

# Iran and Its Connection to the Ongoing Israel-Hamas War

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## Background

Iran's relations with the spread-out Jewish community date back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC when Iranian monarch, Cyrus the Great, issued an edict that the Jews would return to Judea from their Babbilionian exile in 538 BCE, and build in Jerusalem the temple they named Har ha-Bayit, or Temple Mount. The Muslims call it *al-Haram al-Sharif*. The term Al-Aqsa Mosque is often extended to denote the entirety of the plaza on which the mosque and the Dome of the Rock stand.

The Temple Mount of the Jews and the adjacent Western Wall have since served as a site of pilgrimage. During the Six-Day War (1967), Israel (a state established in 1948) occupied East Jerusalem and its Old City, which had been part of Jordan. Israel later annexed East Jerusalem, but the plaza was left under the custodianship of an Islamic trust (*waqf*) maintained by the Hashemite dynasty in Jordan. The site became the bone of contention between the two peoples.

## Belfour Declaration

In 1917 British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour stated in a letter to British Jewish community leader Walter, Lord Rothschild that the British government viewed with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.<sup>1</sup>

After World War I, the United Kingdom was given a mandate for Palestine, which it had conquered from the Ottomans during the war. In 1937 the Peel Commission suggested partitioning Mandate Palestine into an Arab state and a Jewish state.

The British handed the issue over to the United Nations. The result was Resolution 181(II),<sup>2</sup> a plan to partition Palestine into Independent Arab and Jewish States, and the Special International Regime for the City of Jerusalem. The Jewish state was to receive around 56% of the land area of Mandate Palestine, encompassing 82% of the Jewish population. Jewish people from many countries opted for permanent settlement in the Jewish state. The Arabs did not accept the resolution with the result that partition remained the source of irritation. Hence, we have a long and gory history of Jewish-Palestinian acrimony, which has defied a solution. The Israel – Palestinian problem has sucked in regional and international powers, and it has become one of the most dangerous flash points of contemporary world history.

## **Ethnic Clash**

There is no territorial or boundary dispute between Iran and Israel, nor is there any trade and commerce or power rivalry between them. What are considered common causes of acute differences between the states in contemporary times, are absent in this case. What then is the fundamental cause of hostility between them; it is a somewhat intriguing question.

Iran is ethnically an Aryan and non-Semitic nation with great antiquity and rich civilization. In the post-proselytized period, she has been haunted by the obsession of proving to the Arab Muslim world that despite its Aryan ethnicity, Iran wants to prove she is more Islamic than the Arabs, particularly Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islamic faith. Iran has clinched the powerful narrative originating in the holy Quran enjoining upon the “*Moomins*”, meaning the puritanical Muslims, to oust the Zionists and reclaim Jerusalem including Al Aqsa. The narrative came in handy to Iranians because in Iran’s view, the Arab Islamic states have been, somehow, soft-peddalling with the State of Israel, and they would like to steal the march over all of them in fulfilling the Quranic injunction.

Iran’s baffling obsession is reinforced by massively pandering to the ideology of the Shia faith, which claims divergence from the vast majority of the Muslims of the Sunni faith.<sup>3</sup>

## **Iran’s Proxies**

Khomeini’s views on Israel significantly influenced Iran’s foreign policy, shaping its stance towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its relationship with other countries in the region. Iran did not recognize the State of Israel and no diplomatic relations were established. Iran actively supported the Palestinian cause and assisted Palestinian militant groups. Iran opposed peace initiatives such as the Oslo Accords. Iranian leadership always used strong anti-Israel rhetoric and propaganda in its public discourse.

The general practice with aggressive and diehard regimes is to press into services volunteering ethno-religious extremists but profile them as non-state actors to avoid accusations as promoters of terror. Iran plays an important behind-the-curtain role in the Middle East conflict. Some of the notable proxy groups associated with Iran include (1). Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shia militant and political group receiving Iranian support since 1980. It is closely linked to Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) and shares its anti-Israel stance. (2) The Houthis, also called Ansar Allah, a Yemeni rebel group. (3) Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), a militant group active in the Palestinian territories and Israel.

## **Hamas**

The Palestinian militant group called Hamas is responsible for a blitzkrieg of Israeli-Gaza Strip localities on October 7, which has invited all-round retaliation by Israeli defence forces. Formed in 1987 at the beginning of the first Palestinian *intifada* (uprising), the roots of Hamas are to be found in the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is supported by a robust socio-political structure inside the Palestinian territories. The group's charter calls for establishing an Islamic Palestinian state in place of Israel rejecting agreements made between the PLO and Israel. HAMAS is concentrated in the Gaza Strip and areas of the West Bank.

HAMAS has a military wing known as the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades that has conducted many anti-Israel attacks in both Israel and the Palestinian territories since the 1990s. These attacks have included large-scale bombings against Israeli civilian targets, small-arms attacks, improvised roadside explosives, and rocket attacks.

It won legislative elections in the Palestinian territories in 2006, ending the secular Fatah party's hold on the Palestinian Authority and challenging Fatah's leadership of the Palestinian nationalist movement. HAMAS continues to refuse to recognize or renounce violent resistance against Israel. In early 2008, it conducted a suicide bombing, killing one civilian, as well as numerous rocket and mortar attacks that have injured civilians. The US Government has designated HAMAS a Foreign Terrorist Organization.

In June 2008, HAMAS entered into a six-month agreement with Israel that significantly reduced rocket attacks. Following the temporary calm, HAMAS resumed its rocket attacks, which precipitated a major Israeli military operation in late December 2008. After destroying much of HAMAS' infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, Israel declared a unilateral cease-fire on 18 January 2009.

## **Iran-Hamas link**

Hamas's military branch called Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, was created in 1991. The two-decade-long history of Hamas is a gory story of fighting and bloodshed primarily against Israel, and to a lesser degree with other neighbouring entities. Hamas' main objective is to destroy the State of Israel and recover the entire "occupied" land to create the State of Palestine. Israel has been responding militarily to the attacks of Hamas. The parties concerned seemed to be trapped in an unending struggle for control of the region. In this conundrum, international players have also jumped into the fray as necessitated by their respective national interests and perspectives.

Speculations around Iran's involvement in Hamas' 7 October gruesome attack on Israel have been rampant. Iran has denied involvement but its Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei demonstrated his support to Palestinian militant group Hamas in television broadcastings in Iran. <sup>4</sup>

Quoting experts, the *Vox* writes that Iran does provide material support to Hamas as well as training and money. It adds that proxy groups --- armed groups affiliated with a state actor ---; like the Fatemiyoun Brigade in Syria and the Badr organization in Iraq, as well as the Houthis in Yemen, work more in concert with the Iranian regime, but it would be incorrect to automatically blame for Sunday's (7 October) attack right at the regime's (Iran) doorstep. The US Secretary of State said in a recent press conference that the US had no evidence to show Iran's involvement in the attack on Israel.

"Hamas has a rather complex relationship with Iran," Ali Vaez, director of the Iran project at the International Crisis Group, told the *Vox*. "It is a Sunni group, not a Shia group like most of the groups Iran supports, but it also has a history of rupture with Iran," most notably over Iran's support for the Assad regime at the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011," he added.

Though groups like Houthis in Yemen sometimes directly contradict the policies and wishes of their benefactor (Iran), such a significant political and ideological rift as that between Hamas and Iran "has rarely happened with any other non-state actor.

Of course, the Iranian Supreme Leader has been issuing warnings that if the bombardment of Gaza is not stopped forthwith, the fighting might escalate and take a serious turn.

This part of the analysis notwithstanding, the other side of the picture also carries weight and cannot be dismissed cheaply. Biden administration misperceived the incentives for Iran, a disruptive actor on the stage. It was never plausible that informal understandings and a dribble of sanctions relief would be sufficient to pacify the Islamic Republic and its proxies, who have a "keen and time-tested appreciation for the utility of escalation in advancing their strategic and economic interests". Iranian leaders had every incentive to try to block an Israeli-Saudi breakthrough, particularly one that would have extended American security guarantees to Riyadh and allowed the Saudis to develop a civilian nuclear energy program.

At this time, it is not known whether Iran had any specific role in the carnage in Israel. Earlier this week, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Tehran was directly involved in planning the assault, citing unnamed senior members of Hamas and Hezbollah, the Lebanese militant group.

That report has not been confirmed by Israeli or U.S. officials, who suggest that Iran was “broadly complicit,” in the words of Jon Finan, the deputy national security adviser. At the very least, the operation “bore hallmarks of Iranian support,” as a report in *The Washington Post* put it, citing former and current senior Israeli and U.S. officials. And even “if the Islamic Republic did not pull the trigger, its hands are hardly clean. Iran has funded, trained, and equipped Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups and has coordinated closely on strategy, as well as operations—especially during the past decade.” It is inconceivable that Hamas undertook an attack of this magnitude and complexity without some foreknowledge and affirmative support from Iran’s leadership. And now Iranian officials and media are exulting in the brutality unleashed on Israeli civilians and embracing the expectation that the Hamas offensive will bring about Israel’s demise.<sup>5</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the deep-seated animosity between Iran and Israel, despite the absence of traditional geopolitical or economic conflicts, can be attributed to a complex web of historical, ideological, and religious factors. Iran's Aryan heritage, its desire to position itself as a leader in the Muslim world, and its Shia faith have all played significant roles in shaping its stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Iran's support for groups like Hamas further complicates the situation, adding a layer of proxy warfare to an already volatile region. As the world grapples with the ongoing violence and tensions in the Middle East, it becomes evident that resolving the Israel-Palestine issue requires a nuanced understanding of these underlying dynamics and a commitment to dialogue and diplomacy. The recent events, such as the October 7th attack, underscore the need for a holistic approach to address this longstanding conflict and mitigate the potential for further escalation, emphasizing the critical role of international players in promoting peace and stability in the region.

The US sources say that the State Department is in consultations with the stakeholders and regional leaders. President Biden, on a visit to Israel, is emphasising on ceasefire and resumption of talks. Russia and China, both support the creation of two sovereign states, Israel and Palestine. Opinion of some EU members also converges on the formula which has been under consideration for some time.



End notes

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<sup>1</sup> Yapp, M.E.,1987. *The Making of the Modern Near East 1792–1923*. Harlow, England: Longman. p. 290. ISBN 0-582-49380-3.

<sup>2</sup> UNITED NATIONS General Assembly: A/RES/181(II): 29 November 1947: Resolution 181 (II): Future government of Palestine: Retrieved 26 April

<sup>3</sup> Fisher, Max (5 January 2016). "The real roots of Sunni-Shia conflict: beyond the myth of "ancient religious hatreds". Vox. Retrieved 27 June 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen Ioannis in Vox of October 14, 2023

<sup>5</sup> 'Iran celebrates re-enactment of the holocaust by Hamas' by K N Pandita in Eurasian Times of Oct 17, 2023.  
<https://www.eurasiantimes.com/iran-celebrates-re-enactment-of-the-holocaust-by-hamas/>