus test for Iran's commitment to the Palestinian cause

In July 2014, Gaza was heavily bombarded by the Israeli Defence Force, and an intensive military campaign ensued. Israel's aim was to eliminate the Palestinian Islamic movement's firepower. After 10 days of indiscriminate aerial bombing, Israel launched a ground campaign on 17 July 2014 supported by gunboats, fighter jets and tanks. It was reported that the Israeli assault on Gaza was triggered by the killing of three Israeli citizens in the West Bank in June 2014.⁸⁹ While the details of the Gaza war in 2014 and the scale of devastation on the ground, as well as the rationale behind the Israeli invasion, are beyond the scope of this discussion, Iran's reaction towards Israel's actions are worthy of attention. Specifically, it is important to examine the solidarity expressed by Iran and Iranians during the 51 days of the devastating war. Throughout the conflict, Iran demonstrated that its pro-Palestinian values had remained intact since the 1979 Islamic revolution. It is vital to note that the war on Gaza coincided with a period in which Iran was engaged in a series of marathon negotiations with the world powers over its nuclear programme. Tehran was also at the time supporting the Syrian regime and still faced disagreements with Hamas's political bureau over the Syria crisis. Throughout the following paragraphs, I will look into both Iran's government and non-governmental actors' behaviour towards the Gaza war in order to inform my argument that the country's support for the Palestine cause has been largely consistent.

One of the most notable pro-Palestinian reactions in Iran came from the pragmatist President Hassan Rouhani, elected in August 2013. Rouhani assumed office due to two main election promises: de-escalating tensions with the West over the nuclear dossier and conducting economic and political reforms within the government. Shortly after the Israeli invasion of Gaza, on 12 July 2014, Rouhani commissioned Mohammad Javad Zarif (Iran's foreign minister) to concentrate all of NAM's activities towards condemning Israel's "inhuman acts in the Gaza strip".⁹⁰ Rouhani stressed to Iran's FM the necessity of taking care of Gaza's residents,

especially those wounded during the attacks. As head of the NAM, Iran requested that the UN Security Council heed its responsibilities towards the oppressed Palestinians.⁹¹ On 12 July 2014, Rouhani issued a declaration as the head of NAM that strongly condemned Israel's military assault on Gaza. Rouhani concluded the declaration by stating:

I, as the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the rotating head of the Non Aligned Movement [NAM], while seriously condemning the systematic, illegal, and inhumane crimes against the Palestinians, ask the entire concerned regional and international bodies to heed their legal responsibilities immediately, in line with immediate and full lifting of the Gaza siege and in forwarding of humanitarian aids for the Palestinian people, as well as blocking the path for more aggressive acts and the greater massacre of the oppressed Palestinian people through adoption of an effective legal and international mechanism to pursue and put to trail the criminal Zionists.⁹²

In July 2014, Rouhani issued a letter calling on heads of Muslim states to do their utmost in support of an immediate end of the blockade in the Gaza Strip, adding that “[h]elping the oppressed Palestinian people and preventing the aggressive acts of the Zionist regime are the shared responsibility of all international institutions and the world’s freedom-seeking countries”.⁹³ At the cabinet session on 20 July 2014, Rouhani expressed outrage at the “Zionist-regime’s crimes against humanity in Gaza”, further stating that the “Iranian government and foreign ministry will draw attention of the international community to what is going on in Gaza”.⁹⁴ Rouhani dismissed Israel’s attempted justifications for the massacre of Palestinians and accused Israeli leaders of ethnic cleansing in Gaza. He castigated the global community for its silence and stated: “Global reactions unfortunately reveal that the western governments and many Arab and Muslim governments have kept silent towards the crimes or their reactions fall short of the extent of the catastrophe underway in Gaza Strip”.⁹⁵

On 23 July 2014, Hussein Dehghani, ambassador and chargé d’affaires of Iran to the UN, delivered a statement before the meeting of ambassadors of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to the UN. The statement reads:

The Iranian people, like other peace-loving people all around the world, are shocked by the savagery committed by the Occupying Zionist regime against the innocent Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, particularly in the besieged Gaza Strip. In line with the Islamic precious values of brotherhood among Muslims, unity of the Islamic Ummah and supporting the oppressed, the Islamic Republic of Iran is ready and appeals to all Members of the OIC and the OIC institutions, to extend their moral and humanitarian support to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip during this difficult time. [. . .] Like always I would like to reiterate that the Islamic Republic of Iran is and will

remain by its Palestinian brothers and sisters in pursuit of their aspirations for their land, freedom, justice and dignity.⁹⁶

In a public message to a gathering of Iranian children in Tehran (a public show of solidarity dubbed “Gaza children and Iranian children”) Rouhani expressed that “[i]t is not only human being [sic] which is killed in Gaza, but it is the humanity [sic] as a value being victimized”.⁹⁷ Rouhani appealed to Western governments to support the oppressed people of Palestine, despite any interests they had in maintaining an alliance with Israel. He stated, “Bombardment of schools and killing of children in Gaza is a clear example of genocide in the world today”.⁹⁸ Rouhani was amongst tens of thousands of Iranians attending the Quds Day demonstrations in July 2014 in Tehran, showing his government’s solidarity with the people of Gaza. During the demonstrations, Rouhani stated that “those who have kept silent in the face of these crimes are and will be ashamed and history will judge them. Innocent people and children are being killed, and they – Western countries – either keep silent or support the criminal”.⁹⁹ Following Rouhani’s recommendations, Zarif called on the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate Israel’s actions during the 2014 Gaza war and prosecute it. He stated, “Israel has committed serious crimes in Gaza which need to be prosecuted by an international court”.¹⁰⁰ On the condition of anonymity, one employee of Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained to me:

The atrocities of Israel in Gaza in 2014 coincided with the negotiations over the nuclear issue with the world powers. Although Mr Rouhani’s focus was on solving the nuclear dossier and the removal of imposed sanctions, [. . .] he and Mr Zarif did not neglect the people of Gaza. Since the atrocities began in Gaza, we were commissioned to speed up our activities and to liaise with other countries through our diplomatic missions and to do all we can diplomatically to help the people of Gaza, I personally expected Rouhani’s administration to prioritise the removal of sanctions than the war in Gaza, but, it seemed that helping Gaza was as important as the Nuclear issue for Rouhani’s administration. I was worried that shifting all diplomatic efforts to [the] Gaza War could have had negative impacts on the removal of the sanctions at such critical moment. However, it was clear that although Rouhani was using a more diplomatic language than his predecessor, [. . .] his administration effectively demonstrated its uncompromising commitment towards the Palestinian cause.¹⁰¹

Both conservative and reformist factions within the Iranian Parliament unanimously voiced their strong support for the people of Gaza. During the Inter-Parliamentary Union troika meeting of the OIC in Tehran on 24 July 2014, Ali Larijani particularly praised Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hizbullah for their resistance against Israel. Larijani called on the OIC Inter-Parliamentary Union to use its power to support the Palestinian people and requested that the Egyptian government open the Rafah border crossing for the passage of humanitarian and medical aid to the

people of Gaza.¹⁰² Despite the differences between Iran and Hamas over the Syria crisis, Larijani voiced Iran's full support for the "oppressed Palestinian nation's righteous struggle for the liberation of their homeland" in a phone call with Khaled Mashal in July 2014.¹⁰³ The speaker of Iran's Parliament also confirmed that Iran had liaised with the Egyptian government and requested that it permit the Iranian Red Crescent to send humanitarian aid to Gaza through Egypt.¹⁰⁴ President Rouhani commissioned the Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS) to synchronise with Palestinian and Egyptian Red Crescent societies in order to deliver Iranian medical aid, medical equipment, physicians, as well as relief and rescue workers through the Rafah Passage to Palestinians in Gaza. Rouhani also commissioned Zarif to announce Iran's readiness to treat injured Palestinians in Iranian hospitals and to arrange for their safe transfer to Iran for the same purpose.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, Iranian officials received no resolute response from Egyptian authorities, and they instead attempted to send aid through the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC). Zarif, however, remarked that "although the Egyptian foreign minister has promised twice that he will do his best in this regard and we hope to see results".¹⁰⁶

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei defined the Israeli war against the people of Gaza as "genocide". According to Arash Karami, despite their differences over the Syrian Civil War, Iran has worked to maintain close ties with Hamas.¹⁰⁷ During the Eid al-Fitr address to Iranian government officials, Ayatollah Khamenei strongly criticised calls from Western nations to disarm Hamas. Khamenei stated that the

president of America issued a fatwa that the resistance must be disarmed. Yes, it's clear; you want this [minimal] attack in response to all of these crimes not to happen. We say the opposite. The entire world, especially the Islamic world, has a responsibility: whatever it can do to equip the Palestinian people. [. . .] Our clear message to Islamic governments is this: Let's help the oppressed rise and show that the Islamic world will not be calm in the face of oppression. To realize this goal, *all Islamic governments*, irrespective of their political and non-political differences, [must] accelerate help to the oppressed.¹⁰⁸

Following the examples of Khamenei, President Rouhani and the Iranian Parliament, the governmental agencies of the Islamic Republic rushed to voice their support as well. The commander of the IRGC, Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari highlighted the readiness of his forces to continue supporting Palestinian resistance movements in their battle against Israel. He remarked, "When speaking about defending the Muslims, Shias and Sunnis are of no difference to us, and our devotion and dedication goes to the entire Muslim world and the oppressed".¹⁰⁹ Praising the resistance exhibited in Gaza during the 51 days of war, General Jafari stated that "the Gaza war displayed that the power of the Resistance [front] has no end".¹¹⁰ Jafari commented that the number of rockets fired at Israel demonstrated that the power of resistance was growing tangibly. Defining the Palestinian cause as the backbone of Islamic unity, he stated that "the Zionist regime [of Israel] will

collapse soon as a result of the unity among Shia and Sunni Muslims and we are ready for that day".¹¹¹ More notably, support for the people of Gaza was echoed most vociferously within the volunteer sections of the IRGC: the Basij. Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Naqdi, commander of the Basij, announced that there was no limit to Iran's humanitarian support for the people of Palestine. He announced that "the Iranian nation's aid to the Palestinian people recognises no boundary and whatever they need, it will be included in our aid packages".¹¹² High-ranking Iranian officials underlined Iran's military support for Palestinian resistance movements too. Ex-commander of the IRGC and head of the Expediency Council, Mohsen Rezaei, announced that the resistance groups – including Hamas – now had the capability to make and launch rockets "thanks to technology transfer from Iran".¹¹³ Rezaei emphasised that the transfer of defence know-how should be continued in order to enable the Palestinians to make weapons to defend themselves against Israel and reiterated Iran's commitment to the Palestinians in their battle to liberate their homeland.¹¹⁴ In other words, the Gaza war overshadowed Iranian politics once again and facilitated a consensus amongst political factions within the regime. The most prominent Shia *Marajii* in Iran, including Grand Ayatollah Mazaheri,¹¹⁵ Ayatollah Makerm-Shirazi,¹¹⁶ and Ayatollah Noori-Hamedani,¹¹⁷ all issued individual statements supporting the people of Gaza and condemning Israel. They called on all Muslims to forge unity and put aside their differences in order to support the Palestinian nation. These clerics defined the commitment to the Palestinian cause as *taklif* (religious duty).

Iranian public reaction to the Gaza war

It is vital to acknowledge that opponents of the conservatives in Iran equally voiced their support for the Palestinians during the Gaza war. According to one *Al-Monitor* correspondent, the Iranian political establishment was clearly shocked by the fact that the opposition had managed to completely take over the streets on Quds Day in 2014.¹¹⁸ Although the political establishment attempted to accuse supporters of the Green Movement of being ignorant about the Palestinian issue, many of its supporters responded with clear solidarity with the people of Gaza. *Al-Monitor* reported that Iranians posted thousands of pictures with hashtags in support of Palestinians on a daily basis on social media. Many showed their support for Gaza by publishing pictures of murdered men, women and children, along with a poem.¹¹⁹ On 24 July, members of a group known as Iranian Mothers for Peace – including the mother of an Iranian activist within the Green Movement killed by the security forces in the aftermath of the 2009 elections and subsequent protests – gathered outside the UN office in Tehran alongside other civil rights activists and held up signs reading, "End the massacre in Gaza".¹²⁰ On the same day, Khatami – though without access to the government-dominated media platforms – used his Twitter account to invite his followers to participate in Quds Day and to show their support for the Palestinians. Mohammad Khatami expressed that the "honourable" people of Iran always stood with the deprived Palestinian nation. Condemning Israel for its atrocities in Gaza,

Khatami stated that “exhibiting support for the Palestinians is about supporting humanity and it stems from the Islamic and humanitarian values”.¹²¹

Iran’s Youth Cinema Society, alongside a number of artists, organised blood donation events for the children of Gaza in August 2014. The humanitarian movement was staged simultaneously on 2 August 2014 at different centres of Iran’s Blood Transfusion Organization.¹²² After donating blood, a large number of Iranian artists, actors, writers and directors wrote an open letter to the children of Gaza. Some sentences from the letter are worthy of attention, as they demonstrate the feeling of the Iranian public towards Palestine

Greetings, people of Gaza, Children, Infants, Mothers in late pregnancy, Grandfathers, Grandmothers. [. . .] We have heard it has been rainy over there, these last few days. [. . .] Rain lets children shelter their dolls under their umbrellas. What rain is this that makes the dolls into umbrellas for children, entangled with them, in their graves? I saw a cat, roving in the rubble of Gaza, lost, lamenting, Avoiding the shreds of flesh, detritus of the lives of the Children of Gaza. She recognizes the children who shared their meagre meals with her, in rainy days past. The lady of Gaza/Palestine: If the rain over Gaza gives you leave to carry your baby on your back out of the wreckage, do not forget to take along pen and paper. Write my lady; say: “Rain gave me leave to leave. [. . .] Lady Gaza/Palestine: We have heard that your neighbour yonder – the same one who came over in 1948; the same one with whom you shared your bread and water, The same neighbour of 1948 who bemoaned the horrors of Hitler’s crematoria, The same neighbour who had told you your home is the cradle of the prophets, The same neighbour who had told you: Palestine is the land revelation, The same neighbour who had told you: are Muslims not famed for their hospitality?

Lady, we have heard that your neighbour yonder now watches your slaughter from hilltops in jubilation, as if from the galleries on an amphitheatre. [. . .] Lady Gaza/Palestine: You were hospitable to the unannounced guests of 1948. [. . .] Lady Gaza/Palestine: We are left on this shore, pen and camera in hand. We are left astonished: what is to be done? How do we come to pay homage to your prone body? Your shameless neighbour has blocked all of the paths to us – your guests. [. . .] Lady Gaza/Palestine: We were thinking: now that bullets rain on you, Now that the deluge of blood has carried away your children, May be we can infuse life into your children’s innocent bodies, from our own veins.¹²³

The Iranian Oscar-winning director Asghar Farhadi began a media campaign condemning the killing of the Palestinians and posted a picture on his Facebook of himself holding a banner that read, “Stop killing your fellow human beings”.¹²⁴ More notably, Iran’s legendary actor Izzatollah Entazami issued a statement that called on the Iranian people to gather outside the UN Office in Tehran in solidarity with the people of Gaza. In his statement, Entezami stated that:

it is about a month since all this genocide began in Gaza that I can neither sleep, nor eat well, I cannot rest and I cannot calm down. I do not understand how one can see all these wounded children in Gaza and still sleep at night. [. . .] I call on all my beloveds that their hearts beat for the sake of humanity and are disgusted by this genocide to join me in condemning the crimes of the Zionists.¹²⁵

Such statements assert the genuine solidarity of many Iranian people with the Palestinian nation. They also show a connection to the Islamic revolutionary ideas of supporting *Mazloomin* (suppressed) against *Zalemin* (suppressors), the same narratives that unified the Iranian nation during the Islamic revolution in 1979. This is not to say that all Iranians are homogeneous in expressing sympathy with the Palestinians, and certainly some have criticised the Islamic Republic's approach towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In this regard, one MP with no affiliation to either conservatives or reformists, on the condition of anonymity, explained to me:

Since I became an MP in 2012, I have noticed that when there is a discussion on Gaza and on the Palestinian cause, my fellow MPs have a strong consensus and become more Palestinian than the Palestinians. However, on other issues, they may have disagreements. I was astonished when I visited an Arab country for inter-parliamentary meetings that some fellow Arab MPs had no ideas about the historical depth of Iran's pro-Palestinian ideas. They were mainly discussing with me about Iran's support towards the Shia communities in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. Ironically those who were asking me questions about sectarianism in Iran were from an Arab country that has relations with Israel. To me this was frustrating. I believe we should focus on our economy and unemployment-rate and allow our Arab brothers to pay more attention to the Palestinian cause. We need to update ourselves with the global Market and solve our budget deficit. Although it is vital to mention that my colleagues in the Parliament do not agree with me on this case.¹²⁶

Similarly, one taxi driver explained:

Every year I see hundreds of thousands of people pour into the streets of Tehran for the Quds Day, bringing their children, carrying the Palestinian flags. Some of them have no affiliation with the regime including my brother in law. But, when we watch news, we hear some Arab states blame us for Shia-Sunni conflict and some [of them] even call us non-Muslims. Then we hear about Emirates and Saudi Arabia keep calling Iran to give up our islands in the Persian Gulf. We hear that Israel has embassies in some Arab countries. We see photos of this Emir or that Sheikh with the American president. We hear those Emirs and Kings enjoy seeing us not allowed trading our oil so they can sell theirs with higher price. We hear that our government relentlessly spends millions of dollars to help Hamas and other Palestinian groups. I

have no doubt that the Israelis unjustly invaded the Palestinian lands. But, we should let the Arab regimes to deal with this and help the poor Palestinians too. We have been paying heavy costs because of our anti-Israeli and Anti-imperialist tendencies. Since the revolution, we are witnessing more and more sanctions every year. Where are those [Arab] regimes that were supporting Saddam during the war, to see the [Iranian] people in the streets, chanting; Down to Israel since the revolution? We do not even have borders with Israel but we are louder than all the Arab and Muslim states in voicing our support for the Palestinians. I remember my late mother was praying for the Palestinians when she was hearing news about them and she never had political agenda. It is because we believe we are Muslims and we need to care about suffering of the Palestinians, but do those [Arab regimes] know about this?¹²⁷

These countering opinions demonstrate the frustration amongst some Iranians with both the Islamic Republic's handling of internal affairs and with ever escalating regional conflicts. Both of the preceding statements imply disappointment with some Arab states for not acknowledging Iran's historic and genuine solidarity with the Palestinian nation. These opinions, however, continue to be marginal to the mainstream political discourse in Iran, both within civil society and certainly the state.

The Gaza war and its impact on Gaza's Islamic factions' perception of Iran

One of the most tangible outcomes of the 2014 Gaza war was its impact on the Palestinian Islamic movement's relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran's support for the Palestinian resistance in Gaza after the Arab Spring once again demonstrated that it was a reliable ally for the Palestinian resistance movements. According to Hussein Royvaran, the strong resistance shown by Hamas during the 2014 war consolidated its reputation in the eyes of Iran. Likewise, Royvaran argues that many prominent figures in Hamas also realised that Iran's military and political support were invaluable in the fight against Israel. Unwilling to lose their offices in Tehran, Hamas demonstrated a willingness to improve its ties with Iran by visiting Iranian officials in that city. To this end, Ramadan Abdullah played a central role in mediating between Tehran and Hamas. Royvaran sheds a light on Iran's approach towards the Palestinians and argues that Iran's support towards Hamas is "tactical" but that Iran's approach towards the Palestinian cause remains ideological and therefore uncompromising. He states that "the tactics are defined by the ideologies and therefore ideologies influence tactics". Royvaran explains:

For the Islamic Republic, supporting the Palestinian cause and the Ummah is about fulfilling *taklif*, it is like daily prayers for a Muslim, It cannot be terminated or abandoned because we feel not liking it. The Islamic Republic is aware that few elements within Hamas attempt to make political manoeuvres

in [the] region and to widen their networks of support from all regional players such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Similar things happened in regards to our relations with PLO during the first decade of the Islamic revolution, but, the difference is that Hamas and its military wing are committed to the resistance. Nevertheless, the Islamic Republic never requires to be thanked for fulfilling its *taklif*. As the Quran says; We feed you only for the countenance of Allah. We wish not from you reward or gratitude [76:9]. [. . .] The Islamic Republic supports any movement that is committed to the resistance against Zionism.¹²⁸

Since the end of the Gaza war in 2014 and at the time of writing, representatives of both Hamas and Islamic Jihad make routine visits to Tehran. Osama Hamdan, director of Hamas, headquartered in Beirut during his visit to Tehran in February 2016, reiterated that the Islamic Republic of Iran had a role in terms of political, financial and direct support in all of Hamas's victories. In an interview with the Office of Iran's Supreme Leader, Hamdan acknowledged 25 years of Iranian support for Hamas and described Iranian support towards the Palestinian nation as valuable. Declining to explain the details of Iran's supports for Hamas, Hamdan stated:

I will say that any victory the resistance has gained, our Iranian brothers had a role in it. [. . .] In the year 2014, the occupiers believe that the Islamic Republic was too busy with the events in the region and the Arabs distanced themselves from the Palestinian issue. However the outcome shocked the enemies because missiles reached Tel Aviv and Haifa. They were traumatized by seeing the forces of resistance combat the occupiers on the front lines. As a precaution, we say it is difficult to talk about the details regarding Iran's support for the resistance. [. . .] Iran is not one of those countries who would brag and boast about supporting the resistance; in fact Iran's support for the resistance is more a matter of faith and belief than a political one. [. . .] In 2014, the world witnessed this support and its consequences in facing the enemy.¹²⁹

Similar to Hamas officials, the high representative of the PLO and the Palestinian ambassador to Tehran, Salah al-Zawawi, praised Iran for supporting the Palestinians during the Gaza war. He stated, "I want to thank the Islamic Republic of Iran for providing us with training, financial support and weapons and also thank the country for its political and diplomatic stances on Palestine".¹³⁰ Al-Zawawi explained to me that "since years of representing the Palestinian Authorities in Tehran, I feel I am at home here. Everywhere I go and when I say I am a Palestinian, the Iranian people show their genuine solidarity. I cannot express my gratitude towards the Iranian nation for their hospitality and support and solidarity".¹³¹

It is worth noting that Iran's support for the Palestinian cause also brought with it some political implications in Gaza, as some adherents of the Islamic revolution and followers of Shafaqi established a relatively small group that emerged from

Islamic Jihad. In May 2014, a new Muslim faction emerged in the north of Gaza, which expressed a strong ideological affiliation with the Islamic Republic of Iran. This new movement was called *Harakat al-Sabireen, Nasran li Filastin* (Al-Sabireen Movement for Supporting Palestine (HESN)). It was established by Hesham Salem, who was himself a leading member of Islamic Jihad.¹³² In an interview with *Al-Monitor*, Salem denied that his movement represented a split from Islamic Jihad but nevertheless noted that his movement views Islamic Jihad's founder Fathi al-Shaqaqi as a father figure and inspiration: "[The movement] will preserve the embodiment of Shafaqi's ideas without any changes".¹³³ Salem denied accusations that his movement is Shia and stated: "This is untrue. We have always believed in Islamic unity, and I see no reason to separate Sunnis and Shias". On the similarity of his movement's banner with that of Hizbullah, he said: "This is an unintended coincidence. All the banners of the Palestinian factions are similar in terms of their content and symbols".¹³⁴ Salem rejected the discourse of sectarianism and denounced the prevalent beliefs in Palestinian society that Shias constitute an existential threat to Sunnis. Salem argues: "I don't think that Shias don't like Sunnis. I am suspicious of that. The Shias are providing substantial assistance to the Sunnis, and an example of that is the historic Iranian support to Palestinian parties".¹³⁵ The al-Sabireen movement has also publically expressed its gratitude towards the Iranian nation for its historical support of the Palestinian cause. The emergence of al-Sabireen demonstrates that the Islamic revolution and its pro-Palestinian discourse continues to attract the attention of the Palestinian fighters, many of whom are frustrated by the global inaction against Israel's ongoing wars. Such Palestinians are keen to continue their resistance against Israel. Just as the Islamic revolution's message attracted Fathi Shafaqi as a follower in 1979, it is still being received by those who believe in Shafaqi's ideological discourse in spite of current sectarian divisions in the region.

At the same time, Iran continues to consolidate its strong ties with Islamic Jihad. Islamic Jihad's leadership routinely visits Tehran, and its delegates are received warmly by high-ranking authorities. In May 2016, Ramadan Abdullah and his accompanying delegation visited Tehran and met with the Supreme Leader. During the meeting, Ayatollah Khamenei highlighted that "supporting Palestine is an obligation Iran will fulfill".¹³⁶ Thanking the Iranian authorities for their support, Ramadan Abdullah reiterated Islamic Jihad's commitment to resistance and clarified the position of Islamic Jihad towards regional developments:

Americans and the countries that follow them are after presenting an unreal image of the Islamic Republic of Iran and of the Zionist regime – that has been consigned to an afterthought. They are also after disintegrating the region through provoking a war between Shia and Sunni. This is why pressures on Lebanese Hezbollah have increased, but Islamic Jihad of Palestine has insisted on supporting Hezbollah and resisting America and the Zionist regime by having a correct understanding about regional developments.¹³⁷

Concluding this section, a conversation with Nasser Abu Sharif –high representative of Islamic Jihad – is worthy of attention. Abu Sharif sheds a light on the situation in Gaza, explaining that:

there are a number of Salafi groups in Gaza and West Bank that are supported by some Arab states that follow their own political sectarian agenda. To this end they promote sectarian and anti-Iranian ideas. Before, they [Salafi groups] had little opportunities to promote their agenda in Palestine. However, since the eruption of the Syrian crisis, the Salafi groups gained a momentum to amplify their sectarian discourse against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Despite all of this propaganda, Iran is appreciated by many people in Palestine. The followers of the Islamic Jihad always appreciate Iran for its historical pro-Palestinian stance. Such sectarian propaganda advocated by the Salafi groups will have no negative impacts on our relations with Iran. We are the followers of Fathi-Shiqaqi and we remember Iran's historical pro-Palestinian stance.¹³⁸

Indeed, Israel's policies in Gaza have united Iran's political factions. All sides of the political spectrum in Iran have emphasised their uncompromising commitment to the Islamic revolutionary ideas, which encompass support for the Palestinians and opposition to Israel. The wars in Gaza in 2012 and 2014 acted as a litmus tests for Iran's revolutionary commitment towards the Palestinian cause. As I have argued in this chapter, the war in Gaza in 2014 occurred at the time that the Iranian regime and Hamas were deeply at odds over the Syrian crisis. At the time of writing, the Islamic Republic and Hamas have yet to reach a consensus over the Syrian conflict, and Tehran's disagreements with Riyadh and other Sunni-Arab states such as Qatar are yet to be resolved in other areas (such as over Yemen and Lebanon). Nevertheless, Iran has maintained and sought to improve its relations with Palestinian Islamic factions, particularly Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Many commentators would expect Iran to sever its ties with Hamas following the Arab Spring after the latter turned its back on its traditional allies (Iran and Syria). However, the Iranian society and government both unanimously voiced their support for Muslim resistance groups in Palestine during the Gaza war. During the war in 2014, Iranians once again demonstrated their support for the people of Gaza. Although Iranians had been following the Iranian nuclear negotiations anxiously, the situation in Gaza during this conflict continued to be central to the discourse of the state, its ideational self-image and policies. Gaza is viewed in Iran as the symbol of "resistance against global arrogance". For the Iranian political establishment, the importance of the Palestinian cause largely transcends internal politics and external sectarian conflicts. Iran's reaction to the wars in Gaza after the Arab Spring proves that states shape their actions according to their beliefs and interests. It also proves that identity potentially signals whom to balance against and whom to bandwagon with. I have suggested in this book that the Islamic Republic of Iran acted in solidarity with various Palestinian Islamic actors committed to resistance against Israel on the basis of ideological consideration or reasons of state, as well as a genuine sense of identification

with them. For this reason, it is likely that the Islamic Republic of Iran will continue to demonstrate strong solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Iran's commitment to Palestine is thus inseparable from the Islamic Republic's ideological fabric.

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6

CONCLUSION

The trajectory of Iran's pro-Palestinian stance

The subject of this study has been the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran's relations with Palestinian resistance groups and the question of what drives Iran's support for the Palestinians. The history of Iran's relations with Palestine is, in turn, relevant to the broader methodological question concerning the best way of approaching the Palestinian cause in Iran's foreign policies after the Islamic revolution. The preceding chapters aimed at responding to these questions within a case study that covered sequential periods in the history of Iranian relations with Palestine. As the analyses in the preceding chapters show, this study has offered a discursive interpretation of Iran's approach towards the Palestinian cause in the post-revolutionary era. In itemising the theoretical skeleton of this study, notions of Islamic and revolutionary solidarity, as well as religious and revolutionary values, were deployed and explored in order to better characterise the depth of the history of Iranian support for the Palestinian cause. I have shown that the strategic interests of the Islamic Republic are influenced by these values and ideas.

Chapter 1 analysed the discursive construction of Iran's pro-Palestinian ideas that were shaped and championed by revolutionary Iranians during the pre-revolutionary era. It was argued that decades prior to the triumph of the Islamic revolution, Iranian revolutionaries (including prominent left-wing activists) showed solidarity with the people of Palestine. It was also argued that Iranian revolutionaries reached an informal consensus on the necessity to support the Palestinian cause. The empirical evidence surveyed in this chapter demonstrated that prominent Iranian clerics were among the first figures to voice their strong support towards the Palestinians from the very beginning of the Occupation. The depth of the ideological commitment of Iranian revolutionaries towards the Palestinian cause is captured in Ayatollah Motahhari's expression of the duty of Shias with regard to the Palestinian question:

What would the holy prophet do if he was alive today? [. . .] The problem that would fill Imam Hussein's heart with sorrow today is this [Palestine] issue, [. . .] [were] Imam Hussein present today, he would say if you people would want to mourn for me today [. . .] your slogan must be Palestine. [. . .] Shmr of 1300 years ago is dead, he is gone. Get to know your Shmr today. [. . .] It is a shame to call ourselves Shi'as of Imam Ali. The same Ali when he heard that Muslims were attacked said; I swear by God I have heard the enemy has ravaged our fellow Muslim lands and murdered and imprisoned their men and violated their women. [. . .] The same Ali to whom we offer our respect and obedience towards him says; if a Muslim hears these and dies out of sorrow, he is not to be blamed. Are they not Muslims? Don't they have loved ones? Who in the world today can deny the fact that Palestinians have rights to return home? [. . .] By God it is compulsory, just like our prayers, just like fasting, it is a compulsory *infaq*.¹

Along with the primary research conducted for this research, Chapter 1 attempted to demonstrate that the Iranian revolutionaries regarded the Palestinian cause as almost "sacrosanct". Support for Palestine and opposition to imperialism and Israel became unifying principles that guided opposition to the Shah's pro-Western regime. The sacredness of such ideas was especially emphasised by the most prominent leaders of the revolution, including Ayatollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Taleqani and Ayatollah Mottahari. Calls to support the Palestinians were received warmly by many disfranchised Iranians due to their sense of Islamic solidarity, their shared history of battling against colonialism and imperialism, as well as their common religious values.

Chapter 2 covered the post-revolutionary era under Ayatollah Khomeini and analysed the institutionalisation of these beliefs as indispensable mainstays of Iran's strategic preferences. Prior to the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini emphasised the dual, interlinked obligations to liberate Muslim states and Third World countries from imperialism. After the revolution, one of the first moves of the new government in Iran was to institutionalise its anti-Zionist and pro-Palestinian discourse by replacing the Israeli mission in Tehran with a Palestinian embassy. Symbolically, the first part of Israeli territory ceded to the Palestinians was transferred during the heyday of the revolution in Tehran. Ayatollah Khomeini embarked upon the process of "Islamising" the Palestinian cause by symbolically declaring the last day of every Ramadan as Quds Day and calling on Muslims around the world to exhibit solidarity. The pan-Islamic ideas of Khomeini reiterated that the Islamic regime had an obligation to protect Muslims wherever they resided but particularly the people of Palestine against the state of Israel.

Chapter 3 demonstrated the importance of identity and the role of Iran's Islamic values in influencing the hearts and minds of Palestinian activists, with a main focus on the founder of Islamic Jihad (Fathi Shaqaqi). It was suggested that Ayatollah Khomeini's definition of common Islamic values were warmly received by some Palestinian activists, and ultimately turned a new page in the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict. Shafaqi was ideologically motivated by the Islamic revolution in Iran, and his movement changed the course of the Palestinian struggle by reactivating the discourse of Jihad and armed resistance in the struggle against Israel. Up to this point, pan-Arab ideas had monopolised the Palestinian political field. This chapter also emphasised that though ideologically inspired by the Islamic revolution in Iran, Islamic Jihad remains an independent movement. Subsequently, based on ideological solidarity, the Islamic Republic of Iran has reformulated its alliances with the Palestinian factions and has found natural allies in Palestine amongst Islamic movements, particularly after its disagreements with the PLO.

Chapters 4 and 5 provided a comprehensive account of Iran's relations with Hamas since it was first established by Sheikh Yassin. One of the major impacts of the Islamic revolution on Palestinian political life was the emergence of Islamic Jihad, and this factor galvanised the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood to engage in armed struggle and establish what became known as Hamas. The establishment of Hamas coincided with two historical developments: the Palestinian Intifada and the PLO's rapprochement with Israel. Relations between Iran and Hamas flourished after Hamas's political cadre were sent into exile in southern Lebanon, where they were free to enjoy support from Iran and Hizbullah. Hamas's anti-Zionist ideology and popular support on the Palestinian streets inevitably meant that it would be perceived by the Islamic Republic as a reliable and powerful ally against Israel. The impact on the Arab Spring on Iran's relations with Hamas was also examined. It was highlighted that, although Hamas's support for the opposition to Assad challenged its position within the so-called Axis of Resistance, the wars in Gaza proved that Iran would be unwavering in its support for the Palestinians.

My analysis of the Islamic Republic's support for Muslim resistance groups in Palestine likewise echoes that "identity not only provides some leverage over the choice of an alliance partner, but it also proposes that maintenance of that alliance can be dependent on the parties' mutual identification".² In other words, Islamic and revolutionary values of the Islamic Republic determined the interests, identity and policies attainable to the Islamic Republic's leadership in ways that impacted its alliances.

The Islamic Republic's projection of power and influence: the dream of leading the Islamic Ummah

It is perhaps stating the obvious that the Islamic Republic of Iran is a state underpinned and infused by revolutionary values and Islamist politics. Anti-Zionism, suspicion towards the United States, and the Ummah-centric approach of Iran sit comfortably alongside the Islamic Republic's strategic interests and ideological outlook. In other words, strategic interests complement the identity of the state. I would add, however, that the primary reason for why Iranian revolutionaries from diverse political backgrounds have comfortably reached a consensus on supporting the Palestinian cause is the universal acceptance of the need to defend what is perceived to be a just cause. The depth of this was registered during the Islamic

revolution with the introduction of the words *mastazaafeen* (oppressed) and *mostakbereen* (oppressors).

At the same time, this study has suggested one must add that like all states, the Islamic Republic of Iran aims to expand its political and ideological hegemony throughout the region. In this regard, the Islamic Republic perceives that it has the right and the might to lead the Islamic Ummah in its ideological struggle against so-called global arrogance, a term routinely used to refer to the United States. Support for Palestine serves Iran's strategic interests of projecting power and expanding its ideological and political influence throughout the Muslim world. In other words, the expansion of influence and struggle for hegemony within the region complements the Islamic Republic's beliefs about leading the Ummah. By amplifying its pro-Palestinian rhetoric, the Islamic Republic attempts to extend its reach into the Arab world in order to maintain its position within the Ummah as its "leader".

Hence, the Palestinian cause has become strategically advantageous for the Islamic Republic in the sense that it has allowed Iran to convey its political discourse of resistance and emancipation throughout the region, which in turn has given Iran power and influence herein. Various factions in the Islamic Republic underline the Islamic revolution's ideas in an attempt to boost Iran's credibility as a "leader" of the Islamic Ummah. Iran's leadership has likewise constructed the Palestinian cause as a yardstick for quantifying Muslim resistance against "global arrogance". This logic is echoed by Yvette Hovsepian-Bearce, who argues:

The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khamenei perceives Iran to be the leader of the Muslim World and foster parent of Palestine. As such, he regards Palestine's and Iran's interests as one. According to the leader, Iran's ability to export its cultural revolution and vigorously fight as Palestine's champion against Israel is part of Iran's global appeal to oppressed nations. He will continue to assert this militant stance against all internal and external criticism of Iran's support of the Palestinian cause.³

While the Islamic Republic does not credit itself with having solely ushered in the Muslim resistance groups of Palestine, it does regard Palestine as the main front-line against Zionism and imperialism. Although the emancipation of Palestinian land is respected first and foremost as a Palestinian obligation, the Islamic Republic has remained a major supporter of the Palestinian resistance within the convenient legitimating framework of "Islam". Since the Islamic revolution, the Iranian leadership seems determined to avoid bargaining over its commitment towards its principled support for Palestine and resistance against Zionism.

For the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Palestinian cause transcends geography and thus sits comfortably with its strategic objectives due to the ease with which it reflects its revolutionary ideological values. The trajectory of Iran's pro-Palestinian position provides a number of vital analytical lessons. First, ideological principles – such as the desire for independence, resistance against the hegemony of superpowers or solidarity – are not simply imaginary constructs but strategic preferences that appeared

and materialised due to Iran's contemporary history. Second, ideology and national interests can be conjoined. In the Islamic Republic's discursive fabric, revolutionary values are synchronised and conciliated with the state's national interests and therefore can be mutually reinforcing. This approach helps us to understand Iran's aims to widen its outreach towards the Arab world, particularly towards the Levant. Some of the Islamic Republic's strategic aims – particularly those related to Palestine and the Ummah – can be complex for some to comprehend unless we are able to position them within a proper ideological context. The decisive objectives of the Islamic Republic are the renunciation of Zionism and the rejection of dependency on foreign powers. If we return to the conceptual framework followed in this study, we can safely deduce that there is a continuity in how Iran expresses its pro-Palestinian stance and its actual policies. Iran's policy towards Palestine did not, however, simply develop only after the Islamic revolution. The pre-revolutionary era demonstrates that many opponents of the Shah's regime also expressed solidarity with the people of Palestine. Hence, this study has also suggested that Iran's relations with Palestine cannot be simply reduced to opportunism or a desire to exploit the Arab world for material benefit. While some in the Western world and even within Arab states may regard Iran's pro-Palestinian stance as solely opportunistic, such analyses overlook six decades of solidarity demonstrated by Iranian activists – including those with left-wing ideological tendencies – towards the Palestinian cause.

At the same time, this study has highlighted the fluctuations of the discourse about Palestine within the Iranian state. Radical confrontation was repeatedly subdued in order to achieve major diplomatic openings. As indicated, the state in Iran has the ambition to become a regional power with deep strategic access to the Arab world. Palestine became increasingly important to that end, as long as it did not jeopardise Iran's other strategic preferences. This is best exemplified in the negotiations leading up to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement. It is worth noting that the Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif used a more pragmatic tone in regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the nuclear negotiations. For instance, in an interview on 2 February 2014 in Berlin following his attendance at the Munich Security Summit, Zarif stated that "it was up to the Palestinians to determine if they were satisfied with the agreement, and that Iran would not interfere".⁴ In response to a question about what would happen if Palestinians reach an agreement with Israel, Zarif said:

If the Palestinians are happy with the solution, then nobody, nobody outside Palestine, could prevent that from taking place. The problem for the past 60 years is that the Palestinians have not been happy. The Palestinians have not been satisfied. And they have every right not to be satisfied, because their most basic rights continue to be violated and people are not ready to redress those.⁵

A few hours after Zarif and Federica Mogherini announced the nuclear agreement with the world powers on 13 July 2015, concluding a 13-year standoff over

Iran's nuclear programme, Zarif stated, "I believe that this deal will remove a smoke-screen [behind] which Israel was standing and hiding its criminal activities against the people of Lebanon and the people of Palestine".⁶ In responding to why Israel opposes the nuclear deal, Zarif said:

Unfortunately, they need crisis and wars to continue to hide their aggressions and their inhumane policies against the people of Lebanon, Palestine and the people of the region, so peace is an existential threat to them.⁷

Addressing the Fifth Extraordinary OIC (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) Summit on Palestine and Al-Quds in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta in March 2016, Zarif stated that Iran will not abandon the policy of supporting the Palestinian cause against Israel, even though the country has been subjected to nearly four decades of Western pressure.⁸ Hence, the discourse switched to a rather more confrontational language when the nuclear agreement was reached. Undoubtedly, there are fluctuations in Iran's references to Palestine in accordance with the international context; that does not mean, however, that there has been a wholesale sacrifice of the strategic preferences of the state.

In a similar vein, during the Sixth International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Intifada (Uprising) in Tehran on 22 February 2017, President Hassan Rouhani stated that the Islamic Republic believes the Palestinian crisis is the biggest problem facing the Muslim world, adding that the Tehran conference shows "the unbreakable will" of Iranians in supporting the Palestinian cause.⁹ He also stated, "The Iranian people have paid a huge cost for backing Palestinians and opposing the Zionist regime, but they will definitely continue their support".¹⁰ "A very difficult path lies ahead for Muslims to restore the rights of Palestine, but a nation that pursues jihad to defend its rights will prevail", Rouhani expressed in typical language.

Moreover, these proclamations came at a time when Iran was vying for regional suzerainty with Saudi Arabia and must be read in conjunction with the proxy war of two countries in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. Indeed, those proclamations were made amid reports that the Trump administration, a major supporter of Israel, is discussing the Palestine conflict with four Arab countries, namely Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the UAE, aiming to settle their differences with Israel and to form a united front against Iran.

In other words, it can be safely argued that the revolutionary rhetoric changed to something more pragmatic whenever necessary, especially during the presidencies of Khatami and Rouhani. This is because for the reformers and their ambition to open up Iran's international relations, it was not conducive to be radical about the issue of Palestine. The constructive language during the nuclear agreement by Rouhani demonstrates that the Iranian state is capable of changing the discourse towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in accordance with international events.

At the same time during my research, I observed that the revolutionary culture of "permeating" the issue of Palestine is inscribed even in the very linguistic fabric of Iranian cities. Today, there is no major urban area without at least one

street or boulevard bearing the name Quds or Palestine. The rejection of Zionism and resistance against the occupation of Palestine are likewise now embedded in the dictionary of contemporary Iran. In this regard, stripping the pro-Palestinian and anti-hegemonic discourses from the dictionary of the Islamic Republic would require a revolutionary change of state identity and therefore a change of regime. In other words, support for the Palestinians represents a crucial part of the Islamic Republic's DNA, in spite of the fluctuations in the discourse that I have highlighted.

Notes

- 1 Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari's speech on the Palestinian question. Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SxOUMlX7c [Accessed 2 May 2016].
- 2 Michael Barnett, in Peter Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 410.
- 3 Yvette Hovsepian-Bearce, *The Political Ideology of Ayatollah Khamenei: Out of the Mouth of the Supreme Leader of Iran*, London: Routledge, 2015, p. 354.
- 4 Laura Rosen, "What Iran's Foreign Minister Told German TV About Israel, Iran", *Al-Monitor*, 6 February 2014. Available at www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2014/07/iran-zarif-palestine-israel-phoenix-netanyahu-recognize.amp.html [Accessed 02 October 2017].
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Al-Monitor, "Zarif After Deal: The World Has Changed", 13 July 2015. Available at www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/07/mohammad-javad-zarif-interview-post-deal-balconey.html [Accessed 29 September 2017].
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 *Financial Tribune*, "Support for Palestine to Continue Despite Pressures", 8 March 2016. Available at <https://financialtribune.com/articles/national/37923/support-for-palestine-to-continue-despite-pressures> [Accessed 05 October 2017].
- 9 *Financial Tribune*, "Rouhani Receives Dignitaries Attending Palestine Confab", 23 February 2017. Available at <https://financialtribune.com/articles/national/60218/rouhani-receives-dignitaries-attending-palestine-confab> [Accessed 20 September 2017].
- 10 Ibid.

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