



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Iran's Anti-Israel Bill: Desperation Masquerading as Legislation

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Iran's new anti-Israel legislation has banned all contact with the "Zionist enemy," however indirect, even going so far as to criminalize the use of electronics that contain components manufactured by companies with branches in Israel. The law has also mandated the creation of a "virtual embassy" in Jerusalem to protect the Palestinians' interests. For all its hardline posturing, the law reflects chaos within the regime.

Iran's Majlis recently passed a law entitled "Countering Israel's Actions" (*Tarhe Moghabele ba Eghdamat Israel*). Describing Israel as a virulent and malign state, the bill seeks to criminalize virtually all interaction with the "Zionist enemy," however insignificant.

Some of the bill's provisions are straightforward and have been observed by the regime for most of its existence. For instance, political agreements, negotiations, or even exchanges of information "with official and unofficial Israeli entities" are banned. The ban covers all commercial, academic, and cultural activities.

However, in a novel move, the new bill criminalizes all indirect forms of interaction. Entities that "work for the goals of the Zionist regime and international Zionism all over the world" and companies in which "over half of the shares belong to Israeli citizens" are included in the ban. Furthermore, hardware and software developed in Israel or by companies that have production branches in Israel are forbidden.

Both these provisions will be daunting to implement. The first requires an extensive registry of all international publicly traded companies, a task well beyond the capacity of the Iranian government. The second is even more

overwhelming as many IT giants, including IBM, Apple, and Google, to name just a few, have research facilities in Israel. Check Point, Mobile Eye, and numerous other platforms that were developed in Israel are used in many software products. Should Iran actually apply this clause of the law, it will end up in the digital equivalent of the Stone Age.

Clearly, by issuing such a sweeping boycott of the “Zionist entity,” the regime did not consider its unintended consequences. The widespread domestic pushback against the bill has made this quite clear. For example, the bill originally banned Iranian athletes from participating in competitions with Israeli athletes, which contradicts international sports conventions. Iran’s Ministry of Sport, which feared that Iran would be banned from international sports, lobbied the government to drop that article from the final version. Users of the iPhone, too, were quick to register their dismay at having their phones essentially criminalized.

On a more comical note, organizers of anti-Israel events at which Israeli flags are routinely burned complained that because the bill outlaws the manufacture of Israeli flags or other symbols, they will now be forced to import these items.

Even by the shoddy standards of the Majlis, the Countering Israel’s Actions bill stands out. Its provisions are either unrealistic or impossible to implement without devastating Iran’s technological base. The legislation is high on symbolic posturing, including the announcement that Iran plans to open a “virtual embassy” in Jerusalem to protect the Palestinians (a belated response to the American decision to move its embassy there). However, rather than advancing Iran’s anti-Israel agenda, the law reveals the regime’s weakness and internal chaos.

The idea for the bill was born of the personal desperation of Muhammad Ali Pormohtar, a hardline Majlis deputy, and his colleague Muhammad Azizi, both of whom are facing serious corruption charges. Pormohtar, a former high-ranking Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officer, has been charged with money laundering through the Seke Thaman gold trading company to the tune of \$3 billion. Azizi has been accused of “disruption in the automobile market,” a reference to his hoarding of 17,000 cars for future resale. Azizi was sentenced to 61 months in prison, and Pormohtar is expected to stand trial after his immunity expires at the end of the current parliament.

Apparently, these two individuals sponsored the bill to curry favor with Ebrahim Raisi, the hardline head of the judiciary. Because Israel-bashing is essentially risk-free, Ali Larijani and the other deputies jumped on the bandwagon, passing the bill with no objections. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei

gave the law his blessing, and the Revolutionary Guards duly declared it to be a potent weapon in the fight against the “Zionist enemy.”

The internal workings of the regime reek of desperation at the national level, and this absurd bill exemplifies that desperation. The regime, already battered by a catastrophic economic situation, mismanaged the Covid-19 epidemic and is facing the danger of a full complement of UN sanctions. The US has threatened to extend the arms embargo due to expire in October 2020. The disastrous downing of a Ukrainian passenger airliner and sinking of a vessel during a training exercise in the Gulf’s waters were national humiliations. A cyber-attack on Shahid Rajee port in Bandar Abbas, allegedly carried out by Israel in response to an Iranian cyber-attack on its water infrastructure, severely disrupted its operation.

Ironically, the anti-Israel law has piled more misery on the beleaguered mullahs. It is well known that the public has little faith in the regime and even less hope that things will get better. Public protests have been violently put down by the IRGC and its brutal auxiliary, the Basij.

Enforcing the more outlandish provisions of the legislation would be even more damaging to the government’s standing. Possessing an iPhone, for example, could earn its owner a five-year jail sentence if the terms of the bill are enforced. Although no one expects mass arrests over electronics, it is telling that the Guards, by supporting the bill, threw all caution to the wind.

Their strategy was quite simple. Having the benefit of frequent internal polling, the Guards determined that the regime has lost its legitimacy, making coercion the only viable ruling alternative. Although the clerics serve as a front, by all accounts, Iran has become a military dictatorship. Because the Guards organization is so deeply entrenched in the economic and social fabric of Iranian society, it might even survive a democratic revolution, the preferred model of regime change advocates. Rather than challenge it frontally, the Guards would try to hollow the new system out, leaving a thin façade of respectability.

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