

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES
BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY
Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 78

From Omnipotence to Impotence: A Shift in the Iranian Portrayal of the "Zionist Regime"

Ze'ev Maghen

© The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies
Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, 52900, Israel
<http://www.besacenter.org>
ISSN 0793-1042
August 2008

The Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies

The BESA Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University was founded by Dr. Thomas O. Hecht, a Canadian Jewish community leader. The Center is dedicated to the memory of Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, who concluded the first Arab-Israel peace agreement. The Center, a non-partisan and independent institute, seeks to contribute to the advancement of Middle East peace and security by conducting policy-relevant research on strategic subjects, particularly as they relate to the national security and foreign policy of Israel.

Mideast Security and Policy Studies serve as a forum for publication or re-publication of research conducted by BESA associates. Publication of a work by BESA signifies that it is deemed worthy of public consideration but does not imply endorsement of the author's views or conclusions. *BESA Colloquia on Strategy and Diplomacy* summarizes the papers delivered at conferences and seminars held by the Center, for the academic, military, official and general publics. In sponsoring these discussions, the BESA Center aims to stimulate public debate on, and consideration of, contending approaches to problems of peace and war in the Middle East. *A listing of recent BESA publications can be found at the end of this booklet.*

International Advisory Board

Founder of the Center and Chairman of the Advisory Board: Dr. Thomas O. Hecht

Vice Chairman: Mr. Saul Koschitzky

Members: Prof. Moshe Arens, Mrs. Madeleine Feher, Gen. Alexander M. Haig, Ms. Judy Ann Hecht, Ms. Marion Hecht, Mr. Robert Hecht, Prof. Riva Heft-Hecht, Hon. Shlomo Hillel, Mr. Isi Leibler, Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman, Mr. Robert K. Lifton, Maj. Gen. (res.) Daniel Matt, Rt. Hon. Brian Mulroney, Maj. Gen. (res.) Ori Orr, Mr. Seymour D. Reich, Amb. Meir Rosenne, Hon. Yitzhak Shamir, Amb. Zalman Shoval, Amb. Norman Spector, Mr. Muzi Wertheim

International Academic Advisory Board

Desmond Ball *Australian National University*, Ian Beckett *University of Northampton*, Irwin Cotler *McGill University*, Steven R. David *Johns Hopkins University*, Yehezkel Dror *Hebrew University*, Lawrence Freedman *King's College*, Patrick James *University of Southern California*, Efraim Karsh *King's College*, Robert J. Lieber *Georgetown University*, Barry Posen *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, Jasjit Singh *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*

Research Staff

BESA Center Director: Prof. Efraim Inbar

Research Associates: Dr. Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, Dr. Zeev Bonen, Prof. Stuart A. Cohen, Dr. Ehud Eilam, Dr. Gil Feiler, Prof. Jonathan Fox, Prof. Hillel Frisch, Prof. Eytan Gilboa, Prof. Rami Ginat, Eng. Aby Har-Even, Dr. Tsilla Hersheco, Prof. Arye L. Hillman, Dr. Mordechai Kedar, Dr. Avi Kober, Dr. David Korn, Mr. Yaakov Lifshitz, Dr. Ze'ev Maghen, Prof. Amikam Nachmani, Dr. Yuri Petrushevsky, Dr. Jonathan Rynhold, Maj. Gen. (res.) Emanuel Sakal, Prof. Shmuel Sandler, Dr. Ron Schleifer, Dr. Dany Shoham, Dr. Max Singer, Prof. Gerald Steinberg

Director of Public Affairs: David Weinberg

Program Coordinator: Hava Waxman Koen

Production Editor (English): Rebecca Goldberg

Production Editor (Hebrew): Alona Briner Rozenman

From Omnipotence to Impotence: A Shift in the Iranian Portrayal of the “Zionist Regime”

Ze’ev Maghen

In January 2006, the Iranian daily *Jomhūriya Eslāmī* carried the text of a speech delivered in Tehran’s main mosque by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene’i. Attempting to defuse the diplomatic tension occasioned by newly elected President Ahmadinejad’s call for Israel’s destruction at the previous month’s “World without Zionism” conference, Khamene’i 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 even a hint of irony, the reporter who had covered the event continued: “The congregation of worshippers, some seven thousand in number, expressed their unanimous support for the Supreme Leader’s words by repeatedly chanting: *marg bar Omrikā, marg bar Esrā’īl* – ‘Death to America, Death to Israel!’”¹

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 of a century. When the soccer team of Esfahan scores a goal against the soccer team of Shiraz, the fans of the former team cheer wildly: “Death to America, Death to Israel!” At the end of an exquisitely performed sitar solo in a genteel concert hall in Tabriz, the audience shows its appreciation for the artist’s virtuosity by loudly heaping imprecations upon “International Arrogance” (the USA) and “its Bastard Offspring” (the Jewish state). Even at the *hajj*, the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, Iranian participants have increasingly

Ze’ev Maghen is Senior Lecturer in Islamic Religion and Persian Language at Bar-Ilan University, and Chair of the Department of Middle East History. He is also a research fellow at the Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies. The author extends his gratitude to the BESA Center for Strategic Studies for its generous support of the present research.

replaced traditional pious ejaculations of *labayk Allāhumma labayk, lā sharīka laka, labayk* (“I am at your service, O Lord, there is none like unto You!”) with responsive Persian cursing sessions of the English- and Hebrew-speaking enemies of all that is holy. The ritual excoriation of the Great and Little Satans has become second nature in the Islamic Republic to such a degree that the newspaperman quoted above would not even *think* of noticing the boldfaced contradiction between Ayatollah Khamene’i’s ostensibly pacific sentiments and the not-so-peaceful response they garnered from his listeners. Like the “daily two minute hate” of the “enemy of the people” Emmanuel Goldstein in George Orwell’s *1984*, such choreographed venom-spewing is the consciousness-molding mantra upon which an entire generation of Iranians has been raised.

What does such widespread and persistent indoctrination, imbibed *bā shīr-e-mādar* (*cum lacte*, with mother’s milk) and drummed by rote into the consciousnesses of the Iranian citizenry throughout their lives, mean for the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic? What should it mean for Israeli foreign policy? To listen to many *Īrānshenāsān* (Iran experts) the answer to both of these questions is: nothing. These observers buttress this claim with what boils down to two basic arguments. First, they demand – as diehard exponents of *realpolitik* have ever done – that we distinguish between image and reality, between ideology and strategy, between the fiery rhetoric of preachers and street-mobs and the sober goals of an eminently pragmatic regime. Indeed, they point out, even the purportedly impassioned chest-beaters of mosque and madrasa are only engaging in drone-like repetition of slogans that have long since lost all significance in their minds: they are just going through the motions. “Sadly,” writes Asia Times columnist Kaveh-ye-Afrasiabi, “the Israeli perspective on Iran appears fixated on the rhetoric, ignoring...the gap between mass-generated, largely symbolic rhetoric and the actual policy.”² “Calls for Israel’s destruction,” maintains international relations expert Homayun-e-Esaghpour, “whether they emanate from the Iranian street or from the mouths of the political elite, must not be taken at face value. They are weary old catechisms, nothing more.”³ BBC world affairs correspondent Paul Reynolds announced that “the UK Foreign Office does not regard President Ahmadinejad’s statement on Israel as indicating a new and ominous

policy direction, but more as a sign of his inexperience and the very local focus of his government.”⁴ The chief executive, in other words, is wet behind the ears and unschooled in the niceties of diplomacy, and his vitriol is, at any rate, primarily intended for domestic consumption.

Alternative, but no less “realistic,” interpretations hold that Ahmadinejad’s menacing proclamations are first and foremost a way to win friends and influence people in the Arab street, and/or – the most common assertion by far – ultimately a bargaining chip on the way to normalizing relations with Washington.⁵ The vast majority of the Persian President’s countrymen, at any rate, are believed by such pundits not to share his fiercely antagonistic outlook: “The Iranians we should listen to,” explains Mark LeVine, “are not the 100,000 or so marchers in support of Ahmadinejad’s remarks, but the tens of millions who had something better to do that day.”⁶

Once we have accepted their thesis that the threats and execrations emanating from the mouths of the Iranian masses and leadership are so much sound and fury signifying nothing, and that in truth Iranian foreign policy decisions are governed by hard-headed, “rational” considerations no less than those of any other modern polity, the analysts go on to emphasize that there is no *rational* reason for the eruption of hostilities between Iran and Israel. “There are no significant strategic conflicts between Iran and Israel that would force these two countries to go to war against each other,” writes political science Professor Nader-e-Entessar.⁷ “Iran and Israel have no differences or occasions for getting into active hostilities, let alone a nuclear exchange,” reassures Director of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Shahram-e-Chubin.⁸ As the above-cited Kaveh Afrasiabi puts it, “[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.”⁹

Iran and Israel do not share a common border (this argument continues), and their national and economic interests are in no manner opposed to one another. Both countries have traditionally conceived their “frontline” adversaries to be Arab states, and thus their shared “enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend” approach (akin to Ben-Gurion’s

doctrine of “peripheral states”) has thrown them into each other’s arms time and time again, even *after* the Islamic revolution. Iranian saber-rattling against Israel, in other words, has no grounding in geo-strategic reality. It is merely an elaborate bluff, a means toward achieving one or more *other* goals: either the distraction of the Iranian populace from the failures of the Islamic Revolution in general and the shortcomings of Ahmadinejad’s socio-economic program in particular; or the return of Iran to the status of regional superpower (as under the Shah) and flagship of the no-longer-flagging Islamist movement (as under Khomeini); or (as is most commonly argued) the achievement of détente with the US in return for reining in the anti-Israel bellicosity. In the same way that many have asserted that Tehran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons is, in the end, little more than a tool or bargaining chip, so with Iranian Israel-bashing: it is perceived by these commentators as nothing but propaganda and posturing, which *the Iranians themselves* do not take seriously; why, then, should the Israelis take it seriously?

A Question of Intent

The two closely related assessments of the “Iranian threat” that we have just reviewed may therefore be formulated thus: (1) the Iranian “national pastime” of vituperating Israel – and even President Ahmadinejad’s recent and repeated demand that Israel be “completely wiped off the face of the earth” (*maḥv-e-kāmel-e-Esrā’īl az saḡhe-ye rūzegār*)¹⁰ – does not reflect any deeply-harbored sentiments or genuine intentions toward the Jewish State; and (2) what such consistent vilification *does* in fact reflect (besides pure habit) is a secondary ploy designed to realize primary domestic and/or international goals which, once they are achieved, will occasion the mitigation (if not the complete disappearance) of Iranian anti-Zionism. In what follows, I shall suggest counterpoints to these two propositions, and offer a different, less “optimistic” appraisal of the phenomena they address. I will argue that in each case, the conventional wisdom among policy analysts and Iran experts has got the matter half right – but not the important half.

The analysts claim that the daily drill of Israel-damning in Iran has become a tired exercise, a formalistic ceremony that is no longer

accompanied by genuine passion or serious intent – and they are correct. This understanding is even reinforced by our own opening anecdote: oblivious to the content of their own words, and of the extent to which those words contradicted the moderate message Khamene'i was striving to convey, the thousands of mosque-goers mouthed the demand for the demise of America and Israel for the ten-thousandth time in their lives.¹¹ And so in answer to the question, "Do the majority of Iranians really mean it?" we cannot but side with the analysts and reply: "No, they do not." Iran's regular anti-Israel sessions are not, for the most part, the product of bona fide, heart-felt hatred for the Jewish residents or even the Jewish government of the State of Israel. But herein lies the rub: **for it is, in the end, often far more dangerous *not* to mean it than to mean it.** If Iranian citizens and their leaders actually harbored profound and seething hatred for Jews or Zionists, this – I will maintain – would bode far better for the State of Israel's future in the Middle East than the situation that currently obtains.

To understand this we must make a momentary detour into the realm of mass psychology. Fierce anger and hatred, of the excessive caliber required to kill, are highly intense, all-consuming emotions that cannot but subside rather quickly, otherwise the psyche of their bearer will combust and collapse. Moreover, emotion cuts both ways. People who *truly* hate – not those whose hatred is taught, and thus derives from ideological indoctrination designed specifically to *dampen* human emotions in the face of some Ultimate Truth, but people who truly and *passionately* hate – are more often than not just as capable of experiencing *other* strong emotions as well, like pity or empathy or remorse, and are liable to substitute one of these latter feelings for their anger or hatred if the circumstances warrant this. For these and other reasons genuine anger and hatred, of the kind that people really "mean" and strongly feel, are inefficient tools for the creation and preservation of an atmosphere conducive to persistent persecution or mass murder. This is why the really horrific atrocities in human history – the enslavements, the inquisitions, the terrorisms, the genocides – have been perpetrated not in hot blood, but in cold blood: not as a result of immanent feeling, but in the name of transcendent ideology.

The vast majority of Germans in WWII did not personally and passionately hate all Jews: they had never even met the men, women, children and infants whom they would eventually butcher in batch after human batch; how could they possibly harbor genuine feelings towards them in *any* direction? It wasn't for the most part real, immediate emotion but rather methodically and systematically drilled-in ideology that powered the German genocide machine. The enormous crime of the Germans is not that they murdered six million Jews because they hated them, but that they murdered six million Jews despite the fact that they *didn't* hate them.

The same holds true for the events of 11 September 2001. Muḥammad Atta, the ringleader of the terrorists that brought down the twin towers, did not *genuinely and fervently hate* every single individual working in the World Trade Center 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's more, Atta had spent many years in the US 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 throughout that entire time toward every one of these acquaintances and all of their fellow countrymen, solely because of their national affiliation and/or the policies of their government? Could such a creature survive? Here again: it is not genuine, vehement hatred that we have to fear; it is *training*.

What is true for Nazi storm troopers and al-Qā'ida operatives is true for today's fundamentalist Shi'ites. The Iranian tradition of condemning Israel is, for most of the population and even most of their leaders, little more than lip service: the hostility of the militant members of the Iranian population to Israel is never really the result of some current, identifiable, truly heinous act on the part of the Jewish state (although the purported crimes of Israel, such as the recent incursions into the Gaza Strip, are occasionally exploited as triggers of staged popular protests), and such hostility is thus also in no way a function of immediate, genuine, blood-boiling rage. It is, unfortunately, far more durable and deeply implanted than that. That Israel is the devil, the root of all evil, a criminal cancer that must be

excised from the Muslim body politic – all of these are for Iranian Muslims eternal truths (not ephemeral feelings!) that have gradually, through endless tantra-like repetition, been installed down *underneath* the level of conscious meaning, in the place where basic instincts, automatic assumptions and ontological verities reside. When, with the passage of time, sincerely and zealously uttered mottos turn into weary and empty phraseology, we may say in many cases that they have cloyed in, and are consequently banished from, the active mind, only to burrow ever deeper into the recesses of the psyche, where they take root and remain dormant until circumstances require their reactivation. When the time is right – and that time is drawing near – the decades of propaganda pounded into the brains of Iranians (and Muslim populations from Algeria to Indonesia) will perform for the fundamentalists the same function that centuries of Christian anti-semitism in Europe did for the Nazis: by casting an entire people as a pariah and parasitic infestation, by demonizing, delegitimizing and dehumanizing them at home, in school, in the mosque and in the media, the quarter-of-a-century old *routine* of Israel-hatred (added to 1400 years of traditional Islamic anti-Semitism) will have prepared the moral ground in the minds of Iranians and their neighboring co-religionists for the (gradual or instantaneous) eradication of Israel. To sum up the point we have been making: ritual is not a phenomenon to be belittled but rather a force to be reckoned with, **and the older and more “tired” it is, the more permanently rooted and powerful it often becomes.** In short, the analysts, as we said, are correct in asserting that the Iranians do not really “mean it”; what they fail to realize is that is the very reason why they may well *do* it.

All Satans are not Equal

The second argument that we saw advanced by observers follows from the first: since Iranian verbal belligerence toward the “Zionist Regime” is not sincere, it must be a means toward a different end, and that end is eventually to barter a tempering of the Iranian position on Israel, and even support for the Middle East peace process, in exchange for full relations with, and major incentives from, Washington. As in the previous case, the analysts have got it half right. **Today’s Iranian leadership is not interested in trading recognition of and relations with Israel for a rapprochement with**

America; it is interested in trading recognition of and relations with America for a US *abandonment* of Israel. In this connection, we must grasp a crucial distinction between Iranian hostility to the Great Satan and Iranian hostility to the Little Satan, between “Death to America” and “Death to Israel.” This distinction operates on two closely related levels of Iranian and Islamic perception.

First, from a tactical standpoint, it must be understood that in the eyes of the Iranians the Great Satan is...great. The leaders of the Islamic Republic, even the fiercest ideologues among them, harbor no illusions that the United States will be conquered for Islam in the near future, or at any time before the return of the Mahdi, the Shi‘ite – and for centuries now also the pan-Muslim – messiah (it is true that President Ahmadinejad is closely affiliated, *inter alia* through his spiritual mentor Ayatollah Mesbāḥ-e-Yazdī, with the *ta‘jiliyān* or “hasteners” of the messianic advent and with the secret Hojatiyeh-Mahdaviyeh society which shares this goal, but even the outlook of Islamic apocalyptic, as we shall see, can be interpreted as not necessarily involving the immediate dismantling of major Christian polities).¹² Israel, however, is another matter. **More and more Iranian Islamists today – together with their zealous co-religionists in other Muslim countries – believe that the erasure of Israel 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.** One indication of this is the proliferation of articles in the official Persian press – beginning in 2005 and continuing and burgeoning up to the present – which focus not, as in the past, on the infinite strength of the Jewish Lobby and the long arm and entrenched tentacles of the World Zionist Organization, but rather on the diametric antitheses of these phenomena: on every detectable crack, fault and breach in the Jewish national edifice.

Up until recently, the prevalent theme of the Iranian media’s constant parade of feature stories on Jews/Israelis/Zionists has been the familiar exponential exaggeration of the power and influence of those groups.¹³ Such traditional coverage has involved, for example, “histories” of the Jewish behind-the-scenes work to ensure that the United States *and United Nations* (!) always support the Israeli agenda,¹⁴ as well as regular claims to the effect that the administration

of the former entity “growls like a baboon whenever the Zionist lobby tugs at its tail”¹⁵ or even that Israel simply “runs American policy” (*sahyonisthā gardāndegān-e-siyāsat-e-āmrīkā-and*).¹⁶ It has also included in-depth “analyses” of how the Jewish cabal that built and still owns Hollywood has utilized the enormous potential of *honar-e-haftom-donyā* (“the world’s seventh art,” i.e. cinema) in order to bolster the Zionist cause, *inter alia* by making movies that paint Islam in the darkest colors;¹⁷ “irrefutable testimony” showing that Jews control every single one of the “two thousand newspapers in America” and also “strive to weaken the cultures, [national] identities, economies and political independence of all the world’s countries” (*talāsh mīkonand farhang, hoveyyat, eqteṣād va-esteqlāl-e-siyāsī-yehar keshvarī-rā dar jahān taḍ‘īf konand*);¹⁸ “probing research” into the claim that the Israeli Mossad was behind the London bombings of July 2005 (as well as the New York attacks of 9/11);¹⁹ “documented proof” that Zionist money and pressure is indirectly responsibility for what is claimed to be the anti-Iranian bent of the hugely popular *al-Jazīra* television network;²⁰ “clear evidence” that Israel and American Jewry are the primary forces pushing the United States toward a full-scale invasion of Iran;²¹ “ample examples” of the “Jewish dictatorship over Europe”;²² “strong arguments” to the effect that World Jewry was the force behind the mid-twentieth century Stalinist depredations;²³ and even an in-depth “scholarly” exposé of the way in which the Jews carved Protestantism out of Catholicism in order to return Christianity to the Old Testament ethos and consequently to the notion of the Jews as Chosen People.²⁴ These and literally hundreds of other treatments in the Iranian media portraying Israel and Jewry as the nearly almighty “hidden hand” seeking (and succeeding!) to undermine Islam at every turn have of late dwindled considerably, making way for a new and more confident focus designed to show Israel as a polity tottering on the brink of collapse.²⁵

This novel approach is epitomized by President Ahmadinejad, whose repeated descriptions of Israel as a “rotten tree” and a “house of straw,” as well as his “promise” 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,” have become a matter of public record (as has the earlier declaration of former president and current chairman of the Expediency Council Ayatollah Rafsanjani that a

single nuclear bomb would serve to eradicate the Jewish state and solve the Arab-Israeli conflict).²⁶ But the trend is far more widespread than one man. The Israeli evacuation of the Gaza settlements in the summer of 2006, for instance, has become a major symbol of Israeli weakness in Iranian eyes. “The Zionist regime retreats in the face of the slightest resistance,” *Hamshahrī* gloated in the wake of the completion of the “Disengagement” process (*rejīm-e-ṣahyonistī bā saboktarīn mobārezeh aqab neshīnī mikonad*),²⁷ the author of these lines thereby displaying his readiness even to belittle the force of Palestinian resistance in order to portray the weakness of the Israelis. “The willingness of the Zionists to leave their synagogues behind [in Gaza] demonstrates conclusively that they have no God (*hīch khodā nadārand*) and therefore, of course, no religious connection to the Holy Land; they will now be easily ejected from all of occupied Palestine.”²⁸ The headline introducing a lengthy interview with Hizballah leader Ḥasan Naṣrallah soon after the Gaza pullout read: “We, too, drove out the Israeli cowards” (*mā nīz Esrā’īlīhā-ye-tarsān az marg-rā bīrūn kardīm*).²⁹ Referring to that earlier retreat, Ayatollah Khamene’i declared that “Israel’s withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000 ‘proved the justness of the Islamic struggle,’ demonstrating that if Muslims put their trust in God ‘victory will be certain.’”³⁰ Israel’s July 2006 incursion into Lebanon in response to the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers was described by the daily *Eṭṭelā’āt* as “the beginning of the end of the Zionist regime” (*āghāzī-ye-bar pāyān ḥay’at-e-rezhīm-e-ṣahyonistī*).³¹ Though the Iranians were initially shocked by the force of the Israeli reaction, and concerned that they had “shot their bolt” too soon, by the end of the hostilities in mid-August the Iranian press – like that of many other Middle Eastern countries – was exploiting the lack of a clear Israeli victory to describe the Jewish state as even weaker than they had presumed.

What the Iranian media has begun to refer to as “the defeat of the Jerusalem-occupying regime in both Gaza and southern Lebanon (in 2000 and 2006)” is regularly coupled with another perceived indication of increasing Israeli feebleness and trepidation: the security fence. Ayatollah Khamene’i recently described said barrier as “a symbol of the impotence of the Zionists and of their inability to rein in the Intifada,” adding that “the Islamic nation is fully capable of

deciding the fate of Palestine here and now.”³² The spread of suicide operations has sown “terror and panic” (*tars va-vaḥshat*) amongst the Israelis, which is why they have retreated behind a ghetto wall, as their trembling forebears did.³³

But it is the *metaphorical* walls separating the different sectors and camps *inside* Israeli society that receive the greatest amount of coverage. The Iranian press delights in every instance – real, imagined or exaggerated – of internecine Jewish conflict, including that between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, religious Israelis and secular Israelis, new immigrants and old immigrants, right-wingers and left-wingers, reform and conservative, Zionist, non-Zionist, anti-Zionist and “post-Zionist” (this, too, represents a *volte face* of sorts: in the past the prevailing Muslim fundamentalist – and Arab nationalist – tendency was specifically to lump all types of Jews together and dismiss any distinctions between them as smokescreens for their diabolical conspiracies). One article in the daily *Javān* – entitled “Post-Zionism and the Identity Crisis in Israel” – pits “extremist Jews” (*yahūdiyān-e-efrātī*, i.e. nationalists, settlers) against “religious Jews” (*yahūdiyān-e-madhabī*, i.e. ultra-orthodox non-nationalists), and delves into its own (not altogether inaccurate) version of what divides these two persuasions;³⁴ another article describes the large numbers of Russian immigrants to Israel who have not managed to integrate and have either joined “Jews for Jesus” or various Satanic and even Neo-Nazi cults, or have left the country for good;³⁵ and yet another discusses the intricacies of recent Israeli political maneuvering and includes a photograph of Shimon Peres and Amir Peretz talking in an office. “Note that *Peres* is wearing a suit and tie,” writes the author of this lengthy essay, “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.”³⁶ *Lā yuqātilūnakum jamī’an*, echoed Ayatollah Khamene’i in a recent speech to Tehran university students, quoting the 14th verse of the 59th chapter of the Qur’an in reference to the Jews of Madina, *taḥsabuhum jamī’an wa-qulūbuhum shaṭṭā* – “[The Jews] will not fight against you in one body; you think they are united, but their hearts are divided.”³⁷

The new Iranian view of Israel as more flimsy façade than fearsome foe is, in fact, not entirely new. Ayatollah Khomeini himself portrayed the Jewish state as weak and divided, calling it *Esrā'īl dar moqābel-e-Esrā'īl*, “Israel against Israel.” “If the Muslims were only united,” he had continued, “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.”³⁸ It is no coincidence that the rise to power of Ahmadinejad, who sees and paints himself in many ways as the renewer of Khomeini’s revolutionary ideology and zeal, coincides with a resurgence of the belief that Israel’s end is near. “The Zionist entity,” proclaimed the president most recently, “has reached a dead end and is in a process of precipitate decline...All of the conditions are ripe for its removal.” This will be accomplished, he added, by an “explosion of Muslim rage.”³⁹ Three weeks after the eruption of hostilities between Hizballāh and Israel in the summer of 2006, General Secretary of the Guardian Council Ayatollah Aḥmad-e-Jannatī upped Khomeini and whipped up the audience of his Friday mosque sermon with the assertion – first uttered by Egypt’s Aḥmad Sa‘īd on the brink of the Six Day War – that all the Muslims need do is spit, and Israel will drown.⁴⁰ This shift in the Iranian perception of the Jewish state from Potemkin village to potent nemesis and back again is a salient illustration of Efraim Karsh’s argument that “the traits associated with Jews [in Islamic tradition] make a paradoxical mixture: they are seen as both domineering and wretched, both haughty and low.”⁴¹ Karsh immediately adds that “such is the age-old Muslim stereotype – as it is, *mutatis mutandis*, the Christian.” One of the differences between the Muslim and Christian positions alluded to in Karsh’s “*mutatis mutandis*” should be briefly reviewed before we proceed.

It has long (and correctly) been argued that major elements of modern Muslim anti-Semitism have been imported into Islamic lands from Christian Europe, and this holds especially true for the perception of Jews as a powerful international cabal. The Jews as a group not just to be hated but to be feared is a notion that held sway for centuries, and in many locales continues to hold sway, in the Christian West. In contrast, though introduced into Muslim collective consciousness only relatively recently, this outlook on the Jewish people is already waning in the Islamic world. Many factors may account for the

failure of the image of the almighty International Jew to strike deep roots and maintain itself in the contemporary Muslim *Weltanschauung*, but one of these factors is, to the present writer's mind, paramount.

There is an uncanny correlation between the role accorded Jews by Christian and Islamic scripture during the formative period of what Mircea Eliade would term each of these religion's "sacred time." The premier *political-military* enemies of Jesus in the New Testament were the pagan Romans. On the other hand, his increasingly meddlesome *ideological-religious* enemies were the Jews: those Scribes and Pharisees (Hypocrites!) who would not cease peppering the would-be Savior with questions deliberately intended to trip him up. Muḥammad's *political-military* adversaries were his own disowned pagan Quraysh tribe stationed back in Mecca, whence they launched three successive campaigns against the Prophet's nascent faith-community in Madīna. But Muḥammad's *real* trouble came from his pestering *ideological-religious* antagonists, the (genuine or imaginary) Jewish tribes of Medina – as well as the *munafiqun* or "hypocrites," who are closely identified by Muslim tradition with the Jews – who made the Apostle's spiritual-intellectual life extremely difficult with their incessant legal and theological badgering. The similarity in the description of Jewish subversive activity and the reactions to it in the traditions of the two religions is almost eerie, and may explain much. However, no less significant for our purposes here is the following *difference* between the *denouements* of the two classical narratives: in the Evangel the Jews "win," and succeed in having Jesus crucified and most of his immediate followers executed or banished. In the Qur'ānic-Ḥadīthic story *Muhammad* wins, vanquishing his Jewish foes, executing some and banishing the remainder from Madīna (and eventually, under his immediate successors, from Arabia altogether). This formative Islamic experience, which was largely responsible for the *despisal* – as opposed to the fear – of the Jew over most of Muslim history, may have much to do with the new confidence of the latter-day fundamentalists in their ability to eliminate Israel.

The Price of Peace

Having discussed some significant differences between the Muslim and Christian perception of Jews, we now turn to certain no less important differences between the Muslim perception of Jews and of Christians. We do so in the context of the second distinction we seek to elucidate between the attitude of the Islamic Republic to the “Great Satan” and its attitude to the “Little Satan.” If the first distinction we drew was tactical – Iranian Islamic fundamentalists do not see the dismantling of America as a practical goal in the present, but they do see the destruction of Israel as just that – the second distinction is strategic, and derives from a combination of deeply rooted Islamic ideology and centuries of Muslim historical experience. Early on in Islamic history, after the first spate of lightening victories had died down, Muslims realized that they would have to be satisfied with only part of the occidental world, the other part of which they would have to share with the Christians. Islamic leaders and even Islamic clerics accepted and almost enshrined the medieval “status quo,” according to which the ecumene was divided into Islamdom in the East and Christendom in the West. Excessive encroachment, it is true, could not be tolerated – and thus Saladin forced out the Crusaders and the Ottomans were rolled back from Vienna – but on the whole an equilibrium had been reached, in which each side may be said to have even harbored a grudging respect for the other.⁴²

The premier theological underpinning for this political-military policy of compromise was a celebrated Qur’ānic verse, the contents of which immediately explain why there is no room today for the State of Israel in this ideal Islamic system of international balance and mutual tolerance:

You (i.e. Muḥammad 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” (Q. 5: 82).

Already in 1734 George Sale could affirm that “[Muḥammad] used [the Jews], for the latter part of his life, 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.”⁴³ Thus, added to the fact that the Christian world was a massive fact of life that could not be ignored and would not go away, whereas the Jews were “the least of all the nations,” there was also an age-old antipathy towards Jews that – for the most part – did not exist toward Christians. The name of Jesus appears a mere 25 times in the Qur’ān, whereas the name of Moses appears 131 times. Still, from the “first hijra” of Muḥammad’s followers to Abyssinia (615 CE) down to President Ahmadinejad’s open letter to President Bush (March, 2006), Muslims have forever taken advantage of the common Christian and Islamic veneration of Jesus in order to promote good relations between members of the two faiths. Moses, on the other hand, has never once throughout all that time been put to use by Muslim exponents in the same fashion in order to foster coexistence with Jews. The traditional lack of desire or motivation among Muslims to seek a *modus vivendi* with Jews was amplified after the rise of Zionism, and is epitomized by the adamant rejectionism that characterized the Arab position on Israel. From the refusal of Arab representatives to sit with their Jewish counterparts before 1948, through the “three no’s” of 1968 (which included “no negotiations”) and down to a recent BBC radio conference between Arabic speaking representatives of Syria, Lebanon, Hizballah, Hamas and the Islamic Republic which, when joined by an Israeli participant, saw the Iranian spokesman politely bow out with the explanation that he could not be a party to a discussion which included a “Zionist terrorist monster” (*maskh irhābī sahyūnī*).⁴⁴

This multifaceted distinction between the classical Islamic attitude to Christians and the classical Islamic attitude to Jews plays a greater role today than ever before in the formulation of “Islamic” foreign policy toward non-Muslims. This is true for three main reasons: (1) because at no time before in Muslim history have Islamic classical sources been as accessible to the Muslim masses as they are today, due primarily to the increase in literacy and the impact of the “information revolution”; (2) because at no time before in Muslim

history has there existed an actual *Islamic theocracy* that is capable of formulating an “Islamic” foreign policy (especially if we accept the definition of the term “theocracy” rendered by the man who coined the term – Josephus Flavius – as “a government in which the laws of God are enforced *by those most qualified to do so*”); and (3) because at no time before in Muslim history has there existed a genuine Jewish political entity toward which such “Islamic” foreign policy could be formulated. All of this harbors major significance for the Iran-Israel standoff, more than anything for reasons that we shall now put forth.

There is a widespread and common sense notion in the field of conflict resolution that the elimination of “enclaves” or “outposts” inside territory claimed by a rival will both create more defensible borders and, at the same time, inaugurate the kind of entropic equilibrium that eventually allows enemies to become friends. This is the logic that underlay former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s “disengagement” plan for the evacuation of the Gaza settlements, and the logic that currently underlies Prime Minister 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 someday adopt this logic and apply it to the international system and to the increasingly worrisome Islamo-Christian conflict. For no agenda is being pushed more energetically by today’s Islamists worldwide (Ahmadinejad premier among them) than this: **that America and Europe agree to sacrifice the Western imperialist “enclave” or “outpost” known as Israel – the “poison stake” plunged 60 years ago deep into the heart of Islamdom – on the altar of Muslim-Christian rapprochement.** This is, in fact, the central theme of Ahmadinejad’s letter to President Bush, if it is read closely,⁴⁵ as well as the essential import of the Iranian president’s most recent remarks on the subject:

Today, 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.⁴⁶

The Iranians and their Islamist allies throughout the Muslim world are bent on making Israel's abandonment the price of peace in our time, and of late the Western world is dangerously tilting toward appeasement. In a scenario that should ring frighteningly familiar to us, a charismatic leader of an ideological, totalitarian state is building upon the 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 legitimate eventuality. Even more ominous (and more reminiscent) is the willingness of this state and its admirers and proxies to put at risk their own interests and ignore the requirements of rational decision making in favor of achieving this ultimate goal.⁴⁷ If Israel takes these challenges seriously and prepares to meet them with the requisite strength and creativity, this may be her finest hour; if not, it may be the prelude to her last.

Conclusion

The accession of Mahmud Ahmadinejad to the presidency of the Islamic Republic 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 – and perhaps most ominously – a new conception of that polity as weak and unstable, an easy target for a united Muslim (or even just united Shi'ite) 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 in Israel, the region, or the world. Vociferous Iranian declarations about the need to

MIDEAST SECURITY AND POLICY STUDIES

erase Israel from the map are seen by such commentators as nothing more than a means toward achieving certain pragmatic goals, such as eventual détente with the West. This essay argues that, on the contrary, Iranian-Islamist threats to Israel's existence are sincere and constitute tenaciously sought ends in themselves. They must be treated by the Israeli government and by the West at large with the utmost seriousness.

Notes

¹ “Sokhanrānī-ye-Maqām-e-Mo‘azzam-e-Rahbarī dar Masjed-e-Sepah-Sālār,” *Jomhūriya Eslāmī*, reported by *IRNA*, 26 January 2006. Unhappy with more strictly academic methods of transliteration, which for the most part ignore the needs of proper verbal pronunciation in favor of accurate alphabetical correspondence, I have opted in this paper for a system that attempts to navigate between the pitfalls of each. Macrons are employed to indicate long vowels, but – for instance – *kasras* are rendered with an “e” (*Eslām, zabān-e-pāk*) because that is how they sound in Persian. Most consonants have been transliterated as from Arabic, but writing *Riḏā* instead of *Rezā* seems counterproductive to me, and so I have chosen the latter alternative. Some well known names, like *Khamene’i* or *Ahmadinejad* have been left as they usually appear in the English press.

² Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, “The Myth of an Israeli Strike on Iran,” *Asia Times*, 7 April 2005.

³ *Al-Jazīra*, 17 March 2006.

⁴ BBC News Online, 28 October 2005.

⁵ Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, “The Iran-Israel Misconception,” *Asia Times*, 16 March 2006. See also Trita Parsi, “Under the Veil of Ideology: The Israeli-Iranian Strategic Rivalry,” *MERIP*, 9 June 2006.

⁶ Mark LeVine, “Why do some of ‘them’ hate some of ‘us,’” *Beliefnet*, 20 May 2006. Levine employs here a strange calculus, according to which the number of participants required for a demonstration to be taken seriously is in the tens of millions (which means no demonstration in history should have been taken seriously). 100,000 people on the street is small change in his eyes.

⁷ Afrasiabi, op. cit., 2006.

⁸ BBC News Online, 14 February 2006.

⁹ Afrasiabi, op. cit., 2006.

¹⁰ *Rooz*, “Artesh-e-Esrā’īl,” 5 Abān, 1386 (H.S.).

¹¹ “At Friday prayers, much of the outrage is canned, delivered by worshipers bused in for the occasion; one group of bored Air Force conscripts barely looks up as an imam leads the crowd in ‘Death to America’ chants” (Nisid Hajari, “Iran is Giddy but Worried,” *Newsweek*, 6 August 2006).

¹² There are admittedly a handful of statements by Iranian leaders claiming that America can and will be defeated in the near future, such as the following by Expediency Council secretary and former Commander of the Revolutionary Guard *Mohsen-e-Rezā’ī* on 8 June 2006: “America seems so big, but in fact is like a paper tiger – even the slightest tremor could easily make it crumple and disappear” (*MEMRI*, Special Dispatch Series # 1189). Such declarations are probably inevitable, and are occasionally even sincerely believed by those who make them, but they have no detectable resonance that I can see in policy making.

¹³ For surveys and analyses of the age-old theme of the “International Jew” and its rapid percolation into the Muslim world during the twentieth century, see *Yehoshafat Harkaby, Arab Attitudes to Israel* (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press,

1971); Bernard Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites* (London: George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd., 1986, reprinted with new afterward, 1997); Daniel Pipes, *Middle East Fears of Conspiracy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); and now Efraim Karsh, "The Long Trail of Islamic Anti-Semitism," *Israel Affairs*, 2006, vol. 12, no. 1, where a selection of recent Palestinian claims regarding purported Israeli machinations – among them the infecting of Palestinian children with the AIDS virus, cancer and mad cow disease – may also be found.

¹⁴ E.g. Mahdī-ye-'Alīkhānī, "Zavāyā-ye-Tārīkī az Ta'sīs va Tathbīt-e-Esrā'il," *Mouood Online*, 14 April 2004.

¹⁵ David Menashri, "Iran, Israel and the Middle East Conflict," *Israel Affairs*, 2006, vol. 12, no. 1, p. 119.

¹⁶ Supreme Leader 'Alī Ḥosayn-e-Khāmene'ī, "Matn-e-Kāmel-e-Bayānāt-e-Maqām-e-Mo'azzam-e-Rahbarī dar Dīdār-e-Dāneshjūyān va-Dāneshāmūzān be-Monāsebat-e-Sālrūz-e-Taskhīr-e-Lāne-ye-Jāsūsī-ye-Āmrīkā," *Pāyegāh Ettelā' Resānī-ye-Daftar-e-Ḥefz va-Nashr-e-Āthār-e-Ḥaḍrat-e-Āyat Allāh al-Ozmā Seyyed 'Alī Ḥosayn-e-Khāmene'ī*, 8 December 1999.

¹⁷ Maḥmūd-e-'Alīzādeh, "Sinamā-ye-Şahyūnistī Badharī keh dar Maṅtaqeh Kāshteh Mishavad," www.yahood.net, originally posted 13 August 2003.

¹⁸ Rabi' Āqāzādeh, "Jahān Garāyān-e-Yahūdī," *ISNA*, 24 October, 2002.

¹⁹ "Mosād az Ḥamalāt-e-Landan Eṭtelā' Dāsht," *Hamshahrī*, 19 July 2005.

²⁰ Kāzem-e-Yazdī, "Nezām-e-Eṭtelā'-e-Resāne-ye-Felestīniyān dar Dākhel-e-Sarzamīnhā-ye-Āshghālī," *Hamshahrī*, 31 February 2005.

²¹ Yūsef-e-Mazlūmān, "Ḥamleh beh Īrān beh Farmān-e-'Dīvānehā'," *Hamshahrī*, 23 March 2005.

²² "Diktatori-ye-Yahūdīyān bar Orūpā," *Kayhān*, 1 August 2005.

²³ "Gerdehamā'ī-ye-Ūkrā'in: Khaṭar-e-Şahyonizm baroye Bashriyat Kāmelan Jaddī ast," *Javān*, 27 October 2005.

²⁴ Nāder-e-Şāheb, "Nāgoftēhā'ī az Qorūn-e-Miyāne-ye va Jadīd-e-Orūpā: Gerāyesh beh Īdehā-ye-Yahūdī dar Protestāntizm," *Kayhān*, 5 July 2004.

²⁵ I am not claiming that the earlier trend – of conceiving of Jewry and Zionism as extremely powerful and ascribing to them fantastic conspiracies – has disappeared entirely. Indeed, only a few months ago in the spring of 2006, Ahmadinejad's own personal advisor Muḥammad 'Alī Rāmīn wondered aloud "how a bird that had the flu could manage to fly from Australia to Siberia," and proceeded to adduce historical evidence – medieval Jewish well-poisoning as well as Jewish responsibility for the outbreak of bubonic plague, AIDS and SARS – to prove that the dreaded bird-flu was also a Jewish creation (*Rūz*, 9 June 2006).

²⁶ See Efraim Inbar, "The Need to Block a Nuclear Iran," *BESA Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 67* (April 2006), p. 11.

²⁷ "Bā Āghāz-e-Aqab Neshīnī az Bakhshī az Sarzamīnhā-ye-Āshghālī Vorūd Şahyonīst-hā beh-Ghazeh Mamnū' Shod," *Hamshahrī*, 16 August 2005.

²⁸ Ḥosayn-e-Pordā'ūd, "Shabake-ye-Īsārgarān," *IRNA*, 14 January 2006.

²⁹ "Seyyed-e-Ḥasan Naşr Allāh dar Goft-va-Gū bā Hamshahrī," *Hamshahrī*, 27 November 2005. The literal rendering would be "the death-fearing Israelis," which is a clear reference to the 96th verse of the second chapter of the Qur'ān: "And you

will certainly find [the Jews] to be the greediest of men for life, greedier even than the idolators. Each of them wishes to live a thousand years...

³⁰ Mensashri, op. cit., p. 118.

³¹ *Ettelā'āt*, 15 July 2006.

³² "Maqām-e-Mo'azzam-Rahbarī: 'Ommat-e-Eslāmī Qāder ast Sarnevesht-e-Felestīn-rā beh Naf'-e-Mardom-e-Ān Īnjā va-Īnak Raqam Bezanad,'" *Hamshahrī*, 31 May 2006.

³³ Māzyār-e-Fekrī-Ershād, "Zendegī dar Sāye-ye-Dīvār," *Hamshahrī*, 22 December 2005.

³⁴ "Post sahyonizm va-bohrān-e-hoviyyat dar Esrā'īl," *Javān*, 20 December 2005.

³⁵ Ḥosayn-e-Banānej, "Ne'onāzī-hā-ye Esrā'īlī: Negāhī be-Ravand-e-Farār-e-Maghz-hā az Sarzamīn-hā-ye-Āshghālī," *Hamshahrī*, 29 December 2004.

³⁶ "Perez dar barābar-e-Peretz," *Hamshahrī*, 31 May 2006.

³⁷ *IRNA*, 22 April 2006.

³⁸ *Ṣaḥīfe-ye-Nūr*, cited at www.imam-khomeini.com: (*agar moslemīn mojtame' būdand vah har kodām yek satl-e-āb beh Esrā'īl mīrīkhtand, īn dawlat-e-pushālī vah khod-khor-rā sayl mībordand*).

³⁹ Ahmadinejad at the conference of Iraq's neighboring countries, as reported by news.walla.co.il, 11 July 2006 (as of this writing still unconfirmed by Iranian sources).

⁴⁰ *IRNA*, 1 August 2006.

⁴¹ Karsh, op. cit., p. 3. For a somewhat similar metamorphosis in Palestinian attitudes to Jewish power, see the examples adduced in the same article, pp. 6-7. A similarly paradoxical usage is in evidence when Ayatollah Rafsanjani "enumerated the harms done by this flimsy state to the Muslim world," (Menashri, op. cit., p. 110).

⁴² Perhaps the best description of the early acceptance by the Muslims of this state of affairs may be had from Khalid Yahya Blankinship, *The End of the Jihad State: The Reign of Hisham Ibn 'Abd al-Malik and the Collapse of the Umayyads* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

⁴³ George Sale, "Preliminary Discourse" to *The Koran* (London: Frederick Warne and Co., n.d. [originally published in 1734]), p. 27.

⁴⁴ 'Abbās Khānyār, *BBC Arabic*, 12 July 2006.

⁴⁵ It is also a major aspect of the Iranian-led campaign of holocaust denial currently sweeping the Islamic world. The editor of *Kayhān*, Ḥosayn-e-Sharī'atmadārī, for instance, has devoted much energy to an attempt to divert attention away from the fate of European Jews during WWII and toward an obscure, probably legendary incident in the pre-Islamic Arabian past in which – so certain Muslim sources claim – a Jewish king named Dhū Nuwās burned Christians in a trench who refused to convert to Judaism. This, says Sharī'atmadārī, drawing attention to the literal meaning of the word, was the real "holocaust."

⁴⁶ *MEMRI*, "Iran veh ha-Haslamah ha-Nokhekhīt be-Gvulot Yisrael," 12 July 2006.

⁴⁷ See Inbar, op. cit., pp. 11-13.