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# Iran's Sacred Duty: Advocating Palestine in the Face of National Identity Challenges<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The Islamic Republic of Iran's approach to the Palestinian issue since the revolution is characterized by its complexity and intricacy. This article proposes a framework centered on the dynamic interaction between 'self and other' to analyze how identity shapes Iran's policy toward Palestine. Departing from the premise that Iran's foreign policy on this issue is influenced by multiple identities rather than a singular one, the study underscores the notion that these identities can both contest and complete each other. The research seeks the narratives articulated by Iranian elites regarding the Palestine issue. It also handles the Iran decision-maker's discourses regarding developments after October 7, 2023, and the invasion of Gaza. While the aim is to focus on how Iran's national identity has been tested and challenged on the Palestinian matter, the analysis also tries to illuminate how elite discourse has reshaped foreign policy narratives.

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy, National Identity, Self & Other, Discourse, Palestine Issue.

<sup>1</sup> This article is originated from a completed doctoral dissertation conducted under the supervision of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bayram Sinkaya at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of International Relations.

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## İran'ın Kutsal Görevi: Ulusal Kimlik Meydan Okuması Karşısında Filistin'i Savunmak<sup>2</sup>

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### Öz

İran İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin devrimden bu yana Filistin meselesine yaklaşımı, karmaşıklığı ve giriftliği ile karakterize edilmektedir. Bu makale, kimliğin İran'ın Filistin politikasını nasıl şekillendirdiğini analiz etmek için 'benlik ve öteki' arasındaki dinamik etkileşime odaklanan bir çerçeve önermektedir. İran'ın dış politikasının tek bir kimlikten ziyade birden fazla kimlikten etkilendiği varsayımından yola çıkan çalışma, bu kimliklerin hem rekabet edebileceği hem de birbirini tamamlayabileceği fikrinin altını çiziyor. Araştırma, İranlı elitlerin Filistin meselesine ilişkin dile getirdiği anlatıları derinlemesine inceliyor. Ayrıca İran'daki karar vericilerin 7 Ekim 2023 sonrası gelişmeler ve Gazze'nin işgaline ilişkin söylemleri de ele alıyor. Amaç, İran'ın ulusal kimliğinin nasıl sınımlandığına ve Filistin meselesinde nasıl meydan okuduğuna odaklanmak olsa da analiz elit söylemlerinin dış politika anlatılarını nasıl yeniden şekillendirdiğini de aydınlatmaya çalışıyor.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dış Politika, Milli Kimlik, Benlik & Öteki, Söylem, Filistin Meselesi.

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## 1. Introduction

Iran's stance on the Palestinian issue in the post-revolutionary era appears puzzling to many works. Iran's religious motivation in supporting the Palestine cause is handled within the Islamic solidarity context, and the Palestinian issue is being discussed as an "Islamic duty" that requires Iran's collective responsibility. Conversely, in post-revolutionary Iranian politics, nationalist discourse resists foreign influence, defends territorial integrity, and legitimizes the regime. Then, how does the nationalist discourse discuss this issue after the Islamic Revolution? Scholars commonly posit that nationalism and political Islam represent two distinct and often conflicting paradigms (Basiriyeh, 2003, as cited in Saleh & Worrall, 2015, p. 85).

In this point, to answer the question of nationalist views, the focal point will be the identity of the Islamic Republic. Before proceeding with the discussion, the precise point would be state identity. Elites shape state identity through corresponding discourse. The alteration in the identity and objectives of the Islamic Republic was a direct outcome of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This revolution brought about substantial shifts in the ideological, normative, and perceptual foundations that governed Iranian politics. Post-revolutionary Iranian political elites have reconfigured the state identity, emphasizing the imperative to build or "burn bridges" and "define and justify priorities" (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2016, p. 613). Post-revolutionary national identity discourse in Iran tended to burn bridges. That is, two points came to the fore: the rejection of the concept of nation, which the West produced because it aimed to divide the *Islamic Ummah*. The second is the rejection of Pahlavi nationalism. However, the fact that the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) endangered the integrity of the country prevented Iranian leaders from putting the nationalist discourse aside in foreign policy.

The work's main argument is that no fixed identity affects foreign policy. Instead, it argues that the absence of a fixed identity allows for the fluidity of foreign policy decisions, wherein Iranian authorities continuously shape and reshape multiple identities. Iran's Palestinian policy is complex and multifaceted due to competing identities and the diverse discourses among Iranian elites that shape it. To comprehend this issue thoroughly, one must delve into the state identity of the Islamic Republic.

Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has consistently sought to balance its revolutionary Islamic identity with pragmatic national interests (Hunter, 2010, p. 45). While its ideological commitment to supporting oppressed Muslims, including the Palestinians, remains a cornerstone of its foreign policy, this often clashes with the demands of maintaining regional stability and safeguarding broader national interests. This tension between revolutionary ideals and *realpolitik* highlights the flexibility of Iran's foreign policy, which is shaped by the interplay of multiple evolving identities.

The shifts in Iran's approach to Palestine depend on which political factions and identities dominate the regime (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2008). During Khatami's presidency, a more pragmatic, moderate identity emerged, focusing on dialogue and diplomacy. In contrast, under Ahmadinejad, the regime reverted to emphasizing its revolutionary Islamic identity, characterized by anti-Israeli rhetoric and heightened support for Palestinian resistance groups. Ehteshami argues that these shifts demonstrate the absence of a fixed identity in Iranian foreign policy, with competing ideological and strategic interests influencing decisions.

The methodology employed in this study utilizes discourse analysis to examine the construction of "self and other" identities within the Iranian state. This approach facilitates exploring competing or contesting identities, particularly Iran's national and religious state identities, through a constructivist lens. The primary argument is that fixed identities do not solely determine foreign policy. Instead, it contends that these identities are fluid and subject to change over time. Understanding Iranian foreign policy, especially its approach to issues such as the Palestinian issue, will not be sufficient through the lens of a single, static identity.

This study will unfold in three sections. Firstly, it will delve into discussions in the literature on the impact of state identity on foreign policy, exploring how diverse state identities influence foreign policy decisions. Moreover, it will examine whether these identities complement or exist in contention. Secondly, the article will spotlight the "self and other" dimensions of Iranian national identity, elucidating how the discourses of post-revolutionary Iranian political elites shape them.

Lastly, while the Palestine issue will be utilized as a case study, its

complexity exceeds the scope of this study. Therefore, the focus will be on the relations between Palestine and Iran, particularly examining Iran's national discourses concerning these developments. The 7/10 conflict will be pivotal, illuminating Iranian foreign policy discourses regarding Palestine.

## **2. State Identity and Foreign Policy: Competing or Complementary?**

Most people involved in international relations tend to treat states and other actors influential in international politics as if they were persons, so much so that this study will start from this point. It will also handle identity as the state identity, which is linked with the operations of the state apparatus.

The assessment of states as persons unavoidably necessitates establishing an association between states and identity (Wendt, 2004, pp. 289–316). The occupation of identity in this relationship has three fundamental purposes: “telling you who you are, telling you who others are, and telling others who you are” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). In light of this, a state's identity—as expressed in its foreign policy—becomes a crucial symbol of its interactions with and relationships with other states and what it stands for to the outside world.

According to Barnett (1999, pp. 5-36), state identity is contesting the meaning of identity within an institutional context. He focuses on the conflict between competing political and social interest groups in the state identity-foreign policy relationship. Barnett also states that “specific metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive representations” are used when underlining the role of decision-makers and ruling elites in defining state identity. Like Barnett, Adib-Moghaddam claims that cognitive cues refer to “the intellectual production and processing of categories of the self and other”; institutional sources denote the formulation of cultural artifacts as authoritative state narratives (Adib-Moghaddam, 2007, p. 43). A social cognitive structure establishes the boundaries of society's discourse, including how people think about themselves and others. Then, how does state identity set boundaries between *self* and *others*: who are we, and who are they? The concept of identity is related to drawing the boundary between the two. According to David Campbell (1998, p. 8), the constitution of identity is ‘achieved through the inscription of boundaries,

which demarcate ‘inside’ from ‘outside,’ ‘Self’ from ‘Other,’ ‘domestic’ from ‘foreign’ (Campbell, 1992).

While this study deals with the relationship between foreign policy and state identity, it will examine the components of the state identity regarding how the state perceives “*self and other*” and what it should represent. It will mainly focus on the roles that the self assumes about the other. To explain this issue, the study will benefit from Ted Hopf’s work on “Identity and Foreign Policies (Hopf, 2002).” According to Hopf (2002, p. 9), contrary to evaluating the relationship between self and other as conflicting in nature, the exciting quality of an Other is most related to its difference and its dissimilarity to itself. Needing to establish its own identity relative to an Other, the self feels the danger and fragility of this interdependence and responds with discursive exercises of power to reinvigorate the illusory monadic Self (Hopf, 2002, p. 278).

At this point, we cannot think that the state has a single fixed identity. States can have multiple identities; Hinnebusch (2003, pp. 54-72) argues that the salience of a particular identity from multiple identities ties it to a specific social context. Like Hinnebusch, Karawan (2002, pp. 167-168) claims that different identities have been crafted, influencing the orientation of each country and determining its alliances and adversaries. Political leaders have the flexibility to select identities deemed acceptable by their societies. He argues that political elites are pivotal in shaping and reshaping state identity. The coexistence of diverse identities, be they sub-national, national, or supranational, allows ruling elites to mold the country’s identity based on their interests and policy choices at any given moment (Dawisha, 2002, p. 118). In other words, the elite in the states with reasonably secure alternative identities can choose among and then manipulate identities to suit their foreign policy objectives, as they are constructed to make specific foreign policies appropriate and others not.

When states seek to consolidate their power and legitimacy, they construct an identity, especially regarding foreign policy. Therefore, state identity formation can be seen as an organic process; a state may exhibit multiple strands of overlapping, competing, and contested identity. However, these multiple identities can be constructed to complement or competitively frame each other. This depends on how actors choose among competing identities and how complementary identities come together. Wendt (1999,

p. 230) states, “Many situations call up several identities that may point in different directions.” He adds, “There is no way to predict a priori how internal identity conflicts are resolved.” In other words, whether identities are competitive or complementary would depend on the particular identities in question.

The literature discussed underscores the critical significance of comprehending state identity as a fundamental driver of foreign policy conduct and outcomes. Political elites in the developing world often construct and reconstruct state identity to navigate the complexities of both internal legitimacy and external threats. These works collectively reinforce the argument that political leaders possess significant agency in crafting state identity and guiding foreign policy, using identity as a strategic tool to pursue their agendas (Ayoob, 1995). The boundary of the state identity is pivotal in influencing a state’s foreign policy behavior and objectives (Hopf, 2002). Within this framework, the study pivots towards delineating the boundaries between the ‘self and other,’ which profoundly influences a state’s foreign policy decisions and objectives.

Moreover, it accentuates identity’s dynamic and multifaceted nature, diverging from a fixed or monolithic identity. The literature emphasizes the pivotal role of political leaders in shaping and reshaping state identity to align with their agendas and policy objectives. This underscores the agency of political elites in navigating the complexities of identity construction within the context of foreign policy.

Considering the role of state identity and elite, the study will discuss the role of various factors, including historical narratives, cultural symbols, and political interests, in shaping state identity and influencing foreign policy behavior in Palestine. Analyzing these factors with state identity dynamics enables a more comprehensive understanding of identity and foreign policy interplay.

### **3. *Self and Other* Components of National Identity in Post-Revolutionary Iran**

Concerning Iran, the concept of “nation” – *mellat* in Persian cannot be separated from its religious content. Iranians do not “imagine” themselves as a political community in entirely secular terms. Therefore, Vaziri

argues that the conception of Iranian national identity began in the 19th century, driven by concerted endeavors from ruling elites, intellectuals, governmental bodies, and religious figures to foster a sense of unity and nationhood among the populace (Vaziri, 1993, pp. 1-11). While state authorities define and redefine identities, how are the Iranian national “self” and “other” described in the post-revolutionary period? The Islamic Republic needed to construct a homogeneous ‘other’ against the ‘self’. ‘While the self was created collectively, it became the most potent shaping force of Iranian history, domestic and foreign policies.

*The self* of Iran’s national identity underwent significant transformation through different components. Firstly, as discussed above, it is widely acknowledged that historically, Iranian identity has been closely associated with religious identity. Here, the role of a particular form of Islam, Shiism, is underlined in forming Iranian identity (Akbarzadeh & Barry, 2016).

Shia Islam has been crucial in shaping modern territorial nationalism in Iran. The country’s national identity has been deeply influenced by Shiism ever since the Safavid dynasty established it as the state religion. Shiism became a defining element in forming identity, drawing upon its assertions of political authority, its emphasis on martyrdom, and its messianic beliefs (Amanat, 2012, p. 13). Following the revolution, Shiism emerged as a significant symbol of Iranian national identity, highlighting the distinctiveness of the Iranian “self” in contrast to Sunni “others” through its status as a state religion. Moreover, Shiism played a pivotal role as an ideological force during the revolution, and following the revolution, the Islamic state constitution prioritized Shiism within the state framework. Provisions rooted in Shiite faith were incorporated into the Iranian constitution to foster ideological alignment between the state and Shiism. Consequently, within all governmental institutions and roles and in the country’s administration, Shiism’s principles gained prominence, solidifying the state’s identity based on Shiism. Article 12 of the Constitution stipulates that Islam and the *Twelver Ja’fari* School of Religion (Shiism) are the official religions, with this principle declared unchangeable for eternity.

The second component of the national identity of Iran is the relationship between Iranians and the ‘external other.’ The established literature (Ansari, 2012; Cottam, 1979; Marashi, 2011; Vaziri, 1993) suggests that



Iranian identity has been intertwined with experiences of imperialism. The intrusion of imperial powers into Iran provoked nationalist reactions and contributed to the emergence of a new Iranian identity. However, the Pahlavi regime largely downplayed this aspect of history, focusing instead on selective historical narratives of glory. One prominent example is the emphasis on Aryanism and the pre-Islamic Persian Empire. Mohammad Reza Shah heavily promoted “the symbols and imagery of ancient Persia, particularly the legacy of figures like Darius, Cyrus, and Xerxes” (Adib-Moghaddam, 2014, p. 48). This culminated in the extravagant celebration of the 2,500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Persian Empire in 1971 at Persepolis, where the Shah emphasized Iran’s ancient grandeur as part of his broader effort to legitimize his rule. As an opening speech, he proclaimed, “O Cyrus, Great King, King of Kings, Achaemenian King, Sovereign of the land of Iran, I, the Shahanshah of Iran, extend greetings to you on behalf of myself and my nation” (Pahlavi, 1971)

Conversely, the rulers of the Islamic Republic of Iran revitalized discussions on imperial domination, portraying Iranians as victims of various forms of imperialism. Consequently, even after the revolution, Iran’s identity remained in opposition to what was perceived as ‘global arrogance,’ with continuous challenges posed by imperial attempts to dominate Iran and its people.

The interpretation of Iran’s national history highlights the emergence of a significant component of its national identity: “the fear of foreign meddling” (Anoushiravan, 2002, pp. 283-309). Over centuries, Iranian dynasties, notably encountering the Russians and British, grappled with various “external others.” Particularly consequential was the formation of modern Iranian national identity in opposition to Great Britain. British imperialism spurred the mobilization of local actors, including tribes, the *ulama*, and nationalists, against this *external other*, with the Tobacco Protest of 1891 and the 1905 Iranian Constitutional Revolution marking a pivotal moment in this resistance (Amanat, 2012, p. 13).

In the early 1950s, Iran’s conflict with Britain and the United States over oil expropriation and economic sovereignty fostered a deep sense of shared national destiny. The “West,” symbolizing great power and allure, represented the ultimate *Other*, overshadowing previous ghosts from Iran’s past (Amanat, 2012, p. 23). The orchestrated coup by Britain and the

United States against Iran's revered national leader, Mossadeq, epitomizes a historical event viewed as a national struggle against foreign interference. This incident led to widespread opposition to the US throughout Iran (Sariolghalam, 2003, p. 74).

With the onset of the Islamic Revolution, the official historical narrative portrayed the Iranian nation as oppressed, engaged in a struggle to preserve its political independence against Western colonialism. Article 154 of the constitution underscores Iran's commitment to refrain from intervening in the internal affairs of other nations (Iran Constitution, Article 154). This narrative was characterized by a sense of victimization and a culture of resistance, as highlighted in the Constitution's support for the struggles of the oppressed against oppressors globally. The revolution gave rise to the concept of the righteous *Self* versus the wicked *Other*, fueled by a martyrdom paradigm and the notion of sacred defense, particularly evident during the Iran-Iraq war, which was framed as defending the Islamic motherland.

The Iranian national identity underwent a significant transformation with the advent of the Islamic revolution, which framed the Pahlavi dynasty as the "historical other" (Hopf, 2002).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the Islamic Republic of Iran defined itself in contrast to its Pahlavi past, viewing it as the primary threat to its identity. This self-other dynamic aligns with Hopf's models of "Others." The Western *other* was perceived as a source of conspiracy and exploitation to the Iranian "*bio-ontology*," epitomized by the label "the Great Satan," coined by the leader of the Islamic Revolution. Following the 1979 revolution, a new rhetoric emerged, focusing on bio-ontological engineering on Iran's identity at a fundamental level. Jalal-al Ahmad and Ali Shariati, distinguished as pioneering revolutionary intellectuals in Iran, played pivotal roles in shaping the re-engineering process through their influential writings.

In this context, two dominant narratives held sway. Firstly, there is the concept of "westoxification" (*gharbzadegi*), which metaphorically represents the detrimental impact of Western lifestyles, institutions, and values. This notion persisted through the discourse of 'cultural onslaught'

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<sup>1</sup> Hopf sees the Soviet Union as the Historical Other of the Russian Federation in his work.

during the Islamic Republic era. Secondly, there is the notion of “return to the self” (*bazgasht be khish*), which emphasizes a strong alignment with the broader anti-colonial struggle, particularly in rediscovering Iran’s “true” essence (Keddie, 2013). These narratives underscore the significance of how Iran’s political intellectuals interpret the nation’s history.

Within the Islamic Republic’s rhetoric, the pursuit of the “self” was framed as a process of purging the country of Western influence and the perceived moral decay of secularism in favor of embracing “true Islam.” This vision was envisioned as an ideal to be instilled in the hearts and minds of a new generation of Iranians by intellectuals aligned with the Islamic Republic. Consequently, the Islamic Republic embarked on a sustained and systematic campaign against the “Historical Other” and pursued the “re-Islamization” of Iran through educational initiatives and propaganda efforts.

Nevertheless, forty-five years after the revolution, the concept of self within the national identity took on a fresh perspective. A new nationalist narrative emerged, rooted in opposition to the state’s prescribed definition of national interest. This discourse scrutinized the prioritization of political agendas over the welfare of the Islamic *umma* and its unity. In addition to the accepted characterization of the national identity components of the Islamic Republic, the study will also try to explain Iran’s attitude to the Palestinian issue by including this nationalist perspective.

#### **4. National Identity Reflections of the Islamic Republic of Iran on the Palestine Issue**

##### **4.1 Israel and the Palestine question from the viewpoint of the Islamic Republic**

The essence of the Palestine issue is widely regarded as a struggle between two national movements. On the one hand, there is the Zionist movement that has been going on since the early 20th century – the existence of Israel as its embodiment – and, on the other hand, there is the Palestinian national movement (W. Khalidi, 1991, p.5). However, as Rashid Khalidi sets out:

the Palestine-Israel conflict was never one between two national movements contesting equally over the same land but was always a settler colonial conquest by Europe-based Zionists. Jewish settlers aided by Britain and

the United States later on colonized Palestine, creating and securing Israel through six wars (R. Khalidi, 2020).

During Iran's pre-revolutionary era, opposition groups were deeply invested in the Palestinian cause. Left-wing guerrilla forces and student organizations, with socio-political inclinations including anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist, and pro-Palestinian stances, were actively challenging Shah's regime. Prominent revolutionary figures like Mostafa Chamran and Ali Shariati prominently championed the Palestinian cause. Chamran, a vital member of the Liberation Movement of Iran, regarded the Palestinian struggle as a 'just cause.' Similarly, Shariati, a non-clerical religious figure, viewed Israel as a manifestation of Western imperialism and an extension of oppressive global structures (Ahouie, 2017, p. 202). He equated Zionism with other forms of imperialism, such as the historical examples of the East India Company and the exploitation of resources in Congo (2017, p. 202).

In 1968, Khomeini convened with representatives of Fatah and issued a fatwa emphasizing the imperative of supporting Palestine. This fatwa urged financial contributions through *zakat* and political backing until the oppression of Palestine and its people ceased, marking a pivotal moment in the evolving relationship between Iranian revolutionaries and Palestinian factions (Domazeti, 2018, p. 9).

The Palestinian issue has consistently held significance in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic. Immediately following the revolution's success, Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat visited Tehran on February 18, 1979, emphasizing solidarity between Iranian revolutionaries and Palestinian freedom fighters. Iran symbolically transformed the Israeli consulate in Tehran into the Palestinian embassy, signaling alignment with the Muslim world and challenging Egypt's recognition of Israel.

The Palestinian movement gained momentum, striving for self-determination and an independent state. The first intifada (1987–1993) erupted spontaneously in Gaza against Israeli occupation, while Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank grappled for authority (Çinkara, 2024). Following the onset of the 'Arab-Israeli Peace Process' in 1991, Iran directly engaged in Palestinian affairs. Tehran hosted the 'International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Intifada,' inviting resistance groups opposed to the Peace Process. This event marked the inception of

Iran-Hamas relations, with Tehran offering political, military, and financial backing to Hamas. Hence, the alliance between Hamas and Iran primarily stems from their shared opposition to the 'Peace Process' (Sinkaya, 2014)

In 2001, Iran hosted the second Support for Palestinian Intifada conference, attended by Palestinian representatives from various factions. Following Hamas's victory in the 2006 elections, Israel intensified its military campaign against Gaza, culminating in Operation Cast Lead in 2008-2009, prompting Iran to organize the Fourth International Conference on Palestinian Intifada in Tehran in March 2009.

In November 2012, Israel initiated military action against Gaza, known as Operation Pillar of Defense. Although there was not a ground invasion, the conflict resulted in the deaths of 166 Palestinians, predominantly civilians. Subsequently, in July 2014, the Netanyahu government launched another offensive aimed at disrupting the reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas reached in April 2014. These two conflicts, known as the 2012 and 2014 Gaza Wars, served as a 'litmus test' for Iran's stance on the Palestinian cause (Alavi, 2019, p. 184). Despite disagreements between Iran and Hamas regarding the Syrian crisis during the 2014 conflict, Iran remained committed to improving its relations with Palestinian Islamic groups, particularly Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

With the shifting alliances and dynamics during the Arab Spring, Iran, dissatisfied with the support it received from Hamas, sought a partner in Gaza that shared its ideological and operational goals. In May 2014, Iran turned to a newly emerged Muslim group in northern Gaza called Al Sabireen, which exhibited a strong ideological affinity with the Islamic State. The movement, led by Hesham Salem, emphasized its dedication to supporting Palestine. In an interview with Al-Akhbar, Salem rejected sectarian rhetoric and challenged prevailing beliefs in Palestinian society regarding Shiite-Sunni tensions. Regarding Al Sabireen's relationship with Iran, Salem highlighted that all Palestinian groups maintain strong ties with the Islamic Republic and receive protection and assistance from Iran. He emphasized Iran's unique role in providing concrete military support to Palestine, positioning it as the sole country actively safeguarding Palestinian interests on an army level.

The signing of normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states, notably the Abraham Accords in 2020, has significantly reshaped the Middle East's geopolitical landscape. The institutionalization of these accords has intensified Iranian skepticism (Çınkara & Coşkun, 2023). Iran staunchly opposed the agreements, viewing them as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause and a destabilizing factor in the region.

#### **4.2. National *Self* Contest to *Others*: Palestine Issue**

The concept of the ummah has taken on a central role in shaping the Islamic Republic of Iran's position on the Palestinian matter. The defense of Palestine was characterized as an "Islamic duty," one that the Iranian nation must shoulder responsibility for. Ayatollah Khomeini cited Quranic verse 8:60 to elucidate the significance of the Palestinian issue within Iranian national identity, emphasizing the directive to "Prepare against them whatever force you can, and the trained horses whereby you frighten Allah's enemy." This served as an effort to justify the imperative of safeguarding the territorial integrity of Muslim nations (Khomeini, 1981, p. 46).

Referring to the Quran, Ayatollah Khomeini asserted that had Muslims adhered to its command and adequately prepared for war after establishing a government, a small group of Jews would never have dared to occupy their lands and desecrate Masjid al-Aqsa<sup>2</sup>. Khomeini aimed to redefine the Palestinian issue from an Arab nationalist narrative to an Islamic one, thereby positioning Iran as a leader and advocate for the Palestinian cause within the Islamic world (Motamedi, 2023).

Khomeini's characterization of Palestine as "our land" suggests a deep socio-religious connection between the Palestinian issue and Iran's Muslim community. Essentially, he depicted the support and defense of Palestine by Iranian Muslims as an inherent "Islamic duty."

Palestine and Lebanon have been our primary concerns and have never been separate from our concerns in Iran. In general, a Muslim should not

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<sup>2</sup> Masjid al Aqsa is the site in Jerusalem where the Prophet Mohammad is believed to have ascended to heaven, Quran 17:1. Still, it also encompasses the complex of mosques and buildings erected on the site.

just concern himself with only a group of Muslims. We are all responsible for standing up to the oppression by the superpowers and discrediting plans like those of Sadat and Fahd (Sallee/ ell Nolil, 1982, cited in Sariolghalam, 2003, p. 23).

Khomeini's discursive adoptions of the defense of Palestinians as an "Islamic duty" stand on Islamic transnationalism: "Defending Islamic nations is an obligation. But it does not mean that we put Islam aside and cry nationality and pan-Islamism" (Khomeini, 1979).

Secondly, The Islamic Republic of Iran depicted Israel as a manifestation of European colonialism and *External other* and identified it as the primary source of imperialism in the Arab and Muslim world. Khomeini stated that Israel's creation stemmed from a collaboration between Eastern and Western imperialist powers. He asserted that Israel was established to oppress and exploit Muslim people, and it continues to receive support from various imperialist nations. Khomeini accused Britain and the United States, which Iran described as its own *external other*, of supporting Israel militarily and politically, thus enabling Israel's aggression against Arabs and Muslims and continuing the occupation of Palestine and other Islamic regions (Palestine from the viewpoint of imam Khomeini). However, Iran's discourse on the Palestine issue gained significance amidst Iraq's aggression, which ignited nationalist sentiments such as patriotism and the imperative to safeguard Iran's borders. During the war, Khomeini's speech 'The Road to Jerusalem Goes through Karbala' carried nationalistic undertones, portraying Iran as a critical actor in the struggle for Palestinian liberation. By asserting Iran's role in the journey to Jerusalem, Khomeini reinforces the country's national identity as a defender of justice and a champion of oppressed peoples, aligning the Palestinian cause with Iran's historical narrative of resistance against *external other*.

In alignment with this perspective, Supreme Leader Khamenei adopted Iran's anti-imperialist stance towards the Palestinian cause. He referred to the historical intervention of external powers in the region, highlighting the colonial agenda behind the formation of the Zionist regime. Khamenei asserted that the occupation of Palestine has been a component of sinister schemes by global hegemonic powers, with Britain historically and the United States presently aiming to undermine and sow division within the Islamic world (Khamenei, 2001).

The Green Movement protests unequivocally expressed dissent towards the state's foreign policy priorities during the 2009 elections. The movement rejected the Islamic internationalist policy aimed at supporting the oppressed and preserving Muslim unity. Consequently, the nationalist rhetoric of the Green Movement focused on criticizing an *external* entity with which the state was cooperating (Arıkan Sinkaya, 2015, p. 251).

A week before the annual Quds Day on September 11, 2009, Ayatollah Khamenei reaffirmed the Islamic identity of the state, emphasizing its significance. He highlighted that Quds Day is a platform for Iranians to showcase their unity in supporting the Quds issue (Alimagham, 2020). People gathered in various cities, including Mashhad, Rasht, Tabriz, Shiraz, Isfahan, Bushehr, Kerman, Ahvaz, Yazd, and central Tehran, where the most significant demonstrations occurred. These gatherings aimed to bring attention to emerging injustices within the country.

On International Quds Day, observed on September 18, 2009, the nationalist rallying cry "No to Gaza, no to Lebanon, I sacrifice my life only for Iran (*na ghazzeh, na lobnan, janam faday-e Iran*)" (Alimagham, 2020, p. 180; Fitzgerald, 2018). This slogan shifts the focus to Iran rather than Islam, underscoring Iran's nationalist essence and its centrality in Iranian existence and sacrifice. Consequently, the nationalist chant undermines the religious identity of the Islamic Republic and rejects the fusion of Palestine liberation with Ahmadinejad's persona, a critical foreign policy priority of Iran (Alimagham, 2020, p. 180).

Indeed, this slogan echoed in subsequent years during various protests led by the opposition. From the gold and dollar dealers' demonstrations in the Tehran market during the winter of 2013 to the protests in small cities in December 2015 and November 2018, it resurfaced as a rallying cry against perceived injustices (Masoumi, 2021). A resurgence of Iran-centered nationalism, in contrast to the Islamic nationalism propagated by the religious government, appears to be a defining characteristic of much of the opposition both within and outside the system (Ansari, 2012). This sentiment has gained traction among secular elites and a younger generation dissatisfied with the clerical leadership's focus on religious identity at the expense of national pride (Nasr, 2006).



Likewise, in Iran, beginning with the events of 7/10 and the occupation of Gaza, the government struggled to persuade the public of the merits of its policies. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said in a live broadcast to state TV, "If we do not defend Gaza today, we have to defend our cities" (Jazeera, 2023). Furthermore, the narrative disseminated by state and state-affiliated media needs to be more effective in reconciling the disparities between public perceptions and political agendas regarding public interests and priorities.

Reformist and moderate factions, represented by former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, former President Hassan Rouhani, and former President Mohammad Khatami, have underscored the significance of the Palestinian cause. However, they have advocated for limiting Iran's involvement to political support and advocated against military engagement (Azizi & Van Veen, 2023).

Kayhan newspaper answered those who asked why the Islamic Republic did not enter the Palestinian war scene. According to this, the discourse of the Islamic revolution is based on the awakening and strengthening of nations. Of course, it supports and strengthens every oppressed nation that has the will to be free but does not go to war. This strategy has neutralized America's various scenarios and has been against Iran in the West Asian region (Asiran, 2023). In this context, it is evident that Iran aims to prevent the escalation of the conflict beyond Gaza. While it refrains from direct intervention, its proxy force, Hezbollah, similarly avoids initiating large-scale attacks (Kaleji, 2023).

Thirdly, Iran's approach to the Palestine issue is deeply rooted in historical memory. Central to Iran's foreign policy discourse is its stance on Israel, which is often framed in terms of the challenges to the *Historical Other* and supporting the Palestinian cause. Before the Islamic revolution, the Shah's pro-Israeli policy created a fertile ground for the Islamic State's struggle with its perceived *Historical Other*.

The Shah's administration was among the earliest Muslim countries to recognize the state of Israel following its declaration in 1948 (Parsi, 2007, p. 20). During the 1970s, Israel and Tehran solidified diplomatic relations, culminating in establishing a de facto embassy in Tehran and the mutual appointment of ambassadors. This period saw a significant expansion of

trade ties, particularly in oil, with Iran emerging as a critical supplier for Israel (Motamedi, 2023). Given the Shah's close alignment with Israel, Khomeini portrayed the Shah's secularization initiatives as part of a collaboration between Zionism and the West against Iran (Litvak, 2006, p. 270). Khomeini's stance on Israel, Zionism, and Palestine mirrored his antagonism towards the Pahlavi monarchy and the Cold War superpowers (Reda, 2006, p. 2). He contended that Muslims in Iran and Palestine were engaged in a unified struggle against common adversaries: Zionism, viewed as antithetical to Islam, and Shah's regime, perceived as its collaborator (2006, p. 197). The state of Israel was conceptualized as the mutual enemy of Iran and Palestine. The Shah had functioned as a "puppet of imperialism and Zionism." Additionally, he emphasized Iran's unwavering backing for the Palestinians and condemned Zionism as "among the most nefarious manifestations of racism in history" (Ehteshami, 2012, p. 10).

After the 7/10 Gaza Conflict, the Iranian diaspora played a significant role in articulating and spreading this critical narrative. Many of its members, including individuals like Reza Pahlavi, have openly criticized Hamas and expressed support for Israel (Azizi & Van Veen, 2023). His criticism of Hamas is part of his broader opposition to the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. This criticism is part of a broader rejection of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, particularly its backing of Hamas and Hezbollah. By denouncing Hamas and supporting Israel's right to security, Pahlavi positioned himself alongside those who see Iranian influence in the region as a driver of instability. However, it is crucial to recognize that Pahlavi's stance has resonated with specific factions within the opposition, who view this as part of a larger anti-imperialist framework (Villar, 2024). At the same time, it has also provoked backlash, with some accusing him of undermining a key component of Iranian national identity — its long-standing solidarity with the Palestinian cause and opposition to Israel, which many view as central to Iran's political and cultural identity.

Although such criticism was primarily directed at Reza Pahlavi's stance following October 7, supporters of the Green Movement faced similar accusations a decade ago. Amidst nationalist criticism, the political establishment sought to discredit supporters of the Green Movement by accusing them of lacking awareness about the Palestine issue. However, many Green Movement supporters responded to this accusation by

expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people. This solidarity was evident during protests against the Gaza war in 2014. In a Twitter message, Mohammad Khatami unequivocally stated that the people of Iran consistently stood with the oppressed Palestinian nation. Condemning Israel for its actions in Gaza, Khatami emphasized that showing support for the Palestinians is not just about solidarity but also reflects Islamic and humanitarian values rooted in humanity (Khatami, 2014).

## **5. Conclusion**

This study attempted to investigate Iran's stance on the Palestinian issue in the post-revolutionary period, considering the interaction between religious and nationalist narratives. From a constructivist perspective, we analyze how the construction of state identity affects Iran's foreign policy decisions. As a result, it was determined that the construction of state identity in the state-foreign policy relationship serves three fundamental purposes: delineating the self, delineating the other, and communicating the self to the other.

As a case, this work investigates whether there is complementarity or conflict between religious and nationalist discourses in shaping Iran's approach to the Palestine issue. Initially, it explores how the Iranian regime navigates various identity narratives, particularly those related to ethno-nationalism and Persian nationalism. Post-revolutionary, the promotion of ethno-nationalism that highlighted the pre-Islamic Persian empire was rejected, signaling a shift towards a more Islam-centered identity. Thus, rejecting Western-produced concepts of nationhood and Pahlavi nationalism has been prominent in Iran's national identity discourse.

The Palestine issue serves as a poignant lens through which to examine the components of Iran's post-revolutionary state identity. It encapsulates a dual objective: to otherize the predecessor regime, which fostered cordial relations with Israel, and to supplant the concept of *ummah* with a nationalist discourse. On the other hand, when the revolution leader, Khomeini, approached the Palestine issue with an *ummah* discourse, he aimed to remove this issue from Arab nationalism. More than solely emphasizing religious solidarity with fellow Muslims, the regime consolidated its power and legitimacy in relations with Palestine.

The Palestine issue turns into a symbolic battlefield in the rhetoric of the nationalist elites of the Islamic Republic criticizing the regime's foreign policy priorities. It reflects Iran's efforts to redefine itself after the Islamic Revolution, illustrating the complex interplay between religious and nationalist narratives in shaping its foreign policy priorities and objectives.

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