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Iranian Holocaust denial

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Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues and friends,

I am very pleased that you have decided to devote the whole of this event to the topic of Iranian Holocaust Denial. Iran's machinations now lie at the centre of world politics. But only rarely is attention paid to the unique ideological atmosphere that makes the Iranian nuclear program especially dangerous.

Holocaust denial is certainly the cruellest aspect of this ideology. Whoever denies the Holocaust kills the victims a second time. To destroy the memory of the victims completes the work of their extermination. The denial of the Holocaust is also its most bewildering aspect – for there is no other crime in history that has been so precisely described by perpetrators, victims, and external observers.

Most people turn aside from things that are especially cruel or bewildering. They refuse to ask “why?” or consider the possible consequences of this Holocaust denial for Israel and the world. I think our task is to do the opposite. We have to take the Iranian leader's denial of the Holocaust seriously as a specific outlook with its own principles and history and we have to think about the effects of this outlook - even if this involves insights which may send a shiver down the spine.

Let me start with the infamous Holocaust deniers' conference in Tehran which took place on December 2006. This conference was called: “Review of

the Holocaust: Global vision". I will come back to these last words – “global vision” - later.

It was Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad himself who brought this conference to a close. 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."

Had such a gathering taken place in a pub somewhere in Alaska, hardly anyone would have paid any attention. The gathering took on historical significance only because it happened by invitation and on the premises of the Iranian foreign ministry: hosted by the government of a country that disposes of the world's largest oil reserves after Saudi Arabia and the largest natural gas reserves after Russia, hosted by a government, that at the same time adorns its public spaces with photos of corpses with the caption “myth”, and photos of laughing concentration camp survivors with the caption “truth.”

This conference was only the culmination of a campaign that started in October 2005 with Ahmadinejad's threat of a war of aggression: "This regime that is occupying Qods [Jerusalem] must be eliminated from the pages of history."¹ His words elicited strong international criticism. Nonetheless two months later, in December 2005, Ahmadinejad adopted a still more aggressive tone. Now he treated the Holocaust as the object of his scorn. If Europe continues to insist that there was a Holocaust, he suggested, then it should be consistent and transplant Israel to Bavaria for

¹ MEMRI Special Dispatch Series , No. 1013, October 28, 2005
(<http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=countries&Area=iran&ID=SP101305>)

the Holocaust was not the Palestinians' fault. Iran, in any case, does not "accept this claim."²

Since December 2005, the "lie about the Holocaust" has become a regular topic of televised Friday sermons in Iran.³ Talk shows on public television had featured a parade of historians who mock the "fairy tale about the gas chambers." The Iranian state press agency has developed into a platform for Holocaust deniers from all over the world. The religious centre of Qom has announced the launching of new research projects with titles like "Investigation into the Reasons and Justifications of Holocaust-Defenders" or "Overview of English and Arabic Works that Call into Question the Holocaust".⁴ Prominent backers of Ahmadinejad have insisted upon the establishment of a "Truth Commission", because "Western governments do not authorize any information that would allow us to learn what really went on during the Second World War."⁵ Since February 2006, Ahmadinejad placed Holocaust denial at the very centre of his agitation.

Never before had the leadership of a nation made denial of the Shoah a governmental policy at every level of societal life. Never before had the self-image of the United Nations, forged in light of the experience of Auschwitz, been more provocatively called into question.

But there is something else completely new. The novelty of Ahmadinejad's speeches consists in his fusing Holocaust denial with a rhetoric of liberation. Speaking to a rally on February 11, 2006, he mocked at the Europeans by proclaiming that "it is a crime [in Europe] to ask questions about the myth of the Holocaust": "They are allowed to study anything except for the Holocaust myth. Are these not medieval methods? ... On the face of it, the technology has changed, but the culture and the way of thinking remain medieval."⁶

Here, Ahmadinejad had found the theme that he would subsequently return to at every possible opportunity. He is the first to celebrate the intellectual

² MEMRI, Special Report, No. 39, January 5, 2006 (<http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sr&ID=SR3906>).

³ MEMRI, Special Report, No. 39, January 5, 2006 (<http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sr&ID=SR3906>).

⁴ "Aufschwung für Holocaust-Zweifler in Iran", *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, January 16, 2006.

⁵ Philipp Wittrock, "Unser Präsident meint es nur gut", *Spiegel Online*, February 17, 2006.

⁶ MEMRI, *Special Dispatch Series*, No. 1091, February 14, 2006 (<http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP109106>).

and moral crime of Holocaust denial in the stance of a freedom fighter. Until 2006, we were used to associating Holocaust denial with the self-styled "expert" opinions of individual cranks in various countries or with the small disparate band of neo-Nazis. Until 2006, the Holocaust deniers, ostracized by society as obscurantists, had to struggle for every millimetre of respectability they could muster. Now, Ahmadinejad has reversed the customary roles: it is not the Holocaust denier who has to justify himself – but the non-denier. It is not the denier who must struggle for his personal freedom – it is rather the non-deniers – like Tony Blair, for example – who are not free.

“It would be good for Mr. Blair to participate in the Holocaust seminar in Tehran,” the spokesperson for the Iranian Foreign Ministry, Hamid Reza Asefi, had explained, since at the conference Blair would be able to “say the kind of things he cannot say in London.”⁷ But who was it that suppressed freedom of opinion at 10 Downing Street? In this connection as well, Ahmadinejad had a ready answer: “The pillaging Zionist regime has managed, for 60 years, to extort all Western governments on the basis of this myth [of the Holocaust].They are hostages in the hands of the Zionists.”⁸ Here we have it again: It is not the denier who must struggle for his freedom; it is rather the non-deniers – like Tony Blair, for example – who are not free but suppressed by Zionist Jews.

The “Holocaust International Cartoon Contest” announced by the Iranian newspaper *Hamshahri* in February 2006 confirmed this new form of Holocaust denial: creative, modern, unrestrained, and extremely self-assertive. *Hamshahri* has the largest circulation of any paper in Iran and it is publicly owned by the city of Tehran. The newspaper received over 1,000 submissions from 62 countries. In fall 2006, a selection of 200 cartoons was exhibited in the Palestine Museum in Tehran. This was undoubtedly the first internationally publicised exhibition of anti-Semitic art since 1945. The exhibit was opened by Saffar Harandi, the Iranian Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The ambassador of Lebanon and the representative of the

⁷ "Iran Sends Blair Invitation to Holocaust Conference", *Deutsche Welle*, 18 January 2006.

⁸ MEMRI, *Special Dispatch Series*, No. 1091, 14 February 2006 (<http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP109106>).

Palestinian territories figured among the foreign dignitaries present.⁹ The first prize of \$12,000 went to a cartoon by a Moroccan that drew parallels between Israel's security barrier and Auschwitz. The second and third prizes went to cartoons that present the Holocaust as a crude fabrication. The former depicts a stage backdrop that has been knocked over and that is meant to represent a gas chamber and crematorium: "Who knocked that down?" one Jew asks; "Faurrison," replies another. The latter shows two grinning soldiers above a freshly dug mass grave in which they are placing not real corpses, but merely paper cut-outs. There appear, then, not to have been real victims.¹⁰

What interest does the Iranian leadership have in calling into question the factuality of the Holocaust? After all, Iranians can look back on a 3,000-year history of cohabitation with Jews. So why this distortion of reality? My answer to this question – the question "why?" – is divided into three parts. The first I have called "Holocaust denial and Israel", the second "Holocaust denial and the historical war" and the third "Holocaust denial and the nuclear program".

Holocaust denial and Israel

My first proposition is the most obvious: Holocaust denial is motivated by antisemitism and its direct purpose is to contribute to the destruction of Israel. The Iranian leaders, however, do not at all regard themselves as antisemites. "We are friends with the Jewish people", stated Ahmadinejad when he spoke at Columbia university last year. Moreover, the 25,000 or so Jews in Iran represent the largest Jewish community in any Muslim country. Anyone who looks closer, however, will soon discover that Ahmadinejad's rhetoric is steeped in an antisemitism not found in any state leader since World War II. Ahmadinejad does not say "Jews" are conspiring to rule the world. Instead he says, "Two thousand Zionists want to rule the world." "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 thrive on war and hatred. Everywhere

⁹ Baham Nirumand, „Holocaust-Ausstellung in Teheran“ in *Tageszeitung* (taz), 16 August 2006.

¹⁰ See www.irancartoon.com/120/holocaust.

they exist there is war.”¹¹ The pattern is familiar. He invests the word "Zionist" with exactly the same meaning Hitler poured into "Jew": the incarnation of evil. Anyone who makes Jews – whether as “Judas” or as “Zionist” - responsible for all the ills of the world is obviously driven by antisemitism. He must want to eliminate Israel, as the "germ of evil", in order to “save” the world.

In this regard, in his opening speech to the conference, Iranian Foreign Minister Manucher Mottaki left no doubt: 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.¹² If, however, the Holocaust did occur after all, then – per Ahmadinejad’s rhetoric – Israel has even less of a reason to be in Palestine, but should be transplanted instead to Europe. One way or another, the result is the same: Israel must vanish.

The elimination of Israel, the demonisation of Jews and Holocaust denial – these are the three elements of an ideological constellation that collapses as soon as one of the elements is removed. Anyone who accepts the reality of the Holocaust can’t at the same time believe that the Jews are the rulers of the world. Anyone who accepts the Jews as they are, instead of demonising them, can’t call into question the fact of the Holocaust. Anyone who accepts Israel’s right to a secure existence must repudiate the Islamists’ Nazi-like antisemitism. Elimination of Israel, demonisation of Jews and Holocaust denial – if any of the three sides of this ideological triangle is absent, the whole structure collapses. At the same time all these three elements of antisemitism reinforce one another.

Holocaust denial is thus the most extreme form of antisemitism: Whoever declares Auschwitz to be a “myth” implicitly portrays the Jews as the enemy of humankind, who for filthy lucre has been duping the rest of humanity for the past sixty years. Whoever talks of the “so-called” Holocaust suggests that over ninety percent of the world’s media and university professorships are controlled by Jews and thereby cut off from the “real” truth. In this way, precisely that sort of genocidal hatred gets incited that helped prepare the

¹¹ Press Conference, August 28, 2007, see *MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis Series* – No. 389, September 17, 2007, p. 4.

¹² Boris Kalnoky, “Iran versammelt die Holocaust-Leugner,” *Die Welt*, 12 December 2006.

way for the Shoah. Every denial of the Holocaust thus tacitly contains an appeal to repeat it – by eliminating Israel.

Israel is just the regional aspect of the matter. But the title of the December 2006 denial conference was not “Review of the Holocaust: Regional Vision” but: “Global vision”. But what does the Holocaust denial have to do with a “global vision”?

Holocaust denial and the "historic war"

A partial answer was provided by the Iranian government on January 8, 2007. On this day Iran filed a complaint with the UN Human Rights Council against those who do *not* deny the Holocaust. “History cannot be rewritten as it pleases the Israeli regime,” Alireza Moayera, Iran’s representative to the Council, wrote in his letter to its president. “It cannot be manipulated and hand-picked selectively and it cannot be reformatted based on the political agenda or historical ambitions of this regime.”

Here Iran is turning everything inside out. The UN of all organisations, which was founded in the 1940s in response to the horrors of the Second World War, is being urged to oppose all those who don’t deny the greatest horror of that war. It is bad enough when the Holocaust is downplayed or denied with the manipulative goal of delegitimizing Israel. But one cannot talk of manipulation or lie in the case of this letter from the Iranian representative at the UN. The blood-chilling reality is worse than that: these people really mean it! The Iranian leadership believe the Holocaust is a Jewish lie. For them, the delusional system of Holocaust denial is to be elevated to the norm and any divergence from the latter is denounced as a symptom of “Jewish domination”. In their “global vision” all countries must cease honoring the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. And they are working doggedly to this end inside the United Nations. If we want to decipher that mind-set behind such strange behaving a short excursion into Islamist epistemology becomes unavoidable.

For us, the employment of reason is the most self-evident thing in the world. For Islamists the use of reason – apart from in the natural sciences – is an expression of arrogance – hence our castigation as the “World of Arrogance” - and an offence against God. Their starting point is that the Koran must be interpreted and applied literally. But evidently, any kind of reason-based doubt undermines such an approach to the Koran. As a result, doubt and conjecture are opposed.

For Islamist academics, the term "Western imperialism" refers not so much to economic aggression, but first and foremost to an "intellectual invasion" of the world of Islam. In the words of the Islamist Syed al-Attas, "The contemporary challenge of Western civilization...is the challenge of knowledge...which promotes scepticism, which has elevated doubt and conjecture to 'scientific status' in its methodology."¹³ The primary goal of academic Islamism is to "de-westernize" the sciences, i.e. to free them from the principles of doubt and conjecture.

Even in his talk at Columbia University in September 2007, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad clearly articulated this aversion to the Western concepts of “reason” and “reality”. According to him science is permitted only to the strict believer: “Science is the light which illuminates the hearts of those who have been selected by the Almighty. ... Science is the light and scientists must be pure and pious.” Ahmadinejad is here laying down the criteria to be followed in purging the teaching body of Iranian universities.

At the same time Ahmadinejad also showed in Columbia that he defines his notion of “reality” in religious terms. What is real is the message of the Koran, while “material desires place humans against the realities of the world.” And so, just as only the “pure and pious” can be a scientist, so only those who have fully subordinated themselves to the Koran can grasp what “reality” truly is. At Columbia Ahmadinejad said: “Corrupted independent human beings resist acceptance of reality and even if they do accept it, they do not obey it.”

¹³ Syed M. N. al-Attas, cited by Tibi 1992, op. cit., p. 139.

We are dealing here with an Islamist Newspeak, in which words such as “reality”, “scholar” and “science” mean the exact opposite of what secular societies understand them to mean. This explains why observers on Iran hardly ever grasp the meaning of this mindset in its true dimension. This release from all the shackles of material reality enables the Iranian rulers to dub the Holocaust a lie and at the same time believe the Twelfth Imam to be a living reality.

Ahmadinejad owes his sense of mission to the myth of the Twelfth Imam, the Islamic Messiah who disappeared as a small child without a trace in 874. The Twelfth Imam was the last direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammed. Shia doctrine is based on the belief that the Twelfth Imam will someday appear again from out of his "occlusion" and liberate the world from all evil. It is this sense of providence that leads the Iranian leadership to pursue a global revolutionary change. “Our nation’s important mission”, Ahmadinejad enthused in February 2008, “is to introduce the Islamic Revolution to the whole of mankind.”¹⁴ For Ahmadinejad, preparing for the return of the Messiah is "our revolution's main mission."¹⁵ He is clearly predisposed toward apocalyptic thinking. He finances a research institute in Tehran whose sole purpose is to study and, if possible, accelerate the coming of the Imam. He raves that he has been chosen to pave the way for the Twelfth Imam and that he personally has been entrusted with this mission by providence.

Of course the Messiah idea also exists in Christianity and Judaism. There, however, it is meant metaphysically, as the symbol of the hope for a better world. The Shiite current that Ahmadinejad represents has fashioned a concrete political program out of this abstract vision. What does this mean? Let us take the example of the centre of Christianity: Rome, the capital of Italy. The authorities in Rome never thought of demolishing whole blocks of houses and building new boulevards because Jesus the Messiah was shortly to enter the city down them. But this is exactly what is taking place in Tehran. Madness is being put into practice. Even in the course of the

¹⁴ *MEMRI Special Dispatch*, No. 1854, February 29, 2008.

¹⁵ Paul Hughes, ‘Iran President Paves the Way for Arabs’ Imam Return’, *Reuters*, November 17, 2005.

Iranian election campaign of spring 2008 Ahmadinejad has announced “the construction of a vast, lavishly appointed boulevard down which the Messiah will shortly return.”¹⁶

So what has the Twelfth Imam to do with Holocaust denial? What we are dealing with here is a kind of complementary fantasy: the more radical is the credence given to the tales of the Twelfth Imam, the more radically is the Holocaust derided as a made-up story. Only now – after having connected the denial of the Holocaust with the reappearance of the Twelfth Imam – are we able to recognize the meaning of the Holocaust denier conference’s title in its broader sense: “Review of the Holocaust – Global vision.”

The Iranian leadership does not only want to destroy the so-called “Jewish-Christian conspiracy” – that is: the system of international relations that was created after 1945 – it also wishes to overturn the accepted historiography of this system and replace it with the “global vision” of something else. At the start of the Holocaust denier’s conference, Iranian foreign minister Mottaki complained that “the wording of historical occurrences and their analysis [are written from] the perspective of the West”. As against this “Western” historiography, Islamism seeks to create a new historical “truth”, in which the Holocaust is declared a myth, while the Twelfth Imam is deemed to be real. It is in any case not very reassuring to find people who have made plain their religious and apocalyptic understanding of “reality” today in possession of long-range missiles and tomorrow perhaps of a nuclear bomb, which brings me to my third and final point.

Holocaust denial and the nuclear program

Up until now, Holocaust deniers wanted to revise the past. Today, the leading elite in Iran wants to shape the future: to prepare the next Holocaust. Just as Hitler sought to “liberate” humanity by murdering the Jews, so Ahmadinejad believes that he can “liberate” humanity through the violent eradication of Israel. The deniers conference as an instrument for

¹⁶ Rainer Herrmann, ‘Iran zeigt sich unbeeindruckt’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, March 5 2008

propagating this project was intimately linked to the nuclear program as an instrument for realising it.

The nuclear program is already being celebrated in Iran as otherwise only the 12th Imam has been celebrated before: as a sort of divine apparition that will drive all injustice from the earth. Thus, in April 2006, in a cult-like ceremony, Ahmadinejad unveiled two metal containers in which were to be found Iran's first independently enriched uranium. Choirs thundered "*Allahu Akbar*" as exotically clad dancers whirled ecstatically around the containers and lifted them heroically toward the sky in the style of Maoist opera.

Only some years ago, in December 2001, the former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani first boasted that "the use of one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything," whereas the damage to the Islamic world of a potential nuclear retaliatory attack could be limited. "It is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality," he said.¹⁷ While the Islamic world could sacrifice hundreds of thousands of "martyrs" in an Israeli riposte without disappearing – thus the logic of Rafsanjani's calculation – Israel would be relegated to history after the first bomb.

The ideology of martyrdom is the most important heritage that the Ayatollah Khomeini bequeathed to his successors. Life was always regarded by him as valueless and death rather as the beginning of true life. "The natural world," Khomeini explained in October 1980, "is the lowest element, the scum of creation." What is decisive is the beyond: the "divine world which is inexhaustible."¹⁸ This latter world is accessible to martyrs. Their death is no death, but merely the transition from this world to the world beyond, where they will live on eternally and in splendor. Whether the warrior wins the battle or loses it and dies a martyr death, in both cases, his victory is assured: either a mundane victory or a spiritual one.

It is only against the background of these theological convictions that we can comprehend the readiness of Khomeini and some of his followers even to sacrifice Iran itself, if necessary, in order to wipe out Israel. In 1980,

¹⁷ Quoted in MEMRI, *Special Dispatch Series*, No. 324, 3 January 2002.

¹⁸ Cited in Daniel Brumberg, "Khomeini's Legacy: Islamic Rule and Islamic Social Justice" in R. Scott Appleby, *Spokesmen for the Despised: Fundamental Leaders of the Middle East* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 56.

Khomeini summed up this mentality as follows: “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.”¹⁹

Whereas the majority of Iranians and even a large part of the clerical elite would presumably reject such a scenario, the radical Islamist camp appears precisely to be preparing for it. A recent statement by Mohammad Hassan Rahimian, representative of the Iranian revolutionary guide Ali Khamenei, makes this unmistakably clear. And here the return of the Mahdi is linked to the destruction of Israel.

On 16 November 2006, Rahimian explained: “The Jew” – not the Zionist, but the Jew! – “is the most stubborn enemy of the believers. And the decisive war will decide the fate of humanity. ... The reappearance of the Twelfth Imam will usher in a war between Israel and the Shia.”²⁰ “Ahmadinejad too seems to juxtapose the preparation for the return of the Hidden Imam with the collapse of the state of Israel. Let me quote Mehdi Khalaji, who from 1986 to 2000 trained at the traditional centre of Iran’s clerical establishment himself and is now a fellow at the Washington Institute:

“In a June 26, 2007 speech, Ahmadinejad talked about ‘the countdown for the fall of the Zionist regime’ and addressed the leaders of Israel by saying that ‘today I declare by a louder voice, though your eyes and ears are closed, that all the world sees that you are going to be marked, because justice and the pioneer of justice is on his way.’” And Khalaji continues: “Ahmadinejad appears to be influenced by a trend in contemporary apocalyptic thought in which the killing of Jews will be one of the most significant accomplishments of the Mahdi’s government.” Please read against this background

Ahmadinejad’s most recent speech at the United Nations in September 2007: “The age of darkness will end”, he enthused to the General Assembly and “the peoples in Europe and America will be liberated from the burdens the Zionists have inflicted on them”.

¹⁹ From *A Selection of the Imam’s Speeches*, Vol. III, Tehran, 1981, p. 109; quoted in Amir Taheri, *Nest of Spies: America’s Journey to Disaster in Iran* (London: Hutchinson, 1988), p. 269.

²⁰ ISNA, 16 November 2006, <http://isna.ir/Main/NewsViews.aspx?ID=News-825902>, translated and quoted by the Iran research section of Honestly-Concerned.org, 17 November 2006.

There are other dictatorships in the world. But only in Iran are the fantasy-worlds of antisemitism and religious mission linked with technological megalomania and the physics of mass destruction. The specific danger presented by the Iranian nuclear option stems from the unique ideological atmosphere surrounding it - a mixture of Holocaust denial and weapons-grade uranium, of death-wish and missile research, of Shiite messianism and plutonium. We are dealing here with a phantasmagoric parallel universe in which the reality principle is constantly ignored: a universe from which the laws of reason have been excluded and all mental energy is harnessed for the cause of antisemitism.

At the beginning I said: We have to take the Iranian leader's denial of the Holocaust seriously as a specific outlook with its own principles and history. Now we can say that the denial of the Holocaust is the key feature in order to understand what Iran's current ideology and politics is about. The shocking malice of this new type of Iranian Holocaust denial leads many people to turn away their eyes, while others try to rationalize it as sheer propaganda. The example of the 1938 Munich agreement, however, shows the consequences of failing to take what antisemites say, literally. It shows where the flight into illusion eventually leads - to total war. At that time only a tiny minority in Germany appreciated what Stefan Zweig noted shortly before he took his own life, namely, "that the greatest monstrosity is to be expected as a matter of course." Ladies and Gentleman - we have to make sure that this part of history will never repeat itself.
