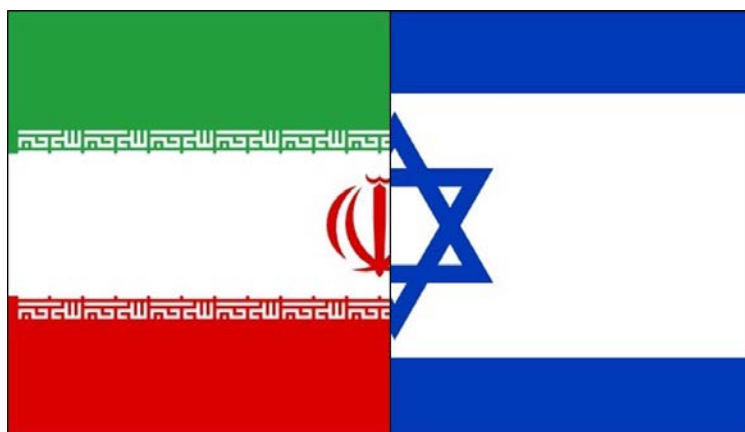




Jerusalem Days: The Mirror Image of the Struggle Between Israel and Iran

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Main Argument

- The perception of Iran as a threat in Jerusalem is quite similar to the perception of Israel as a threat in Tehran. Forty years after Iran turned from a close partner, at the heart of Israel's regional alliances versus the Arab world, to the enemy against whom alliances are formed between Israel and Arab countries – it is worth examining what remains in place and what has changed in the fundamental approach of the Iranian regime vis-à-vis Israel. The coincidental concurrence of the two “Jerusalem Days”, the Iranian and the Israeli, and what they symbolize, provides us with an opportunity to examine the ideological underpinnings of the struggle, which will play a prominent role whenever Iranian proxies, such as Hezbollah, are ordered to act.
- Israel is the last and possibly only cornerstone in the Iranian regime's ideological and security doctrine that has remained in place throughout the regime's forty years of existence. The bottom line of this view is that Israel is an existential threat to the Islamic regime and “the Revolution,” and therefore, Iran must strive to achieve Israel's destruction and exert every effort to further this goal in practice. The struggle to reach this ultimate goal can be

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carried out even at a price of compromising on other principles of the revolutionary doctrine of the Iranian regime.

► This perception of Israel rests on three pillars – religious, historical and strategic. Only their combination can explain how enmity toward Israel, which has no territorial or economic dispute with Iran, has become a central element of the ideology of the Islamic regime and the top threat, in Tehran’s perception. This manifests in the near-consensus concerning Israel among camps within the regime that disagree on every other ideological, security or political matter. More so, the policy toward Israel has not emerged as a matter for discussion and debate even when central aspects of Iran’s regional policies – which are highly contested between the regime and the Iranian population – are directly related to Israel. For example, Iranian protesters have been chanting for years “money to Iran and not to Palestine,” but no one will dare to opine (at least not publicly) about the connection between financing “Palestine” and the primordial, and possibly unnecessary, struggle against Israel.

► The combination of deep animosity, originating in religion and history, and a strategic threat perception, has made Israel, in the eyes of the Islamic Republic, into a unique and permanent enemy. This is an enemy that can not be reconciled with; it is an enemy whose strategic capabilities must be properly countered; and active efforts need to be made to harm and weaken it, and over time, bring about its final collapse. Take out the religious component and the racist underpinnings, and you get Israel’s threat perception of Iran.

► Iran and Israel marked “Jerusalem Day” on dates not far apart, each with its own communal narrative. For Iranians, “Quds Day” is marked due to an old guidance of Khomeini, which continues to be observed mostly in Tehran’s traditional support bases in the Middle East and the Muslim diaspora.

► Not long ago, Iran also marked the forty-year anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. The celebrations were not accompanied by soul-searching, an examination of what has been achieved versus what has been planned. The question of “what comes next?” did not come up. This is despite the fact that similarly to Israel, Iran is the scene of vibrant discussions, among politicians, the public and media outlets, regarding questions of identity, culture, history, traditions, religion and state, the individual and the community, majority and minorities, gender, economic and social justice, freedoms and state priorities.

► Contrary to the uniform and dogmatic image of Iran in the West, painted all black, there is a fascinating and multi-faceted nation. On the rare occasions when the pious Islamic

appearance is cracked, behind it appears a more complex composition than the one usually believed in the West and Israel. It is likely that in the age of transborder media, the Iranian reader who was born after the revolution and war raised on a uniform and negative view of Israel, encounters other aspects of it as well. To which extent the average Iranian is interested in the conflict with Israel is a different matter.

► The expression “Islamic Revolution” is somewhat misleading, both in regards to the historical facts and the current reality in Iran. The revolution, which bubbled under the surface in the 1970s until it brought about the fall of the monarchy in 1979, united groups along a wide ideological spectrum, from the nationalist Right to the Communist Left, all of whom rejected the political order of the time. The internal power jockeying of these groups allowed the Islamist movement, led by the charismatic cleric Khomeini, to stabilize its rule and establish a new order based on religion.

► From those days onward, there have been ongoing power struggles regarding the nature of the regime and state in Iran. Khomeini has been dead for a while, and the fascists and Marxists are in literal and ideational graves. Few, if any, miss the Shah. But they have been replaced by other forces clashing with each other: youth who consume Western media and seek freedoms; clerics who wish to separate religion and state or at least create some space between the two; women who have grown tired of the religious-cultural rules of the game and are coming out of their shell to create change; and a relatively large share of the population that asks the regime mostly to avoid intervening in their daily life, thus allowing it to be more tolerable and less stifled.

► Indeed, the similarities between Iran and Israel are more significant than is commonly believed. The widespread perception in Israel is of Iran as the ultimate enemy, the “total evil” standing opposite to the “total good.” At the same time, it is widely seen as “one more” of the “retarded” Muslim nations around Israel. These perceptions ignore the similarities between both countries. Iranian society combines, in the building blocks of its identity, a rich historical culture, in which religion plays a central role, but not an exclusive one, even if the individual does not necessarily adopt a religious lifestyle; and adoration of education, advancement, technology and innovation. Iranian teenagers, similarly to Israeli ones, are the stars of international science, math, robotics and chess competitions. Iranian scientists publish thousands of academic articles per year in leading international journals in the fields of chemistry, engineering, biology and biochemistry. In some disciplines, they are the leaders in

the field among Middle Eastern scholars, ahead of Israel and far ahead of the Arab world. At the same time, Iran is a proud nationalistic state, which has to deal with the existence of minority groups residing within its borders (including, an Arab minority), and experiences phenomena such as racism, discrimination and even violent suppression of “the Other.” The Iranian nation also harshly criticizes its leadership (this has been the case for years and applies not just the current rulers) on various topics, but at the same time shares the sense of isolation and the perception that its rulers engender and implant with regards to Iran’s neighborhood.

► The external environment of “revolutionary” Iran has also radically changed. Iraq of Saddam Hussein, the major nemesis who led a blood-soaked war against Tehran during the 1980s, has become – owing to the intervention of the United States, the “Great Satan” – a playground receptive of Iranian influence. Iraq also marked the clear shift in U.S. attention to countering Sunni Islamic radicalism (named “global jihad,”) in its various forms from Bin Laden’s al-Qaeda to ISIS, to a large extent at the expense of the struggle against the revolutionary Shi’ite Iran. The collapse of the Communist bloc, the weakening of the Arab regimes (culminating in the “Arab Spring” in the beginning of the current decade) and the undermining of the secular nature of Turkey under Erdoğan, have all removed additional ideological and security threats to the “Revolution.” These changes gradually brought about the stabilization of the Islamic regime in Iran as a steady actor in the regional and global scene, which is able to use carrots along with the traditional tools of subversion. In addition, these changes significantly reduced the risk of external intervention to topple the Iranian regime.

► It is in this context– of a revolution that has become institutionalized a long time ago, revealing a natural gap between its original vision and the situation on the ground, and of dramatic changes in the Middle East and the world – Israel has remained the last cornerstone in the Iranian regime’s ideological and security doctrine, and possibly the only one that has remained static throughout the regime’s forty years of existence.

The Religious Component: The Shi’ite Perception of Judaism and Khomeini’s View of Zionism

► The Shi’ite Muslim minority (but the dominant current in Iran) holds a fundamentally more hostile view toward Judaism, compared to the Sunni majority among Muslims. Shi’ites

closely observe rules regarding purity, and in their view, “infidels,” including Jews, are impure and must not be touched. Similarly to the prohibition in Judaism on drinking wine poured by gentiles, observant Shi’ite are prohibited from drinking water from a glass touched by a Jew or to eat food prepared by a Jew. In addition, intolerant currents emerged in Shi’ite Islam toward other minority groups that are perceived as complicit in the oppression of the Shi’ites by the Sunnis. Meanwhile, the Sunni majority, which felt secure in its supreme status, usually evinced “the magnanimity of victors” toward minority groups (with the exception of Shi’ite Muslims).

► Due to this, Iran was the only Muslim country that issued decrees of annihilation against Jews until the 19th century. Entire Jewish communities were forced to convert to Shi’ite Islam or were exterminated, while in Sunni Muslim countries Jews enjoyed the status of protected persons (in Arabic: *ahl al-Dhimma*) since they are monotheists. In the 20th century, due to clear European influence, racist and antisemitic perceptions also infiltrated Iran, where they found a receptive audience. Jews were accused of having loose morals and poisoning wells, in a manner reminiscent of Nazi doctrines and also blood libels from the Middle Ages.

► Khomeini, who laid the foundations of the modern Shi’ite view that calls for the eradication of Israel, personally took part in developing Shi’ite jurisprudence antagonistic to Jews. Even in his earlier writings, in the 1940s, he underlined the distinction between “pure Muslims” and “impure Jews,” and even included Jews as one of the elements defiling a believer, along with pigs, corpses and semen. He prohibited his followers from buying from Jews food products that can not be purified, such as meat and vegetables, and habitually quoted passages from the Qur’an describing Jews as deeply implicated in sin. According to Khomeini, Prophet Muhammad destroyed the Jewish tribe of Banu Qurayza in the city of Medina, because they corrupted Muslim society. In this way, Khomeini legitimized, even if implicitly, the destruction of Jews in our time.

► Beyond this, to adapt his ideational discourse to his time, Khomeini linked Judaism, Zionism and the West. The hostility toward Israel was a central component of his overall religious worldview, from how he understood Islam, to the religion’s spiritual and historical purpose, and the crisis of Islam in the modern era.

► Khomeini, like many other Islamic scholars (Sunni and Shi’ite), before and after his time, saw Islam as a perfect and eternal set of rules, whose role is to organize societal life and shape a person’s soul. In his view, man, who is a weak and inherently luscious, must

overcome his corporeal form and selfishness through spiritual adherence to the Islamic nation. The way to achieve this goal is by instituting Islam over the state and merging between religious authority (of the jurispudent, the faqih) and political authority (the sovereign, wali).

► In the same spirit, Khomeini believed that the decline of the Islamic world into materialism and struggles over power and internal hegemony are a result of a conspiracy of the superpowers, and particularly the United States, aiming to maintain Western power over Muslim. He saw Zionism as a virus in the service of the West's agenda to realize this plot – inserting secular and materialistic ideology into the heart of the Islamic world, which would guide believers away from the righteous path and ensue their spiritual, political and economic subjugation.

► As a result, Khomeini wrote a great deal and preached about the ideational similarity and real-world cooperation between Zionism and “global imperialism” (which he also dubbed “global arrogance.”) In his view, the State of Israel is the most intolerable manifestation of imperialism – a foreign plant emplaced in the Middle East to perpetuate the subjugation of Muslims. More so, the establishment of the State of Israel, according to Khomeini, was a challenge to a basic view in Islam that Jews are merely a religious group, which is not entitled to sovereignty in any way. Thus, as long as Israel exists, Muslims are facing a twin challenge to their faith: Jews control Muslim holy lands, and the Christian West maintain its superiority over Islam, while it is Islam that should be – in accordance with the natural rules of history – the superior one. Only the destruction of Israel will solve this problem.

► It may be wrongly perceived that elaborating on Khomeini's theories – which included clear antisemitic motifs – is a dated, theoretical and anachronistic discussion, since the man died over three decades ago. It is also true that Khomeini's perceptions on religion and state – which shaped the revolutionary regime – were controversial among Shi'ite clerics even in his lifetimes. However, at least when it comes to Israel, Khomeini's edicts were and continue to be the guiding star for the leaders of the Iranian regime, all of them Khomeini's students or students of his students. They quote him often, as a source of authority, when discussing the need to destroy “Little Satan,” “the cancer” and simply “the Zionist enemy.”

The Historical Aspect: From Cyrus, the Pre-Islamic Infidel, to the Shah, the “Modern Infidel”

► Shi’ite Islam, similarly to Judaism, is a religion with a long historical memory, keeping a record of the wrongs done to it, guided by a sense of persecution and victimhood that in Shi’ite eyes stems from jealousy of its religious superiority. The Jewish saying “every generation there are those who rise to destroy us” encapsulates well the history of the Shi’ites too, and the consciousness of its adherent. “Remembering Amalek,” the Jewish religious obligation of remembering the bitter enemy of the Israelites, is similarly marked by the Shi’ites in the ceremonies during the ‘Ashura day of mourning, when believers recreate their military defeat at the hands of the Sunnis in the Battle of Karbala (680 CE) and beat themselves until they bleed. “Cursing Haman,” who sought to destroy the Jewish people in the Book of Esther, in the Shi’ite version manifests in cursing the first three caliphs in Islam, considered holy by the Sunnis, and giving their names to animals. This practice is an expression of the contempt felt by Shi’ites toward those who in their view deprived Imam Ali, the progenitor of Shi’ite Islam (and the fourth caliph) of his rightful inheritance following the death of the Prophet Mohammad. The phenomenon of anusim in Judaism also has a parallel in Shi’ite Islam – “taqiya,” the principle that allows one to hide his true Shi’ite faith due to persecution and edicts of extermination.

► If the modern-day formative experience of Jewish persecution is the Holocaust, then by comparison, in the eyes of Khomeini and his followers, the Shah regime is similar to that of the Nazis. Indeed, World War II made its mark on Iran, leaving a deep national trauma. Shah Reza Pahlavi’s open support for Hitler (who in turn, saw the Persians as potential partners for reducing British influence in the Middle East, and attributed Aryan origins to them), and the strategic location of Iran as a relatively short line of supply from the United Kingdom to the USSR, both led to a Soviet-British invasion of Iran in August 1941. Occupied Iran was divided between the two superpowers until the end of the war, the Shah was exiled and his son, Mohammed Reza, was crowned in his stead.

► A second formative and negative experience of foreign meddling in Iran occurred in the early 1950s, which culminated in a coup orchestrated by the United States and Britain in 1953 against the popular socialist Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadegh. This event, connected to internal power struggles and riots in Iran, immense economic interests (mainly preserving British control over Iranian oil exports), and ideological derivatives of the Cold War between

the West and the Soviet bloc, reified the position of the Shah (who escaped for a brief period from the country) as the lackey of the West and whose continued rule relies on the graces of Washington and London.

► The third trauma in Iran's 20th century history occurred after the Islamic Revolution. This trauma was connected to the historic sense of injustice engendered by the Sunni-Shi'ite (and Arab-Persian) rivalry. The Iran-Iraq war lasted for almost a decade, exacted from Iran a cost of hundreds of thousands killed and billions of dollars, and put in real jeopardy the future of the Revolution. The Iraqi threat continued to demand most of Iran's military resources until the US occupation of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003. The focus of the 1990s was rehabilitating the country from the physical and mental destruction left by the war. Thus, the masterminds of the Islamic Revolution essentially lost two decades in their quest to create a new order in Iran.

► Khomeini and his loyalists, in their interpretation of Iranian national traumas, linked both in real time and in hindsight, Judaism, Zionism and Israel to the camp of the "historic enemy." If the Shah and his Iranian supporters were seen as a form of Nazis, then the Jews were seen as their aids. Khomeini described Israel, the Shah's strategic ally, as part of Western imperialism and a partner in the repression of the Iranian people. He blamed Israel for providing torture instruments to the Shah's secret police, the SAVAK, and training its personnel in brutal torture methods. He also claimed that Israel wishes to take over Iran's economy, destroy the local agriculture and precipitate Iranian dependency on export of food from the West. In his view, Israeli agents, with the Shah's encouragement, infiltrated all sensitive and major positions and departments in Iran's economic and security institutions. A recent echo of these ridiculous perceptions can be heard in the accusations of a senior Iranian security official in the summer of 2018 that Israel is responsible for the prolonged drought in Iran because it is "stealing clouds."

► In the same spirit, Khomeini interpreted almost any move made by the Shah and one intended to serve the West, Zionism and the Jews and harm Islam. This is how he saw the White Revolution, a policy of economic and social Western-secular reforms that the Shah promoted in the 1960s. According to Khomeini, Israel assisted in the celebrations in 1971 marking 2,500 years to the rule of Cyrus, the King of Persia, to glorify and provide legitimacy to the culture and idol worship that existed in Persia at the time. In another instance, he condemned the law banning non-Muslims from serving as judges, arguing that this way, the

Shah paved the way for Jewish judges who will adjudicate not in accordance with the laws of Islam. On another occasion, Khomeini claimed that the oath of allegiance of the Shah's military was made on a "holy book" and not the Qur'an, to allow Jews and other infidels to serve as officers in the Iranian military and control the Muslims.

► It is clear that the importance of the historical component in the perception of Israel as an enemy has been significantly eroded over the years. Generations have been raised in Iran that have no memory of the Shah, and the national traumas that shaped Khomeini's generations are the subject of history books, not lived experiences. As an Israeli journalist commented on the compliments given in Israel to President Trump, equating his recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital with the Cyrus Declaration, the Balfour Declaration and Truman's recognition of the State of Israel: "Trump may have heard that there was once a president named Truman, but he likely has no idea who Balfour or Cyrus were."

The Strategic Aspect: The Best Defense is Offense (in Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, etc.)

► The historical and religious components in Iran's revolutionary perception of Israel as an existential threat complement each other and create a methodical and well-sourced theory revolving around deep hatred of the "Zionist entity" and its portrayal as a demonic enemy that must be destroyed. This is both the source of strength and weakness of this approach. On the one hand, some in Israel and the West believe that the leaders of the Iranian regime fully believe what they say, and therefore must be stopped at any cost. On the other hand, others see Khomeini's ideology as ancient rhetoric and a mixture of recycled antisemitic motifs, whose place is in boring texts collecting dust in libraries and speeches to which no one listens, and therefore, are not a cause of concern. In the view of the latter, modern-day reality in Iran, the Middle East and the world requires a more level-headed analysis of the threat emanating from Iran to Israel and the West. This threat, in their view, must be examined while keeping in mind the practical and pragmatic elements of Iran's national security doctrine, supposedly devoid of ideology.

► In light of this, it is worth briefly examining Iran's national security doctrine and Israel's place in it. The Iranian regime has never published this doctrine, but it is possible to deduce it based on statements made by senior Iranian political-security officials over the years, as well as models of other national security doctrine. The foundational goals of the Iranian approach

is gaining international acceptance and recognition of the Islamic Revolution and the regime it brought into power; ensuring the territorial integrity and security of the country; exploitation of natural resources (mainly oil and gas) for providing economic welfare to the citizenry; regional hegemony (meaning, influence and veto power over events in its immediate surrounding and at the heart of the Middle East); recognition of Iran's leading international role; and leadership of the Islamic world (despite the weak starting position due to Iranians' belonging to the minority Shi'ite sect).

► This national security doctrine – which is grounded in the abovementioned national traumas – contains internal tensions. For example, between Iran's desire to gain technological superiority, including nuclear capabilities, while also wanting to avoid the perception of a rogue actor; the need to integrate in the global economy while suffering from a negative international image that discourages investments; between the desire for legitimacy and international recognition, and the defiance of the regional and international order and subversion of it; between the desire to lead the Muslim world and a policy undermining regional stability. Israel is relevant to almost all of these internal tensions.

► At the heart of the Iranian national security doctrine is the supreme interest of the regime – maintaining its survival and stability at all cost. In the eyes of the Iranian leadership, the Western world – led by the United States and egged on by Israel – has never recognized the legitimacy of the “revolution,” and therefore strives to topple the Islamic regime, from its moment of inception till this today. This is done through a combination of subversion inside Iran and incessant external pressure (economic sanctions, military threats, assistance to Iran's enemies). Tehran believes this policy is pursued even if the West adopts an outward appearance of welcoming and engaging Iran (for example, with the nuclear accord, from which the U.S. withdrew, demonstrating the real intentions of the United States, according to Tehran's view).

► As a result, every step taken by the Iranian regime in the domestic sphere, the Middle East or the international arena, is presented by it as a reaction and a defensive response to the Western-Israel threat to its survival. In addition, Iran's official propaganda does not distinguish between the external threat to Iran as a sovereign country and the threat to the existence of the regime – the national interest and Islamic interest (which surpasses Iran's borders) are the same.

► Iran's efforts to gain regional hegemony, which in modern times originated in the time of the Shah, is based on Iran's large territory and population, its location in a strategic crossroad, its central position in the Muslim world, its history as a regional empire and contribution to civilization, its national resources and its military might. As such, Iran sees Turkey and Egypt and two "natural" competitors for hegemony, both of them nation states with similar characteristics. On the other hand, Israel is a different type of competitor, a "youth league" player trying to compete in "the big league," therefore necessitating a particular response.

► Iran's desire to lead the Muslim world is in line with its self-conception as a regional power. To realize this goal, Tehran uses a slew of tools, combining coercion and military means and "softer" tools – economic, political and cultural. In the past, these efforts were labeled "exporting the revolution," i.e. transferring the Iranian model to other arenas in the Middle East (Lebanon as the most apparent one) and outside of it. These days, it is branded in a more "user friendly" manner. The main tool at Iran's disposal in this effort is the array of "Resistance" factions, "the Shia crescent," an Islamic global network, international alliances, the nuclear program, military buildup, and along them, the struggle against Israel.

► The Resistance apparatus is made up of regimes and organizations carrying out terror attacks against Israeli, American and Western interests, and subverting pragmatic regimes in the region, in a way that serves, directly and indirectly, Iranian interests. Tehran is the economic, military and political engine of this apparatus. Central players in this apparatus are Hezbollah in Lebanon and today in Syria as well, the Shi'ite militias in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, the Houthi rebels in Yemen, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip, and in a way (although through a different type of relationship) the Assad regime in Syria, Hamas, secular Palestinian groups, and some radical Sunni Islamist groups.

► The Shi'ite crescent and the global Islamic network allow Iran to expand its sphere of influence to more complex and distant arenas – whether in its natural Shi'ite "lebensraum" (for example, among the Shi'ite minority in Saudi Arabia, and the Shi'ite majority in Bahrain and Iraq, which all have a more complex and less immediate relationship with Iran); as well as in Muslim communities, Shi'ite and Sunni, across the world (in central Asia, Africa, south America and the Balkans).

► The international alliances include agreements and cooperation in the economic, diplomatic and military spheres with rising powers such as Russia, China and India. These

alliances serve Iran in its effort to counter the American and Israeli efforts to place sanctions against it or bring to bear diplomatic pressure against it, but also to entrench its presence in arenas across the Middle East where these powers are operating. Clear examples for this are the alliance of interests between Iran and Russia that rescued the Assad regime in Syria from collapse, and the Iranian effort to “embrace” India, at a time when Israel and Saudi Arabia are striving to establish a steady alliance with it.

► The nuclear program is the backbone of the Iranian security apparatus and its national security doctrine. Gaining military nuclear capability – if and when Iran violates the agreement it signed with Europe and the United States in 2015 (the JCPOA), and from which the U.S. withdrew in 2018 – will serve Iran’s desire to ensure its security and regional and international standing, as well as to achieve strategic balance vis-à-vis Israel. In parallel, since the early 2000s, Iran has been building the largest military force in the Middle East, which maintains impressive strategic capabilities in all spheres of warfare. This military provides Iran with deterrent capabilities, and if need be, an ability to decisively defeat opponents.

► The collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq in 2003 pushed the Iraqi arena from the top of Iran’s list of threats to the bottom. More so, Iraq has turned from a source of threat to a place of opportunity. In parallel, Saudi Arabia gradually rose to the top of the list, since the removal of the Iraqi threat left Iran at the top of Riyadh’s list of threats to national security. This led Saudi Arabia to build up its power vis-à-vis Tehran. However, Israel and the United States, “little Satan” and “big Satan,” have remained the most significant threats in the eyes of the Iranian regime, just like in the times of Khomeini.

“Would Not Kneel Down or Pay Honor: ”Israel as a Distinct Enemy in the Eyes of the Iranian Regime

► The “cultural assault” waged by the United States against Iran, a major theme in Khomeini’s doctrine, is still a central concern of Iran’s leadership. Tehran routinely warns about the infiltration of Western culture, which eats away at the values of Islamic society and the strength of its regime. These messages are also used as a well-known tool to blame the West for the social and economic ills in Iran. However, they also reflect the perception among Iranian Islamic revolutionary figures with regards to the soft power threat presented by Western culture. This threat only increases when the U.S. and Iran negotiate and engage in diplomacy to bridge disagreements (for example, the JCPOA) over historical bad blood and

religious tensions. In this respect, the reduction in tensions and constructive dialog are even more dangerous in the eyes of the Iranian regime than tensions and violent rhetoric, which have again taken hold following the withdrawal of the Trump Administration from the nuclear accord in May 2018.

► At the same time, Iran continues to regard American presence in the Middle East (and central Asia) as a direct threat to its forces, assets and freedom of movement in its “home court” – the Persian Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz. In recent years, the shows of force of the two sides in this maritime arena have produced some well-publicized altercations, as well as rare clashes as part of the campaigns in Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

► Despite this, there is a significant difference between Iran’s approach toward the U.S. and its main rivals in the Arab world (previously Iraq and now Saudi Arabia) and its approach toward Israel. Iraq and Saudi Arabia have maintained and continue to maintain contact, even if limited, to reduce tensions and reach understandings (even if temporary and limited in scope). There are various officials inside the Iranian regime who in recent decades have raised the question whether and to which extent it is possible to reconcile with these enemies. There is a great deal of hostility toward the U.S., but it is also possible to detect an admiration of U.S. power, even if Iranian never admit to it publicly. Toward the Arab world, Iranian officials project a sense of arrogance, originating in the self-conception of Persian culture as superior, ancient and more advanced than the Arab one. Either way, these are rivals with whom Iran has been willing to deliberate and reach understandings, even if temporary and tactical.

► On the other hand, Israel is the only country toward which Iranian rhetoric is incredibly acrimonious – to the point of explicitly calling for its destruction – and the forceful and defiant policy with regards to it enjoys wall-to-wall support among Iran’s leadership. Israel’s strategic capabilities, the steadfast support it enjoys from the United States, as well as Jerusalem’s moves to constrain Iranian actions in the nuclear sphere and regional arena are perceived by Tehran as an existential threat. Senior Iranian military officials, as well as Iranian propaganda outlets, often refer to the nuclear threat posed by Israel, in their view, to the entire region, while Iran’s efforts in the nuclear sphere are for civilian uses only and “peaceful purposes.”

► In the entire history of the post-revolution regime in Iran there is has been only one known dissenting voice with regards to Israel among the Iranian establishment – Abdullah Nuri, a

cleric who served at the Minister of Interior in the Khatami administration. In 1998, when addressing the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian at the time, he argued that Iran should not adopt a more radical line than that of the Palestinians themselves, who are the side directly involved in conflict with Israel. Using a metaphor, Nuri argued that “the pot should not be hotter than the soup.” He paid for this position, as well as his ardent reformist approach inside his ministry, with his job, was sent to prison and removed from the stage of Iranian politics. Nuri’s statement, twenty years ago and even more so today, was exceptional and his fate indicates just how unacceptable it was to Iran’s leadership.

► Israel’s unique position as a perpetual enemy is rooted in a genuinely held belief of the Iranian leadership that Israel “surrounds” Iran from all directions and acts in every possible arena against Iranian interests. According to this view, Israel is meddling in Iranian internal politics, and is deeply involved in the countries surrounding Iran, in its “lebensraum” and traditional areas of influence – from the Kurdistan region of Iraq, to Armenia and Azerbaijan and the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union in central Asia. This is in addition to Israeli “subversion” in the Sunni Arab world (and particularly in Saudi Arabia and its partners in the Persian Gulf, a clear Iranian sphere to influence). Iran is also concerned about Israeli efforts to push the United States and Western world to isolate Iran and topple the Islamic regime there.

► The desire to achieve strategic parity with Israel, justifies, in its view, efforts to develop nuclear capabilities, which it believes that Israel possesses, as well as to use force against Israel in other arenas. According to the approach Islamic regime, some of Iran’s national security goals are achieved beyond its borders. Thus, attacks carried out by Palestinian “Resistance” forces against the IDF in the Gaza Strip or firing of long-range rockets by Hezbollah from southern Lebanon deep into Israeli territory, are Iran’s first defensive line against the threat posed to it by Israel, in Tehran’s view.

► Similar to how Israeli leadership takes seriously Iranian declarations about Israel’s destruction, the leadership in Tehran is truly concerned with the possibility that Israel will follow on its threats to carry out a strategic attack against Iran’s nuclear sites and long-range missiles. The mutual deterrence discourse between senior officials in the two countries adopts the similar rhetoric “I suggest to Iran/Israel not to test the seriousness of our intentions and the extent of our capabilities.” This discourse has been going on for (at least) three decades, but this has not calmed Tehran’s concerns. To the contrary, there are

occasional reports about raising of alert inside Iran's security establishment due to fears of a looming Israeli attack against Iran and particularly its nuclear facilities. These fears were substantiated in 2018, due to combination of the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, the tight strategic coordination between the American administration and the Israeli government, and the greater willingness of Israel's leadership to publicize the complex intelligence operations on Iranian soil and in the territories of its partners.

► As mentioned, Iran has a long historical memory, and knows well the precedents of Israeli strikes against the nuclear reactor in Iraq in 1981 and the nuclear reactor in Syria in 2007 (one of the operations that received significant publicity last year). In recent years, Iran has also been receiving ongoing smaller reminders in the form of Israeli strikes to destroy infrastructure, material and Iranian technology in Syria and Lebanon, as part of the "campaign between wars" waged by Israel.

► The unwritten rules of this campaign have (mostly) contained it within the realms of indirect conflict, which allows both sides to control the heat of the fire and avoid unwanted escalation and spiraling out of control. In 2018, this campaign turned into a direct conflict, culminating in Israel killing of several Iranians on Syrian soil, on several occasions, and even claiming responsibility for these attacks. The rules have changed due to the security-political situation that has emerged in Syria after almost a decade of civil war there, the understandings reached between Israel and Russia, which is still the real decision-maker in Syria, and the Israeli effort to dislodge Iran from the arena. The civil war was initially an opportunity for Israel due to the crumbling of the threat from the Syrian Army in the Golan Heights front, but later became a much graver threat, in the form of a second Iranian front along Israel's northern frontier, in addition to the Lebanon front. Also, Israel has been reminded of Iran's ability to cause damage in Gaza as well, in which the daily confrontations have taken new and more complex forms than in the past.

► To summarize, the combination of deep animosity, originating in religion and history, and a strategic threat perception, has made Israel, in the eyes of the Islamic Republic, into a unique and permanent enemy. This is an enemy that can not be reconciled with; it is an enemy whose strategic capabilities must be properly countered; and active efforts need to be made to harm and weaken it, and over time, bring about its destruction. Take out the religious component and the racist underpinnings, and you get Israel's threat perception of Iran.