



National Iranian American Council

NIAC US-IRAN POLICY MEMO

1411 K St NW Ste 600, Washington, DC 20005

202-386-6325

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web: www.niacouncil.org | e-mail: info@niacouncil.org

ISRAEL, GAZA AND IRAN: TRAPPING OBAMA IN IMAGINED FAULT LINES

In talking about the assault on Gaza, neo-conservative pundits and Israeli hardliners have relied on a familiar frame. The fighting in Gaza, they say, is a struggle between Israel and so-called "moderate" Arab states (namely, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia) on the one hand, and Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas on the other. In reality, Israel is fighting Iran in Gaza, the argument reads.

These imagined Manichean fault lines defy logic and reality. This conflict is the last thing Tehran would have wished for in the last few weeks of the Bush administration. It increases the risk of a US-Iran confrontation now, and reduces the prospects for US-Iran diplomacy once President elect Obama takes over - neither of which is in Iran's national interest. Rather than benefiting from the instability following the slaughter in Gaza, Iran stands to lose much from the rise in tensions. And so does Obama.

To Iran, Hamas is no Hezbollah

While there certainly is an underlying rivalry between Israel and Iran that has come to fuel many other otherwise unrelated conflicts in the region, not every war Israel fights is related to Iran. In this specific case,

the parallels to the 2006 Lebanon war are inaccurate. Iran's ties to Hamas are incomparable to the much deeper relationship Iran enjoys with Hezbollah. Iran's close relationship with Hezbollah is rooted in the Iranian view that Shiite minorities in Arab countries are Iran's most likely allies and agents of pro-Iranian sentiment; consequently, backing Hezbollah is viewed to be in Iran's core national interest. In contrast, Iran's relationship with Hamas is a marriage of convenience at best.

In spite of its ardent pro-Palestinian rhetoric, Iran's relationship with Palestinian groups -- including Hamas -- has often been strained. Tensions with Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organization were mostly rooted in Arafat's insistence on defining the Israel-Palestinian conflict as a secular Arab nationalist cause -- leaving non-Arab Iran with no opening to play a leadership role in the Muslim world's cause célèbre. Differences with Hamas, however, derived from a mix of politics and ideology. Hamas' intellectual roots go back to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni fundamentalist movement. Furthermore, during the Iraq-Iran war, both the PLO

and Hamas expressed support for Saddam Hussein.

Throughout the 1980s, Iran was better at offering rhetoric than practical support to the Palestinian cause, due to Iran's immediate security concerns. This changed in the mid-1990s, when Iran feared that the Oslo peace process was partially aimed at securing Iran's prolonged isolation and political exclusion. But even after the outbreak of the second Intifada, the Iranians took the lead in making grandiose speeches about Iranian backing of the Palestinian cause, but seldom tried to live up to the standards set in its statements.

European diplomats in contact with representatives of Islamic Jihad and Hamas visiting Iran after fighting between Israelis and Palestinians had broken out reported back that both groups were utterly disappointed with their Iranian hosts whom they accused of making empty promises -- Tehran neither provided them with money nor weapons. A joke in the streets of Tehran reflected Iran's pretense: "Why aren't there any stones left to stone the adulteress? Per the order of the Supreme Leader, all the stones have been shipped to



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Palestine as Iran's contribution to the Intifada."

Again, history seems to be repeating itself. After daily demonstrations in Tehran in favor of the Palestinians, including a six-day sit-in at Tehran airport by hard-line students demanding government support for sending volunteers to fight in Gaza, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei contained the protesters by thanking them - while pointing out that Iran was not in a position to go beyond rhetorical support since "our hands are tied in this arena." Other Iranian officials have reinforced that message. General Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, declared that Hamas does not need military support to defend itself. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's brother indicated to the demonstrators at Tehran airport that Iran's support for the Palestinians would be limited to "spiritual support for the victimized people of Gaza."

Why Israel's offensive in Gaza should worry Obama

Tehran's complex, if not conflicted, response to the assault on Gaza can best be understood in the context of its broader strategic aims. By rejecting any material Iranian support or involvement in the Gaza battles, Iran's strategic imperatives trumped its ideological concerns and pretenses once more. Khamenei's statement regarding Iran's hands being tied resembles Ayatollah Khomeini's refusal to support the Lebanese Shiites by directly entering into war with Israel in 1984 through his edict that the road to Jerusalem goes through Karbala. That is, until Iran has defeated Saddam Hussein, it will not be sucked into a conflict with Israel, regardless of Tehran's ideo-

logical opposition to the Jewish state.

Contrary to the neo-conservative narrative that the fighting benefits Iran, Tehran seems to view the Israeli assault on Gaza as highly problematic for several reasons. First, there are suspicions in Tehran that Israel's offensive is a trap with the aim of drawing both Hezbollah and Iran into the fighting. With only weeks left till President Elect Obama takes office, any direct conflagration between Iran and Israel would significantly reduce Obama's ability to deliver on his campaign promise of opening talks with Tehran without preconditions.

Second, increased tensions and polarization in the Middle East undermines Obama's ability to pursue a new policy towards this region, including a shift in America's 30-year old policy of isolating Iran. In fact, polarization along the imagined Gaza fault lines - and a misleading equation of Hamas with Tehran - traps the incoming Obama administration in an involuntary continuation of the Bush policies that contributed to the increased instability in the Middle East in the first place. From the vantage point of Israeli hardliners, this may be a welcomed outcome since it will make compromise with Tehran more difficult and pressure on Israel less likely. Hence, Tehran seems poised not to help reduce Obama's maneuverability.

Third, the conflict is creating unwelcome tensions between Iran and key Arab states. Arab dictatorships fearing that the rise of Iran would weaken America's position in the Middle East and that the survival of Hamas would embolden Islamic nationalist opposition groups throughout the region - both of which would undermine

these Arab governments' undemocratic rule - initially sided with Israel by remaining silent or explicitly putting the blame on Hamas. But as the casualties rose and the images of slaughter spread on Arab satellite TVs, the anger of the Arab streets reached the Arab palaces and courts. A similar pattern was seen in 2006 when many Arab governments initially welcomed Israel's air assault on Hezbollah in Lebanon. There, the change of heart had less to do with the images of Lebanese casualties and more to do with Hezbollah's surprising resilience and fighting power.

Though it is true that increased tensions enables Iran to score propaganda victories on the Arab streets, since many Arab states have either remained silent or secretly collaborated with Israel to defeat Hamas, this does carry a great risk for Tehran. If the fighting in Gaza goes on for too long, the spillover effects will be felt in increased Arab-Iranian tensions at a time when Tehran is more interested in soothing ties with the Arabs in order to minimize Arab disruption to any potential US-Iran opening.

The neo-conservative narrative and its imagined fault lines may temporarily add fuel to the US-Israeli alliance, but it will neither bring stability nor order to the region. Rather, it will push the Middle East further into endless conflict and restrict America's next president to a mindset and a policy framework that risks making the promise of change a dream unfulfilled.

Trita Parsi is the author of Treacherous Alliance - The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the US, a silver medal recipient of the Council on Foreign Relations' Arthur Ross Book Award.