
Eradicating the “Little Satan”: Why Iran Should Be Taken at Its Word

Ze’ev Maghen

THE ACCESSION of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been accompanied by a sharp transformation in the Iranian attitude to, and depiction of, the state of Israel. This change includes not only an amplification of the traditional hostility toward the Jewish polity, but also—most ominously—a new conception of that polity as weak and unstable, an easy target for a united Muslim (or united Shiite) offensive.

The prevailing opinion among Middle East experts and Iran watchers, however, is that the revised rhetoric is just that—rhetoric—and that it harbors no significant ramifications for policy-making on the part of Israel or any other states in the region or the world. Vociferous Iranian declarations about the need to erase Israel from the map are seen as nothing more than a means toward achieving certain pragmatic goals, such as eventual détente with the West.

This view is wrong. Iranian-Islamist threats to Israel’s existence are sincere, and they signal the determined pursuit of tenaciously-held ends.

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II

IN JANUARY 2006, the Iranian daily *Jomburiya Eslami* carried the text of a speech delivered by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei in Tehran’s main mosque. Attempting to defuse the diplomatic tension occasioned by the call for Israel’s destruction issued by the then-newly elected President Ahmadinejad at the previous month’s “World Without Zionism” conference, Khamenei concluded his uncharacteristically moderate sermon with the following ringing remarks:

We Iranians intend no harm to any nation, nor will we be the first to attack any nation. We do not deny the right of *any* polity in *any* place on God’s earth to exist and prosper. We are a peace-loving country whose only wish is to live, and to let live, in peace.

Without missing a beat, or evincing a discernible hint of irony, the reporter who covered the event continued:

The congregation of worshippers, some 7,000 in number, expressed their unanimous support for the Supreme Leader’s words by repeatedly chanting, *marg bar Omrika, marg bar Esra’il* “Death to America! Death to Israel!”

This is not as strange as it sounds. Chanting “Death to America! Death to Israel!” has been the way Iranians applaud for over a quarter-century.

When the soccer team from Isfahan scores a goal against the soccer team from Shiraz, its fans cheer wildly: “Death to America! Death to Israel!” At the end of an exquisitely performed sitar solo, the genteel audience in a concert hall in Tabriz shows its appreciation by loudly heaping imprecations upon “International Arrogance” (the USA) and “its Bastard Offspring” (the Jewish state). Even during the hajj, the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, Iranian participants have replaced their traditionally pious ejaculations of “I am at your service, O Lord, there is none like unto You!” with responsive Persian cursing sessions aimed at the Hebrew- and English-speaking enemies of everything that is holy. Like the daily “Two-Minutes Hate” in George Orwell’s 1984, this venom-spewing is the mantra upon which an entire generation of Iranians has been raised.

What does this persistent indoctrination, imbibed with mother’s milk and drummed by rote into the consciences of the Iranian citizenry, mean for the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic? In the eyes of many Western and non-Western experts, the answer is: nothing. First of all, these experts urge, we must distinguish between image and reality, between ideology and strategy, between the fiery rhetoric of preachers or street mobs and the sober goals of an essentially pragmatic regime. Indeed, they insist, even the chest-beaters of mosque and *madrassa* are only repeating slogans that have long since lost all significance in their minds: they are just going through the motions.

“Sadly,” writes the *Asia Times* columnist Kaveh Afrasiabi, too many Israelis ignore “the gap between mass-generated, largely symbolic rhetoric and [Iran’s] actual policy.” Nor, we are urged to believe, is such “mass-generated rhetoric” truly massive in scope. “The Iranians we should be listening to,” explains Middle East specialist Mark LeVine, “are not the 100,000 or so marchers in support of Ahmadinejad’s [anti-Israel] remarks, but the tens of millions who had something better to do that day.” According to Paul Reynolds, a BBC world-affairs correspondent, President Ahmadinejad’s vitriol is in any case intended primarily for domestic consumption, as a means of distracting the Iranian populace from the economic failures of the Islamic revolution, and no one should mistake it for a guide to foreign policy.

Ultimately, most analysts agree, Ahmadinejad’s menacing proclamations are meant to serve as a bargaining chip: something to be given away in exchange for normalized relations with the West. After all, they stress, there is no *rational* reason for any eruption of hostilities between Iran and Israel.

The two countries do not even share a common border, and their national and economic interests are not in conflict. To the contrary, both have traditionally conceived their “frontline” adversaries to be Arab states, and history has time and again thrown them into each other’s arms, both before and even after the Islamic revolution of 1979. “Iran and Israel have no differences or occasions for getting into active hostilities, let alone a nuclear exchange,” reassures Shahram Chubin, the director of the Geneva Center for Security Policy. To quote Afrasiabi again, “[I]t is difficult to find any expert on Iran’s foreign affairs today who actually shares the view [that there exists a basis for] strategic conflict between Iran and Israel.”

III

IS THE DAILY drill of Israel-damning in Iran only a tired exercise, a formalistic ceremony no longer accompanied by genuine passion or serious intent? Are the experts correct on this score? In a word: yes. Oblivious to the content of their own words, thousands of mosque- and *madrassa*-goers calling for the demise of Israel are not, for the most part, expressing a bona-fide, heartfelt hatred for the Jewish citizens or even the Jewish government of the state of Israel. About this the experts are quite right: it is ritual, and the Iranians do not really “mean it.”

But therein lies the rub. In the end, it can often be far more dangerous *not* to mean what one is saying than to mean it—a point that may be illuminated by a brief detour into mass psychology. Fierce anger and hatred are highly intense, all-consuming emotions that subside quickly if the psyche is not to combust and collapse. Such emotions, moreover, are not only extremely intense but exceedingly unstable. People who truly hate are often just as capable of experiencing other intense emotions, including pity or empathy or remorse.

For this reason, among others, genuine anger and hatred, of the kind that is really “meant” and strongly felt, are inefficient tools for creating or sustaining an atmosphere conducive to long-term persecution or mass murder. That is why the truly horrific atrocities in human history—the enslavements, the inquisitions, the terrorisms, the genocides—have been perpetrated not in hot blood but in cold: not as a result of urgent and immanent feeling but in the name of a transcendent ideology and as a result of painstaking indoctrination.

The vast majority of Germans in World War II did not personally and passionately hate the Jews:

they had never even met the men, women, children, and infants whom they would eventually butcher en masse. It was, for the most part, a methodically drilled-in ideology that powered the genocide machine, a machine that killed six million Jews *despite* the fact that the Germans did not hate them.

Similarly with the events of September 11, 2001. Did Muhammad Atta, the ringleader of the terrorists who brought down the Twin Towers, genuinely and fervently hate every single individual working there on that fateful day, let alone all of the passengers on the plane he commandeered? How could he? He had never met them, and they had never personally done anything to him. What is more, Atta had spent many years in the United States preparing for his mission, during which time he rubbed elbows with all types of Americans. Is it plausible that he managed to maintain a constant boiling rage all day every day toward every one of these acquaintances and their fellow countrymen? How could such a creature survive, or master the self-control to carry out his assigned role?

What is true for Nazi storm troopers and al-Qaeda operatives is true for today’s fundamentalist Shiites. It is not their genuine, vehement hatred that we have to fear; it is their endless, drone-like training. Their militant hostility to Israel is no more a function of immediate, genuine, blood-boiling rage than it is the result of some heinous act or other performed by the Jewish state, however frequently such purported crimes are exploited as triggers of “popular” protest. The hostility is, unfortunately, something far more durable and deeply implanted.

That Israel is the devil, the root of all evil, a criminal cancer that must be excised from the Muslim body politic—these propositions are not ephemeral feelings for most Iranian Muslims, but rather eternal truths that gradually, through endless, tantra-like repetition, have cloyed in the conscious mind while simultaneously installing themselves *beneath* the level of immediate emotion and awareness, in the place where basic instincts, automatic assumptions, and ontological verities reside. There they have taken root, to remain dormant until circumstances require their activation. When the time is right—and the rulers of Iran have made no secret of their conviction that the time is drawing ever nearer—decades of propaganda will serve the same function for them that centuries of Christian anti-Semitism in Europe performed for the Nazis.

The analysts and pundits are thus indeed correct in asserting that the Iranians do not really “mean it.” They fail to realize, however, that this is the

very reason why they may well “do it.” By casting an entire people as a parasitic infestation, by demonizing, de-legitimizing, and dehumanizing them at home, in school, in the mosque, and in the media, the quarter-century-old routine of Israel-hatred, added to 1,400 years of traditional Islamic anti-Semitism, has prepared in the minds of Iranians and their neighboring coreligionists the moral ground for the eradication of the state of Israel.

IV

WHAT, THEN, of the second argument advanced by Iran specialists, to the effect that Iranian verbal belligerence toward Israel is really a means toward an entirely different end, something to be bartered in exchange for full relations with Washington and sundry other international benefits? Here, too, the analysts have it half-right. At least some elements within today’s Iranian leadership are indeed interested in a rapprochement with the West and especially with America. But Tehran in no way intends to lessen its enmity toward Israel in exchange. To the contrary: the Islamic Republic is offering to diminish its enmity toward the West *in exchange for the latter’s abandonment of Israel.*

In this connection, we must grasp a crucial distinction between Iranian attitudes to the “Great Satan” of the United States and to the “Little Satan” of Israel. Iranians may chant “Death to America” and “Death to Israel” with equal fervor, but from a tactical standpoint they well understand that the Great Satan is . . . great. The leaders of the Islamic Republic, even the fiercest ideologues among them, are under no illusion that the United States is about to be conquered by and for Islam in the near future.

Israel, however, is another matter. More and more Iranian Islamists today—together with their zealous coreligionists in other Muslim countries—believe that the erasure of the Jewish state from the map is a dream that *can* be realized in the here and now, whether in one fell swoop or through a relentless process of attrition and erosion. And one strong indication of this, beginning in 2005 and continuing and intensifying up to the present, is a major turnaround in government statements and published material about Israel and the Jews in the official Persian press.

Up until recently, the prevalent tendency of such coverage had involved the traditional exaggeration of the power and influence of the “Jewish lobby” and the long arm and entrenched tentacles of the government of Israel and the World Zionist Orga-

nization. This entailed everything from in-depth “analyses” of how the Jewish cabal that owns Hollywood has utilized the enormous potential of “the world’s seventh art” to bolster Zionism and blacken the face of Islam; to “documentary evidence” that Zionist money and pressure is responsible for the anti-Iranian and anti-Shiite bent of the *al-Jazeera* television network; to in-depth “scholarly” exposés of the manner in which historically the Jews carved Protestantism out of Catholicism in order to reimpose on Christianity the ethos of the Hebrew Bible with its doctrine of the chosen people.

But these and hundreds of other portraits of Israel and world Jewry as the “hidden hand” undermining Islam at every turn have dwindled considerably of late, giving way instead to their opposite. The emphasis now is on every detectable crack, fault, and weakness in the Jewish national edifice, and on Israel as a polity teetering on the brink of collapse.

THE NEW approach is epitomized by Ahmadinejad himself, with his repeated descriptions of Israel as a “rotten tree” and a “house of straw,” as well as his pledge to his constituents and to the rest of the Muslim world that “this shameful stain on the face of the land of Islam will soon be cleansed.” But the trend is far more widespread than the expostulations of one man. In the Iranian media, for instance, Israel’s evacuation of its Gaza settlements in the summer of 2005 has become a major symbol of the decrepitude of the Jewish state. “The Zionist regime retreats in the face of the slightest resistance,” the newspaper *Hamsbahri* gloated in the wake of the disengagement process. “The willingness of the Zionists to leave behind their synagogues in Gaza demonstrates conclusively that they have no God, and therefore, of course, no religious connection to the Holy Land; they will now be easily ejected from all of occupied Palestine.”

Soon after the Gaza pullout, the headline on a lengthy interview with Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Iranian-backed Hizballah, proclaimed: “We, Too, Drove Out the Israeli Cowards.” The reference was to Israel’s prior withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000—a retreat that in the eyes of Ayatollah Khamenei had similarly “proved the justness of the Islamic struggle” and demonstrated that if Muslims put their trust in God, “victory will be certain.” As for Israel’s July 2006 incursion into Lebanon in response to the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers, Iranians were initially shocked by the force of it. But by the end of hostilities in mid-August the Iranian press—like that of many other Middle Eastern

countries—was pouncing on the lack of a clear Israeli victory as a sign that the Jewish state was even feebler than many had presumed.

The perceived military defeats of “the Jerusalem-occupying regime” are regularly coupled with still another alleged indication of Israeli weakness—namely, the security fence protecting Israel’s civilian population from Arab terrorism. Ayatollah Khamenei recently described this barrier as “a symbol of the impotence of the Zionists and of their inability to rein in the *intifada*.” So successful have suicide operations been in sowing “terror and panic” among Israelis, Khamenei declared, that, like their trembling forebears in Europe, they were now retreating behind a ghetto wall. “The Islamic nation,” he added, “is fully capable of deciding the fate of Palestine here and now.”

BUT IT is not the actual wall but the metaphorical walls dividing the different sectors and camps *within* Israeli society that have received the fullest and most scornful coverage. The Iranian press delights in every instance—real, imagined, or exaggerated—of internecine Jewish conflict: between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, religious Israelis and secular Israelis, new immigrants and old immigrants, right-wingers and left-wingers, Zionists, non-Zionists, anti-Zionists, and post-Zionists.

Thus, a recent article in the daily *Javan* entitled “Post-Zionism and the Identity Crisis in Israel” pitted “extremist Jews,” i.e., nationalists and settlers, against “religious Jews,” i.e., ultra-Orthodox non-nationalists. Another piece described the supposedly large numbers of Russian immigrants who have not managed to integrate into the life of the country and have either left for good or else ended up joining the Jews for Jesus movement or various satanic and neo-Nazi cults. Still another report, devoted to the intricacies of recent Israeli political maneuvering, included a photograph of President Shimon Peres and former Defense Minister Amir Peretz conversing in an office. “Note that *Peres* is wearing a suit and tie,” wrote the author, “whereas *Peretz* is not even wearing a jacket and has his shirt open. This is the traditional method of showing disrespect in Israel, whose politicians all hate one another with a vicious hatred.”

And so forth. This, too, represents a *volte-face* of sorts: in the past, the prevailing tendency of the official Iranian press was to dismiss any distinctions among Jews as mere smokescreens, a mask behind which they plotted their diabolical conspiracies. But today’s view is also not entirely new. None other than Ayatollah Khomeini portrayed the Jew-

ish state as weak and divided. “If the Muslims were only unified,” he declared, “and each one of them took a bucket of water and poured it out onto Israel, this straw state that is already eating itself alive would be washed away in no time.”

In that light, it is not altogether surprising that the rise to power of Ahmadinejad, who paints himself as the renewer of Khomeini’s revolutionary zeal, should have been accompanied by a resurgence of the belief that Israel is but a flimsy façade whose end is near. “The Zionist entity,” proclaimed the president recently, “has reached a dead end and is in a process of precipitous decline. . . . All of the conditions are ripe for its removal” by means of an “explosion of Muslim rage.” Elaborating on the same motif in the summer of 2006, Ayatollah Ahmad-e-Jannati, General Secretary of the Guardian Council, whipped up the audience of his Friday sermon with the assertion—first uttered by Egypt’s chief propagandist Ahmad Said on the brink of the Six-Day war—that all the Muslims need do is spit, and Israel will drown.

V

THE SHIFTING Iranian line on the condition of the Jewish state—from Potemkin village, to potent nemesis, and now back again—is a salient illustration of a phenomenon noted by the historian Efraim Karsh. In Islamic tradition, Karsh writes, “the traits associated with Jews make a paradoxical mixture: they are seen as both domineering and wretched, both haughty and low.” Such, he adds, is “the age-old Muslim stereotype—as it is, *mutatis mutandis*, the Christian.” The differences encompassed in that “*mutatis mutandis*” are, however, pertinent to our discussion.

It has long (and correctly) been argued that major elements of modern Muslim anti-Semitism were imports into Islamic lands from Christian Europe. This holds especially true for the perception of the Jews as a powerful international cabal and a force to be not only hated but downright feared—an idea that held sway for centuries in the Christian West, and that in some locales continues to hold sway today. By contrast, this particular feature of the anti-Semitic creed, though introduced into Muslim collective consciousness relatively recently, is already waning in the Islamic world. Many factors may account for this, but to my mind one is paramount.

There is an uncanny correlation between Christian and Islamic holy scripture concerning the role played by Jews during the formative period of each

religion. In the New Testament, the premier political-military enemies of Jesus were the pagan Romans. On the other hand, his increasingly meddlesome ideological-religious enemies were Jews: the scribes and Pharisees who would not cease peppering him with questions deliberately intended to trip him up and undermine his message. Similarly in Islamic historiography: Muhammad’s political-military adversaries were the members of his disowned pagan Quraysh tribe back in Mecca, who launched three successive campaigns against the nascent faith-community in Medina. But the real trouble came from his pestering ideological-religious antagonists, the (genuine or imaginary) Jewish tribes of Medina itself who with their incessant legal and theological badgering made the prophet’s spiritual life extremely difficult.

When it comes to the nature of Jewish subversive activity, the traditions of the two religions are thus almost eerily alike. But no less significant is a difference between them. In the Gospels, the Jews “win”: they succeed in having Jesus crucified and most of his immediate followers executed or banished. In the Qur’an and *hadith*, by contrast, Muhammad wins, vanquishing his Jewish foes, executing some, and banishing the remainder from Medina and eventually, under his immediate successors, from Arabia altogether.

This formative Islamic experience was largely responsible for the disdain and scorn expressed toward Jews over most of Muslim history, as opposed to the fear and hatred characteristic of Christian attitudes. The same derisive contempt may be reflected in the surge of confidence felt by today’s fundamentalists in their zealous resolve to eliminate the state of Israel from the map.

And that brings us to the larger, non-tactical dimension of the fundamentalists’ divergent attitudes toward the “Great Satan” and the “Little Satan”—a dimension deeply rooted in both Islamic ideology and centuries of Muslim historical experience.

VI

EARLY ON, after their first round of lightning victories along the Mediterranean littoral, Muslims came to realize that they would have to be satisfied with conquering only part of the Western world; the other part they would have to share with Christians. Islamic leaders and even Islamic clerics accepted and even enshrined the medieval status quo, according to which hegemony would be divided between Islam in the East and Christendom in the West. To be sure, cross-boundary encroach-

ments were a constant menace and had to be repulsed—Saladin forced out the Crusaders, and the Ottomans were rolled back from Vienna—but on the whole an equilibrium was reached in which each side might even be said to have harbored a grudging respect for the other.

This political-military compromise benefited from an important theological underpinning, epitomized in a celebrated verse from the Qur'an whose contents simultaneously suggest why, in the idealized Islamic conception of balance and mutual tolerance, there is no room today for the state of Israel:

You [i.e., Muhammad and the Muslims] will certainly find the most violent of people in enmity against the believers to be the Jews and the idolaters; and you will find those who are nearest in friendship to the believers to be those who say: "We are Christians."

Thus, in addition to the fact that the Christian world was a massive fact of life that could not be ignored and would not go away, Christians occupied a special religious category and were mostly set apart from the age-old antipathetic strictures aimed at Jews. The name of Jesus appears a mere 25 times in the Qur'an; the name of Moses appears 131 times. Nevertheless, from the "first hijra" of Muhammad's followers to Abyssinia (615 C.E.) down to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's open letter to President George W. Bush in March 2006, Muslims have forever invoked the common Christian and Islamic veneration of Jesus in order to promote good relations between members of the two faiths. Throughout all this time, Moses' ubiquity in the Qur'an has rarely if ever been exploited by Muslim exponents in order to foster coexistence with Jews.

Already in 1734, the English Orientalist George Sale wrote that Muhammad "used" the Jews "much worse than he did the Christians, and frequently exclaims against them in his Koran; his followers to this day observe the same difference between them and the Christians, treating the former as the most abject and contemptible people on earth." This traditional attitude was amplified a hundredfold after the rise of Zionism, finding expression in the adamant rejectionism that characterized the Arab position on Israel.

VII

THE DISTINCTION between the classical Islamic attitude toward Christians on the one hand, and toward Jews on the other hand, plays a greater role today than ever before in the formulation of

"Islamic" foreign policy toward non-Muslims. The reasons for this include the fact that never before has there existed an actual Muslim theocracy capable of formulating such an "Islamic" foreign policy, together with the fact that never before has there existed a genuine Jewish polity toward which that Islamic policy could be formulated or implemented. The result is of major significance for the Iran-Israel standoff, as well as for any statesman or analyst who purports to understand it or hopes to influence its direction.

Among theorists of international conflict resolution, the belief is widely held that the removal of one party's "enclaves" or "outposts" from territory claimed by a rival party can not only help create mutually satisfactory borders but can inaugurate the kind of equilibrium that will eventually allow foes to become friends. In Europe, the great example is the post-World War II territorial adjustments that, however painful, put an end at last to the centuries-old enmity of France and Germany. In the Middle East, on a purely local scale, the same logic underlay Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's policy of evacuating Israel's Gaza settlements and handing over the territory to the Palestinians, as it did Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's projected "consolidation" of the Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria.

The specter that now haunts the state of Israel is that the West may some day adopt this logic, deeply problematic as it has proved to be locally, and apply it internationally vis-à-vis Iran and the "Little Satan" as a means of resolving the larger conflict between fundamentalist Islam and the "Great Satan." For no agenda is being pushed more energetically by today's Islamists worldwide than that, for the sake of Muslim-Christian rapprochement, and on pain of terrible consequences otherwise, America and Europe agree to offer up the Western imperialist enclave or outpost known as Israel on the altar of "accommodation."

This, indeed, was the implicit central theme of Ahmadinejad's 2006 letter to President Bush, as it is the menacing import of the Iranian president's most recent remarks on the subject:

[T]oday, it has been proven that the Zionists are not opposed only to Islam and the Muslims. They are opposed to humanity as a whole. They want to dominate the entire world. They would even sacrifice the Western regimes for their own sake. I have said in Tehran, and I say it again here—I say to the leaders of some Western countries: stop supporting these corrupt people. Behold, the rage of the Muslim peoples is accumulating. The

rage of the Muslim peoples may soon reach the point of explosion. If that day comes, they must know that the waves of this explosion will not be restricted to the boundaries of our region. They will definitely reach the corrupt forces that support this fake regime.

The Iranians and their allies throughout the Muslim world are bent on making the abandonment of Israel the price of "peace in our time." In a scenario that should ring frighteningly familiar, a charismatic leader of an ideological, totalitarian state is building upon an endemic anti-Semitism inculcated by centuries of religious indoctrination to create an atmosphere in which the massacre of large numbers of Jews and the destruction of their

independent polity will be considered a tolerable if not indeed a legitimate eventuality.

That is ominous enough. Even more ominous is the apparent willingness of any number of leaders of the Western world, under the banner of a hoped-for "reconciliation" with a major Middle Eastern power and a world religion, to tilt dangerously toward appeasement, ignoring the requirements of rational decision-making and putting at risk the West's own abiding interests and deepest values.

As for Israel, if it takes today's challenges seriously and prepares to meet them with the requisite strength and creativity, this may yet turn out to be its finest hour. If not, we may be witnessing the prelude to its last.