AHMADINEJAD’S RHETORIC AND THE ESSENCE OF THE ISRAELI-IRANIAN CLASH

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The Zionist regime should be wiped off the map.” With these reckless comments, Iran’s hard-line President Mahmood Ahmadinejad brought to light a defining feature of ideological states and rulers – their distinction between rhetoric and operational policy, and the outside world’s refusal to view such distinctions as acceptable. In the case of Iran and Israel, it is the shift in geo-strategic interest that has caused Iran’s rhetoric on Israel to be viewed differently today than it was fifteen years ago, when Tehran’s statements were more belligerent and more frequently repeated. To fully understand the state of Israeli-Iranian relations, one must look beyond the ideological façade put up by both states and discern the actual policies being pursued.

Iran’s case is particularly telling of the predicament of the ideological state. One of the pillars of its revolution has been opposition to Israel, yet throughout the first decade of its existence, the Islamic Republic shared many strategic interests with the Jewish State. Iran and Israel both viewed the Soviet Union with great suspicion. Iran because the Russians had for long eyed the warm waters of the Persian Gulf and supported Iraq militarily. Similarly, the Soviet Union was the military backer of Israel’s major Arab foes.

In addition, both states saw Iraq as a major menace. Israel had long viewed its “Eastern front” as an existential threat; the idea that four Iraqi divisions would overrun Jordan and posit themselves on Israel’s eastern border was the Israeli nightmare scenario. Iran, on the other hand, had seen its centuries-long rivalry with Iraq culminate in Saddam’s invasion of Iranian Khuzestan in 1980.

Iraq invaded Iran on September 23, 1980, nineteen months into the Islamic revolution. During those nineteen months, Ayatollah Khomeini had handed over the Israeli mission in Tehran to the PLO, declared Israel an illegitimate state that needed to be destroyed and promised the Islamic masses that the revolution would one day reach Qods (Jerusalem). Iran had also managed to ruin its relations with Washington by taking US diplomats at the American embassy in Tehran hostage.

But in spite of these actions and declarations, only three days after Iraqi troops entered Iranian territory, Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan held a press conference in Vienna in which he urged the United States to forget the past and help Iran keep up its defenses. At the time, discussions between Iranian and Israeli officials in regards to arms sales were reportedly under way in Zurich, while
Israel’s Ambassador to the US, Ephraim Evron, discussed the war with Secretary of State Muskie and expressed Tel Aviv’s concerns regarding an Iraqi victory and the impact it would have on the balance of power in the region. The discussions were aimed at softening Washington’s stance on arms sales to Tehran.

Throughout the 1980s, the Israelis continued to sell American arms to the Khomeini regime while lobbying Washington to improve its relations with Tehran. These efforts culminated in the Iran-Contra scandal, an Israeli-initiated operation which heavily involved Israel’s Prime Minister Shimon Peres. In a letter to President Reagan in February 1986, Peres wrote that the US should resolve the dispute in Lebanon through dialogue with Tehran in order to establish a “broader strategic relationship with Iran.” Later in September of that year, Peres met with Reagan at the White House, where he referred to the American hostages in Lebanon as “a ‘hurdle’ that must be crossed enroute to a “broadened strategic relationship with the Iranian government.”

The Iranian regime, in turn, comfortably put ideology aside when it helped advance Iran’s security and interests. According to one Iranian analyst, “the ideological opposition to Israel played a role for this regime before the revolution.” At one point, an associate of Ayatollah Khomeini sought the Ayatollah’s approval for a purchase of weapons originating in Israel. The ailing leader of the revolution asked whether it was necessary to discuss and inquire about the source of the weaponry when making the purchase, to which the associate replied no. “Then,” Khomeini concluded, “we don’t care.”

“Our policy back then was to not get entangled in the Palestinian issue,” explained Iran’s former Deputy Foreign Minister Mahmoud Vaezi. “Our policy towards the region has a soft-power and hard-power side. We always declare our views and our beliefs. But that doesn’t mean that we need to operationally these views into actual policy.” At the time, the Israelis recognized and appreciated Iran’s differentiation between rhetoric and policy.

Today, however, the geo-strategic map has changed. Iran and Israel no longer share common threats. Rather, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the defeat of Iraq have increased their ability to pose a threat to each other. Furthermore, the end of the Cold War has left the Middle East in a state of flux; thirteen years after this historic event, the region still lacks an ordering principle. It’s a region without a hegemon and without balance.

The anarchical nature of the post-Cold War Middle East threw the two most powerful states of the region – Iran and Israel – into a strategic rivalry. Both states sought to reshape the region and its ordering principle to benefit their own interests and safeguard their privileged position in the region. Iran started to translate its rhetoric on Israel into actual policy in order to sabotage the peace process – deemed to be the weakest link in the US-Israeli effort to create an Israel-centric order in the region based on Iran’s prolonged isolation.
Israel, in turn, embarked on a global campaign to isolate and weaken Iran while depicting it as an existential threat to the Jewish State and the entire Western world. Most importantly, Israel sought to sabotage any effort to improve US-Iran relations, since such a development would put Israel at a significant disadvantage in its rivalry with Iran. The Israelis feared that the U.S. would forget about Israel’s concerns with Iran in a U.S.-Iran dialogue, and instead focus on strengthening its ties with the oil-rich nation in light of China’s inevitable strategic challenge to the U.S. and its need for Persian Gulf oil. “A small state is always worried that a global ally will make a deal in which it takes a global view of the deal and forgets about local details that for a local actor is very important,” Itamar Rabinovich, a close advisor to Rabin who served as Israel’s ambassador to the United States in the 1990s explained.\(^8\) Ironically, the efforts to isolate Iran and prevent a U.S.-Iran dialogue from materializing were led by Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, the same Israeli leaders that only six years earlier had sought to improve relations between Washington and Tehran.

In these sensitive times, in which the nuclear impasse may force a reluctant Bush Administration to deal with the Iranian regime more or less directly, Ahmadinejad’s irresponsible comments has been a God-sent gift to the Jewish State. Empty rhetoric or not, due to the radically different geo-political situation, Ahmadinejad’s speech will be capitalized on by the Israelis and the West and any claim of differentiation between rhetoric and policy will be readily dismissed. Ahmadinejad has already managed to erode what little confidence was left between Iran and the EU after the breakdown of nuclear talks in September.

The West’s response the Iranian President’s oratory has been remarkably unified; the EU has led the diplomatic condemnations – indeed, Europe has seldom reacted this harshly to Iran’s rhetorical excesses – while the U.S. has figured in the background. The Israelis, in turn, have been instructed to keep a low profile in order to avoid having the stand-off turn into an Iranian-Israeli or Islamic-Jewish conflict.

But in spite of the diplomatic rattling on all sides, little seems to have changed on the substance of the issues, at least for now. Brussels’ position on the nuclear front converged with that of Washington already in January 2005, Israel’s has called for UN sanctions on Iran for more than four years and the Bush Administration continues to deny Iran the right to nuclear technology.

Rather than a new seed for a future conflict, Ahmadinejad’s anti-Israeli statement and the ensuing diplomatic frenzy are symptomatic of a geo-strategic – rather than ideological – collision that has been long in the making.
NOTES


3 Top Secret Memorandum from Oliver North to National Security Advisor John Poindexter, September 15, 1986. (National Security Archives)


5 Telephone interview with Prof. Nader Entessar, January 25, 2005. Iran’s empty rhetorical threats against Israeli interests were further made evident when the Iranian Foreign Ministry called for an end to oil sales to countries that supported Israel on August 14, 1980. The statement was never translated into policy. “Iran calls for stopping oil supply to countries supporting Israel,” Xinhua, August 15, 1980.

6 Interview with former Deputy Foreign Minister Dr. Mahmoud Vaezi, Tehran, August 16, 2004.

7 Interview with Ehud Yaari, Jerusalem, October 24, 2004.

8 Interview with Itamar Rabinovich, former advisor to Rabin and Israeli Ambassador to the US, Tel Aviv, October 17, 2004.

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