OxfordResearchGroup
building bridges for global security

March 2007

VOICES OF AGGRESSION: EXPLORING ISRAELI-IRANIAN RHETORIC

Dr. Farhang Jahanpour

In the second paper he has contributed to a series of occasional ORG briefings from key international commentators and experts, Farhang Jahanpour explores the extreme rhetoric from Israel and Iran, and argues that it should not be allowed to jeopardise the unique history of relationship between these two countries.

The Israeli Military Threat

The growing antagonism between Iran and Israel poses perhaps the most dangerous security risk to the two countries and to peace in the Middle East. For a long time now, in response to Iran's nuclear programme, which Iran insists is only for peaceful purposes and Israel and the United States suspect of having military dimensions, factions within Israel have been in the forefront of calls for an attack on Iran's nuclear sites. There has even been some talk of a nuclear attack on Iran. In January 2007, the *Sunday Times* revealed that in case the United States would not follow on her threats to attack Iran, the Israeli military was getting ready to carry out a tactical nuclear strike on Iran by itself. The paper revealed that "Israel has drawn up secret plans to destroy Iran's uranium enrichment facilities with tactical nuclear weapons." They reported that two Israeli air force squadrons, overseen by Major General Eliezer Shkedi, were training to destroy an Iranian facility using low-yield nuclear 'bunker-busters', and had already carried out practice runs in preparation for such an attack.[1]

Israel has denied that report, but there are other indications that confirm the broad outlines of that article. It should be remembered that Israel carried out a similar, non-nuclear, attack on a reactor that was under construction in Iraq at the start of the Iran-Iraq war in 1981. Recently *Haaretz* reported that an Israeli think tank, the Institute for National Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University, had concluded in its annual report that unless military action was taken against Iran she would acquire nuclear weapons, and that Israel would be capable of carrying out such an attack alone. According to *Haaretz*: "A member of the institute's board, Brigadier General (ret.) Giora Eiland said there would not be a military strike without a full 'strategic and military' understanding with the US." Eiland continued: "Even if, at the end of the day, Israeli jets are going to carry out, or execute, this attack, it might be perceived – and rightly – as an understanding between the United States and Israel."[2] Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has not ruled out a military strike against Iran's nuclear programme, but has expressed the hope that other ways

Farhang Jahanpour, a British national of Iranian origin, is a former Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Languages at the University of Isfahan, and a part-time tutor in the Department of Continuing Education at the University of Oxford, where he teaches courses on politics and religion in the Middle East. Dr. Jahanpour also spent 18 years at the BBC Monitoring Service covering the news from Iran, the Middle East and North Africa. This is the second paper he has prepared for ORG. The first, *Iran's Nuclear Threat: Exploring the Politics*, was published in June 2006. Dr. Jahanpour has also drawn up a chronology of Iran's nuclear programme for the ORG website.

The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Oxford Research Group.

could be found to keep Tehran from becoming a nuclear power. Avi Dichter, Israel's minister for public security, told a recent BBC documentary that Israel might have to take a "preventative" approach.[3] On 20 November 2006 the Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, also reported that President Bush said he would understand if Israel chose to attack Iran.

In an article at the end of December 2006, Brigadier General (Ret.) Oded Tira, a former Israeli chief artillery officer, bemoaned the lack of US action against Iran, and called for unilateral Israeli action. He wrote: "The Americans must act. Yet if they don't, we'll do it ourselves, because there are no free rides and our existence isn't guaranteed. Addressing Iran would have positive implications for us in terms of the strategic balance in our region and when it comes to Hezbollah, stability in Lebanon, and Syria's power." He argued that as "President Bush lacked the political power to attack Iran", Israel should campaign to win the support of the Democrats to stiffen his resolve. He continued:

> "As an American strike in Iran is essential for our existence, we must help him pave the way by lobbying the Democratic Party (which is conducting itself foolishly) and US newspaper editors. We need to do this in order to turn the Iranian issue to a bipartisan one and unrelated to the Iraq failure. We must turn to Hillary Clinton and other potential presidential candidates in the Democratic Party so that they publicly support immediate action by Bush against Iran. We should also approach European countries so that they support American actions in Iran, so that Bush will not be isolated in the international arena again."[4]

American neo-conservatives have been most vociferous in their advocacy of regime change in Iran. Patrick Clawson, deputy director for research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a staunch supporter of President Bush, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: "So long as Iran has an Islamic republic, it will have a nuclear-weapons program, at least clandestinely… The key issue, therefore, is: How long will the present Iranian regime last?"[5]

In an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Joshua Muravchik, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, advocated the use of force against Iran. He simply started his article with: "We must bomb Iran."[6] The words "bomb Iran" flow very easily from the tongues and pens of some neocons due to Iran's programme of enrichment of uranium under intense IAEA inspection – which she is entitled to do according to NPT regulations – but of course no one is allowed even to mention, for example, Israel's nuclear arsenal.

Indeed if one reads the texts of the speeches and discussions at the January 2007 Herzliya Conference, one sees that the remarks of a large contingent of US neocons who spoke at that conference were even more extreme than those of most Israeli participants. Richard Perle assured Israel that if she carried out an attack on Iran the US would go along with it. He said: "If the Israeli government comes to the conclusion that it has no choice but to take action, the reaction of the US will be the belief in the vitality that this action must succeed, even if the US needs to act with Israel in the current American administration."[7] James Woolsey, former CIA director, was not even satisfied with attacking Iranian nuclear sites alone, but stressed the need to destroy the entire regime. He said: "And if we use force, we should use it decisively, not execute some surgical strike on a single or two or three facilities. We need to destroy the power of the Vilayat al-Faqih if we are called upon and forced to use force against Iran." Speaking about the recent war in Lebanon, he regretted that it had not extended to Syria. He said: "It is a shame that Israel did not – and the United States did not help and participate in – a move against Syria last summer when Hezbollah gave the opportunity. We should not pass up, if we are forced to use force, the opportunity to use it decisively."

Iranian Anti-Israeli Statements

It is in the face of such an unremitting barrage of threats and campaigns that Iranian hardliners, believing that attack is the best form of defence, have engaged in heavy anti-Israeli propaganda of their own. Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's[8] anti-Israeli tirades and the appalling conference on the Holocaust should be seen in that context. As many experts who have analysed Ahmadinejad's remarks in Persian have pointed out, there has been some exaggeration and misrepresentation of what he said about Israel and the Holocaust.[9] Nevertheless, he now represents the most strident anti-Israeli stance in the Middle East. When the Danish cartoons depicting Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist caused outrage in the Islamic world, the West defended the newspaper's right of freedom of expression. It was partly in response to what they perceived as Western double standards that the Iranian authorities decided to "test the extent of the West's tolerance of free speech".

Speaking in a conference on "The World without Zionism", Ahmadinejad questioned the Holocaust and the continued existence of the 'Zionist regime'. He rejected the claim that six million Jews perished in gas chambers, although it was not clear whether he was questioning the entire Holocaust, the number of the victims or the manner of their death. However, his main argument was that the Holocaust has been used as a powerful myth to justify support for the State of Israel. He also argued that if the West really did commit those atrocities, it had no right to criticise others – including Iran – for their human rights record. Thirdly, as the West was responsible for the Holocaust, he asked why the Palestinian people should have to pay the price for that atrocity?

Some of his other attacks on Israel have, however, been exaggerated. He did not advocate an attack on Israel and committing genocide, as has been claimed by many commentators in the West. Benjamin Netanyahu, the Likud leader and former Israeli prime minister, often refers to Ahmadinejad as a 'genocidal manic' and compares him to Hitler. In a speech in Los Angeles he said: "It's 1938 and Iran is Germany. And Iran is racing to arm itself with atomic bombs," adding that there was "still time" to stop the Iranians.[10] Ahmadinejad has compared the 'Zionist regime' to the Apartheid regime in South Africa and to the Soviet Union, both of which collapsed, but in neither case did it involve the massacre of the whites or the communists. What he advocated for Israel/Palestine was that there should be a referendum with the participation of Arabs and Jews on the basis of equality to decide the nature of the future state.

There is no doubt that many clerics and other Muslim fundamentalists in Iran have strong anti-Jewish sentiments. In fact, their treatment of religious minorities in Iran, including the Zoroastrians, Christians and Jews, but particularly the Baha'is, has been appalling. Even their treatment of their fellow Sunni Muslims or Muslim mystics, the Sufis, has not been much better. There are a large number of Sunnis living in Tehran but, despite repeated requests, the government has not allowed the construction of a single Sunni Mosque in the city. Not long ago, the government attacked a Sufi centre in Qom, levelled it to the ground and arrested a large number of Sufis from the Gonabadi Order. Ever since the revolution, Baha'i students have been prevented from studying in Iranian universities. Baha'i houses of worship have been confiscated and destroyed. Many Baha'is have been expelled from government positions and some were even forced to pay back the salaries that they had received in the past.

However, it is important to bear in mind that Ahmadinejad does not represent the entire Iranian establishment when it comes to foreign policy, and his powers are very limited. All major decisions in Iran, especially in foreign policy, are taken by the Supreme National Security Council, which is composed of all the leading figures of the system. The President is only one of the members of the Council, which also includes the secretary of the Guardian Council, the chairman of the Expediency Council, the head of the judiciary, the head of the intelligence, the heads of the armed forces and the Revolution Guards, etc. The Council often meets in the presence of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, who seems to have the final say on major national issues.

A day after Ahmadinejad made his remarks about Israel, the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement, pointing out: "The Islamic Republic of Iran is committed to its engagements based on the UN charter and has never resorted to, nor threatened to resort to, force against another country." It reiterated Iran's official policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict, which is to accept any agreement that is democratically reached between the Israelis and the Palestinians. It should also be remembered that the Islamic Republic is the only country in the Islamic world that has bought arms from Israel, during the Iran-Iraq War.

Part of Ahmadinejad's rationale for making such extreme statements is to appeal to Muslim and Arab opinion in the Middle East. As many Sunni Arab regimes have warned against a 'Shi'a Crescent', which has to be confronted by a 'Sunni bulwark', Ahmadinejad tries to tell the Sunnis that Iran shares many of their values. His next aim is to bolster his rather shaky position among the Iranian hardliners. Unlike previous presidents, Ahmadinejad is not a member of the Iranian political establishment. His power is based on his populist policies and his slogans of fighting against corruption and 'bringing the oil money to people's tables', which encouraged many lower class people to vote for him. After 18 months in power, none of those policies have been successful. His anti-Israeli and anti-Holocaust campaigns have been partly aimed at ingratiating himself with the hardliners.

However, this tactic has also backfired. When Ahmadinejad first questioned the Holocaust, the former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami strongly criticised his successor. He said that as the Koran teaches that "he who kills a single person unjustly, it is as though he has killed the whole of mankind", how could any sane person justify or even try to belittle the killing of millions of innocent people purely due to their religion? Former President Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani has also spoken openly against Ahmadinejad's policies. Ayatollah Hoseyn Ali Montazeri, the one-time designated heir to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in a recent interview with the BBC, criticised Ahmadinejad's position both on nuclear policy and on his provocative statements about Israel.[11] Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's chief foreign policy adviser, Mr. Ali Akbar Velayati, announced that the Holocaust was a fact of history and chastised those who question its reality. Ali Larijani, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, also declared the Holocaust a "historical matter" to be discussed by scholars (not by ignorant politicians). *Hamshahri*, published by the spokesman of the Supreme National Security Council, in an editorial referred to Ahmadinejad's policies as "hot air strategy." The *Islamic Republic* newspaper, a mouthpiece of the traditional conservatives that reflects the views of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, wrote that Ahmadinejad's policies on the nuclear program and on the Holocaust are aimed at covering up his government's failure.

The conference on the Holocaust organised by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 12-13 December 2006, with the participation of a number of orthodox Rabbis, Holocaust deniers, and rightwing racists from both Europe and America, was meant as a way of justifying Ahmadinejad's remarks. However, far from helping that cause, it has understandably outraged many people throughout the world. Rather than bolster Iran's position, the conference has further isolated the Iranian President and his regime in world public opinion. What is not often realised is that the conference has also been widely condemned inside Iran. At a time when Iranians are subjected to many serious threats from abroad, this opportunistic move could be regarded as recklessly playing with the destiny of millions of Iranians. Apart from its political repercussions, this outrageous act has also sullied the good name of Iranians whose history of support for the Jews at the dawn of the Iranian Empire and their long coexistence with their Jewish compatriots have been unique in the annals of history.

A History of Iranian-Jewish Co-existence

Not only do historical texts confirm the close bonds between Jews and Iranians, the Hebrew Bible itself is the most eloquent testimony to the millennia-old relations between the two peoples. The Bible does not contain such warm references to any other people as it does to the Persians. Those who are today sowing the seeds of discord between the Jews and the Iranians do not seem to know anything of Iranian

history or to have even read the Bible. Fourteen books of the Bible either directly deal with an event which has happened in Iran, or have references to Iran. Half of these are in the form of memoirs of Jews in the courts of the Medes and the Achaemenids, while the others refer to events which happened in Iran.[12]

The Jewish people have had a long and inseparable connection and association with Persian history, and Persia and the Persians have a special place in the Bible. Iran has the oldest Jewish community of the world outside the Holy Land. The first group of Jews was transferred to Iran by the Assyrian King Shalamanser in the 8th century BC. During nearly three millennia of contact and coexistence with the Iranians, Iranian Jews have been influenced by Persian culture and, in turn, have contributed greatly to that culture. There exists an extensive Judeo-Persian literature, which is written in the Persian language but in Hebrew script.

After the Arab conquest and the establishment of Islam in Iran, Iranian Jews played a big role in translating many texts from Hebrew, Aramaic and Assyrian sources into Arabic and Persian, thus enriching the fund of knowledge in Islam. Jewish musicians played a big role in keeping Persian classical music alive during periods of fanaticism when hard line clerics frowned upon music making. With very few rare exceptions when religious fanaticism and bigotry held sway, Iranians have lived in peace and amity with their Jewish fellow citizens. Iran still has the largest Jewish minority in the Middle East outside Israel, despite the fact that tens of thousands of Iranian Jews have left Iran since the Islamic revolution (alongside some four million other Iranians), who still manage to maintain their links with Persian language and culture.

Iranian Condemnations of the Holocaust Conference

With the exception of a few rightwing newspapers, most Iranian newspapers either totally ignored the conference or courageously condemned it. The message columns of most newspapers have been particularly remarkable, with many people writing to question the wisdom of holding such a conference.

An editorial in *E'temad* described Ahmadinejad's policies as "populism at home, adventurism abroad." One of the most outspoken condemnations of the conference was published by the *Baztab* news agency, which is affiliated to the long-term commander of the Revolution Guards and the present secretary of the powerful Expediency Council, Mohsen Reza'i. In a brave article titled "Adventurism at the expense of national interests", a regular columnist Fo'ad Sadeghi wrote that he could not remain "silent and indifferent towards a phenomenon that has many direct and indirect consequences for national interests and which would have even worse consequences in the future."[13] After examining some of the dubious reasons given for holding that conference, the columnist sums up his reasons for condemning that conference as follows (which I have summarised):

1) Although Ayatollah Khomeini was opposed to the existence of the state of Israel, in none of his writings and speeches did he ever question the Holocaust.
2) After the victory of the Islamic revolution, despite the fact that both Ayatollah Khomeini and later Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i had complete control over all organs of the state, they did not authorise any government institution or Islamic publicity organ to cast doubt on the Holocaust.
3) Denying the Holocaust, which has been accepted by world public opinion, would only provide an excuse to those who wish to magnify the threats against Israel and deny the rights of the Palestinians.
4) Iran which is fighting hard to justify her use of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes would be regarded as an international outcast by denying the Holocaust, which would only intensify Western pressure on her nuclear programme.
5) The support of Neo-Nazi and Neo-fascist groups could be used to justify negative propaganda against Islam in the West.

6) Even if the issue of the Holocaust were a matter of academic debate, there could be no justification for the involvement of the government and the President himself in such an objectionable venture.

Even more interesting than the article itself, were the numerous comments by the readers. They are too numerous to quote, but they show the extent of the disgust of most Iranians towards this foolish venture. The recent elections in Iran were a slap in the face for Ahmadinejad and showed his growing unpopularity. In the local council election in Tehran, only three out of 15 victorious candidates belonged to Ahmadinejad's group. The same story has been repeated in the election for the Assembly of Experts, which appoints and supervises the supreme leader of the country.

Students have also risen against the new government. Despite heavy security measures, when Ahmadinejad visited the prestigious Amir Kabir University of Technology in December 2006, students booed him and did not let him finish his speech. The students held his portraits upside down and at least three of his portraits were burnt in front of his eyes. One poster held aloft and printed in most newspapers read: "Fascist president, you are not welcome in the university." Many students chanted "death to the dictator." In an attempt to pacify the students, his office invited them to visit him. In an open letter that was extensively published by the media, the students rejected the offer and called for a change of his policies. Therefore, despite the impression given by most of the Western media about Ahmadinejad's popularity, the truth is somewhat different. The recent conference on the Holocaust has further isolated him both at home and abroad.

Israeli Voices Call for Restraint

In the same way that Ahmadinejad's anti-Israeli policies have been condemned in Iran, many peace-loving Jews in Israel and abroad have also repudiated the radical anti-Iranian policies of Israeli leaders, and have called for negotiations to resolve the differences between Israel and Iran. The former Israeli foreign minister, Shlomo ben-Ami, in a recent article in *Haaretz* wrote:

> "Israel's approach to the conflict with its neighbors has too frequently been characterized by mental fixation: It has generally veered away from diplomatic paths in favor of fighting them and 'explaining' to the world how dangerous these enemies are to it, as well as to Israel.
>
> The question today is not when Iran will have nuclear power, but how to integrate it into a policy of regional stability before it obtains such power. Iran is not driven by an obsession to destroy Israel, but by its determination to preserve its regime and establish itself as a strategic regional power, vis-a-vis both Israel and the Sunni Arab states. The Sunnis are Iran's natural foe, not Israel. The answer to the Iranian threat is a policy of detente, which would change the Iranian elite's pattern of conduct."[14]

He rightly pointed out that this could not be achieved by Israel alone, but was first and foremost an American issue. However, he complained:

> "Unfortunately, George Bush's America is not interested in conflict resolution; instead, like Israel, it is fighting rearguard battles against evil states and organizations. What happens when these collapse is on display in Iraq: Never has the Middle East been more dangerous and volatile than it has been since Saddam Hussein was toppled. The US, in destroying Iraq as a counterweight to Iran, is directly responsible for Iran's current strategic edge, as well as for its audacity."

Writing in the same newspaper, Gabrielle Rifkind, Human Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group, conveyed the same message and advocated a conversation of equals between the US, Israel and Iran. She wrote:

> "From a wider perspective and in the longer term, there are no profound reasons for hostility between Iran and Israel. Iran has never been invaded, threatened, nor has her population been expelled by the Israelis. The Iranians' real quarrel is with successive US administrations over the last 27 years. Israel is used as a pawn, because of its very close relationship with the US.
> The great void in the Iranian-American-Israel relationships is one of the most dangerous anomalies in international relations at present. Distorted megaphone diplomacy has done a great deal of damage, and what is currently needed is a conversation of equals behind closed doors to shift the current dangerous rhetoric to communication. Ultimately, there is much to talk about."[15]

Conclusion

To sum up, the extreme voices on the Israeli and Iranian sides do not represent the entire populations and do not serve the best interests of either country. The increasing use of sloganeering and hostile propaganda by extremists in Iran and Israel, each trying to demonise the other, is counterproductive and may result in tragic consequences for both. The only solution to the mutual hostility between the two countries is to engage in a serious dialogue, probably through third parties, and to resolve their differences before they plunge the region into another catastrophic war.

No matter how hard and far-fetched this solution seems, the alternative is much worse for both countries. Iranians and Jews have lived peacefully together for thousands of years. This unique history of relationship should not be jeopardised by hostile and unreasonable voices on either side.

Notes and References

[1] Uzi Mahnami and Sarah Baxter, "Revealed: Israel Plans Nuclear Strike on Iran", *Sunday Times* (7 January 2007), http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2089-2535310_1,00.html.

[2] Amos Harel, "Think Tank: Israel Could Attack Iran's Nuclear Program Alone", *Haaretz* (2 January 2007), http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/808677.html.

[3] Bethany Bell, "Torn Loyalties of Israel's Iranian Jews", *BBC News* (12 January 2007), http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6256407.stm.

[4] Oded Tira, "What to do with Iran? We must coordinate independent strike with US, prepare for Iranian response", *Ynetnews.com* (30 December 2006), http://www.ynetnews.com/Ext/Comp/ArticleLayout/CdaArticlePrintPreview/1,2506,L-3346275,00.html.

[5] Seymour M. Hersh, "The Iran Plans", *The New Yorker* (17 April 2006), http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/060417fa_fact.

[6] Joshua Muravchik, "Force Is the Only Answer; Diplomacy Has Done Nothing to End Tehran's Nuclear Threat", *Los Angeles Times* (20 November 2006), http://www.aei.org/publications/pubID.25159,filter.all/pub_detail.asp.

[7] See, http://www.herzliyaconference.org/Eng/_Articles/Article.asp?ArticleID=1652&CategoryID=223.

[8] The correct transliteration of the Iranian President's name is "Ahmadinezhad". However, for conventions sake, we have used the much more common "Ahmadinejad".

[9] Virginia Tilley, "Is Iran's President Really a Jew-hating, Holocaust-denying Islamo-fascist who has threatened to 'wipe Israel off the map'?", *Counterpunch* (28 August 2006), http://www.counterpunch.org/tilley08282006.html; Kam Zarrabi, "Tehran's Holocaust Seminar:

Questioning the Sanctity of the Sacred Cow!", *Payvand*, (15 December 2006), http://www.payvand.com/news/06/dec/1154.html.

[10] Seymour M. Hersh, "The Next Act", *The New Yorker* (27 November 2006), http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/061127fa_fact.

[11] Sadeq Saba's interview with Ayatollah Montazeri on BBC's Persian Service (20 January 2007), http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2007/01/070120_mv-montazeri.shtml.

[12] In the first category one can mention the Book of Esther which is about the history of a Jewish girl who is married to Xerxes, whose name is given as Ahasuerus in the Bible. She prevents the massacre of the Jews by Haman with the help of her uncle Mordecai and the support of her husband, the Persian king. In Jeremiah we have the reference to the Medes as God's sword against the enemies of Israel. Ezekiel is about the period of exile in Babylon which ended with Cyrus's conquest of Babylon. In Ezra there is the story of the rebuilding of the Temple with the assistance of Cyrus and Darius. In Isaiah there are many complimentary references to Cyrus and God's support for him. The book of Daniel is about the period of his service at the court of Darius and the forecasts which he made for that king. In fact, the beautiful tomb of Daniel in southern Iran is a place of pilgrimage for Muslims and Jews alike. The book of Nehemia is about the story of the cup-bearer and confidante of Artaxerexes. In Zechariah we again have the story of the rebuilding of the Temple at the orders of Darius.

[13] *Baztab* (19 December 2006), http://www.baztab.ir/news/55919.php.

[14] Shlomo Ben-Ami, "The Basis for Iran's Belligerence", *Haaretz* (16 September 2006), http://mfp.hostwindsor.com/nph-index.cgi/010110A/687474703a2f2f7777772e6861617265747a2e636f6d2f686173656e2f737061676573f3735393733312e68746d6c.

[15] Gabrielle Rifkind, "What Lies Beneath the Rhetoric", *Haaretz* (26 December 2006), http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/802749.html.