

Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust, September 20, 2013

„Moderate“ Holocaust Denial in Iran?

by Matthias Küntzel

Dear Director Schoenberg, dear Jodi Shapiro, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's not only a great pleasure but also a great honor for me to be here – in this great city and in this very institution, the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust. I'm most grateful to the LAMOTH for inviting me and I am most grateful to you for attending this event.

Our topic today is Holocaust denial in Iran. This topic is disputed. Two weeks ago, according to the “New York Times”, the new foreign minister of Iran, Mohammad Javad Zarif wished a ‘Happy Rosh Hashana’ on his English-language Twitter account to Christine Pelosi, the daughter of Representative Nancy Pelosi of California. Christine responded: “Thanks. The New Year would be even sweeter if you would end Iran’s Holocaust denial, sir.” To which Mr. Zarif responded: “Iran never denied it. The man who was perceived to be denying it is now gone. Happy New Year.”¹

Wonderful message, isn't it? Obviously, the theme of this very event has vanished into thin air. Or perhaps not.

Let us take a closer look at Mr. Zarif words. He claims: Iran never denied the Holocaust. This denial of the denial, however, is utterly misleading. During the last eight years, Iran was the first and only country in the world to make Holocaust denial a matter of official foreign policy – within the United Nations, on the Internet and elsewhere.

Mr. Zarif's second claim: “The man who was perceived to be denying it is now gone” is partly true since Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is fortunately no longer president. But what about Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of the Islamic

¹ Rick Gladstone and Robert Mackey, Iran Signals an Eagerness to Overcome Old Impasses, in: New York Times (NYT), September 5, 2013.

revolution, who has also ridiculed “the myth of the massacre of Jews known as the Holocaust”²?

Words matter. Whoever calls the Holocaust a “myth” kills the victims a second time. To destroy the memory of the victims completes the work of their extermination. And this is not the end of the story.

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 seventy 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 way for the Shoah. Every denial of the Holocaust thus tacitly contains an appeal to repeat it.

It is thus no coincidence that the Iranian regime was not only the first country to make Holocaust denial a matter of foreign policy but is likewise the first country to openly threaten the Jewish state with annihilation.

True, under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iranian Holocaust denial has taken a substantive leap forward. His portrayal of the Shoah was, however, neither a new nor a personal obsession but rather an intensification of themes long prominent in the Islamic Republic’s ideological discourse.

From the 1990s onward, Iran has gone further than any Arab country in hosting and officially endorsing Western Holocaust deniers who have been shunned in their home countries such as Jürgen Graf, Wolfgang Fröhlich and Fredrick Töben.

In 1998, President Mohammad Khatami grieved over the prosecution of French Holocaust denier Roger Garaudy; Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei even met Garaudy in person. Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani voiced moral support for

² The Office of the Supreme Leader Sayyid Ali Khamenei, Leader Receives Air Force Serviceman, July 2, 2006.

Holocaust deniers as well. As early as 2001, the *Tehran Times* called the findings of the Nuremberg trials about Auschwitz „the biggest lie in history“.³

After December 2005, the new Iranian President Ahmadinejad placed the denial of the Holocaust at the center of his rabble-rousing. Now, the Iranian regime established “exposure” of the “Holocaust Myth” as the new historiographical paradigm. The “lie about the Holocaust” became a regular topic of televised Friday sermons. Talk shows on public television featured a parade of historians mocking the “fairy tale about the gas chambers.” The Iranian state press agency developed into a platform for Holocaust deniers from all over the world.⁴

The “Holocaust International Cartoon Contest” announced by the Iranian newspaper Hamshahri in February 2006 revealed the new style of Iranian Holocaust denial: creative, modern, unrestrained, and self-assertive. Hamshahri is owned by the city of Tehran. The newspaper received over 1,000 submissions of Holocaust denying cartoons from 62 countries. One of the first prizes went to a cartoon that shows two grinning soldiers above a freshly dug mass grave in which they are placing not real corpses, but merely paper cut-outs, suggesting that there were no real victims.⁵

Later on, the regime helped to produce a series of animated cartoons to be found on the internet at *Holocartoons.com*. Any child can find them on the Net, download them, and have a good laugh, since, with no spoken dialogue, their effect is not language-dependent.

They consist of twenty short and “amusing” animations that all begin in the same way: A Nazi – recognizable by the swastika on his shirtsleeve – pushes a big spray can with the word “gas” written on it and activates it. At once the whole screen is filled with gas clouds. At this moment, a Jew depicted as a

³ David Menashri, Iran, The Jews And The Holocaust, Research Paper, Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism, Tel Aviv 1997, p. 8.

⁴ MEMRI, Special Report, No. 39, 5 January 2006
(<http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sr&ID=SR3906>).

⁵ See www.irancartoon.com/120/holocaust.

hook-nosed worm makes a merry entrance, sniggering loudly. Greedily and gleefully he sucks the big gas clouds into his lungs. Finally, he loudly belches out two small gas clouds which form the word “Holocaust”. Then the episode begins.

Not only the depiction of “Jews,” but also the content of these animated cartoons is disgusting. One features a strange steel edifice with the words “gas chamber” on it, which the same ten Jews continually enter from the front and exit from the back. As this is happening, a counter records the number of those passing through until it stops with a loud ring at the figure of six million, at which the ten Jews fall into each other’s arms laughing hysterically.

In the 1930s the Germans pioneered radio and film techniques in order to perfect the dissemination and inculcation of Jew-hatred. Today, Iranian antisemites use the most advanced technology to disseminate their propaganda, in particular via the Internet.

In December 2006, Iran’s foreign minister Manucher Mottaki opened the infamous conference “Review of the Holocaust: Global vision” which brought together 60 participants from thirty different countries including Ku-Klux-Klan leader David Duke and officials from the German neo-Nazi party NPD – 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.

This conference was special not only because of its state sponsorship, but also because of its purpose. Previously, Holocaust deniers wanted to revise the past. With this conference, Iran wanted to shape the future. If “the official version of the Holocaust is called into question,” maintained Iranian Foreign Minister Manucher Mottaki in his opening speech, then “the nature and identity of Israel” must also be called into question.⁶ In his closing speech, Ahmadinejad promised the audience: “The life-curve of the Zionist regime has begun its

⁶ Boris Kalnoky, “Iran versammelt die Holocaust-Leugner,” Die Welt, 12 December 2006.

descent, and it is now on a downward slope towards its fall. ... The Zionist regime will be wiped out, and humanity will be liberated.”⁷

This sentiment – liberation through destruction – is the one for which the Holocaust historian Saul Friedlaender coined the term “redemptive antisemitism”. It is not so far from that expressed in a Nazi directive of 1943: “This war will end with anti-Semitic world revolution and with the extermination of Jewry throughout the world, both of which are the precondition for an enduring peace.”⁸

In 2007, Iran even filed a complaint with the United Nations Human Rights Council against those who do not deny the Holocaust.⁹ Thus, the UN, of all organizations, which was founded in the 1940s in response to the horrors of World War II, was being urged to oppose all those who do not deny the greatest horror of that war.

Iran was also the only country to attack UN Resolution 61/255 against Holocaust denial, which the United Nations General Assembly passed in 2007.¹⁰ Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor of the *Kayhan* daily published by the Supreme Leader’s office, claimed that this resolution “is preparing the UN’s corpse for burial in the graveyard of history”, since it was “clearly opposed to the most basic recognized principles of human rights.”¹¹

Let me now come back from this world organization to the new Iranian foreign minister Zarif and his twitter message to Christine Pelosi which says: “Iran never denied the Holocaust.”

⁷ Yigal Carmon, “The Role of Holocaust Denial in the Ideology and Strategy of the Iranian Regime,” in Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Inquiry and Analysis Series, No. 307, 15 December 2006.

⁸ Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy. Nazi Propaganda During World War II And The Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), p. 209.

⁹ Letter to Ambassador Luis Alconso De Alba, President of the Human Rights Council, from Ambassador Alireza Moayera, Permanent Representative of Iran to the Council, Geneva, January 8, 2007.

¹⁰ Matthias B. Krause, *Ohne Abstimmung. Erstmals verabschiedet die UNO eine Resolution gegen die Leugnung des Holocaust*, Jüdische Allgemeine, February 1, 2007.

¹¹ *Kayhan*, January 28, 2007, cited in Memri Special Dispatch No. 1443, January 30, 2007.

One has the impression that this man does not know what he writes. I would of course be happy if Iran finally supports the UN Resolution which condemns Holocaust denial or if it deleted Holocartoons.com or if it apologized to the survivors of the Shoah. Nothing like this, however, is on the agenda or even in sight.

Consider, for example, how most recently the Iranian President answered the question whether the Holocaust was real. His answer: "I am not a historian. I'm a politician."

He thus questioned the reality of the Holocaust by insisting that only a specialist can decide if it was real or not, while for a politician this question has to remain open.

Or consider the following remark by foreign minister Zarif which most Western journalists - eager for signs of moderation in the Tehran regime - didn't notice. On his Facebook page, Mr. Zarif, whom the "Wall Street Journal" coined "Iran's ,moderate' Holocaust denier"¹² published the following analogy:

"We condemn the massacre of Jews by the Nazis, and we condemn the massacre of Palestinians by the Zionists."

The Holocaust is thus reduced to a policy comparable with the measures of the Israeli state towards the Palestinians while the Zionists' "crimes" are considered to represent a new Holocaust. The message of Zarif's entry is clear: Zionists behave like Nazis, Palestinians suffer like Jews.

This widespread, in Europe even popular, analogy is utterly wrong. It is a historical fact that the armies of six Arab nations tried to get rid of the Jewish state in 1948. But have you ever heard that six Jewish armies tried to destroy Germany in 1939 so that Germany had to defend itself against the Jews?

What we can conclude is that the tone of Holocaust denial has partly changed, but not its substance.

¹² David Feith, Iran's ,Moderate' Holocaust Denier, in: Wall Street Journal, August 5, 2013.

Let me please add one or two comments about Hussein Rouhani, the new Iranian president. People were thrilled by his reputed Twitter account: “As the sun is about to set here in Tehran I wish all Jews, especially Iranian Jews, a blessed Rosh Hashana.”¹³ This message caused a stir and raised the hope that a détente or even agreement with the U.S.A. is in sight.

It was rarely noticed, though, that the Iranian press agency immediately denied the report about Rouhani’s twitter message by underlining “that the Iranian president has no official Twitter account” and that “any official news on him is released by the presidential office”.¹⁴

More important is the fact that Ahmadinejad too used to send Rosh Hashana greetings to the Jews. “We are friends with the Jewish people”, stated Ahmadinejad when he spoke at Columbia University last year. How is this mystery to be resolved?

Ahmadinejad did not say “Jews” are conspiring to rule the world. Instead he said, “Two thousand Zionists want to rule the world.”¹⁵ He said: “For sixty years now, the Zionists have blackmailed all western governments.”¹⁶ He maintained that “The Zionists have imposed themselves on a substantial portion of the banking, financial, cultural and media sectors.”¹⁷ You see: He invested the word “Zionist” with exactly the same sense with which Hitler once invested the word “Jew”: namely, that of being the incarnation of all evil. Whoever makes Jews responsible for all the ills of the world – whether as “Judas” or “Zionists” – is clearly driven by antisemitism. He must want to eliminate Israel in order to “liberate” humanity.

¹³ Yoel Goldman, Iranian president tweets Rosh Hashanah greeting, in: The Times of Israel, September 4, 2013.

¹⁴ Fars News Agency, Iran Denies Media Reports about President Rouhani’s New Year Tweet to Jews, September 5, 2013.

¹⁵ Hooman Majd, “Mahmoud and Me,” New York Observer, 2 October 2006.

¹⁶ MEMRI, Special Dispatch Series, No. 1091, 14 February 2006.

¹⁷ From “Letter to the Noble Americans” (consultable at <http://edition.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/11/29/ahmadinejad.letter/>).

What about the new president who allegedly wished all Jews a blessed Rosh Hashana? He wrote a book about the nuclear issue which claims that Israel is the „axis of all anti-Iranian activities.“¹⁸

Israel of all countries as the “axis of all anti-Iranian activities”? I found this remark reminiscent of the paranoid projections of the Nazis. In an essay published ten days after the German invasion in Czechoslovakia in March 1939, Josef Goebbels wrote: “The Jews are guilty. They want war, and they are doing everything in their power to drive the people into it.”¹⁹

Rouhani repeated this paranoid theme at his first press conference on August 6, 2013. Here, he referred to unspecified “war-mongering pressure groups” that he accused of confusing the White House at the behest of an unidentified country. Guess what country he meant. Let me quote the new Iranian president:

“Unfortunately, a pressure group in the US, which is a warmongering group and is against constructive talks is [pursuing] the interests of a foreign country and mostly receives its orders from that foreign country. ... The interests of one foreign country and one group have been imposed on the members of the US Congress. And we can see that even the interests of the United States are not considered in such actions.”²⁰

These remarks went also unheeded in the media. I have the impression that most journalists do not want to spoil the good feeling they associate with the new Iranian president by looking too closely at what he actually said.

Words, however, matter. What did Rouhani mean?

There are many UN Security Council resolutions about the Iranian nuclear program which were adopted unanimously or nearly unanimously and with the consent of all the veto-holding powers. The whole world wants Iran to stop its weapon-related nuclear enterprise.

¹⁸ Thomas Erdbrink, President-Elect Stirs Optimism in Iran and West, in: NYT, July 26, 2013.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, Cambridge and London (Harvard University Press) 2006, p. 55.

²⁰ Rouhani: US officials still do not fully grasp the Iran’s realities, in: Iran Daily Brief, 9 August 2013.

Rouhani however blames one country - Israel - for pulling the strings against the interests of the American people. He accuses Israel of giving orders to the Israel- lobby in the US: not for the sake of peace but for the sake of war; not in order to foster constructive talks but in order to prevent successful negotiations; not in favor of the American people but against American interests.

“The Jews are our misfortune” was the battle cry of the most important antisemitic pamphlet which paved the road to Auschwitz. I am talking about the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion”. “Israel - the war-mongering Jew is our misfortune” – this is the gist of Rouhani’s idea.

You might recall the 1994 bombing of a Jewish charities office in Argentina that killed 85 people and injured 300 – a crime obviously instigated by the Iranian leadership. The sole reason for this crime was the fact that the state of Argentina did not want to continue its nuclear co-operation with Iran. Who, however, was to blame and to punish for Argentina’s independent decision? The Jewish scapegoat, who else.

This example illustrates that the anti-Jewish paranoid pattern contains a call to kill. If the Jews of Argentina are responsible for the government’s decisions you have to kill them in revenge. If Israel is responsible for the wars in the world, you have to wipe it out in order to secure peace in the world.

Thus we must summarize that also Hossein Rohani differs from Ahmadinejad essentially in tone, not in substance.

Let me conclude. I mentioned three topics today. First: Holocaust denial, second: demonization of Zionists or Jews, third: the wish to get rid of Israel. All three items are interwoven and belong together. They form what I call an ideological triangle.

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 demonizing them, can’t call into question the fact of the Holocaust. Anyone who accepts Israel’s right to a secure existence must repudiate antisemitism. Elimination of Israel, demonization of Jews and

Holocaust denial – if any of the three sides of this ideological triangle is absent, the whole structure collapses.

In other words: Anyone who really wants to overcome the stupid notion of Holocaust denial has to throw "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" overboard and has to recognize Israel. We look forward to the day when that happens in Iran.

At the moment, however, it seems that America's politicians and media would rather allow themselves to be taken in by the new Iranian government's public relations spin than to recognize the unchanging policy that underlies it.

In reality, the old foreign policy program of the Islamic Republic remains in place : the long-term goal is to replace the liberal and democratic system – the so-called "world of arrogance" - with a Sharia dictatorship according to the model of Iran. In 2006, Ahmadinejad's letter to U.S. president George W. Bush made this abundantly clear: "Those with insight can already hear the sounds of the shattering and fall of the ideology and thoughts of the liberal democratic systems."

This morning, however, the "New York Times" wrote: "Paradoxically, the Iranian leaders view what they see as America's declining regional influence as a positive." Paradoxically? The Iranian regime does not conceal what it wants. The problem is that the West does not listen.

The new president Hossein Rouhani has been a personal friend of Supreme leader Ali Khamenei for 40 years. He shares this program without shoving it in the public's face once a week. He calls the state of Israel a "sore", not a "cancer".²¹ And he smiles. His medium-term goal is to complete the Iranian nuclear option.

²¹ "In our region, a sore has been sitting on the body of the Islamic world for many years, in the shadow of the occupation of the holy land of Palestine and the dear Quds." See: Thomas Erdbrin und Jodi Rudoren, Iran's President-Elect Provokes Furor Abroad With Remarks on Israel, in: NYT, August 2, 2013.

Since August, when he took office, the number of modern Iranian centrifuges has grown rapidly as has the number of executions. But Rouhani still smiles. He wants to play chess with the nations, while the West plays dice.

Why has the Obama administration most recently reduced its sanctions against Iran without the slightest concession by the regime? This is my guess: Because it still hopes for a normal dialog: If I do something good for you, you will do something good for me in return. Iran's regime, however, is no normal government but a revolutionary one. It does not want to stabilize the *status quo*, it wants to overturn it. Ali Khamenei does not think in terms of "me" **and** "you", but of "me" **or** "you".

It is necessary, not only to commemorate the Holocaust, but to draw the obvious conclusions for the present. That is why I appreciate and admire the work of this institution, the LAMOTH. History shows the consequences of failing to take what antisemites say literally. It shows where the flight into illusion eventually leads – to total war. That is what we must bear in mind. That is what we must prevent. Thank you for your attention.

I presented this statement on September 20, 2013 at a public event of the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust and published it on September 23, 2013 on my Homepage.