



PERSPECTIVES

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Most Iranians Couldn't Care Less About the Palestinians or Israel

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Diplomats who served in Tehran frequently claim that Israel and the Palestinians are marginal to Iranian concerns. They are correct about the Iranian public and wrong about the leadership. Maybe this and other formidable gaps between the Iranian public and the leadership could provide the fuel to ignite the opposition to remove them from power.

Three years ago, the then Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, who had also served as ambassador to Iran, told members of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies something they had heard from other foreign diplomats. "You Israelis are obsessed with Iran," he said. "For Iranians, you and the Palestinians are a marginal concern."

The Polish minister was right about the average person-in-the-street in Iran, but he was wrong about the leadership. Their divergence of interest regarding Israel and the Palestinians is but one element in the disconnect between the Iranian leadership and the Iranian public – a disconnect that may explain why Iranians took to the streets to protest the ayatollahs.

The Polish minister was correct that Israel and the Palestinian question are of only marginal concern to even educated Iranians. This can be seen by examining internet search terms, which Google Trends plots by country to show relative interest. Terms can be entered in any language including Farsi, which uses Arabic script. (Many of the terms related to Israel and the Palestinians are in fact the same in Farsi and Arabic, though Farsi is an Indo-European language like English and Arabic is a Semitic language.)

This means it is easy to compare the Iranian public's interest in Israel and the Palestinian problem to its interest in Arab states.

“Filastin” is both the Arabic and the Farsi term for Palestine. One would think, given the increasingly belligerent tenor of Israeli-Iranian relations, that Iranians would show interest in both Israel and the Palestinian problem.

But typing “Filastin” into Google Trends in Arabic script clearly confirms the Polish minister’s observation. In the breakdown by country, Iran did not even appear in the 11 countries listed as searching for the term. In the past five years, Iranians searched the term less than one-hundredth the number of times Palestinians did and less than one twenty-fifth the number of times the Jordanians did, who were second on the list of those who searched the term. (That Jordan is second on the list is hardly surprising as most of its population is Palestinian.)

These differences are even wider than they first appear, as there are at least ten times more Iranians than Palestinians and Jordanians whose levels of internet use is similar to that of the Palestinians.

The lack of interest amongst Iranians is confirmed when other terms are searched.

Probably the most prevalent term regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the term “occupation”, which the Palestinians have successfully marketed in the world.

The number of Iranians searching the term “ihtilal”, “occupation” in both Arabic and Farsi, again amounts to less than 1% of the searches made by Palestinians and only 4% of searches made by Jordanians. Iran does not even make the list of 19 states where searches amount to one-hundredth of those searched by Palestinians.

Hamas, whose leaders have been warmly embraced in Tehran and many of whose fighters have been trained by Iranian Revolutionary Guards, is also of negligible concern to the average Iranian. Iran ranked last out of 21 states who use Arabic script to search for Hamas, and the relative interest is similar to that of the two previous terms.

Perhaps the more religious evocation of “al-Quds”, which means “holy place” and is both the Farsi and the Arabic word for Jerusalem, has greater resonance among Iranians?

Not at all. Iran does not figure in the top twenty countries searching for al-Quds, and searches for the term by Iranians account for less than 1% of the number of Palestinian searches. For the more religious symbol, the al-Aqsa mosque (“masjid al-Aqsa”), there were too few searches to record.

Obviously, the Iranian man- and woman-in-the-street does not share the leadership's enthusiasm for Hamas, Jerusalem, or, for that matter, the Palestinian issue writ large.

And he or she doesn't think much about Israel either.

While Iran is of much concern to Israelis, the term "Israel" in Farsi/Arabic receives much the same attention in Iran as terms related to Palestinians. Once again, Iran appears last on the list of 21 countries, with searches for Israel by Iranians amounting to one-hundredth the number of Palestinian searches and one-fortieth the number of Jordanian searches.

For Israelis, the search for "Iran" in English (which for most Israelis is only a second language) amounts to 4% of the number of searches of the word in Iran, which understandably tops the list. By comparison, searches of the word "Iran" in the US amount to only 6% the number of Iranian searches for the term. Considering that the population of the US is about 40 times that of Israel, this means Israelis search the term "Iran" hundreds of times more often than the average American. (One can't compare the term in Hebrew as only in Israel is Hebrew widely read or spoken.)

The Iranian public's lack of interest in Israel and the Palestinians contrasts sharply with the focus, almost obsession, of the leadership of the Islamic Republic with Israel and, to a lesser extent, the Palestinians.

This is especially true of the hardliners. After all, the elite units of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard are called the al-Quds Force, and one of the biggest annual political events in Iran, al-Quds Day, is devoted to defaming Israel and castigating it for being a "usurper" state that expelled and now occupies the Palestinians.

There is, however, good news. The staggering gap between the Iranian public's concerns and interests clearly contrast with those of its leadership. It might grow even larger and widen to other areas – which might be sufficient to motivate the Iranian public to get rid of this leadership of woes altogether.

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