



PERSPECTIVES

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Iran's Quds Day: Ideology or Interests?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: On June 8, the Islamic Republic of Iran held its annual “Quds Day” to express the nation’s support for the Palestinian struggle. Iran invests a great deal of effort into commemorating this event and mobilizes its citizens to flood the streets in solidarity. Is the hostility towards Israel on display on Quds Day a reflection of pure ideology, or is it a product of Tehran’s desire to elevate its status as regional hegemon and leader of the Muslim world?

Quds Day (*Ruz-e Jehani-ye Quds*), which is marked in Iran annually on the last Friday of the month of Ramadan, represents that country’s effort to show solidarity with the Palestinian struggle. The event broadcasts the Iranian government’s uncompromising line against the existence of Israel. As in previous years, many Iranian citizens both within the country and abroad took part in demonstrations, which included hate speeches by senior Iranian officials who called for the destruction of Israel and the burning of the flags of the US, Israel, and even Saudi Arabia.

The decision to mark Quds Day, adopted by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini not long after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, was aimed at highlighting the approach of the revolutionary regime towards the Palestinian struggle. That approach was to challenge the ruling hegemony of the US and the Western countries (the “arrogant powers”) and to call for unification of the Muslim world against their influence.

To determine the source of the Islamic Republic's hostility towards Israel, it is useful to examine the historical context. The Islamic revolution, which was a culmination of Khomeini's opposition to the Shah and his rulings, occurred during a crisis in modern Islam. In Khomeini's view, Iran's precarious situation stemmed from the control of an autocratic monarch who had chosen to

disengage from Islam. This had led to an unprecedented dependence on the US and the West, and Iran's close ties with Israel at the time were part and parcel of that relationship.

It is difficult to determine exactly how Khomeini became aware of the ties between monarchist Iran and Israel, as the Shah's regime made every effort to blur them for both internal and external reasons. However, Khomeini made much use of them in his preaching. In the introduction to his book *Velayat-e Faqih Hokumat-e Eslami*, he focused on identifying the enemies of Islam. This document, which over time became something of a constitution in the revolutionary political system, presented the Jews as enemies of Islam and placed Israel at the center of the axis of resistance for the Islamic Republic.

The expansion of ties between Iran and Israel in the 1960s, especially in the security, commerce, and agriculture fields, infuriated Khomeini. In his Ashura Day speech in June 1963, he described three circles with a common center that were barriers to Iran's development. In the outer circle he placed the massacre in which Hussein bin Ali and his supporters were killed by Yazid ibn Mu'awiya and his army in the Battle of Karbala in the seventh century, which led to a fracture in the community of believers. In the middle circle he placed the Shah's declaration on the principles of the "White Revolution" aimed at deepening the separation between religion and state. In the innermost circle he placed the connection between Iran and Israel, which in his opinion symbolized the disconnection of the ruler from the will of the people.

On June 5, 1963, Khomeini was arrested and imprisoned in Tehran, but the authorities allowed him to return to the city of Qom. A month later he delivered another speech in which he attacked Israel's involvement in the initiative of land reform and the military cooperation between the two countries.

In November 1964 Khomeini was exiled from Iran, but fifteen years in exile did not diminish his influence. In February 1979, he established the Islamic Republic of Iran, shut down Iran-Israel relations, and brought an end to the extensive bilateral network of contacts the two countries had built over three decades.

Khomeini's resolute opposition to Israel's presence in the region became, over time, a model for those who sought to prove their loyalty to the man and his path. After his death in June 1989, his statements regarding Israel gained power. Despite differences of opinion, the various factions of the government presented a unified anti-Israel front.

Though it is difficult to make generalizations about the Iranian political structure, the main differences of opinion among conservatives, pragmatists, and reformers center around four central themes:

1. The balance of power between institutions that derive their authority by virtue of divine decree and those that derive their authority from the will of the people;
2. Iran's foreign relations, particularly the degree of openness to the West;
3. economic approaches; and
4. civil liberties, with an emphasis on freedom of expression.

However, all factions are united in their hostility towards Israel. This is due to the fear that an opinion that is not in compliance with that of the revolution's instigator will lead to a loss of political legitimacy and might even prompt a judicial tribunal.

The Islamic Republic uses the Palestinian struggle as a platform on which to achieve geostrategic successes that serve its own interests. Presenting itself as the guardian of the Palestinian struggle helps Tehran make the case that it is a supporter of the oppressed against the oppressors. All this raises Iran's prestige and dwarfs the power of its rivals in the Muslim world.

Consequently, the current supreme spiritual leader, Ali Khamenei – like his predecessor – was prepared to forget the fact that Yasser Arafat did not show any particular interest in Khomeini's teachings, despite the fact that he was the first guest of honor to be invited to Iran after the revolution. Arafat's and the PLO's lack of support for Iran during the Iran-Iraq War is another issue the Iranian leadership tends to forget, despite the memory of the bloody war that lingers in the collective Iranian memory. Iran's anti-Israel position outweighed the slight of Arafat's ambivalent stance during the war, which could indicate that Iran's interests are subject to strategic considerations rather than deriving entirely from ideology. Similarly, Iran's strategic interests led it to renew its support for Hamas despite that organization's policy regarding the fighting in Syria, which again demonstrates its adaptation to changing circumstances.

The hostility of the Islamic Republic towards Israel stems from both strategic and ideological considerations. On the ideological level, although it sometimes seems that the attitude towards Israel and the US stems from the same conceptual pattern, there is a fundamental difference. Iran's position vis-à-vis the US is based on a deep conceptual conflict that involves stinging historical memory, but Iran has no objection to the US's right to exist.

This is not the case with Israel. The current Iranian government, encouraged by the security establishment, entirely rejects Israel's presence in the Middle East.

The Iranian regime's anti-Zionism, which is frequently accompanied by anti-Semitic motifs, does not necessarily reflect the feelings of the Iranian people, who are concerned with their daily lives. The display of mass processions on Quds Day is not a testimony to pure ideology. The participation of large numbers of Iranians in marches is not proof that the animosity towards Israel promoted by the regime is shared by the Iranian public.

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