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A Threat in Any Language

by **Joshua Teitelbaum**

The leader of Iran wants to “wipe Israel off the map.” Was he misquoted? Not by a long shot. By **Joshua Teitelbaum**.

During the past several years, Iranian leaders—most prominently President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—have repeatedly called for the destruction of Israel and the Jewish people. Certain journalists and Iran experts interpret some of these statements to be simple expressions of dissatisfaction with the Israeli presence in the West Bank or eastern Jerusalem or with the current Israeli government and its policies.

“Ahmadinejad did not say he was going to wipe Israel off the map, because no such idiom exists in Persian,” insists Juan Cole of the University of Michigan, who argues that Ahmadinejad was not calling for the destruction of Israel. Jonathan Steele writes in the *Guardian* that Ahmadinejad was simply remarking that “this regime occupying Jerusalem must vanish from the page of time. . . . He was not making a military threat. He was calling for an end to the occupation of Jerusalem at some point in the future. The ‘page of time’ phrase suggests he did not expect it to happen soon.”

Scholars continue to soft-pedal the Iranian president’s words. Professor Stephen Walt, previously the academic dean of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government and coauthor of *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* with Professor John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago, told a Jerusalem audience in early June 2008: “I don’t think he is inciting to genocide.”

In reality, the intent behind Ahmadinejad’s language is clear. Those who seek to excuse the Iranian leader should be challenged when they use the tools of scholarship to obfuscate these extreme and deliberate statements. What emerges from a comprehensive analysis of what Ahmadinejad said—and how it has been interpreted in Iran, including by leading blogs and news outlets, some official—is that the Iranian president was calling not just for “regime change” in Jerusalem but for the actual, physical destruction of the state of Israel. Ahmadinejad’s language constitutes a call for genocide, the destruction of the Jewish state and its residents.

The Iranian government itself reinforces this understanding with its own rendering of Ahmadinejad’s slogans on posters and billboards and during official parades. Moreover, examining them in context demonstrates beyond a doubt that when Iranian leaders use the euphemism “Zionist regime” or “the Jerusalem-occupying regime,” they are definitely referring to the state of Israel and not to the present government. Iranian leaders simply follow the timeworn practice in the Arab world of referring to the “Zionist regime” in an attempt to avoid dignifying Israel by using its name. They are not talking about a nondirected, natural historical process that will end with Israel’s demise; rather, they are actively advocating Israel’s destruction and have made it clear that they have the will and the means to effect it.

THE “WIPE ISRAEL OFF THE MAP” SPEECH

In an address to the “World without Zionism” conference held in Tehran on October 26, 2005,

Ahmadinejad said:

Our dear Imam [Khomeini] ordered that this Jerusalem-occupying regime [Israel] must be erased from the page of time. This was a very wise statement. (*Va Imam-e aziz-e ma farmudand ke in rezhim-e eshghalgar-e Qods bayad az safhe-ye ruzegar mahv shaved. In jomle besyar hakimane ast.*)

New York Times Tehran correspondent Nazila Fathi translated the statement as Israel “must be wiped off the map,” a nonliteral translation that nevertheless conveys the meaning of the original: the destruction of Israel.

It cannot be credibly denied: the Iranian president has persistently called not just for “regime change” in Jerusalem but for the actual, physical destruction of the state of Israel.

Soft-pedaling Ahmadinejad’s call for the destruction of Israel, Cole told the *Times* that all Ahmadinejad had said was that “he hoped its regime, i.e., a Jewish-Zionist state occupying Jerusalem, would collapse.”

Official Iranian representatives and organs have since based their slogans on Ahmadinejad’s statement, loosely translating the statement as “Israel should be wiped off the face of the world.” This is evident in photographs of banners and signs in parades and ceremonies. Even the Iranian newscaster who introduced the report on the “World without Zionism” conference used the word “Israel” (instead of the “Jerusalem-occupying regime”) and also the word “world” (instead of the “page of time”), rendering Ahmadinejad’s statement as “erasing Israel, this disgraceful stain, from the world.”

Although Iranian leaders are well aware that they are watched by the international media and occasionally soften their statements accordingly, they are less careful in internal forums and events. But when Ahmadinejad punctuates his speech before a large crowd with “Death to Israel” (marg bar Esrail), this is no longer open to various interpretations. He is openly calling for the destruction of a country, not a regime.

DEHUMANIZATION BEFORE GENOCIDE: ISRAEL AS INFECTION

In the same speech of October 26, 2005, Ahmadinejad returned to the theme of Israel as dirty vermin that must be eradicated:

Soon this stain of disgrace will be cleaned from the garment of the world of Islam, and this is attainable. (*Be-zudi in lake-ye nang ra az damane-ye donya-ye Islam pak khahad kard, va in shodani’s.*)

To remove any doubt in the mind of the Persian reader that Ahmadinejad is referring to Israel, the Iranian president’s official site (www.president.ir) interpolates the word “Esrail” in its report on the speech to explain the expression “stain of disgrace.”

A common motif of incitement to genocide is the dehumanization of the target population. The Nazi weekly *Der Stürmer* portrayed Jews as parasites and locusts. In the early 1990s, Hutu propaganda in Rwanda against the Tutsis described them as cockroaches. Before Saddam

Hussein attacked the Iraqi Shiite population in 1991, his Baath Party newspaper characterized them as “monkey-faced people.” Similarly, Iran’s Ahmadinejad has called Israeli Jews “cattle,” “bloodthirsty barbarians,” and “criminals.”

The theme of the Israeli as a germ or microbe is a common one with the Iranian president. In his speech before a crowd in Bandar Abbas on February 20, 2008, Ahmadinejad said:

In the Middle East, they [the global powers] have created a black and filthy microbe called the Zionist regime, so they could use it to attack the peoples of the region, and by using this excuse, they want to advance their schemes for the Middle East. (*Dar mantaqe-ye Khavar-e Miyane niz jarsum-e siyah va kasifi be-nam-e rezhim-e sahyonisti dorost karde-and ta be-jan-e mardom-e mantaqe biandazand va be-behane-ye an siyasatha-ye khod-ra dar Khavar-e Miyane pish bebarand.*)

On the occasion last year of the sixtieth anniversary of Israel’s founding, Ahmadinejad stated that “global arrogance established the Zionist regime sixty years ago.” The Islamic Republic News Agency reported that “President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Thursday labeled the Zionist regime as a ‘stinking corpse’ and said those who think they can revive the corpse of this fabricated and usurper regime are mistaken.”

According to Ahmadinejad, ridding the world of the germ of Israel is possible and imminent. On April 14, 2006, he insisted that Israel was “heading towards annihilation.” He added that Israel was

a dried, rotten tree that will collapse with a single storm. (*Derakht-e khoshkide va puside’i ast ke ba yek tufan dar ham khahad shekast.*)

Referring to the United States (the “Great Satan”) and Israel (the “Little Satan”), Ahmadinejad said at a military parade on April 17, 2008:

The region and the world are prepared for great changes and for being cleansed of satanic powers. (*Mantaghe- va jehan amade-ye tahavolat-e bozorg va pak shodan az doshmanan-e ahrimani’s.*)

Ahmadinejad was fully prepared to make his assertions about Jews and Israel in the Western press as well. In an interview that appeared in the French daily *Le Monde* on February 5, 2008, he said the Jews of Israel are “a people falsified; invented, [the people of Israel] will not last; they must leave the territory.” Again, this is not a call for a change of government or new policies. It is clear he believes that Israelis will not endure and will not continue to stay on the territory where they live. This is a call to remove Israel’s Jewish population from the country, either by ethnic cleansing or by physical destruction.

READING AHMADINEJAD IN TEHRAN

Although certain Western commentators seek to whitewash Ahmadinejad’s statements on Israel, pro- and anti-regime Iranians (and others in the region) have no doubt that the Iranian president has been referring to the destruction of Israel.

“Soon this stain of disgrace will be cleaned from the garment of the world of Islam, and this is attainable.”

Resalat, a conservative Iranian daily, published an editorial on October 22, 2006, titled “Preparations for the Great War,” reflecting on an Ahmadinejad speech two days earlier. “It must not be forgotten that the great war is ahead of us, perhaps tomorrow, or in a few months, or even a few years,” the editorial read. “The nation of Muslims must prepare for the great war, so as to completely wipe out the Zionist regime, and remove this cancerous growth.”

One anti-regime blog stated: “In every Internet site that I visit today (for example BBC or Radio-Farda) or the satellite radio and television news stations that I listen to, the first news item is the pearls of wisdom issued by Mr. Ahmadinejad regarding the countdown to the destruction of Israel.”

Another Persian-language blog critical of Israel quoted Ahmadinejad and then asked its readers, “What have we done to erase this Israel from the scene of time?”

In the Ham-Mihan Forum, a question was raised about Ahmadinejad’s declaration that the countdown toward Israel’s destruction had begun. Among the seventy-one responses: “My opinion is that first you [Ahmadinejad] should fix up your own country, and then you can say that Israel should be destroyed. The people in Iran don’t have bread and we are concerned with Palestine.”

An Iranian newspaper editorial read: “The nation of Muslims must prepare for the great war, so as to completely wipe out the Zionist regime, and remove this cancerous growth.”

“I wish that all of this energy that is devoted to the destruction of Israel would be directed towards the destruction of drug addiction, poverty, corruption, and prostitution.”

Bloggers at Imam Sadegh University called for a boycott of Israeli products, with the following message: “Dear bloggers: If you would like to do so, you can take the first steps towards obliterating Israel from the map of the world.”

Ahmadinejad’s statement at the “World without Zionism” conference is widely quoted in blogs by those supporting the statement, those critical of the statement, and those who support the statement but question the timing. Persian-language bloggers all agree, however, that “the Jerusalem-occupying regime must be erased from the page of time” means the physical destruction of the state of Israel.

Even before Ahmadinejad spoke about wiping Israel off the map, the Iranian regime used such expressions without leaving any doubt about what they meant. A banner calling for Israel’s elimination was draped across a Shahab-3 missile during a 2003 military parade, for example. The Iranian regime itself has clarified that such expressions about Israel’s future do not describe a long-term historical process, in which the Israeli state collapses like the former Soviet Union, but rather the actual annihilation of Israel as a result of a military strike. The Shahab-3 missile has a range of eight hundred miles or more and can reach Israel from Iranian territory.

Michael Axworthy, who served as the head of the Iran section of Britain’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1998–2000, rejects the notion that Ahmadinejad has been

mistranslated and misinterpreted: “The formula had been used before by Khomeini and others, and had been translated by representatives of the Iranian regime as ‘wiped off the map.’ Some of the dispute that has arisen over what exactly Ahmadinejad meant by it has been rather bogus. When the slogan appeared draped over missiles in military parades, that meaning was pretty clear.”

THE THREATS START AT THE TOP

Iran's highest political authority is Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who succeeded Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989. Khamenei has made statements about Israel similar to Ahmadinejad's. In a televised sermon on December 15, 2000, he declared, “Iran's position, which was first expressed by the Imam [Khomeini] and stated several times by those responsible, is that the cancerous tumor called Israel must be uprooted from the region.”

“Dear bloggers: If you would like to do so, you can take the first steps towards obliterating Israel from the map of the world.”

A month later, on January 15, he stated: “It is the mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to erase Israel from the map of the region.” Hossein Shariatmadari, a Khamenei confidant who serves as one of his major mouthpieces, wrote an editorial in the Iranian daily Kayhan on October 30, 2005, in which he argued, “We declare explicitly that we will not be satisfied with anything less than the complete obliteration of the Zionist regime from the political map of the world.”

Ayatollah Ahmad Janati, a member of Ahmadinejad's inner circle and chairman of the Guardian Council of the Constitution, told reporters during a celebration of the anniversary of the Islamic revolution that every year the crowds are bigger and the slogans more enthusiastic. He added, “The blind enemies should see that the wish of these people is the death of America and Israel.”

Mohammad-Ali Ramin refers to himself, as does the press, as an adviser to Ahmadinejad. The secretary of the political committee of the Rayeheh Khosh-Khedmat Party, which supports the president, he is a well-known Holocaust denier and is believed to be behind the president's statements on that issue. On June 9, 2006, according to the reformist Internet daily Rooz, Ramin told students in Rasht:

Among the Jews there have always been those who killed God's prophets and who opposed justice and righteousness. Historically, there are many accusations against the Jews. For example, it was said that they were the source for such deadly diseases as the plague and typhus. This is because the Jews are very filthy people. For a time, people also said that they poisoned wells belonging to Christians and thus killed them.

Ramin does not even bother to cover up his anti-Semitism by using “Zionists” instead of “Jews.”

Ayatollah Hussein Nuri Hamadani, a leading religious authority associated with the regime, told a meeting with the Mahdaviyat (messianic) Studies Institute in April 2005, “One should fight the Jews and vanquish them so that the conditions for the advent of the Hidden Imam will be met.”

A CASE OF INCITEMENT

Finally, it is instructive to examine the view of the Shiite militia Hezbollah toward Israel for an indication of Iranian intentions. Hezbollah was founded in 1982 with the deployment of Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley and the training of its first cadre; its first governing council was established by the Iranian ambassador to Damascus, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi. In its founding political platform, Hezbollah is clear that it takes its orders from Tehran: "We abide by the orders of one single wise and just leadership . . . personified by Khomeini."

Take note of the statement of Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary-general of Hezbollah. In 2002, he disclosed his own organization's genocidal intent when he declared:

Islamic prophecies and not only Jewish prophecies declare that this state [Israel] will come into being, and all the Jews of the world will gather from all corners of the world in occupied Palestine. But this will not be so their false messiah [al-Dajjal] can rule in the world, but so that God can save you the trouble of running them down all over the world. And then the battle will be decisive and crushing.

The statements of Iran's proxies and its leaders, particularly President Ahmadinejad, leave no doubt. They constitute incitement to genocide of the people of Israel. They are alarmingly similar to the coded statements of incitement that preceded the Rwandan genocide of the Tutsis in 1994 and should therefore alarm all peace-loving people.

There is ample legal basis to prosecute Ahmadinejad in the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court for direct and public incitement to commit genocide and crimes against humanity.

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