The Past, Present, and Future of Iranian-Israeli Relations  
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Introduction

Of all the countries in the Middle East, Iran and Israel have an especially pronounced adversarial relationship. While the world is familiar with Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s inflammatory comments about Israel and the Holocaust, the relationship between Iran and Israel was not always so hostile. Prior to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the two states recognized their shared interests and developed informal relations and security alliances. However, the Islamic Revolution and its regime ushered in a new ideology with its recalculation of Iranian national interests. This resulted in the deterioration of the two states’ previously close, albeit informal, relationship to the present state of affairs. A more holistic understanding of the relationship between these two states is necessary in order to evaluate the current state of Iranian and Israeli relations, as well as Israeli threat perceptions of the Iranian regime. Addressing potential future scenarios and policy options available might provide an opportunity to improve relations. While many in Israel today, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, view Iran to be a primordial enemy and an existential threat, this perception is not entirely accurate. Given the two states’ history of relations, there are future scenarios that would be likely to provide a catalyst for improving relations between Iran and Israel.

Pre-1979 Iranian-Israeli Relations

The pre-revolutionary relationship between Iran and Israel began after Israel attained statehood in 1948. Both Iran and Israel perceived the other to be a necessary, strong ally in the region to address its own interests and security concerns, and developed its own foreign policies
accordingly. For Israel, developing relations with Iran was part of Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion’s (1948-1953; 1955-1963) “peripheral states” foreign policy. To counter hostility and security threats from the Arab states, Ben Gurion formulated a policy that would drive a wedge among its enemies by forging alliances with non-Arab nations situated on the periphery of the Middle East, namely Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia.\(^1\) Ben Gurion argued that “it is possible that through contacts with the peoples of the outer zone of the area [Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia] we shall achieve friendship with the peoples of the inner zone, who are our immediate neighbors.”\(^2\) Through this policy, his administration also hoped to create the image of the Middle East as a multi-religious, ethnic, and cultural area, not exclusively Arab or Islamic. Iran was viewed as especially important by Israel due to its strategic location, size, and economic potential.\(^3\) Achieving and maintaining good relations with Iran, an ally of the United States at the time, was essential to successfully implementing this policy and countering Nasserist expansionism and Soviet influence in the Middle East. These Israeli foreign policy goals are still relevant today, as Israel hopes to create networks of interaction and infrastructure with its neighbors to eliminate widespread regional enmity toward Israel.\(^4\) Israeli foreign policy objectives hold that a change in other states’ perception of Israel as the enemy coupled with regional acceptance is the only way to achieve long-term security.\(^5\)

For Iran under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s reign (1941 to 1979), developing a stronger if informal relationship with Israel was a way to counter threats posed to Iran by the

\(^2\) Sohrab Sobhani, *The Pragmatic Entente*, 34.
\(^3\) David Menashri, “Iran, Israel and the Middle East Conflict.” *Israel Affairs*, 12.1 (January 2006) 109.
\(^5\) Laura Drake, “Continuity and Change in Israeli Foreign Policy,” 196.
new, radical regimes in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, as well as to improve ties with the United States beginning in the 1950s. More importantly, Iran also felt increasingly isolated by the Soviet Union’s hostile regional interference and the limitations of its own connection to the United States. Given these threat perceptions, the Shah felt that Iranian security and interests could best be aligned with Ben Gurion’s periphery policy. In order to prevent Soviet advances in the region but avoid Arab opposition to Iranian policies, Iran decided to pursue relations with Israel on a secretive basis. Even when the heads of state interacted directly with one another, the meetings were kept out of the public eye. In 1958, the Israeli leadership and the Shah directly negotiated upgrading the Israeli Eilat-Ashkelon pipeline behind closed doors. Even Ben Gurion’s groundbreaking visit to Iran in 1961, setting the precedent for successive visits by Israeli prime ministers, was kept from the public eye.

One of the primary issues of concern for Israel in its relationship with Iran prior to the 1979 Revolution was the issue of recognition. By 1950, Pahlavi had accorded de facto recognition to Israel, and this recognition was not withdrawn by Mohammad Mossadegh, Iran’s democratically elected prime minister from 1951 until his overthrow in the C.I.A. coup of 1953. It is important that the Shah directly addressed the continuance of Iranian recognition of Israel under Mossadegh, as this was the only time during the Shah’s reign where he was not the absolute head of state, fleeing in exile to Baghdad between August 15 and 19, 1953. Iranian de

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7 Sohrab Sobhani, The Pragmatic Entente, 35.
8 Sohrab Sobhani, The Pragmatic Entente, 35.
10 Trita Parsi, Treacherous Alliance, 23.
11 Trita Parsi, Treacherous Alliance, 26.
12 Shaul BKhash, “Iran’s Relations with Israel, Syria, and Lebanon,” 116.
facto recognition of Israel resulted in extensive, yet relatively quiet, security and economic cooperation. The Shah later reaffirmed this recognition during a public interview in July of 1960.\(^{14}\) This second recognition of Israel by Iran led to a rupture of diplomatic relations between Iran and Egypt in the same year. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1956-1970) accused Iranian leaders of being colleagues of the colonists and used the event to expand Egypt’s influence into the Gulf states.\(^{15}\) Relations with Egypt were later restored in 1970, when Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi called for restoration of the Arab territories to the Arab states after the 1967 War and dispatched humanitarian aid to some of the Arab countries.\(^{16}\) Despite this development in Arab-Iranian relations, Israel and Iran continued to cooperate in both security and economic affairs until the 1979 Revolution.

However, this recognition by Iran was informal and, although Israel leapt at every opportunity to make their growing relationship with Iran public, Iran kept even the deployment of its diplomats in Israel a secret; the Israeli diplomats in Iran were excused from certain ceremonies required for all other diplomats.\(^{17}\) Israel was careful not to press Iran too hard on more official recognition because doing so “could negatively affect the substance of its relations with Tehran…the Israelis were willing to forgo the ceremonial trappings of diplomacy as long as the real substance was present.”\(^{18}\) As a result of Iranian de facto recognition of Israel and their shared regional and security interests, Iran and Israel enjoyed extensive security and economic cooperation in the years before 1979. These took the forms of security alliances, cooperation

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\(^{15}\) Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*, 28.

\(^{16}\) Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *Iran’s Foreign Policy, 1941 – 1973*, 421.

\(^{17}\) Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*, 26-27.

\(^{18}\) Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*, 27.
between each state’s intelligence agencies, and business contracts between both private and public actors.

**Pre-1979 Iranian-Israeli Security Cooperation**

One of the first and most significant areas of Iranian-Israeli cooperation in the pre-revolutionary years was in regional security concerns. Iraq at this time was viewed as a threat to the national security of both states and thus Iran and Israel engaged in multiple ventures to pursue their mutual interests regarding this state. After many countries in the Middle East expelled their Jewish populations in the years following Israel’s creation, Iran provided assistance to Iraqi Jews fleeing to Israel. Beginning in 1948 and continuing through 1952, Iran allowed thousands of Iraqi Jews to use Iran as a transit point on their way to Israel.19 In order to successfully facilitate the movement of Iraqi Jews to Israel, Israel cooperated with SAVAK, the Shah’s intelligence agency.20 Iran today is home to the largest Jewish population outside of Israel in the Middle East.21 Despite the discrimination that they face living in the Islamic Republic, article 13 of the Iranian constitution names Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians as the only recognized religious minorities in Iran, enabling them to “perform their own religious rites, and to act according to their own canon in personal matters and religious education.” Official censuses conducted by the Islamic Republic in 1986 and 1996 place the numbers of Iranian Jews at 26,354 and 12,737, respectively; outside estimates place the number closer to 35,000.22

Iran and Israel also cooperated with one another in providing assistance to Iraqi Kurdish groups between the 1960s and 1970s. Both Iran and Israel shared an interest in keeping Iraqi

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19 Shaul Bakhash, “Iran’s Relations with Israel, Syria, and Lebanon,” 116.
forces engaged in its northern territory to avoid pressuring Iran to its southern border and Israel on its eastern.\textsuperscript{23} Iran was worried about the Baathist regime’s hostility and increasing Soviet influence in Iraq, and Israel viewed Iraq as a threat if it were to attempt an attack on Israel.\textsuperscript{24} Israeli decision-makers also saw an important window of safety if Iran could balance against Iraq.\textsuperscript{25} Both Iranian and Israeli officials agreed that supporting a mere guerilla campaign alone would not be effective; they instead agreed to provide training and equipment to Mullah Mustafa Barazani’s Kurdish rebels.\textsuperscript{26} Throughout the 1960s and into the early 1970s, Iran and Israel provided the Kurdish rebels with arms, ammunition, military advisers, training courses, and funds. Both Iran and Israel viewed Iraq at this time to be a security threat and worked within their respective goals, undermining threatening regimes and using periphery states to affect the inner circle, to aid the Kurdish rebels against the Iraqi government.

Aside from aiding Kurdish rebel forces within Iraq, SAVAK and Mossad took advantage of other opportunities for significant cooperation regarding their respective states’ mutual security concerns. Iranian SAVAK chief Teimur Bakhtiar met in Rome with the Israeli ambassador and Mossad chief Isser Harel in 1957.\textsuperscript{27} From this point forward, “Israel and Iran exchanged intelligence on Egyptian activities in the Arab world and participated in some joint operations.”\textsuperscript{28} In the Iranian port city of Khoramshahr near the southern border with Iraq, Mossad and SAVAK established an office to use the local Iranian Arab population to infiltrate Basra and Baghdad in Iraq.\textsuperscript{29} The operation was extremely important, and through the use of this joint office, “Iran and Israel were able to obtain valuable information on Soviet arms transfers to

\textsuperscript{23} Sohrab Sobhani, \textit{The Pragmatic Entente}, 46.
\textsuperscript{24} Trita Parsi, \textit{Treacherous Alliance}, 34-35.
\textsuperscript{25} Trita Parsi, \textit{Treacherous Alliance}, 28.
\textsuperscript{26} Sohrab Sobhani, \textit{The Pragmatic Entente}, 47.
\textsuperscript{28} A.W. Samii, “The Security Relationship,” 170.
\textsuperscript{29} Sohrab Sobhani, \textit{The Pragmatic Entente}, 47-48.
Iraq, such as the number of Soviet advisors assisting the Iraqi military and the exact types of weapons delivered.\textsuperscript{30}

In late 1958, Iran, Turkey, and Israel formed an intelligence exchange alliance called “Trident.”\textsuperscript{31} According to documents stolen from the American embassy in Tehran and subsequently published, “the Trident organization involves continuing intelligence exchange and semiannual meetings at the chief of service level.”\textsuperscript{32} The Persian section of the 11\textsuperscript{th} published volume of documents\textsuperscript{33} states that “the main goal of the Israeli-Iranian relationship was the implementation and development of anti-Arab and pro-Israeli policies, which was the decision of the Iranian leadership…Mossad regularly provided reports about the various activities of Egypt in other Arab countries as well as uprising and events in Iraq, and the activities of the communists which would have impacted Iran.”\textsuperscript{34}

SAVAK and Mossad conducted joint intelligence operations that involved breaking into Tehran-based embassies of Arab states to gain access to their materials\textsuperscript{35} in addition to anti-Egyptian and anti-Iraqi intelligence work. Mossad also trained SAVAK agents in “torture and investigative techniques.”\textsuperscript{36} Israel became a new source for Iranian weapons purchases,\textsuperscript{37} selling Iran high-tech military equipment and training pilots, paratroopers, and artillery men.\textsuperscript{38} The Shah’s regime was even willing to sacrifice relations with powerful Arab states in favor of Israel,

\textsuperscript{30} Sohrab Sobhani, \textit{The Pragmatic Entente}, 48.
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Documents from the U.S. Espionage Den, Volume 11} (Tehran: Muslim Students Following the Line of the Imam, 1980) 24.
\textsuperscript{33} The stolen documents are published in 77 volumes by a group called the Muslim Students Following the Line of the Imam. The volumes contain the original documents in English; some of the documents that had been shredded at the time the students seized the embassy were reconstructed and published as well. Each volume also includes the group’s own “translation” of and commentary on the English documents, resulting in large differences between the Persian and English sections of the books.
\textsuperscript{34} [صفحه ۲۶], \textit{Documents from the U.S. Espionage Den}, page 62. Translated from the Persian section of the published text by Shahryar Oliai.
\textsuperscript{35} Sohrab Sobhani, \textit{The Pragmatic Entente}, 49.
\textsuperscript{36} Trita Parsi, \textit{Treacherous Alliance}, 26.
\textsuperscript{37} Shaul Bakhash, “Iran’s Relations with Israel, Syria, and Lebanon,” 116.
\textsuperscript{38} Trita Parsi, \textit{Treacherous Alliance}, 26.
as it perceived states such as Egypt and Iraq as a threat to Iranian national security. Because Israel also perceived such states to be a threat to its own national security, Israel provided Iran with this crucial intelligence and training.

Pre-1979 Iranian-Israeli Economic Cooperation

Beyond their significant if informal security alliances and cooperation, Israel and Iran also cooperated economically prior to the Iranian Revolution. One of the main focuses of this economic collaboration was agriculture. Due to its own climate and natural environment, Israel had gained considerable experience in developing arid land. In 1963, the Israeli government corporation TAHAL Ltd., of Tel Aviv, won an Iranian government contract to develop over 120,000 acres of the Qazvin area, an already underdeveloped area further impoverished by an earthquake in the previous year.\(^{39}\) Due to the work by the Israeli contractors, the average income for the Qazvin farmers increased from $40 to $500, after orchards started producing cash fruit crops.\(^{40}\) Approximately 1,500 rural cooperative workers were trained by the Israeli contractors who also helped Iran develop its tourism economy.\(^{41}\) In order to cement relations between Iran and Israel, the Shah ordered his ministers to hire Israeli consultants, and according to former Israeli Labor Minister Arieh Eliav, “Israel trained some ten thousand Iranian agricultural experts.”\(^{42}\) Overall, Iran also needed the far more advanced Israeli technology and drew upon Israeli expertise in construction and import-export trade.\(^{43}\) By the end of the 1960s, “Israeli trade with Iran amounted to $250 million annually.”\(^{44}\)

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\(^{39}\) Robert B. Reppa, Sr., *Israel and Iran*, 98.

\(^{40}\) Robert B. Reppa, Sr., *Israel and Iran*, 99.

\(^{41}\) Robert B. Reppa, Sr., *Israel and Iran*, 99.


\(^{43}\) Shaul Bakhash, “Iran’s Relations with Israel, Syria, and Lebanon,” 116.

\(^{44}\) Sohrab Sobhani, *The Pragmatic Entente*, 65.
In addition to Iran hiring Israeli corporations and consultants to develop its agricultural industry, Israelis were also hired for major Iranian construction projects. One important example that has recently received attention is the headquarters of Iran Air, Iran’s national airline carrier. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi hired Israeli engineers to build the airline’s headquarters in Tehran, and there were regular flights between Tehran and Tel Aviv throughout the 1960s.\(^{45}\) While indicative of close relations and economic cooperation prior to 1979, the Iranian national carrier’s office building has elicited sharp reactions from the current Iranian regime after images were released by Google Earth of the Star of David built on the rooftop.\(^{46}\) As might be expected, Iranian officials called for the immediate removal of the symbol (although how the symbol went undetected by the Islamic Republic for over thirty years remains to be addressed).

Finally, one of the most important dimensions of the economic relationship between pre-revolutionary Iran and Israel was their oil trade. As previously stated, one year after the 1956 Suez Crisis, Iran and Israel respectively financed and constructed the Eilat-Ashkelon pipeline. The pipeline connected the Gulf of Aqaba to the Mediterranean, enabling Iranian oil exports to bypass the Suez Canal. Given Iran and Israel’s mutual distrust of Egypt, Iran’s ability to lessen its dependence on Egypt by bypassing the Suez Canal is especially important; at the time, 73 percent of Iranian imports and 76 percent of Iranian oil exports flowed through the Suez.\(^{47}\) Despite Arab criticism over the Iranian-Israeli cooperation, Iran’s financial interests in trade and security cooperation with Israel outweighed its interest in appeasing Arab sentiments; a mere 100 days after construction began, the pipeline became operational and began transporting Iranian oil.


\(^{47}\) Trita Parsi, _Treachery’s Alliance_, 23.
to Israel for $1.30 per barrel.\textsuperscript{48} The pipeline has since expanded and is managed by the Israeli Eilat Ashkelon Pipeline Company, Ltd.,\textsuperscript{49} after Iran’s withdrawal from the project following the Revolution.

Former United States Foreign Service Officer Theodore L. Elliot, Jr. confirms these motivations in a letter to the United States ambassador in Tehran dated February 13, 1969. The letter states that the Shah, in a January 31\textsuperscript{rd} meeting between Iranian and Israeli officials that year, declared that the pipeline would be a financial benefit to Iran, his certainty that Arab nations are not able to defeat Israel, and that Israel is a friend to Iran.\textsuperscript{50} After the 1973 Arab oil boycott began, the Shah continued to supply Israel and the West with oil, despite Arab criticism,\textsuperscript{51} and Iran became Israel’s primary oil supplier.\textsuperscript{52}

**Post-1979 Iranian-Israeli Relations**

In spite of the positive, informal nature of Iranian-Israeli relations, the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the following government ushered in a new interpretation of Iranian foreign policy objectives. The revolutionary government’s interpretation of these interests, in stark opposition to the Shah’s previous policies, negatively affected the relationship between Iran and Israel. For Supreme Leader Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini (1979 to 1989), “Israel was created by imperialism ‘to suppress and exploit’ Muslims, and has been supported ever since ‘by all the imperialists.’”\textsuperscript{53} Even prior to the Revolution, Khomeini stated that “‘Israel does not wish’ the

\textsuperscript{48} Trita Parsi, Treacherous Alliance, 23.
\textsuperscript{50} Documents from the U.S. Espionage Den, page 79. Translated from the Persian section of the published text by Shahryar Oliai.
\textsuperscript{52} Shaul Bakhash, “Iran’s Relations with Israel, Syria, and Lebanon,” 116.
\textsuperscript{53} David Menashri, “Iran, Israel and the Middle East Conflict,” 110.
Qur’an, the ‘ulama,’ or any single learned man ‘to exist in this country.’ [Israel] wishes ‘to appropriate your wealth’ and to remove ‘anything it regards as blocking its path’ – most notably the Qur’an.”

The revolutionary rhetoric also viewed the Shah’s close alliances with the United States and Israel as rendering Iran dependent and vulnerable and the policies to be anti-Islamic and anti-Iranian. Ben Gurion’s periphery policy was viewed by the revolutionaries as an insufficient way to achieve long-term security and regional leadership. To combat this perceived dependency, the new regime supported befriending over balancing against Iran’s Arab neighbors as the best means to achieve these long-term goals, appealing to pan-Islamic over pan-Arab sentiments to bridge the Persian-Arab divide. However, this strategy has failed, as Iran still has hostile relations with several Arab states and has been unable to export the Revolution as it had hoped. Instead of viewing a close yet informal working relationship with Israel and the United States as a desirable foreign policy objective, Khomeini and the new regime identified four main foreign policy objectives for the Islamic republic and chose to follow a policy of non-alignment to meet these new goals. These objectives were to achieve autonomy in foreign policy, avoid costly involvement in the United States-Soviet Union rivalry, end Iran’s dependence upon one ideological camp, and finally to generally improve ties with all states, with the exception of Israel and apartheid South Africa.

In the early days of the Revolution, Israel tried to maintain its relations with Iran. Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan tried to keep some Israeli personnel in Iran as long as possible after the revolution “hoping that their presence would compel the revolutionary government to

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54 David Menashri, “Iran, Israel and the Middle East Conflict,” 110.
56 Trita Parsi, Treacherous Alliance, 89.
57 Houman A. Sadri, “An Islamic Perspective on Non-Alignment.”
maintain Iran’s ties to Israel.”

Israel still viewed Iran as an important partner for achieving regional interests; however, Iranian Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan (1979 to 1980) severed all relations with Israel, including oil sales and air links, on February 18, just a week after the Revolution. This did not mean that Israel and Iran’s interests completely diverged in the region; Israel, at this time, still perceived Iran as an important ally. When Iran became involved in the war with Iraq that lasted from 1980 through 1988, it faced an adversary that was far better funded and armed than itself. Israel was also concerned about Iraq, as its relations with Arab states (with the exception of Egypt) and the Soviet bloc were still hostile; in this light, “Iraq was the single greatest regional threat to Israel’s security, while Iran – in spite of its ideology [and] harsh rhetoric…was seen as a non-threat.”

When Iraqi ballistic missiles struck Tehran, three hundred miles from Iraqi defense lines, Israel was suddenly put in range by advanced Iraqi weaponry.

During the mid-1980s, Israel became involved with arms deals to Iran to assist Iran in combating their mutual enemy, Iraq. These arms sales were part of the infamous Iran-Contra Scandal, where the United States and Israel sold arms to Iran and United States President Ronald Reagan then used the money to support the Nicaraguan Contras to secure the release of hostages held in Lebanon. This incident is especially significant in evaluating the future of Israeli-Iranian relations because it shows that, when the regime was threatened, Khomeini was willing to pragmatically deal with Israel, trading religious rhetoric “for the realism of international

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58 Trita Parsi, Treacherous Alliance, 80.
59 Trita Parsi, Treacherous Alliance, 82.
60 Trita Parsi, Treacherous Alliance, 92.
61 Trita Parsi, Treacherous Alliance, 99.
62 David Menashri, “Iran, Israel and the Middle East Conflict,” 115.
In addition to weapons, Iran also purchased Israeli food products, routed through third countries in attempts to hide the fact that the products were Israeli.

While instances of interaction between the two countries are rare, there are more recent examples. After Khomeini’s death in 1989 and the end of the brutal Iran-Iraq war that had crippled the Iranian economy, Israel temporarily resumed its purchase of Iranian oil. Under this new deal, Israel “agreed to purchase two million barrels of oil for $36 million [in order] to secure Iranian help in winning the release of three Israeli prisoners of war held in Lebanon.” Officials in both states attempted to keep the deal quiet, but one year later, Israeli Energy and Infrastructure Minister Moshe Shahal told the Knesset that Israel had made a $2.5 million profit from the deal.

In January of 2010, an Israeli software and information technology company called DaroNet admitted to signing a $1 million contract with the Tehran Chamber of Commerce. Although trade between the two states is officially illegal in each, DaroNet spokesperson Yehoshua Meiri stated that his company “sold Tehran’s Chamber of Commerce over 70 licenses providing for the use of DaroNet’s signature business website management software…. [and] his company only realized they were selling the system to an Iranian entity when they were asked to translate the system into Farsi.” Israeli and Iranian laws were bypassed to make the business transaction, as the contract was signed with a “European businessman from the Netherlands representing the Tehran Chamber of Commerce.”

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65 Shaul Bakhash, “Iran’s Relations with Israel, Syria, and Lebanon,” 122.
66 Trita Parsi, Treacherous Alliance, 131.
68 B. Joffe-Walt, “Iran-Israel Trade Revealed.”
Commerce denied that any such agreement was made, but Meiri claimed that “lots of Israelis do business with Iran…from cherry tomatoes to high tech, it’s a $250 million trade.”

Present Iranian-Israeli Relations and Israeli Threat Perceptions

Given Iran’s pre-revolutionary relations and mutual foreign policy objectives, the Islamic regime’s new interpretation of Iranian foreign policy goals, and its past pragmatic cooperation with Israel, it is important to turn to the question of the status of present Iranian-Israeli relations. Simply put, the current state of relations is one of extreme animosity and fear, further complicated by both Israeli and Iranian leaders’ statements obscuring the fact that the states’ conflict is not primordial. Because of the rhetoric currently espoused by Ahmadinejad and the conservatives in control of the Iranian regime and Iran’s nuclear endeavors, Israel presently views Iran as a serious threat within the region. For Israeli politicians and the general public, Ahmadinejad’s statement in 2005 that “Israel must be wiped off the map” (or “This Jerusalem-occupying regime must vanish from the pages of time,” depending on the translation) was strong evidence “of Iran’s malign intent towards the Jewish state…Ahmadinejad’s outburst underlined the importance of putting an end to Iran’s nuclear ambitions.”

Statements made by Ahmadinejad with the support of other hardliners in Iran make it clear why Israel would be worried about Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. As the presidency was returned to hardliners with the 2005 election of Ahmadinejad, Iranian rhetoric against Israel grew stronger. In October of 2005, at a conference organized by pro-government high school students entitled “A World Without Zionism,” Ahmadinejad stated that “the Palestine question would be resolved only when a Palestinian government was established over the whole of the Palestinian

69 B. Joffe-Walt, “Iran-Israel Trade Revealed.”
territory, refugees returned to their homes, and there were free elections in which all people from all races and religions could vote and choose a government.”71 This new rhetoric was in sharp contrast to previous reformist president Ayatollah Mohammad Khatami (1997 to 2005) who publicly stated that Iran would accept and not interfere in a two-state solution as long as the Palestinians agreed to the formula. Ahmadinejad’s statements were not only directed at Israel, but he also addressed other Arab and Muslim states, declaring that any state that recognized Israel “should know that they will burn in the fire of the Muslim nation’s fury. The Islamic nation cannot allow its historical enemy to live in the heart of the Islamic world and have its security guaranteed.”72

However, it is important to note that such claims and fiery rhetoric do not go undisputed within Iran. Ahmadinejad’s 2006 Holocaust-denying conference and his comments denying the severity of the Holocaust drew criticism from reformists within Iran. Khatami stated that the Holocaust is a historical reality and that “we should speak out even if a single Jew is killed. Don’t forget that one of the crimes of Hitler, Nazism and German National Socialism was the massacre of innocent people, among them many Jews.”73 Additionally, the Mosharekat Front, Iran’s largest reformist political party, argued that Ahmadinejad’s rhetoric will not benefit Iranians nor improve the position of the Palestinians, instead leading to the West and Israel forming a unified front against Iran.74

In regard to Israeli concerns of Iranian nuclear ambitions, it is important to understand the relationship between Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Ahmadinejad and their influence over Iranian foreign policy. Despite having democratic structural elements (such as direct elections of

71 Kasra Naji, Ahmadinejad, 146.
72 Kasra Naji, Ahmadinejad, 147.
73 Kasra Naji, Ahmadinejad, 160.
74 Kasra Naji, Ahmadinejad, 160.
the president and Majles, the Iranian parliament), the government structure is overwhelmingly dominated by the non-elected positions and the Supreme Leader’s authority is absolute. In such a system, the fact that Supreme Leader Khamenei has not yet reined in Ahmadinejad’s use of such rhetoric, at times engaging in it as well, makes the nuclear issue of greatest importance for Israeli decision-makers. The first part of Israel’s threat perception is the Israeli fear that once Iran acquires a nuclear weapon, it would be a “game changer” in the region and spark a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Countries that also feel threatened by Iran, especially Saudi Arabia and Egypt, may start to develop their own nuclear capacities and weapons. Even if Iran reaches the capability to produce a nuclear weapon in a brief period of time, Israel faces a threat to its national interest in that Iran could become a greater relative regional power. In this scenario, Hamas and Hezbollah could be strengthened; Fatah, Egypt, and Jordan weakened; Syria and Turkey might move to ally closer to Iran; and regional moderates seeking peace with Israel would be weakened, the result being increasing difficulty in achieving peace between Israel and its neighbors. An additional Israeli fear regarding a nuclear-armed Iran is that “Iran would . . . give the bomb to one of its direct proxies, most likely Hezbollah.” Finally, Israel is concerned that Iran, upon completion of nuclear weapons, would attack Israel.

In light of these concerns, the Israeli public is overwhelmingly in support of aggressive measures against Iran. In surveys conducted by Tel Aviv University’s Center for Iranian Studies, 75 percent of Israelis believe that the United States cannot stop Iran from acquiring

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nuclear weapons and that 50 percent of Israelis support Israel taking immediate military action.\textsuperscript{79} Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu views Iran as an existential threat, even calling Ahmadinejad “a modern Hitler” in 2008.\textsuperscript{80} In the previous year, Netanyahu warned of a situation in which Israel has “failed and Iran has succeeded in acquiring a bomb [stating that] against lunatics, deterrence must be absolute, total. The lunatics must understand that if they raise their hand against us, we will hit them in a way that will eviscerate any desire to harm us.”\textsuperscript{81} Israeli public and politicians’ concerns also stem from Ahmadinejad’s membership in the Hojjatieh Society, a fringe group dedicated to preparing the world for the coming of the 12\textsuperscript{th} Shi’a Imam, the hidden Mahdi; Ahmadinejad’s chief spiritual adviser, Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, is also a member of this group.\textsuperscript{82} Policy-makers who see Iran as an existential threat view Ahmadinejad’s Hojjatieh Society membership as evidence of the ineffectiveness of deterrence, especially since the Mahdi is brought back by cataclysm. Israeli leaders also find Iran’s continued adherence to religious dogma in its attitude towards Israel concerning.\textsuperscript{83}

These Israeli fears of a nuclear Iran are also shared by many leaders in the Gulf states that wish to challenge Iranian regional hegemony, as evidenced in the recently exposed WikiLeaks. Several leaders are quoted as imploring the United States to act militarily against Iran. Perhaps most notably was Saudi Arabian King Abdullah’s statement to “cut off the head of the snake.”\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{80} Ronen Bergman, “Letter from Tel Aviv.”
\textsuperscript{81} Ronen Bergman, “Letter from Tel Aviv.”
\textsuperscript{82} Jerome R. Corsi, \textit{Why Israel Can’t Wait}, 87-88.
\textsuperscript{83} David Menashri, “Iran, Israel and the Middle East Conflict,” 111.
Former parliamentary majority leader and current Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri was quoted in 2006 telling American officials that “Iraq was unnecessary. Iran is necessary.”

President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen stated in the same year that “Tehran ‘wants to restore the Persian empire.”

United Arab Emirates’ Defense Chief, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Zayed stated that “Ahmadinejad is Hitler” and “any culture that is patient and focused enough to spend years working on a single carpet is capable of waiting years and even decades to achieve even greater goals [nuclear weapons].”

King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa of Bahrain in 2009 argued “forcefully for taking action to terminate [Iran’s] nuclear program, by whatever means necessary.”

In the face of these revealing comments to which the United States government has reacted negatively, Netanyahu believes the outcome to be positive. He argues that “Our region has been hostage to a narrative that is the result of 60 years of propaganda, which paints Israel as the greatest threat…for the first time in history, there is agreement that Iran is the threat.”

However, just as there is debate among prominent Iranian political figures regarding the current administration’s approach toward Israel, there is significant debate within key figures in the Israeli government. One of the most important of these figures is Ehud Barak, the former Israeli prime minister currently serving as defense minister. This past year, Barak has publicly stated that “Iran does not pose an existential threat to Israel,” adding that if Iran becomes nuclear,

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86 “Fears of a Nuclear Iran.”
87 Jo Becker, et. al. “Around the World, Distresses over Iran.”
then “it will spark an arms race in the Middle East.”90 The stream of WikiLeaks also reveals Barak’s opinion that a strike on Iranian nuclear facilities was only viable until the end of 2010, because after that, “any military solution would result in unacceptable collateral damage.”91

Furthermore, the Israeli intelligence community is also in sharp disagreement with Netanyahu. Experts on Iran correctly argue that Ahmadinejad does not make the final decisions and that Ayatollah Khamenei holds the real power.92 They also argue that throughout the regime’s existence, it “has shown pragmatism and moderation whenever its survival was at stake… [and an] Israeli counterstrike [to an Iranian attack]… would mean the end of the revolutionary regime.”93 Additionally, Mossad and Military Intelligence completely diverge with Netanyahu’s ideological camp about the motivations behind the Iranian pursuit of nuclear weapons capabilities.

Aside from considerations of prestige and influence, they argue that Iran is following this policy in order to deter intervention and regime change by the United States.94 An Israeli military option is also criticized because, in a strike on Iranian nuclear facilities, “Israel will obtain only a short-term delay of the Iranian bomb, but will get involved in a prolonged war” with Iran and its regional proxies, including Syria.95 Such an attack could also bolster hardliners within Iran, making the situation even more difficult to resolve. The challenge facing Israeli foreign policy is which interpretation and pressure will emerge dominant – the public and certain elected officials’ beliefs that Iran and its pursuit of nuclear technology and weapons are

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91 Barak Ravid. “Netanyahu: WikiLeaks Cables Prove Israel is Right on Iran.”
92 Ronen Bergman. “Letter from Tel Aviv.”
93 Ronen Bergman. “Letter from Tel Aviv.”
94 Ronen Bergman. “Letter from Tel Aviv.”
existential threats to Israel, or the security and intelligence community who directly oppose this interpretation. The office of Israeli prime minister and other elected offices are subject to domestic concerns and threat perceptions in a much different way than the non-elected Iranian office of the Supreme Leader (Khamenei controls Iran’s armed forces and Ahmadinejad retains the support of the high echelons of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps). Such domestic pressures could create a scenario in which Israeli politicians, through their own cost and benefit analysis, decide that attacking Iranian nuclear facilities is in Israel’s national interest without necessarily believing that Iran is an existential threat to Israel. With the domestic pressures placed upon elected politicians and their own self-interest to retain power, Netanyahu and other Israeli foreign policy-makers run the risk of ignoring intelligence expertise and engaging in highly controversial policies unilaterally to act against a high, but not existential, threat.

**Evaluating Israeli Threat Perceptions**

In evaluating the gravity of each of these threat perceptions, the realist belief in the rationality of the Iranian regime offers a better basis for analysis than the neoconservative perspective that views Iran to be a rogue state that will not be receptive to diplomacy. As seen in the Islamic regime’s eagerness to make weapons deals with the United States and Israel during the 1980s in what became known as the Iran-Contra Scandal, “Iranian political leaders [are] willing to sacrifice the religious ideology that drove the revolution to the realism that would allow Iran to survive as an independent state . . . and ensure the survival of the regime.”

However, instances of major cooperation between the Iranian and Israeli governments during the post-revolutionary years only occurred when the threat perceptions of one another were lower and the situation between Israel and Iran is clearly different today than it was during the 1980s

and early 1990s. While these critiques are true, the examples of weapons and oil cooperation indicate that there are certain conditions under which the Iranian regime is willing to forgo strict adherence to the regime’s ideology and work with Israel, provided that this cooperation is viewed by the Iranian government to be in its interests.

A regional nuclear arms race or the relative strengthening of Iran would clearly be detrimental to Israeli interests. As Ariel Ilan Roth writes, “Israel fears that Iran’s nuclear ambitions could undermine its qualitative superiority of arms and its consistent ability to inflict disproportionate casualties on adversaries – cornerstones of Israel’s defense strategy.”

Furthermore, Roth argues that even though Israel has signed peace treaties with “leaders who have reconciled themselves to Israel’s existence… [they] have done so because they believed Israel was strong but unlikely to endure in the long-term.” With Iran’s nuclear program and a regional nuclear arms race challenging Israel’s thus-far successful defense strategy, Tehran’s pursuit of a nuclear program is a real threat to Israeli defense and regional interests. Arab states choosing to bandwagon with Iran instead of balancing against it could also be a concern, but given the statements made by Arab leaders in the recent string of WikiLeaks, such a scenario is unlikely. Furthermore, the fact that Saudi Arabia and Egypt, competing for regional hegemony with Iran, have already started to pursue nuclear programs speaks directly to the very real fears in the region as a whole of a nuclear-armed Iran.

An added concern is that even if Iran acts rationally according to realist understandings of national interest, it still may not be receptive to diplomatic efforts to stop its nuclear program. However, chief Iranian nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili is currently engaging in diplomatic talks with United Nations and European Union leaders in Geneva. The talks began Monday,

97 Ariel Ilan Roth, “The Root of All Fears.”
98 Ariel Ilan Roth, “The Root of All Fears.”
December 6, 2010, and are expected to continue. This is an important development and will hopefully address issues that were discussed but not resolved during the previous year, when leaders were able to reach a groundbreaking deal that would involve Iran exporting low-enriched uranium for international processing, until Iranian officials introduced new conditions and the deal dissolved. Even though all parties cite a lack of mutual trust as an obstacle in reaching a resolution, the fact that important parties are continuing the 2009 Geneva talks indicate that Iranian leaders have not entirely ruled out the value of diplomacy and might still be receptive to diplomatic efforts.

Neoconservatives such as Jerome Corsi argue that it is likely that Iran is developing nuclear weapons not only to gain regional hegemony, but also to destroy Israel. They take seriously Ahmadinejad’s statements regarding the Mahdi and his rhetoric linking the Mahdi to Iran’s nuclear development. Furthermore, negotiation with Iranian leaders to persuade them to forgo nuclear pursuits are viewed as futile and that military force, over negotiations, is the only way to halt Iranian nuclear ambitions. With the rise of the Islamic Republic, the abrupt end of Iranian-Israeli relations, and statements by Khomeini implying that Israel is destroying Iran’s ability to be a Muslim society, it could be argued that the conflict was transformed from one where realist principles would win out to a religious one, where religion replaces national interests as the primary lens of analysis. According to this interpretation, the conflict between Iran and Israel would be even more difficult, if not impossible, to resolve.

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103 David Makovsky and Dennis Ross, Myths, Illusions, and Peace, 185-186.
Even if Iranian leaders view national interests through a mixture of realist and rational principles, the regime has shown that, under specific circumstances, realism becomes the primary vehicle driving foreign policy and religious framing becomes a rhetorical tool used to support particular policy approaches. Additional concerns of Iran attacking Israel with a nuclear weapon or turning a nuclear weapon over to Hezbollah and Hamas are equally less realistic concerns. Iran is already participating in the diplomatic process, and “no nuclear state has ever turned over its most prized military asset to a subsidiary actor or surrendered its exclusive control over a weapon that it worked so hard to maintain.”\textsuperscript{104} Furthermore, Iranian ally and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad told United States officials that Iran would not use a nuclear weapon against Israel because “an Iranian nuclear strike against Israel would result in massive Palestinian casualties, which Iran would never risk.”\textsuperscript{105}

Contrary to neoconservative voices and Netanyahu’s beliefs, Iran’s regime, however inflammatory its rhetoric may be, is a rational actor. Using international relations theory and assuming Iran does produce nuclear weapons, Roth applies the principle of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) to explaining why an Iranian nuclear strike on Israel would be highly unlikely.\textsuperscript{106} The MAD theory holds that a state armed with nuclear weapons will be deterred from attacking another nuclear power if it knows that this state has a second strike capacity that would allow it to successfully retaliate after sustaining an attack. However, this argument is valid only when each state is a nuclear power and at least one has a second-strike capability and when there is symmetrical information about that second-strike capability. Former deputy secretary general of the International Atomic Energy Agency Dr. Olli Heinonen told Israeli

\textsuperscript{104} Ariel Ilan Roth, “The Root of All Fears.”
\textsuperscript{106} Ariel Ilan Roth, “The Root of All Fears.”
newspaper Haaretz in January 2010 that “Iran's centrifuges… are not working well; some of them are defective. Only about 3,000 are working properly, and Iran will need many more to enrich uranium to a level that will allow it to manufacture a nuclear weapon.” Based on this assessment of Iranian nuclear capacity, Iran clearly lacks a second-strike capability, a condition required by MAD theory, to be able to attack Israel and defend against Israeli retaliation.

The Iranian regime would be deterred from launching a nuclear attack on Israel by “the Israeli capacity to respond to an Iranian nuclear attack by destroying Iran’s eight largest cities, its oil industry, and its capacity to operate as a functioning society… ‘little in the behavior of the leaders of revolutionary Iran…suggests that they would see this as a good trade.” Israel possesses a far greater nuclear stockpile than whatever “infant capability Iran could muster in the foreseeable future. Moreover, Israel is believed to possess a secure submarine-based second-strike capability that could devastate Iran.” Roth also argues that no nuclear-armed state has ever given its most prized military asset which it worked so hard to obtain to another actor, thereby surrendering complete control. Iran is also unlikely to give a nuclear weapon to Hezbollah, which would result in the assured destruction to which it cannot retaliate. However, these far less likely scenarios are currently affecting Israeli policy, as Israel’s military has already been participating in practice exercises in the Mediterranean to attack Iran.

Finally, in addressing the concerns of Ahmadinejad’s own Mahdi and anti-Israel rhetoric, these provocative statements should not be taken alone to be the primary indicators of real threats. Throughout the Islamic Republic’s history, Iranian officials have regularly adapted

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107 Amos Harel, “Here’s Why Israel Must Not Attack Iran Now.”
109 Ariel Ilan Roth, “The Root of All Fears.”
realism at the expense of religious ideology.\textsuperscript{111} Despite Ahmadinejad’s association with the Hojjatieh Society, his neo-fundamentalists “no longer aim to take on the mantle of Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini’s revolutionary ideals…religion and revolutionary ideology have become convenient means to an end, but not the end themselves”\textsuperscript{112} Even if Ahmadinejad truly believes in Yazdi’s ideas, he does not create or control Iranian foreign policy; the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is in charge of both foreign and domestic policy. While Khamenei has made controversial statements as Supreme Leader, his do not garner the attention given by the international community to Ahmadinejad’s fiery rhetoric. It appears that the survival of the regime is the present leadership’s top priority.\textsuperscript{113} Thus, a nuclear-armed or nuclear-weapons-capable Iran is a far more real and likely threat to Israel’s interests than these extremist statements and Ahmadinejad’s rhetoric.

**Future Scenarios for Potential Improvement in Iranian-Israeli Relations**

From their cooperation prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, it is clear that Iran and Israel are not primordial enemies and have the capacity to work effectively with one another when their interests align. Even Israeli cooperation during the 1980s with Khomeini’s regime to sell weapons to Iran is indicative of the power of pragmatism when the Iranian regime feels pressured and its legitimacy threatened. The current status of Iranian-Israeli relations will continue to remain contentious as long as both sides continue to pursue their current policy trajectories. But this does not have to remain true.

\textsuperscript{111} Barbara Ann Reiffer-Flanagan, “Islamic Realpolitik,” 15.
\textsuperscript{113} David Makovsky and Dennis Ross. Myths, Illusions, and Peace, 177.
Both sides have many different policy options, but perhaps most beneficial is an analysis of the potential, positive effects of two concrete policies with which Israel is already engaged. Such counterfactual propositions “play a central role in the efforts of political scientists to assess their causal hypotheses.”\textsuperscript{114} Despite the obvious risks of not knowing with absolute certainty if these hypothetical scenarios will transpire as described, counterfactual analysis is useful in that “it allows us to explore the workings and consequences of nonlinear interactions in open-ended systems in ways many other research methods do not.”\textsuperscript{115} While there are changes that could take place in the future in Iran such as the empowerment of moderates in the government and greater democratization, Israel is currently engaged in policies that could significantly and positively affect Iranian-Israeli relations. Keeping in mind that there are many other factors that can influence international relations, for the purposes of examining how pursued Israeli policies and future results might positively affect Israeli relations with Iran, the two scenarios most deserving of attention are meaningful peace agreements between Israel and the Syrians or Palestinians.

**An Israeli-Syrian Agreement**

Regardless of the form it would take, if Israel were to sign a peace agreement with Syria, there would be significant implications for the potential trajectory of relations with Iran. In a 2008 *Newsweek* interview, former Israeli Foreign Ministry official Alon Liel stated that “a comprehensive peace agreement will necessitate meaningful changes [in Syria’s relationships


with Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran.”\textsuperscript{116} Although this is a hypothetical situation to evaluate how Israel and Iran could improve relations, it is not an improbable situation. The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institute states that “various Syrian spokesmen have alluded to the position that Syria’s alliance with Iran is not fixed and that it is mostly a result of Washington’s rejection of Syria.”\textsuperscript{117} When considering the situation in Iraq as well, it is important to bear in mind that “Syria’s interest may diverge from Iran’s over the long run when an eventual U.S. withdrawal could turn Iraq into an arena of competition rather than cooperation between Syria and Iran.”\textsuperscript{118}

With the United States acting as a mediator to provide incentives for each side to make the necessary compromises, such a peace agreement would be certain to realign regional politics in the Middle East and significantly influence Damascus’ relationship with Tehran.\textsuperscript{119} Former United States Secretary of State Madeline Albright recommends that “an Israel-Syria negotiation would also have the advantage of pushing Iran to the sidelines and bringing Syria closer to its fellow Arabs.”\textsuperscript{120} Without the support of Syria, by virtue of such a treaty, and Iran, by the treaty’s likely requirement of Syria severing ties to funnel Iranian weapons and funds, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza would be significantly weakened.\textsuperscript{121} Iran’s ability to fund, arm, and influence these groups to the extent that it presently does in using them as proxies to challenge Israel would therefore be significantly diminished. If the United States and Israel can persuade Syria that a peace treaty with Israel is more important than its relations with Iran, it

\textsuperscript{119} Kevin Peraino, “‘A Huge Day.’”
\textsuperscript{120} Madeline Albright, Memo to the President Elect (New York: HarperCollins, 2008) 265.
might be possible to override Iranian efforts to derail such a treaty. Indeed, Bashar al-Assad has already stated that he desires peace between Syria and Israel and has encouraged the United States’ involvement in reaching a resolution.\textsuperscript{122}

A Syrian peace agreement with Israel would necessitate a re-evaluation of Iranian foreign policy in the region. Given its weakened ability to challenge Israel and the loss of its key Arab and regional ally, the Iranian regime would face two choices: either to continue with its hard-line position, or to moderate its rhetoric and policy for its own security interests. It seems more probable that Tehran would choose the latter option. Iran has faced years of economic sanctions and isolation, and despite the currently bleak situation of the Iranian economy, economic motivations alone would not be as significant in changing Tehran’s policies, especially if it continues to interact with China and Russia. Iran could choose to become more isolated and remain unwilling to engage, however, the loss of Syria as an ally changes its security stance in the Middle East. As previously mentioned, two major Arab powers, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, already perceive Iran as a threat, and without Syria, Iran would no longer have an Arab ally in the region.

Even if American combat missions have officially ended by the time an Israeli-Syrian agreement is made, the large number of United States bases scattered throughout the Middle East and especially within states bordering Iran would give the Iranian regime cause for concern. Losing Syria as an ally could shift the regional balance of power away from Iran, and the Iranian regime could perceive a relationship with the other strong regional powers as a means to still have a voice in the region, possibly decreasing its hostility towards Israel and moving toward improving the relationship. Additionally, different agreements reached between Syria and Israel would have different effects on Iran; particular conditions could change Iran’s willingness to

\textsuperscript{122} "WikiLeaks: Iran Won’t Use Nuclear Bomb on Israel, Says Assad."
reevaluate its hostile rhetoric towards Israel and a decision to expand influence in Lebanon and other Middle Eastern states. Even if an Israeli-Syrian agreement does not result in Syria completely abandoning ties to Iran, there can still be positive outcomes. Such a result would provide Syria with a greater opportunity to facilitate relations between Iran, Israel, and the United States.

Policies of aggravating Israel would not be a wise choice for Tehran’s leaders, considering the new regional dynamics and the loss of previously heavy influence on proxies against Israel. It is probable that Iran, acting as the rational actor it is, will see reducing hostility towards Israel as necessary to achieve its security objectives. De-escalation of hostility towards Israel would also offer Iran an opportunity to become closer to the community of nations and improve relations with Western powers. This could open the door for cooperation between Iran and Israel in mutual regional security interests, stability in Iraq for example. It is likely that a relationship similar to the pre-revolutionary one will not immediately re-establish itself, and that Iran will not formally recognize Israel as a Jewish state until a peace agreement is made with the Palestinians. However, a de-escalation of hostility would go a long way for improving regional stability and allowing for renewed Iranian-Israeli cooperation. This scenario seems especially important given how close the Syrian and Israeli negotiating teams were to reaching an agreement on the Golan Heights during the 1990s.

An Israeli-Palestinian Agreement

Another scenario to consider regarding the potential for an improvement between Iran and Israel would be if Israel and the Palestinians were to reach an agreement with one another. The exact form of such an agreement is less important than the fact that it be mutually beneficial
for the parties. If Israel follows the “Syria-first” negotiating track promoted by the military, then a Syria-Israel agreement could “create the conditions for the kind of confidence-building measures between Israel and the Palestinian National Authority necessary for the eventual establishment of a Palestinian state.”123 Although the Israeli public’s perception of the Iranian regime might be that it is irrational, this does not negate the benefits of a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. Such an agreement “could cause the Iranian people to recoil from the madness that has taken over the religious leadership of this great and honored nation . . . [having] a much greater impact than any Israeli or American military operation [which] would only perpetuate this region's pain and suffering.”124 In addressing Netanyahu, who does view Iran as an existential threat, Israeli President Shimon Peres argues that concessions to the Palestinians are “not an anathematic threat to Israeli identity, but rather a vital weapon in the Israeli arsenal when staving off the real, physical existential threat posed by a potential Iranian bomb.”125

While an Israeli-Syrian agreement might be easier and less costly to reach than an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, it is likely that the latter would also have a very significant impact on Iran at multiple levels. On the first level, an Israeli-Palestinian agreement that could also incorporate the other Arab states, inclusion of the Saudi 2002 peace plan in negotiations for example, could mean that Iran faces even stronger challenges to its regional power as more and more Arab states, already hostile to Iran, recognize and develop closer relationships with Israel. This would be another situation that could shift the balance of power away from Iran, clearly undesirable for

123 Zach Dorfman, “Pursuing a ‘Syrian Strategy’ for Arab-Israeli Peace.”
Iranian national interests. Iran would have to recognize this change of power in the region and, given its weakened position, a hostile and belligerent approach would not seem to best serve its national interests. In one sense, an Israeli-Palestinian agreement might be a reversal of the Ben Gurion periphery policy of befriending countries on the outer rim in order to build access to one’s neighbors; in this case, the Israelis would be making peace agreements with their neighbors in order to positively influence relations with a country on their periphery. While one might argue that the periphery could become more hostile in face of these new power dynamics, Iran’s place as a regional hegemon would be threatened and a reevaluation of its foreign policy would be necessary in avoiding further conflict and if it wants to maintain regional influence.

On a deeper level, an agreement between the Palestinians and Israelis would be an extremely important move in undermining the Islamic regime’s rhetoric and demonization of Israel in order to maintain its own legitimacy. Such a peace agreement would challenge the current regime’s rhetoric and its ability to remain hard-line and fundamentalist would be significantly reduced. If the Palestinians gained their own state as the result of such an agreement, it would be very difficult to persuasively construe Israel as a colonial, occupying power. Iranian dissident investigative journalist Akbar Ganji argues that “the gushing wound of Palestine is the most appropriate site for the worsening of the infection of fundamentalism.”

For Ganji, a just solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and “the formation of an independent Palestinian state, next to Israel, is essential…a resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict will transform the region and move it away from the destabilizing decades of the past and help the development of democracy.” In light of these serious legitimacy, security, and regional power concerns for Iran, in the regime’s own self-preservation interests, recognizing Israel or at the

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127 Akbar Ganji, “Dreaming of a Free Iran.”
very minimum losing the momentum for intervention by proxy would be a likely outcome. Such an event would provide Israel with significant opportunity to at least begin a more positive interaction with Iran and as a platform for building on common regional aspirations.

Even foreign-policy oriented Iranian leaders recognize this potentiality and have made allusions to how they would react to such an agreement. During his presidency, Ayatollah Khatami stated that “Iran would not actively disrupt a just agreement reached between Israel and the Palestinians,” despite harshly criticizing Israel for its treatment of the Palestinians.128 During this same period, prominent professors of prestigious Iranian universities were criticizing the “Death to Israel” rhetoric. In 1994, Tehran University professor Ahmad Naqibzadeh stated that “most states now support just a peace in the Middle East, ‘but only a few speak about Israel’s destruction. Moreover, if the Palestinians themselves should decide to make peace with Israel, no other state should condemn them.’”129 Using a Persian expression, he implied that Iran and its regime should not be “more Palestinian than the Palestinians.”130

**Conclusion: Foreign Policy Implications**

As proven by the informal yet extensive relationship, especially in the security and economic arenas, between Iran and Israel prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the picture painted by current rhetoric from both sides that Israel and Iran are primordial enemies is clearly an illusion. The fact that Iran and Israel enjoyed relatively close relations with one another, particularly at a time when such a relationship was even less popular than it is today, demonstrates that at least at one time, the two countries realized their mutual interests and concerns in the Middle East and were able to work with one another to pursue mutual goals.

128 David Menashri, “Iran, Israel and the Middle East Conflict,” 112.
129 David Menashri, “Iran, Israel and the Middle East Conflict,” 113.
130 David Menashri, “Iran, Israel and the Middle East Conflict,” 113.
After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the new Iranian regime brought with it a new interpretation of Iranian national interests. This interpretation discounted the Ben Gurion periphery theory and instead focused on policies of non-alignment with Israel or the Western powers, resulting in a break of relations with Israel. Despite this new policy of non-alignment, Iran has worked with Israel in its post-revolutionary period, most significantly in their arms dealings during the 1980s.

Iran is very different today under the Islamic Regime, and Israel has also undergone major changes since the pre-revolutionary time period. Furthermore, the global and regional context in which these two states act is also very different. Even if opportunities for dialogue between Israel and Iran arise, this does not necessitate that Iran, acting within realist international relations theory as a rational actor, will be completely receptive to diplomacy or abandon religious rhetoric. Rationality, in realism, is the notion that leaders select efficient means to pursue their states’ policy goals. However, regardless of religious and inflammatory rhetoric used to achieve policy objectives, Iran and Israel do share common interests. Israeli peace agreements with the Syrians and Palestinians could create an opportunity to improve Iranian-Israeli relations allowing these two states to develop their common goals.

As with the situation prior to 1979, there are still significant security concerns shared by Iran and Israel. Stability in Iraq is beneficial to both Iran and Israel, and each state has a vested interest in realizing this goal. The emerging Iraqi state has the potential to become a new market for both countries and would be an important ally for each in the region. Given its relationship with Lebanon, improving relations with Iran would be in Israel’s interest as both could cooperate with the various actors in Lebanon to improve its stability. If an Israeli-Syrian agreement were to be reached, Israel might enjoy improvement in its relationship with Syria and the added benefit of improved relations with Iran. At present, it is clear that there is intense hostility
between Arab states and Iran who share Israeli concerns regarding Iranian nuclear ambitions. If Iran were to improve its relationship with Israel, it is likely that the competitive nature of Arab-Iranian relations would be less hostile. An improved relationship with Israel would also be likely to improve Iranian relations with the United States, as the two states also share strong security interests in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Building upon the cooperation to be gained from working together to address mutual security interests, there are large economic opportunities for Iranian and Israeli cooperation as well. Petroleum still comprises 80 percent of Iran’s exports\(^{131}\) and continual sanctions limit its trading partners. Even with Chinese interest in Iranian natural resources, expanding into new markets will be a crucial factor in improving the prospects of the Iranian economy. Cooperation with Israel on other regional security issues could allow for future opportunities to expand Iranian (and Israeli) trading partners, as Israel would be able to use Iranian natural resources. Despite the many changes that have taken place since the 1979 Revolution, Israel can still offer high-tech equipment and programs (as seen in the DaroNet example) and agricultural assistance, and Iran still exports oil and natural gas (as seen in the 1989 deal with Israel).

Even with all of the revolutionary rhetoric, Khomeini’s actions demonstrate the regime’s principle architect’s willingness to forgo his own rhetoric in order to maintain power and ensure the survival of the regime, taking advantage of instances where threat perceptions of Iran were low. In the brief history of the Islamic Republic, “whenever the initial revolutionary creed clashed with the interest of the state, Iran’s state interests ultimately triumphed over dogma forcing a change in actual policy.”\(^{132}\) Although the general threat perceptions by Israelis of Iran are very high and center on Iran’s nuclear program, viewing Iran and the Islamic regime as


\(^{132}\) David Menashri, “Iran, Israel and the Middle East Conflict,” 111.
irrational actors is erroneous. There are strong, clear reasons why the Iranian government would not pursue a nuclear attack on Israel, but a situation where each country attempts to use nuclear deterrence against the other is not desirable for either party nor would it contribute to stability and peace in the Middle East.

There are steps that Israeli policy-makers can take regarding Iran that would provide the opportunity to repair thirty years of damaged relations. While the Iranian-Israeli working and cooperative relationship will obviously not be rebuilt overnight, crucial actions by Israeli leaders could set the process in motion. The most significant of these potential courses of action are meaningful, mutually beneficial peace accords between Israel and the Syrians and Palestinians. For all of the aforementioned reasons, such agreements, regardless of their exact details and the difficulty it would take to reach them, would be significant steps for Israel to take and could have the important impact of beginning to improve Iranian-Israeli relations with one another. Each country is a powerful player in the Middle East and has a wealth of resources that would be greatly beneficial to the other. Concrete actions by Israeli leaders towards meaningful peace with the Syrians and Palestinians are the beginning steps to reshaping and building upon what was once, and could again be, an important and mutually beneficial relationship between Israel and Iran.
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