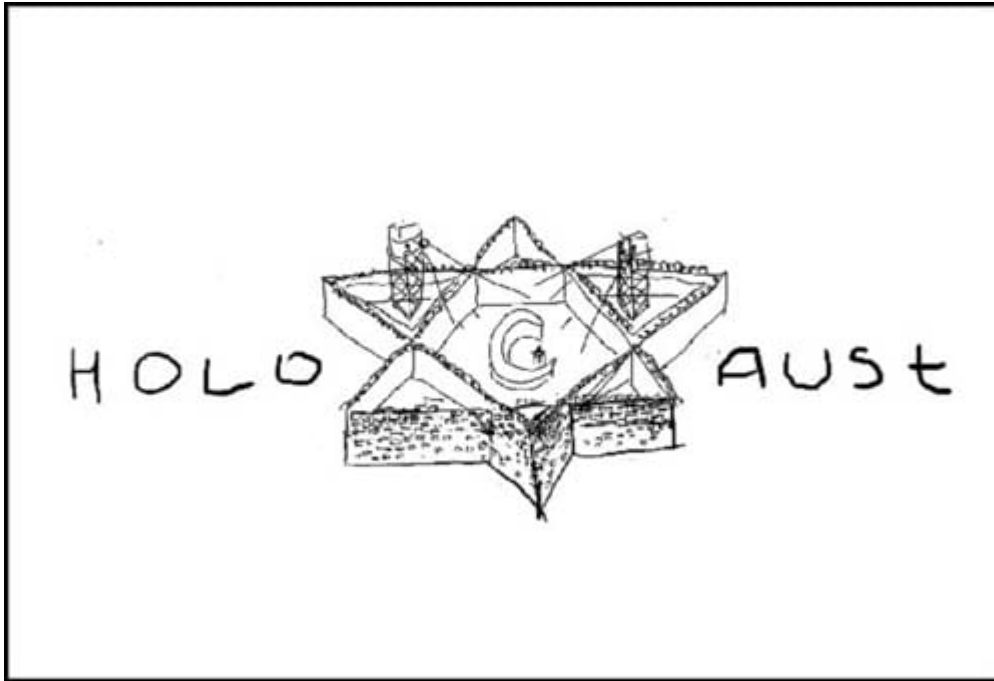


Interpreting Iranian Threats against Israel

by Joseph S. Spoerl (June 2018)



Cartoon from Summer 2016 Holocaust Cartoon Contest held in Iran: [\[1\]](#)

Special mention: Misha (Russia)

In 2006, a controversy erupted over a statement made in October 2005 by then-President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Had Ahmadinejad said that Israel should be “wiped off the map” or merely that “this regime occupying Jerusalem must vanish from the page of time”? *The New York Times* had initially [reported](#) the former, [\[2\]](#) but left-wing anti-Israeli commentators like Juan Cole of the University of Michigan and Jonathan Steele of the *Guardian* [argued](#) for the latter translation. Cole wrote, “I smell the whiff of [right-wing, anti-Iranian] war propaganda,” and Steele insisted that Ahmadinejad “was not making a military threat. He was calling for an end to the occupation of Jerusalem at some point in the

future.”[3]

Cole and Steele may or may not have gotten the Persian right, but more importantly, they ignored the larger context of Ahmadinejad’s statement.

As for the Persian, the *New York Times* [consulted respected translators](#), who informed them that “‘wipe off’ or ‘wipe away’ is more accurate than ‘vanish’ because the Persian verb is active and transitive.”[4] On the other hand, in his biography of Ahmadinejad, the Iranian journalist Kasra Naji disagrees with the translators consulted by the *Times* and sides with Juan Cole regarding this one statement by Ahmadinejad.[5] However, unlike Cole and Steele, Naji has the honesty to cite examples of statements by Ahmadinejad and other Iranian leaders clearly calling for Israel to be erased, excised, or obliterated.[6]

As for the larger context, it includes the whole world view of the Iranian regime as well as its military posture.

A central component of the Iranian regime’s ideology is paranoid Jew-hatred that posits a global conspiracy of Jews allegedly aiming at the destruction of the Islamic faith. The Zionist movement and Israel are the leading edge of this supposed Jewish plot to destroy Islam and Muslims. This image of Jews as the enemies of Islam who must be subjugated and placed under strict Islamic control is rooted in the Koran, Islamic law, and the earliest extant biographies of Muhammad.[7]

Supplementing these Islamic sources, in the 20th century, Islamists like those who rule Iran have enthusiastically embraced a Western anti-Semitic work, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This work is a forgery produced by the Tsarist Russian secret police roughly around 1900 in which the Jews are portrayed as conspiring to take over the world and destroy all non-Jewish religions.[\[8\]](#) Iran expert Orly Rahimiyan writes: “The Islamic Revolution [of 1979] was accompanied by a continuous wave of Protocols editions, alongside other anti-Israel and anti-Jewish texts.”[\[9\]](#) The Iranian state promotes the *Protocols* as part of its official propaganda: “. . . since the revolution, they have been issued by government publishing houses such as that of the Revolutionary Guards, the department of Translation and Publication, the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization, and the Propaganda Department.”[\[10\]](#) Another Iran expert, Meir Litvak, writes: “. . . state-run Iranian television regularly broadcasts documentaries and drama shows based on the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Such programs claim that the State of Israel was founded on the basis of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which exposed the Jewish plot to take over the world.”[\[11\]](#) Iranian Holocaust-denial stems from the same anti-Semitic conspiracy thinking: If the Holocaust is a myth, this can only mean that malevolent Jewish conspirators control media, academia, and political parties across the Western world.[\[12\]](#)

In his classic study of the *Protocols*, aptly entitled *Warrant for Genocide*, historian Norman Cohn summed up the significance of this toxic forgery as follows:

As I see it, the deadliest kind of antisemitism, the kind that results in massacre and attempted genocide, has little to do with real conflicts of interest between

living people or even with racial prejudice as such. At its heart lies the belief that Jews—all Jews everywhere—form a conspiratorial body set on ruining and then dominating the rest of mankind.[\[13\]](#)

This is precisely the type of anti-Semitism that was a central aspect of Adolf Hitler's world-view[\[14\]](#) and which has now become a central component of the ideology of the Iranian state.[\[15\]](#) Adolf Hitler's words perfectly capture the thinking of the Iranian leadership from 1979 to the present: "I have read the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—it simply appalled me. The stealthiness of the enemy, and his ubiquity! I saw at once that we must copy it—in our own way, of course . . . It is in truth the critical battle for the fate of the world."[\[16\]](#) This way of thinking about the Jews is the real reason behind any sort of threat against Israel emanating from the Iranian regime.

Left-wing commentators like Juan Cole and Jonathan Steele have no excuse for ignorance here. Historians of anti-Semitism like Robert Wistrich have been pointing out the alarming parallels between Iranian and Nazi Jew-hatred for decades, with plenty of evidence available by 2006. For example, in his classic 1985 study *Hitler's Apocalypse: Jews and the Nazi Legacy*, Wistrich pointed out that the Iranian Embassy in London was publishing excerpts from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in its English-language journal *Imam* in 1984. The preface to the series told readers, "All through history, Zionism has been the perpetual enemy to Islam."[\[17\]](#) In his 1991 history of anti-Semitism, *The Longest Hatred*, Wistrich again pointed out the centrality of paranoid, conspiratorial Jew-hatred to the regime founded by Ayatollah Khomeini.[\[18\]](#) The German political scientist Matthias Küntzel reports that in 1996, the Iranian state disseminated a German-language pamphlet quoting the

Ayatollah Khomeini describing Israel as a “festering sore and a cancerous tumour on the body of the Islamic countries,” “a man-eating giant and a pagan usurper,” a “monster aspiring to world domination,” a “germ of corruption in the heart of the Arab world,” and an “enemy of all mankind.”[\[19\]](#) Küntzel reports personally visiting the Iranian stand at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2005 and purchasing a complete English edition of the *Protocols* published by the Islamic Propagation Organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran; at the same stand, he purchased an English edition of Henry Ford’s *The International Jew* (a work based on the *Protocols*) published in 1997 by the Tehran-based Islamic Culture and Relations Organization.[\[20\]](#)



Juan Cole and Jonathan Steele

Against this background, attempts by Juan Cole and Jonathan Steele to put a benign interpretation on Ahmadinejad’s 2005 statement about Israel are clearly an obfuscation of the real

import of the Iranian president’s words. Cole and Steele are not isolated or insignificant examples of such obfuscation. They represent a long and dishonorable tradition of Western leftists and academics willfully mischaracterizing the Iranian regime and Islamist movements generally. The American historian George L. Simpson has published an important recent article copiously documenting Western leftist and liberal delusions about Khomeini and his regime.[\[21\]](#) Political scientist Ofira Seliktar has documented decades of American policy and intelligence failures regarding Iran, noting that “[t]he failures are deeply rooted at every level. The paradigms that drive American foreign policy are generated by

a scholarly community often highly politicized and out of touch with reality,"[22] a point that Martin Kramer had made more generally about academic Mideast Studies in the USA a decade earlier.[23] Neil J. Kressel, a professor of psychology at William Paterson University, has [documented](#) in great detail how the social sciences in the USA have almost completely ignored the widespread phenomenon of Islamic anti-Semitism, which explains why US policy makers and journalists are so ignorant on this important topic.[24] As historian Jeffrey Herf, a leading authority on Nazi Germany and a keen student of US Iran policy, [has written](#), "The scholarship on the history of anti-Semitism hasn't yet had a significant impact on the policy discussions in Washington about Iran." [25]

Professor Juan Cole is a paradigmatic example of such politicized detachment from reality in the academic realm, as is *The Guardian* in the journalistic world. It is this same detachment from reality that leads leftists like [Jeremy Corbyn](#) and [Judith Butler](#) to describe Hamas and Hezbollah as "friends" or "progressive" members of the "global left." [26]

Moreover, since the 2006 controversy over the exact translation of Ahmadinejad's Persian, the Iranian regime has helpfully provided us with a flood of new evidence regarding its real intentions vis-à-vis Israel. Much of this has come from the English-language news outlets of the Iranian regime itself (e.g. Fars News, IRNA, Press TV, Tasnim), sparing us the task of translating from Persian to English and thus risking misinterpretation of their true meaning. Consider a [Fars News release](#) in English dated April 21, 2018, quoting the Commander of Iran's Army, Major General Abdolrahim Moussavi.[27] The article quotes General Moussavi as saying of Israel,

' . . . we shouldn't allow one day to be added to the ominous and illegitimate life of this regime,' General Moussavi said. He ensured annihilation of the Zionist regime in 25 years, but said this would not mean the IRGC [Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps] would sit and do nothing for 25 years. 'The Army will move hand in hand with the IRGC so that the arrogant system will collapse and the Zionist regime will be annihilated,' General Moussavi said.

Addressing the "Zionists," the IRGC Lieutenant Commander Brigadier General Hossein Salami is quoted in the same article as saying,

'You have no way out to escape and you are living in dragon mouth [*sic*],' General Salami said, addressing the Zionists . . . General Salami told the Zionists to be aware that in case of outbreak of any war 'you can be assured that it will result in wiping you off [*sic*], the smallest target is your existence, there is no smaller target than that . . . '. General Salami advised the Tel Aviv regime not to pin hope on the US, Britain, and France, and said, 'You are gone when they arrive there like an ambulance sent to a dead man that can only take him to the graveyard; then, behave yourself and avoid doing dangerous calculations.[*sic*]'

Back in 2006, when discussing Ahmadinejad's statement about making Israel disappear, Jonathan Steele insisted that Ahmadinejad was merely "making a vague wish for the future" and predicting the eventual collapse of the Zionist state of

Israel, which would pave the way for “regime change.”[\[28\]](#) Steele wrote then that the Iranian president’s language “makes it crystal clear that he is talking about regime change, not the end of Israel.” And of course, many Western leftists also would love to see “regime change” in Israel, which is exactly [what the BDS and one-state movements](#) seek.[\[29\]](#) To these anti-Israeli leftists, Ahmadinejad’s position was not so unreasonable after all.

The above quotations from two of Iran’s top military commanders show how misguided this all is. The context makes it crystal clear that the prediction of Israel’s demise is also a threat, and a violent one at that. Read again this key statement: “He [the commander of the Iranian Army] ensured annihilation of the Zionist regime in 25 years, but said this would not mean the IRGC [Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps] would sit and do nothing for 25 years. ‘The Army will move hand in hand with the IRGC so that the arrogant system will collapse and the Zionist regime will be annihilated,’ General Moussavi said.” In other words, Iran is actively working to ensure that its “prediction” will come true. (We might also wish to interpret Ahmadinejad’s 2005 statement in the context of statements [he made](#) in 2010, when he denied that Israeli Jews are even human, asserting that they “only appear to be human,” and anyway, since they are atheists, they “are not entitled to man’s minimal rights.”[\[30\]](#) These chilling words would seem to portend something a bit rougher than mere “regime change.”)

In fact, Iranian threats to destroy Israel often take the form of predictions of Israel’s imminent demise. The context of these “predictions” is not only a conspiracy theory that sees Zionists and Jews as eternal enemies who aim to destroy Islam and even denies that they are human beings with rights. It is

also an active Iranian military build-up in Lebanon and Syria that is aimed at Israel, including solid-fuel ballistic missiles with GPS precision targeting and half-ton conventional warheads that can now [strike anywhere in Israel](#).[\[31\]](#) Uzi Rubin, the former head of Israel's missile defense program and thus one of the world's leading experts on Iran's missile capability, [describes](#) Iran's missile threat as "fast growing in quantity and quality." Rubin notes: "A precision-guided missile that can hit and destroy aircraft shelters from 1,500 kilometers can also hit and destroy critical national infrastructure such as power stations and desalination plants. It can also hit and destroy nuclear power stations, causing Chernobyl scale disaster. This is an existential threat by any other name."[\[32\]](#) As *The New York Times* has recently [reported](#), "Iran can strike Israel directly through Hezbollah, which is believed to have more than 100,000 missiles and rockets, some capable of hitting major Israeli cities and sensitive infrastructure."[\[33\]](#) Israel may have the best [missile defense system](#) in the world,[\[34\]](#) but even it can be overwhelmed by sheer volume. That appears to be the Iranian strategy. Even without nuclear weapons, the Iranian threat to Israel is an existential threat. Iran's steadfast support for Hamas, Hezbollah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad makes the threat that much more serious.[\[35\]](#)

In the following Appendix, I catalogue a long list of Iranian threats to destroy Israel from a variety of sources, most of them made *since* the 2006 controversy over the translation of Ahmadinejad's Persian. In some cases the threat is explicit in the title of the source; in other cases the reader must click on the link and examine the text to find the threat. For the reasons given above, I include predictions of Israel's demise as threats. The overall pattern and the context described in this paper are more important than any single example, and it is precisely this pattern and context that anti-Israeli

leftists like Juan Cole and Jonathan Steele consistently ignore, obscure, or deny.

I also include in the following Appendix threats against Israel by the Lebanese Shiite movement Hezbollah. The reason is that Hezbollah is a close ally of Iran and espouses the same ideology as the Iranian regime. Hezbollah has “assimilated the doctrine of the Islamic Republic of Iran totally and pledged allegiance to its leader, Ayatollah Khomeyni [or Khomeini], and his heir, ‘Ali Khamaneh’i [or Khamenei].”[\[36\]](#) For Hezbollah, “The struggle with Israel and the Jews is a total life-or-death war,” a modern continuation of the historical struggle between Judaism and Islam dating back to the founding of Islam.[\[37\]](#) According to Hezbollah leaders, “either we destroy Israel or Israel destroys us,”[\[38\]](#) “the Jews are the enemy of the entire human race,”[\[39\]](#) and “the struggle with the Jews is a struggle for Islamic survival.”[\[40\]](#) Like Iran (and Hamas[\[41\]](#)), Hezbollah uses the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in its propaganda.[\[42\]](#) Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, has repeatedly denied Israel’s right to exist, threatened to wipe Israel out, and stated in 2002 that “If they [the Jews] all gather in Israel, it will save us the trouble of going after them worldwide.”[\[43\]](#) The foundational statement of the Hezbollah program proclaims that “our struggle will end only when this entity [Israel] is obliterated. We recognize no treaty with it, no cease fire, and no peace agreements . . .”[\[44\]](#)

Hitler and the Nazis sincerely believed that World War II was a war of self-defense against a global Jewish conspiracy bent on extermination of the German people. Heinrich Himmler spoke for all the Nazis when he stated in October 1943, “We had a moral duty towards our people, the duty to exterminate this people [the Jews] which wanted to exterminate us.”[\[45\]](#) The

Iranian regime sees the struggle against Israel in exactly the same light. Its founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, “was . . . convinced that the central political theme of contemporary life was an elaborate and highly complex conspiracy by the Jews—‘who controlled everything’—to ‘emasculate Islam’ and dominate the world thanks to the natural wealth of the Muslim nations.”[\[46\]](#) Khomeini warned his followers that “the Jews . . . are opposed to the very foundations of Islam and wish to establish Jewish domination throughout the world.”[\[47\]](#) Khomeini’s paranoid, Judaeophobic conspiracy thinking lives on in Iranian state propaganda that is strikingly reminiscent of Nazi propaganda, for it features the same stark dichotomy: “Either we destroy them, or they destroy us.”[\[48\]](#) Every single threat to Israel emanating from Iran and its allies must be interpreted in light of this fact.

Appendix: Iranian Threats to Destroy Israel

(in reverse chronological order)

“Army Commander: Zionist Regime Annihilated in 25 Years,” Fars News Association (Iran), April 21, 2018, accessed April 23, 2018, <http://en.farsnews.com/print.aspx?nn=13970201000537>