

Dossier: Israel-Palestine Conflict

Iran: Continuity in Foreign Policy towards Israel after the War in Gaza

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The Ideological Foundations of Iranian Foreign Policy towards Israel

Iran's stance towards Israel and the Palestinian conflict is deeply rooted in its ideological, political and strategic interests, largely influenced by the principles established by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution and founder of the Islamic Republic instituted in 1979. Since that historic moment, Iran has positioned itself as a staunch supporter of the Palestinian cause and an adversary of Israel, opposing its existence as a "Zionist regime" that excludes the Palestinian population and prevents them from having their own state. Khomeini regarded Israel as a tool of Western imperialism, especially that of the United States, with whom it broke diplomatic relations in 1979, and described it as a threat to Islam, Muslim unity and regional stability. This rhetoric has been a constant in Iranian foreign policy since 1979 and continues to define its foreign policy towards Israel and other actors involved in the Palestinian conflict. Khomeini's principles were endorsed by his successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and implemented by various Iranian governments, including reformist presidents Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) and Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021).

As part of its stance of support for Palestine, Iran has consistently backed Palestinian resistance groups, especially Hamas and Islamic Jihad – which, although Sunni, share its political definition through Islam –, by providing them with financial, military and logistical assistance. This support is seen not only as a religious and moral responsibility, but also as a strategy to weaken Israel's influence in the region and counter the presence of its allies, in particular the United States. Conversely, Iran has maintained very frosty relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization, which was seen as having betrayed the will of the Palestinians by signing the Oslo accords.

Iran's rhetoric and actions have escalated tensions with Israel, leading to periodic clashes, especially in proxy conflicts in countries such as Lebanon and Syria, where Iran supports groups such as Hezbollah, which was created at Iran's behest in 1982, and the government of Bashar Assad, respectively. As a result of these tensions, low-intensity military clashes have been taking place for decades, mainly in the latter countries, where Israel has directly intervened by eliminating members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards stationed in these countries as well as members of local groups. In March 2024, a report by UNIFIL (the UN Interim Force in Lebanon), stationed on the Blue Line dividing Israel and Lebanon and established after the 2006 war, reports nearly 9,000 artillery exchanges on both sides of the line, with an overwhelming majority of shells coming from Israel with targets in Lebanon of almost 8,000.¹

¹ United Nations Security Council Secretary-General. "Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) during the period from 21 June to 20 October 2023 – Report of the Secretary-General (S/2024/222) [EN/AR/RU/ZH]." <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/implementation-security-council-resolution-1701-2006-during-period-21-june-20-october-2023-report-secretary-general-s2024222-enarruzh>.

But Israel has also attacked Iran directly as well as cybernetically dozens of times between 2010 and 2024, as indicated in the United States Institute for Peace report.² These attacks include the elimination of numerous Iranian nuclear scientists on Iranian soil, either by direct drone strikes or through agents on the ground. The latest such attack was the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh, leader of Hamas's political wing, in July 2024. It should be noted that Israel has never officially claimed responsibility for any of the direct attacks on Iran. Iran, on the other hand, had never attacked Israel directly from its territory until the April 2024 attack.

Despite the international sanctions and diplomatic isolation to which Iran has been subjected almost since 1979, but more pronouncedly since 2006, its government continues to use the Palestinian issue as a cornerstone of its foreign policy. This reinforces its axis of resistance with other regional actors such as Hezbollah, Syria, the Iraqi Mobilization Forces and the Yemeni Houthis, and allows it to maintain its influence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and among the Arab population, as demonstrated by the war that began in October 2023.

The Impact of the War in Gaza on Iran's Regional Strategy

Prior to the outbreak of war in Gaza in response to the 7 October Hamas attack, the region was experiencing two simultaneous trends that heralded a period of reduced tensions. On the one hand, in late 2020, a gradual process of normalization of relations began between several Arab countries and Israel, starting with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, and followed by Morocco and Sudan a few months later. Several weeks before the conflict, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman declared in an interview that his kingdom was close to signing peace with Israel. Iran, on the other hand, normalized relations in August 2020 with the United Arab Emirates, a country that had recalled its ambassador in 2016 after the attacks on the Saudi embassy in Tehran. In March 2023, Iran and Saudi

Arabia restored their relations with an agreement signed in Beijing. These two normalization processes occurred simultaneously, with neither Iran nor Israel imposing restrictions on their counterparts for normalizing relations with their adversary. It was therefore possible to envisage a region where bilateral cooperation was not based on a zero-sum game, but on the understanding that regional stability benefited everyone equally. This, unfortunately, had left the Palestinian population, mainly in Gaza, out of the equation, as support from Arab countries was reduced to a minimum, leaving only the Iranian-led Axis of Resistance as the sole champion of the Palestinian cause.

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In Iran's case, the restoration of diplomatic relations with its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) neighbours was intended to avoid the strict regional and international isolation imposed by the Trump administration, and to reaffirm its aspiration to be recognized as a regional power. All this, without demanding that these states abandon their commitments to Israel after the Abraham Accords as a condition for the restoration of diplomatic ties. This Iranian pragmatism demonstrated diplomatic balance and the effective use of asymmetric deterrence tactics during the last years of the Hassan Rouhani administration and the first years of Ibrahim Raisi's rule. During this period, several incidents in the waters of the Persian Gulf, never officially claimed by Iran, demonstrated the vulnerability of the oil kingdoms' defences to attacks carried out using low-cost technology and devices. Moreover, these events underscored the delicate situation created by US inaction in the face of the per-

² United States Institute for Peace (USIP). "The Iran Primer." 31 July 2024, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2022/aug/11/timeline-israeli-attacks-iran>.

ceived threat from Iran, during both the Obama and the Trump administrations.

The war that erupted in Gaza in the aftermath of the 7 October conflict dashed both of the positive trends mentioned above, derailing, for the time being, a possible path of rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia and other Arab states. It also called into question the governments that had already normalized with Israel, although criticism did not escalate into street protests because of the limitations imposed by the governments in question. Iran's rapprochement with its Persian Gulf neighbours was also put to the test. Following the attack, Iran was quickly identified as Hamas's main financial and political supporter. *The Wall Street Journal* claimed that Iran's late Foreign Minister, Amir Abdollahian, had convened meetings in Gaza and Lebanon with representatives of various factions to plan and organize the attack.³ Iran's leader, Ali Khomeini, strongly refuted these claims, stating that while Iran consistently supports the group, it exercises no control over its strategies or political decisions, thus distancing itself from the attack, the preparations for it and the decision to carry it out.⁴ Nevertheless, Iranian media praised the attacks and several Iranian officials commented on Israel's vulnerability and the persistent will of Palestinians to challenge the Zionist establishment, backed by the Iranian-led Axis of Resistance. They also criticized Arab nations for seeking to normalize relations with Israel.⁵ Further reinforcing Iran's claims of non-involvement was US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who commented a few days after the attacks that there was no concrete evidence directly linking Iran to the events of 7 October.⁶ Similarly, Israel Defence Forces spokesman Daniel Hagari said they were unable to conclusively link Iran to the planning or execution of the attacks, apart from the acknowledged support they have provided over the years.⁷

Iran's resistance to any pact with Israel, from the 1979 Camp David Accords to the Madrid and Oslo Accords in the early 1990s, and most recently the Abraham Accords in 2020, has consistently strengthened Iran's political strategy. This stance particularly resonates with the "Arab street," which often expresses stronger support for the Palestinian cause than its own leaders. Recent geopolitical trends highlight that Iran's sustained support for groups such as Hamas has amplified its influence in the Middle East. This sentiment is not limited to the Arab and Muslim population, but extends to anti-imperialist segments across the "Global South." By circumventing conventional diplomatic norms, Iran's open support for these attacks seeks to connect with those who feel marginalized by their governments' growing ties to Israel and by the perceived imperialist foreign policy of a United States that flouts international law and the international system designed by it after World War II. It is important to note that this Iranian stance is not a novel direction spearheaded by the late Ibrahim Raisi, President during the early months of the war, but rather an extension of a long-standing foreign policy doctrine coined by Khomeini during his leadership.

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In this context, Iranian Foreign Minister Amir Abdollahian's three meetings with Ismail Haniyeh, two in

³ SAID, Summer et al. "Iran Helped Plot Attack on Israel Over Several Weeks." *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 October 2023, www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iran-israel-hamas-strike-planning-bbe07b25.

⁴ Al Monitor. "Khamenei cheers Hamas' 'epic' attacks on Israel, but denies Iran role." *Al Monitor*, 10 October 2023, www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/10/khamenei-cheers-hamas-epic-attacks-israel-denies-iran-role.

⁵ Press TV. "Arab states normalizing with Israel should learn lesson from Palestine developments: Leader's aide." *Press TV*, 9 October 2023, www.presstv.ir/Detail/2023/10/09/712367/Arab-states-normalizing-Israel-learn-lesson-Palestine-developments.

⁶ POUND, Jesse. "Blinken says U.S. has 'not yet seen' evidence of Iran involvement in Hamas attack on Israel." *CNBC*, 8 October 2023, www.cnbc.com/2023/10/08/blinken-says-us-has-not-yet-seen-evidence-of-iran-involvement-in-hamas-attack-on-israel.html.

⁷ WINTOUR, Patrick. "No evidence yet of Iran link to Hamas attack, says Israeli military." *The Guardian*, 9 October 2023, www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/09/no-evidence-yet-of-iran-link-to-hamas-attack-says-israeli-military.

Doha and one in Tehran, served a dual purpose. First, to openly demonstrate Iran's unwavering support for Hamas and the Palestinian cause to the international community. Second, it was a show of force to the region at large, and particularly to Israel and the United States. Quite simply, and unlike other states that normalized with Israel or were about to, Iran has not been forced to change its discourse after the outbreak of the war or disguise its foreign actions, as its stance has always been to oppose any negotiations with Israel and support the non-state groups fighting them. Thus, at the beginning of the war and following Blinken's visit to Qatar just a day before the first meeting between Abdollahian and Haniyeh in October 2023, the Qatari Foreign Ministry's statements on Iranian assets in South Korea – currently held in Qatari banks and not yet claimed by the United States – were seen as strategic moves to ease rising tensions with Iran and avoid breaking the trend existing between the two shores of the Gulf. It also suggested that the US found it difficult to reverse a deal brokered by Qatar without potentially provoking a more forceful response from Iran, which would aggravate an already complicated regional crisis.⁸

In the early months of the war, Iran emerged as a regional player actively advocating de-escalation of the Gaza conflict and seeking to contain its geographic spread, even amid its continued warnings to Israel. The unprecedented telephone dialogue between Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman focusing on the unrest in Gaza,⁹ was widely perceived as a promising sign of the region's diplomatic aspirations to maintain the status quo established in recent years. This direct communication was the result of the previous rapprochement concluded in Beijing in early 2023, which, in any case, was initiated during Rouhani's tenure.

From the outset, Raisi's foreign policy strategy was significantly marked by his staunch opposition to

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the United States and Israel, especially after the incidents that began on 7 October, along with the revitalization of the "resistance" narrative and posture, as seen in the discourse of economic resistance and support for the Axis of Resistance during the recent conflict in Gaza. Although this strategy is not original to Raisi but to his predecessors, most notably Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, it has allowed him to define his foreign policy doctrine as "revolutionary pragmatism," as Forough described it.¹⁰

Crisis and Continuity: Pezeshkian's Succession after Raisi's Death

The accident that claimed the lives of President Raisi and his minister Abdollahian on 19 May 2024 was a severe blow and a challenge for Iran's political elite. On the one hand, they were faced with the need to restore the contested legitimacy of the electoral system after Raisi's controversial unopposed victory in 2021, and were now forced to conduct an unplanned and time-critical election process with no strong candidates and a predictably low turnout. On the other hand, the continuity of a foreign policy that had gained support in the region thanks to its firm stance in the war and after Iran's first direct attack on Israel on 13 April could be jeopardized. Although this attack failed to cause significant damage, it demonstrated Iran's determination to engage directly in a confrontation with Is-

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar (@MofaQatar_EN), "His Excellency the Prime Minister." X (formerly Twitter), 12 October 2023, 10:16 a.m., https://twitter.com/MofaQatar_EN/status/1713091466124198142.

⁹ Reuters. "Iran president, Saudi crown prince speak for first time since ties restored." *Reuters*, 12 October 2023, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-president-saudi-crown-prince-speak-first-time-since-diplomatic-ties-2023-10-11/.

¹⁰ FOROUGH, Mohammadbagher. "Raisi's Foreign Policy: Pragmatic Revolutionism and the Iranian Pivot to Asia." *GIGA Focus*, (Berlin, Germany: GIGA, December 2021), www.giga-hamburg.de/assets/tracked/pure/28756321/web_Nahost_2021_07_en.pdf.

rael and, above all, its military and technological capacity to reach Israeli territory.

Against all odds, a candidate linked to reformism, Masud Pezeshkian, emerged victorious in the second round of the 5 July elections, sparking speculation that Iran's tone on the war and an eventual confrontation with Israel might moderate. However, the president-elect's first statements and actions made it clear that he would maintain a hard line in his policy towards Gaza and Israel. In a message to Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah on 8 July, Pezeshkian stated that Iran "has always supported the resistance of the people of the region against the illegitimate Zionist regime" and that "support for the resistance is deeply rooted in Iran's fundamental policies and will continue firmly."¹¹ Ismail Haniyeh's presence at Pezeshkian's inauguration ceremony was another indicator of the direction his administration would take regarding Iran's position in the war, at least during this phase of the conflict. This clearly demonstrates that the new President's room for manoeuvre appears to be limited by the consensus of a political elite dominated by conservatives, who uphold the narrative of resistance as a unifying element both inside and outside Iran. However, Pezeshkian would be keen to avoid another direct action on Israeli territory that would draw a response from the US and the international community.

In this context, the Israeli-claimed elimination in Beirut of one of Hezbollah's leaders, Fuad Shukr, and the unclaimed assassination of Haniyeh in Tehran a day after the inaugural ceremony, appear to be direct Israeli actions to pressure Pezeshkian to maintain the rhetoric of confrontation, which ultimately justifies Israel's continued action in third countries to force the support that the US cannot deny it because of existing commitments.

Conclusion

Analysis of Iran's posture vis-à-vis Israel and the war in Gaza, along with recent geopolitical developments in the region, shows that Iran has maintained a consistent strategy based on resistance and support for non-state groups such as Hamas. Despite international pressure and changing regional dynamics, this policy has allowed Iran to strengthen its influence in the Middle East and consolidate its leadership in the so-called "Axis of Resistance." The deaths of Raisi and Abdollahian represented a significant challenge, but the election of Pezeshkian suggests continuity in Iranian foreign policy, indicating that the revolutionary pragmatism espoused by Raisi and previous presidents will continue to guide his approach to the region.

¹¹ ZIMMT, Raz. "Pezeshkian's election could become a burden for Israel." *IranSource*, Atlantic Council, 18 July 2024, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/masoud-pezeskian-israel-diplomacy/.