

Green Dreams

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Articles & Testimony

During a campaign speech at the University of Uroomiyeh in northwestern Iran a few months before the June presidential election there, Mir Hossein Moussavi, the main reformist presidential candidate and now opposition leader, was interrupted by angry groups of basiji, the regime's paramilitary enforcers, carrying pictures of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Palestinian flags. "I see the root of some [of our] problems in this hall," Moussavi said when he saw the flags. "For instance some people are carrying a Palestinian flag. Though we like Palestine, we are in Iran and the province of Azerbaijan.... I stepped into the campaign exactly to confront this [kind of] radicalism." Mousavi's loss in what was widely believed to have been a rigged election brought hundreds of thousands of demonstrators to the streets, many of whom could be heard chanting, "No Gaza, no Lebanon, I sacrifice my life for Iran."

Might Iran's relationship with Israel change if the democratic opposition comes to power? Though the so-called Green Movement, the pro-democracy protesters who took to the streets after the disputed election, represents a significant development in Iran's politics, the answer is far from clear. What is unmistakable, however, is that a large swath of Iran's population no longer accepts at face value the statements of the Islamic Republic's leaders, who have said the Jewish State must be "wiped off the map."

The Islamic Republic's attitude toward the Israel emerged from a pre-revolutionary alliance of Islamic clerics, leftist intellectuals, and political militants belonging to the communist Tudeh party, the Islamic and socialist Mujahedin-e Khalq, or the People's Holy Warriors, and the Marxist Fedayeen e-Khalq, the People's Freedom Fighters. Since the revolution, the Islamic Republic has had no problem in improving and expanding its relation with socialist and communist regimes: Iran's best friends today are China, Russia, and Venezuela. A main similarity between Islamic ideology and Marxism is that the concept of the nation-state is absent in both. Instead of a "nation," Islamic ideology is based on the concept of the "Umma," or Muslim mass, while Marxism uses the term "class." Marxism's international class conflict between the proletariat and bourgeoisie parallels the conflict in Islamic ideology between the Muslim Umma, also called the mustazafin, in English "the oppressed," and the mustakberin, in English "non-believers," or the arrogant ones. Just as the secretary of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union was both head of state and head of all Communists, the leader of an ideological political order like the Islamic republic does not see himself solely as head of state, but as the "ruler of the Islamic world," or the wali-e amr-e muslimin-e jahan.

When Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came to power in 1979, he declared nationalism contrary to Islam and said "nationalism is opposed to Islam and it is the source of Muslims' misery. Nationalists are the army of devil and are serving the superpowers and enemies of the Quran." The Islamic rulers of Iran called the country Muslim world's "Umma al-Qura," a quranic term used for Mecca that describes it as the mother of all cities. Therefore, by calling Iran the mother of all cities, they meant that they are the leaders of all Muslims and Iran is the capital of Islamic world. Just like international communism, pan-Islamic ideology defined its policies beyond national borders and legitimized political and military intervention in other countries in order to support Muslims against foes like "western imperialism" and "Jewish occupation of Israel".

Many Muslims were attracted by this passionate new discourse, but disillusionment rapidly followed. While support for Palestinian groups as well as Shiite extremists in Lebanon and other places in the region became one of the main components of Iran's foreign policy, there was plenty of evidence that Iran's support and sympathy were hardly unconditional. Imam Musa Sadr, moderate charismatic Shiite leader who was the head of Shiite community -- and had benefited from the Shah's financial and political support to Lebanese Shiites -- was kidnapped by the Libyan government and then disappeared in August 1978. The Islamic Republic, despite its close relationship to Libyan government and its leader, Moammar Gadhafi, did not make any effort to liberate Sadr. After more than three decades, moderate Shiites not only in Lebanon but also in other countries still wonder why Iran did not show any interest in pursuing Sadr's case.

The situation of Sunni Muslims in Iran proved that the regime's claim to lead all Muslims worldwide is motivated by politics rather than religious conviction. Since the Iranian revolution, Sunni Muslims in Iran, who comprise more than 10 percent of the population, suffer from systematic discrimination in various levels. Many of their leaders were executed or imprisoned without legal justification. Sunni seminaries in southwestern Iran were destroyed by the government and teachers arrested. Sunnis are banned from any significant political participation. Sunnis are not allowed to have a mosque in Tehran, even while Christians and Jews have churches and synagogues.

In foreign policy, the Iranian regime pretends that it supports Palestinians simply because they are Muslims and a Muslim cannot keep silent when he sees the sufferance of his fellow Muslim. Yet in the recent conflict between Christian Armenia and Muslim Azerbaijan, Iran supported Armenia. In July 2009, when a series of violent clashes erupted between Uighur Muslims and Chinese state police, which led to the death of more than 190 Muslims, the Islamic Republic of Iran did not react to it at all -- because the regime's relationship with China took precedence.

The anti-Western approach that created common ground for Islamists and leftists during the revolution remains major component of the Islamic Republic's public rhetoric. Israel, as the main ally of the West in the Middle East, was an immediate and appealing target on both "Islamic" and anti-capitalist grounds. Iran has had repeated conflicts with Arab countries (from Iran-Iraq war to controversy over three islands in Persian Gulf to dispute over Bahrain), which stem from four centuries of rivalry between Iranian monarchies and the Ottoman Empire. Before the Islamic Revolution, Iran's leaders attempted to swing the power equation to their benefit by making an alliance with the West. After the revolution, Iran lost the West's support and saw itself as having been forced to create a new anti-Western political alliance to restore the balance. The collapse of the Soviet Union made Islamic Republic's leader believe that they can in fact lead an anti-Western and anti-Israeli front in the region by using pan-Islamic ideology and undermining national identity. The enmity toward Israel is not driven as much by Islamic motivation as it is by a lust for power.

Many critics of Islamic radicalism believe that both radical leftists and Islamic fundamentalists share an old communist principle, that the end justifies the means. They hold that Iran's approach to the Palestinian issue is totally instrumentalist, and that the success of peace process will create a fundamental problem for Islamic Republic by depriving the regime of a "big enemy" to which it can attribute all its political and economic failures and use to stigmatize its opponents. Especially after three decades, the Islamic Republic can hardly explain why Islamic ideology has not realized its promises to bring worldly prosperity for every Iranian citizen -- or why it has failed to resist what it calls the "cultural invasion" of the West. Iranian youth are the most Westernized in the middle east after Israel's. Hence, the Islamic regime does not have any soft power to influence Muslims by showing them an alternate model for culture, economy, or politics.

Islamic Leaders hold that there are only two ways for becoming a superpower in the region: the way that the Shah chose, of making an alliance with the west and Israel, and the way Iranian revolutionaries have chosen, a defiant Islamic-Marxist alliance against the West and Israel. For most Iranians, the second way has proved to be

economically and internationally costly with no evident success.

For many Iranians, especially the younger generation, it does not matter whether Israel is a good or legitimate country: They want Iran's leaders to place Iran before anything else. In 2008, the Tehran city council allocated \$3 million dollars to aid construction in Lebanon. This decision was widely criticized by reformist politicians as well as the general public for depriving Tehran of funds that could have gone to more pressing needs, like addressing its pollution crisis or transportation problems. A Persian proverb holds that "if a house needs light, the mosque does not deserve it." What Iranians, especially the newer generation, care about most is not Palestine or Lebanon but the concrete economic problems of the country and integrating Iran into the global community.

What are the future prospects for Iran-Israel relations? No one can predict for sure. But what is certain is that so long as the government in Iran is not perceived by its people as legitimate, its policies, including its opposition toward Israel, will have no legitimacy either. So far, the Islamic Republic has substituted the Iranian people's "national interests" with the "expediency of the regime," as defined by the Supreme Leader, who considers himself the ruler of Islamic world. In a democratic Iran, "national interests" would be defined by the consensus of free political parties and an open civil society, aided by a free press.

Iran's complicated relations with Arab countries will certainly play an important role in shaping a new government's policy toward Israel. But Iran's new generation has shown that it cares more about Iran's immediate national concerns than it does about the Palestinian cause. This leaves hope that a future government of Iran would examine the Arab-Israeli conflict through the viewpoint of Iran's "national interests" rather than the ideologically-driven "expediency" of the current regime, and reverse Iran's current enmity with Israel. ❖

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