

Understanding Iran-Hamas Relations from a Defensive Neo-Realist Approach

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Abstract

This paper aims at understanding the dynamics behind the Iranian support for the Sunni Palestinian group Hamas by analyzing the mutual relations from a defensive neo-realist approach. The paper begins with a historical overview of Iran-Hamas relations and the periods that saw these relations being improved or deteriorated. It then addresses the defensive neo-realist approach in terms of the basic ideas proposed by Kenneth Waltz, the founder of the theory of neo-realism, and the differences between his view and the offensive approach suggested by John Mearsheimer and others. The third part of the paper examines the defensive neo-realist analysis on the relation between states and non-state actors by testing Iran as an inspector for soft power in the Sunni-majority region, and, the probable threat that can be defended by this relation. It also deals with the difficulties averting Iran from becoming the sole hegemon in the region and how Iran takes advantage of this relationship to maintain a dominant role in the Middle East and how the latest rapprochement between two Gulf countries and Israel would contribute to consolidate that relation.

Keywords: Iran, Hamas, Neo-Realism, Defensive Realism, Soft Power.

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Savunmacı Neo-Realist Bir Yaklaşımla İran-Hamas İlişkilerini Anlamak

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Öz

Bu makalenin amacı, İran ile Filistinli Sünni grup Hamas arasındaki ilişkileri ve İran'ın gruba verdiği desteğin ardındaki dinamikleri, neorealist bir bakış açısıyla analiz etmektir. Makalede, İran ve Hamas ilişkilerinin iyileştiği veya kötüye gittiği dönemler tarihsel bir bakış açısıyla ele alınmıştır. Neorealist teorinin kurucusu Kenneth Waltz tarafından savunulan temel fikirler ışığında, savunmacı neorealizm incelenerek Mearsheimer ve diğerleri tarafından savunulan saldırgan yaklaşım ile arasındaki farklar ortaya konmuştur. Makalenin üçüncü bölümünde, Sünni çoğunluğu barındıran bölgede yumuşak güç denetmeni olarak İran masaya yatırılmış ve bu bağlamda olası tehditler incelenerek savunmacı neorealizm bakış açıları ele alınmıştır. Son olarak İran'ın bölgede tek başına hakimiyet kurmasını engelleyen zorluklar, İran'ın bu ilişkiyi Orta Doğu'da dominant pozisyonunu sürdürmek için nasıl kullandığı ve yakın dönemde gerçekleşen iki Körfez ülkesi ile İsrail arasındaki yakınlaşmanın bu ilişkiyi pekiştirmeye nasıl katkıda bulunacağı incelenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İran, Hamas, Neorealizm, Savunmacı Realizm, Yumuşak Güç.

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1. Introduction

Iranian support for Hamas has been much debated recently, thus the discussion over this topic has escalated following Iran's "aggressive"¹ sectarian policies in the region, most notably, what has been taking place nowadays in the Syrian and Yemeni crises. Hence, 'Why is Iran supporting the Sunni Hamas group?' was among the questions highly asked lately by Arab searchers and observers.²

Meanwhile, many Iranian leaders have tried to explain their policies in the region by claiming that Iran has no sectarian basis while sending all forms of support to the anti-Israel resistance groups.³ They point to Iranian support for the Sunni Hamas group as an evident to confirm that Iran still backs the 'axis of resistance,' no matter Sunni or Shia, against Israeli hegemony in the region.⁴

Although the mutual relations had worsened over Hamas' positions on the Syrian and Yemeni crises, Iran remained the group's largest supporter over the last two decades.⁵ Within 2006-2012, Iran's annual financial support for Hamas was estimated at \$250 million in addition to the huge military assistance to the military wing of Hamas recognized in different occasions.⁶

¹ Mark Gasiorowski, "The New Aggressiveness in Iran's Foreign Policy", *Middle East Policy Council* 14, no. 2, Summer 2007, accessed: January 17, 2020, <https://mepc.org/journal/new-aggressiveness-irans-foreign-policy>.

² Mohammed Abu Hadid, Why does Iran support Hamas?, *Al-Jazeera*, January 19, 2020, accessed: April 17, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.net/blogs/2020/1/19B3>. See: Taghrid Ali, What is the secret behind Iran's support for Hamas? *Hafryat*, December 5, 2019, accessed: April 17, 2020, <https://hafryat.com/en/node/13460>.; Mervat Ouf, Why does Iran back Hamas military wing, Al-Qassam, not Hamas as a whole?, *Sasa Post*, May 10, 2017, accessed: April 20, <https://www.sasapost.com/irans-relations-iran/>.

³ Widad Jaber Ghazi. The Iranian position of the Palestinian parties: Hamas movement as a model. *Al-Mustansiriya Journal of Arab and International Studies*, 17 (2020): 3.

⁴ "Iran and Palestinian Cause: the Candied Promises," *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, October 10, 2016, accessed: April 17, 2020, <https://aawsat.com/home/article/756786/9>.

⁵ Mahmoud Haniyeh, "Hamas and Iran: Dialectic of the relationship and its roots", *Al-Mayadeen*, January 9, 2020, accessed: September 19, 2020, <https://www.almayadeen.net/articles/blog/1373044/%D8%A>.

⁶ "Iran's post-sanctions windfall may not benefit Hamas," *The Washington Post*, August 31, 2015, accessed: April 20, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/will-irans-post-sanctions-windfall-benefit-hamas-maybe-not/2015/08/30/08d0c62c-481e-11e5-9f53-d1e3ddfd0cda_story.html.

This paper doesn't go beyond the dynamics behind the strained relations between Hamas and Iran; rather, it is an attempt to understand the reasons behind the Iranian support for the Sunni Hamas group by analyzing the relation from a defensive neo-realist approach.

This paper begins with a historical overview of Iran-Hamas relations and the periods in which these relations improved or deteriorated. It then addresses the defensive neo-realist approach in terms of the basic ideas proposed by Kenneth Waltz, the founder of the theory of neo-realism, and the differences between his views and the offensive approach suggested by Mearsheimer and others. The third part of the paper tests the defensive neo-realist views on the relation as Iran has been looking for gaining soft power in a Sunni-majority region, and, secondly, the probable threat that can be defended by this relation. Thirdly, it deals with the difficulties preventing Iran from becoming the only hegemon in the region and how Iran takes advantage of this relation to maintain a dominant role in the Middle East. Finally, it argues that the latest Arab Gulf countries' rush to have normalized ties with Israel would consolidate the Iran-Hamas alliance.

2. What is Defensive Realism?

Defensive neorealism is one of structural theories that were originated from the international relations' realist approach. The work of Kenneth Waltz's 'Theory of International Politics' came by the idea of defensive realism hence Waltz believed that "the anarchical structure of the international system encourages states to maintain moderate and reserved policies to attain security." Waltz deems that states in international anarchical system are not intrinsically aggressive actors since their first concern is not only to accumulate power but to preserve their status in the system as well.⁷

The assumptions of defensive realism differ from the offensive realist approach adopted by Mearsheimer and others which argues that states seek to accumulate power as much as possible 'power maximizers' and only via domination and hegemony states can acquire the needed security.⁸

⁷ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979), 47.

⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 21.

Defensive neorealism argues that what offensive neorealism means by aggressive expansion abolishes the assumptions claimed by the balance of power theory, thus Waltz asserts that states balance more than bandwagon. Meanwhile, the defensive realism considers that any state in the anarchic system seeking to achieve hegemony will be immediately repulsed, 'counterbalanced' by the status quo preferring states. At the time offensive realists argue that states are inherently search for dominance and hegemony, defensive realists believe that states are socialized and aware enough that the ongoing aggression leads to resistance from other states, for which, Snyder says "international anarchy punishes aggression, it doesn't reward it."⁹

Additionally, in contrast to the offensive realism which calls for maximizing power as much as possible, Waltz deems that the anarchic international system fosters strategic incentives for any rational state to gain more power, but it is foolishness for such state to search for hegemony in this system. Waltz argues that instead of maximizing power states should accumulate an 'appropriate amount of power,' since being too powerful would specifically drive the other powerful states to balance against you and influence negatively your security, or they may agree to completely destroy your power.¹⁰

Although the two parts of structural realism have agreed on the significance of power, they differ on the amount of power that should be accumulated by the state. Furthermore, both defensive and offensive neorealists agreed on three strategies through which power can be increased or accumulated which are internal balancing [military spending], external balancing [creating alliances], and waging military conflicts, as these strategies allow states not only to increase their power but also to weaken their potential threats.¹¹

Five reasons put by neorealism answer why states search for power. Firstly, the anarchic nature of the world system itself because there is no

⁹ Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Cornell University Press, 1991), 11.

¹⁰ Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith, *International Relations Theory: Discipline and Diversity* (Oxford University Press, third edition, 2013), 73.

¹¹ Peter Rudloff, "Offensive Realism, Defensive Realism, and the Role of Constraints." *The Midsouth Political Science Review*, 14 (2013): 47]

international government or hierarchy system [no globe authority] that could police states' behaviors. Secondly, each state has its own amount of offensive military capability, it is true that it differs from one state to another but it changes over time. Third, it is difficult for policymakers of each state to know the intentions of other states, hence intentions are non-measurable the same as military capabilities, which means that they cannot be verified as well. The fourth assumption argues that the main goal of each state is to preserve its survival, territorial integrity, and autonomy of its own political order. Fifth, as states are rational actors, its logical that these states will search for all available ways to accumulate more power for their survival.¹²

Different from the hard power (both defensive and offensive) approach, a theory of soft power was emerged by Joseph Nye, based on the idea that various actors (state, organization, single person) can exercise power by non-violent and non-forceful means. While asserting that 'there is no contradiction between realism and soft power,'¹³ Nye suggested that instead of military capabilities, we have persuasion and attraction as the main sources of power, where states becoming able to convince others to follow their example, instead of coercing them. Hence, soft power is about a world in which war is not the only way to resolve conflicts and a world within which international institutions matter.¹⁴

3. Historical Overview

The Iran-Hamas relations dates back to 1990, three years after the establishment of the Palestinian resistance group, when the exiled Hamas' leader Khalil al-Qoqa held a first visit to Iran to take part in the 'Tehran First Conference to Support the Palestinian Intifada.'¹⁵

A year after, bilateral ties developed into a formal level during the Tehran Second Conference to Support the Palestinian Intifada as within

¹² Rudloff, "Offensive Realism, Defensive Realism, and the Role of Constraints." 42.

¹³ Joseph Nye, *The Future of Power*. (New York, Public Affairs, 2011), 82.

¹⁴ Joseph Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, (New York, Basic Books, 1990), 267.

¹⁵ First Palestinian Intifada was a Palestinian public uprising launched on December 8th of 1987 and lasted until 1993's September 13th when the Oslo agreement was signed between Israel and the PLO's leadership.

the conference, the Hamas delegation had officially asked the Iranian leadership to open a representative office for Hamas in Tehran which went into effect within the same year by appointing the Hamas' exiled leader Imad al-Alami as a permanent representative for the group in Iran.¹⁶ Opening the first representative office for Hamas in Tehran coincided with coldness bilged the relations between Iran and the PLO's leaders due to the launch of peace negotiations between them and Israel early in 1990s, in response to which many Iranian students had besieged the headquarters of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)'s envoy to Tehran in 1994.¹⁷

The second significant stage which fostered the relations between the two sides belonged to the first mass deportation Israel carried out against 415 of Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders in 1992 to Lebanon's southern district of Marj Al-Zuhoor, where the Palestinian leaders cultivated the relationship with Iran and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah, which also contributed to the matureness of Hamas as a heavy-weight Palestinian organization and increased the group influence in the Gaza Strip and West Bank as well.¹⁸

During their exile in Lebanon, the Palestinian leaders were frequently visited by Iranian leaders and they directly received material support from them.¹⁹ In 1998, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the co-founder of Hamas, headed to Tehran and met with many of the Iranian leaders with this visit being considered as "critical" after it managed to feature the emerging relationship between the two parties.²⁰ Sheikh Yassin, during the visit, had thanked the Iranian leadership for what he described the "Iranian support for the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli occupation."²¹

¹⁶ "A look back: Iran-Hamas relations throughout history," *Qpost News*, Jan. 3, 2020, accessed: Sept. 5, 2020, <https://www.qposts.com/37326-2/>.

¹⁷ Tariq Hammoud, "Differences between Hamas and Iran, Prospects of Future's Relation 2010-2014." *Al-Zaytouna Center for Studies and Consultation*, April 1, 2015, accessed: January 9, 2020, <https://www.alzaytouna.net/2015/03/18/#.X0USNJMzbnF>.

¹⁸ "1992's Mass Deportation of Hamas Members," *Maan News Agency*, Dec. 21, 2010, accessed: April 2, 2020, <http://www.maannews.com/Content.aspx?id=214068>.

¹⁹ Awad Al-Rjoub, "Hamas and Iran: Will the Break Continue?" *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*, July 26, 2015. July 26, 2015, accessed on April 7, 2020, <http://www.aljazeera.net/knowledgegate/newscoverage/2015/7/26/>.

²⁰ "Yassin from Tehran: Our Priority to Intensify Resistance Against the Occupation," *Archive of Al-Hayat Daily*, accessed: January 5, 2020, http://daharchives.alhayat.com/issue_archive/Hayat%20INT/1998/4/29/.

²¹ "Yassin from Tehran."

Iranian Foreign Ministry had commented on the same event by saying: “The visit is important for Iran since it came by a chief leader for a Palestinian movement that has a big popularity in the Palestinian street and plays a substantial role in the Palestinian cause.”²² A year after the Sheikh Yassin’s visit, the head of the political bureau of Hamas Khaled Meshaal held an official visit to Iran, which was seen as one of the dynamics behind the deterioration of the group’s relations with the Jordanian regime. Soon after, Jordan decided to shut all Hamas offices in Amman, a development that paved the way for weaving closer ties with Iran following the Hamas’ leadership’s decision to transfer their offices to Damascus after failing to restore good relations with the Hashemite Kingdom.²³

The outbreak of the Palestinian Second Intifada²⁴ contributed also to improve the Iran-Hamas relations as Iran had welcomed and backed the effective parties in the Intifada, in particular, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad groups.²⁵ In 2001, Iran hosted a conference to support the newly-erupted Intifada as many of Palestinian MPs, and different representatives of Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad movements had actively taken part. Within the conference, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei hailed the role of the second Palestinian Intifada in managing to restore what he described the “Palestinian national unity.”²⁶ The first difference between Hamas and Iran on the regional issues was regarding the Iraqi war,²⁷ as Hamas declared its support for the Iraqi resistance movements against the U.S. invasion, which combated also against the Iraqi government that had good relations with Iran.²⁸

²² “Hammoud, Differences between Hamas and Iran,” 3.

²³ “Hammoud, Differences between Hamas and Iran,” 4.

²⁴ Erupted on September 28th, 2000 as a response to the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to Al-Aqsa Mosque. The death toll due to the confrontations between the two sides was estimated by 3000 Palestinians and 1000 Israelis. Many observers say that the Sharm El-Sheikh summit held in 2005’s February to be the end of the Intifada.

²⁵ Rachel Brandenburg, “The Iran Primer, Iran and the Palestinians,” *United States Institute of Peace*, October 13, 2010, accessed: January 7, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-palestinians>.

²⁶ Brandenburg, “The Iran Primer: Iran and the Palestinians”.

²⁷ “Hammoud, Differences between Hamas and Iran,” 5.

²⁸ “Hammoud, Differences between Hamas and Iran,” 5.

In 2006, after the surprise winning of Hamas in the Legislative Council's election, the Iran-Hamas relations had seen a dramatic development since Iran pledged to stand with Hamas to let its government succeed against the international calls, mainly from the International Quartet for Middle East, for boycotting the resistance group.²⁹ The International Quartet, which includes US, EU, Russia and UN had decided to suspend any monthly funds set to be sent for the Palestinian authority.³⁰ Later in the same year, Ismail Haniyeh, then Palestinian Prime Minister, made an official visit to Tehran, where he held many meetings and signed different agreements with the Iranian side as Iranian then President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad vowed that his country would send an annual aid worth \$250 million to Palestinians.³¹

Over the 2008-2009's war launched by Israel against the Gaza Strip, the military support by Iran to the Hamas military wing played a critical role in the war, as Iran had secretly sent many military equipment that were reportedly used to repulse the Israeli offensive. Only one month following the war, Meshaal visited Iran again and thanked its leadership for being what he deemed as "a partner in the victory."³²

At the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011, Hamas adopted a neutral position and tried to mediate between the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition, before officially declaring its support for the Syrian people's uprising.³³ Iran, which stood with the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, slammed the Syrian protests as an international conspiracy plotted against what it described the 'axis of resistance.' The Iran-Hamas relations became to a big extent estranged over the Syrian crisis and the annual support worth of \$250 million was cut.³⁴

The differences between the two parties didn't exist only on the Syrian uprising but extended over the Yemeni crisis as well with Hamas issuing

²⁹ "Arouri: Hamas visit to Iran historic and strategic," *Arabi 21*, June 22, 2019, accessed: Sept. 5, 2020, <https://arabi21.com/story/1196886/%D8>.

³⁰ "Hammoud, Differences between Hamas and Iran," 6.

³¹ Brandenburg, "The Iran Primer: Iran and the Palestinians."

³² Brandenburg, "The Iran Primer: Iran and the Palestinians."

³³ Mustafa Habboush, "Hamas' external relations: a way out of the bottleneck," *Anadolu Agency*, July 29, 2019, accessed: Sept. 14, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/%D8%A7>.

³⁴ Al-Rjoub, "Hamas and Iran: Will the Break Continue?"

a statement in which it implicitly announced its support for the 2015's Saudi-led campaign in Yemen against the Iran-backed Houthi militias which overran the Yemeni capital late in 2014.³⁵

Over the Syria's Aleppo crisis in 2016, Hamas released another press statement condemning what was going there and called for an immediate move to "save the civilians who were exposed to daily killings and to stop the horrific massacres committed against them." Although the Hamas statement didn't refer directly to Iran, Russia, or even Syrian regime, the member of Iranian Parliament's Commission of National Security and Foreign Policy Heshmatullah Falahat Beshah said one week after the statement that Hamas had moved away from Iran accusing the group's leaders of carrying out "acts of hostility against Iran."³⁶

However, the calmness over the Syrian crisis and the tension between Iran and the Saudi axis at one side and the Iran-US at the other, made the two parties in dire need to resume the good ties, with many of Hamas leading figures paying official visits to Iran and thanking the "great" Iranian support for the Palestinian resistance movements in the blockaded Gaza Strip.³⁷

4. Analyzing Iranian Support for Hamas

Since the early phases of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Iranian leaders considered Israel, along with the U.S., as first enemy for their country and also used to describe Tel Aviv as "Little Satan" and the "Zionist Entity."³⁸ Meanwhile, the revolutionary Iran considered the Palestinian cause as one of the most important issues in the world even the fairest of them all, and it dealt with it as a strategic cause for both the Arab and Islamic

³⁵ Al-Rjoub, "Hamas and Iran: Will the Break Continue?" See also: "Yemen's Houthis overrun Southern Taiz," *Anadolu Agency*, August 2, 2016, accessed: January 7, 2020, <http://aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/yemen-s-houthis-overrun-southern-taiz-pro-govt-source/620432>

³⁶ Adnan Abu Amer, "Aleppo Crisis makes Iran-Hamas Relations Cold Again", *Al-Monitor*, December 29, 2016, December 29, 2016. <http://www.almonitor.com/pulse/ar/originals/2016/12/hamas-iran-relations-aleppo-condemn.html>.

³⁷ Ali Abo Rezeg, "Iran Needs Hamas More Than Hamas Needs It", *Daily Sabah*, December 28, 2018, accessed: April 7, 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2018/12/28/tehran-needs-hamas-more-than-hamas-needs-it>.

³⁸ Brandenburg, "The Iran Primer: Iran and the Palestinians."

peoples. Hence, it was seen as one of inalienable principles of the ‘Islamic Revolution’ that cannot be “subjected to political considerations or the self-interests anymore.”³⁹

Therefore, the successive Iranian leaders had adopted a supportive vision towards the Palestinian cause since such policy would constitute a very significant source of popular legitimacy⁴⁰ for which they were in a dire need, hence the religious supreme ‘ayatollahs’ Khomeini and Khamenei said in different occasions that the Palestinian issue would remain the cause of the whole Islamic nation ‘Ummah’ as long as Israel exists as a state over the Palestinian territories, confirming that “any solution for this just cause cannot be accomplished without whipping Israel from the Middle East’s map.”⁴¹ They also asserted that Iran, with the other Muslim countries, should submit the required military and financial support for the Palestinians in their struggle against the Israeli occupation.⁴²

But Iran, in many cases, has found itself vis-à-vis a real dilemma represented in the difficulty of combining the ‘inalienable principles’ of the Islamic Revolution over the Palestinian cause and the country’s national interests. Because of which, the different Iranian regimes tried to balance between the mentioned-above principles and the country’s interests with a view to keep Iran a key player in the Palestinian cause in one hand and such role not to be at the expense of the Iran’s national interests which were associated with many internal dimensions in the country.⁴³

Subsequently, Iran built its relations with the Sunni Palestinian resistant factions in regard with the Iranian national security which considered the U.S. and Israel as a probable threat that may launch a surprise aggression against its territories, not on the basis of strategic ideological alliance like

³⁹ Abdulqadir Tafish, “Iran and Palestinian Cause, the Reality and Variables,” *Al-Jazeera Centre for Studies*, December 13, 2012, accessed: January 9, 2020, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2012/12/2012121373958469610.html>.

⁴⁰ Hamzah Abu Shanab, “What brings Hamas and Iran together”, *Al-Mayadeen*, January 15, 2020, accessed: Sept. 10, 2020, <https://www.almayadeen.net/articles/opinion/1374367/%D9>.

⁴¹ Tafish, “Iran and Palestinian Cause, the Reality and Variables.”

⁴² Tafish, “Iran and Palestinian Cause, the Reality and Variables.”

⁴³ Tafish, “Iran and Palestinian Cause, the Reality and Variables.”

it did with the Lebanese Hezbollah.⁴⁴ Three determinants via which we can understand the Iranian national interests in supporting Hamas from a defensive realist approach argued by the theorist Waltz of structural realism (neo-realism).

4.1. Maximizing Soft Power

Since the war launched by the U.S. and Britain against Iraq in 2003, Iran has been facing a wave of sectarian hatred in the region due to its supportive positions for the forces that allied with the Anglo-American invasion there. The Iran behavior first in Iraq, and then in Lebanon, and lately its intervention in Syria and Yemen by supporting the Shia militias there -- at the expense of the Sunni components -- made the sectarian issue reconsidered again on the Middle East. The rethinking of the ideological and cultural aspects, especially among the Sunni communities, seemed largely novel as these communities were evaluating Iran in the past from its political positions in different regional issues not from its sectarian background.⁴⁵

The annual Arab Opinion Index done by the Qatar-based Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies which addresses the Arab opinions at the end of each year by meeting more than 20,000 Arab citizen from different 12 Arab countries indicated that at the end of 2015 at least 63 percent of the respondents saw the Iranian policies in the region as negative comparing with 52 percent at the end of 2014.⁴⁶ Therefore, Iran has seen itself in a dire need for a Sunni ally that has a good reputation in the Arab region to not only whitewash its deeds but to beautify its image that was tarnished because of selecting sectarian trends in the region. Iran finds that Hamas, as a Palestinian resistance group, can play that role after the group has proved that it enjoys an overwhelming popularity among the Sunni Arab and Muslim peoples.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ "Resistance and the Political Trends in the Region," *Al-Jazeera*, March 6, 2007, accessed: January 22, 2020, <http://www.aljazeera.net/specialfiles/pages/b3c34cc1-b8ac-4b0b-a3a1-6ae029f954ce>.

⁴⁵ "Hammoud, Differences between Hamas and Iran," 8.

⁴⁶ "The 2015 Arab Opinion Index", *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, December 21, 2015, accessed: January 11, 2020, <http://www.dohainstitute.org/content/727ce38a-9c8c-4de2-9c51-45c44bcc0a88>.

⁴⁷ "Hammoud, Differences between Hamas and Iran," 8.

Iran, as well, seeks to prove for the Muslim people the credibility of its supportive rhetoric for the Palestinian cause which affirms always on the centrality of the Palestinian cause for the whole Islamic nation ‘Ummah.’ Tehran understands very well that its good relation with Hamas largely serves its propaganda in terms of being a non-sectarian country in the region.⁴⁸

Thus, Iran splendidly realizes the significance of the Palestinian cause in terms of adding to its soft power in the region at the time most of the Arab regimes prefer to ally with the Palestinian movements that adopt the compromising and peaceful [moderate] options in their struggle with Israel, most notably, Fatah group.⁴⁹ Iran, by its support for the resistance groups like Hamas and the Islamic Jihad attempts to send a message for the Sunni Arab peoples that it does nothing but filling the vacuum had been left by the Arab regimes for decades. The failure of the peace process between the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority had contributed to make this narrative more credible and prompted Iran and its Palestinian allies to confirm that the peaceful alternative with Israel was not fruitful so far due to the Israeli stubbornness and non-willingness to give any concessions for Palestinians in return. The ongoing American support for its Israeli ally was also used to justify the fiasco of the decades-long peace process and negotiations.⁵⁰

4.2. Defending a Probable Threat

Iranian policy makers feel that their country has been an always target for a real threat from Israel, the state that has the strongest nuclear arsenal in the region. With the ongoing support from the U.S. and some European powers, Israel managed to possess the capacity of three sorts of nuclear

⁴⁸ “Hammoud, Differences between Hamas and Iran,” 8.

⁴⁹ Firas Ilyas, “Iran-Hamas and relations overtaking sectarian limits”, *Noon Post*, July 29, 2019, accessed: Sept. 10, 2020, <https://www.noonpost.com/content/28732>. Camilla Sandberg, “The Defensive Iran: Rethinking Realism in the case of the Iranian Nuclear Program,” *E-International Relations Students*, August 10, 2013, accessed: January 16, 2020, <https://www.e-ir.info/2013/08/10/the-defensive-iran-rethinking-realism-in-the-case-of-irans-nuclear-programme/>.

⁵⁰ Fatma Al-Smadi, “Hamas and Islamic Jihad Redefine Relations with Israel,” *Al-Jazeera Center for Studies*, September 20, 2015, accessed: January 11, 2020, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2015/09/201592084340199169.html>.

power in air, on land, and in water with a big number of vehicles that are able to carry nuclear warheads, in addition to owning submarines that could launch nuclear attacks against any country in the Middle East region.⁵¹

Israel's possession for nuclear weapons dates back to 1973 but it didn't acknowledge that it attained this technology until 1983 when many reports released that Israel at least had 200 nuclear devices, and recent media information said that the total number of devices Israel reigns nowadays is between 100-400. Not only the obvious nuclear weapon that threatens Iran but also the different covert operations that were carried out by Israel against the Iranian nuclear facilities since 2010.⁵² Hence, in the period between 2010-2012, the Iranian authorities announced that at least four of the Iranian nuclear scientists; Massout Mohammadi, Majeed Shahrayar, Daryosh Rezai Nacad, and Mostafa Ahmedi Rushin were assassinated in Tehran. Although no group had claimed responsibility for the assassination attacks, Tehran has always pointed the fingers on the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad.⁵³

Meanwhile, Iran feared that its nuclear installations could be attacked by Israel because it had a bad reputation in this regard as first of which was in Iraq against what was known by Osirak plant in 1981,⁵⁴ the same Israel actually had done with the Syria's Dir Ezzur nuclear facility in 2007, not to forget the almost weekly or monthly attacks Israel launch over Syria since the beginning of the 2011 crisis,⁵⁵ and the fires targeted different nuclear sites in Iran, mainly Natanz plant.⁵⁶ Moreover, Israel is an historical ally with the U.S. and its well known that the survival of Israel is a matter of national security in the U.S. to the level that U.S. designs its foreign policy in the Middle East according to the Israeli interests and in

⁵¹ Sandberg, "The Defensive Iran."

⁵² Sandberg, "The Defensive Iran."

⁵³ "Most Famous Assassination Attempts Against Iranian Scientists." *Sasa Post*, January 6, 2015, accessed: January 16, 2020, <https://www.sasapost.com/assassination-of-iranian-nuclear-scientests>.

⁵⁴ Sandberg, "The Defensive Iran."

⁵⁵ "The Attack on Syria's al-Kibar Nuclear Facility." *Jewish Policy Center*, February 2, 2009, accessed: January 12, 2020, <https://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/2009/02/28/the-attack-on-syrias-al-kibar-nuclear-facility/>

⁵⁶ "Iran nuclear: Fire at Natanz plant 'caused by sabotage.'" *BBC*, August 23, 2020, accessed: Sept. 18, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53884701>.

different occasions there was serious talks between the two sides, U.S. and Israel, to direct a joint air-strike against the Iranian nuclear facilities, most importantly, the discussion took place in October 2012.⁵⁷

With a view to undermine such critical and probable threat, Iran resorts to defend itself by allying with the non-state groups in the region which carry the same degree of hostility against Israel, most of which Hamas and other Palestinian resistant groups.⁵⁸ Hence, this shows that at the time Hamas is in dire need for having Iranian support, Iran is keener to have the Palestinian groups' trust with a view to avoiding an Israeli threat by reaching strategic alliances.⁵⁹

4.3. Failure to be Region's Sole Hegemon

Studying the ambitions of Iran in being the only Middle Eastern hegemon should not be isolated from addressing the ability and capability that qualify Iran to act in this way. Though, Iran has been seen as very far of being even a great power due to the weakness of its economical, industrial, and even the technological capacities.⁶⁰

It is true that sometimes the Iranian economy ranks at the biggest 20 economies, with regard to the GDP based on PPP valuation [billion current international dollars,]⁶¹ but that doesn't mean that Iran possesses the economic capacity qualifying it to dominate its neighboring countries. The population of the Islamic Republic is around 75, almost the same with Turkey which Iran is always lagging behind, and much less than Egypt which numbered more than 100 million.⁶²

⁵⁷ Sandberg, "The Defensive Iran."

⁵⁸ Rusty Trevino, "Is Iran Offensive or Defensive Realist, A Theoretical Reflection on Iranian Motives of Creating Instability," *Journal of Strategic Security* 5, no. 6 (2013): 385.

⁵⁹ Adnan Abu Amer, "Iran to continue Hamas support despite international outrage." *Adnan Abu Amer official website via Al-Monitor*, February 12, 2018, accessed: Sept. 18, 2020, <https://adnanabuamer.com/post/763/%D8>.

⁶⁰ Trevino, "Is Iran Offensive or Defensive Realist," 386.

⁶¹ "World GDP Ranking 2016", *US-based Knoema company*, accessed: January 15, 2020, <https://knoema.com/nwnfkne/world-gdp-ranking-2016-data-and-charts-forecast>.

⁶² Trevino, "Is Iran Offensive or Defensive Realist," 386.

With regard to the industrial and technological sectors, Iran had managed to achieve significant progress in the indigenous military technologies and in the automobile industries. According to the International Organization of Motor Vehicle Manufactures (OICA), Iran has been recorded among the top 15 in the automobile industries in the world because it managed to double its car manufactories within the latest seven years. However, the country's accelerated strides to expand the economic capacity came at the expense of the efficiency of its products which to a big extent were negatively affected by the government mismanagement and corruption, the dreadful crony capitalism, and the international sanctions.⁶³ Not to forget the sanctions imposed over Iran by Trump's administration in the summer of 2018 which worsened the already ailing Iranian economy and badly affected the national currency.⁶⁴

All of these affected badly the capacity and sustainability of Tehran's economy which stays unable to submit solutions for the stagnant GDP or to find jobs for millions of Iranian people who are stemming from the lack of scientific opportunities, floated currency and shortages of goods.⁶⁵ Focusing the country's capabilities on the nuclear program should not be neglected as well.⁶⁶

Subsequently, such economic circumstances made Iranian capacity unable to be the greatest power in the region due to the absence of the required capabilities to turn its income into a strong state. Moreover, the Iranian leadership are not able to take advantage from the gains come to the country's treasury from the oil revenues as these gains are lost to the governmental mismanagement and corruption and they are always subject to the frequent fluctuations of the international oil market which is largely affected by the regional competition with the oil-rich countries like Saudi Arabia that decided such fluctuating policies since 2011 with a view to cause shrinking in the Iranian oil revenues and also to destabilize the regime there.⁶⁷ Moreover, the fluctuations hit the Iranian oil production

⁶³ Trevino, "Is Iran Offensive or Defensive Realist," 387.

⁶⁴ "Six charts that show how hard US sanctions have hit Iran." *BBC*, December 9, 2019, accessed: April 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48119109>.

⁶⁵ Trevino, "Is Iran Offensive or Defensive Realist," 387.

⁶⁶ Trevino, "Is Iran Offensive or Defensive Realist," 387-388.

⁶⁷ Trevino, "Is Iran Offensive or Defensive Realist," 387.

by the U.S.' sanctions and coronavirus pandemic. This means that any drop for the international oil prices is accompanied by recession for the Iranian economy in general and for the industrial sector in particular, most importantly what Iran had suffered due to the hyper-inflation that recently struck the country's economy.⁶⁸ Iran failed to impose itself as a regional hegemony or at least the greatest power in the region due to the different mentioned-above factors. Then Iran should not be classified as the regional hegemon but a survivor that resorts to the non-state groups like Hamas and Hezbollah in order to prove for the regional and international powers that Iran is a considerable power that cannot be marginalized or ejected and any attempt to do so means it is able to erupt an upheaval that can shake the whole region.

4.4. Arab Rush to Normalize Ties with Israel

The recent Arab countries' rush to have normalized ties with Israel amounts to be a major dynamic prompting Iran and Hamas to consolidate their alliance. Since the very beginning, Iran slammed the deals signed between the UAE, Bahrain and Israel and termed it as "a strategic stupidity". Iran also reiterated that such deal would "empower the Resistance Axis"⁶⁹ comprised of the latter, Hezbollah and Hamas. Almost two days after the reached deal, the Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif phoned the chief of Hamas Ismail Haniyeh and reassured him that Tehran "felt confident that the heroic Palestinian people, Arab and Muslim worlds are strong enough to foil this agreement." Haniyeh, for his part, presented thanks for what he described as: "Iran's role in defending the Palestinian rights."⁷⁰

Iran's strong reaction against the Gulf-Israel agreement comes due to the tremendous risks Tehran was expecting of such a deal on its national security. Iranians see that any Gulf-Israeli rapprochement would allow the Israeli entity to reach their southern borders via the UAE, after Israel

⁶⁸ Trevino, "Is Iran Offensive or Defensive Realist," 387-388.

⁶⁹ "Iran slams UAE-Israel deal." *Iran Daily*, August 14, 2020, accessed: Sept. 8, 2020, <http://www.irandailyonline.ir/News/272874.html>.

⁷⁰ Iran, Hamas discuss UAE-Israel normalization deal, *Anadolu Agency*, August 15, 2020, accessed: Sept. 8, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iran-hamas-discuss-uae-israel-normalization-deal/1942493>.

is already approaching from the north due to the close relations between Baku and Tel Aviv. That concern also existed among the Iranian policy makers when they adopted a categorical rejection towards the Iraqi Kurdish Region referendum in September 2017 and spared no effort to thwart it.⁷¹ The Iranian concern over that was seemingly not exaggerated. Almost two weeks after the deal reached between the two sides, JForum, the official news site of the Paris-based French-speaking Jewish community, revealed that the UAE and Israel were working to establish a spy base in the UAE-held Yemeni strategic archipelago of Socotra.⁷² Many analysts, including Ibrahim Fraihat and Sayed Mohammed Marandi, agreed that the Israeli-Emirati potential spy base would aim at nothing but “monitoring the Iranian activities in the Gulf of Aden with a view to curbing Tehran’s relationship with Houthi rebels,” given the Socotra’s critical location overlooking the strategic Bab al-Mandab Strait, a main shipping route that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea. Months before the deal, the UAE managed to deploy hundreds of its troops and mercenaries on the strategic island, which led to a huge rift between Abu Dhabi and the Yemeni government.⁷³ The creation of that base was seen also as an additional indicator that the deal signed between the two countries aimed at something more than normalizing ties, it was meant for building a solid alliance targeting Iran and its interests in the region.⁷⁴

At the time Iran was outraged of the recent normalization deal, its policy makers looked to it as an opportunity to enhance its relations with the Palestinian groups, foremost Hamas, and an opportunity to restore some influence lost during the latest decade within the Arab world. Among the Arab peoples, these normalization deals break all religious, political, and historical taboos.⁷⁵ If Iran had conducted huge efforts in the media,

⁷¹ Saber Anbari, “Iran and the Arab Train towards Normalization ... Winning and Losing Accounts,” *Al-Jazeera*, December 18, 2017, accessed: Jan. 11, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.net/opinions/2017/12/18/%D8%A5%D9>.

⁷² Hannan Greenwood, “Report: Israel, UAE setting up spy bases in Yemen, Israel Hayom,” *Israel Hayom*, August 31, 2020, accessed: Sept 15, 2020, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2020/08/31/report-israel-uae-setting-up-spy-bases-in-yemen/>

⁷³ Ali Abo Rezeg, “Israel-UAE spy base on Socotra targets Iran, China, Pakistan.” *Anadolu Agency*, Sept. 2, 2020, accessed: Sept. 15, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/israel-uae-spy-base-on-socotra-targets-iran-china-pakistan-/1960475>.

⁷⁴ Ali Abo Rezeg, “Israel-UAE spy base on Socotra”.

⁷⁵ See the Arab Opinion Index launched on annual basis by the Doha-based Arab

political and cultural spheres to reveal the truth and tendencies of the Arab countries running towards normalization with Israel, it might have backfired in light of regional rivalry, but these unilateral moves towards Israel have already uncovered those states and tarnished their image in front of the Arab peoples.⁷⁶ Among Arabs, it is known since the Nasser's era in 1950s, that the centrality of the Palestinian cause makes it a scale measuring the popularity of presidents, groups, states, and rulers as any support for Palestine and its resistance is directly reflected among the Arab communities, which Iran highly apprehends and wants to take advantage of.⁷⁷

The normalization process, as well, would embolden Hamas to come closer to Iran and justify its political discourse on this regard. Hamas had been criticized in different occasions that it was exceeding the Sunni Arab states of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, known also as the "Moderate Axis", which put Hamas under pressure of the diminishing support and popularity among the Arab communities.⁷⁸ Hamas feels that such Arab axis has crossed all the red lines, which would allow its leaders to freely move towards the Iranian axis since it is permissible for the Palestinian largest resistance group to remain silent on such behaviors and policies. Based on that, the Palestinian group didn't hesitate to reject and decry the classification of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in a statement released by the Arab foreign ministers,⁷⁹ because it sensed the gravity of the situation. Most importantly, the Palestinian group issued a statement thanking the Iran-backed Houthis' initiative to launch a swap deal with Saudi Arabia to release Hamas members⁸⁰ imprisoned there in exchange

Center for Researches and Policy Studies in October 2020, where 88 percent of Arab respondents rejected any rapprochement moves with Israel in both the short and long runs, "The 2020 Arab Opinion Index", *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, October 2, 2020, accessed: Oct. 10, 2020, <https://arabindex.dohainstitute.org/AR/Pages/Arab-Opinion-Index-2019-2020.aspx>.

⁷⁶ Anbari, "Iran and the Arab Train towards Normalization..."

⁷⁷ Saber Anbari, "Iran and the Arab Train towards Normalization..."

⁷⁸ Saber Anbari, "Iran and the Arab Train towards Normalization..."

⁷⁹ "Hamas rejects Arab FMs' classification of Hezbollah as terrorist organization," *Russia Today*, Nov. 20 2017, accessed: Sept. 17, 2020, https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/911044-.

⁸⁰ Around 40 Hamas members have been imprisoned by Saudi authorities since 2017 on charges of raising funds for the Gaza-based relief organizations.

of many Saudi officers captured by the Yemeni rebels during the ongoing war.⁸¹

5. Conclusion

In the defensive neo-realist approach, Waltz argued that states are defensive actors searching for their security and survival more than hegemony as Mearsheimer and others claimed. It actually makes sense to understand the Iranian support for Hamas from the defensive neo-realist perspective. Iran is a regional power and knows very well that its internal circumstances and economic capacities don't qualify it to be the only regional hegemon due to the presence of regional powers Iran is lagging behind such as Israel and Turkey since both of them are having larger military capabilities than what Iran has.

Therefore, Iran seeks to maintain its 'security' survival by allying with the non-state groups that their interests meet with Iran in opposing Israel. In defensive neorealism, states also seek for maximizing appropriate bunch of power, which is required for states while balancing superpowers since this power can be attained in different ways, most importantly by its external allies.

Iran had allied with Hamas searching for soft power it needs in a Sunni-majority region with an aim to improve its status in the Middle East, the status that was tarnished because of the sectarian policies adopted by Ayatollahs' regime since the Iraqi war. Furthermore, Iran knows very well that it may come under a probable Israeli or U.S. attack because of its nuclear program which makes Iran in dire need to ally with the Palestinian resistant groups with a view to erupting a multi-direction front against Israel if such attack takes place.

It is true that Iran-Hamas relations haven't been strong like they were in the past due to many factors, most recent, Hamas positions in the Syrian and Yemeni crises. However, cancelling of the 2015 deal by U.S. President Donald Trump reaffirmed Iran's need to maintain that relation.

⁸¹ "Hamas welcomes Houthi rebels to exchange Saudi soldiers with Hamas members," *Al-Jazeera*, March 26, 2020, accessed: Sept. 17, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2020/3/26/%D8%A7%D9>.

The ongoing threat of the U.S. current administration and any breakthrough in the peace talks over Syrian crisis may strengthen the Iranian need to foster its relations with Hamas again for the same defensive neo-realist reasons, hence cutting relations with a Palestinian resistant group in this sensitive time will show Iran as nothing but opportunist country which Iran has been keen not to appear so.

Moreover, and most recently, the Arab Gulf countries' [UAE and Bahrain] rush to have normalized ties with Israel would not prompt the two to only improve ties but to consolidate alliance given the fact that Iran has been looking for the recent deals as a threat to its national security. The deals will also embolden Hamas to have closer ties with the Iranian ally by justifying to their supporters across the Arab world that the Arab Sunni leaders of UAE and Bahrain "have sold the Palestinian cause for nothing in return." Hamas was violently slammed in the recent years for rapprochement with Iran with the normalization deals come to justify that the Hamas move was in the right direction.

It is noteworthy also that the viability of the Waltzian defensive neo-realist approach in interpreting the Iran-Hamas relations doesn't mean that it is viable too to explain the Iranian support for Shia militias in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, hence Mearsheimer's offensive neorealist and Wendt's constructivist approaches are better explainers for such deep and solid relations.

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