

ROUND TABLE

Continuity and Change in the Islamic Republic's Vision of Regional Order: The Palestinian Cause in Iranian Foreign Policy

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Introduction

Since 1979, the Islamic Republic has framed itself as a revolutionary anti-imperialist state that advocates for the oppressed, with the Palestinian cause as a central pillar of its ideological framework. No other country has been so consistently supported in words and deeds. To understand the significance of the Palestinian cause in the Islamic Republic's vision of regional order requires placing Palestine within the Islamic Republic's foundational narrative of resistance, anti-imperialism, and independence. True to its nature as a revolutionary state, the Islamic Republic challenges the existing regional and global order, advocating for change and resistance to great power politics while presenting itself as a steadfast defender of the oppressed. This revolutionary narrative established Palestine as a symbol of the Islamic Republic's commitment to anti-imperialism and resistance. In contrast, Israel is framed as an illegitimate colonial entity imposed by Western imperialists, with Israel's existence seen as but an extension of U.S. dominance in the Middle East.¹ The hostility toward Israel, which became a defining feature of Tehran's foreign policy after 1979, stems from both ideological convictions and strategic considerations.

Support for Palestine also has domestic and regional benefits. Internally, this support strengthens the regime's legitimacy among its followers by aligning with a widely supported cause in the Muslim world. Externally, this support extends Tehran's influence across the region, particularly among populations sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. The Islamic Republic promotes a vision of regional order in which the oppressed, such as the Palestinians, resist colonial and imperial domination, reinforcing Tehran's broader aim of reshaping the regional landscape. To realize these aims, Tehran utilizes the Axis of Resistance, a loose but ideologically aligned network of actors including Hezbollah, Hamas, and formerly the Assad regime, all of whom share Tehran's vision of order, with the Palestinian cause serving as a central symbolic anchor. The nature and coherence of this axis have evolved across different presidencies, reflecting changes in regional dynamics and Tehran's strategic calculations. The Axis of Resistance has evolved from an ideologically driven alliance into a pragmatic network of state and non-state actors coordinated largely

¹ Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*.

through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force. Under Khomeini, the Axis of Resistance embodied Islamic solidarity against Zionism, whereas later presidents adapted it to shifting regional realities. Ahmadinejad expanded its transnational reach, while Rouhani maintained coordination despite diplomatic engagement. Under Raisi, the axis grew more assertive in response to the Abraham Accords and U.S.-Israeli cooperation. Recent developments, including the Hamas-provoked Gaza war in October 2023 and the attack on the Islamic Republic's diplomatic mission in Damascus in April 2024, have tested the axis's coherence but also reaffirmed its centrality to Tehran's regional strategy.² In this context, however, it is important to remember that the Islamic Republic, despite its revolutionary ideology and proclaimed anti-imperialist stance, submits to the rules and rituals of diplomacy and has performed its role as a member of the international community in international fora – such as the UN General Assembly – since 1979, balancing its ideological commitments with pragmatic engagement on the global stage. Moreover, as we shall observe, the Islamic Republic has used international fora to voice its criticisms, proclaim its views, and make its demands heard.

A closer examination of Tehran's words and actions reveals that the country has been both a driver of change and a preserver of the status quo, often reducing its oppositional stance to symbolic resistance. To provide evidence, this article traces patterns of continuity and change in Tehran's vision for order, resistance, and its support for Palestine over the past forty-five years, focusing specifically on the Islamic Republic's foreign policy discourse under its first Supreme Leader and successive presidents. By examining Tehran's words and actions, this contribution illuminates the complexities behind the country's ideological stance, which often appears forcefully oppositional but can manifest as symbolic resistance rather than tangible change. In doing so, this article provides a nuanced understanding of the country's dual role as both an agent of transformation and a maintainer of the existing regional order.

The foundation of the Islamic Republic's ideology and the Palestinian cause

The Islamic Republic's Islamic revolutionary ideology is a product of its time, shaped by the diverse currents and ideas that dominated the years leading up to the revolution. This ideology represents a modern construct, blending the thoughts of various influential thinkers with theories and movements such as socialism, nationalism, and Third Worldism.³ Revolutionary ideologue Ali Shariati popularized a core concept of the Islamic Republic's worldview, the Quranic term *mostaz'afin* (مستضعفين), to refer to the oppressed, embedding it within the broader context of global anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles.⁴

Under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as Supreme Leader, the Islamic Republic's ideological foundation was consolidated, institutionalized, and enshrined in legal frameworks such as its 1989 constitution, in which the Islamic Republic firmly positioned itself as the defender of the oppressed (*mostaz'afin*) in opposition to the oppressors (*mostakberin*) by supporting “the struggles of the oppressed against the oppressors all over the world in pursuit of their rights.”⁵ This reflects Tehran's anti-colonial stance by subscribing to a total rejection of “colonialism and to prevent the infiltration of foreigners with full determination.”⁶ These ideas of Islamic solidarity extend to the country's foreign policy, which seeks to

² It should be noted that the Axis of Resistance has been significantly weakened by the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 and Israel's military actions in the region, which cut the leadership structure of both Hezbollah and Hamas while also reducing their military and strategic capacities.

³ Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*.

⁴ Arjomand, *The Turban*, 93–94.

⁵ Islamic Republic of Iran, “Constitution,” Article 154.

⁶ Islamic Republic of Iran, “Constitution,” Article 3.5.

“expand and fortify Islamic fraternity and collective *ta‘āvon* [cooperation] among all people” and “organize the country’s foreign policy on the basis of Islamic criteria, brotherly commitment to all Muslims and unfaltering support for all the *mostaz‘afin* of the world.”⁷

The importance of supporting the oppressed was highlighted by Ebrahim Yazdi during the Islamic Republic’s first official appearance at the UN General Assembly in 1979: “But if we are to serve the cause of peace and justice in the world, we cannot ignore the plight of the oppressed without losing our legitimacy.”⁸ However, among the various struggles that Tehran supports, support for “the oppressed and downtrodden people of Palestine” holds a central place.⁹

Khomeini (1979–1989): Consolidation of the ideological foundation

Under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic consolidated its ideological foundations, including its anti-imperialist convictions and opposition to Zionism. The Islamic Republic undid many of the ties and alliances of the deposed shah and severed ties with Israel, closing the Israeli embassy in Tehran and transferring it to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Khomeini called Israel a “cancerous growth in the Middle East” and cast it as an extension of Western colonialism and imperialism, cementing the Islamic Republic’s self-image as a bulwark against Zionism and the vanguard of anti-imperialist resistance.¹⁰

However, while Khomeini’s ideological commitment to Palestine, regarded as an “Islamic duty,” was unwavering, the Islamic Republic’s ability to act on this commitment was constrained by the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), which consumed much of the country’s resources.¹¹ Nonetheless, the Islamic Republic laid the foundations of its “Axis of Resistance” during this time and pledged “to fight shoulder to shoulder with our Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese brothers and sisters to liberate all Zionist-occupied Arab territories.”¹² Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon led to the PLO’s expulsion from its southern base used for attacks on Israel, a move the Islamic Republic characterized as “a new phase of the long struggle of the Arab and Moslem nations.”¹³ Hezbollah was founded in 1982, arising from the invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon. Tehran threw its financial, military, and political support behind Hezbollah and created a strategic front against Israel. In 1987, the first *intifada* took place, declared in Tehran as a heroic, even epic uprising.¹⁴ As indispensable for resolving the Middle East, Tehran suggested the restoration of the rights of the Palestinians, the right to self-determination, the return of the Palestinian people to their homeland, and “the establishment of an independent Palestine in all the occupied lands belonging to the Palestinian people.”¹⁵ The years under Khomeini set the frame for Tehran’s long-term strategy, combining Islamic revolutionary discourse with selective, calculated interventions to advance its vision of regional order.

Rafsanjani (1989–1997): Pragmatism and strategic recalibration

After the eight-year war with Iraq, President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani prioritized economic reconstruction and diplomatic pragmatism. Tehran shifted its focus toward rebuilding relations with regional and international actors, aiming for cooperation instead of

⁷ Islamic Republic of Iran, “Constitution,” Article 3.15, 3.16.

⁸ Yazdi, A/34/PV.21, 448.

⁹ Velayati, A/38/PV.13, 187.

¹⁰ Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, 76.

¹¹ Moussavi, A/36/PV.26, 661.

¹² Moussavi, A/36/PV.26, 550.

¹³ Velayati, A/37/PV.27, 517.

¹⁴ Velayati, A/43/PV.14, 78–80.

¹⁵ Velayati, A/43/PV.14, 78; Velayati, A/38/PV.13, 187.

confrontation. During Rafsanjani's presidency, Israel and the PLO signed the Oslo Accords: Oslo I in 1993 and Oslo II in 1995. The Islamic Republic strongly opposed the accords, declaring that the agreement did not "present a realistic solution to the root causes of the conflict" and considering "the signing of this accord as a conspiracy against Islam and Palestine."¹⁶ However, while the Islamic Republic remained consistent in its opposition to Israel and rejected the 1993 Oslo Accords, it did not directly obstruct the peace process, but continued to support resistance groups.

This approach reflects the Islamic Republic's preference for symbolic resistance over direct confrontation amidst practical constraints and strategic calculations. Its opposition was therefore mainly rhetorical, supplemented by indirect support to resistance movements such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) through financial aid, political backing, and limited logistical assistance, often through intermediaries. This strategy allowed Tehran to maintain influence, upholding its revolutionary credentials and image as the defender of the Palestinian cause while avoiding both confrontation with Arab governments and jeopardizing its post-war diplomatic rehabilitation. Strengthening ties with resistance groups such as Hamas and PIJ also marked a shift from the Islamic Republic's earlier alignment with the secular PLO. This reflected a broader pattern: while consistently opposing the regional status quo in rhetoric, Tehran selectively engaged with elements when beneficial to its strategic interests.

For the Islamic Republic, Middle East peace and security depend on resolving the Palestinian issue. The government's solution to the crisis consists of the full restoration or realization of the rights of the Palestinian people, the liberation of all occupied territories, the return of all Palestinian refugees to their homeland, the right to self-determination, and the establishment on an independent Palestinian state in the entire territory of Palestine.¹⁷

Khatami (1997–2005): Dialogue and reform

President Mohammad Khatami focused on diplomacy, with his "Dialogue Among Civilizations" initiative aimed at improving the Islamic Republic's global standing.¹⁸ Under his tenure, Tehran began to promote a "global civil society" and called for "a new paradigm of inclusion and dialogue on participation, tolerance, understanding and collective cooperation."¹⁹ Khatami's government actively de-emphasized confrontational rhetoric, prioritizing reintegration into the international system. However, his government also maintained support for Palestinian resistance. Tehran's approach remained prescriptive and solving the Palestinian issue was cited as pivotal to resolving the Middle East crisis and achieving lasting peace and security.²⁰ Concretely, the Islamic Republic called for the recognition and restoration of the rights of the Palestinian people, their right to self-determination, the return of the refugees to their homeland, an end to the occupation of Palestinian territories, and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.²¹ The latter is supposed to be achieved through "democratic means," an idea first introduced during Khatami's tenure.

However, the Oslo Accords did not hold and collapsed by 2000. With the outbreak of the second *intifada* (2000–2005), Tehran intensified its backing for armed Palestinian factions, demonstrating that while its tone could shift, its underlying commitment to resistance remained. Israel's threat to expel Yasser Arafat turned into siege and isolation in his home in

¹⁶ Velayati, A/48/PV.78, 21.

¹⁷ Velayati, A/44/PV.13, 101–102; Velayati, A/46/PV.5; Velayati, A/49/PV.5, 37–38; Velayati, A/50/PV.5, 29; Velayati, A/47/PV.5, 51–52.

¹⁸ Khatami, A/53/PV.8, 4.

¹⁹ Kharrazi, A/52/PV.6, 23; Kharrazi, A54/PV.12, 12.

²⁰ Kharrazi, A/59/PV.9, 34.

²¹ Kharrazi, A/55/PV.16, 30; Kharrazi, A/57/PV.9, 20; Kharrazi, A/52/PV.6, 24; Kharrazi, A/59/PV.9, 34.

Ramallah until his death in 2004. Tehran strongly condemned Israel's actions.²² Overall, the Khatami years reinforced the Islamic Republic's dual approach, characterized by balancing pragmatic diplomacy with sustained, albeit indirect support for Palestinian militancy.

Ahmadinejad (2005–2013): Politics of Confrontation

With President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his inflammatory rhetoric, the Islamic Republic returned to a politics of confrontation. Under his presidency, Tehran deepened its aggressive anti-Israel rhetoric, including Ahmadinejad's denial of the Holocaust and calls for the destruction of Israel.²³ Ahmadinejad seized every opportunity to condemn Israeli actions while highlighting the Palestinian plight. The Ahmadinejad administration significantly increased material support for Hamas, particularly after 2006, when Hamas won the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council and took control of Gaza. The 2006 Lebanon War and 2008–09 Gaza War further solidified Tehran's role as a central backer of the "Resistance Axis."

Ahmadinejad's presidency was characterized by an expansionist vision of regional order in which the Islamic Republic again sought to actively reshape the Middle East. However, while his rhetoric exhibited a strong revolutionary drive to overturn the existing order, Tehran's actions remained within a framework of strategic deterrence rather than direct confrontation. The nuclear issue became central to the Islamic Republic's international positioning, highlighting how its resistance narrative served multiple purposes beyond just Palestine.²⁴ Under Ahmadinejad, Tehran called for an end to the occupation of Palestinian land, the restoration of the rights of the Palestinian people, the return of Palestinian refugees to their homeland, the establishment of a democratic Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, and a referendum and free elections for Palestinians to decide their type of governance.²⁵

Rouhani (2013–2021): Moderation and constructive engagement

Hassan Rouhani's presidency brought a shift toward diplomatic engagement with the West. Having campaigned on a platform of hope and prudence, Rouhani pledged moderation and constructive engagement, which culminated in the signing of the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA). While the deal temporarily reduced tensions with the West, Tehran's support for Palestinian resistance remained a constant. However, the Syrian civil war (2011–2024) diverted much of the Islamic Republic's attention and resources.

Hamas's distancing from Tehran, due to its support for Bashar al-Assad, led to a temporary cooling of relations, underlining the idea that the Islamic Republic's vision of order is not merely ideological but also shaped by pragmatic calculations. Yet, after the unilateral U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018, Tehran reasserted its hardline stance, renewing close ties with Hamas and intensifying its anti-Israel rhetoric. This was due, at least in part, to the United States's 2018 relocation of its embassy to Jerusalem, effectively recognizing the city as Israel's capital, a decision Tehran condemned as violating Palestinian rights and an escalation of Israeli occupation. Furthermore, the Trump administration's proposal of the "Deal of the Century" – announced in detail in 2020 and aimed at resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – was firmly rejected by the Islamic Republic. The Abraham Accords, aimed at normalizing relations between Israel and several Arab States, which was signed in 2020, dealt a serious blow to inter-Arab solidarity and the defense of the Palestinian

²² Kharrazi, A/58/PV.12, 28.

²³ Ehteshami and Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise*, 109–119.

²⁴ Glombitza, "Islamic Revolutionary Ideology."

²⁵ Ahmadinejad, A/60/PV.10, 7; Ahmadinejad, A/64/PV.4, 35; Ahmadinejad, A/65/PV.12, 8–9; Ahmadinejad, A/63/PV.6, 12.

cause. These developments reinforced Tehran's narrative of resistance, and it continued to position itself as a defender of Palestinian self-determination and an opponent of U.S. and Israeli policies in the region. While President Rouhani's discourses were not prescriptive in the same way as his predecessors, they were unequivocal in their judgements and introduced the term apartheid in connection to Israel's treatment of the Palestinians.²⁶

What has been and continues to be practiced against the innocent people of Palestine is nothing less than structural violence. Palestine is under occupation; the basic rights of the Palestinians are being tragically violated, and they are deprived of the right of return and access to their homes, birthplace and homeland. Apartheid as a concept can hardly describe the crimes and the institutionalized aggression committed against the innocent Palestinian people.²⁷

Raisi (2021–2024): Turn East

Under President Ebrahim Raisi, Tehran reinforced its hardline stance. Contrary to the Rouhani administration, Raisi's government aligned closely with the IRGC's strategic vision. The Islamic Republic also continued its commitment to the Palestinian cause, leveraging it as both a tool of resistance and a means to project power. With the Abraham Accords shifting the regional alliance structure and strengthening Israel's position, Tehran intensified its support for Palestinian groups as a counterweight. Another result of the changing dynamics in the region was the 2023 agreement to restore relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Hamas-provoked outbreak of the war in Gaza in October 2023 was hailed by Tehran, but proved to be a major challenge to the Axis of Resistance, as Israel dealt the Islamic Republic several major blows, including the attack on the Islamic Republic's embassy in Damascus in April 2024.²⁸ Regarding Tehran's demands on the Palestinian issue, President Raisi followed in the footsteps of his predecessors, declaring that the only viable solution to the crisis was a comprehensive referendum by all Palestinians regardless of religion or ethnicity.²⁹

Pezeshkian (2024–): Renewed moderation and reformist pragmatism

After Raisi died in a helicopter crash in May 2024, together with Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Tehran called for new elections. In July, reformist Masoud Pezeshkian assumed the presidency amid challenging times. Israel's attacks continued, going so far as to attack on Iranian soil, assassinating Hamas's political leader, Ismael Haniyeh, in Tehran in July 2024, after Pezeshkian's inauguration ceremony. Only two months later, Israel followed with the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut in September. While Pezeshkian is viewed as a reformist and moderate compared to his predecessor, it remains unclear whether his presidency will mark a change or continuity in the Islamic Republic's approach to regional resistance and support for the Palestinian cause. First indications, however, point to a continuation of its policies, reinforced by the renewed declaration of opposition to a two-state solution and by distancing itself from a resolution adopted by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) which was signed under the Raisi administration.³⁰

²⁶ Rouhani, A/68/PV.6, 12.

²⁷ Rouhani, A/68/PV.6, 14.

²⁸ Khamenei, "Islamic World Must Not Remain Silent."

²⁹ Raisi, A/76/PV.3, 59–60.

³⁰ Khabar Online, "Iran Reiterates Stance on Palestine"; Amwaj Media, "Is Iran Shifting its Stance?"

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic's vision of regional order and support for Palestine have evolved over the past forty-five years, demonstrating both continuity and change. While consistently framing itself as an opponent of Western hegemony and defender of the Palestinian cause, Tehran's actual policies have been shaped as much by pragmatic calculations as by ideological considerations. At times, Tehran has actively pushed for change, using resistance movements to challenge regional and global hierarchies. At other times, its opposition has been largely symbolic, allowing the country to maintain revolutionary legitimacy while avoiding direct confrontation. This duality of being both a driver of change and a maintainer of the status quo is characteristic of the Islamic Republic's long-term approach to the region.

By tracing these shifts across the initial years and successive presidencies, it has become clear that while Tehran's support for the Palestinian cause and resistance remains constant, its application is flexible, adapting to the necessities and opportunities of the moment. Each administration has balanced ideology with pragmatism, ensuring continuity through evolving forms of engagement and restraint. If historical patterns of adaptation hold, the Islamic Republic under Pezeshkian is likely to maintain this balance: upholding the resistance narrative and support for Palestine while pursuing diplomatic moderation without direct military involvement. Regional pressures and now decimated resources will continue to keep this resistance largely symbolic rather than transformative. Ultimately, the Islamic Republic's vision for and of regional order remains deeply intertwined with its support for Palestine, reflecting both its ideological commitments and pragmatic priorities. Thus, continuity, more than change, continues to shape the Islamic Republic's foreign policy choices in its approach to Palestine and the wider region.

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