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Political Obstacles to a Referendum in Palestine: The Case of Iran's Proposal*

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Abstract

This study assesses the political challenges that hinder the implementation of a proposed referendum on Palestine, framed within Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST), which underscores the significance of a dominant global power in sustaining international order. The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran has suggested this referendum as a means to determine Palestine's political system. From an HST perspective, the United States significantly impacts the international arena, including policies regarding Palestine. Its support for Israel complicates the political landscape and undermines alternative peace proposals, including those from Iran. This article seeks to answer the main question: what political obstacles prevent holding a referendum in Palestine, and what methods can be used to overcome those obstacles? The findings of the article indicate several political dynamics and factors that impede the referendum: political divisions within Israel regarding peace with the Palestinians, lack of consensus among Palestinian factions, differing approaches among Arab states, and conflicting positions of both Islamic and non-Arab countries. Additionally, the stances of the permanent members of the UN Security Council exacerbate these challenges. The author finds that Iran's proposal has overlooked the international framework of a two-state solution.

Keywords: Arab States, Iran, Israel, Palestinian, Referendum, US

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1. Introduction

The Supreme Leader of Iran's proposal for a referendum in Palestine to determine its political future aligns with hegemonic stability theory, which suggests that global stability and the enforcement of international norms are often maintained by dominant powers. In this context, Iran's call for a referendum serves as an alternative to the plans typically offered by Western powers and Israel, which forge the discourse on Palestinian sovereignty. Since the escalation of the Palestinian issue on October 7, 2023, the situation has reached a critical point, yet most plans proposed by the United States and Arab states are likely to fail due to the entrenched influence of hegemonic powers supporting Israeli actions.

Iran argues that a democratic solution to the Palestinian question is essential under international norms. However, the dominance of Israel and its supporters—primarily the United States and the European Union—creates significant barriers to achieving such a solution. Hegemonic stability theory explains that when a single dominant power or coalition controls global institutions like the United Nations and international law, it can influence conflict outcomes to align with its interests. Israel, backed by the U.S. and the EU, has used this influence to obstruct any genuine democratic process that could lead to Palestinian self-determination.

Iran's referendum proposal challenges this hegemonic narrative, asserting that if Western powers genuinely support democracy, they should endorse a referendum, allowing Palestinians—both in occupied territories and the diaspora—to determine their own fate. This referendum would test the sincerity of Western powers regarding international norms on self-determination and human rights. However, these hegemonic powers have consistently

blocked such initiatives, as they would undermine Israel's geopolitical and strategic interests.

From a broader perspective, Iran's call for a referendum critiques the double standards of Western powers, which advocate for referendums and democratic processes in some contexts, but consistently disregard them in Palestine. Hegemonic stability theory indicates that the global system is influenced by the priorities of dominant powers, and the obstacles to a Palestinian referendum reflect this imbalance. While the proposal holds promise for resolving the conflict in line with democratic norms, its success hinges on overcoming significant opposition from hegemonic powers that support Israel's occupation.

Iran's advocacy for a Palestinian referendum reflects its broader vision for the Middle East, where political legitimacy stems from the will of the people rather than coercion or occupation. However, implementing this proposal will depend on regional actors, particularly in the Islamic world, uniting to expose the ongoing crimes of the Israeli regime. This solidarity could help shift global public opinion and challenge the hegemonic powers that have sustained Israel's dominance in the region.

The article's main question is: What political obstacles hinder a referendum in Palestine, and what strategies can be employed to overcome these challenges? The author argues that political disputes in Israel regarding peace with the Palestinians, a lack of consensus among Palestinian factions, varying approaches from Arab countries, the contradictory positions of Islamic and non-Arab countries towards Palestine, and the political views of the permanent members of the UN Security Council pose significant barriers to holding a referendum.

2. Theoretical Framework

Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) argues that the international system is more stable when there is a dominant global power, known as the hegemon, which plays a central role in maintaining order, managing conflicts, and providing collective goods (like economic stability, peace, and trade). This theory is grounded in the idea that a single, powerful state's leadership is essential for creating and enforcing the rules that govern international relations. According to HST, international stability is heavily reliant on the leadership of a dominant state, which has the capacity and willingness to enforce international norms and ensure that global systems function smoothly. This hegemon must have military, economic, and political influence. The hegemon provides essential public goods to the international system, such as a stable currency, economic coordination, and military security. These goods are essential for the functioning of global markets and for preventing widespread conflict. Public goods are typically underprovided in the absence of a hegemon (Keohane, 1984, p. 35). The hegemon not only creates rules and norms, but also has the power to enforce them; it ensures compliance through economic or military coercion or through persuasion and leadership. This can include using institutions like the United Nations or the International Monetary Fund to enforce order (Kindleberger, 1973, p. 100). The hegemon's position must be seen as legitimate. Other states need to accept its leadership, or at least acquiesce to its dominance. A hegemon that loses legitimacy risks instability within the international order (Keohane, 1984, p. 58). When a hegemon is in decline or when a new power rises to challenge its dominance, the system becomes less stable. The transition from one hegemon to another is often marked by conflict and disorder (Wallerstein, 2011, p. 25). In the

West Asia region, the US has been acting as a hegemon to protect its interests, and guaranteeing the survival of Israel is part of its vested interests. In this regard, America has refused to implement any plan that would endanger the security of Israel, including the two-state solution advocated by the international community, let alone Iran's initiative. Nevertheless, there are some key regional and international players who may challenge the US position by using the Palestine issue, such as China, Russia, and Turkey.

3. Iran's Plan for Referendum in Palestine

The Islamic Republic of Iran's primary strategy for Palestinians includes resistance against occupation as well as cherishing Palestinians' right of self-determination: an inviolable right for all people to determine their political, economic, and social system. Although the rule of self-determination is based on the United Nations Charter, Western countries were indifferent to it until the General Assembly Resolution 1514 of 1960 gave it a binding aspect. Iran's government submitted its proposal regarding holding a referendum in Palestine to the Secretary General of the United Nations. The mechanisms of the referendum consist of the following principles:

- 1) Exercising the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their historical land: Iran's plan has been submitted according to the resolution of 1948 (1948) of the United Nations General Assembly regarding the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their original homeland. The plan includes all genuine Palestinians. Iran aims to facilitate the participation of all Palestinians, especially the Palestinian refugees, in this referendum. To implement the referendum, all Palestinian citizens must register their identity. An

international organization, with representatives of the Palestinians, has to supervise the implementation.

2) Holding a national referendum among the Palestinian people: in this phase of the implementation of the plan, all the Palestinians, including Muslims, Christians, and Jews, will have the right to participate in the referendum, and the representatives of the Palestinians, including the followers of all religions will play an essential role in the undertaking. They are responsible for the planning and implementation of the project. An international committee will be formed under the supervision of the United Nations. In addition, a global fund will be formed with the help of members of the international community under the supervision of the mentioned committee to promote and financially support the implementation of this project.

3) Establishing the political system desired by the majority of the Palestinian people: this issue will be determined and decided in the parliament created by the Palestinian people.

4) Deciding the status of the non-native residents of Palestine: this matter will be determined by the political system elected by the majority, and the decision of that political system must be respected by the countries of the world (Khamenei.ir, 1398 [2019 A.D.]).

Iran has intermittently suggested a "referendum" or similar democratic solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This stance reflects its ambition to be seen as a regional power supporting for Palestinian rights and opposing Israeli policies. By advocating a Palestinian referendum—allowing Palestinians, including those in exile, to vote on their future—Iran seeks to change the political balance in favor of Palestinian self-determination and diminish

Israeli dominance in the region. From HST's perspective, Iran is a regional challenger to the traditional hegemon, the United States, which has consistently supported Israel. Iran aims to position itself as a power capable of offering an alternative to the U.S.-Israel alliance.

4. Dispute in Israel Over Peace with Palestinians

Israel's political system is based on proportional representation and allows for a multi-party system, with numerous parties represented in the 120-seat Knesset. Almost every party represents a part of Israeli society. Therefore, a typical Knesset includes many factions. While no political party can gain a majority seat in the Israeli parliament, every party with the most seats in the Knesset must form a coalition with other parties to form a new government. Israel political parties are locked in a dispute over controversial issues, including peace with Palestinians. The current extremist Israeli government will reject any steps that explicitly lead to a two-state solution. However, the current Israeli government will not permanently persist, and polls show a more centrist government may be formed soon. If this happens, the United States – notably President Biden can build diplomatic leverage to find a peaceful solution for the conflict – has an important role to play in putting the two-state solution back on the respective public's agendas as the only viable long-term option for peace and security (Barron, 2024).

4. 1. Likud Party

Israeli society has moved further right in recent decades, with 62% of the population belonging to the political right in 2022. Benjamin Netanyahu, the current Prime Minister of Israel, is the leader of

Likud—the most significant right-wing party in the Knesset. Likud party members are vehemently opposed to the establishment of a Palestinian state in the Jordan River. The decision by the central committee of Israel's ruling Likud party to reject the creation of a Palestinian state west of the Jordan River may be consequential for peace in the Middle East. Interestingly, Likud's action comes at a time when the international community, especially the United States, has fully endorsed the notion of a Palestinian state at peace with Israel, including through an unprecedented resolution of the U.N. Security Council (Telhami, 2002). Currently, Benjamin Netanyahu has established a political alliance and formed a government with the most ultra-right-wing political factions in Israel, including the Likud, which argue that a two-state solution is a doomsday scenario that must be prevented at any cost. Significantly, Netanyahu has objected to the PA ruling Gaza due to Abbas's denial of the Holocaust and the PA's denial of the October 7 events. However, he also insists that the same PA should continue governing the West Bank (Svetlova, 2023). Just as Palestinians refuse to recognize Israel as a Jewish state, the Likud party refuses to accept the idea of a Palestinian state. Netanyahu believes that strength is the only element that would compel the Palestinians to accept Israel (Kaplan, 2024). The party has acknowledged that "Netanyahu's entire political biography is the struggle against the establishment of the Palestinian state". To justify the occupation of Palestinian territory, the Likud party has claimed, "In the Mideast today, any evacuated territory will be overtaken by radical Islam and terror groups backed by Iran. Therefore, there will be no withdrawals and no concessions" (Reed, 2015). The strong stance of the Likud party on Palestinians demonstrates that it would not accede to the referendum plan.

4. 2. Yesh Atid

Yesh Atid, the Knesset's largest centrist party by seats, is led by former Prime Minister Yair Lapid. Lapid has urged Netanyahu to recognize Palestine as a state under certain conditions and guarantees. He stressed, "Netanyahu should declare that under certain conditions and specific guarantees, he is willing to accept a future Palestinian state that joins in fighting terrorism." Nevertheless, he did not specify what the conditions and guarantee should be. Moreover, he did not give the details of the cooperation he expected from the proposed Palestinian state. Referring to Ben-Gvir, an extremist Israeli politician, the opposition leader emphasized he "does not allow" Netanyahu to declare his readiness to accept Palestine as a state, depicting the current situation as "the madness we are living in" (Middle East Monitor, 2024). In an interview with Fathom, he claimed, "Israel needs to create a gap between the people of Gaza and the terror organization running Gaza". Like his counterparts in right parties, he insisted, "We may need to raise the military pressure on Hamas, but at the same time, we have no interest in having a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, neither as human beings nor as a strategy" (Lapid, 2018). Contrary to right-wing politicians, by adopting a more moderate approach to Palestinians in Gaza, he asserted, "The Palestinian Authority should only partake in the civil component in Gaza. We need a model like Areas A and B [of Judea and Samaria]; the Israel Defense Forces enters and operates there whenever it wants" (Jewish News Syndicate, 2024).

5. Divide between Palestinian Factions

The political Dynamics in the West Bank and Gaza show there is a

disparity between the Palestinian Authority, led by Abu Mazen, and Hamas. Fatah dominates the West Bank, while Hamas has controlled Gaza since 2007. As the ruling party, Hamas needed to implement effective policies to govern the Strip and alleviate the people's suffering. In June 2006, Hamas expelled Fatah from Gaza, further deepening the divide between the two factions. This weakened Palestine as a whole, hindering its ability to confront external threats and garner popular support. Numerous attempts have been made to mediate their conflict (Yang , 2008, p. 5). However, they have proved futile.

A further divide has emerged among Palestinians about scheduling national elections. There is a concern that national elections will instead exacerbate the existing divisions. Eventually, Palestinian political leaders have to decide whether national elections might serve as a unifier or whether some reconciliation must be achieved before national elections can be meaningful. Another divide among Palestinians is echoed in approaches toward engagement with Israel. The Majority of the Palestinians object to any form of normalization and support for a more complete severing of the Palestinian economy from Israelis. Other Palestinians, particularly those who work in the private sector, have adopted a more pragmatic approach, seeking permits to enter Israel for work, business, or social outings, even as they avoid publicizing their Israeli connections (Garber, 2022).

Since the 1990s, the Palestine Liberation Organization (P.L.O.) has shown an interest in making the principle of peace with Israel. Since then, an opportunity for something unprecedented began to form: the first direct dialogue between Israel and the P.L.O. and what would become their most sustained effort to achieve a peaceful settlement. This was known as the Oslo peace process, named after the city where the secret talks took place. It ran

through most of the 1990s and came as close as possible in resolving this intractable conflict. In the end, Oslo failed, as it seemed in advance (Bazelon, 2023). The Oslo Accords not only did not lead to fruitful results for Palestinians, they even had dire consequences for them. Israel reoccupied areas under PA control and demolished infrastructures of the authority, including the security apparatus. The Israeli army besieged President Yasser Arafat in his headquarters, leading to his assassination. Moreover, Israel unilaterally withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005 and ignored Hamas's intention to take over the region, leading to the separation of the Strip from the West Bank. Furthermore, Israel rapidly increased settlements—the settler population is now at 800,000 compared with 200,000 when the accords were signed (Alkidwa, 2019, p. 136).

Contrary to P.L.O., Hamas and Islamic Jihad not only did not recognize Israel, they are even committed to obliterating it and freeing Palestinian territories. From its establishment in the late 1980s, on the eve of the first Palestinian intifada or uprising, Hamas has been committed to armed struggle and the destruction of Israel (Krauss, 2023). The fundamental goal of Hamas is to create a Palestinian state. However, no Arab or Islamic country or movement is willing to ally militarily with Hamas to establish an independent state (Friedman, 2024). Nevertheless, Hamas's attitude to negotiations with Israel has changed over time. Hamas leaders appear unified behind the tenet that Israel's 'moral legitimacy' as a Jewish state must not be recognized. However, Hamas leaders have, since the early 1990s, shown that Hamas would be prepared to accept a hudna, an Islamic term for a long-term truce, as an alternative to a complete peace agreement (Hovdenak, 2009, p. 63).

The approaches of these groups indicate they are not prepared to hold a referendum in Palestinian territories. Hamas and the P.L.O. are geographically and politically divided. A recent poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (P.S.R.) in the West Bank and Gaza Strip reveals that support for a two-state solution has dropped to one-third, while a majority now favors armed struggle. Notably, this poll shows a significant decrease in support for the two-state solution compared to previous surveys, with a 30-point drop coming mainly from the Gaza Strip. Despite this decline, nearly half of respondents in both regions believe the top priority for the Palestinian people should be an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders and the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital (Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 2024).

The political landscape in Palestine is sharply divided between the Palestinian Authority (PA), led by Fatah, and Hamas, which governs Gaza. Fatah generally supports a two-state solution, while Hamas advocates a more radical approach toward Israel. This division hampers the possibility of a unified Palestinian stance, posing a significant obstacle to any referendum proposal. Regarding HST, the internal political fragmentation in Palestine indicates a lack of hegemony, as no single actor or faction can guide the Palestinian people toward a common political solution. This fragmented structure complicates efforts to rally support for a referendum, particularly one with external backing, such as from Iran, which is not universally accepted among all Palestinian factions.

6. Different Approaches of Arab Countries

After decades of antagonistic relations and several wars, Israel and Egypt reached a peace agreement in 1979. As part of the treaty, Israel agreed to return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt, which it had occupied during the 1967 Six-Day War. In return, Israel obtained an influential Arab ally and a more secure southern border. The deal also improved Egypt's ties with the US, with US aid to this Arab country increasing significantly in the aftermath of the peace treaty. However, Mira Tzoreff, a senior researcher at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, argues the relations between Israel and Egypt are growing colder as the war in Gaza continues. He asserts, "As the late Egyptian President [Anwar] Sadat mentioned, it remained the country's goal to solve the Palestinians" (Valente, 2024). It may be said that the Jordan-Israel peace treaty is very much a derivative of the Oslo process. The treaty was signed on October 26, 1994, in the Wadi Arava along the border between the two countries, with President Bill Clinton as a witness. It has endured for twenty-five years due to its strategic value for both nations and the United States (Riedel, 2019).

After years passed without any new deal between Israel and Arab countries, geopolitical conditions in the Middle East have given momentum to a rapprochement between Israel and the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Bahgat, an Israeli analyst, argues, "Israel has always wanted good relations with all Arab countries, including the GCC", adding that now, the GCC has plenty of reasons to consider Israel as a friend rather than a foe. He says, "Egypt, Iraq, and Syria were the three pillars of the Arab world. However, these three pillars are much

weaker than they used to be, leaving the three non-Arab countries in the region—Iran, Turkey, and Israel—as the main players”. (Luxner, 2020) Israel and the Persian Gulf states have a lot in common and cherish potential ways to work together on hi-tech, agricultural technology and the innovations that have made Tel Aviv a center of start-ups. Nevertheless, security has remained the driving factor of the relationship between Arab countries and Israel. On the security issue, Israel’s advances in air defense, electro-optical, and intelligence gathering have consequences for Persian Gulf countries that have shared interests. For instance, cooperating against shared views of Iranian threats is a natural path to cooperation (Frantzman, 2019). In addition, Israeli analysts argue that the Abraham Accords have overcome the political and security obstacles generated by the current reality. The Arab officials who signed the agreements with Israel have adhered to the containment policy that they pursued regarding the conflict in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (Ben-Shabbat & Aaronson, 2022, p. 3).

Nonetheless, some Arab countries have economic considerations to develop their ties with Israel. For instance, economic factors in Israel and the UAE provide a solid domestic drive for normalizing relations. In this regard, the UAE had the fourth-largest gross domestic product in the Middle East at \$414 million in 2018, while Israel ranked fifth at \$370 million. Furthermore, Israel’s ties with the UAE, with a significant role in providing financial aid for many other regional countries, may send a clear message to the Palestinians that they have to try harder to find a solution to the conflict with Israel. The intra-Palestinian divide and corruption within the Palestinian Authority made it easier for the UAE leadership to justify diplomatic relations with Israel (Fulton & Yellinek, 2021, pp. 504-505). The Israeli experts claim the

Abraham Accords remain a matter of consensus, not only due to their advantages in security, economics, and technology, but also because of their emphasis on the hope of true peace and a better future (Ben-Shabbat & Aaronson, 2022, p. 6). Given the fact that the accords signal the determination of their parties to break the Arab taboo of normalizing relations with Israel, the agreements formalize Israel's membership in the status quo alignment (Yossef, 2021, pp. 8-9).

It is worth noting that all normalization processes are strictly undertaken by governments, not by people. Among ordinary citizens, the conflict has been long-standing and complex. As Yara Hawari, a senior analyst, explains, "Since the beginning of the Zionist project in Palestine, people across the region consistently and unwaveringly have opposed it" (Ben Labidi, 2024, p. 2).

One of the crucial goals of normalization between Israel and Arab states is to guarantee peace in the region. However, peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan failed to moderate the Israeli position. On the contrary, Israel has adopted positions that are more stubborn than when peace agreements were reached with the two Arab countries. Therefore, it needs to be clarified why or how the more recent normalization with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco can lead to peace (Muasher, 2021). The Palestinian territories and the sanctity of Jerusalem are still crucial matters for certain regional states, including Qatar and Kuwait. Qatar, for example, has been the most vocal regional state in criticizing Israel's war against Gaza, as well as the most generous in helping rebuild that territory. Contrary to these two countries, the UAE faces a dilemma. The Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank have considered the UAE's full embrace of the Abraham Accords a betrayal of their cause (Vakil & Quilliam, 2023, pp. 71-72). The

sustained efforts of Arab countries to reach a political and security agreement with Israel, whether the conflict in the region has been resolved or not, show they are not ready to accept the referendum plan offered by Iran. While Iran may suggest a referendum, Arab states have historically been divided in their approach to Palestine. Countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt tend to favor negotiations with Israel and support a two-state solution. In contrast, others, particularly those allied with Iran, advocate for more radical approaches, such as a single Palestinian state or a broader struggle against Israeli occupation. The evolving dynamics of the Arab-Israeli normalization processes, such as the Abraham Accords, further complicate Iran's proposals, as Arab states may view the referendum disruptive to their diplomatic strategies.

7. Approach of Islamic and Non-Arabic Countries towards Palestine

Most Islamic countries around the world have expressed their concern and condemnation of the occupation of Palestinian territories, including the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Muslim countries, including Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan, are expected to support Palestine or, at least, remain neutral—a position that would earn them the contempt of their people. Meanwhile, most Islamic states have failed to reach an agreement for imposing economic and diplomatic sanctions on Israel. If these countries claim to be supporting Palestinians or seriously rejecting the genocide and have the political will to act on their political promises, they will undoubtedly impact the Israeli government, forcing it, at least, to accept a ceasefire in Gaza (Fetouri, 2024) and eventually withdraw from the West Bank, which it has occupied since 1967. Almost all Muslim-majority

countries have adopted a passive stance concerning the Gaza Strip. While they criticize Israel's ongoing massacre in Gaza, they are well aware that mere criticism is ineffective. This condemnation is often seen as an attempt to appear proactive and conceal their inability to take significant action. They are sincere and severe in their criticism, but they do so to cover the shame of being unable to do more. From its dictator to its elected leader, nobody likes Israel; they attack only with words (Karataş, 2024).

7. 1. Turkey

Turkey and Israel have maintained close ties for most of their 74-year relationship. However, relations have been tumultuous over the past two decades under Erdoğan, often mirroring the fluctuations in Israeli-Palestinian tensions. In 2009, Erdoğan walked out of a panel with Shimon Peres in Davos, accusing him of killing children. In 2010, a Turkish aid flotilla attempted to breach the Gaza blockade, resulting in a deadly Israeli raid and prolonged tensions between the two nations. Two key factors have shaped Turkey's policy on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. First, Erdoğan views Hamas as a legitimate Palestinian actor, reflecting his ideological alignment with the Muslim Brotherhood. Second, the Palestinian issue is central to Turkey's aspirations for regional leadership, with Erdoğan leveraging neo-Ottomanism to promote this vision to Turkish voters (Aydıntaşbaş & Huggard, 2023).

Moreover, the Industry for Peace initiative is undertaken by the Turkish Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges (TOBB), first in Gaza and then in the West Bank. TOBB aims to carry out the plan to attract investment in these areas, which will employ hundreds of Palestinians. However, the project not only contributes to the employment, private sector development, and economic and

social capability in Palestine, but it also increases security for Israel (Altunisik & Cuhadar, 2010, p. 382). The foreign policy of Turkey during Erdoğan's presidency suggests that reconciliation with Israel has been crucial for Turkey. Turkey sought to regain its role as a mediator by providing leverage over Syria and Israel about the Golan talks in December 2008. The deterioration of relations with Israel prevented Turkey from playing a mediating role between Israel and Hamas during the Pillar of Defense strike on Gaza in December 2012 (Ulusoy, 2020, p. 424). Turkey's status as a neutral country, as well as its human and material capacity, which are considered means for resolution efforts, contribute to Turkey's acceptance by the two sides. Both governments urged for Turkey's help because both Israel and Palestine welcomed their close relations with Turkey and its objective approach. Therefore, Turkish officials took part in shuttle diplomacy between Israel and Palestine to convince them to put an end to the violence and restart negotiations. Turkey, for instance, conveyed messages between Israeli and Palestinian parties for ceasefire talks during the Gaza operation in 2008 (Ayaz Avan, 2019, pp. 686-687).

7. 2. Pakistan

The Palestine cause has always remained a significant pillar of Pakistan's foreign policy, and respective governments of different political inclinations have broadly endorsed the Palestinian people. For example, Pakistan always staunchly supported this cause in multilateral forums and was one of the founding members of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), a Pan-Islamic institution established to adopt a strong and united Muslim stance on the Palestine cause (Karim, 2023). Pakistan's foreign policy has put further Israeli normalization agreements on ice. After the 2020 Abraham Accords, Pakistan was reportedly pressured to recognize

Israel. That pressure was expected to intensify if close ally Saudi Arabia followed suit—a prospect now unlikely anytime soon. Although Pakistan has informally engaged with Israel—cultural activities, intelligence sharing, even a 2005 public meeting of their foreign ministers—the country refuses to recognize Israel until there is a Palestinian state. Pakistan's commitment to the Palestinian cause is not simply rhetorical; it has provided financial support to Palestinian governments—including Hamas—and humanitarian aid to Palestinian civilians (Kugelman, 2023). Perhaps Pakistan would be among the few countries in the Islamic world that have political readiness to embrace Iran's plan for a referendum in Palestinian territory.

7. 3. Malaysia

Malaysia's foreign policy has played a part in fighting for the rights of Palestinians. There are four aspects of basic principles that shape Malaysia's foreign policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Firstly, the Malay people are Muslim and strongly believe in Ummah and the brotherhood. These beliefs influence the foreign policy of the state. Secondly, idiosyncratic Malaysian leadership also contributed to the forming of Malaysia's foreign policy. Thirdly, the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip also influences Malaysia to seek a solution in the Middle East. Ultimately, the weakness of the great powers in dealing with the conflict in the region affects Malaysia's foreign policy toward the Palestinians (Norfatihah Md Yusoff et al., 2021, p. 17). Malaysia has consistently made clear its pro-Palestine views. The Malaysian government is unequivocal in condemning Israel's slaughter in Gaza and endorsing a two-state solution. Malaysia's efforts to guarantee a tangible solution to the

Israel-Palestinian conflict will not succeed without adequate bargaining power over Washington and key Arab states in the region. Due to its lack of diplomatic relations with Israel and a one-sided stance on the issue, Malaysia needs a highly flexible policy concerning the conflict (Yew Keat, 2023).

Nonetheless, Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysian Prime Minister, has asserted that Malaysia will remain firm in its humanitarian aid and condemn Israel's unlawful occupation of Palestine (The Straits Times, 2023). Over the years, Malaysia's increasing support for Palestine was demonstrated in the establishment of several educational and humanitarian centers in Gaza, including Malaysia Quranic Schools, Masjid Imam Shafie, the Malaysian Hall in Gaza, Cinta Gaza Malaysia, and the Malaysian Consultative Council of Islamic Organizations (Faizal Musa, 2024, p. 15). On the other hand, Anwar's decision to disallow Israeli ships to dock in Malaysian ports was a strategic action to boost his international credibility and, at the same time, allowed him to shame his political competitors. It is worth noting that this decision was made around the same time the Houthis began their operations in the Red Sea, which Anwar acknowledged was clearly due to "the Israeli occupation's aggression against Gaza" (Faizal Musa, 2024, p. 22).

Under Hegemonic Stability Theory, the actions of major Islamic states can shape the regional order in the Middle East. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, many Islamic countries, including Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan, have voiced concern and condemnation regarding the occupation of Palestinian territories such as the West Bank and Gaza Strip. These nations are likely to align with Palestine or, at the very least, adopt a neutral stance, driven by the need to respond to prevailing ideological and political currents within the broader Muslim world.

Failing to take such positions could provoke domestic discontent and undermine the legitimacy of these governments, as they might be seen as straying from their people's expectations. Consequently, the hegemonic influence of shared religious and political norms in the region plays a crucial role in shaping their foreign policy decisions.

8. Political Views of Permanent Members of UN Security Council

The UNSC members enjoy the “support” effect of having powerful friends, although they face a “pacifying” impact from the restraint imposed on them. The powerful countries do not want to be drawn into costly conflicts, so they choose pacific candidates for the UNSC and further impose costs for bellicose adventurism. The strategic interaction of adversaries in this setting is complex (Smith & Vreeland , 2023, p. 530). In most cases, UNSC members have decided according to this logic. For example, after the Six Day War (1967), the Israeli military occupied the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Gaza, Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula; the UNSC issued a resolution to prevent more hostile moves by Israel. In November, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 242, which demanded Israel to withdraw not immediately and unconditionally, but in exchange for a negotiated agreement and the cessation of Arab belligerency (Louwerse, 2022, p. 306). In 1973, the Egyptian-Syrian military invaded Israel. Their offensive move compelled Israel and the United States to re-engage with the peace process and eventually concede to Sadat's territorial demands; Israel insisted that any prospective agreement preclude the formation of a Palestinian state in the occupied territories

(Louwerse, 2022, p. 306). Following the war, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 338, calling for a ceasefire and the implementation of resolution 242, as well as negotiations between parties. These two UNSC resolutions would shape the political trajectory of UNSC permanent members regarding the conflict and peace process in the Middle East.

8. 1. The United States

American politicians are divided over what approach has to be taken to the peace process in the region. The Republicans, especially the Trump administration, consider the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a prime irritant that prevents peace and prosperity in the Middle East. Trump adopted a pro-Israel strategy, the so-called 'Peace to Prosperity' plan, also dubbed the 'Deal of the Century,' that placed more obstructions and complexities on the road to Palestinian emancipation while leaving Israeli colonial policies unchecked (Fraihat & Basem, 2024, p. 123). Unlike Republicans, Democrats have prioritized the issue of Palestine and Palestinian rights in their agenda. In 2001, the U.S. Campaign highlighted the urgent need for a new strategy focused on human rights education about Palestine, Israel, and occupation in the U.S. It pointed out that many Americans are largely unaware of the existence and illegality of military occupation in Palestine, the human rights violations associated with it, and the way in which Israel's actions exacerbate these violations. Furthermore, it emphasized the general lack of awareness regarding the U.S.'s financial, diplomatic, and military involvement in the crisis, as well as the true histories of Palestine, Israel, and U.S. engagement in the region (Bennis, 2016, pp. 46-47). Despite this political rhetoric, the Obama administration boosted the financial support to Israel to US\$4 billion annually and put slight pressure on Israel to end its

atrocities against Palestinians. Many commentators have paid attention to the blatant bias of the US administration toward Israel. Noam Chomsky, for instance, pointed out that US imperial policy has been based consistently on a pro-Zionist bias among American politicians, media, and intellectuals (Fraihat & Basem, 2024, p. 122). Even some analysts argue that the Gaza War not only highlights the illusion of American hegemony in the Middle East, but also signifies the decline of America's unipolar influence in the region. Similar to Iran, Hamas has entirely rejected the American "peace process" in the Arab-Israeli context. Generally, Islamic states have opposed the American initiative aimed at achieving Arab-Israeli peace, which has been a cornerstone of U.S. policy in the region for decades, despite the significant influence that the United States wields in the Middle East (Gause, 2024).

The United States, a key ally of Israel, is a dominant power in the Middle East and has historically opposed Palestinian initiatives that threaten Israel's security or legitimacy. The U.S. has played a central role in shaping the peace process, frequently vetoing UN resolutions that support Palestinian sovereignty or referendums.

8. 2. Russia

Relations between Russia and Israel have seen numerous ups and downs since the establishment of Israel in 1948. President Putin uses the new relationship with Israel to glorify Russia's status in the Middle East. He sees Israel as a significant pillar of Russian foreign policy in the region (Hill & Huggard, 2024). Russia was determined to maintain dialogue with both Israel and its enemies: Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, and Syria. This move enabled Russia to obtain position recognition and introduce itself as a great power

and an essential mediator in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Israel had tolerated Russia's preexisting relations with its foe and Hamas-backer Iran, but Moscow's vocal support for Hamas following the attack in Israel on October 7 is seen as a step too far (Czerny, 2023). By adopting this approach, Russia seeks greater stability in the Middle East. Chaos in the region is a blow to Russian interests. These include blunting violent Islamic extremism that has targeted Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union, such as Tajikistan (Cafiero, 2024). Moreover, Russia made an effort in recent years to reconcile Hamas with Fatah; however, despite a constant diplomatic effort, Moscow could not forge a reconciliation between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, and was even unable to release all the Russian citizens who Hamas held despite all that Russia had done diplomatically for the Palestinian organization (Freedman, 2024). Meanwhile, Moscow has consistently endorsed a two-state solution and the establishment of a Palestinian state. From 2002, it was a member of the so-called 'quartet', a group of four (UN, US, EU, and Russia) aimed to resolve the conflict (Nixey & Kozhanov, 2024). The future of Russian-Israeli relations is uncertain, hinging on Israel's stance towards the Palestinian issue. If Israel continues to reject a two-state solution and opts for a predominantly Jewish state, it may jeopardize its democratic identity. Current hardline policies under Netanyahu suggest a preference for a Jewish state, which could alienate Western democracies. However, Russia, favoring authoritarian stability, may become a more favorable partner for Israel (Katz, 2021, p. 127).

Using hegemonic stability theory (HST), we can interpret Russia's actions and strategies in the Middle East as efforts to establish and maintain a stable regional order under its leadership.

Russia's engagement with Israel and its complex relationships with Iran, Syria, Hamas, and Hezbollah illustrate its ambition to be recognized as the central power in the region. According to HST, Russia's stability in the Middle East is linked to its attempts to prevent chaos that could threaten its security interests. The failure to mediate reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, despite ongoing diplomatic efforts, underscores the limitations of Russia's influence and how its inability to resolve conflicts undermines its hegemonic goals. Nonetheless, Russia's support for a two-state solution and its membership in the Quartet demonstrate its commitment to shaping the broader framework for peace in the Middle East. In the context of good relations with Israel and Hamas, Russia's increased presence in the Middle East poses a significant challenge for the West in the foreseeable future. By operating as a great power with a global reach, contemporary Russia openly supports groups such as Hamas to counterbalance the U.S. in the region (Rumer & Weiss, 2024).

8. 3. China

China's ties with Palestine, which are intertwined with its general Middle East approach, have deep historical roots. China officially recognized Palestine in 1988, but bilateral relations began in 1965. In the same year, the Palestine Liberation Organization opened a representative office in China, which was converted to embassy level in 1974. On the other hand, Israel is one of the Middle Eastern countries in which China has invested. Many of these investments are related to the Belt and Road Initiative. China wants to continue its increased collaboration with the Persian Gulf states by taking advantage of the Palestine issue. Beijing seeks to

strengthen anti-U.S. policies in the region by including Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iraq in its ongoing cooperation with Iran and Russia (Çalışkan, 2023).

As China attempted to boost its influence in the Middle East, Hamas, and Fatah leaders met in Beijing to conduct Chinese-led unity talks that have failed to deliver results. Hamas's political chief, Ismail Haniyeh, led Hamas's delegation at the negotiations, while Fatah was represented by three officials, including Fatah's deputy chairman, Mahmoud al-Aloul. In addition, China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, met with the two sides, while the parties met on their own in between (Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2024). Reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah will strengthen the legitimacy of the Palestinian movement. It may also reinforce Fatah and moderate the Islamist group Hamas. China is increasingly considering Hamas as a legitimate political force in Palestine's future and statehood, avoiding condemning or recognizing the group as a terrorist organization (Sun, 2024). Given the efforts of China to bring the divides between Palestinians to an end, it is a long-time proponent for independent Palestine to coexist with Israel. In this regard, Xi Jinping, the Chinese President, has asserted that a "two-state solution" was the fundamental way out from "the cycle of conflicts" between Israel and Palestinians (Ziwen, 2023). In general, the proposition China follows as "First establish an independent Palestinian State enjoying full sovereignty based on the 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital, and at the same time fully respecting Israel's rights to exist and its legitimate security concerns; Second, negotiation should be taken as the only way to peace, and the immediate priority is to take credible steps to stop settlement activities, end violence against innocent civilians, lift the blockade of the Gaza Strip and properly

handle the issue of Palestinian prisoners to create the necessary conditions for the resumption of peace talks; Third, principles such as 'land for peace' should be firmly upheld; Fourth, the international community should provide an important guarantee for pushing forward the peace process" (Liu & He, 2017, pp. 35-36). In fact, China, as an active participant in the region, has supported the independence of Palestine (Olimat, 2023, p. 19). Its stance on Middle East affairs indicates that China disagrees with Israel on the future of Palestine (Zhu, 2023, p. 180). China perceives the steadfast support of Israel by the United States as an opportunity for exploitation. Consequently, it employs its condemnation of Israel and advocates for a two-state solution to position itself as a more appealing ally in the broader Middle East. Additionally, China has consistently utilized its state-run media to criticize U.S. policies regarding Palestine, attributing the deteriorating humanitarian situation to U.S. support for Israel (Shirazi, 2023). China is unlikely to acknowledge Iran's plan regarding Palestinian territory, especially as it aims to act as a mediator to promote a two-state solution. Its increasing interests in the Middle East, fueled by economic ambitions and energy needs, complicate its role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By maintaining a neutral stance, China aims to avoid alienating Israel and moderate Arab states, thus preserving its credibility as a mediator and ensuring regional stability amid the competing influences of the U.S. and Russia.

8. 4. Britain

Britain was among several actors who considered the two-state vision an opportunity. Through the framework of the Quartet (the UN, EU, US, and Russia), Britain planned to develop a road map that would chart the path to the realization of peace in the Middle

East. (Hollis, 2010, p. 142). Britain was more engaged in the Middle East than it was and is currently an apparent mediator there. Moreover, the country decreases £90 million from its conflict prevention budgets in the Middle East and North Africa. Britain will have to make difficult choices if it seeks more significant involvement in the Middle East peace process. Furthermore, if it is willing to engage more or differently in the Middle East, it will have to balance the views of old and new allies (O'Sullivan, 2023). Despite Britain's critical strategic and economic interests in the Middle East, the region has yet to be a priority for British overseas development assistance. Therefore, the British foreign policy toward Palestine has been criticized across the board, affecting its reputation in the region (Belbagi, 2024).

Recently, the country declared it could officially recognize a Palestinian state after a cease-fire in Gaza without waiting for the results of what could be talks between Israel and the Palestinians concerning a two-state solution (Abuelgasim, 2024). Britain's ties with Israel had prospered despite the lack of any progress toward a resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Britain decided to leave the European Union in June 2016, which Israel saw as an opportunity to promote trade with London. Britain is now one of Israel's most important export markets after the United States, having reached a Trade and Partnership Agreement (TPA) with Israel in January 2021 (Bermant, 2024). Britain, as one of the crucial allies of Israel in Europe, claims it supports the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. However, its military and diplomatic support of Israel indicates that it is not sincere. Meanwhile, there is hope that the labor government would adopt a more moderate and fairer stance toward Palestinians, although no one expects it to consider

Iran's proposal as a severe plan for bringing peace to the Middle East.

8. 5. France

The formal recognition of a Palestinian state has been the long-term goal of Western countries, such as Ireland, Norway, and Spain, endorsing a two-state solution for Israel and the Palestinian conflict. But with Israel's war against Hamas continuing, some countries are moving towards state recognition as a political gesture. However, France stands by its decision not to recognize a Palestinian state (Caulcutt & von der Burchard, 2024). Since October 2023, the French authority has repressed the expressions of outrage by civil society, students, and media personalities at the humanitarian impact of Israel's war against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. It has created a growing distance between the political class and French society (Massena, 2024). As the war in Gaza continues, the French government is seeking to distance itself from the Israeli genocide in Gaza and the US-led support of this genocide. The move of France has three reasons. First of all, Houthi's strategic move to target any ship coming or going to Israel is ultimately disrupting traffic in the Red Sea through one of the world's busiest commercial waterways, Bab Al-Mandab. Secondly, France is a close ally of Arab states. Unlike Washington, Paris' diplomacy in the Middle East is not predicated on military action per se. However, it was involved in the US' so-called war on terror, the anti-ISIS alliance. Furthermore, France tries to manipulate the Iran-Arab rift, in addition to the rift in Lebanon between Hezbollah and the other pro-France political forces in the country. Thirdly, France is experiencing social instability. The French society is far from docile, with various social and political issues often

intersecting. Most progressive groups in France view Palestine as a crucial aspect of their fight for justice and equality (The Palestine Chronicle, 2024). Although some parts of French society may endorse the Palestinians, the French government is willing to show its commitment to a two-state solution. Meanwhile, France would not abandon its pro-Israeli policies shortly. Undoubtedly, France would continue to support Israel militarily, so that the regime can defend itself against regional threats.

9. Conclusion

Applying Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) to Iran's proposal for resolving the Palestinian question reveals that the current international order, shaped by influential global powers, presents significant challenges to Iran's plan. HST posits that the stability and effectiveness of the international system often hinge on the leadership of a dominant power that provides public goods and enforces rules. In this context, the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has emerged as the prevailing paradigm, largely promoted by hegemonic powers such as the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations. Although these international actors differ on certain aspects of the conflict, they largely agree that the two-state solution is the most viable path to peace.

Iran's proposal, which opposes the two-state solution, competes with this established order and struggles to gain widespread acceptance. The hegemonic powers and international institutions supporting the two-state framework play a crucial role in maintaining this stability, making it difficult for alternative proposals like Iran's to gain traction. These dominant actors shape

global norms and have entrenched a solution that aligns with their geopolitical interests and ideological beliefs.

The broad support for the two-state solution from entities like the United Nations, the Quartet, and major global players such as the United States and Russia highlights the hegemonic control these powers exert over international diplomacy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They influence the legal and political discourse surrounding Palestine and dictate the terms of international support, particularly concerning the recognition of Israel's right to exist and the legitimacy of Palestinian governance structures, such as the Palestinian Authority (PA).

From the HST perspective, Iran's proposal must navigate a system dominated by hegemonic powers. Despite Iran's legal arguments—asserting that all Palestinian territories belong to the Palestinian people—these ideas struggle to disrupt the existing balance of power. Iran faces resistance not only from Western powers, but also from factions within Palestinian society, including the PA, which has traditionally engaged with the international community through the two-state framework.

To advance its proposal, Iran must first address the lack of consensus among Palestinian factions. The PLO's central role in negotiations with Israel and the international community complicate Iran's push for an alternative solution, particularly since Iran's proposal does not incorporate the PLO into its framework. Additionally, the failure to secure the support of key global actors, including Russia and China, who have publicly endorsed the two-state solution, poses a significant hurdle for Iran's ambitions.

According to HST, Iran's ability to shift the international order and promote its proposal depends on its capacity to build coalitions

with other global powers, especially within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). This coalition-building might challenge the hegemonic framework surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian issue. However, as long as the current hegemonic powers dominate the discourse and enforce the two-state solution, Iran's plan is likely to encounter substantial obstacles.

Therefore, Iran has to take several steps to introduce its plan and encourage other states to endorse the holding of a referendum in Palestine. First, Iran needs to convince all Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) members to support Iran's plan. Iran must cooperate with members of the OIC to forge a coalition to advance the proposal in other international institutions. Secondly, the Islamic Republic of Iran, like China, needs to play the role of mediator in the conflict and make an effort to reconcile between Palestinian factions. With a consensus among Palestinians regarding Iran's proposal, Iran will be able to implement its plan. Ultimately, Iran has to dissuade Russia and China from endorsing the two-state solution.

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