



Academic Paper

The Mirror Mental Images in the Iranian and Israeli Collective Mind



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The Mirror Mental Images in the Iranian and Israeli Collective Mind

Prof. Dr. Walid ‘Abd al-Hay¹

Introduction

Mirror images that societies maintain of one another should not be overlooked in the analysis of international relations, both in peace and conflict conditions. These images are affected and shaped by several variables, the most important of which are:²

- ▶ 1. The nature of the historical relations between the two societies under study.
- ▶ 2. The regional and international environment at the moment of studying this relationship.
- ▶ 3. The ruling system and the degree to which it is affected by the mental images of society. Here, democratic regimes are distinguished from autocracies, where the societal mental image is hidden in authoritarian societies in favor of the mental image of the rulers.
- ▶ 4. The level of education and awareness, and their impact on the ability to “rationalize” mental images.
- ▶ 5. The system of values prevailing in each society, and their divergence or convergence with the opponent society. The theory of social representation³ defines the concept of mental images as something drawn by the literatures of cultural heritage and the value system of a society, and also by the central feature of historical relations between one society and another. This last variable (historical relations) is the focus of a study of nine countries published by UNESCO in 1953. The study was developed on the basis on defining the image of the other (the opposite society) and the self in the mind of the local public opinion, to identify the most important determinants shaping the image of the other. The study concluded that mirror image between societies is the result of the nature of the historical relationship between them.⁴



First: The Historical Framework of the Iranian-Israeli Relationship⁵

It is worth beginning with a historical background of the relationship between the Jewish people and the Iranians (Persians). Perhaps the starting point in this relationship begins with the assistance given by the kings of Persia (Cyrus in particular) in the sixth century BCE to the Jews to return to rebuild their supposed “Temple.”

The second stage began with the Sassanid state, which made Zoroastrianism its official religion. This state pursued persecution against other religions, including Judaism, although the periods of Shapur I and Shapur II were the least severe.

Under Islamic states, Jews in Iran were not persecuted, but with the arrival of Hulagu to Iran in 1255 CE, a period of persecution against Jews at the hands of the Mongols began (especially in the periods of Ghazan Khan and M. Oljeitu). In 1383, Timur Lenk (Tamerlane) invaded Persia and seized it in 1385, transferring part of the skilled Jewish population to Samarkand (his capital) to develop industry there, especially the manufacture of textiles.



The relationship with the Jewish population strained, however, with the Safavid state's adoption of Shiism. At this stage, a view of the Jews as “impure” prevailed, despite the leniency shown by Shah Ismail towards the Jewish population (1588–1629). The Shiite clergy had a sharp attitude towards the Jews, to the extent of inciting the population against them and working to expel them from Isfahan. Shiite religious fatwas had a clear role in drawing a negative mental image of the Jews, to the point of prohibiting trade with them, or prohibiting drinking from a cup touched by a Jew or forbidding eating food prepared by a Jew, and even considering them in later historical stages as part of a Western conspiracy to destroy Islam.⁶ However, a trend of tolerance of Jews returned for a short period during the reign of Nader Shah (1736–1747).

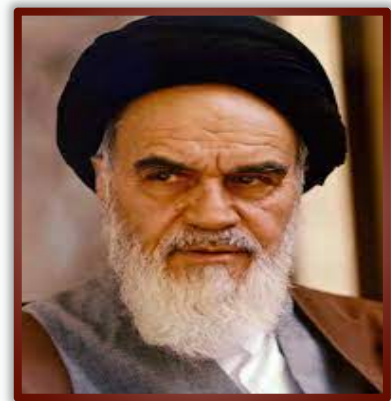
Under the Qajar state, fatwas by Shiite clerics against the Jews resumed, which prompted the Qajar state to return to their persecution.



In the era that followed, Shah Reza exhibited sympathy with the Jews at first, but his rapprochement with Nazi Germany in the 1930s made him distance himself from this relationship. With the establishment of Israel, the number of Jews in Iran was about 140–150 thousand, but the growing role of the clergy in Iran and the rise of the Iranian National Front, under Mosaddegh, drove more than a third of Iranian Jews to emigrate to Palestine during the period 1948–1953. The defeat of the National Front and the return of Shah Muhammad Reza to power improved conditions for the Jews significantly in Iran (80% of them counted among the middle class, compared to 10% among rich and 10% among the poor).

From 1979 until the beginning of 2008, the number of Jews decreased to less than 40 thousand, more than half of them live in Tehran. Up to 25 synagogues exist in Iran, including 11 in Tehran.

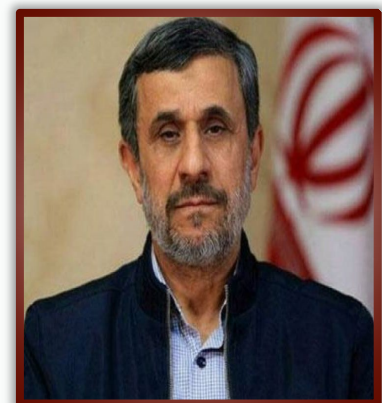
Ayatollah Khomeini had issued a fatwa to protect the Jewish faith from persecution, emphasizing the distinction between Judaism and Zionism. The Jewish minority was granted a seat in the Islamic Consultative Assembly (parliament). However, arrests targeted Jewish figures in different periods on charges of spying for Israel, as happened in 2000 throughout the present days.



Ayatollah Khomeini

Israeli researchers believe that Shiites have a “racist” view against Jews, demanding their extermination and the destruction of Israel. The Israeli researcher Dove Dell, who has worked for more than twenty years in Israeli intelligence circles, in addition to his role in the Israeli army, has cited many supposed examples of these views.⁷

The image of some Iranians, especially officials or some clerics, seems more positive in the Israeli perspective. In fact, the Israeli mind draws a hierarchical picture based on the levels of hostility to Israel in the Iranian mind. Khomeini or Mahmud Ahmadinejad and their followers are the top of the list of this pyramid of hostility, while we find that some personalities such as the Minister of Interior in the government of President Mohammad Khatami, Hojjatoleslam Abdollah Nouri, is at the bottom of the pyramid of hostility based on his reluctance to support the Palestinians against Israel, and his demand that Iran stop interfering in Palestinian affairs. A study by Professor David Menashri at Tel Aviv University reveals this hierarchy clearly.⁸



**Mahmud
Ahmadinejad**



Second: What Can be Inferred From the Previous Heritage?

The general trend indicates that the position of Shiite clerics was mostly hostile to Jews. In a majority of eras, these clerics engaged in incitement against Jews, which means that the current position of the Iranian state is consistent with a historic trend, particularly since the current state is dominated by the sectarian-religious intellectual background of its leaders.

The anti-Israel political literature in contemporary Iranian national movement dates back to the 1940s, with the publications of the “Fedayeen al-Islam,” considered the first fundamentalist Islamic organization in Iran to use armed violence as a legitimate means of resistance. Some of the movement’s leaders had relations with Islamic movements in the Arab region, especially with the Muslim Brothers (MB) movement in Egypt, which contributed to strengthening the tendency to hostility against Jews and Zionism.⁹

The key stages of the modern and contemporary relationship between Iran and Israel can be summarized as follows:

- ▶ • 1947: Iran opposes the decision to partition Palestine.
- ▶ • 1948: Iran establishes low level diplomatic relations with Israel.
- ▶ • 1951: Relations between the two sides are severed during the rise of the Mosaddegh government.
- ▶ • 1953: Relations are restored after the fall of Mosaddegh.
- ▶ • 1956: Iran supports the tripartite aggression against Egypt, in which Israel took part, after President Gamal Abdel Nasser attacked the Baghdad Pact.
- ▶ • 1960: Iran-Israel relations are restored to de facto recognition.
- ▶ • 1979 until now: The relationship is severed following the Iranian Revolution. The Israeli embassy in Tehran is shuttered, replaced with the embassy of Palestine. A confrontation begins between the two countries that saw mutual economic and political pressures, in addition to indirect and ongoing military showdowns.

The above demonstrates that the Iranian-Israeli relationship has been non-linear in its progression, but has helped shape mutual mental images and perceptions.



Third: The Contemporary Mental Image of Israel in Iranian Society

The mental image of Israel in contemporary Iranian society may be represented in the seven following aspects of Iranian views:¹⁰

- ▶ 1. The religious dimension: This is in turn represented in the Shiite religious heritage that we have overviewed, in what was enshrined in the Iranian religious literature regarding Quds Day announced by Khomeini, and in religious fatwas (religious rulings issued by Muslim scholars) regarding donations to the Palestinian resistance, not to mention the impact of education curricula and media on the minds of Iranians who were born after the revolution more than forty years ago, which includes a negative image of the society and the state in Israel.
- ▶ 2. Israel is nothing but an extension of the colonial West. Nicknames like “Little Satan” (Israel) and the “Great Satan” (United States—US) are among Khomeini’s phrases that have been enshrined in Iranian political literature, and have formed a mental image held by Iranian society or large segments of it.
- ▶ 3. Zionism exploited the Jews in fueling hostility against Islam on the one hand, and exaggerating the issue of the Holocaust. on the other. Ahmadinejad’s speeches in this regard played an important role in confirming this dimension in the Iranian mental image of Israel.
- ▶ 4. The strategic perspective of Israel as a force competing with Iran for regional dominance, which is evident from the analysis of Iranian official statements.
- ▶ 5. Iran’s mental image of Israel has contributed to deepening the negative image of Israel in some Arab regions, both Sunni and Shiite.¹¹
This image was reinforced by the policies of the Iranian state on the one hand, and some intellectual and literary activities with symbolic connotations on the other hand, such as changing the name of a street in Tehran in 2004 from Khaled al-Islambouli Street (the leader of the group that assassinated former Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat) to the Palestinian Intifadah Street.
- ▶ 6. Israel’s role in supporting the idea of dual containment during the Iran-Iraq war between 1980 and 1988, with the aim of prolonging the war and exhausting both sides. This was echoed by Menachem Begin. Moreover, the intimate relations between the Shah and Israel left a negative image of Israel among the Iranian national and religious public opinion.¹²
- ▶ 7. The Iranian media played a key role in deepening a specific idea, which is that the central enemy of Iran is the US, and that Israel is one of the most important



tools of the US in preventing the development of Iran, evidenced by the following:¹³

- a. Modern historical events including the US intervention in 1953 to thwart the attempt to build a democratic system under Muhammad Mosaddegh. Since the US and Israel have identical political objectives, the stance vis-à-vis Israel is a reflection of the position vis-à-vis the US. Also, Iran's Western and Arab opponents are all allies of the US.



- b. Considering Israel one of the most important factors for political instability in Iran.
- c. Considering the US a key influencer curbing Iranian power in the face of Israel.
- d. The employment of hostility against Israel in the internal competition of Iranian political forces.
- e. The Israeli bet on the Iranian Green Movement to change the political orientation of the Iranian state left a negative impression on Israel's image.

Fourth: The Iranian Image in the Israeli Mind

How do the Israelis view contemporary Iran? To understand the image of Iran in the Israeli collective mind, we will first review Israeli opinion polls in the previous four years, in addition to presenting a historical overview of the relations between the two parties to which I referred earlier, and the influence of Iranian Jews in Israel on this image. The number of Jews of Iranian origin in Israel is about 135 thousand. Israel has begun to offer incentives to the remaining Jews in Iran, or about 25 thousand people, to immigrate to occupied Palestine, but most of them seem uninterested so far.¹⁴



The mental image of Iran in Israel features the following aspects:

1. Considering Iran a threat to Israel¹⁵

Table 1: Israelis who Consider Iran an Existential Threat to Israel

Threat level	Percentage (%)
Very high	30
High	31
Moderate	24
Low	6
Not a threat	2
Don't know	8

The results of the polls presented in table 1 show that 61% of Israelis classify Iran as a very high or high level threat, while the Israelis who viewed it as not posing a threat or a low level threat were only 8%.

2. Endorsing Attacks on Iranian Facilities Without US Approval

Iran's pursuit of an advanced nuclear program is almost the most important factor influencing the Israeli tendency to confront Iran. The percentage of Israelis who support the idea of attacking Iranian nuclear facilities "without" US approval is much higher than those who oppose it. The percentage of those who strongly support the attack is equal five folds the percentage of those who reject the move, as shown in table 2.



Table 2: Attacking Iranian Nuclear Facilities Without US approval

Support level	Percentage (%)
Strong	31
Average	27
Disagree to some extent	19
Completely disagree	6
Don't know	17

3. The image of Iran in the Minds of Israeli Schoolchildren (Future Leaders)

Table 3: The Image of Iran in the Minds of Jewish Schoolchildren in Israel¹⁶

Topic	Grade out of 5
Knowledge of Iran	2.4
Iran is a global threat	3.71
Iran is a threat to Israel	4.03
Relations with Iran in the future will be positive	2.8
Iran is a stable country	2.46

In the mind of the Israeli Jew, the image of Iran appears to be a reflection of two historical experiences. The first is that Iran—in the Israeli mind—is a repetition of the regime of Hitler and his anti-Semitism. The second is that the fear of Iran is because “it sponsors terrorism and works to develop its nuclear program.” The answers of various Jewish groups show that Sephardic groups seem to be more aggressive towards Iran and believe that the solution is by destroying it, while the Ashkenazim see that solving the problems with Iran requires contemplation and reflection. Table 3 indicates that Israeli students—who are the leaders of the future—hold a sharply hostile image of Iran, where more than 80% are focused on the Iranian



threat. However, this image contains another dimension, which is that more than 50% of Israeli students believe that Iranian-Israeli relations will be positive in the future.

However, the Iranian image among Israelis includes another important dimension, which is scientific competition. The image of scientific progress seen through some indicators, such as the superiority of the Iranians in international competitions in subjects such as mathematics, or in the number of academic articles that record a clear growth in citation levels (Citation index) in chemistry, engineering, biology and biochemistry, reinforce this concern about Iranian scientific development, especially that in some disciplines, they are the leaders in the field among Middle Eastern scholars, ahead of Israel and far ahead of the Arab world.¹⁷ This means that the Israeli mental image of Iran contains hatred and a sense of threat on the one hand, and admiration on the other, something that perpetuates the feeling of Iranian menace in the Israeli mental image.



The Israeli side tries to emphasize a specific image, which is the “Persian superiority” over the Arab civilization. This focuses on some of the comparisons contained in the Iranian intellectual literature on comparing Shiism and Sunnism, where the former and Persian culture are linked to the city, on the one hand, and the role of Persian thinkers in Islamic civilization, on the other hand. Moreover, the Israeli image is focused on the idea of Iran belonging to the Aryan race, in contrast to the nomadic Arabian culture dominated by mythologies and the literalism of the Bedouin scripture, according to the Israeli perspective, a matter in which they have relied on writings by Ali Shariati as one of the most prominent thinkers of the Iranian revolution along with other thinkers.¹⁸

Fifth: The Image of Iran in the Research of Israeli Think Tanks¹⁹

We have selected six Israeli think tanks that are the most concerned with issues related to Israel’s international relations, as follows:

- ▶ 1. Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA).
- ▶ 2. Institute for National Security Studies (INSS).



- ▶ 3. Israel Council on Foreign Relations (ICFR).
- ▶ 4. Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (JCPA).
- ▶ 5. Mitvim: The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies.
- ▶ 6. Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (MDC).

By examining the Iran-related studies of these centers, we can see the following (table 4):

Table 4: Research Topics on Iran in Israeli Think Tanks

Think tank	Research topics on Iran							Top topic
	Nuclear program	Arab and international relations	Foreign security operations	Links to armed organizations in the Arab region	Military advancement	Internal economic and political conditions	Total	
BESA	4	2	1	3	2	1	13	Nuclear program and impact on US foreign policy in the region
INSS	13	31	2	16	11	23	96	International relations esp. with China
ICFR	4	9	1	2	1	7	24	International relations esp. with China
JCPA	5	7	1	3	7	3	26	International relations (studies are marked by propaganda)
Mitvim	6	5	1	3	4	1	20	Nuclear program (Center inclined towards diplomacy)
MDC	1	2	2	3	2	7	17	Internal conditions and Shi'ism
Total	33	56	8	30	27	42	196	—
Rank	3	1	6	4	5	2	—	—



A examination of the literature of Israeli research centers on Iran indicates the following:

- ▶ 1. The total number of studies published on Iran to date by these six Israeli centers was 196 (taking into account the dates of establishment of these centers).
- ▶ 2. The INSS ranked first in the number of studies on Iran, with 96 studies, or about 48.9% of the total studies.
- ▶ 3. The Iranian-Arab and international relations ranked highest among the concerns of Israeli think tanks (56 studies). Iran's internal conditions came in second place (42) followed by the Iranian nuclear program (33).
- ▶ 4. Both the INSS and ICFR are the most focused on Sino-Israeli relations.
- ▶ 5. The central feature of the content of the Israeli literature produced by these centers is the "management of the conflict with Iran," and the largely absence of issues concerning cooperation or a positive image.

Sixth: Samples of Studies Published by Israeli Research Centers on Iran

1. The Prospects of an Iranian-Israeli war in a study by INSS

The assassination of Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani in 2020 had a great impact in escalating Iranian-Israeli tensions, despite the fact that the assassination was carried out by the US, whose president officially claimed responsibly for the strike.²⁰ An INSS study has identified the sources of threats to Israel on three fronts: northern occupied Palestine (Hizbullah), the resistance in Gaza, and Iran itself. claimed that the Iranian threat is embodied in:²¹



Qassem Soleimani

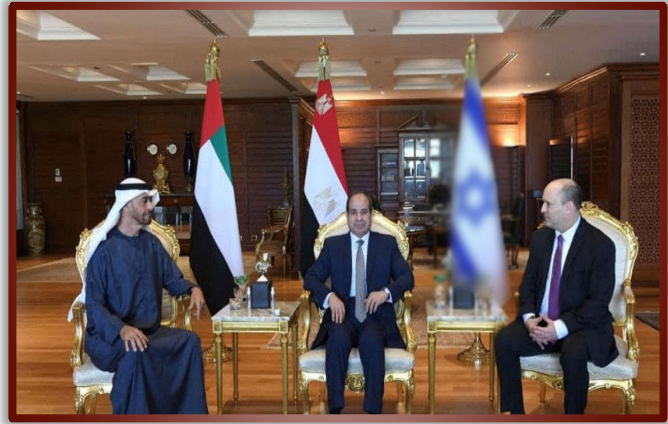
- ▶ a. Its military technology program led by its nuclear program and missile program.
- ▶ b. Iran's proxies, such as Hizbullah, the Palestinian resistance in Gaza, Ansar Allah in Yemen, and most armed Shiite organizations in Iraq. However, the precision-guided missile program that Hizbullah is working on is seen as the second greatest threat after the Iranian nuclear program.
- ▶ c. Iranian military presence geographically adjacent to Israel, especially in Syria.



- d. Concerns that the US is “working to remove itself from the region,” which may tempt resistance forces to push for more confrontation with Israel.

➡ To confront these threats, the INSS suggests working on:²²

- a. Expanding Arab normalization with Israel in conjunction with deepening Arab-Iranian tensions, as was evident from the Negev Conference in March 2022 and in the wake of a summit attended by the Egyptian President, the Israeli Prime Minister and the Emirati Crown Prince (now the head of state of the UAE). However, some indicators seem worrisome for Israel in this regard, such as the increased possibility of a new agreement between the US and Iran regarding the Iranian nuclear program, the weak Saudi and Emirati responses to Ansar Allah’s strikes on sensitive sites, the reluctance of the Gulf states to comply with Western demand to increase energy production to ease the energy crisis resulting from the Ukrainian crisis, not to mention the absence of the Palestinian and Jordanian sides from discussions of Arab-Israeli relations at the Negev conferences in 2022.
- b. Developing a joint military option with the US to confront the Iranian nuclear program.



There is a clear confusion in the Israeli assessments of the possibility of a deal on the Iranian nuclear program between Iran and the US.²³ There are those who believe that the agreement is better than non-agreement (e.g. the former head of Military Intelligence Amos Yadlin, Aharon Zeevi Farkash of the Israeli Military Intelligence, former Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon, former Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot, as well as former Mossad chief Tamir Pardo). And there are those who believe that not reaching an agreement is the best outcome for Israel (such as former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the current PM Naftali Bennett).

2. MDC Studies

In its studies of Iran, this center focuses on three topics: social media discussions on Iran; the Russian-Iranian-Turkish competition in Syria and the position of these countries towards Saudi Arabia; and the action of Iranian political institutions, political figures and opposition institutions. The writings are predominantly hostile to Iran and



question the relationship between Iranian society and the authorities.²⁴ The studies of this center are in line with the studies of the Chaim Herzog Center for Middle Eastern Studies and Diplomacy (CHC), which focus on the Iranian cultural structure.²⁵

3. BESA Studies

This center's studies are predominantly "propaganda" in nature, rhetoric, and construction,²⁶ in comparison, for example, to the more academic view of Mitvim's studies that criticize Israeli trends, especially in dealing with the relationship with Iran.²⁷

BESA also provides general information about Jews in Iran, where a study on the situation of Jews in Iran indicates that the number of Jews in Iran in 2021 is between 8,500 and 20 thousand. As for their political and social conditions, they are as follows:²⁸



- ▶ a. Judaism is one of the recognized religions in Iran, along with Islam, Christianity and Zoroastrianism.
- ▶ b. Each of the three other minority religions, including Judaism, has one designated seat in the parliament.
- ▶ c. Those who adhere to the Jewish religion (and others) are allowed to practice their religious rites within the limits of the law.
- ▶ d. According to the Jewish Committee in Tehran, five Jewish schools and a kindergarten are active in Tehran, but the authorities required their principals to be Muslim. The government reportedly continued to allow the teaching of Hebrew, but limited the distribution of Hebrew texts, particularly non-religious texts, which made it difficult to teach the language, according to the Jewish community. The Iranian government has reportedly asked Jewish schools to remain open on the Shabbat citing the need to conform to the schedule of other Iranian schools, however, the Israeli study consider this a violation of Jewish religious law.
- ▶ e. According to the Jewish Committee of Tehran, there are 31 synagogues in Tehran, more than 20 of which are active, and 100 synagogues throughout the country. Representatives of the Jewish community said they were free to travel in and out of the country, and the government generally did not impose a ban on Jews traveling to Israel, although it did ban other citizens from traveling to Israel.



- ▶ f. The Shiite religious view of Judaism seems—from the Israeli academic point of view—more hostile compared to the Sunni view.

A British academic study, based on field research, by Rusi Jaspal²⁹ has revealed that the Iranian Jews, who make up between 3–4% of the population in Israel, are facing difficulty identifying with the Israeli identity, at the expense of their original Iranian identity.

Conclusion

The mental image of the two parties concerning their relationship has the following indicators:

- ▶ 1. The historical periods in which antagonism between the Jews and the Iranians dominated are longer than the periods that saw harmony.
- ▶ 2. The Islamic religious dimension in Iranian culture is one of the main pillars of this antagonism, and the Shiite sect reinforced this antagonism in the mental image about Jews.
- ▶ 3. The Israeli-US relationship is one of the pillars of how Iranian see Israel.
- ▶ 4. The Iranian revolution constituted a shift in the Israeli view of Iran, deepening the contradiction between the two parties. Meanwhile, contemporary Shiite literature reinforced this trend.
- ▶ 5. Scientific progress in Iran, compared to the region—including Israel—is a point of concern for the Israeli elites. This is reflected in the high percentage of Israelis, among the elite, authorities and the Israeli society, who consider Iran the number one threat to Israel.



Endnotes

- ¹ An expert in futures studies, a former professor in the Department of Political Science at Yarmouk University in Jordan and a holder of Ph.D. in Political Science from Cairo University. He is also a former member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Irbid National University, the National Center for Human Rights, the Board of Grievances and the Supreme Council of Media. He has authored 37 books, most of which are focused on future studies in both theoretical and practical terms, and published 120 research papers in peer-reviewed academic journals.
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