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WHAT LIES BEHIND AHMADI-NEJAD'S HATE SPEECH?

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President Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad of Iran persists in his almost obsessive hate speech against Israel, including declarations that border on Holocaust denial. While his first statements might have been attributed to political inexperience, continued and even more extreme rhetoric suggests some calculated policy, even if its true purposes are not easy to decipher.

Since Iran's central objective now is apparently to buy time until it acquires a nuclear capability, these sorts of declarations and the international focus on Iranian extremism they attract would seem to contradict the central goal. It might have been expected that a leader who was elected on the promise to improve the lot of the masses would have concentrated on domestic affairs rather than on an anti-American, anti-western or anti-Israeli campaign. But Ahmadi-Nejad has instead taken every opportunity to voice extremist views.

On October 26, he presented his vision of a world without Israel or the United States and urged that Israel be wiped off the map. On December 8, during the Islamic Conference Organization meeting in Mecca, he complained that since the west was responsible for what some describe as "the Holocaust," no one should demand that the Palestinians pay the price. "Some European countries," he said, "insist on saying that Hitler killed millions of innocent

Jews in gas chambers, although we don't accept this claim. If the Europeans are honest, they should give some of their provinces in Europe – like in Germany, Austria or other countries – to the Zionists and the Zionists can establish their state in Europe."

On December 15, he went even further in propagating arguments raised by Holocaust deniers, even if not fully supporting them, and claimed that the Jews have invented "a legend" under the name "Massacre of the Jews" and "they hold it higher than God himself, religion itself and the prophets themselves." "Why," he asked the rest of the world, "does the innocent Palestinian nation have to pay the price of this heinous crime you committed? ... If you have committed a crime, then you have to pay the price. I propose that if you have committed a crime, it's good if you allocate a part of your country or Europe, America, Canada, or Alaska to them so that they can establish a country for themselves."

How can such extremist rhetoric be explained? The first possibility is simply a sincere belief in the need to destroy Israel and an assessment that Iran can lead such an historic mission. Ahmadi-Nejad in fact is reviving early revolutionary slogans mouthed by Ayatollah Khomeini himself. And even if Khomeini became a bit more circumspect in his rhetoric after seizing

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power, anti-Jewish literature, including the infamous "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," continued to be published by state agencies; Persian-language editions were even displayed recently at the Frankfurt Book Fair. Prominent Holocaust deniers are invited to Iran by regime leaders and offered a platform to spout their views. And the press is full of reports in a similar vein. The *Tehran Times* seems especially obsessed with the Holocaust. "Perhaps the biggest lie in history," claims one article, "took a formal shape during the Nuremberg trials, when a confession obtained by means of torture turned into the cornerstone of the official Auschwitz version." "No one," charges another article, "has ever asked the Jewish swindlers who present themselves as 'gas chamber witnesses' any critical question. Yet, 'the terrible accusation' of genocide is based only upon the lies of a handful of Jewish swindlers like Rudolph Vrba, Filip Mueller and Elie Wiesel and confessions obtained through torture."

A second explanation may lie in the mystical belief in a divine mission and heavenly oversight. A leading website in Iran has published a transcript and video recording of Ahmadi-Nejad claiming to have felt "a light" while addressing world leaders at the United Nations in September. According to the transcript, he said that someone there, possibly from his entourage, subsequently told him "When you began with the words 'In the name of God' ... I saw a light coming, surrounding you and protecting you to the end [of the speech]." Ahmadi-Nejad said that he sensed a similar presence. "I felt it myself, too, that suddenly the atmosphere changed and for 27-28 minutes the leaders could not blink," the transcript continues. "I am not exaggerating...because I was looking. All the leaders were puzzled, as if a hand held them and made them sit. They had their eyes and ears open for the message from the Islamic Republic." He concluded his speech at the General Assembly with a call to God to hasten

the return of the Twelfth – hidden – Imam in order to fill this world with peace and justice. His government has also approved significant sums to reconstruct and maintain sites associated with the Twelfth Imam, such as the well in Jamkaran, from where the Imam was believed to have disappeared.

Ahmadi-Nejad may also believe that he can promote his "solution" through the use of force. As one whose world-view was largely formed by the experience of the Iran-Iraq War, he apparently thinks that war can accomplish the aims that diplomacy fails to achieve. American problems in Iraq and rising oil income may have reinforced this sense of potency.

In addition, Ahmadi-Nejad may hope to consolidate his political position at home by giving voice to widely-held views on Israel. Although he was elected on a platform of domestic reform, problems at home continue to proliferate. Diverting attention away from economic issues and toward an external enemy may serve to mollify public opinion.

Finally, he may expect to strengthen Iran's standing in other parts of the Islamic world by voicing popular opinions on Israel and taking the lead in supporting the Palestinian cause and even to soften suspicions among neighboring Muslims about Iran's nuclear program. No less important, such declarations may consciously or unconsciously be intended to transform Iran's nuclear program into an Israeli problem and thus hopefully induce Europe and the rest of the world to be more indulgent of Iran's nuclear ambitions.

All in all, Ahmadi-Nejad's hate rhetoric seems to emanate from some combination of inexperience, political calculation and genuine animus grounded in mystical belief. But whatever the precise mixture of these elements, the last seems to be the most powerful explanation, and the most ominous.

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