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**Israeli-Iranian  
Relations:  
The Ideological  
Differences between  
Israeli and Iranian  
Leaders and Their  
Perception of Threat**

Master's Thesis

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Studies

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## **Abstract**

This thesis looks into the ideologies of two Israeli Prime Ministers – Ehud Olmert and Benjamin Netanyahu and two Iranian Presidents Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani. Concretely, the author wants to know how the ideologies of these leaders influence the relations and the threat perception between Israel and Iran. The timeframe of the thesis is set between 2006 when Ehud Olmert became the Prime Minister and 2015 when Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The Iranian nuclear program, as the most poignant dispute between Iran and Israel, will serve to analyze the ideologies and the perception of threat.

## **Abstrakt**

Táto práca sa zaoberá ideológiami dvoch izraelských premiérov - Ehuda Olmerta a Benjamína Netanjahua, a dvoch iránskych prezidentov Mahmúda Ahmadínežáda a Hassana Rouhaniho. Autor sa konkrétne zaoberá otázkou, ako ideológie týchto vodcov ovplyvňujú vzťahy a vnímanie hrozieb medzi Izraelom a Iránom. Časový rámec práce je stanovený na obdobie medzi rokmi 2006, kedy sa Ehud Olmert stal premiérom a 2015, keď Irán podpísal tzv. Spoločný komplexný akčný plán. Iránsky jadrový program, ako najpálčivejší spor medzi Iránom a Izraelom, bude slúžiť na analýzu ideológií a vnímania hrozby.



## Statutory Declaration

I hereby declare that I have written the submitted Master's Thesis concerning the topic of **Israeli-Iranian Relations:The Ideological Differences between Israeli and Iranian Leaders and Their Perception of Threat** independently. All the sources used for the purpose of finishing this thesis have been adequately referenced and are listed in the Bibliography.

In Brno, May 5, 2019

.....  
Viktor Fudala



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## List of Terms and Acronyms

IDF	- Israeli Defence Forces
IRGC	- Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
JCPOA	- Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
NPT	- Non-Proliferation Treaty
OPEC	- Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
P5+1	- Permanent members of the UNSC (United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, France) and Germany
PLO	- Palestinian Liberation Organization
SAVAK	- Sāzemān-e Ettlā'āt va Amniyat-e Keshvar - Organization of National Intelligence and Security of the Nation - the Iranian secret service and secret police
UN	- United Nations
UNGA	- United Nations General Assembly
UNSC	- United Nations Security Council
WMD	- Weapons of mass destruction





## 1 Introduction

Similarities and differences in ideologies of state leaders may determine cooperation or discord between them and the states they represent. If there is an intersection between the leaders' ideologies, the perception of threat by other countries or leaders should be lower. Conversely, with minimal or no similarities between ideologies the perception of threat grows and relations between countries tend to be uncooperative or even hostile. Therefore, this thesis will support the argument that the ideologies of leaders are a crucial part of states' behavior towards other international subjects.

The topic of this thesis is the highly problematic Israeli-Iranian relations, or more precisely, how ideologies of the leaders of these two countries shape the relations. Specifically, the thesis will focus on the ideologies of two Israeli and two Iranian leaders – Israeli Prime Ministers Ehud Olmert and Benjamin Netanyahu, and Iranian presidents – Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani<sup>1</sup>. The perception of threat between the leaders and the countries constitutes an essential part of the thesis. The author of the thesis presumes that the ideologies of the leaders are a crucial part of their threat perception of the other state and its leader. The perception of threat between Israel and Iran and their leaders has been very dynamic in different periods due to various political developments in Israel, Iran, and the Middle East region.

When it comes to the current international political scene, the case of relations between Israel and Iran is one of the most hostile. However, it has not always been the case. Iran and Israel enjoyed relatively good relations during the rule of the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi until the Islamic revolution in 1979 when the Iranian clergy with its leader Ruhollah Khomeini overthrew the Shah's regime. With the change of the state regime in Iran, the relations gradually deteriorated and the threat perception between the two countries grew. Even after the Iranian

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<sup>1</sup> The position of Iranian president is not the highest ranking position in the Iranian regime. The uppermost ranking position is the Supreme Leadership Authority, or in other words the Supreme Leader, currently the Ayatollah Ali Khomeini. However, the rank of the president is the topmost elected official in Iran and thus it will be the main focus of this thesis. Nevertheless, there will be also emphasis on the Supreme Leader and his ideology which will be discussed in the third chapter.

revolution in 1979, the hostility between the countries was not on the same level as it was in the previous twenty years.

The perception of threat between Israel and Iran during the government of the leaders mentioned earlier was generally very high due to incidents, conflicts, actions, and disputes, such as the Iranian nuclear program. Whether personal ideologies of Olmert, Netanyahu, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani had any significant impact on the perception of threat will be the central part of the thesis. Moreover, there will also be a comparison between the ideologies of Olmert and Netanyahu, and between Ahmadinejad and Rouhani. The author will look at the differences between their ideologies and the impact on the transition of power between the Israeli leaders in 2009 and the Iranian leaders in 2013 and the impact the transition had on the threat perception.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, this thesis is a comparative study of the Israeli and Iranian leader's ideologies and their impact on the relations of the two states.

In 2009, Benjamin Netanyahu replaced Ehud Olmert as Prime Minister of Israel. Although both Olmert and Netanyahu had been together in center-right Likud until 2006, shortly before Olmert became Prime Minister he had left to the centrist party Kadima. In 2013, after eight years of the rule of the conservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the moderate President Hassan Rouhani took over. The overall timeframe of this work is set between the years 2006 and 2015 which mark two crucial events in Israeli and Iranian politics. In 2006, Olmert assumed the office of the Prime Minister (Ahmadinejad was elected the Iranian President a year earlier). In 2015, Iran, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council Germany, and the European Union<sup>3</sup> agreed on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or in other words the Iranian nuclear deal.

The idea behind this thesis comes from the book *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789-1989* by Mark L. Haas. In this book, the author argues that ideological differences or similarities between world leaders shaped relations between great powers in different periods of history. He states five cases of relations of great powers between the years 1789-1989: three wars during the French revolution,

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<sup>2</sup> The position of the United States in the Israeli-Iranian relations will be an important part for the thesis. Nevertheless, the author will not focus on the Israeli-US and Iran-US relations in separate chapters.

<sup>3</sup> The Permanent Members of the Security Council of the United Nation are the United Kingdom, France, China, the United States, and Russia.

the Concert of Europe, the relations between the UK, France, and Germany in the interwar period, Sino-Soviet relations in the 1960s, and lastly the end of the Cold War and US-Soviet relations. Haas operates with ideology and perception of threat and concludes that “ideologies of leaders are likely to impact leaders’ foreign policies by affecting their perception of threat” (Haas 2005, 1). Haas asserts that if the ideologies of two leaders have similarities, the perception of threat is low. Conversely, if the ideologies differ, the perception of threat is high.

The author of this thesis thus would like to know whether a similar model can be applied to current relations, or ideologies, of any two leaders or countries. This is the reason why the thesis will look into Israeli-Iranian relations and the ideologies of the four leaders. The relations between the two countries are rather unique since there are not many examples in the study of international relations where two countries are so hostile towards each other but are not involved in direct armed conflict, as is the case with Iran and Israel. There are not many instances, where representatives of a UN member openly call for the destruction of another UN member.

## 1.1 Theoretical Framework of the Thesis

Since this thesis looks into the ideologies of leaders and their influence on the perception of threat, the constructivist theory of international relations serves as the main theoretical framework for this work. Constructivism states that we project ideas onto the material world. The same applies to ideologies – we (and especially state leaders) project our world view to the materialistic world. For example, if an Israeli leader believes that Iran poses a threat to Israel, it is not only because of the Iranian nuclear program itself but mainly because of how Iranian leaders view and behave towards Israel. Alexander *Wendt*, one of the most prominent scholars of constructivism, states that “anarchy is what states make of it” (1992). The same may be said about Israeli-Iranian relations: the relationship is what these two states and their representatives make of it. The relations thus do not necessarily depend only on the military might, population, and strength of the economy of these two countries (as the neorealist theory presumes) but also on historical grievances, domestic political development, the ideologies of the leaders, their background, their statements and actions towards the other country. The

sum of these conditions (and more) make up the overall relations between Iran and Israel.

Any form of realist theory would not suit the purpose of the thesis since the main focus of such theories is power. This thesis, however, does not examine the power structure behind the Israeli-Iranian relations. Although the main argument of classical realism deals with the human nature and its drive for power as the cause of conflict, ideology of state leaders cannot be perceived as human nature, since it is a constructed set of ideas. Other realist theories, such as neorealism, cannot be applied to this thesis since they deal with the anarchic structure of the international system which again is not the point of this thesis. Moreover, for neorealism, the state is the highest actor and a “black box” – the domestic structure of the state and the type of leaders, their beliefs, etc. do not matter. Besides, Haas argues that realists see power as the core concept in international politics, while ideology does not have any important value (Haas 2005, 2). Therefore, realism as a whole is not suitable as a theoretical framework because it deals with concepts which do not coincide with the aims of this thesis.

Similarly, the liberal theories of international relations cannot be applied to this thesis. Liberal institutionalism values cooperation between states and mutual benefits stemming from such cooperation. Moreover, liberalism considers international organizations, which regulate norms of behavior of states, a crucial part of the international system. Neoliberalism, just like neorealism, works with the notion of the anarchical structure of the international system, where states seek power through absolute gains. However, this thesis works with the relations between Israel and Iran. Currently, cooperation between them is close to zero on every level. Even though international organizations such as the United Nations will be mentioned in this work, they do not play a considerable role concerning the influence of ideology on the perception of threat in Israeli-Iranian relations.

Some terms or ideas which stem from realism will be used in this thesis, for example the concept of threat perception. Constructivism excludes neither realism nor liberalism. Constructivism recognizes these materialistic theories but emphasizes the ideas behind them. Therefore, for the sake of the clarity of the thesis, two terms must be explained: threat perception and ideology.

Threat perception is a condition where one agent (state) intends or has the means to impose some type of punishment towards another

agent (Davis 2000, 10). A threat does not have to be carried out. In realist theories, power is used to threaten another actor – power is used by a more powerful agent (as to the military might or population size) to threaten another actor or agents with less power may feel threatened. Thus, these theories operate with power asymmetry and threat perception stemming from it. Social constructivists understand threat perception through the identification of two categories “self” and “other.” Tajfel explains that one’s identification with their own “self” group automatically creates a positive image about their own identity group and a negative about the “other” group (1978).

Moreover, one identifies themselves with beliefs, behavior, and attitudes of their own group. That means that the “other” group (them) will be perceived as more threatening than the groups with similar characteristics. Therefore, threat perception can be conducted by examining the threat perceived through power relations or/and a different identity politics (for example, a different ideology) – the combination of material threats and differences in identities which construct a threat perception between two agents.

The second term, ideology, is a comprehensive term. Haas suggests that there is a limited agreement in policymaking and academia about the impact of ideologies on international relations (Haas 2012, xiv). For realism, the ideology of a leader of a state does not matter, since it is a very state-centric theory and it operates with rationality, rather than ideological precepts. According to Moazzam, social constructivists analyze ideologies as a component of the social structure of a society which influences the creation of foreign policy decisions. Moreover, she describes three main components of ideology: it offers concepts to explain current reality, it criticizes other existing ideologies and has a vision for the future. She also identifies one more important feature of ideology – it helps to identify friends and foes in the international system (Moazzam 2017). Michael Hunt describes ideology as *“an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that reality”* (2009). Oxford English Dictionary gives us a more general definition of ideology<sup>4</sup>: *“A systematic scheme of ideas, usually relating to politics, economics, or society and forming the basis of*

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<sup>4</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “ideology,” accessed March 1, 2019, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/91016?redirectedFrom=ideology#eid>

*action or policy; a set of beliefs governing conduct. Also the forming or holding of such a scheme of ideas."*

For Haas, ideological beliefs are "*politicians' specific, frequently unique, preferences for ordering the political world both domestically and internationally*" (Haas 2012, xv, 3). Moreover, he claims that for leaders, domestic power and the security of their states are the key goals. Ideologies influence their policies which affect these two goals. Ideologies thus help leaders to decide who are possible enemies and allies (Haas 2005, 20).

For the sake of this thesis, three components of ideology stand out: it is a set of ideas which describe the reality in a limited way, it has a formative aspect towards leaders' perception of reality, and it helps to forge policies towards other international subjects.

Every leader of a country follows some kind of ideology. Their ideologies can be determined through analysis of their personal background, political affiliation, public statements, and actions. This will be the core of the thesis: analysis of the ideologies of the two Iranian Presidents and two Israeli Prime Ministers and their effect on the mutual perception of threat.

## 1.2 Hypothesis and Research Questions

There are three research questions set for this thesis:

*Do the ideological differences of the Israeli and Iranian leaders between the years 2006 and 2015 influence their mutual perception of threat and thus shape the relations between Israel and Iran?*

*Does the difference in President Rouhani's and President Ahmadinejad's ideological background influence the perception of threat by Israel?*

*Does the difference in Prime Minister Netanyahu's and Prime Minister Olmert's ideological background influence the perception of threat by Iran?*

Israeli-Iranian relations were perilous between the years 2006 and 2015. While during the presidency of Ahmadinejad, who was a hardliner

and a conservative, Iran pursued the development of WMD and verbally attacked Israel, the President Rouhani, a moderate, restrained himself from rhetorical attacks and conducted a more constructive dialogue with the US about the future of the program, which, however, Israel disapproved of. Prime Minister Olmert, a right-center politician, warned about the Iranian nuclear program during his speech before the Congress. When the JCPOA was signed, Netanyahu, a right-wing conservative, claimed that it was “*a very bad deal.*” The research questions serve to examine to what extent do the ideologies of the Israeli, and Iranian leaders, differ, and whether they determine the perception of threat. Ultimately, they serve to help to prove or disprove the hypothesis.

The hypothesis of this thesis is:

*The perception of threat between Israel and Iran is higher when the ideological discord between the Israeli Prime Ministers and the Iranian Presidents is wider. If there is an intersection between their ideologies, the perception of threat between the countries should be lower.*

### 1.3 Methodology and Thesis Structure

This thesis will use the comparative method as a research method. The thesis is unique because it will be a double-comparison between the ideologies of Prime Ministers Olmert and Netanyahu and the influence of their ideologies on the perception of threat by Iran and a comparison of ideologies between Presidents Ahmadinejad and Rouhani and the influence of their ideologies on the perception of threat by Israel. The thesis uses one case study, the Iranian nuclear program, to analyze the positions and the threat perception of the four leaders towards the other state. The goal of the thesis is to prove or disprove the assumption of the hypothesis: that if there is a wider discord between the leaders, the perception of threat grows or vice versa, if there is an intersection between the ideologies, the perception of threat is lower. The intention behind the thesis is to find out whether ideology is an important factor in Israeli-Iranian relations. The author will use various sources, public statements and speeches, interviews, news articles, documentaries, and

sources from scholarly literature to describe and then analyze the ideologies of the mentioned leaders.

The second chapter of this thesis will contain a brief history of relations between Israel and Iran with emphasis on ideologies and mutual perception of threat by the leaders of both countries. The chapter will be divided into two parts: the relations before the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 and after the revolution until 2006. This chapter serves as the background to understand the dynamic formation of Israeli-Iranian relations. The third chapter will focus on the state structure of Iran, the ideology of the state and Presidents Ahmadinejad and Rouhani as well as their background and actions. The fourth chapter will similarly deal with Israel, its state structure, state ideology (if there is such a thing), and personal ideologies of Prime Ministers Olmert and Netanyahu. The fifth chapter will look into the most significant dispute between Iran and Israel: the Iranian nuclear program. In this chapter, the author will analyze various statements of the Israeli and Iranian leaders about the nuclear program. The sixth chapter will serve as an evaluation of the findings from the previous chapters and is a comparison of ideologies of the four leaders. Lastly, in the concluding chapter, the author will answer the research questions and if the assumption of the hypothesis was correct or not. Also, the limits of the work and further research will be discussed.



## 2 Historical Background of the Israeli-Iranian Relations

### 2.1 The Israeli-Iranian Relations between 1948-1979

The beginning of the Israeli-Iranian relations can be dated shortly before the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. A year before, in 1947, the United Nations General Assembly voted for the Partition plan of Palestine. The partition aimed to create two states – the Jewish state of Israel and the Arab state of Palestine in the former British Mandatory of Palestine. Iran, as a member of the Ad Hoc Committee on Palestine, voted against the partition, arguing that partition of Palestine would create future problems in the region. The Iranian delegation in the UN supported a different plan – a federation (Bahgat 2006, 13, Parsi 2007, 20). The head of the delegation, Mostafa Adl, claimed that the Iranians did not direct their position against the Jewish population, they merely wished the Palestinian population to have the right to self-determination as stated in the UN Charter (Patten 2013, 4-5). Moreover, Iran claimed that they would support the partition if the majority of the Palestinian population did too. Likewise, the Iranian Shah Mohammad Pahlavi stressed that he did not support the partition, stating that the solution would create future conflicts between Arabs and Jews (Parsi 2007, 20), which turned out to be true in the end.

Despite the Iran's and other countries' opposition, the UN adopted Resolution 181 concerning the partition. The representatives of the Jewish population, the Jewish Agency, agreed to the UN partition plan but the Palestinian side did not (Bregman 2016, 11-14). Thus, right after the declaration of independence of Israel, a war broke out between the newly established state and its Arab neighbors. The result of the ten months long war was that Israel occupied more territory than the partition plan had proposed (Bregman 2016, 33). The war was the first test for Israeli survival and it has been shaping the relations between Israel and the Arab nations to these days.

Later, in May 1949 Israel was admitted as a member into the UN with thirty-seven votes in favor, twelve against, and nine abstentions (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013a). Iran was one among the countries which voted against the admission (Patten 2013, 6). Iran never

recognized Israel *de jure*. Only later in the beginning of the 1950s, did Iran recognize Israel *de facto* (Parsi 2007, 20). Ramazani calls this Iranian stance a “calculated ambivalence” (1978, 414). This term means that Iran was hesitant towards Israel because the Iranian government did not know what to expect from the newly formed Israel. Israel could not oppose this ambivalence since it faced more far-reaching problems (e.g. the War of Independence, Jewish migration); hence the first Israeli government was content with such limited relations with Iran. There are a few reasons why the two countries established and later maintained such a relationship which was friendly and trusting in the years leading up to the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

First, Israel turned to Iran to help relocate the Iraqi Jewish population from Iran to Israel. Since the creation of the state, the right for Jewish immigration to Israel was one of the pillars of Israeli’s foreign policy (Goldberg 1991, 91, 95). The Jewish immigration to Israel was also vital for Israel itself in order to develop Israel as a state and nation since the Jewish population of Israel in 1948 consisted only a little over five-hundred thousand persons (Bahgat 2006, 14, Rabinovich and Reinhartz 2008, 571-572). Because of the establishment of Israel and the subsequent war, anti-Jewish sentiment rose among the Arab population. The only country which relatively protected its Jewish population was Iran<sup>5</sup>. The Iraqi Jews were one of the largest Jewish community in the Middle East. The Iraqi government harassed the population through anti-Jewish laws by declaring Zionism a crime and not allowing them to immigrate (Patten 2013, 7). Operation Ezra and Nehemiah was one of the first acts between Israel and Iran which helped to build trust among the two countries.

The second reason has to do with the start of the Cold War. In the first years of Israel, the first Israeli Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, declared that Israel would not align with neither the United States nor the Soviet Union (Bahgat 2006, 4). Nevertheless, Israel tried to build a good relationship with the Soviets. Moscow was very active in the UN partition plan and Israel’s admission into the organization (Bahgat 2006, 14). There are two explanations behind this position, one ideological and one pragmatic. Ben-Gurion created his ideology based on a mixture of

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<sup>5</sup> At the end of the 1940s, Iranian Jews numbered up to 100 000. Contrarily, after the Israeli independence, there was very low immigration of Iranian Jews to Israel. The low immigration was due to the relative freedom and economic well-being of Iranian Jews (Bahgat 2006, 28).

Judaism and realpolitik. Stemming from Judaism, Ben-Gurion believed that Israel had to support world peace. Thus he would not join either side. From the pragmatic side, the Prime Minister expected material help from the Soviets and their allies (Goldberg 1991, 96). Additionally, there was also the question of Jews in the Soviet Union – Ben-Gurion's intention for Israeli non-alignment foreign policy was to keep the Jewish population in the Soviet Union safe (Barzalai 1982, 15). For these reasons, it was crucial for Israel in its early years to develop good relations on all sides possible.

Ben-Gurion's political affiliation might have had a certain influence on his coquetry with the Soviet Union – he was the head of the Mapai party or in the full name Worker's Party of the Land of Israel, a center-left political party. Mapai's logo consisted of a hammer and spikes which were traditional socialist symbols (World Zionist Organization 2019). Moreover, many Israelis favoured socialist ideas and believed that the Soviet Union was primarily responsible for the defeat of Germany in the Second World War (Parsi 2007, 21). Therefore, the ideological proximity between Mapai and the Soviets could have played a role in the Soviet Union's early friendly position towards Israel and vice versa.

However, Ben-Gurion's pro-Soviet tilt lasted only for about two years. In 1950, Israel voted in favor of the resolution denouncing North Korean invasion to South Korea (Bahgat 2006, 14). Moreover, in the same year, Israel approved the Point Four Program (Iran as well), a US aid for developing countries after the Second World War (Ramazani 1978, 415). The alignment towards the US was the beginning of the end of the cooperation between Israel and the Soviets. Ben-Gurion turned Israel towards the West. This development prompted Iran to develop closer ties with Israel<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, the Shah believed that maintaining a good relationship with Israel would help him to develop a closer tie to the US through the Jewish lobby in Washington (Bahgat 2006, 33).

The Shah, on the other hand, was worried about a possible Soviet interference or even invasion to Iran. Iran had a long history of wars with Russia in the nineteenth century (Parsi 2007, 20). During the Second World War, Soviet troops occupied some parts of Iran and only after the pressure of the United States, the Soviets moved out (Hess 1974). Moreover, Iran shared its northern border with the Soviet Union.

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<sup>6</sup> Ramazani argues that if the Soviet Union had not been so active in the Israeli cause at the UN, Iran might have recognized Israel *de facto* much earlier (1978, 451).

Naturally, the Shah and the Iranian ruling elite were afraid of the spread of Soviet influence and communism. Thus, Shah tried to build a relationship with the US. However, the Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who was responsible for the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951, turned to the Soviets for economic help due to economic problems caused by an embargo by western oil companies (Patten 2013, 9). As a result, the Shah was in opposition to the Iranian government.

Moreover, the Mossadegh government ordered to close down the Iranian consulate in Israel in 1952. Nevertheless, Mossadegh had not revoked the *de facto* recognition of Israel (Ramazani 1978, 415). In the end, Mossadegh was overthrown in the *coup d'état* by the British and American intelligence services in 1953. The coup reinstated Shah as the dominant figure in Iran's politics and after that, until the revolution in 1979 Iran was completely pro-Western.

Clearly, during the two years of Israeli flirtation with the Soviet Union, Iran was cautious and skeptical towards establishing bilateral relations with Israel. However, the Israeli change to a pro-Western orientation persuaded the Shah to establish closer ties with Tel Aviv although Iran still did not recognize it *de jure*. The Shah could not unilaterally do that because he faced domestic and international opposition. The domestic opposition consisted of communists and Shia fundamentalists. Both groups opposed Israel and denied its existence (Patten 2013, 6). The international opposition comprised mainly the Arab states which pressured Iran not to formally recognize Israel (Bahgat 2006, 14). On the one hand, the Shah wanted to maintain a stable relationship due to cultural and religious ties with these states. On the other hand, the Shah deemed Israel as a potential ally since Iran viewed Israel as the only anti-Soviet state in the region. Thus, Iran and Israel developed semi-secret relations, which were very close but hidden from any unnecessary publicity. Nevertheless, Iran's cooperation with Israel was well known. Some Arab states accepted it, while Egypt severed its diplomatic relations with Iran because of it in 1960 (Bahgat 2006, 25, Patten 2013, 41).

Third, Ben-Gurion knew that Israel was alone in the immediate region, surrounded only by Arab nations. Thus, he came up with the so-called "Policy of the Periphery." This policy aimed to establish alliances with non-Arab neighbors in the region in the fight against Arabs,

Nasserism<sup>7</sup>, and Soviet influence in the region (Bahgat 2006, 31). The first country with which Israel established such an alliance was Turkey, one of the few Muslim nations which recognized Israel *de jure* shortly after Israel's independence. Another Israeli ally was Ethiopia. Iran, too, became one of the Israeli allies in the periphery. This policy served as a core of the Israeli foreign policy until the end of the Cold War (Parsi 2007, 21). Therefore, the intention to build a closer partnership was shared both by the Shah and by Ben Gurion's government. Both sides found practical benefits in it, as documented in one Shah's speech: "*We are not intimidated by anybody who tries to tell us whom we should have for our friends, and we make no alliances merely for the sake of alliances or of vague principles, but only in a support of our enlightened self-interest*" (Patten 2013, 10). However, without the ideological proximity of Israel and Iran in the form of pro-Western orientation this alliance would not have existed.

### **2.1.1 Cooperation between Iran and Israel**

As a result of these developments, Israel and Iran started to cooperate on many levels. The Shah was interested in the experience of the Israeli military and experts in agriculture, water treatment, and urban infrastructure. Many Israeli experts visited Iran to develop Iranian agriculture (Parsi 2007, 24). The Israeli Minister of Agriculture even visited Iran and his counterpart in 1964. El Al, the Israeli airliner, had a regular connection between Tel Aviv and Tehran. Many Israeli private firms operated in Iran (Patten 2013, 52). It was not long until the two countries started cooperating on a military level. Yitzhak Rabin, the Chief of Staff, who later in the 1990s became the Prime Minister, went to Iran to seal a deal for a sale of the Israeli-made Uzi sub-machine gun (Patten 2013, 45). The Israeli intelligence service Mossad actively cooperated with the Iranian counterpart SAVAK (Bahgat 2006, 41, Cook 2008, 112). They gathered valuable information about Soviet influence in Iraq such as weapons sales (Patten 2013, 46). Israel trained Iranian intelligence operatives, pilots, paratroopers and weapon technicians (Parsi 2007, 26). The cooperation between the armies and the intelligence service of the two countries meant that the relationships were not based only on

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<sup>7</sup> Gamal Abdel Nasser was the second Egyptian president. He supported the ideology which called for pan-Arab unity and nationalism, which some called Nasserism since he was an official leader of Panarabism (Bahgat 2006, 23).

purely pragmatic intentions, but also on the ideological closeness of the leaders.

Furthermore, the Israeli and Iranian armies cooperated in the training of their soldiers. Many Iranian officers visited or went through training in Israel (Bahgat 2006, 22). The military forces of both countries cooperated on the development of various arms, including canons and a missile system (Patten 2013, 67). Some parts of the Iranian army used Israeli-made equipment. Israel carried out maintenance of Iranian warplanes and Iran reciprocally serviced Israeli missiles (Patten 2013, 52). Thus, concerning military cooperation, the two countries were dependent in some cases on each other.

Most importantly, Israel bought a significant amount of oil from Iran. Until 1957, Israel was dependent on the imports of oil from the USSR, which covered almost thirty percent of Israel's consumption. Thus, Iran seemed like a better partner, not to mention a better quality of Iranian oil. Moreover, the Soviet Union was not a reliable partner mainly for political reasons, which proved to be right in 1957 when it stopped the oil supply. The shipment of Iranian oil, however, had to be done through a Swiss company to bypass any domestic criticism and political uproar (Patten 2013, 12-13, 38-39)<sup>8</sup>. The Shah needed to distance himself from Israel so it would not anger the Arab states.

As mentioned, one of the reasons of the Iranian-Israeli cooperation was the spread of pan-Arabism. Nevertheless, Iran balanced between the Arab states and Israel. There were instances when Iran criticized Israeli actions. In 1955, Iran became a member of the UNSC. The Iranian delegation at the UN repeatedly voted in favor of resolutions which were unfavorable towards Israel. During the Suez Crisis, the Shah openly denounced Israel for joining France and the UK in the military operation. The Shah argued that the states must respect the UN Charter (Patten 2013, 38). The Iranian delegation at the UN voted in favor of the US resolution calling for the UK, France, and Israel to withdraw from Egypt (Patten 2013, 36). However, Ramazani explains that the Shah did so in order to prevent the even bigger spread of the Soviet influence and Nasserism (1978, 416). Another explanation of why Iran criticized Israel

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<sup>8</sup> The Iranian population did not support the dealings with Israel. There were cases during football matches between the two countries when Iranians would shout anti-Semitic insults. Iranian students and some of the intellectuals had an anti-Israeli stance – during protests in Iran in 1960s they used anti-Israeli slogans (Patten 2013, 54).

was the strategic importance of the Suez canal for Iran's oil exports (Bahgat 2006, 39).

Iran insisted that all dealings with Israel must be undisclosed. Iranians went through such measures that if Iranian officials traveled to Iran, they would go through Turkey and would not stamp their passport in Israel. Moreover, even though there was a presence of Iranian diplomats in Tel Aviv, officially they were listed as diplomatic personnel of Switzerland (Parsi 2007, 26). Israelis knew why Iranians behaved this way. Nonetheless, they did not hide their disagreement with it. When Ben-Gurion visited Iran in 1961, the visit was kept secret as all other visits of Israeli officials. However, in 1968, the Shah met with the Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir in Tehran. Meir's cabinet was fed up with the secrecy of the relations and insisted on *de jure* recognition by Iran (Parsi 2007, 26-27). They discussed the advantages of détente for both countries. However, the relationship had to be kept in secret (Patten 2013, 56). Thus Iran kept oscillating between the Arab states and Israel. Nonetheless, the Arab countries knew about their relations and the export of oil from Iran to Eilat – Patten argues that it was one of the reasons why Nasser blocked the Gulf of Aqaba before the start of the Six-days War (2013, 57).

Israelis tried to make negotiations with Iran as public as possible. Meir even persuaded the Western powers to press Iran to grant Israel *de jure* recognition. Nevertheless, Shah did not yield with his stance. Thus, during the 1970s, although Israel had a diplomatic presence, they did not undergo protocol ceremonies, and the embassy did not have any Israeli symbols connecting it to Israel. On the other hand, the Israeli ambassador had access to the Shah's palace, unlike other envoys, and usually was referred to as the ambassador of the State of Israel (Parsi 2007, 27).

### **2.1.2 The Six-Day War**

The Shah denounced Israel after the Six-Day War in 1967 for occupying the Arab lands. Despite Iran being somewhat secular during Shah's rule, Israel's occupation of Jerusalem was viewed negatively among many Muslims in Iran, as in other parts of the world (Bahgat 2006, 40, Patten 2013, 50). Likewise, Iran was critical towards Israel at the UN level, calling for immediate withdrawal from the Arab lands. This war changed Iran's position towards Israel in their relationship (Parsi 2007, 30). Since

Israel won, it was a devastating strike for the pan-Arab movement. The Shah was worried that if Israel was too strong, Iran could lose its balancing position between Israel and the Arab states (Parsi 2007, 30-31). In combination with more profits from the sale of oil, the Shah did not have to rely too much on Israel (Parsi 2007, 33). In 1970, Iran renewed relations with the new Egyptian president Nasser. Soon after that, Nasser died. The new Egyptian president Anwar Sadat expelled the Soviet advisers in 1972 and turned Egypt towards the US (Bahgat 2006, 33). This move tightened the Iranian-Egyptian reconciliation (Parsi 2007, 32), not to mention that Sadat and the Shah developed a very good personal relationship. Iran thus grew ties with one of the biggest enemies of Israel.

Tel Aviv did not wholly understand why the Shah behaved this way. For Israel, Egypt remained a threat to its existence, while Iran was satisfied that Egypt no longer fell under the Soviet influence (Parsi 2007, 34). As Parsi explains, Israel did not necessarily fit the context of the Cold War, since the threat from the Arab states remained the same whether they inclined towards the US or USSR (2007, 35). Moreover, Iran always had aspirations to be a dominant player in the Middle East, but needed the approval of the Arab states. Iran's relationship with Israel was an obstacle in any meaningful relations with the Arab states, although Iran tried to bribe them through loans (Parsi 2007, 43). Therefore, Iran tried to prove that it was independent of Israel by siding with Arabs in the 1970s.

### **2.1.3 The Yom-Kippur War in 1973**

In the Yom-Kippur war in 1973, Iran actively provided Arab states with medical and infrastructure support. Before the start of the war, Egypt received a shipment of oil from Iran (Parsi 2007, 47). They sent pilots to Saudi Arabia and permitted fly-overs of Soviet aircraft over Iran (Patten 2013, 59). Furthermore, Iran did not permit the transfer of Australian Jewish volunteers through its territory (Ramazani 1978, 418-419). This change of Shah's policy towards more-Arab friendly attitude is connected with better relations to Egypt (Bahgat 2006, 40). Though Iran helped the Arab states in the war, it continued supplying oil and arms to Israel (Parsi 2007, 48). The Shah did not see a problem in supporting the Arab countries on the one hand and maintaining an economic relationship with Israel on the other. Because of the oil embargo by the



OPEC countries, Iran's oil revenues rose, and thus it benefited from the war (Patten 2013, 61).

After the war, Israel tried to re-establish the relations with Tehran by appointing Uri Lubrani as the new ambassador in Iran in 1974. Lubrani was a close associate of Ben-Gurion and shared his idea of the Policy of the Periphery. Tel Aviv thought that man like Lubrani could change the frozen relations and persuade the Shah to recognize Israel *de jure*. Nevertheless, the Shah did not share Israel's willingness to restart the relations and did not meet with Lubrani for over three years after his appointment (Segev 1988, 83-84).

Due to the developments in the region, such as the result of the Yom-Kippur war and the subsequent rise in oil prices, the Shah began to make more arbitrary decisions in cases where both countries were involved without consulting Israel. In 1975, he signed a peace treaty with Saddam's Iraq at the meeting of the OPEC countries in Algiers, ending the joint support of Iran and Israel for the Iraqi Kurdish rebels – the peshmerga, which started in 1965. This was a surprise for both the US and Israel since the Shah decided without notifying his partners (Parsi 2007, 54). The peace treaty solved a long time dispute between Iraq and Iran concerning the waterway on their borders. The Shah assumed that the peace treaty would also secure the safe passage of Iranian ships in the Persian Gulf which Iraq threatened (Patten 2013, 65). Again, the Shah believed that the treaty with Iraq would grant Iran respect among the Arab countries (Parsi 2007, 59). However, the Shah argued that one day Iraq would attack Iran and this deal only prolonged the armistice. Even Iranian military officials admitted to their Iranian counterparts that this deal was a mistake (Parsi 2007, 60). This proved to be true after the Islamic revolution when Iraq invaded Iran.

In 1977, Menachem Begin became the Prime Minister of Israel. It was the first time in Israel's history that the Labor party was not part of the government. Instead, the Likud, a right-wing party, formed the government. The loss of the Labor party was mainly attributed to the results of the Yom-Kippur war (Parsi 2007, 70). Begin completely changed Israel's strategy for the Middle East – he wanted Israel to be a dominant power in the region (Parsi 2007, 70). The Policy of the Periphery also underwent ideological changes – alliances with non-Arab states became more critical since, according to Begin, it was impossible to reach any meaningful settlement with the Arabic states (Parsi 2007,

70-71). Thus the relations between Israel and Iran became even more important than before.

The Shah was worried that Begin would halt any peace process between Israel and Arab states, mainly Egypt (Bahgat 2006, 41). He naturally preferred the Labor party, since they had developed a working relationship over the years. Begin in his eyes was not that trustworthy (Parsi 2007, 71). Begin sent his Minister of Foreign Affairs Moshe Dayan to Tehran to assure the Shah that Israel would not block the peace process (Patten 2013, 64). Besides, there was concern about the possibility of failure of the peace process which would result in war and further destabilization in the Middle East (Bahgat 2006, 41). However, Dayan claimed that Israel was ready to pursue peace talks with Egypt. A few months later Sadat announced he would like to talk before the Israeli parliament Knesset. Shortly after that, Dayan arrived in Tehran to reproduce the discussion between Israel and Egypt. During this visit, the minister pressed the question of *de jure* recognition, which the Shah dismissed (Parsi 2007, 73). Despite all the Iranian setbacks in the Israeli-Iranian relations, Begin's move was important because he wanted to show the Shah that their partnership held despite his different ideological background compared to the previous governments.

Despite the treaty with Iraq, Iran was more and more concerned about the possible war with the state. The Soviet Union provided loads of weapons to Iraq, including the new Scud missiles (Parsi 2007, 74). Iran thus decided that the military also needed a missile system which would help to counter the Iraqis. Washington under Carter declined any sales of American missiles. Thus, Iran turned to Israel which agreed to the development of the missiles under the Project Flower (Parsi 2007, 76). However, the countries did not complete the project – two years later, the popular revolution led by critics of the Shah deposed the monarch. Moreover, with the victory of the revolution, thirty years of carefully built relations with Israel were broken.

We can observe three trends in the relations of Israel and Iran between the years 1948 and 1979 concerning ideology and perception of threat. Firstly, after the creation of Israel, the threat perception of Iran was somewhat non-existent. Iran waited to see how Israel's position in the Middle East would unfold – as it was mentioned, Iran maintained an ambivalent position towards Israel. However, Israel's inclination towards the USSR made the Shah a little uneasy. Thus, when Israel cut off the relations with the Soviets, and ideologically Israel moved towards the

West, Iran's threat perception of Israel became very low. Had not Israel done so, Iran would not have pursued forming relations, and it would have viewed Israel as a possible threat due to the Soviet interference in the region and in Iran itself.

Secondly, Israel with Ben-Gurion's leadership looked for any cooperation with non-Arab states in the Middle East. Iran's involvement in the relocation of the Iraqi Jewish community was a proof to Israel that Iran could be a reliable partner in the future. Therefore, Iran became one of the countries of Israel's Policy of the Periphery. Hence, Israel's threat perception of Iran was low.

Thirdly, despite Iran's criticism regarding Israel's involvement in the conflicts with its Arab neighbors, the two countries maintained and further developed cooperation in trade, military, and intelligence sectors. Iran represented the biggest exporter of oil to Israel. Once Iran got more revenues from oil due to the 1973 crisis, it did not have to rely on Israel as before. Nevertheless, cooperation between them continued until the revolution, and the threat perception remained low for both countries.

## 2.2 Israeli-Iranian Relations since the Islamic Revolution until the end of the Cold War

The overthrow of the Shah and the Islamic revolution in 1979 eliminated the Israeli-Iranian alliance. Whatever the outcome of the revolution would have been, the Israeli officials knew that the secret alliance was gone and that the new Iranian leadership would not share the same views on Israel as the Shah (Patten 2013, 67). Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a long-time critic and the face of the movement against the Shah, became the new leader of Iran. Shortly after him taking power, Iran cut off diplomatic ties with Tel Aviv. Thereupon, as a symbol of the 180-degree turn in the policy towards Israel, the Ayatollah met with Yasser Arafat, the leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (Parsi 2007, 83). Although Iran's old Shah regime protested against the treatment of Palestinians by Israel numerous times, the new government considered it one of the main parts of its foreign policy (Patten 2013, 69). However, as Parsi explains, Khomeini understood the support as an interest of the whole Muslim community, not the nationalist interest of Palestinians (2007, 83). The new Shi'a regime denied Israel's right to exist and

declared that it should be annihilated (Bahgat 2006, 36, 42). Moreover, Israel was labeled by Tehran as the “Lesser Satan” while the United States became the “Great Satan” (Bahgat 2006, 11). The hardline leadership of Iran has more or less maintained this approach to these days.

Concerning the development in Iran, there were two groups among the Israeli officials: those who thought the Shah’s regime should be preserved and those who believed that the revolution was just a temporary setback in the relations. Israel was still interested in Iran as a partner in its Policy of the Periphery. Ariel Sharon, the future Prime Minister of Israel, suggested sending a commando to rescue Shah, but the Israeli cabinet rejected the plan (Parsi 2007, 91). Despite the animosity of Khomeini towards Israel, Tel Aviv tried to pursue appeasement with the Islamic republic. For example, after Iran’s approval, they sent back Iranian tanks which Israel fixed up during Shah’s rule (Parsi 2007, 94). The various arms deals between Khomeini’s regime and Israel made it possible for Iranian Jews to emigrate to Israel or the US (Parsi 2007, 96).

After the Islamic revolution, Israel wanted to be sure that the Iranian Jews would be unharmed. Many wealthy Iranian Jews emigrated to the US rather than to Israel (Bahgat 2006, 29). The Ayatollah declared that the Iranian Jewish community did not have to worry about its security and religious practice in Iran since they belonged to one of the Abrahamic religions. Khomeini thus made a difference between Zionism, Israel, and Judaism. Nonetheless, the Jewish community lived in fear for their future well-being in Iran. The community mostly supported the monarchy, which created tensions between them and the Shi’a radicals. These fears were supported by some moves of the revolutionary forces, such as the execution of the President of Iran’s Jewish community Habib Elghanian or slogans during the protest calling for the death of Jews (Patten 2013, 71-72).

### **2.2.1 Iran-Contra Affair**

Despite this hostility, the Israeli-Iranian relations did not end right after the revolution. In 1980, Saddam Hussein used the chaotic post-revolution situation in Iran and attacked it. Israel, worried about Iraqi success and change in the balance of power contacted Iran through back channels and started to supply weapons to Tehran (Patten 2013, 69). Some people in the Israeli Ministry of Defense questioned the decision to

sell arms to Iran. However, Begin's government tried to secure the position of the Jewish community in Iran (Patten 2013, 70), since it was one of the pillars of Israeli foreign policy. With the US arms embargo to Iran due to the capture of the US embassy in Tehran, Israel used this situation to bypass the embargo and sell various types of heavy weapons and parts, some of them manufactured by the US. Thus Israel sold weapons it bought from the US. The sales started in 1980 and continued until 1986. Although Iran secretly dealt with Israel on the military level, Tehran escalated rhetorical attacks against Israel to prevent any suspicion about their relations (Parsi 2007, 100).

Nonetheless, Iran's rhetoric remained in the realm of words; it could not afford to anger Israel with any concrete actions in fear that Israel would stop the weapon transactions. Although it seemed that the Khomeini regime would not be replaced, Israel still sought to cooperate with Iran, hoping that the cooperation would resume like during the Shah's rule. Therefore, some Israeli officials supported the idea to strengthen the Iranian moderates. However, not everybody shared the same idea. Others wanted to stage a coup in Iran (Parsi 2007, 107-108). Israel still viewed Iran as an important partner in its Periphery policy. Afterward, Israel admitted that it supplied arms to Iran. By doing so, Tel Aviv sought Arab isolation of Iran and thus more dependence on Israel from this strategy (Parsi 2007, 108). Naturally, Khomeini denied any dealings with Israel, calling it false rumors.

Later, the Reagan administration, although it provided Iraq with arms, decided that it would also supply weapons to Iran and it would use the already established channels between Israel and Iran. The US did it for three reasons: it believed that the sale would help them release US nationals captured in Lebanon. Furthermore, Washington was worried about the possibility of the collapse of Iran and subsequent Soviet dominance in the region, since the USSR had invaded neighboring Afghanistan in 1979. Moreover, the administration wanted to establish some line of communication with Tehran, because they had severed relations after the revolution (Bahgat 2006, 35). For the United States, these sales also had significant domestic implications, which resulted in the so-called Iran-Contra affair and indictment of some US officials. Iran's intention in this affair was not a rapprochement with Israel, but with the United States (Parsi 2007, 129).

Israel also had strategic interests in the conflict. Its two biggest enemies were preoccupied with fighting each other, and thus they could

not focus on any significant actions in the region. Moreover, some Israeli officials believed that the Khomeini regime would eventually collapse and thus Israel should maintain a connection with Iran through liberal forces in the country. Likewise, by supplying weapons, Israel repealed possible Soviet arms sales to Iran (Bahgat 2006, 37). They also thought that the arms sales would limit the Shi'a militias in Lebanon, which later formed the Hezbollah group (Bahgat 2006, 36).

Hezbollah emerged in the 1980s, officially in 1985 as a consequence of the Lebanese Civil War and the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon in its aftermath. Israel invaded Lebanon to fight the Palestinian Liberation Organization which had settled in Southern Lebanon (Ayoob, 2007, p. 116). Hezbollah was formed from different Shia militias which operated in the south, where the majority of Lebanese Shia population live. Hezbollah fought not only the Israeli Defense Forces but also Christian militias, the so-called South Lebanon Army, sponsored by Israel (Ayoob, 2007, p. 119). From the beginning, Iran and its Revolutionary guards supported Hezbollah (Norton, 2014, p. 53). Iran primarily waged a proxy war against Israel through Hezbollah. The group even pledged its allegiance to the Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini (Norton, 2014, p. 150). The attacks on Israeli troops did not end with the end of the Lebanese Civil war, but with the withdrawal of the Israeli force from Lebanon in 2000 (Harb, 2005, p. 177).

Despite the Israeli support of Iran in the Iran-Iraq war, the new Iranian regime repeatedly condemned Israel and its actions against Palestinians and Lebanon, calling for a global fight against Zionism. During the invasion of the Israeli Defense Forces to Lebanon to fight the PLO, Iran sent the Iranian Revolutionary guards through Syria to fight them (Patten 2013, 78-79, Bahgat 2006, 46). In 1979, Egyptian President Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Begin signed the peace treaty between the two countries. Egypt officially recognized Israel and the countries established embassies in 1980. Moreover, in 1982 Israel invaded Lebanon, where a civil war was happening at the time. Israel created a buffer zone in southern Lebanon, preventing a possible attack of Hezbollah and Syria (Luft 2000), which occupied northern parts of Lebanon<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, Israel secured most of its surrounding borders and normalized its relations with its former biggest immediate enemy -

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<sup>9</sup> This buffer zone existed until 2000, when Israeli troops moved out under the orders of the Prime Minister Ehud Barak (Luft 2000)

Egypt. For these reasons, Israel's support for Iran in the name of the Policy of the Periphery turned out to be to some extent counter-productive because Iran became a more significant threat to Israel than the neighboring Arab countries.

In brief, the 1980s were a period of uncertainty between Israel and Iran. Israel did not know what the threat perception should be. Tel Aviv had various plans with Iran, and secretly it was hoping that Iran would resume the relations as in the pre-revolution era. During the Iran-Iraq war, Israel supported Iran, but after it had ended, Iran was no longer interested in dealings with Israel. However, Iran's rhetoric against Israel was not perceived as a major threat for Israel, although Iran's support in the formation of Hezbollah was. The new regime did not perceive Israel as a direct threat, but the radical ideology influenced its rhetoric against Israel.

### 2.3 The Relations after the End of the Cold War until 2006

After the Iran-Iraq war had ended, it was clear that the Policy of the Periphery with Iran is no longer viable due to Iran's hardline ideological stance against Israel. The Arab states did not seem to be a serious threat anymore – Egypt and Iraq were on the side of the West. However, Israelis viewed Iran more and more as a threat. Iran's involvement in Hezbollah and the position of Iran itself became a threat. The last hope for change was after Khomeini's death in 1989. Israel anticipated that moderate government would assume power in Iran, which would open the door for rapprochement (Parsi 2007, 131). Israel thus preferred Iran which would be ideologically at least moderate towards Israel.

With the disappearance of the Soviet Union from the international scene in the 1990s and the defeat of Iraq in the Gulf War in 1991, Israel and Iran did not have a common enemy which would unify them. Therefore, Tel Aviv started to view Iran as a possible threat. It was a complete reversal of the Policy of the Periphery – while Israel tried to pursue the peace process with the Arab countries, it identified its long time "ally" as a threat (Parsi 2007, 161). The new Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the Foreign Minister Shimon Peres promoted this

change<sup>10</sup>. Rabin and Peres even created a government office called the “Peace in the Middle East Department” whose aim was to coordinate anti-Iranian campaign (Cook 2008, 42). The objective of the campaign was to portray the Iranian leaders as a threat to peace in the world. However, the Israeli military and the public did not perceive it that way. The two politicians reasoned that Israel tried to solve the relations with the Arab states, while Iran could become a real threat in the future (Parsi 2007, 168). This was a change in the position of Israel – in 1987 Israel called Iran “a geo-strategic friend”, and five years later it was “the biggest global threat” (Parsi 2005, 247).

At the end of the 1990s, Iran gradually restarted its nuclear program (this topic will be discussed more in depth in the fifth chapter). Despite the Israeli views, Tehran’s perception of threat towards Israel was the same as in the 1980s – it regarded it only as a distant rival (Parsi 2007, 144). Israel no longer faced threats from conventional armies thus the focus of the Israeli security turned to three new areas: domestic problems with the Palestinians, nuclear weapons proliferation, and relations with the US (Parsi 2007, 148). Israel thus needed a new threat because its “old enemies” did not pose a threat after the end of the Cold War. After Bill Clinton became the US president in 1993, the US adopted the policy of Dual containment, containing both Iraq and Iran. Rabin’s cabinet was pleased with the US decision. The policy was adopted so Israel could focus on the peace settlement and meantime Washington would limit the Iranian threat (Sick 1999). Israel tried to limit any dialogue between the US and Iran, in worry that such an arrangement would seclude Israel and finally they achieved it.

Meanwhile, the new Iranian president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani favored a more pragmatic policy towards the West. However, the US was not interested in Iran after the collapse of the USSR. For example, the US completely ignored Iran during the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks in Madrid in 1991 (Parsi 2007, 169-170). Concerning the relations with Israel, as it was mentioned, Iran did not perceive it as a threat. However, following the change in the Israeli rhetoric against Iran which came with the election of Rabin, Iran realized that the relations would not be the same as before – Iranians would continue with its offensive rhetoric towards Israel, but overall there relations would stay lukewarm. With

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<sup>10</sup> In 1992, the Labor party won the elections, and Rabin became the Prime minister. It was the first time since 1977 that the Labor party ruled without Likud.



the change, Rafsanjani realized Iran had to react. When the Oslo peace accord was signed, the Iranian president and the Supreme Leader accused Arafat of treachery and of trying to undermine the peace by supporting terrorist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah (Parsi 2007, 175, Takeyh 2009, 174, Haas 2012, 79). As Haas explains, Rafsanjani was a political opportunist and sided with both Iranian moderates or conservatives – that resulted in different political behavior. When he supported moderates, Rafsanjani was more prone to deal with the US. When he sided with conservatives, the president supported policies which were anti-US and anti-Israel (Haas 2012, 71).

Moreover, even though the Iranian officials had denounced Israel before, the verbal and symbolic attacks escalated. For example, the Iranian parliament declared that Israel must be wiped out from the world (Parsi 2005, 175). Also, Rafsanjani renewed the support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and radical Palestinian organizations with the intention to foil the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. During this time, two attacks occurred against Israeli embassy, or Jewish community center in Argentina. However, two Israeli actions against Hezbollah preceded the two terrorist attacks. The attacks were pinpointed to Iran, which was a proof for the Israeli government that Iran was indeed a threat (Parsi 2007, 178-179). As Iran's proxy, Hezbollah's actions against Israeli targets were perceived by Israel as Iran's indirect war.

In 1996, Likud with Benjamin Netanyahu in the lead won the parliamentary by a narrow margin. Netanyahu opposed the Oslo peace process and the whole elections more or less served as a referendum on this matter. After an intelligence report from the Israeli military and Mossad concerning whether Iran represented a threat to Israel, Netanyahu chose Mossad's report which said that Iran was not a threat and Israel could restart the periphery policy. The report of the military claimed otherwise – it had the same position as Rabin's cabinet. Therefore, the first Netanyahu's government stopped confronting Tehran (Parsi 2007, 197). The cabinet blamed the Labor party for escalation of the dispute with Iran. Moreover, Netanyahu urged Israeli officials to establish a dialogue with their Iranian counterparts. Except for strategic reasons, Netanyahu's idea for thawing the relations with Iran was to limit threats of terrorist attacks which could be sponsored by Iran (Parsi 2007, 198). However, it did not take long for Netanyahu to completely reverse his position towards Iran.

Although Iranians were cautious about the Netanyahu's intentions, Tehran appreciated the reduction in tensions between the two states. Rafsanjani's government perceived Likud as a more moderate force in Israeli politics since it did not blame Iran for all Israeli security problems. For example, Iranians urged Hezbollah to seek an armistice with Israel. Still, Iran was not interested in relations with Israel, but with Washington. That worried Netanyahu because he did not want Israel to be left out from Iran-US dealings (Parsi 2007, 199-201). On the other hand, Iran did not want Israel to meddle in its relations with the US.

In 1997, Sayyed Mohammad Khatami, a progressive Iranian politician, won the presidential elections. While Khatami approached the US and tried to restart the relations, he was not very keen to do so with Israel. The same year, Khatami labeled Israel as the "main problem of the region (Haas 2012, 79)." On the other side, Netanyahu, who did not achieve any significant shift in relations with Tehran, resumed the aggressive stance against Iran (Parsi 2007, 207). Israel realized that whatever political party would rule in Iran, they would not change the rhetoric against Israel. Israel continued with the same stance under the new Labor Prime Minister Ehud Barak after the elections in 1999. Iran resumed its usual rhetoric attacks against Israel concerning the Palestinian question and Israel's existence (Parsi 2007, 218-221). For example, in 2000, the Supreme Leader Khamenei called for the annihilation of Israel (Haas 2012, 79). Iranian leaders thus maintained the rhetoric against Israel despite the political shift after the election of the new president Khatami.

After the September 11 attacks, Iran offered its help to the Bush's administration to counter the Taliban in Afghanistan. (Parsi 2007, 228-230). Iran aided the US with intelligence about Taliban, logistics, and post-invasion settlement (Haas 2012, 99). However, Ariel Sharon warned the new Bush administration about the cooperation with Tehran. Neoconservatives from both the US and Israel tried to limit any talks with Iran. Israel portrayed Tehran as "the centre of world terrorism" (Cook 2008, 44-45). In 2002, Israel seized a ship in the Red Sea carrying various arms. According to Israelis, the ship was of Iranian origin. The capture was a proof Israel waited for – that Iran supported terrorist groups. Washington accepted the Israeli evidence that the ship had been sent from Iran. Parsi mentions that the ship could have set out from Iran, without Khatami's knowledge – there were groups within Iran which wanted to undermine Khatami's position towards the US (Parsi

2007, 233-235). His government informed Washington that Tehran had nothing to do with the shipment (Parsi 2007, 234). A few weeks later, in his first State of the Union speech, President George Bush said the following:

*“Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom ... States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an Axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world”* (The White House 2002).

Bush marked Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an “Axis of Evil” because these three countries pursued the development of weapons of mass destruction (Heradstveit and Bonham 2007). It was a shock to Khatami, mostly because Iran actively assisted America in Afghanistan. Moreover, as Haas writes, during Khatami’s presidency Iran’s support for terrorist groups had decreased. However, conservatives in Iran actively supported such groups (Haas 2012, 81). According to Heradstveit and Bonham, Bush’s labeling of Iran as the member of the Axis of Evil helped Iranian conservatives and hardliners in political mobilization (2007, 438). It may have had an impact in the 2005 presidential election in Iran in which a right-wing hardliner Mahmud Ahmadinejad won.

In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq. The invasion was surprisingly swift, and as a result, the regime of Saddam Hussein ended. Few weeks after the attack, Iran, with the approval of the Supreme Leader Khamenei, sent a proposal to the US where it listed its demands and concessions, including a complete abandonment of Iranian nuclear program, recognition of Israel and normalization of the relations, and disarmament of Hezbollah (Cook 2008, 88). The proposal was received by the National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and the Secretary of State Collin Powel. However, Donald Rumsfeld, the Defense Secretary, put a complete stop to the proposal, saying: „We don't speak to evil“ (Corera 2006). It was a radical setback in US-Iran relations. Rumsfeld belonged to the neoconservative wing of the Bush administration, and his ideology may have impacted the decision of not pursuing the talks with Tehran (Adib-Moghaddam 2007). Many Iranian diplomats presented the same proposal to Israelis. However, neoconservatives from both the US and Israel put a stop to this too (Parsi 2007, 254-254).

Cook writes that the US cut off almost every opportunity for dialog with Tehran (2008, 46). Iran took the US disapproval of the proposal as a sign of disrespect. It made Iran less prone to deal with both the US and Israel in the following years.

In 2001, Ariel Sharon, the leader of Likud, became the Prime Minister. He had held this position until he suffered a stroke in 2006. In his memoirs, Sharon stated that the nuclear program was a threat to Israel because even moderate politicians in Iran called for the destruction of Israel. Moreover, he said that Israel was ready to strike against the Iranian nuclear facilities, but it was the responsibility of the international community to come up with a plan concerning Tehran's nuclear intentions. He called Iran the most serious threat to Israel not only because of the Iranian nuclear program and development of long-range missiles, but also due to Iranian support of terrorist groups fighting Israel (Dan 2006, 229, 244-245).

As a reaction to the US and Israeli threats, Khatami declared that *"anyone who dared attack his country would face a burning hell"* (Black 2005). Khatami mostly engaged with the EU since he saw it as a way how to develop Iran's economy (Tazmini 2009, 75). Iranian reformists regarded Iran's economic development and industrialization as the main priority, and to achieve that they needed to cooperate with the West (Haas 2012, 91). In 2004, conservatives dominated the parliamentary elections and a year later in 2005, the presidential elections in Iran had a surprising outcome. The hardline conservative politician Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won. With Ahmadinejad as President, Iran no longer wanted to engage with the West.

To sum up, the Israeli-Iranian relations after the Cold war had their ups and downs. The Labor party found a scapegoat in Iran, while the Likud party tried to stabilize the relations for various strategic and political reasons. However, Iran was not interested in pursuing relations with Tel Aviv due to its relationship with the US, which had treated Iran disrespectfully and were seen as a threat by Iran. Therefore, Israel completely turned its back to Tehran. Iran was more interested in relations with the US, but Israelis were afraid they would be left out from any deal made between the two countries. Thus they undermined Iranian efforts to approach the US. Iran did not regard Israel as a valuable partner. For Iran it was partly for ideological reasons – it could not afford to deal with Israel because of the nature of the regime. Because of the Israeli officials' rhetoric against Iran, Iran started to perceive Israel as a

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ISRAELI-IRANIAN RELATIONS

threat. Likewise, Israel felt threatened by the Iranian support of terrorist groups operating against Israeli targets, and, most importantly, because of the development of their nuclear program.



## 3 Iran: State Structure and the Ideologies of the Leaders

### 3.1 The Origin of Iran's State Ideology

To understand the ideology of the Presidents Mahmood Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani, we have first to explore the ideology of Ruhollah Khomeini, the face of the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the first Supreme leader of Iran. Iran's state ideology derives most of its ideas from Khomeini's teachings and views, and it is still relevant for the Iranian state even after almost thirty years after his death.

The roots of Khomeini's Shia Islam ideology go back to the rule of the Shah – Khomeini was one of the biggest critics of the monarchy. Born in 1902, Khomeini studied at an Islamic seminary and became a Shia scholar – Ayatollah. In 1963, he became a Marja' (a grand ayatollah) – by this time he was already politically active. Due to his anti-shah views and political activities, Khomeini lived in exile in Turkey, Iraq, and France (Takeyh 2009, 12).

Khomeini's ideas were shaped by both the domestic situation in Iran and global currents. The main tenet of the ideology is a mixture of Shia political Islam and Iranian nationalism. According to Takeyh, the role of religion in the politics was perceived as necessary for the Iranian public, but it did not necessarily mean that they supported the creation of a theocratic state (2009, 12). One of the crucial points which influenced the ideology was a general notion that many regional and foreign powers threatened Iran for most of its history. Whether it was the Ottoman Empire, Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union, the UK, or the United States, this historical experience took place in the historical memory of many Iranian intellectuals, including Khomeini. He was very mistrustful to other types of governance. He claimed that there was no difference between democracy, communism, dictatorship or despotism. Khomeini stressed that Islam is a political ideology (Takeyh 2009, 13).

The 1960s brought a global wave of anti-colonialism, Khomeini became a more prevalent figure in the fight against the Pahlavi monarchy. He strongly opposed secularism and the close relations with the United States, which, together with the UK, staged a *coup d'état* in 1953. Khomeini's slogan, which became more prevalent after the

revolution, was “neither East nor West” since he imagined his Islamic revolution as a third way between the US and the Soviets (Takeyh 2009, 20). Moreover, an important factor of the Khomeini’s ideology is the practice of Shi’a Muslim during the Sunni dominance in the region. Shi’as could hide their faith before Sunnis if their lives were under threat (Giles 2003, 147). Giles argues that this notion called *taqiye* is nowadays used also by some of the Iranian government officials to justify not to be completely truthful for their own benefit.

During the protests in 1963 and 1964, concerning the exemption of the U.S. military personnel from Iranian law, Khomeini became more visible. Various classes in Iran supported Khomeini’s vision of Islam’s importance in Iranian politics. Khomeini ideology thus included a mixture of leftist ideas criticizing the economic order, exploitation by foreign powers, Islam as a dominant factor in politics, and Iranian nationalism (Takeyh 2009, 12).

As a result of the protests in the 1960s, Iran banished Khomeini from Iran. However, he maintained a connection with the domestic opposition and clergy and created a network of the opposition of Iranians outside of Iran. Thus, he became a dominant figure in the opposition against the Shah. While in Iraq, Khomeini developed his vision of the political Shia Islam. In his book called, *Hokumat-e Islami, Velayat-e Faqih (Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist)*, published in 1970, Khomeini stressed the importance of Sharia law as the guiding law of the government (Bruno 2008). The guardianship of the jurist is the central tenet of Iran’s theocracy (Giles 2003, 142). The guardianship of the jurist assumes that an Islamic jurist has a dominant say in Iranian politics through the role of the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council (Takeyh 2009, 16). Khomeini argued that the government should be divided into the three traditional branches: executive, legislative, and judicial, however with the oversight of the jurist (Bruno 2008). According to Khomeini, these democratic institutions should serve for the implementation of God’s will on Earth (Takeyh 2009, 17).

However, as Takeyh notes, Khomeini’s idea of vilayat-e faqih had one structural problem. Historically the Shia clergy operated with various views on social, religious, and political interpretations. However, Khomeini’s idea of rule relied only on a small number of clerics without the reliance on the rest of the Iranian clergy. This became a problem later during the revolution, where traditional clergy was suppressed (Takeyh 2009, 17, 30).



A very significant part of the Khomeini's ideology is the anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist stance. It stems from two interconnected things – the before mentioned distrust of foreign powers and the creation of the state of Israel. It was the West which initiated the creation of the Jewish state. Moreover, the sole existence of Israel conflicted with the whole Islamic world, since Jerusalem is the third holiest place for Muslims (the place where prophet Mohamed ascended to heaven). Takeyh explains that the stance against Israel was not to please Arabs but an essential part of the ideology as a whole. Even before the creation of the Islamic Republic, Khomeini called for a boycott of Israel and support for Palestinians (Takeyh 2009, 20, 62-63).

After Khomeini's death, the new Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei<sup>11</sup>, allied himself with the Iranian conservatives, since he was very close to them ideologically (Takeyh 2009, 119). Khamenei became the hard-liners new face and a source of power. Their ideological view coincided more with despotism than democratic representation since the state should be designed according to the word of god, not people. Thus conservatives found Khamenei as an ally in such ideas. They relied on him and his support and vice-versa (Takeyh 2009, 119). Concerning foreign policy, the Supreme Leader and the Iranian right-wing maintained anti-American stance (and together with its anti-Israel stance as well) (Takeyh 2009, 120).

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, when the Islamic republic was established, the constitution required the Supreme leader to be Marja', the highest Shia authority. However, after Khomeini's death, the constitution was amended so Khamenei could take the post since he did not hold the title (Djavadi 2010). Moreover, Khamenei was not the first in line of succession of Khomeini. Ali Montazeri supposed to become the next Supreme Leader, however, he got into conflict with Khomeini over the structure of the regime. Montazeri remained a voice of the opposition in Iran until his death in 2009 – it was Montazeri who criticized Khomeini for not being eligible to hold the post of the Supreme Leader (Giles 2003, 149).

### 3.1.1 The Constitution of Iran

The Iranian constitution includes some articles which may tell us about some of the elements of Iran's state ideology especially concerning other states:

*“The Islamic Republic government of Iran is obliged to use all of its resources in the following areas... the complete rejection of colonialism and the prevention of foreign influence”* (The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 3, Section 8).

*“The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on the rejection of any kind of domination, both its exercise and submission to it; the preservation of the all-inclusive independence of the country and its territorial integrity; the defense of the rights of all Muslims; non-alignment in relation to the domineering powers; mutual peaceful relations with nonaggressive states”* (The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran Article 152).

Such articles of the constitution have origin in the Iranian historical experience with foreign powers including the United States. Since the US is the closest ally of Israel, these articles are indirectly aimed against Israel too. The leaders of Iran must follow the constitution, and it serves them as a guideline for establishing relations with other countries. Iran's goal of protection of all Muslims in Article 152 coincides with the protection of Palestinians against Israel.

## 3.2 State Structure of Iran

Current Iran is the first modern theocratic state<sup>12</sup>. Thus it is a unique kind of state type, found nowhere else in the world. It is a rather complicated system of multiple governing and decision-making bodies. As Giles explains, the whole Iranian system is a combination of formal

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<sup>12</sup> The Holy See in the Vatican is also a theocracy. However, it is not considered a 'modern' theocracy.

and informal governance, which often compete with each other (Giles 2003, 142). It is a mixture of theocracy, democracy, and also partly military dictatorship. Four political bodies represent the theocratic part of Iran: the Supreme Leader, the Guardian Council of the Constitution, the Assembly of Experts, and the Expediency Council.

The Supreme Leadership Authority, or the Supreme Leader, is the religious head of Iran. He enjoys a vast range of powers. The Supreme Leader is the head of the armed forces, appoints various members of different political and armed bodies, as well as some cabinet members, such as the Minister of Defense and Minister of Foreign Affairs (Giles 2003, 142). He also guides the foreign policy, economy, and some other domestic affairs. Moreover, he is the head of the armed forces and can declare war<sup>13</sup>. Most importantly, the tenure of the Supreme Leader is for life. There have been only two Supreme Leaders yet – Khomeini and his successor Ali Khamenei.

The second crucial theocratic body is the Guardian Council of the Constitution. The members are Islamic Shia jurists and clerics. The primary purpose of the council is approval of the members of the Parliament, the Presidential candidates, and the Assembly of experts, evaluation whether legislature conforms to Islamic law, and oversight over elections in Iran. (Giles 2003, 142, Katzman 2019b, 5). Therefore, the council is a very significant body in Iranian politics, without its approval Iranian politicians cannot run for any position. There are twelve members in the council. One half is directly appointed by the Supreme Leader. The Chief Justice of Iran appoints the other half; however, the Supreme Leader selects the Chief Justice. Thus, it can be argued, that the whole council is appointed by the Supreme Leader (Giles 2003, 142).

In 1988, the constitutional changes in Iran created yet another governing body – the Expediency Council. The role of the council is to resolve disputes between the Majlis (the Parliament) and the Guardian Council (Katzman 2019b, 5). The members are the head of the three branches of the government, clerics from the Guardian Council, and the rest are appointed members by the Supreme Leader. The Expediency council also has the power to issue “emergency laws” bypassing the Parliament and the Council of Guardians, which cannot annul such laws (Giles 2003, 143).

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<sup>13</sup> Iran is one of the few countries, where the president does not hold this power

The Assembly of Experts is the institution which selects the new Supreme Leader. It is currently comprised of eighty-eight members. The members are elected in a public election; however as mentioned before, the members must be first vetted by the Guardians Council. Moreover, they also need the approval of the Supreme Leader to assume the position. Theoretically, the assembly should have oversight over the Supreme Leader, but in reality, the members do not oppose him (Giles 2003, 143).

Thus, the Supreme Leader holds enormous powers, and he is hardly ever opposed. Without his direct or indirect approval, no one can run for an elected office. It is especially important for the position of President and the Islamic Consultative Assembly – the parliament. Only members who do not pose a threat to the state regime can be permitted to run for a governmental office.

### **3.2.1 The President and the Iranian Parliament**

The roles of the parliament and the president represent the democratic part of the system. The position of the Iranian President is the second highest ranking position in Iranian politics. The presidential term is limited to two consecutive terms. However, the former president can run after one term pause<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, the competences of the president are limited and most important decisions concerning foreign policy, including the nuclear program and national security, must be approved by the Supreme Leader (Bruno and Afridi 2009). Milani explains that the “founding fathers” of Iran, wrote the constitution in such way so the role of the president would not become too powerful and would not suppress the role of Islam of the new regime (2009).

Nonetheless, the President has some power over the Supreme Leader – as the second strongest man, he has to discuss the most critical domestic and foreign issues with the Supreme Leader, and thus they together create a kind of guideline for Iran (Milani 2009). For example, the president can influence the decisions of the supreme leader through the Supreme National Security Council, in which president appoints half of its members – the other half are appointed by the Supreme Leader (Milani 2009). However, it also matters how close the ideologies of the

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<sup>14</sup> For example, Rafsanjani run for president in 2005, despite serving as a president between 1989-1997.

President and the Supreme Leader are. For instance, Ahmadinejad was much closer to Khomeini due to his conservative hard-liner views than his predecessor, the reformist Khatami (Milani 2009). Regardless, most of the powers of the president are of executive function, day-to-day running of the state, like matters of Iran's economy. The President is also the public face of the state, appearing in most of the media, especially in the West when there is news from Iran.<sup>15</sup> Thus, most importantly, the President creates an image of Iran in the international community (Milani 2009).

The Islamic Consultative Assembly, the Majlis, or in other words the Iranian Parliament, is the legislative body consists of almost three-hundred elected members. The Majlis can be turbulent, but mostly it is very insignificant (Takeyh 2016). The laws it passes must be in accordance with Islam – the Council of Guardians ensures that the laws are in order with Islamic religious standards and the Iranian constitution (Katzman 2019b, 8). Nonetheless, as Takeyh writes, there have been cases when the Guardian Council vetoed laws that did not have anything to do with Islam (2016). The Guardian Council, as it was mention before, chooses potential candidates – many reformer politicians do not get vetted, and only people loyal to the Islamic State can run for a position in the Majlis (Takeyh 2016). Nevertheless, the Speaker of the Parliament holds a considerable amount of power within Iran<sup>16</sup>.

### **3.2.2 The military part of the government – Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps**

The military in Iran is divided into two parts – the conventional military called *Artesh* and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) – *Sepah-e Pasdaran*. The IRGC holds much power within Iran. The original role of the IRGC was to defend the Iranian Islamic revolution and later the regime from a possible coup (Bruno, Bajoria and Masters 2013). It was created after the Revolution, and it has its own navy, air-force (ballistic missiles program), army, and an intelligence unit (Byman, et al. 2001, 35, Katzman 2019a, 14). Also, there is a paramilitary unit called Basij, which closely cooperate with the IRGC and serve as the force against domestic

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<sup>15</sup> A simple Google search supports this argument: When typed Iran into Google News, most of the articles mention the incumbent President Rouhani

<sup>16</sup> Before Rafsanjani became the president, he was the speaker of the parliament, where he build a network of contacts in Iran

protests (Byman, et al. 2001, 38, Katzman 2019a, 18). The IRGC has been involved in many conflicts around the Middle East – for example, it helped to establish Hezbollah in Lebanon and supports the Asad’s regime during Syrian Civil War (Katzman 2019a, 41, 44). Most importantly, the IRGC constitutes a hardline conservative pro-regime force, which closely cooperates with the Supreme Leader. The IRGC is also heavily involved in the Iranian economy (Katzman 2019a, 22) – they handle strategic industries and also a part of the black market (Bruno, Bajoria and Masters 2013).

Moreover, there are four informal power groups in Iran: the clerics, the government officials, the revolutionary officials, and influential persons. The informal power structure is reinforced by family networks and personal connections. Such connections created a small group of elites rule over Iran – having a personal connection to Ayatollah Khomeini or later to Khamenei is especially important. For example, the former president Khatami’s father was a religious teacher to Khamenei (Giles 2003, 144). Many government officials are members of the Iranian clergy and former IRGC members.

One characteristic of Iran’s state structure is the duality of the system. On one side there are the “theocratic” and revolutionary institutions and on the other secular bodies – the Supreme Leader versus the President, the Guardian Council vs. the Parliament, the Revolutionary Guards vs. the Army. The combination of the duality and the formal and informal groups makes Iran a very complicated system which ensures that only loyal people to the regime can be in charge. If anybody from the establishment, whether it is the Supreme Leader, the members of the Guardian Council, or the leaders of the IRGC do not agree with somebody, they have many ways of how to remove such person.

### 3.3 Personal Background and the Ideology of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad belongs to the new generation of young people from the revolution who fought in the Iran-Iraq war especially from the conservative spectrum. Born in 1956 in a village of Aradat, near the provincial capital of Garmsar. His family later moved to Tehran where they adopted the last name, Ahmadinejad. He studied civil engineering for which he received an undergraduate degree in 1979, the same year

the Islamic revolution began. Later in the 1990s, he received a Ph.D. degree in transportation engineering. During the revolution, he was involved in a student organization Islamic Association of Students in the Science and Technology University, which belonged to the Office for Strengthening Unity between Universities and Theological Seminaries – the organization which took hostages in the US embassy<sup>17</sup> (Biography.com Editors 2017).

Not a lot of information about Ahmadinejad's life in the 1980s is known. During the Iraq-Iran war, Ahmadinejad probably fought in the Kurdish parts of Iran – it is unclear whether he belonged to the IRGC or the Basij (Biography.com Editors 2017). There are also allegations that Ahmadinejad planned assassinations of the Kurdish leader Qassemloou in Vienna in 1989 and Salman Rushdie, the author of *The Satanic Verses* on which Khomeini declared a fatwa (Pike 2011).

His political career started as a governor of cities of Maku and Khoy in the late 1980s. Later he became an advisor to the governor-general of the Kurdistan province and also he was an advisor to the Ministry of Culture. In the 1990s, he was selected as the governor general of the Ardebil province (Pike 2011). During Khatami's presidency, he was removed from this position and became a teacher. In 2003, the conservative municipal board in Tehran elected Ahmadinejad as the mayor of the capital. Ahmadinejad imposed a lot of anti-Western, conservative and religious laws in the city such as banning fast-food chains, demanding male employees of the city to have beards, and establishing segregated elevators based on gender (Biography.com Editors 2018).

Ahmadinejad is a profoundly religious and orthodox man, a follower of Hojjatieh Shi'ism, a messianic and apocalyptic sect. He was a member of the conservative principalist party the Islamic Society of Engineers, and he is connected to another conservative party the Alliance of Builders of Islamic Republic (Pike 2011). During the 2005 presidential election, he was not the front-runner of the elections and was not expected to win (Takeyh 2009, 230). Quite the opposite – the polls placed Ahmadinejad on the last place. He was not even chosen as the leading conservative candidate from the bloc of the principalist parties (Takeyh

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<sup>17</sup> It is unclear if Ahmadinejad participated in the hostage crisis. The people who organized the takeover of the embassy denied that Ahmadinejad was involved (Montagne and Inskeep 2005), however some of the former hostages claim he was there (Hawley 2005).

2009, 232). However, he was supported by the Supreme Leader, conservative clerics in mosques, and the Basij militias. In the end, the former president Rafsanjani won the first round with twenty-one percent, Ahmadinejad got a little over nineteen percent. In the second round, Ahmadinejad won. During the second round, many reported voting irregularities occurred, which however the Guardian Council dismissed (BBC 2005). Thus Ahmadinejad became the first non-clerical president of Iran. Ahmadinejad's victory shows the importance of the informal groups in Iran such as the network of right-wing clerics.

Ahmadinejad was very vocal and aggressive against Israel. In 2005, he spoke at the "World against Zionism" conference in Tehran where he declared that Islam is in a battle with "World of Ignorance" led by Zionists (Pike 2011).<sup>18</sup> Ahmadinejad had many controversial and offensive statements about Jews and denial of the Holocaust (Takeyh 2009, 256). As Takeyh explains, such statements stem from the ideology of the state, and they try to impress Muslim masses in the Middle East. Ahmadinejad sincerely believed that Israel is a Western construct enforced into the Muslim world (Takeyh 2009, 257). He did not support any peace settlement between Palestinians and Israelis, saying: "Anybody who takes a step toward Israel will burn in the fire of the Islamic nation's fury (Esfandiari 2005)."

After the first Ahmadinejad's presidential term, Iran's economy was in bad condition – high inflation, unemployment combined with high revenues from oil which the government wasted on populist short-term economic programs (Bakhash 2019). He pressured Iranian banks to give low-interest loans which the IRGC people used for their benefit. Moreover, the IRGC acquired many strategic state industries and enterprises (Bakhash 2019).

In June 2009, the Ahmadinejad ran again for the president. The IRGC and the Basij militias actively helped with Ahmadinejad's campaign and anti-campaign against other candidates (Rahimi 2009, 7-8). In a much-

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<sup>18</sup> There were accusations that Ahmadinejad said that „Israel should be wiped out,“ however as many sources report, the phrase was wrongly translated (Cook 2008, 78). A similar case happened when Ahmadinejad organized a conference about the Holocaust and historical records of Jewish deaths in it which Israel and the West portrayed as Holocaust denial. Ahmadinejad intended to provoke the West and Israel with this offensive act but as Cook explains the conference also has to do with Western hypocrisy towards the portrayal of the Prophet Mohammed in Danish cartoons and Israel's treatment of the Palestinians (2008, 77). Nevertheless, this was not the only instance when Ahmadinejad questioned the existence of the Holocaust.



disputed first round, Ahmadinejad won the majority of the votes. His rivals, reformists Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, declared that election fraud occurred and demanded the Guardian Council to do a recount (Addis 2009).

Many protests broke out in support of Mousavi and general opposition against Ahmadinejad's management of the country (Roshandel and Lean 2011, 14). A recount of the votes declared Ahmadinejad the winner again. The Supreme Leader also supported him (Safshekan and Sabet 2010, 558). The protests continued throughout the summer and turned into the Green revolution movement. The former president Rafsanjani and Khatami also supported the protests. However, the IRGC and Basij suppressed the protests by force. Two years later Mousavi and Karroubi were put under house arrest. The IRGC and the Basij militias thus had a huge impact on the re-election of Ahmadinejad (Rahimi 2009).

The second Ahmadinejad's term continued with attacks on the West and Israel, defending the Iranian nuclear program, and plummeting economy. The economic sanctions imposed by the US and the EU crippled many sectors of the Iranian economy (Bakhash 2019). Although Khamenei and Ahmadinejad were allies, they got into a serious dispute when the president wanted to dismiss Khamenei nominee for minister of intelligence. Since then the relations worsened, Ahmadinejad was the first president called for questioning to the Majlis in the history of the Islamic republic. Later, many of the president's aides were imprisoned or dismissed (Bakhash 2019). Khamenei came out as a winner, and in the last years of his term, Ahmadinejad's power diminished.

The ideology of Ahmadinejad can be described as neo-principalist. The neo-principalists belong to the Iranian new right, and among its members, we could find prominent figures from the IRGC and the Basij. The ideology has characteristics of authoritarianism, nationalism, and pragmatism. They also believe that they can use any means necessary to bring God's will on Earth – thus they can justify all arrests, executions, and moves against their opposition through this prism (Safshekan and Sabet 2010, 549). Violence for them was acceptable when defending the Islamic republic, even the use of terrorism (Takeyh 2009, 225). They despised the former governments of Rafsanjani and Khatami due to their attempts to get closer to the West, especially the US (Takeyh 2009, 226).

Sashel and Safshekan argue that neo-principalist's idea of the state is similar to the Chinese model – economic liberties, very authoritarian,

and a strong sense of sovereignty (2010, 550). Despite being very religious, the neo-principalist are anti-clerical. The neo-principalists dispute the legitimacy of the previous government's led by clerics. The 2005 Ahmadinejad's cabinet consisted almost entirely of former IRGC commanders, military and security personnel with only one cleric (Safshekan and Sabet 2010, 553). As strong nationalists, they believe that Iran's economy must be strong – thus they privatized many state industries which some ended up in the IRGC commanders' hands (Safshekan and Sabet 2010, 555). They blamed reformists that they did not care for ordinary people, and under populist slogans, the neo-principalists got popular in the rural areas. They were distrustful of the West because in their eyes the West would always conspire against Iran (Takeyh 2009, 225). Therefore, during Ahmadinejad's presidential terms, the IRGC's power rose tremendously.

### 3.4 Personal Background and the Ideology of President Hassan Rouhani

Hassan Rouhani, born as Hassan Fereydoun<sup>19</sup>, was born in 1948 into a religious family. He attended an Islamic seminary in the holy city of Qom. Rouhani studied in at the University of Tehran and later in Scotland, where he received his Ph.D. title. He is a Shi'a cleric, holding the title Hojjat ol-Islam, one position bellow ayatollah (Katzman 2019b, 12).

He has been a bulwark supporter of Khomeini and the revolution – he started his political carrier in the 1960s when he spoke against the Shah's regime, for which he was arrested numerous times. He closely cooperated with Khomeini, Khamenei, Rafsanjani, and other influential persons during the revolution. During the Iran-Iraq war, Rouhani headed various defense organizations. He was also one of the Iranian officials who dealt with Americans about arms sales in the 1980s (Katzman 2019b).

Moreover, between the years 1980 and 2000, he was a member of the Majlis where he held the position of the Deputy Speaker. Later after the war in 1989, he was the head of the Supreme National Council (nominated by Khamenei) and also the security advisor to the presidents

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<sup>19</sup> He changed his surname during the Shah's era so the secret police SAVAK would not recognize him – 'rouhani' means a cleric in Persian

Rafsanjani and Khatami. He held both positions until 2005. He was also elected into the Assembly of Experts in 1999 and remains in the position until these days. Rouhani also served as the chief negotiator for the Iranian nuclear program between 2003 and 2005 (Biography.com Editors 2018). During the 2009 post-election protests in Iran which the Iranian regime suppressed, Rouhani was a member of the Supreme National Security Council. Therefore, the repression happened with his approval (Takeyh 2016). Thus, Rouhani has a rich political career and experience both within Iran and in the international politics.

Rouhani decided to run for president in March 2013. He was not the favorite of the election right away. He was going to step down and support the former president Rafsanjani. However, Rafsanjani did not pass through the vetting process of the Guardian Council (Barzin 2013). Thus he and Khatami supported Rouhani's candidacy for president. Rouhani ran as a candidate of the Moderation and Development Party which he founded in 1999 (Vaez 2016).

In 2013, after eight years of Ahmadinejad's presidency, Rouhani won the election in the first round against a conservative Mohammad Ghalibaf. Many experts ascribe the landslide victory due to Rouhani's program which attracted reformist groups from the Green movement. Rouhani promised to ease social tensions and improve the freedom of speech. The main aim of Rouhani's presidency was to revive the Iranian economy after the economic decline during Ahmadinejad's rule. To do that, Rouhani needed to reopen Iran to the international community and make a deal with the United States about the future of the Iranian nuclear program to lift the international sanctions (Naji 2017). Few weeks after he became president, Rouhani spoke on the phone with President Obama, which was an unprecedented move from both sides since the Islamic revolution. In 2015, Rouhani achieved his goal, the JCPOA deal was signed between the P5+1 and Iran which led to the lifting of some sanctions by the US and the EU. Unlike Ahmadinejad, Rouhani does not have a significant relationship with the IRGC. After being elected, Rouhani declared that the IRGC should not meddle in Iranian politics (Torbati 2013). Moreover, he criticized the Revolutionary Guards for opposition against the JCPOA (Shine, Zimmt and Catran 2017).

The party which supports Rouhani may tell us a lot about his political ideology. The party belongs to the reformist camp of parties, unlike Ahmadinejad's party which was part of the Principalists group. As it is obvious from its name, the Moderation and Development Party

represents a moderate stance in Iranian politics. Being a moderate in Iran means being loyal to the Islamic republic but remaining somewhat conservative – Vaez describes Rouhani as a pragmatic republican (2016). Another author, Thomas Juneau, calls Rouhani moderate conservative (Juneau 2014, 100). Rouhani's ideology is, however, a mixture of conservative and reformist ideas. When it comes to Iran at the international scene, Rouhani maintains a more conciliatory stance, while in domestic matters he is more conservative – for example in social issues (Vaez 2016).

Rouhani is neither a reformist nor a liberal despite being connected to the reformist camp. He has been involved with the political establishment since the revolution, thus professes some tenets of the Islamic Republic's ideology. During the inauguration of Rouhani's Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif, Rouhani declared that his government will not leave behind the principles of the Islamic Republic (Sermin 2013, 70). Also, he forged a coalition of with some conservatives (Vaez 2016).

While Rouhani was praised by some Western politicians as a moderate, who brought Iran out of the international isolation, some of his actions are questionable. For example, during Rouhani's first term, Iran had heavily invested into the support of the Syrian President Bashar Asad in the Syrian Civil War who used chemical weapons against his citizens on multiple occasions. Concerning Israel, Rouhani was not offensive as Ahmadinejad, but remained reserved towards it. In August 2013, Rouhani called Israel "*an old wound sitting on the body of the Islamic world*" (Fisher 2013).<sup>20</sup> Later in September, when asked to clarify his statements about the Holocaust during an interview at the Council on Foreign Relations, he said:

*"I think that I have responded in one or two interviews and in which I was asked about it, and I explained that we condemn the crimes by Nazis in the World War II, and regrettably those crimes were committed against*

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<sup>20</sup> This statement caused much controversy. At first, the Iranian media reported that Rouhani declared „*Israel is a wound on the body of the world of Islam that must be destroyed*“. Prime Minister Netanyahu immediately condemned Rouhani, saying that he showed his true face. When it became clear that Rouhani did not say those words, the Prime Minister's office refused to change the condemnation, explaining that the first statement shows how Rouhani truly feels, whether it is true or false (Fisher 2013).

*many groups, many people. Many people were killed, including a group of Jewish people."*

*"And we condemn their crimes in general. We condemn the murder and killing of innocent people always. It makes no difference to us, when that person is innocent and is killed, whether he or she was Jewish or Christian or Muslim. There's just no difference in our eyes. We condemn crimes as such."*

*"But the argument here is that if the Nazis committed a crime, this does not mean that the price paid for it should be done by other people elsewhere. This is no and should not be -- serve as any justification to push out from their homes a group of people because of what Nazis did. Although that crime by the Nazis is definitely condemnable, oppressing people in another part is also condemnable, because people should be allowed to return to their homes and to their lands" (Council on Foreign Relations 2013).*

Although Rouhani did not deny the Holocaust as Ahmadinejad did, he played down the impact of the Holocaust on the Jewish people when saying that *"a group of Jewish people were killed"*. Also, he used this topic to criticize Israel's treatment of Palestinians. Nevertheless, despite the criticism towards Israel, he also declared some positive messages about Jews. In 2013, a few months after he was elected, he wished happy New Year to all Jews, especially to Iranian ones (Rouhani 2013b).



## 4 Israel: State Structure and Ideology of the Leaders

### 4.1 Israel's State Structure and the Role of the Prime Minister

Israel is a typical Western liberal democracy when it comes to the division of state powers into the legislative, executive, and judiciary branches. However, Shmooha calls Israel an ethnic democracy. An ethnic democracy is a state driven by an ideology or a movement of ethnic nationalism. The ethnic group considers the land where it lives in as its exclusive homeland. The ethnic nation shapes the overall image of the state for its benefit. Such a system divides people into members and non-members, regardless of citizenship. The non-members are less-desirable and may be perceived as a potential threat to the ethnic group. Since ethnic democracy values ethnicity more than citizenship and equality of all citizens, it is limited, unlike the Western democracy model which promotes civic equality (Shmooha 2002, 477-478).

Since the focus of this thesis is the Israeli prime ministers, we will quickly look into their competencies. It is important to mention that the President is not part of the executive branch; he is only a symbolic head of the state. His competences are limited to ceremonial functions (The Knesset 2014). Israel, for most of its history, has had a parliamentary system of government<sup>21</sup>. It means that the head of the party which wins most of the votes in the parliamentary election gets a mandate from the

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<sup>21</sup> In 1992, the Basic Law concerning the Executive branch (the Constitution of Israel) was changed to a direct vote of the prime minister in elections. The intention behind this change was to separate the executive and legislative branches, so the prime minister would not have to form a government with small parties which could have various demands. The Knesset would also check the cabinet better. In reality, the change did not work. While the voters chose between two strongest candidates from either Labor or Likud in the prime minister elections, in the parliamentary elections, they could support another smaller party. The power of the small parties increased while the power of the two traditional parties decreased in the Knesset. The prime minister could be dismissed by a simple majority after which parliamentary election would ensue or a qualified majority which would bring a new election of the prime minister. The law was changed back to its original form in 2001 (Arian, Nachmias and Amir 2002, 35-36, The Knesset 2014).

president to form the government<sup>22</sup> (Arian, Nachmias and Amir 2002, 36). The prime ministers, together with the Israeli parliament – the Knesset, are elected for a four-year term. The prime minister is the head of the Israeli government. The cabinet headed by the prime minister decides on every important major decision concerning both domestic and foreign affairs. Therefore, the Israeli prime minister is, politically, the most powerful and most visible person in Israel – *primus inter pares* (Arian, Nachmias and Amir 2002, 35, 41). Three institutions limit the prime minister: the Knesset (the vote of confidence), the powers of the prime minister defined by law, and the shared accountability of the cabinet (Arian, Nachmias and Amir 2002, 36). The tenure of the prime minister is unlimited given that he can construct new government after parliamentary elections. One of the significant powers of the Prime minister is the deciding vote if there is a tie among the cabinet members (Arian, Nachmias and Amir 2002, 41). The whole cabinet rarely discusses sensitive information regarding foreign affairs and security due to fears of information leakage to the press (Arian, Nachmias and Amir 2002, 45). Therefore, unlike in Iran, the Prime Minister as the highest elected official enjoys also most of the power.

## 4.2 State Ideology of Israel

Zionism as an ideology has a special place in the state of Israel. It is de facto the state ideology (Shmooha 2002). On the contrary, Rabkin writes that Zionism forms the official ideology of the state (2016, 184). The birth of modern Zionism can be dated to the second half of the nineteenth century. The rise of anti-Semitism during this time in Europe was a motor to form political Zionism. One of the leading thinkers of Zionism, Theodor Herzl, promoted the idea that Jewish diaspora should reunite as a nation and create their state in Palestine, their ancestral homeland (Jewish Virtual Library 2019a). The term comes from the word Zion which is a hill in Jerusalem but also represents the Land of Israel (Rabkin 2016, 37). Zionism is a form of Jewish nationalism – Zionists believe that

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<sup>22</sup> If that person is unable to form a coalition government, the mandate goes to the party which comes second in the parliamentary elections. Such a situation, for example, happened in 2009 when Kadima with Tzipi Livni as the head of the party won the elections but did not form a government. However, Netanyahu's Likud came second and became the Prime Minister for the second time.



Jews as a religious entity are a nation (Halperin 2015). It had four goals: a shift of religious identity of Jews to a national identity, develop a national language, to move Jews to Palestine, and establish the state there (Rabkin 2016, 45). If we look into today's Israeli society, Zionists have accomplished these goals – Israel is a nation state, they use Hebrew as the national language, and most importantly Israel exists as an independent state.

For Zionists, Judaism is both a national identity and a religion (Beauchamp 2018). The Declaration of the State of Israel promotes Zionist ideas that the Jewish people had the “national and historical right” for the creation of the Jewish State in Palestine (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013b). Zionism became the non-official state ideology – it promoted the development of the new state and protection of the Jewish community (Jewish Virtual Library 2019b). Shmooha argues that the primary condition for ethnic democracy, which according to her Israel falls into this category, is the pre-existence of ethnic nationalism (which Zionism is for Israel). After the creation of the ethnic state, the nation with the help of its ideology would shape the state (Shmooha 2002, 479). Moreover, the goal of the ideology is to make Israel Jewish in demography, culture, language, institutions, identity, and symbols (Shmooha 2002, 485). Zionism shaped Israeli policies; a good example is the Law of Return – any Jew born outside of Israel has the right to immigrate to Israel and get Israeli citizenship (Taylor 1972, 49). Therefore, it would be wrong to assume that Zionist ideology has not had an impact on today's composition of Israel.

To this day, every Israeli prime minister has followed some version of Zionism – Zionism as an ideology has split into different subcategories: left, right, religious and other types. Thus, every Israeli prime minister defends and protects the central tenet of Zionism – the right to the existence of Israel. As a consequence, any move which endangers the existence, Zionists view as a threat to Israel. Suitable examples are the Arab opposition and the wars against Israel after 1948 or Iranian leaders' offensive remarks towards Israel. Thus, Zionism is an integral part of the ideology of each prime minister of Israel.

### 4.3 The Ideology of the Likud Political Party

The Likud party, in full name The Likud-National Liberal Movement, in translation meaning “Unity”, is a right-wing political party which was created in 1973 by Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon. The party formed by merging seven right-wing parties. As the website of Likud describes, the party promotes ideas like social equity, a free market economy, and preservation of the Jewish traditions and culture (2017).

A considerable part of the ideology of Likud comes from the ideas of Revisionist Zionism. Revisionist Zionism is a sub-category of Zionism which was created in the 1920s. During the times of the British Mandate, the revisionist Zionist did not accept limits to Jewish immigration and settlements in Palestine. Instead, they promoted unrestricted settlement even in the East bank of the Jordan River (Jones and Murphy 2001). The two chief ideologues of this movement were Ze’ev Vladimir Jabotinsky and later Menachem Begin, who was the leader of the political party Herut, a predecessor to Likud (Likud 2017).

Jabotinsky believed that the opposition against the creation of Israel by Arabs was imminent and any reconciliation would be impossible. He even opposed the partition of the British mandate into two states. The only deciding force would be Israel’s military might which would make the Arabs accept Israel – a concept he called the “Iron wall” (Shlaim 1996, 280). He opposed Labor (left) Zionism and stressed the importance of national unity – Revisionists were inspired by the early Italian fascism (Halperin 2015). He only accepted the creation of Greater Israel – Eretz Israel. During the British Mandate, Jabotinsky and Begin had a terrorist organization, the National Military Organization (the Irgun) which targeted British forces in Palestine (Shlaim 1996, 280). To sum up, the Revisionist Zionism asserts the need for a strong, uncompromising Israeli nation, which has the right to the whole Jewish historical land and it would defend it with any means necessary.

Even after Begin became Prime Minister in 1977, he still believed in idea that the Jewish people have had the historic right to occupy the Greater Israel which encompasses the West Bank<sup>23</sup> (Shlaim 1996, 281-

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<sup>23</sup> Shlaim describes Begin when he was the Prime Minister as unstable, very emotional, and living in the past. He was deeply affected by the Holocaust and saw all enemies of Israel as new Nazis. Due to this limited perception, he could not evaluate all threats realistically and adequately. Shlaim explains that these traumas and

282). Begin did not recognize Palestinians as a nation; he considered them as a part of Arabs who already had nation-states. When asked if Israel was going to annex the Western bank, Begin answered that “you annex foreign land, not your own country (Shlaim 1996, 283).”

Begin resigned in 1983, and Yitzhak Shamir stepped in as the Prime Minister and remained there with a two-year break<sup>24</sup> until 1992. Ideologically speaking, he was no different from Begin. He strongly opposed any peace settlement with Palestinians as well as with the Jordanian King Hussein, with whom Peres had brokered a peace deal in 1987 (Shlaim 1996, 286-287). Halperin argues that the revisionist idea of using force when needed and the inevitability of the conflict with the Arabs shaped the ideology of today’s Likud (2015). Also, the Palestinian uprisings, terrorist attacks by the PLO, and the refusal to recognize Israel by Arabs made Likud’s leaders even more convinced about their ideology (Walter 2012). Hence, the ideological outlook of Likud had remained consistent despite the change of the leadership – this also applies to Benjamin Netanyahu. The only Likud leader to whom this did not apply was Ariel Sharon – he was the first Likud member to acknowledge Palestinian right for the West Bank.

#### 4.4 The Ideology of the Kadima Political Party

Kadima was a centrist party created in 2005 by the leader of Likud Ariel Sharon, after a split in the party between him and Netanyahu over the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza strip. Moderates from Likud, including the next Prime Minister Olmert and the Minister of Justice Tzipi Livni, joined the party along with some Labor politicians like Shimon Peres who lost the leadership of the party (BBC 2013). Kadima in translation means “Forward.” The minister of Education Meir claimed that Kadima does not have any ideology – that the party is not laden by ideologies of Ze’ev Jablonsky and Berl Katzenelson, the founder of Labor Zionism (Raved 2006). However, the BBC states wrote that Kadima committed to the fusion of the Zionist ideology with the Israeli-Palestinian peace

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perceptions made Begin a true believer of Jabotinsky’s Revisionist Zionist ideas (1996, 282)

<sup>24</sup> In 1984, Likud and Labor formed a National Unity Government where Peres served as the Prime Minister and Shamir as Foreign Minister for the first two years and after they swapped the roles for next two years (Shlaim 1996, 286-287)

settlement (BBC 2013). Kadima was a party of moderation. They believed that Israelis as a nation have a national and historic right to Israel, but to secure the Jewish majority and a Jewish democratic state, they have to give up part of the land to the Palestinians. The party wanted to follow the road map of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to achieve the goal of the two states solution (Jewish Virtual Library 2005). Former Likud members outnumbered former Labor members, but the party remained a centrist. After the inability to form a government in 2009 and unsuccessful elections in 2013 Tzipi Livni stepped down as the head of the party. The party was dissolved in 2015.

#### 4.5 The Personal Background and Political Ideology of Ehud Olmert

Ehud Olmert was born in Nahalat Jabotinsky in Israel in 1945. Nahalat Jabotinsky was a settlement, named after Ze'ev Jabotinsky, where the former fighters from Irgun and members of the right-wing party Herut lived. The Irgun group and Herut were not very popular among the mainstream Israeli population and politicians, due to the past terrorist attacks on the British troops (Abrams 2008, 38). His father was a member of the Knesset and later became the head of the settlements of Herut. Herut's ideology followed the revisionist ideas of Ze'ev Jablonsky. The logo of the party consisted of the Jordan River, and its two banks and the slogan of the party was "*To the banks of the Jordan River*" (Abrams 2008, 39, Peraino 2009). Such ideas influenced young Olmert. Since Olmert grew up in a strong right-wing environment, he was an ardent defender of the right-wing ideas such as Israeli control of the West Bank. He was the leader of the Betar Youth Organization, a youth organization connected to Herut. Mainstream society viewed the organization as ultra-right nationalist due to their opposition to socialism and support for the expansion of the Israeli territory (Abrams 2008, 39-40).

Olmert joined the IDF in 1963 and served in the prestigious Golani Brigade. However, his military service did not last long due to some injuries (Abrams 2008, 46). He studied philosophy, psychology, and law at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. At the university, he joined Herut's student organization. In 1973, he was elected into Knesset for the Free Center party which ran together with Likud, making him the youngest member at the time (Abrams 2008, 58). In 1985, he joined

Likud and remained as MP in the Knesset until 1988. In that year, he became a minister without portfolio for minority issues in Shamir's cabinet. Two years later he became the Minister of Health. In 1993, he won the elections for the mayor of Jerusalem against Labor member Teddy Kollek who ran the city since 1967. Olmert served as the mayor for ten years. During his tenure as the mayor of Jerusalem, Olmert supported the construction of new settlements in the Palestinian parts of the city (Sommers 2008, 38) and opposed the Oslo Accords (Liebler 2016). Together with Netanyahu, they reopened the Hasmonean Tunnel which connected the Western Wall with the Muslim quarter in Jerusalem. The reopening caused violent protests by Palestinians and left dozens dead (Sommers 2008, 39-40). Olmert was also criticized by mismanagement of Eastern Jerusalem where the majority of Palestinians live due to his ideologic bias (Margalit 2001). However, Olmert was praised for developing education, infrastructure and public transportation in the city (Sommers 2008, 38).

In 2001, Sharon as the Prime Minister declared that Palestinians have the right to have their state in the West Bank (Lis 2014). In 2003, Olmert became the Minister of Industry, Trade, and Labor in Ariel Sharon's cabinet, and he also became the deputy Prime Minister. The same year, he called for unilateral withdrawal from the occupied territories, without Sharon's direct approval. He explained his move by saying that if *"we have to choose between Great Israel or a Jewish democratic state ... then my choice is a Jewish democratic country, and it means that we will never be able to keep all of the territories and we have to compromise on the territory"* (Bikel 2006b). However, in the same interview, he stated that Jerusalem was never the capital of anything else other than the Jewish nation (Bikel 2006a). From these two statements, we can see that while Olmert was able to make some compromises towards the Palestinians, he still believed in the Revisionist idea that Jerusalem is solely Jewish, possibly also because he was the mayor of Jerusalem.

In 2005, Sharon and Olmert left Likud to form Kadima – Sharon decided to unilaterally withdraw the Israeli army and relocate the Israeli settlers from the Gaza strip. However, as Peleg and Waxman write, the intention behind the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza was to preserve the Jewish majority in Israel (Peleg and Waxman 2011, 122). A year later, Sharon suffered a massive stroke, and Olmert became the acting Prime Minister. Kadima, under his leadership, won the 2006 parliamentary

elections. He became the twelfth Prime Minister of Israel. Olmert wanted to extend Sharon's plan and intended to withdraw Israeli settlements from the Western Bank. The withdrawal aimed to limit the volume of Palestinians living under Israeli control (Peleg and Waxman 2011, 122). However, Olmert's cabinet never implemented the plan because of the start of the Lebanese war in 2006 (Economic Cooperation Foundation 2006). Sharon's and Olmert's withdrawal plans can be viewed from two points: the first is the intention to start the dialogue and renew the peace process with the Palestinian authority. The second intention was ideological: to preserve the unity of the Israeli nation through demographic majority which again stems from the Revisionist Zionism.

In 2006, Hezbollah killed and abducted IDF soldiers from the northern border with Lebanon. As a response, Israel attacked Lebanon and Hezbollah positions there in the hope of rescuing the kidnapped soldiers and destroying Hezbollah. The operation ended with a stalemate. However, both sides declared victory. Olmert argued that the Israeli military won while the critics blamed him for the poor results, mainly that the terrorist organization was able to fire rockets into Israel's territory on a daily basis. Concerning the Israeli-Iranian relations, this war is considered as the first proxy war between the two countries (Salem 2010, 4). Olmert's popularity fell due to his management of the war, and many people including his cabinet members demanded his resignation (Heller 2007). The war halted the peace process started by Sharon and Olmert and led to the resumption of the construction of the wall between Israel and the West Bank (Salem 2010, 5). Moreover, in 2007, the Winograd committee, an Israeli commission which investigated the Lebanese war, concluded that Olmert and some of the cabinet members were responsible for the poor Israeli results of the war (Urquhart 2007). Despite the criticism, Olmert did not resign.

In 2007, Olmert made a serious error, when he admitted that Israel possesses nuclear weapons – Israel has always maintained a policy of ambiguity over its possession of WMDs (Myre 2006). The same year, the Annapolis peace conference between Israel and Palestinians ended with a joint statement for the renewal of the Road Map for Peace. Olmert stated during the conference, that there is no other solution than two national states (Olmert, 2007). However, the peace process was halted in 2008 due to Olmert's resignation. The Iranian Supreme Leader called for the boycotting of the peace conference, saying that the results would only benefit the Zionist regime (BBC 2007).

A year later, Hamas launched rockets from Gaza into the Israeli territory. Olmert warned Hamas that if it did not stop, Israel would retaliate. As the attacks continued, the IDF started Operation Cast Lead in Gaza which first consisted of airstrikes and a naval blockade and later a ground offensive in 2009. Unlike the Lebanese War in 2006, Operation Cast Lead did not spark criticism towards Olmert as the majority of Israelis supported the operation (The Jerusalem Post 2008). Regarding the Israeli-Iran relations, Israel accused Iran of supporting Hamas with weapons. There were three cases when Israeli forces destroyed Sudanese vessels loaded with Iranian arms intended for Hamas (Haaretz 2009). The Iranian support towards Hamas can be regarded as yet another proxy war between Israel and Iran, and it influenced the perception of the threat of Israel. In 2008, Olmert stepped down due to allegations of corruption. However, he remained in the position of Prime Minister until the parliamentary elections in 2009. In 2012, respectively in 2014 and 2015, he was found guilty of breach of trust, bribery, and fraud and in the end was sentenced to a twenty-seven month prison term (CNN 2018).

The young Olmert's ideology was much more radical than Olmert's ideology as Prime Minister. For example, Olmert was one of the few who voted against the peace agreement with Sadat (Bikel 2006b). The fact that he left Kadima to follow Sharon means that he became more moderate at least in the question of the Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement. One of the explanations, why his ideology changed to a more centrist, is the influence of his wife and friends, who were more left-oriented (Sommers 2008, 47). In the Frontline documentary, he said: *"Yes, I have changed my opinions about some fundamental issues, and I am proud of it"* (Bikel 2006b).

#### 4.6 Personal Background and Political Ideology of Benjamin Netanyahu

Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu was born in 1949 in Tel Aviv (the first Prime Minister born in independent Israel) and spent his childhood in the United States. Netanyahu's father was a historian, a convinced Zionist, and believed in the very pessimistic and fatalistic perception that the world is fundamentally hostile to all Jews (Kirk 2016). Netanyahu's worldview thus encompassed the belief that the world will not care

about the security of the Jewish nation – thus it was up to him to defend Israel. After the 1967 war, Netanyahu joined the IDF and later became part of the special forces unit Sayeret Matkal (Kirk 2016). After completing his military service, he went back to the US to study architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he received a master's degree in 1976.

His political career was very rich. In the 1980s he started as the Spokesman of the Israeli embassy in Washington DC. In 1984, he became the Israeli Ambassador to the UN. Four years later, Netanyahu returned to Israel where he was elected to the Knesset for Likud. Another four years later he became the head of the party. In 1993, Yitzhak Rabin, the Prime Minister and the leader of the Labor party, and signed the Oslo Accords with the Palestine Liberation Organization. Netanyahu and Likud strongly opposed the peace settlement and built a right-wing coalition of religious and conservative parties against it, which organized huge public protests. At these protests, Netanyahu used very strong language against Rabin. In 1995, after leaving a pro-agreement rally, Rabin was assassinated by an ultra-rightwing fanatic who opposed the peace settlement. Many, including Rabin's wife, blamed Netanyahu for the assassination because of his hate speech against Rabin (Kirk 2016).

After Rabin's death, Shimon Peres took over the Labor party, and it seemed that Likud would lose in the coming elections in 1996. However, due to a series of terrorist attacks perpetrated by Hamas, Likud's popularity rose up as it warned against terrorism and the impossibility of dealing with the Palestinians. Likud won the elections, and Netanyahu became the youngest Prime Minister of Israel at the age of forty-six. He also changed his position towards the Oslo Accords, although he was still reluctant towards implementing the peace process. Netanyahu signed the Hebron Agreement and the Wye River Memorandum which concerned the Israeli withdrawal from certain parts of Palestine. Lochery argues that Netanyahu did so from pragmatic reasons: first of all, he needed to attract centrist voters who viewed the peace process as a good thing; secondly, his power ambitions surpassed his ideological convictions (1999). Nevertheless, his cabinet was not very active in the implementation of the agreements.

In 1999, he lost the prime ministerial elections to Ehud Barak. After Sharon became the Prime Minister, Netanyahu became the Foreign Minister for a few months in 2002/2003. Later, he served as the Minister of Finance but resigned in 2005 when Sharon announced the plan for the



withdrawal from the Gaza strip. As the Finance Minister, he passed major economic reforms and was praised for bringing Israel back from an economic recession (Scott 2015). Sharon left Likud and formed Kadima and Netanyahu became the leader of Likud again as well as the leader of the opposition in the Knesset. In 2009, he became the Prime Minister for the second time and since then until now (2019) he has managed to remain in this position. During his second tenure, Netanyahu declared that he would support the peace process if the Palestinians recognized Israel as the Jewish state, the settlements in the Western Bank would remain and insisted that Jerusalem remains the capital of Israel (Kershner 2009). With conditions like these, Netanyahu purposely brought the negotiations to a standstill. In the matter of Israeli-Iranian relations, Netanyahu secretly flew to Moscow to persuade President Putin to stop the sale of the Russian S-300 anti-aircraft missile system (McCarthy and Harding 2009). In 2010, Russia halted sales of weapons as a move to warm relations with the US and Israel (Roth 2016).<sup>25</sup> Thus, Netanyahu's trip to Russia was partly successful.

It is also important to mention Netanyahu's relationship with US President Barak Obama. The ideologies of Netanyahu and Obama are very different, while Obama is a liberal in foreign policy, Netanyahu is more of a realist. They did not agree on many things, including the stance towards Palestinians, Israeli construction of settlements in the Western Bank, or dealing with Iran<sup>26</sup>. In 2009, during a speech in Cairo, Obama criticized Israeli settlement expansion which enraged Netanyahu. Because of many disagreements between Netanyahu and Obama (especially about a possible strike against Iranian nuclear facilities), the Israeli Prime Minister decided that he would turn to the right-wing in the US, which supported him. In the 2012 US presidential elections, due to the disagreements with the Obama administration Netanyahu directly supported Mitt Romney, the Republican candidate for President. It was for the first time that a foreign leader appeared in the political campaign for a presidential candidate – more so, Netanyahu campaigned against the sitting President (Kirk 2016).

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<sup>25</sup> However, in 2015, Russia sold the upgraded S-300 version to Iran, after the JCPOA was signed (Roth 2016).

<sup>26</sup> Marvin Kalb, an American journalist, in the Frontline documentary about Netanyahu, said that Netanyahu was worried about Obama's election and the relationship of the US to Israel since Obama's middle name is Hussein and his father is a Muslim (Kirk 2016).

Concerning the proxy conflict between Iran and Israel, in 2011, the Israeli navy special forces captured a ship containing weapons made in Iran. According to the Prime Minister, Hamas was supposed to receive the shipment (BBC 2011). In 2012, a suicide bomber attacked a bus with Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria, killing five Israelis and the driver. Right after the attack, Netanyahu accused Hezbollah and Iran of perpetrating the attack (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012b) and two years later Bulgarian investigators came to the same conclusion (Bilefsky and Kantchev 2014), although they later claimed that the evidence was inconclusive. Iran denied any involvement in both cases. Nevertheless, the case shows that Netanyahu believed that the threat from Iran comes not only from its nuclear program, but also from involvement through its proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas.

In 2013, Netanyahu and Likud won the parliamentary elections, and he became Prime Minister for the third time. In 2014, Hamas abducted and murdered three young Israelis. This incident led to the launch of Operation Protective Edge in Gaza, of which the objective was to retaliate against Hamas which had attacked Israel with rockets from Gaza. In his speech at the UNGA, Netanyahu compared Hamas to the Islamic State terrorist organization and that the operation is the same as the US bombing of ISIS (Agencies at the United Nations 2014). Iran helped Hamas with transferring technology to build Iranian modelled rockets (Perry 2014).

At the end of 2014, Netanyahu fired the Minister of Justice Tzipi Livni (the leader of liberal Hatnuah political party)<sup>27</sup> and the Minister of Finance Yair Lapid (the head of centrist Yesh Atid party). Livni, who started in Likud, said that she shares the same ideology as Jabotinsky and Begin, but the policies proposed by the ultra-Orthodox party Jewish Home which was part of the coalition were unacceptable for her (Zion 2014). The Prime Minister accused the two politicians of not supporting the government. The firing led to a dissolution of the government and new parliamentary elections in 2015 which Netanyahu's Likud won and became the Prime Minister for the fourth time.

Certainly, Netanyahu's upbringing by his right-wing father left much influence over his ideology. Jabotinsky's ideology had a profound impact on Netanyahu (Rabkin 2016, 63). We can see the weight of Jabotinsky's ideology on Netanyahu through his disagreement with the Oslo Accords,

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<sup>27</sup> Livni left Kadima and formed her own party with other defectors from Kadima in 2012.

and the withdrawal from the Gaza strip. In the documentary about Netanyahu, it is mentioned that Netanyahu wants to be like Winston Churchill, who saves Israel from Iran. Eyal Arad, a former advisor, said that Netanyahu has a mesianic notion of himself, as a person who saves the Jewish people from Iran, like Churchill saved Europe from the Nazis (Kirk 2016). Many columnists also write about Netanyahu's Churchill complex. Ari Shavit argues that Netanyahu sees himself as the savior of the world against Iran (2015). Jonathan Freedland writes that the more Netanyahu's warnings about Iran's threat are rejected, the more he looks like Churchill (2015). Therefore, Netanyahu's ideology and personality is greatly influenced by the notion that he is the modern Churchill.

Leslie writes that Netanyahu believes that "*the Jewish people live amidst the hostile that will never fully accept their presence in it.*" Moreover, for Netanyahu, the Holocaust is a permanent state of being – he uses it to shape a reality according to his needs (Leslie 2017, 78). Netanyahu thus created Israeli foreign policy based on the constant panic of Israel being destroyed – mostly by Iran. Many times, Netanyahu altered historical facts to support his worldview. For example, in 2015, he stated that Hitler wanted only to expel Jews from Germany, but it was the Mufti of Jerusalem who suggested to Hitler to exterminate the Jewish population (Rudoren 2015). Because of such lies, Leslie argues that Netanyahu belongs to populists like Donald Trump or Marine Le Pen, both of whom altered facts to construct their own reality (2017).



## 5 Case Study: Iranian Nuclear Program

### 5.1 Israeli Nuclear Program:

Before writing about the Iranian nuclear program, it is important to first mention the Israeli nuclear program and its history. Currently, Israel is the only country in the Middle East which owns nuclear weapons. The Israeli nuclear program started in the 1950s. Initially, France helped Israel with the development of the program – it aided with the construction of the first nuclear reactors. Such reactors were stationed in an underground facility in the city of Dimona (Martinů 2006, 27). However, the United States was not pleased with the Israeli program and demanded inspections<sup>28</sup>. France also provided Israel with data from its nuclear weapons tests. The first Israeli nuclear test detonation happened in 1966 in the Negev desert. Due to political reasons, after the Six-Day War in 1967, France stopped aiding Israel.

Israel thus needed to find new sources of uranium. South Africa not only provided Israel with the material but the two countries also collaborated together – for example in 1979 the two countries conducted a nuclear test in the South Atlantic Ocean (Martinů 2006, 31). During the Yom-Kippur War, the Israeli cabinet under Prime Minister Golda Meir contemplated the use of nuclear weapons in case of emergency (Martinů 2006, 30). However, due to a swift Israeli counter-attack against the Arab states, they did not use them. In 1986, a former technician from Dimona disclosed the program for a British newspaper outlet, describing the details of the Israeli nuclear program, confirming that Israel, in fact, owns nuclear weapons. Currently, Israel has the whole nuclear triad – ballistic missiles, strategic bombers, and submarines armed with nuclear missiles (Martinů 2006, 32-33).

For its entire history, Israel has maintained an ambiguous nuclear posture. At the beginning, it was due to international and US reactions, internal opposition<sup>29</sup>, and the Arab response (Evron 2008, 121). Israel has not signed the NPT (Martinů 2006, 30). There is still not much

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<sup>28</sup> Although the US inspectors came to Dimona to inspect the site, they only accessed the upper parts of the complex where they saw a replica built by the Israelis. The inspectors never saw the underground facility (Martinů 2006, 28)

<sup>29</sup> For example, Ariel Sharon and Yitzhak Rabin were against acquiring nuclear weapons (Martinů 2006).

information about Israeli nuclear weapons. As Evron writes, currently the ambiguous posture is a diplomatic fiction – Israel does not officially admit the existence of nuclear weapons (2008, 122). Evron also argues that Israel's ownership of nuclear weapons helped to establish peace between Israel and some Arab countries (2008, 123). Initially, the Israeli nuclear program and this policy were aimed at the Arab states, however, laterly the deterrence and the policy is aimed towards Iran and the Iranian nuclear program.

In 1981, the Minister of Defense Ariel Sharon claimed that the third element of the Israeli defense policy is preventing Israel's enemies from acquiring nuclear weapons: *"Israel cannot afford the introduction of the nuclear weapon. For us, it is not a question of balance of terror but a question of survival. We shall, therefore, have to prevent such a threat at its inception"* (Global Security 2005). As Roshandel writes, Israel and Iran need each other. Iran's aggression gives Israel a rationale for keeping its nuclear warheads (2011, 89).

On the contrary, Israeli nuclear capability is only a partial reason why Iran wants to acquire nuclear weapons. The other being Iranian hegemonic tendencies and US intentions in the region (Evron 2008, 124). Therefore, Israel, as the only country in the region which has nuclear capabilities, is in a strange position. On the one hand, Israel pressures other countries in the region against proliferation, mostly for its security reasons, but on the other hand the country has not signed the NPT, thus does not let other countries inspect its nuclear program, and does not acknowledge the existence of its nuclear weapons.

### 5.2 The Beginning of the Iranian Nuclear Program

The Iranian nuclear program started during the Shah's era. With the help of German company Siemens, they planned to construct a nuclear power plant in Bushehr. Iran belongs to one of the countries which created the NPT in 1968. Therefore, Iran is committed to only use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and refrains from the production of nuclear weapons (Pikaev 2008, 99). However, the Iranian revolution put a stop to the program. The new Islamic Republic resurrected the program in 1985 with a centrifuge program which is needed to enrich uranium (Fitzpatrick 2008, 92). The incentive to restart the program was the war with Iraq (Pikaev 2008, 99). Iraq attacked Iran with chemical weapons

and thus owning a nuclear weapon would be a significant deterrence against the enemy.

Tehran's official position towards proliferation is that the country does not want to acquire nuclear weapons and that the Iranian nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes. The Supreme Leader Khamenei even declared a fatwa against development, production, stockpiling, and the use of such weapons (Fitzpatrick 2008, 92). In the 1990s, Iran decided to finish the power plant in Bushehr. Western companies were not interested in participating in the construction due to possible sanctions against them. However, Russia aided with building the plant. Despite pressure from the USA, Russia continued with the support, although Moscow limited the delivery of some technologies. The US worried that Iran could use used uranium fuel to produce nuclear weapons. Thus it pressed Russia to demand the return of such fuel back to Russia (Pikaev 2008, 101). During the 1990s, there was almost no information about the Iranian nuclear program, and it was not completely clear whether Iran worked on acquiring nuclear weapons.

Iranian officials argued that Iran needs to be self-sufficient in the production of nuclear fuel. They argued with Iran's mistrust towards other countries. However, Iran does not have enough domestic resources to be self-sufficient. It would have to import uranium ore regardless. Besides, the fuel needed for the Iranian nuclear plant in Bushehr, which Russia helped build, needs a specific Russian-manufactured fuel, which Iran does not have the blueprints for and Russia was not willing to provide them (Fitzpatrick 2008, 95). Thus, naturally, many countries were suspicious of Iran's program and Iran mastered its excuses concerning it.

The details of the Iranian issue became clearer in 2002 when a group of Iranian exiles brought forward evidence about the underground enrichment plant in Natanz and a heavy-water research reactor in Arak which may have been used to produce plutonium needed for the construction of a nuclear weapon (Fitzpatrick 2008, 93). However, it was not Russia who supplied the centrifuges, but most likely Iran got them through the black market, more concretely through A.Q. Khan, the "father" of the Pakistani nuclear program (Pikaev 2008, 101). Although Iran had signed the NPT protocol, it did not sign a supplementary agreement to the NPT which demands signatories to notify the IAEA in case of a construction of a new nuclear facility. Iran, during Khatami's rule, signed the agreement in 2003, but during the first Ahmadinejad's

term, Iran dropped out from it (Fitzpatrick 2008, 93). The reason why Iran signed the agreement most likely was the US invasion into neighboring Iraq in 2003.

After the IAEA found out about the Natanz facility, Iranian officials lied to the agency and changed the account whenever new information came to light. Fitzpatrick lists two examples: Iran lied about the nature of the uranium – first, they claimed it was from their domestic stocks, later when the IAEA refuted the claim, Iranians claimed that they had acquired it from the black market. The second instance happened at the Kalaye Electric Company, where the employees could not find keys from a laboratory room when the IAEA inspectors visited the site. The IAEA suspected that Iran was conducting enrichment of uranium there. The next time the IAEA personnel visited the site, the laboratory was redone and repainted. However, the inspectors detected traces of contamination in the room (Fitzpatrick 2008, 94). It was due to such irregularities that the international community suspected Iran of clandestine nuclear research. In the third chapter, the notion of *taqiye*h was mentioned – not telling the truth for its own benefit. Therefore, two examples can be understood through this term – Iranian officials concealed the truth before the IAEA.

Concerning the NPT, Iran has not met fourteen obligations, such as not reporting the import of nuclear material. The IAEA wanted to report Iran to the UNSC for breaking safeguard breaches. However, Iran suspended the program, so the IAEA did not proceed. In 2007, the US National Intelligence Estimate concluded that Iran halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003 (National Intelligence Estimate 2007). However, some sources confirmed that Iran continued in the program, although without the knowledge on what level the nuclear weapons program was. It is not clear who controls the Iranian nuclear program. The military, respectively the Iranian Guards, have been involved in different stages of the program – mining, uranium enrichment, and centrifuge construction. In 2004, a defector from Iran provided data about weaponization studies. The US, British, French, and German intelligence agencies confirmed that the data is accurate (Fitzpatrick 2008, 96). The Supreme Leader has an ultimate say about the nuclear program, however the decision-making process goes through the Supreme National Security Council, to which the Supreme Leader and the President appoint its members (Milani 2009). Therefore, the President can also influence the decisions about the nuclear program.



### 5.3 Iran's Nuclear Program during Ahmadinejad's Presidency

In 2004, Iran signed the Paris agreement together with Germany, United Kingdom, and France (the EU-3), in which Iran committed to “*provide clear and long-term guarantees of the peaceful nature of its nuclear program*” (Pikaev 2008, 102). In exchange for Iranian “good behavior”, the three countries would resume economic contacts. Rouhani, as the chief Iranian nuclear negotiator claimed that there were two groups in Iran: those who wanted a diplomatic solution and those who wanted to resist the West (Kerr 2019, 8). In 2005, Iran in exchange of tight international control of its nuclear program wanted provisions for the nuclear program as well as the lifting of some sanctions and access to the EU market (Pikaev 2008, 104). The EU did not accept the proposal in fear that the newly elected President Ahmadinejad would not abide by the deal. With the election of Ahmadinejad into office, Iran renewed the program, canceled the EU-3 talks, and the IAEA notified the Security Council in 2005 (Fitzpatrick 2008, 94, 96, Pikaev 2008, 105). Nevertheless, according to a US intelligence analysis, Iran was far behind in nuclear research, and it would take the country at least ten years to build the weapon (Parsi 2007, 266). The group of those who wanted to resist the West won, and for the next eight years President Ahmadinejad continued with the program.

In May 2006, Prime Minister Olmert declared at the Knesset the following:

*“The threat from Iran places a heavy shadow on the entire region and threatens the peace in the world. The attempt by the tyrant, dark and terrorist-supporting regime to achieve nuclear armament is the most dangerous development in the world today and the international community has to do everything in its power to stop it”* (AP Archive, 2006a).

The same month, Olmert had a speech before the US Congress, where he also spoke about the Iranian nuclear program. He said that Iran is on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons. He also directly charged at Ahmadinejad:

*"Their President believes it is his religious duty and his destiny to lead his country in a violent conflict against the infidels. With pride he denies the Jewish Holocaust and speaks brazenly, calling to wipe Israel off the map. For us, this is an existential threat. A threat to which we cannot consent. But it is not Israel's threat alone. It is a threat to all those committed to stability in the Middle East and the well-being of the world at large" (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006).*

Two weeks later Israel attacked Hezbollah in Lebanon. Cook argues that the intention behind the attack was to decimate Hezbollah so it would not have the possibility to retaliate against Israel if the US and Israel launched an airstrike against Iran (Cook 2008, 53). Thus, Olmert contemplated the airstrike, but only with the help of the US.

Netanyahu had an even more apocalyptic conception of Iran. At the United Jewish Communities General Assembly, he declared: *"It's 1938 and Iran is Germany. And Iran is racing to arm itself with atomic bombs."* Furthermore, he said that Ahmadinejad was preparing the next Holocaust on Israel (Hirschberg 2006). The two politicians coincided on the idea that Iran represents a threat to Israel. Likewise, Ahmadinejad's anti-Semitic rhetoric, although it was nothing new from Iran, in combination with the nuclear program, intensified the perception of the threat by Israel.

Later at the end of July, the UNSC adopted Resolution 1696 which demanded Iran cease all uranium enrichment activity and plutonium reprocessing by 31 August (Pikaev 2008, 110). All members of the UNSC adopted the resolution with only one abstention by Qatar. The Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations, Javad Zarif, who is one of the closest politicians to Rouhani and serves as the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Rouhani's cabinet, accused Israel of leading the global campaign against the Iranian nuclear program, which according to him, is for peaceful purposes. Moreover, he criticized Israel for having nuclear weapons, while the Jewish state "cries wolf" and prevents other states from developing nuclear energy (United Nations 2006). Iran did not abide by the resolution and by doing so it contravened international law (all resolutions of the UNSC are binding). The fact that the resolution passed almost completely unanimously meant that the international community was serious about the Iranian nuclear program.

Since the 1990s, Israeli officials have declared that Iran was close to getting a nuclear weapon (Cook 2008, 41). In the second chapter, it was mentioned that Prime Minister Rabin and Peres started a campaign against Iran – one of the reasons why Iran posed a threat was its attempt to become nuclearized (Cook 2008, 42). For example, Peres claimed that Iran would produce the weapon by 1999 (Parsi 2007, 163). Prime Minister Sharon had the same perception about Iran. In 2008, Prime Minister Olmert said:

*“The main point of the estimate was that there is no evidence that the Iranians restarted their [covert] military program since it was closed in 2003... Based on the information we have, the military program continues and has never been stopped. If this program continues, at some point they will be in possession of a nuclear weapon”* (Newsweek Staff 2008).

Olmert thus continued in the rhetoric which Peres started, warning that Iran is close to getting nuclear weapons. However, this apocalyptic news has not been fulfilled even after the signing of the JCPOA.

In November, Olmert had another speech concerning Iran:

*“If Iran achieves the ability to produce nuclear weapons, as we know it is seeking to do, we will enter a new era of instability unlike any the world has ever seen... We will not tolerate those who challenge Israel's right to exist while actively seeking to develop the catastrophic weapons to fulfill their goals... No longer can the international community afford to hesitate, contemplate or waver in its dealing with this defiant state. No longer can we allow Iran to defer the demands of the international community without consequence”* (AP Archive, 2006b).

A month later, Resolution 1737 imposed limited sanctions on Iran concerning the import of nuclear technologies to Iran (Pikaev 2008, 111). After the negotiations failed, the P5+1 group was formed. The group tried to negotiate with Iran, but there was no advance in the talks.

In 2007, Israeli aircrafts bombed a nuclear compound in Syria. A similar mission happened in 1981 when Israeli intelligence obtained information about Saddam Hussein's nuclear complex. The Israeli Air Force under Operation Opera bombed the Osirak nuclear facility in Iraq, destroying the Iraqi nuclear program and setting the research back by years (Martinů 2006, 36). According to an Iranian general who defected in 2006, North Korea and Iran aided Syrians with the construction of the Al Kibar nuclear reactor. The Israeli intelligence gathered substantial evidence proving that Syria was, in fact, building a reactor there (Follath and Stark 2009). Thus Olmert ordered the strike under the codename Operation Orchard in September. Later, the IAEA confirmed that there were traces of uranium near the facility<sup>30</sup>. The Israeli strike had two implications: Israel felt threatened by yet another nuclear program in its vicinity, and the airstrike on Syria could have been a warning for Iran that it could be next. There were also discussions that Sharon's and later Olmert's cabinet planned an airstrike against the Iranian program (Cook 2008, 49, Roshandel, 2011, 86, Parsi 2007, 236).

Olmert however, never confirmed that Israel would strike Iran:

*"I don't want to go into this issue every time I'm asked, 'Do you have plans?' The United States is the leader of the international effort to stop the Iranians from becoming nuclear. The European countries, the Russians, the Chinese, the Japanese—all the most powerful nations of the world are joined together in an effort to stop the nuclearization of Iran. I hope they will be successful"* (Newsweek Staff 2008).

In a different interview, he added: *"One senses a megalomania and loss of proportion in the things said here about Iran. We are a country that has lost a sense of scale"* (Aharanot 2009, 204). Despite Olmert's claims, in 2008 the Israeli Air Force conducted an exercise over the Mediterranean Sea. The exercise was a simulation of a strike against Iran (Philips 2010). The following year, the Iranian army and the Revolutionary Guards launched an air defense exercise to prepare for the potential airstrike (Roshandel, Iran, Israel, and the United States 2011, 85). Although Olmert may had thought of the air strike, he left it as the last solution and

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<sup>30</sup> Bashar al-Assad claimed that Israel planted the uranium footprint (Follath and Stark 2009).

again he stressed that it is the responsibility of the international community to resolve the Iranian program.

In 2007, Ahmadinejad declared that it is the sovereign right of nations to construct nuclear weapons (Roshandel 2011, 97). However, in his speech at the United Nations, the president stated that the Iranian nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes (Kelemen 2007). Ahmadinejad repeated similar statements in the following years. Nevertheless, the system of centrifuges Iran had accumulated suggested that the intention goes further than just a civilian nuclear program since the same centrifuges can be used for military purposes (Farwell and Rohozinski 2011, 25, 33). Later, concerning the 2006 war with Hezbollah, the president declared that Israel must be destroyed: "*Israel is an illegitimate regime, there is no legal basis for its existence*" (Yoong 2006). Throughout his presidency, Ahmadinejad made many such remarks.

In 2008, President Ahmadinejad announced that Iran had increased the number of centrifuges in the Natanz facility to nine thousand (Fitzpatrick 2008, 93). When a reporter asked Olmert what he thought about the new centrifuges, he answered: "*We have to listen to him, but that doesn't mean that we have to believe everything he says*" (Newsweek Staff 2008). Because of such developments, Israel and the US developed a very aggressive computer virus named Stuxnet of which the aim was to target and disable the Iranian centrifuge systems. According to the US and Israeli intelligence services, the operation codenamed Olympic Games was partly successful. It damaged many computers and up to twenty-three percent of centrifuges in Natanz (Bergman 2018, Farwell and Rohozinski 2011, 29). In 2012, an US official confirmed that the virus was a joint Israeli-American project, of which the aim was to make Iranian engineers believe that they were unable to run an enrichment facility (Nakashima and Warrick 2012). The success of Stuxnet was proof that Israel and the US do not have to bomb the nuclear facilities but that they can use other means to fight against the Iranian threat.

The Security Council passed the Resolution 1803 which called for Iran to cease all uranium enrichment and enrichment-related research (United Nations Security Council 2008). The resolution was passed unanimously showing the gravity of the situation. The resolution widened sanctions on various Iranian subjects and made it possible for states to impose further sanctions. In December, at the press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Prime Minister Olmert declared:

*"We are working together with other countries including your country to create a comprehensive and concerted effort by all the major international forces to stop the Iranians from having a nuclear and non-conventional capacity" (AP Archive, 2008).*

That was one of the of last Olmert's declarations as Prime Minister concerning the Iranian nuclear threat.

In 2009, both President Ahmadinejad and Prime Minister Netanyahu gave speeches at the United Nations. Ahmadinejad implied that Israel has power over many countries: *"It is no longer acceptable that a small minority would dominate the politics, economy and culture of major parts of the world by its complicated networks."* Days before, he again doubted the existence of the Holocaust: *"It is a lie based on an unprovable and mythical claim."* He added: *"This [Israeli] regime has no future. Its life has come to an end"* (Hafezi and Sedarat 2009). Netanyahu criticized Ahmadinejad's speech and previous statements about the Holocaust being a lie. Regarding the nuclear program, Netanyahu stated:

*"But if the most primitive fanaticism can acquire the most deadly weapons, the march of history could be reversed for a time... That is why the greatest threat facing the world today is the marriage between religious fanaticism and the weapons of mass destruction... Above all, will the international community stop the terrorist regime of Iran from developing atomic weapons, thereby endangering the peace of the entire world?" (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2009)*

In the same year, Israeli, the US, and French intelligence agencies uncovered a secret enrichment facility near the city of Qom. The US condemned Iran and put more sanctions against it (Bergman 2018). In the years 2009 and 2010, the P5+1 offered various deals to Iran, but in the end, Iran refused all of them. Thus, the UNSC passed another resolution. Resolution 1929 imposed new economic sanctions, which meant to cripple the Iranian economy even more. In an interview for the ABC news network, Ahmadinejad stated that the sanctions are ineffective and considered them as a violation of international law (Date

2010). In 2010, Iran declared that it had enriched uranium to twenty percent purity, which was a step towards enriching it to ninety percent – the purity needed to construct a nuclear weapon (Katzman 2019a, 9). Moreover, the IAEA reported that Iran has the potential to construct a nuclear weapon, further uranium enrichment, and missile warheads (Roshandel 2011, 84).

Israel employed some radical tactics in dealing with the Iranian nuclear program. Mossad was behind a couple of assassinations of Iranian nuclear researchers and engineers. Mossad planned to halt the program for as long as possible. Mossad chose fifteen Iranian individuals for assassination. In 2010, there were three attempts to kill Iranian scientists, two of them were successful. The assassinations brought a secondary effect – Iranian intelligence services believed that Mossad had infiltrated them. Therefore, they had to check all equipment for the program they got on the black market, which halted the progress of the program (Bergman 2018). In the following year, two more scientists were assassinated. The killing also caused fear among some of the Iranian scientists and some of them requested a transfer from the nuclear program to different research (Bergman 2018). However, Netanyahu was convinced that it was not enough and Israel must be tougher.

Netanyahu sincerely believed that Iran would use nuclear weapons against Israel (Kirk 2016). Ehud Barak, the former Prime Minister, and the Defence Minister of the second Netanyahu government shared Netanyahu's conviction that Iran is close to building a weapon. In 2012, Netanyahu and Barak ordered the Israeli military to plan a strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. Israel did not communicate the plan with the Obama administration which was worried about the implications of such a strike. However, Israel was not ready to attack Iran by itself – the Israeli military was not convinced about it being successful. Therefore, in the summer of 2012 Netanyahu asked Obama if the US would back up such a strike and would protect Israel in case of a possible retaliation by Iran and its proxies. Obama declined (Zanotti, et al. 2012, Kirk 2016). Interestingly, the head of Mossad, Meir Dagan, thought that the strike was a bad idea too. According to him, the only reason why Netanyahu and Barak did it was to exploit the situation which would bring them support in the next elections. He believed that the strike was not in the national interest of Israel (Bergman 2018). Obama's pursuit of a diplomatic solution did not coincide with Netanyahu's conviction that

Iran responds only to force and widened the already undermined relations between them.

A few months before the 2012 US presidential elections, Netanyahu started a campaign urging Obama to strike against Iran (Kirk 2006). In the speech at the UN, the Israeli Prime Minister declared that a “red line” must be placed before Iran and its nuclear weapons program: *“The red line must be drawn on Iran’s nuclear enrichment program because these enrichment facilities are the only nuclear installations that we can definitely see and credibly target”* (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012a). Obama did yield to Netanyahu’s pressure. It was one of the reasons why Netanyahu stepped in to support the Republican presidential nominee, Mitt Romney – to have an American president who would support Israel. Netanyahu’s plan did not work. Sixty-nine percent of Jewish voters in America voted for Obama (Kirk 2016). After Obama won re-election, Netanyahu decided that Israel would go on with the struggle against Iran alone.

Responding to the “red line” and possible Israeli airstrikes, Ahmadinejad, in an interview for CBS News, declared that Iran had never threatened the Zionist regime. When asked to explain the rhetoric against Israel, the Iranian president said that Iran only suggested that Israel must stop killing Palestinians (CBS News 2012). On the other side, he criticized Netanyahu for drawing the red line and threatening to attack Iran.<sup>31</sup>

When Iran wanted to buy the upgraded anti-aircraft S-300 systems from Russia in 2010, the intention was probably to defend itself from a potential Israeli airstrike. Israel threatens the regime security of Iran (Roshandel 2011, 89); it is the biggest concern of the Iranian leaders vis-à-vis the relation to Israel. Israel was ready to strike Iran in 2010 and 2012. However, as Follath and Stark point out, a strike against Iran would not be a single mission only as with the strikes against the nuclear facilities in Iraq and Syria (2009). The Iranian nuclear program is spread out throughout the whole country, and many of the laboratories are buried underground (Roshandel 2011, 91-92). An airstrike would do

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<sup>31</sup> In many interviews with Ahmadinejad, journalists asked the president to explain his aggressive rhetoric against Israel. Ahmadinejad always answered very vaguely and elusively



little damage to such facilities<sup>32</sup>. Therefore, Israel, with or without the help of the US<sup>33</sup>, would have to attack multiple targets and the success of the mission would depend on many factors (Follath and Stark 2009). Not to mention the international reaction the Israeli strike would cause. Also, the strike could make Iranians more convinced for the need for nuclear weapons.

Moreover, Roshandel writes that he does not understand the intention of Israel to destroy the Iranian nuclear program, because Israel would lose the immediate threat and a strong enemy which would hurt the Israeli political legitimacy (Roshandel 2011, 89). Nevertheless, the possibility of an Israeli (and US) airstrike against the Iranian nuclear facilities made Iran worry and it felt threatened. Thus, it tried to limit the possibility of war with Israel and deter Israel from such a strike (Roshandel 2011, 83). After Shimon Peres' death, it was revealed that during an interview for *The Jerusalem Post* in 2014, he declared that he was the one who stopped Netanyahu from the airstrike in 2012 (Linde 2016). However, he stated that the information could be made public after he is dead.

Between 2012 and 2013, the Obama administration and Iranian diplomats conducted secret diplomatic talks about the future of the Iranian nuclear program in Oman. Bergman writes that Obama initiated the talks in fear that Israel would attack Iran (2018). The Israeli intelligence found out about these talks and Netanyahu was furious. However, he could no longer strike Iran as it would damage the relations with the US significantly. During a meeting with the State Secretary John Kerry, Netanyahu told him it was a betrayal. Shortly after the meeting, Netanyahu invited Obama's former advisor, Dennis Ross, to his residence. Ross said that Netanyahu seemed very alarmed. Netanyahu thought that Iran only responded to the threat of force and dealing with Iran was a sign of weakness (Kirk 2006). By dealing with Iranians, Obama achieved two things: he showed to Netanyahu, that diplomacy

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<sup>32</sup> Roshandel mentions that if the US attacked Iran, it could use nuclear earth penetrators against, underground facilities, however, it would be an extremely dangerous move since the penetrators are small-scale nuclear weapons themselves (Roshandel 2011, 92).

<sup>33</sup> Among the thousands of documents published by Wikileaks, was a US diplomatic cable which stated that the Saudi King Abdullah urged the US to strike Iran to stop the nuclear program (Wikileaks 2008). Therefore, Israel was not the only country which wanted a more robust US position against Iran.

has priority, and he made sure that Israel did not attack Iran because he believed Netanyahu would not risk undermining the US position further.

#### 5.4 Iranian Nuclear Program during Rouhani's Presidency until the Signing of the JCPOA

After Rouhani became president in 2013, there was a change in Iran's stance towards dealing with the West. In the same year in July, Iran and the P5+1 signed the Joint Plan of Action in which the countries agreed on a partial suspension of the nuclear program and a reduction of some of the sanctions imposed on Iran. The agreement later led to a more complex solution concerning the nuclear program – the JCPOA. In September, at the United Nations, a Rouhani address included indirect criticism towards Israel. He denounced the assassinations of nuclear scientists: *"Here, I should also say a word about the criminal assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists. For what crimes have they been assassinated?"* Regarding the Iranian nuclear program, he stated:

*"Iran's nuclear program – and for that matter, that of all other countries – must pursue exclusively peaceful purposes. Nuclear weapon and other weapons of mass destruction have no place in Iran's security and defense doctrine, and contradict our fundamental religious and ethical convictions" (Rouhani 2013a).*

Later, Netanyahu called the speech *"a cynical speech that was full of hypocrisy" and that Rouhani only wanted "to talk and play for time in order to advance its ability to achieve nuclear weapons"*. He added that the only diplomatic solution for Iran is to dismantle the nuclear program completely (Rudoren 2013). Rouhani lowered the anti-Israeli rhetoric; he was not aggressive as Ahmadinejad, although he did not refrain from criticizing Israel. For Netanyahu, the new president was not a change since he represented the same regime, which threatened Israel. During an interview at the Council of Foreign Relations, Rouhani again indirectly criticized Israel and its position against Iran's nuclear program. He stated:

*“The second issue is that, should there be concerns, if they are rational, rather than propagandists and irrational ones, that those rational concerns must be addressed and settled in, in fact, achieving our rights and goals, we do not wish to ignore the interests of any other country. We do not seek to go into war with any country...*

*...We seek to have a stable and peaceful region that can achieve development, and we, therefore, believe – meaning my government – believes that it will always seek and create moderation...*

*... There is a group that through false propaganda has sought to portray Iran as a threat, and by portraying Iran as a threat, to bring pressure on people...”* (Council on Foreign Relations 2013).

In these passages he addressed Israel – he refuted Israel’s worries about Iran’s potential (nuclear) attack against Israel and accused Israel of spreading misinformation about Iran. Rouhani later stated that Iran would never seek the development of nuclear weapons (Haaretz and Reuters 2013). Nevertheless, during the World Economic Forum at Davos in January 2014, the president stated that Iran would continue with the peaceful nuclear program. He stressed that Iran, as the signatory of the NPT, has the right to civilian nuclear technology (Mathuros 2014). In September, at the UNGA, Rouhani said: *“We are of the view that the nuclear issue could only be resolved through negotiation, and those who may think of any other solution are committing a grave mistake”* (Rouhani 2014). Rouhani yet again indirectly mentioned Israel – he criticized the possibility of the Israeli airstrike.

In March 2015, Netanyahu was invited to give a speech before the US Congress<sup>34</sup>. In the speech, he used the Holocaust and the Second

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<sup>34</sup> The invitation of Netanyahu sparked much controversy in the American political scene – the Speaker of the House of the Representatives, John Boehner planned to invite Netanyahu to the Congress without letting know the White House. His office notified the White House the same day Netanyahu got the invitation. Such a move was unprecedented and a breach of diplomatic protocol and undermined the foreign policy of the White House (Beauchamp, 2016).

World War to compare Iran to Nazis and that it presented a threat not only to Israel but to the whole world. Netanyahu underlined that Iran is a sponsor of terrorism and compared its ideology to the one of the Islamic State. Concerning the deal, he criticized the concessions the Obama administration was willing to make towards Iran. The first concession was that Iran would not have to abandon its nuclear infrastructure. Netanyahu said that it would leave Iran with the possibility to construct nuclear warheads in the future. He doubted the role of the IAEA, underlying that an Iranian officials had lied about the program before. Netanyahu was also worried that Iran would continue with its research in its secret facilities. The second concession he criticized was the period of the deal – most of the restrictions on the program would expire between ten to fifteen years. criticized was the period of the deal – most of the restrictions on the program would expire between ten to fifteen years. He also criticized that the Iranian missile program was not included in the deal. The Prime Minister stated that without the sanctions, a stronger Iranian economy would make it possible for Iran to acquire the weapons faster. He demanded Iran fulfill three conditions: ceasing aggression toward other countries in the Middle East, stopping the support for terrorism, and to stop threatening Israel (Netanyahu 2015).

Netanyahu's worries were justified in his eyes. The worries were a construct of his convictions about Iran and its regime and previous Iranian behavior concerning the nuclear program and Israel. However, Netanyahu failed in convincing Congress to block the deal. Without the support of the Democratic Party, the Republicans were unable to stop the JCPOA. The former US Special Envoy for the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Martin Indyk, said that Netanyahu stopped being rational about the issue – the Prime Minister directly went against the US President and the most important agreement of Obama's presidency (Kirk 2006). Netanyahu thus lost his "ideological war" not only against Iran but also against Obama.

Before the JCPOA was signed in 2015, the US Vice President John Biden stated that Iran would be able to produce a nuclear weapon within a few months – Iran had a stockpile of enriched uranium, but still not enough to develop the weapon (Katzman 2019a, 9). The JCPOA set many conditions on the Iranian nuclear program. The number of centrifuges is limited to five thousand from nineteen thousand (James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies 2018). Iran cannot build a heavy-water

reactor. Iran is supposed to redesign the current heavy-water reactor so it will not produce plutonium (Kerr 2019, 5). The uranium conversion program is to be halted. Moreover, the deal limited the stock of enriched uranium Iran can keep at any time. New acquisitions for the nuclear program must proceed through a special channel, controlled by the IAEA (Kerr 2019, 16). The IAEA has unlimited access to all Iranian nuclear facilities (James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies 2018). The limits to the program apply for fifteen years. In exchange, the UNSC lifted the international sanctions put on Iran for its non-compliance concerning the nuclear program.

The former Prime Minister Olmert in an interview for al Jazeera repeated that it is not Israel's duty to lead the international effort to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and stated that he thought this position was a consensus among other political leaders. He said that the deal is not ideal but it is a "done deal" and stressed that Israel must accept the commitment of President Obama and trust him (Olmert 2015). However, Prime Minister Netanyahu's reaction was quite the opposite:

*"Amazingly, this bad deal has not required Iran to cease its aggressive behavior in any way. By not dismantling Iran's nuclear program, in a decade this deal will give an unreformed and unrepentant and far richer terrorist regime the capacity to produce many nuclear bombs. In fact, an entire nuclear arsenal with the capacity to deliver it. What a stunning historic mistake. Israel is not bound by this deal with Iran because Iran continues to seek our destruction. We will always defend ourselves" (Reuters 2015).*

After the P5+1 and Iran had agreed upon the deal, Netanyahu ordered the cancellation of the strike on Iran (Bergman 2018) but stressed that he would not let Iran create a nuclear weapon. Although the P5+1 and Iran signed the JCPOA in 2015, the Iranian officials were anxious about the possible lasting of it into the future. They worried that the new U.S. government after the 2016 elections will not abide by the deal and will pull out, which turned out to be true. In May 2018, the US President, Donald Trump, announced that the US is abandoning the deal, calling it

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an embarrassment (Gearan and DeYoung 2018), which pleased Israel and PM Netanyahu, who had called the deal “very bad” before (Kirk 2016). However, both Iran and its European counterparts decided to continue with the nuclear deal despite the US withdrawal.

## 6 Evaluation

### 6.1 Comparison between Ahmadinejad and Rouhani

When we look into the ideologies of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani, there are some overlapping ideas. However, the two presidents differ when it comes to the language and rhetoric, radicality, and the importance of the Iranian nuclear program. They are both loyal to the regime of the Islamic Republic, however, even though Ahmadinejad belongs to the staunch supporters of the regime, he is not an insider as is Rouhani. Rouhani has participated in the construction of the regime, while Ahmadinejad was a secondary figure in this process.

First of all, from the point of view of international relations theories, Ahmadinejad is a neorealist – Iran is all alone in the anarchic world, and therefore it needs nuclear weapons to protect itself. Rouhani, on the other hand, shares some liberal views – he believes that Iran will prosper if it cooperates with the outside world. We may witness this in their attitudes towards the nuclear program. During Ahmadinejad's presidency, there was no advancement in the diplomatic talks with the West. He won the presidency on the promise to revive the economy for which he needed to deal with the P5+1.

Secondly, there is a difference in their political ideology. Ahmadinejad's neo-principlism goes against people like Rouhani since the neo-principlists believe that clerics should not hold high positions within the state. Ahmadinejad has been called an ultra-rightwing conservative, not only due to his rhetoric towards Israel but also because of his zealous religious and political views. Even though the media and political scientists label Rouhani as a moderate, a moderate conservative is more appropriate. Nonetheless, the two presidents belong to two different factions within Iran which compete against each other. Therefore, even though they may share some conservative values, their worldview on how to approach questions concerning both the domestic and international scenes differ.

Moreover, Ahmadinejad's relationship with the IRGC was a much closer one. Rouhani competes with the IRGC which did not support the JCPOA. He also criticized the IRGC for meddling into Iranian politics and its economic ties to the economy.

Thirdly, both Presidents consider Israel as an enemy. Nevertheless, Rouhani did not use such offensive language as Ahmadinejad frequently did, at least in the timeframe of this thesis. President Rouhani denounced Israel on multiple occasions, but his statements never mentioned the destruction of Israel. He even tried some soft diplomacy, when he approached Jews through social networks. The reason for Rouhani's much milder rhetoric was an assurance to the West that Iran is treating the nuclear deal with the utmost respect. Rouhani's milder language, however, does not mean that he views Israel more favourably. He calls Israel a Zionist regime. The Shi'a Islamic ideology, which Rouhani is part of, considers Israel an illegitimate state. Note that even the Shah's regime was reluctant to accept the existence of the new Jewish state initially. Nevertheless, the Shi'a radical ideology completely denies its existence. For them Israel lies in one of the secret sites of Islam and the Jewish state is a Zionist oppressor. Both him and Ahmadinejad support the Palestinian cause – it is one of the pillars of Iranian foreign policy. The Hezbollah group also receives continuous support from Iran despite the change of presidents. When it comes to the Holocaust views, Ahmadinejad is a Holocaust denier. Denying the Holocaust in his eyes puts the existence of Israel in to question. Rouhani acknowledged the existence of the Holocaust, even though he downplayed it by saying that many people died during the war and by pointing to Israel's misuse of the tragedy to promote its self-interests against Palestinians.

Fourthly, the two had slightly different views on the Iranian nuclear program. While Ahmadinejad did not want to yield to the West and especially in no way to Israel. Rouhani understood that in order to restart the gears of the economy such as the sale of Iranian oil, he has to stop the centrifuges spinning. For him, Israel was not an important participant in the renegotiation. However, they both kept stressing that the intent of the program is purely for peaceful purposes. One thing to note is that the JCPOA would not happen if Rouhani was not the president and there was not a liberal in the White House like Obama, both of whom believed in a diplomatic solution of this issue. There was an intersection between Rouhani's and Obama's ideology which made it possible to initiate the negotiations. Ahmadinejad was not interested in negotiations because of his ideological tilt.

Lastly, the reason why the Shia ideology and the two presidents consider Israel as the Lesser Satan, is its relationship with the United States – the Great Satan. Throughout its history, Iran and its leaders have



developed distrust towards great powers and to the US especially since it staged a coup d'état in 1953. Israel, as the closest ally to the US in the Middle East, thus naturally provokes Tehran. In addition, the fact that the Shah's regime cooperated with the US and Israel also influenced relations between Israel and the Islamic Republic as the Shi'a ideology wanted to distance itself from the Shah's Iran.

Do the ideologies of the Iranian leaders surpass their rational thinking? Do Iranian leaders want to acquire nuclear weapons for ideological reasons? The reason why the Iranian leaders seek to construct a nuclear weapon was not to destroy Israel, but to gain prestige and power in the Middle East, possibly even globally. Most importantly, the regime wanted to construct the "bomb" to protect itself, and thus also protect the ideology it represents.

## 6.2 Comparison between Olmert and Netanyahu

At first sight, the ideologies of the two Israeli Prime Ministers should have a lot in common. Both Ehud Olmert and Benjamin Netanyahu come from a similar ideological background. The Revisionist Zionist ideology shaped their worldview during their youth. They both were members of the right-wing party Likud. Likewise, both Olmert and Netanyahu disagreed with the Oslo Accords and were for the spread of the Israeli settlements and Israeli control over the occupied territories. However, the Sharon-Olmert tandem changed its position towards the Palestinians which, together with internal pressures of Olmert's family, caused the right-wing Olmert to become a centrist and much more prone to compromises. However, Netanyahu remained a staunch conservative, whose vision was of a strong Israel. Nonetheless, they both would consider themselves as Zionists who would protect the interests of the Israeli nation.

Concerning the Iranian nuclear program, both Olmert and Netanyahu claimed that Iran was trying to produce a nuclear weapon and that it signified a great threat for Israel since the leaders of the Islamic Republic had on numerous occasions proclaimed that Israel must be destroyed. However, Rabin and Peres started with such statements. The positions of both Olmert and Netanyahu were influenced by the obscure handling of the Iranian nuclear program by the Iranian leaders

with the combination of hateful rhetoric against Israel from the Supreme Leader Khamenei, President Ahmadinejad, and other Iranian officials.

Regarding the Holocaust remarks by Ahmadinejad, Olmert believed that it was Ahmadinejad's ideology and religious views that influenced his anti-Semitic rhetoric. He called it an existential threat to Israel. For Netanyahu, Ahmadinejad's militant ideology was a confirmation of his worries about the intentions of Iran's leader.

Both Olmert and Netanyahu had good reasons why they did not trust Ahmadinejad's claims that the Iranian nuclear program has only a peaceful purpose. The Iranian leaders lied and about the program, which raised doubts about the nature of the program not only in Israel but also among many other nations in the world. That is why both Israeli Prime Ministers responded with claims that it could potentially strike the Iranian nuclear program.

However, Olmert never supported the idea that Israel would unilaterally attack Iran and its nuclear facilities. In all of his public statements, he declared that the international community with the US leadership has to deal with Iran. Israel, in his eyes, could not afford to attack Iran as it could bring a potential threat of attacks by Iranian proxies, or that Israel is a too small country to pursue such a big goal on its own. Nevertheless, his administration sent many signals to deter Iran from proceeding with the nuclear program like the strike against the Syrian reactor or the airforce exercises indicating that Iran is indeed a target.

Under Netanyahu, on the other hand, Israel was ready to strike Iran. His ideology had an impact on his decision-making. He views himself as the savior of Israel. In his eyes, Israel is a vulnerable nation, which must be protected at any price. When Rouhani became the Iranian president, Netanyahu did not trust him as much as he did not trust Ahmadinejad. For him, Rouhani represented the same regime which threatened the existence of his country and supported terrorist groups which had attacked Israelis. Netanyahu's apocalyptic predictions, combined with his messianic notion of himself and combined with the Churchillian vision certainly shaped his ideology and the perception of a threat by Iran, while Olmert's ideology has become more pragmatic and moderate.

From the point of view of international relation theories, Olmert was thus more of a liberal-oriented Prime Minister – he saw Israel as a part of the international community. Netanyahu, on the other hand, is a pure realist. He was convinced that Israel is alone in the anarchic world

and therefore it must protect its interests and survival on its own. Netanyahu believed that Obama was very idealistic and naïve to believe that Iran would adhere to the nuclear deal.

Olmert and Netanyahu have an issue about the nature of the Islamic Republic and its ideology since not only the leaders but also the regime itself poses a threat to Israel since it does not acknowledge the right of Israel to exist.

It is questionable, whether it is possible to compare ideologies of leaders from two countries with completely different political systems. From the analysis, if we take the division of political ideologies purely on a left-right basis, it is clear that all four leaders belong to the conservative spectrum. However, there is no intersection between their conservative ideologies. Nevertheless, the ideologies of the leaders are an important part of the construction of relations between the two countries as it has been shown in this thesis.

To conclude, in the introduction, it was mentioned that ideology helps to distinguish friends from foes. In the case of this thesis, the ideologies of the Iranian leaders help them distinguish that Israel is their foe and vice versa, and it is through their ideologies the Israeli Prime Ministers know whom to trust. Moreover, it was written that a group with distinct characteristics is more threatening to our group than a group with similar characteristics. The Iranian regime and its leaders represent very different values from Israel and its leaders. The first is a militant theocracy; the other is a unique democracy. Therefore, Israel will feel threatened by Iran and Iran by Israel for a long time until there will be a change in their regimes, rhetoric, and the types of leaders who put ideology behind them, so that the two countries will be able to build some level of trust between them.

## 7 Conclusion

The thesis contains three research question and one hypothesis.

*Do the ideological differences of the Israeli and Iranian leaders between the years 2006 and 2015 influence their mutual perception of threat and thus shape the relations between Israel and Iran?*

Yes, the ideological differences of the two Iranian and two Israeli leaders influenced their perception of threat between each other. The ideologies also shaped the relations of the two countries. The ideological differences repose in how the Israeli and Iranian leaders see the other country.

For Ahmadinejad, it was the fundamental character of the Jewish state with which he had an ideological problem. It would not matter who is the Prime Minister of Israel. Ahmadinejad would perceive Israel as a threat regardless. However, it can be argued that the Iranian perception of threat was not as high as the Israel's, since Israel never threatened to wipe out Iran directly. The possibility of a unilateral Israeli airstrike, though, was higher during Netanyahu's prime ministership. Rouhani also had a problem with the possibility of the airstrike, but he limited the offensive rhetoric of his predecessor. Olmert believed that Iran posed a threat due to Ahmadinejad's militant rhetoric. Netanyahu did not perceive the ideologies of Ahmadinejad and Rouhani as very different. He stated many times that Rouhani is no different from Ahmadinejad, that him being a moderate is just a lie. For Netanyahu, the problem lies in the nature of the Iranian regime and its longtime hostility towards Israel. It would not matter who the Iranian President is because the role of the Supreme Leader would remain very powerful and would significantly shape the foreign policy of Iran.

*Does the difference in President Rouhani's and President Ahmadinejad's ideological background influence the perception of threat by Israel?*

Yes, the different ideological background of President Rouhani from President Ahmadinejad did have an impact on the perception of threat by Israel. Being more open to dealing with the West, Rouhani

believed that the threat of an Israeli airstrike was lower since Iran was willing to make deals on its nuclear program. It was during Ahmadinejad's presidency when Israel threatened to strike Iran, which was influenced by Ahmadinejad's hateful statements.

*Does the difference in Prime Minister Netanyahu's and Prime Minister Olmert's ideological background influence the perception of threat by Iran?*

Yes, the different ideological background of Prime Minister Olmert from Prime Minister Netanyahu influenced the perception of a threat from Iran. Both Olmert and Netanyahu perceived Iran as a threat. However, Olmert was not as vocal and aggressive towards Iran as Netanyahu was. Netanyahu's ideology is based on the idea that the Israeli people are all alone in the world and Israel must rely on itself when it comes to the security of the state.

*The perception of threat between Israel and Iran is higher when the ideological discord between the Israeli Prime Ministers and the Iranian Presidents is wider. If there is an intersection between their ideologies, the perception of threat between the countries should be lower.*

The assumption of the first part of the hypothesis is correct. The ideological discords between Olmert and Ahmadinejad, Ahmadinejad and Netanyahu, and Netanyahu and Rouhani, were very wide and the perception of threat proved to be very high by both countries. However, the second assumption of the hypothesis cannot be proven correct or incorrect since there seems to be no or almost no intersection between the ideologies and thus it is unclear if the threat perception between the countries lowered during the 2006-2015 period. Although Ahmadinejad left office in 2013, the threat perception of Netanyahu did not change with Rouhani becoming president.

## 7.1 Limits of the thesis and further research

The thesis is limited by its time-frame and researched subjects. The two Israeli and two Iranian leaders give us only a partial account of the Israeli-Iranian relations. To get the whole picture of the threat

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perception between Iran and Israel, analysis of all the main Israeli and Iranian leaders would be needed going back as far as at least since the start of the Iranian revolution. Some people may say that the ideology of leaders is not enough to analyze the threat perception between the two countries, however this thesis does not claim it is the only criterium but a way on how to look at the threat perception and Israeli-Iranian relations. Further research should also include analysis of other case studies such as the conflicts between Israel and Iran, mostly the proxy wars between Israel and Hezbollah, and Hamas. Furthermore, the role of Syria in Israeli-Iranian relations, which has not been discussed much in this thesis, and threat it poses and how it is perceived by Israel would be an additional piece for the puzzle. The ideology of Bashar Asad and the perception of the threat from Syria by Israel and vice versa could tell us more about the nature of the Syrian-Iranian alliance and Syrian-Israeli rivalry in the region. Also, it would be interesting to compare the ideologies of the US presidents with Israeli Prime Ministers and Iranian leaders, since the US plays a significant role within the Israeli-Iranian relations.

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