

Iran's Obsession with the Jews

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On December 12, 2006, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad personally brought to a close the infamous Holocaust deniers' conference in Tehran. A strange parade of speakers had passed across the podium: former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, the nutty followers of the anti-Zionist Jewish sect Neturei Karta, and officials of the neo-Nazi German National party, along with the familiar handful of professional Holocaust deniers. Frederick Töben had delivered a lecture entitled "The Holocaust--A Murder Weapon." Frenchman Robert Faurisson had called the Holocaust a "fairy tale," while his American colleague Veronica Clark had explained that "the Jews made money in Auschwitz." A professor named McNally had declared that to regard the Holocaust as a fact is as ludicrous as believing in "magicians and witches." Finally, the Belgian Leonardo Clerici had offered the following explanation in his capacity as a Muslim: "I believe that the value of metaphysics is greater than the value of history."

If this motley crew had assembled in a pub in Melbourne, nobody would have paid the slightest attention. What gave the event historical significance was that it was held by invitation, at the Iranian foreign ministry: on government premises, in a country that disposes of the world's second-largest oil reserves (after Saudi Arabia) and second-largest natural gas reserves (after Russia). And in this setting, the remarks quoted above provoked not dismissive laughter, but applause and attentive nods. On the walls hung photographs of corpses with the inscription "Myth," and others of laughing concentration camp survivors with the inscription "Truth."

The Tehran deniers' conference marks a turning point not only because of its state sponsorship, but also because of its purpose. Up until now, Holocaust deniers have wanted to revise the past. Today, they want to shape the future: to prepare the way for the next Holocaust.

In his opening speech to the conference, the Iranian foreign minister, Manucher Mottaki, left no doubt on this point: If "the official version of the Holocaust is called into question," Mottaki said, then "the nature and identity of Israel" must also be called into question. The purpose of denying, among all the Nazis' war measures, specifically the persecution of the Jews is to undermine a central motive for the establishment of the state of Israel. Auschwitz is

delegitimized in order to legitimize the elimination of Israel--that is, a second genocide. If it should turn out, however, that the Holocaust did happen after all, Ahmadinejad explains that it would have been a result of European policies, and any homeland for the Jews would belong not in Palestine but in Europe. Either way, the result is the same: Israel must vanish.

This focus explains why the conference's sponsors attached so much importance to the participation of a delegation from the Jewish sect Neturei Karta. Although it does not deny the Holocaust, the sect welcomes the destruction of Israel. That objective was the common denominator uniting all the participants in the conference. In his closing speech, Ahmadinejad formulated it with perfect clarity: "The life-curve of the Zionist regime has begun its descent, and it is now on a downward slope towards its fall. . . . The Zionist regime will be wiped out, and humanity will be liberated."

Holocaust denial and the nuclear program

Just as Hitler sought to "liberate" humanity by murdering the Jews, so Ahmadinejad believes he can "liberate" humanity by eradicating Israel. The deniers' conference as an instrument for propagating this project is intimately linked to the nuclear program as an instrument for realizing it. Five years ago, in December 2001, former Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani first boasted that "the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything," whereas the damage to the Islamic world of a potential retaliatory nuclear attack could be limited: "It is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality." While the Islamic world could sacrifice hundreds of thousands of "martyrs" in an Israeli retaliatory strike without disappearing--so goes Rafsanjani's argument--Israel would be history after the first bomb.

It is precisely this suicidal outlook that distinguishes the Iranian nuclear weapons program from those of all other countries and makes it uniquely dangerous. As long ago as 1980, Khomeini put it this way: "We do not worship Iran, we worship Allah. For patriotism is another name for paganism. I say let this land [Iran] burn. I say let this land go up in smoke, provided Islam emerges triumphant in the rest of the world."

Anyone inclined to dismiss the significance of such statements might want to consider the proclamation made by Mohammad Hassan Rahimian, representative of the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who stands even higher in the Iranian hierarchy than Ahmadinejad. A

few months ago, on November 16, 2006, Rahimian explained: "The Jew"--not the Zionist, note, but the Jew--"is the most obstinate enemy of the devout. And the main war will determine the destiny of mankind. . . . The reappearance of the Twelfth Imam will lead to a war between Israel and the Shia." The country that has been the first to make Holocaust denial a principle of its foreign policy is likewise the first openly to threaten another U.N. member state with, not invasion or annexation, but annihilation.

Yet it's all confusing. Why, if Iran wishes Israel ill, does it deny the Holocaust rather than applaud it? Ahmadinejad's Holocaust denial has been especially well received in the Arab world, where it has won praise from Hezbollah, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas. Yet in the Arab world, Hitler is admired not for building highways or conquering Paris, but for murdering Jews. How can Holocaust denial be most prevalent in a region where admiration for Hitler remains widespread? To unlock this paradox it is necessary to examine the anti-Semitic mind.

Brother Hitler and Eichmann the Martyr

Holocaust denial is anti-Semitism at its most extreme. Whoever declares Auschwitz a myth implicitly portrays the Jews as the enemy of humanity: The assumption is that the all-powerful Jews, for filthy lucre, have been duping the rest of humanity for the past 60 years. Whoever talks of the "so-called Holocaust" implies that over 90 percent of the world's media and university professorships are controlled by Jews and are thereby cut off from the "real" truth. No one who accuses Jews of such perfidy can sincerely regret Hitler's Final Solution. For this reason alone, every denial of the Holocaust contains an appeal to repeat it.

Consider this passage written by an Egyptian columnist for the state-controlled newspaper *Al-Akhbar*, Egypt's second-largest daily, and published in April 2002:

The entire matter [of the Holocaust], as many French and British scientists and researchers have proven, is nothing more than a huge Israeli plot aimed at extorting the German government in particular and the European countries in general. But I, personally and in light of this imaginary tale, complain to Hitler, even saying to him from the bottom of my heart, "If only you had done it, brother, if only it had really happened, so that the world could sigh in relief [without] their evil and sin."

Often, however, enthusiasm for the Holocaust is expressed unvarnished. In 1961, when the trial of Adolf Eichmann dominated the headlines, such enthusiasm became evident for the first time. The Jordanian *Jerusalem Times* published an "Open Letter to Eichmann," which stated: "By liquidating six million you have . . . conferred a real blessing on humanity. . . .

But the brave Eichmann can find solace in the fact that this trial will one day culminate in the liquidation of the remaining six million to avenge your blood." Arab writers such as Abdullah al-Tall eulogized "the martyr Eichmann," "who fell in the Holy War." In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt summarized the mood in the Arab world:

The newspapers in Damascus and Beirut, in Cairo and Jordan did not conceal either their sympathy for Eichmann or their regret that he "did not finish the job"; a radio broadcast from Cairo on the opening day of the trial even included a little sideswipe at the Germans, reproaching them for the fact that "in the last war, no German plane had ever flown over and bombed a Jewish settlement."

This heartfelt desire to see all Jews exterminated was reiterated in the Egyptian daily *Al-Akhbar* in April 2001 by the columnist Ahmad Ragab: "[Give] thanks to Hitler. He took revenge on the Israelis in advance, on behalf of the Palestinians. Our one complaint against him was that his revenge was not complete enough."

Obviously, from a logical point of view, enthusiasm for the Holocaust is incompatible with its denial. Logic, however, is beside the point. Anti-Semitism is built upon an emotional infrastructure that substitutes for reason an ephemeral combination of mutually exclusive attributions, all arising from hatred of everything Jewish. As a result, many contradictory anti-Jewish interpretations of the Holocaust can be deployed simultaneously: (1) the extermination of millions was a good thing; (2) the extermination of millions was a Zionist fabrication; (3) the Holocaust resulted from a Jewish conspiracy against Germany that Hitler thwarted and punished; (4) the Holocaust was a joint enterprise of the Zionists and Nazis; (5) the Zionists' "Holocaust industry" exaggerates the murder of the Jews for self-interested reasons; (6) Israeli actions against the Palestinians are the "true" Holocaust--and so on.

We are dealing here with a parallel universe in which the reality principle is ignored, and blatantly contradictory fantasies about Jews all have their place so long as they serve to

reinforce anti-Semitic paranoia and hatred: a universe in which the laws of reason have been abolished and all mental energy is harnessed to the cause of anti-Semitism.

Amid the confusion, this universe is characterized by two constants: the refusal to come to terms with the facts of the Holocaust as it actually took place; and a willingness to find in the Holocaust a source of encouragement and inspiration, a precedent proving that it is possible to murder Jews by the million. This is why the precise content of Ahmadinejad's Holocaust tirades is not the issue. He is obsessed with the subject because he is fascinated by the possibility of a second Holocaust.

Why, then, did Ahmadinejad repeatedly and publicly embrace the ultra-orthodox Jews at the conference? Why did he personally greet every Jew present and say that "Zionism should be strictly separated from the Jewish faith"? Let us take a look at modern anti-Semitism in Iran.

Ahmadinejad and the Jews

Ahmadinejad's great inspiration, the Ayatollah Khomeini, not only recognized the mobilizing power of anti-Semitism in the struggle against the shah, he made use of it himself, as far back as the 1960s. "I know that you do not want Iran to lie under the boots of the Jews," he cried out to his supporters on April 13, 1963. That same year, he called the shah a Jew in disguise and accused him of taking orders from Israel. This drew a huge response from the public. Khomeini had found his theme.

Khomeini's biographer Amir Taheri writes: "The Ayatollah was by now convinced that the central political theme of contemporary life was an elaborate and highly complex conspiracy by the Jews--'who controlled everything'--to 'emasculate Islam' and dominate the world thanks to the natural wealth of the Muslim nations." When in June 1963 thousands of Khomeini-influenced theology students set off to Tehran for a demonstration and were brutally stopped by the shah's security forces, Khomeini channeled all their anger toward the Jewish nation: "Israel does not want the Koran to survive in this country. . . . It is destroying us. It is destroying you and the nation. It wants to take possession of the economy. It wants to demolish our trade and agriculture. It wants to grab the wealth of the country."

After the Six Day War of 1967, the anti-Semitic agitation, which drew no distinction between Jews and Israelis, intensified. "[I]t was [the Jews] who first established anti-Islamic propaganda and engaged in various stratagems, and as you can see, this activity continues

down to the present," Khomeini wrote in 1970 in his principal work, *Islamic Government*. "[T]he Jews . . . wish to establish Jewish domination throughout the world. Since they are a cunning and resourceful group of people, I fear that . . . they may one day achieve their goal." Then in September 1977, he declared, "The Jews have grasped the world with both hands and are devouring it with an insatiable appetite, they are devouring America and have now turned their attention to Iran and still they are not satisfied." Two years later, Khomeini was the unchallenged leader of the Iranian revolution.

Khomeini's anti-Semitic attacks found favor with the opponents of the shah, both leftists and Islamists. His anti-Semitism ran along the same lines as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the turn-of-the-century hoax beloved of the Nazis that purports to expose a Jewish conspiracy to rule the world. *The Protocols* was published in Persian in the summer of 1978 and was widely disseminated as a weapon against the shah, Israel, and the Jews. In 1984, the newspaper *Imam*, published by the Iranian embassy in London, printed excerpts from *The Protocols*. In 1985, Iranian state authorities did a mass printing of a new edition. Somewhat later, the periodical *Eslami* serialized *The Protocols* under the title "The Smell of Blood: Jewish Conspiracies."

Just two years ago, in 2005, at the Iranian booth at the Frankfurt Book Fair, I was readily able to buy an English edition of *The Protocols* published by the Islamic Propagation Organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Other anti-Semitic classics were also available, such as Henry Ford's *The International Jew* and Mohammad Taqi Taqipour's screed *Tale of the "Chosen People" and the Legend of "Historical Right."* The cover of the latter volume caught my eye: a red Star of David superimposed over a grey skull and a yellow map of the world. Obviously, even after the death of Khomeini in 1989, the worldwide dissemination of anti-Semitism by Iran continued.

The fact that 25,000 Jews now live in Iran, making it the largest Jewish community in a Muslim country, is not incompatible with the foregoing. The Jews in Iran are made clearly to feel their subordinate Dhimmi status. Thus, they are not allowed to occupy higher positions than Muslims and so are disqualified from the leading ranks in politics and the military. They are not allowed to serve as witnesses in court, and Jewish schools must be managed by Muslims and stay open on the Sabbath. Books in the Hebrew language are forbidden. Up to the present, the regime, which has time and again published anti-Semitic texts and caricatures, has prevented such hate-mongering from resulting in violence against Jews. Nevertheless, the

combination of incitement and restraint leaves the Jewish community in a state of permanent insecurity. Today, the Jewish community serves Ahmadinejad not only as an alibi in his power game, but also increasingly as a deterrent: In the event of an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities, this community would find itself hostage and vulnerable to acts of reprisal.

Irrespective of the leeway that Ahmadinejad has, for the time being, left the Iranian Jews, his rhetoric is steeped in an anti-Semitism that is unprecedented for a state leader since World War II. Ahmadinejad does not say "Jews" are conspiring to rule the world. He says, "Two thousand Zionists want to rule the world." He says, "The Zionists" have for 60 years now blackmailed "all Western governments." "The Zionists have imposed themselves on a substantial portion of the banking, financial, cultural, and media sectors." "The Zionists" fabricated the Danish Muhammad cartoons. "The Zionists" are responsible for the destruction of the dome of the Golden Mosque in Iraq.

The pattern is familiar. Ahmadinejad is not a racist social Darwinist who, Hitler-like, wants to eliminate every last trace of "Jewish blood." The term "half-Jew" is not used in Islamist discourse. But he invests the word "Zionist" with exactly the same meaning Hitler poured into "Jew": the incarnation of evil.

The Iranian regime can court the Jewish Israel-haters of Neturei Karta all it wants, but anyone who makes Jews responsible for the ills of the world--whether calling them Judas or Zionists--is clearly driven by an anti-Semitism of genocidal potential. Demonization of Jews, Holocaust denial, and the will to eliminate Israel--these are the three elements of an ideological constellation that collapses as soon as any one of them is removed.

Ahmadinejad inhabits a delusional world that is sealed off from reality. The louder the liberal West protests against Holocaust denial or the Islamists' demands for the destruction of Israel, the more convinced Ahmadinejad becomes of Zionist domination. In a conversation with the editors of the German newsweekly *Der Spiegel*, the Iranian president reacted as follows to the remark that the magazine does not question Israel's right to exist: "I am glad that you are honest people and say that you are required to support the Zionists." Only when we too finally realize that the Holocaust is a Jewish lie--only when we too want to annihilate Israel--only then will Ahmadinejad be convinced that we are academically credible and politically free. It is this lunacy that makes the revolutionary mission of the Iranian leadership so dangerous.

Which brings us to the question of the broader significance of Iranian Holocaust denial. The Islamist mission is by no means restricted to Israel.

"Historical War"

In his first speech on the guiding principles of his politics, Ahmadinejad made this clear: "We are in the process of an historical war, . . . and this war has been going on for hundreds of years," he declared in October 2005. This is a war, then, that is not fundamentally about the Middle East conflict and will not end with the elimination of Israel. He continued: "We have to understand the depth of the disgrace of the enemy, until our holy hatred expands continuously and strikes like a wave." This "holy hatred" is boundless and unconditional. It will not be mitigated by any form of Jewish or non-Jewish conduct--other than subordination to *sharia* and the Koran.

In his letter to George W. Bush, the Iranian president described his objective: "Those with insight can already hear the sounds of the shattering and fall of the ideology and thoughts of the liberal democratic systems." The letter also tells how the liberal democracies will be shattered. Even here (if slightly diluted), the ideology of martyrdom--*You love life, we love death*--is propagated: "A bad ending belongs only to those who have chosen the life of this world. . . . A good land and eternal paradise belong to those servants who fear His majesty and do not follow their lascivious selves."

Shiite Islamism confronts us with an adversary who reviles the achievements of modernity as Satan's work, who denounces the international system created after 1945 as a "Jewish-Christian conspiracy," and who therefore wishes to overturn the accepted historiography of the postwar period. At the start of the Holocaust deniers' conference, Foreign Minister Mottaki explained that the problem is the "wording of historical occurrences and their analysis [are written from] the perspective of the West." As against this "Western" historiography, Islamism wants to create a new historical "truth," in which the Holocaust is declared a myth, while the Twelfth Imam is deemed real. Whereas the delusional worldview of Holocaust denial is elevated to the norm, any deviation from it is denounced as a symptom of "Jewish domination."

Even as he is conducting his religious war, Ahmadinejad is also playing the role of a global populist. He addresses his speeches to all the world's "oppressed." He cultivates good relations with Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez and ingratiates himself with the Western left by using anti-American rhetoric. His use of the word "Zionist" is strategic. It is the Trojan horse by which he makes his anti-Semitism respectable, allowing him to be at once an anti-Semite and Holocaust denier and the ultimate spokesman for the "oppressed nations."

Of course, Iran would not have to rely on Holocaust denial to pursue its strategic objectives. Yet Ahmadinejad insists on the point, in order to provide ideological undergirding to his push to destroy Israel. He also speculates that this project might win the approval of the Europeans. After all, in Europe the delegitimization of Israel has been going on for some time--if for different reasons. Recently the BBC organized a symposium on the question of whether Israel would still exist in 50 years. In a poll taken four years ago in the E.U., 59 percent saw Israel as "the biggest danger to world peace." Even in the United States, a growing number of intellectuals are convinced that Israel and its American supporters are the real source of the problems facing American foreign policy. The alarm cannot be sounded loudly enough. If Iran is not put under pressure without delay and forced to choose between changing course and suffering devastating economic sanctions, the only remaining alternatives will be a bad one--the military option--and a dreadful one--the Iranian bomb.

This article was translated from German by Michael Bugajer and John Rosenthal.