



Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism
Tel Aviv University

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THE JEWS OF IRAN
BETWEEN ANTISEMITISM AND ANTI-ZIONISM

Miriam Nissimov

One of the founding precepts of the Islamic Revolution and one that has guided its path ever since has been the uncompromising battle between the *mostazaeafin* (the oppressed) and the *mostakberin* (arrogant [western imperialism]). These two notions divide the world between righteousness and falsehood, between justice and injustice. For the Islamic Republic of Iran the cause of the *mostazaeafin* is one of the mainstays of its policy, at least officially. Iran's attitude toward Israel and Zionism is based on this principle, regarding Israel as a *mostakberin* which has crushed the just rights of the defenseless Palestinians. Alongside their continuous denunciations of Zionism and Israel during the past thirty years, the leaders of the Islamic Republic have continually reasserted the fact that they differentiate between Jews and Zionists.

The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Jewish Community – Thirty Years After

In 1979, with the victory of the revolution, the first challenge the Jewish community faced was to define and build ties with the new institutions and leaders. The anti-Israel and anti-Zionist orientation of the revolution, which was evident from the outset, made this task particularly urgent. On May 14, 1979, almost four months after returning to Iran, leader of the revolution Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini outlined his views concerning the status of the Jewish community in Iran, at a meeting with Jewish spiritual leaders. He said that the Islamic Republic's attitude toward Iran's religious minorities would be the same as toward other members of the Iranian nation; Islam would not discriminate against them in any way. At the meeting he compared Moses' struggle against the pharaohs of Egypt with the Islamic Republic's struggle against the *mostakberin*. The Zionists, he said, who cooperated with the

mostakberin, deserved the loathing of all Jews for carrying out crimes against the *mostazeafin* in the name of Judaism.

Khomeini thus established the distinction between Jews and Zionists, laying the foundations for the official policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran with the words, "We know that the narrative of the Jewish community differs from that of the Zionists" (*ma midanim keh hessab-e jame'e-e yahood qir az hessab-e jame'e-e anhas*).

Realizing the importance of this differentiation to its wellbeing, the Jewish community has done everything in its power to express disapproval of Zionism and Israel. Its representatives have participated in demonstrations, carrying signs with slogans such as "Death to Israel," and after any Israeli operation in Lebanon or against the Palestinians, the community has published denunciations of Israel and its policies. In August 2006, during Israel's war against Hizballah, the representative committee of Iranian Jewry announced its willingness to hospitalize Lebanese and Palestinians wounded in the "savage killing carried out by the army of the Zionist regime." In response to the Gaza war (late December 2008–mid-January 2009) the supreme religious leader of the Jewish community, Haham Mashalleh Golestani-Nejad, issued a religious ruling that called on Jews to boycott Zionist products. In an interview with Fars News Agency, he said the Zionists were not the sons of Jacob and did not belong to the nation of Moses, and their deeds were illegitimate, contravening the laws of the Torah. Siamak Moreh-Zedek, the Jewish representative in the Majles (Iranian parliament), praised the victory of the oppressed of Gaza, and applauded the Islamic Republic for aiding the people there and facilitating their victory.¹

Alongside these efforts, Iranian Jews have gone to great lengths to stress loyalty to the Islamic Republic. In his book titled *The Iranian Jews* published in 1990, Ali Asqar Mostafavi, a member of the Iranian Jewish Committee, referred to Shi'i culture as being an umbrella under which the Jews and the Jewish religion had found protection. An important event enabling the community to express support for the revolution takes place annually when the Islamic Republic celebrates its victory. In 2009, at the official gathering to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the revolution, Siamak Moreh-Zedek said that the Islamic revolution strengthened the possibility of brotherhood between the believers of different monotheistic religions. The 1979 revolution had been neither political nor economic in nature but a cultural and religious uprising, he said, and one of its most important achievements was the transformation of a secular society into a religious one.

Jews and Zionists – An Obscure Distinction

The Jewish community's consistent efforts to differentiate themselves from Zionists are challenged repeatedly by the remarks and declarations of Iranian officials, who mention Jews and Zionists interchangeably. The seemingly simple division has not always been easy to

follow at the official level and even less so at the conceptual one. During the 64th session of the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2009, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad pronounced: "It is no longer acceptable that a small minority dominate the politics, economy and culture of major parts of the world through its complex networks, establish a new form of slavery, and harm the reputation of other nations, even European one and the US, to attain its racist ambitions."² Nevertheless, in an interview to the Associated Press, a day before this speech, Ahmadinejad tried to clarify the distinction: "We differentiate between Jews and Zionists; Zionism is a political party but the Jews are followers of a Divine Messenger."³

Due to the Islamic Republic's stance on the Palestinian issue, Zionism, Israel and even Jews and Judaism are dominant topics not only in the political arena but also in the publishing, media and academic ones. Over the last several years, more than 80 books dealing with Judaism and/or Zionism have been published in the Islamic Republic of Iran. "Global Zionism" has also been the explicit theme of several TV productions of IRINN (Islamic Republic of Iran News Network). Two of these were alleged documentaries: *The Secrets of Armageddon* and *The Secrets of Armageddon 2 – Army of Shadows*, screened in 2008 and 2009, respectively. The first series made widespread use of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to prove that international Zionism was aiming to take over the world. Over twenty-six episodes, the film presented the supposed historical schemes of global Zionism to take control over Iran. The second production, premiered on August 22, 2009 (the first day of Ramadan), dealt with "the historical, social and political roots of the cultural invasion of the Crusado-Zionist West in the last four centuries."⁴ According to IRINN, the decision to produce a sequel was made due to the popularity of the first series in Iran and abroad.⁵

The Islamic Republic of Iran directs considerable efforts to substantiating its claims against Jews and Zionists upon supposedly academic grounds. Abdollah Shahbazi, former head of the Political Studies and Research Institute (PSRI)⁶ and a well-known historian in Iran, has published over the last decade a comprehensive five-volume study, titled *The Jew and Parsi Plutocrats, British Imperialism and Iran*, which contains conspiratorial anti-Jewish themes and has been uploaded to his website.⁷ Pseudo-scholarly books, articles and studies continuously "uncover" and analyze the history of Jews and Zionism. Suffice to mention two books published in 2006: *The Ungrateful Loan Holders – a Short History of Judaism and Jews in Iran*, and *Introducing Judaism to Youth – Why the Jews Should Be Driven Out of Palestine?* In 2008, in addition to exhibitions and conferences on the subjects of Judaism and Zionism, multimedia software also became available: "The Research Project on Satan," for example, presents discussions on these issues. Multimedia software on Judaica was displayed, ironically, during the seventeenth international Qur'an exhibition held in the Great Mosque of Tehran.⁸ The software includes information regarding "the image of Jews in the Qur'an,"

"seditious acts of Jews in the early period of Islam," *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and a complete version of Henry Ford's booklet "The International Jew."⁹

The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Holocaust

Much has been said and written regarding the Islamic Republic's attitude toward the Holocaust. Like Zionism and Judaism, the Holocaust has been the topic of books, articles and TV productions. Since 2007 more than ten books have been published in Iran directly tackling the issue of the Holocaust. These include *Holocaust and Islamophobia* (Council [Jameeh Modarresin] of Qom Islamic Academy, 2007) and *The Hidden Half – the Creators of the Myth of the Holocaust* (Kayhan, 2008).

Ahmadinejad's frequent inflammatory statements regarding the Holocaust have furthered denial attitudes in Iran and attracted worldwide attention, as illustrated by Iran expert David Menashri.¹⁰ Yet, alongside the extremism of official public statements, one can point to a change in the essence of claims regarding the Holocaust. The traditional ones were aimed mostly at distorting, belittling its historical significance, or trivializing Holocaust atrocities,¹¹ and demonstrating that the Zionists were using the Holocaust to attract sympathy and to legitimize their actions.¹² In recent years, the demand for "impartial research" of the Holocaust has been added to this discourse. In May 2006 in an interview to *Der Spiegel* less than a year after his election to the presidency, Ahmadinejad said, "we have started a significant debate. We ask two clear questions: one, did the Holocaust really happen?... We believe that if a historical event really occurred, the more you examine it and the more you talk about it, the clearer it becomes... Let an impartial group from all over the world examine it... In Europe there are two opinions regarding the subject: there is a group of scholars or people, most of them with political motives who say the Holocaust happened; however, another group of scholars disagrees with this opinion and most of those have been arrested."¹³ Ahmadinejad repeated the same argumentation in his interview to Larry King on CNN (September 23, 2008). In referring to the Holocaust Ahmadinejad said: "They just simply do not allow anyone to freely discuss the history that happened. They just say this is our account of the history and this is what happened and everybody else just listen... What I'm saying is let more research be done... on that history, there is a claim that the extent of this calamity was what it was, there are people who agree with it, there are people who disagree, some completely deny it, some absolutely agree with the whole account of it. What we were saying is that we should have an impartial group do their own research about the extent of the calamity... and let them announce the result."¹⁴

The call to conduct "impartial research" regarding the Holocaust was directed not only at western countries; Iran, itself, took a step in this direction. In December 2006, it hosted an international conference that was intended to provide an opportunity to "clarify the

hidden and open corners of this issue.”¹⁵ At the last session the participants resolved to establish a foundation to strengthen motivation for conducting more research into the Holocaust in order "to find out the truth."¹⁶ Mohammad Ali Ramin, director of the conference, was unanimously elected as head of this “international foundation to review the Holocaust.”¹⁷ Ramin, an engineer by training, is a political specialist and publicist who lived for many years in Germany. During that time he cooperated with Iran’s foreign ministry and Islamic culture and guidance ministry and organized dozens of political gatherings and cultural seminars for the benefit of German-speaking Muslims in Europe.¹⁸ Ramin is also an advisor of Iran's president and one of his staunchest advocates. In an interview to IRNA (Islamic Republic News Agency) in October 2009, Ramin alluded to a connection between Iran's nuclear program and Ahmadinejad's stand regarding the Holocaust, suggesting there was a link between international pressure on Iran's nuclear program and Ahmadinejad's propensity to raise the Holocaust issue. "In the last thirty years," he said, “international imperialism (*estekbar-e jehani*), together with Zionism, has been repeatedly concocting allegations against the Islamic Republic, one of the main ones in recent years being that regarding Iran's nuclear program.” For the first time, he continued, in response to the West's allegations, the president had presented claims regarding one of their own “crimes” (inventing the myth of the Holocaust). In the years prior to the Ahmadinejad era, the West's repeated allegations had put Iran constantly in the position of the accused, but now Iran was the prosecutor, he asserted. Praising Ahmadinejad for his courage in raising the issue of the Holocaust, Ramin told IRNA that by doing so Iran had entered the arena of international diplomacy and management of western public opinion.¹⁹

The Tenth Presidential Election and the Holocaust

Besides celebration of its thirtieth anniversary, in 2009 a vigorous presidential campaign was conducted in Iran that ended with controversial election results. In addition, due to Ahmadinejad's repeated statements regarding the Holocaust and international denunciations, it became an issue in the tenth presidential campaign. In his first press conference as a candidate, Mir Hossein Mousavi, representing the pragmatic and reformist wing of Iran's political map, was asked by foreign journalists to clarify his attitude toward the Holocaust. Mousavi said that Islam was a religion of love and kindness that treated the killing of a single individual with the same severity as the killing of many; yet in regard to the Holocaust, there were questions related to the number of Jews killed and their Jewishness. "What I'm saying is if something like the so-called Holocaust happened, why should the Palestinians pay the price for the Nazis' sin."²⁰ On another occasion, Mousavi said that the Holocaust was not Iran's business,²¹ and criticized Ahmadinejad's policy on the matter as not beneficial to Iran. A similar opinion was sounded by Mehdi Karroubi, the other pragmatic reformist candidate. In

response to a question of his supporters regarding the truth of the Holocaust, Karroubi said: "I have expressed my view on this subject several times... This event indisputably took place... and there was killing, and it shouldn't matter if in this event six million or six thousand were killed. The Holocaust certainly happened."²²

Conservative presidential candidate Mohssen Rezaee, former chief commander of the AGIR (Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution), refused to discuss the Holocaust. In an interview to Channel Two of the IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran's Broadcasting), he said: "We should put aside the Holocaust debate; it is not desirable for us to let this issue enter our revolutionary political literature."²³

Conclusion

In analyzing trends of antisemitism in the Islamic Republic of Iran, one should bear in mind the gap between explicit antisemitic references in books, articles and official statements, and the relative tranquility of the life of the small Jewish community in Iran. According to *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen, Iran's behavior toward its Jewish community tells us more about Iran, its sophistication and culture, than all the inflammatory rhetoric of its official spokesmen.²⁴ Yet, even if one chooses to dwell on this positive aspect, it should be borne in mind that the Islamic Republic's position regarding the Holocaust, its uncompromising attitude toward Zionism, its blurring of the distinction between Jews and Zionists, and its explicit antisemitic discourse increasingly evident in the academic and public sphere should serve as a warning light to all concerned.

¹ <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8505250536>

² http://www.un.org/ga/64/generaldebate/pdf/IR_en.pdf

³ <http://cms.mfa.gov.ir/cms/cms/Tehran/fa/news/17778>

⁴ <http://smostaghaci.persianblog.ir/post/324>

⁵ As evidence of its popularity, 25,000 websites reportedly responded to the series, or posted excerpts with English or German subtitles. Ibid.

⁶ One of the leading institutes in the Islamic Republic for contemporary Iranian historical research, <http://www.ir-psri.com/>

⁷ <http://www.shahbazi.org/Plutocracy/index.htm>

⁸ <http://www.irna.ir/View/FullStory/?NewsId=674045>

⁹ http://hanif-ngo.ir/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=43&Itemid=57

¹⁰ <http://www.tau.ac.il/Anti-Semitism/asw2005/menashri.html>

¹¹ Ibid

¹² This line of argument was well summarized in an article titled: "Holocaust – the Goose that Lays Golden Eggs," *Jam-e Jam* online, November 15, 2003.

¹³ *Der Spiegel*, May 29, 2006, based on the Farsi translation of the interview as published in <http://www.alefba.com/translationInterview.htm>

¹⁴ <http://www.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nn=8707021357>

¹⁵ IPIS call for papers: <http://www.ipis.ir>

¹⁶ http://www.moqavemat.ir/?lang=fa&state=showbody_news&row_id=7219

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- ¹⁷ http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2006/12/061214_mf_holocaust.shtml
¹⁸ <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8808101683>
¹⁹ <http://www.irna.ir/View/FullStory/?NewsId=722985>
²⁰ <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8801171029>
²¹ <http://aftabnews.ir/vdcawyna.49n0u15kk4.html>
²² <http://aftabnews.ir/vdca06na.49n0a15kk4.html>
²³ <http://aftabnews.ir/vdcew78o.jh87ei9bbj.html>
²⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/22/opinion/22iht-edcohen.3.20350579.html>