

Hassan Rouhani's Policy Towards Palestine (2013-2017)

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to analyze the Hassan Rouhani's foreign policy towards Palestine since 2013-2017. The Paper contends that under Rouhani's administration, Iran continued echoing anti-occupation rhetoric's against Israel, while articulated more support to Palestinians and their struggle. Under his government, Iran yet again remained the champion and a true defender of the Palestine Issue.

Introduction:

Hassan Rouhani was the seventh president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. On June 14, 2013, Rouhani won a landslide victory in Iranian national elections and was eventually elected as President of Iran on August 3, 2013. Prior to Presidency, Rouhani held many political posts in Iran; he was an active member of Iran's 'Supreme National Security Council' and 'Expediency Council' since 1989 and an eminent member of 'Assembly of Experts' since 1999. In his political career, he served the post of deputy speaker of the fourth and fifth terms of the Parliament and was the Secretary of Iran's 'Supreme National Security Council' from 1989 to 2005.¹ As a competent bureaucrat, Rouhani came from the moderate school of thought. He was Iran's top economic negotiator who led his country's nuclear programme negotiations with three EU countries namely UK, France, and Germany on October 21, 2003.²

Hassan Rouhani's Foreign Policy

On August 4, 2013, soon after ascended the post of president, Rouhani outlined his foreign policy plans, he announced that peace and stability in the Arab region would be his administration's topmost priority. He announced that his country does not want any war or discrepancy with any state, Iran will stand with peace, stability, tranquility and peaceful settlement of regional and international disputes. Iran wishes to maintain and strengthen its relations with other countries on mutual respect and non-interference principles. He also asserted that Iran would not tolerate and support the forceful change of borders and governments in other countries, he, therefore, made it clear that his government will stand against the foreign intervention

¹ For details see "Biography of Hassan Rouhani." At *Encyclopedia Britannica*, retrieved from, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hassan-Rouhani> (Accessed on July 16, 2019).

² For further details see "EU Ministers Strike Iran Deal", retrieved from, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/oct/22/iran.politics1> (Accessed on July 16, 2019).

especially in Persian Gulf. About the ongoing blockade and economic sanctions, President Rouhani made it clear that the Islamic Republic of Iran will defend its independence and sovereignty, which is bestowed by the Islamic revolution. Furthermore, he affirmed that under his tenure, Iran would continue its revolutionary spirit, which had benefited the country with a stable government and improved the quality of life and human rights in Iran. He stressed that his government will follow the path of Islamic revolution and would place its foreign policy on moderate moulds broadly on prudence rationality.³

Unlike Iran's former regimes, Hassan Rouhani led a different path and introduced a discourse of moderation in Iranian foreign policy. His government was configuring Iran's foreign policy discourse around two nodal points, namely balance and equilibrium. He made various laborious efforts to establish a balance between prohibitive confrontation of the justice-oriented fundamentalist discourse and prohibitive submission of the Iranian reformers. His party entered the election battle by promising an acceptable solution to Iran's slow economic progress and had guaranteed that his administration would acquire a higher position and rank for Iran in the international market.⁴ He pledged that his government guarantees respect to human rights, and would free the political prisoners. He also promised that his government would replace the Ahmadinejad's confrontational foreign policy with effective re-engagement policy with the European Union and West.⁵

Unlike Ahmadinejad's contrast stands, his government led a constructive engagement with the world, especially with the West. Contrary to Iranian fundamentalists who have changed Iran's nuclear programme into a pivotal and identity-related problem, Rouhani's government attempted to marginalize the issue, wished to solve it peacefully and led friendly engagements with the EU and West. Hassan Rouhani placed his foreign policy on moderate moulds, his government followed idealism accompanied by a realism which was described as halfway to a comprise and halfway to a conflict with the US-led West over Iran's nuclear issue. Regarding his adaptation of moderate path, Hassan Rouhani in a speech on February 11, 2014 had categorically spelt out that:

³ For details see "President of Iran, Hasan Rouhani Announced Plans of Foreign Policy", retrieved from, <https://www.cancilleria.gob.ec/president-of-iran-hasan-rouhani-announced-plans-of-foreign-policy/#> (Accessed on July 16, 2019).

⁴ LejlaJafari, Ali Alihosseini, Seyyedjavad Emamjomeh zadeh. "Discourse Analysis of the Moderate Government's Foreign Policy in Iran", 149, retrieved from, <https://www.fdv.uni-lj.si/docs/default-source/tip/diskurzivna-analiza-zmerne-vladne-zunanje-politike-v-iranu.pdf?sfvrsn=0> (Accessed on December 29, 2019), retrieved from <https://www.fdv.uni-lj.si/docs/default-source/tip/diskurzivna-analiza-zmerne-vladne-zunanje-politike-v-iranu.pdf?sfvrsn=0> (Accessed On July 16, 2019).

⁵ Mohsen Milani, "Rouhani's Foreign Policy: How to Work With Iran's Pragmatic New President", Foreign Affairs, June 25, 2013, retrieved from, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2013-06-25/rouhanis-foreign-policy>, (Accessed on July 16, 2019).

“I think it is necessary for the Iranian nation to be informed of some points concerning the foreign policy and nuclear issue. The government’s policy regarding foreign affairs is the policy of moderation; neither submission nor compromise, neither passiveness nor confrontation”.⁶

But, despite of Hassan Rouhani’s moderate foreign policy, his government continued echoing anti-occupation rhetoric’s against Israel while articulated more support to oppressed Palestinians and their struggle. Under his tenure no changes appeared in Iran’s foreign policy towards Palestine question, Iran yet again remained the champion of the Palestine struggle and a real defender of democratic rights of people of Palestine. On August 2, 2013, prior to the day of announcement of the election results, Hassan Rouhani echoed hard rhetoric’s against Israeli regime on Quds Day rally and described its occupation of Palestinian territories as “old wound”. In his official remark, Rouhani said: “in our region and under the occupation of Palestine and dear Jerusalem, there has been a wound on the body of the Islamic world.”⁷ President Rouhani also said that Iran’s rally of the Quds days since 1979 Islamic revolution is a clear indication of Iran’s support and worship to the Palestinian cause and emphasizes that importance of Quds (Jerusalem) to Palestinian Muslims. The “Quds Day rally is a reminder that Muslim people will not forget their historical right, and they will resist oppression and invasion.”⁸

Rouhani launched a direct verbal attack against the Israeli regime and its brutal policies and urged its complete removal from the territories of Palestine. President Rouhani also expressed its increasing doubts about the possibility of an Israel-Palestine peace agreement. He said, “Israelis show a compromising face to the world but continue their expansionism in practice”. Both Israel and Palestine had resumed their conciliatory talks in Washington on August 2013, after ending a three-year freeze in peace talks. On 2013 ‘Quds Day’ Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei repeated the same tone and said ‘Palestine will be free and hoped the emergence of Islamic Middle East.’⁹

Despite of Hassan Rouhani’s hard rhetoric’s against Israel, his government had not divorced Iran’s traditional pro-Palestinian approach. The Arab spring followed by Syrian Civil war appeared to a litmus test for his administration. But, despite some difference with Palestinian groups mainly with Hamas, Rouhani’s government continued its support and solidarity to Palestine question. His government narrowed down the differences with Hamas over the Syrian conflict and succeeded in resuming Iran’s unconditional support to Palestine resistance. Besides Hamas, Hassan Rouhani’s government also resumed its political

⁶ LejlaJafari, Ali Alihosseini, Seyyedjavad Emamjomeh zadeh. “Discourse Analysis of the Moderate Government’s Foreign Policy in Iran”, 149.

⁷ Nasser Karimi. “Iran’s Rouhani: Occupation of Palestine is Wound”, retrieved from <https://www.apnews.com/0318310fca5a4e1084bea4aec8a10b01>, (Accessed on July 16, 2019).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ For details see “Iran’s New President Rouhani Calls Israel Old Wound”, *Times of Israel*, retrieved from, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hasan-rouhani-calls-israel-old-wound-that-must-be-removed/>, (Accessed on July 16, 2019).

and financial support to other groups such as to Hizbullah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad whom Iran perceived more ideological.

Within the framework of Iran's pro-Palestinian approach, Hassan Rouhani's administration had changed the revolutionary rhetoric's into a more pragmatic approach mainly because of his ambition of constructive engagement with the outer world. Quite similar to the Khatami's presidency, President Rouhani had not separated his government from Iran's traditional pro-Palestinian policies. On July 8, 2014, when Israel through operation protective Edge launched another offensive attack against Hamas-ruled Gaza territory, he extended Iran's financial aid to Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad and assisted these groups militarily. The operation was launched following the kidnapping of three Israeli civilians by Hamas, Israel's airstrikes and ground bombardment and the Hamas rocket attacks resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent Gaza civilians.

Iran condemned the Israel's hostilities on Gaza civilians and encouraged Hamas and Palestinian groups for their courageous resistance against Israeli aggression. Iran's back and support to Palestinian groups during the Gaza conflict appeared to be a significant turning point in Iran-Palestine relations, with this conflict Iran narrowed down its differences with Palestinian groups, especially with Hamas. According to Avi Jorisch, "Israeli's operation protective edge, which began in earnest in early July 2014, has brought Hamas and Iran closer and we are now witnessing a significant re-establishment of bilateral relations".¹⁰ Also with this war, Iran cemented its status further and proved itself as a true supporter and a real defender of the Palestinian issue. The signs of Iran's shift appeared when on July 29, 2013, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei admired the Palestinian group's resistance against Israel's assault and urged world Muslim to assist and equip their backing to the Palestinian struggle against settler Israel. Two days later Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps's military commander, General Qassem Soleimani applauded the Palestinian groups; he echoed similar rhetoric's against Israel and remarked that "We are prepared to support the Palestinian resistance in different ways". General Soleimani also published a rare public letter to the head leaders of Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and other resistance groups. By which Soleimani assured that Iran would continue to perform its religious obligation and will support the Palestinians and their struggle till the date of their victory from Zionist occupation.¹¹

However, the relationship with Palestinian groups appeared to be strained when the civil crisis erupted against Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen in early 2014. Following the escape of President Hadi on March 27, 2015 to Aden, Saudi Arabia launched an offensive military operation 'Decisive Storm' against the Iranian backed Houthi rebels, as a result of which Iran broke its contacts with the resistance groups of Hamas and

¹⁰ Ilan Berman. "Iran's Deadly Ambition: The Islamic Republic's Quest for Global Power", retrieved from, <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=IBxODQAAQBAJ&pg=PT43&dq=Iran+supported+palestinian+second+intifada&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjz28fel8jhAhUsGaYKHQdfCtYQ6AEITTAH#v=onepage&q=Iran%20supported%20palestinian%20second%20intifada&f=false> (Accessed on April 12, 2019).

¹¹ Kay Armin Serjoie. "One Result of the Gaza Conflict: Iran and Hamas Are Back Together", retrieved from, <https://time.com/3138366/iran-and-hamas-alliance-after-gaza-war/>, (Accessed on July 18, 2019).

Palestinian Islamic Jihad. During the Yemen crisis, both Hamas and PIJ opposed Iranian-backed rebels and refused to denounce the Saudi-led offensive against the Houthis in Yemen. Both, Iran and Palestinian groups shared an opposite stands and refused to act on each other terms throughout the Yemen civil crisis. From May 2015 during Yemen crisis, Iran reportedly stopped its financial support to Hamas and PIJ and shifted its interest and support to the Al-Sabirin Movement (The Patient Ones), in Gaza Strip.

Al-Sabirin faction was Iranian backed movement in Palestine which was established in 2014 and was led by Hisham Salem, a former member of the PIJ. The group is an Iranian inspired movement and is in total support of Iran on regional issues. The status of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) was not known until late 2015. It was during November 2015 when both sides shared supportive statements and resumed its relations with each other. In November 2015 PIJ General Secretary had praised Iran and remarked that Teheran had never stopped its support to Palestine and Palestinian groups. In response, Iran's advisor to the supreme leader, Ali Akbar Velayati remarked that his country (Iran) would never stop its backing to PIJ and other allied groups in the region.¹²

The relations with Hamas appeared to be worse than PIJ throughout the Yemen crisis. Hamas refused to condemn the Saudi-led campaign against Houthis and paid its official visit to Saudi Arabia in July 2015. The tour seemed to be a tactical move by which Hamas perceived that the movement would gather more political and financial support, especially from Arab states. The visit, however, angered Iran which reportedly stopped its financial support to it, and cancelled Hamas's visit to Iran. At the end of July, tensions appeared apparent between Iran and Hamas. The leaders of Hamas openly accepted that Iran had suspended its financial support to their movement.

In August 2015, Deputy Foreign Minister of Hamas, Ghazi Hamad remarked at 'The Washington Post', that relations between Hamas and Iran were not right; the problem between them is well known. Ghazi Hamad asserted that his group does not want to lose its relationship and support with Iran. But, despite all tensions the link appeared to be reasonable in late 2015, in November 2015, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's advisor said that Iran would not let down its political and economic endorsement to Hamas.

In December 2015 Hamas's representative in Tehran Khaled Ghadoumi met with Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and urged him to strengthen the Iran-Hamas relations. Also in the same month Deputy Chief of Hamas's Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh appealed Iran to lend its support for new Palestinian Intifada against Israel and its occupation. Furthermore, Haniyeh recalled how Palestine is a subject matter to the Islamic revolution, the Iranian government and its people.¹³ Iran's relations with Hamas improved as Hamas's official Usama Hamdan paid his official visit to Tehran on February 10, 2016, and confirmed that Iran once again resumed its support Palestinian struggle and resistance groups. Hamdan hoped that this

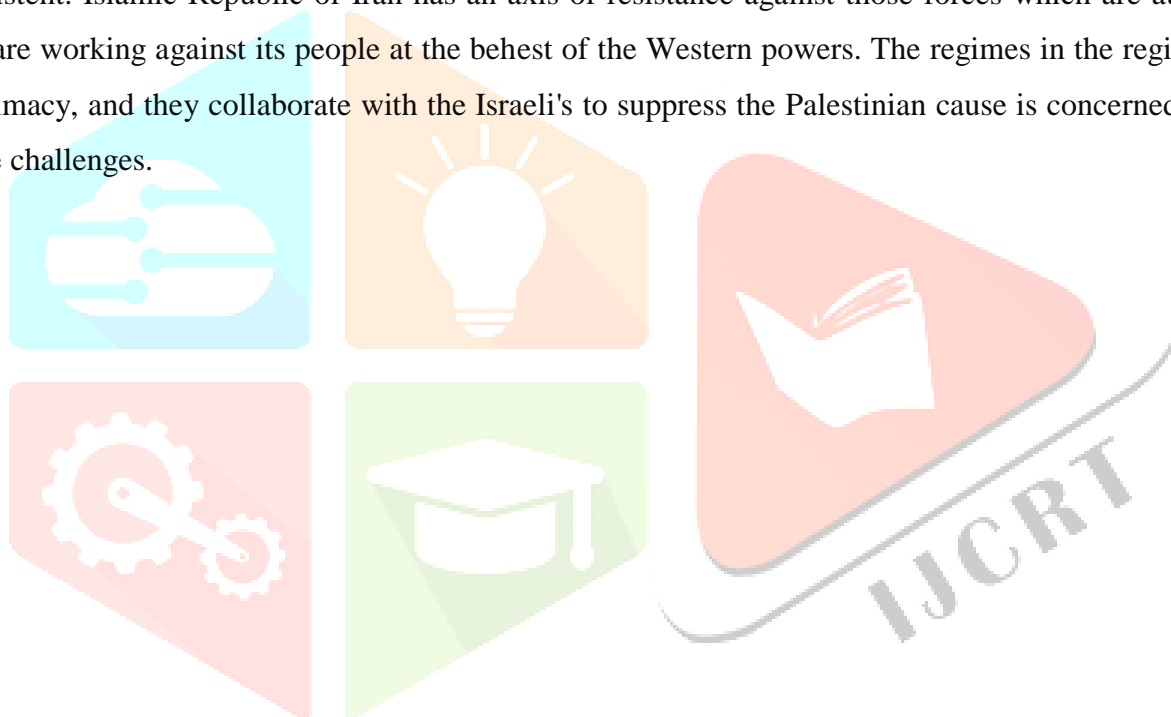
¹² Rachel Brandenburg. "Iran and the Palestinians", *The Iran Primer*, 3, retrieved from, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-palestinians> (Accessed On July 18, 2019).

¹³ Ibid.

visit would be a new beginning of cooperation between Hamas and Iran.¹⁴ Similarly, in May 2016, Iran resumed its financial grants to Palestinian Islamic jihad and allocated an amount of US \$70 million aid to PIJ. The decision was announced when PIJ delegates visited Iran at the invitation of Iranian officials.¹⁵

Conclusion

In concluding remarks it can be observed for the successive Iranian government, the Palestinian Question has remained an emotive issue and topmost concern in the Arab region. The emergence of Hamas and its ideology in close affinity with the Iranian leadership, Iran while supporting Shia Hizbullah in Lebanon continued to support Sunni Hamas in Palestine. The change of Iranian leadership and its Ayatollah's through elections did not suffer from aiding the Palestinians. Right from Ayatollah Khomeini down to Ali-Khameini and from first Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan to President Hasan Rouhani, the policy has been consistent. Islamic Republic of Iran has an axis of resistance against those forces which are authoritarian and are working against its people at the behest of the Western powers. The regimes in the region have no legitimacy, and they collaborate with the Israeli's to suppress the Palestinian cause is concerned withstood these challenges.



¹⁴ Moshin Mohammad Saleh. eds., *The Palestine Strategic Report 2016-2017*. Lebanon: Al- Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations Beirut, 2018, 413.

¹⁵ Daniel Levin. "Iran, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad", retrieved from, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/iran-hamas-and-palestinian-islamic-jihad> (Accessed on July 18, 2019).