



A pedestrian walks past a state-sponsored anti-Israel mural in Tehran in December 2024. The Islamic Republic frequently depicts Israel as the “Little Satan” and the “poisonous spawn” of America, the “Great Satan,” reflecting a core ideological framework examined by Farhad Rezaei and Ofira Seliktar in their analysis of the regime’s antisemitic and anti-Zionist worldview. Image licensed from [Shutterstock](#)

Note: This is the first installment of a two-part article. Part 2 will appear in the Fall 2026 issue of the *Middle East Quarterly*.

Iran’s Islamist Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism: Jews as Source of All Evil (Part 1)

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Compared to other categories of antisemitism, Islamist antisemitism and anti-Zionism have been under-researched, and their implications for global security are not well understood. This analytical gap is

particularly noticeable with regard to the Islamic Republic of Iran, a leading Islamist state and the largest purveyor of antisemitic and anti-Zionist content translated into some thirty-six languages.

Part 1 of the paper analyzes the numerous sources of the regime's contemporary antisemitic and anti-Zionist constructs. Part 2 will expose the multiple platforms that the Islamic Republic of Iran has created to propagate both antisemitism and hatred of the "Zionist enemy" in Iran, the Middle East, and beyond.

Introduction

When Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini arrived in Tehran on February 1, 1979, few expected that the newly proclaimed Islamist Revolution would savagely target the Jews and their collective embodiment, the State of Israel. However, within a short time, the outlines of a radical antisemitic creed emerged, driven by Khomeini's eschatology mandating the 'liberation' of Jerusalem and a global fight against Jews. Just as fast, the regime created a huge publishing and media industry to disseminate antisemitic and anti-Israeli propaganda. By making the materials available in thirty-six languages, Tehran

became the largest antisemitic player in the world, demonizing the Jews and Israel.

Part 1 of this paper has three sections (Part 2 will appear in the next issue of the journal). The first section discusses neo-Shiism or Khomeinism—the radical revision of traditional Shiism and its eschatological mandate to eliminate Israel. The second section analyzes the sources of this antisemitic construct and the resultant ideational architecture of grievances. The third section traces the connection between Holocaust denial and anti-Zionism.

Neo-Shiism: A Marriage of Theology and International Politics

Historically, the Shiite tradition was more negatively disposed toward the Jews than Sunni Islam. However, Khomeini's theological innovations turned the relations into a virtual life-and-death struggle. Khomeini, who was exiled to Najaf for resisting the shah's White Revolution—an effort to modernize Iranian society—spent

his time rethinking the Shiite creed. In 1970, he published a slim volume of lectures, *Islamic Government*, later expanded and retitled *Velāyat-e Faqīh (The Guardianship of the Jurist)*. Contrary to the age-old tradition of quietism, Khomeini declared that the faqih, a capable juror, should serve as an interim ruler until the return of the disappeared Twelfth Imam, the Mahdi. More radically still, Khomeini revised the Shiite eschatology, postulating that the disappeared Imam would return from his occultation only after Jerusalem and the Temple Mount were back in Muslim hands: In other words, the State of Israel would have to be obliterated to pave the way for Shiite redemption.¹

In revising the eschatology, Khomeini borrowed from the teaching of Ayatollah Abol-Ghasem Kashani, a leftist cleric involved with the anticolonial movement in the 1930s. Kashani attacked the British for colonialism, imperialism, and other forms of

“mendacious oppression.” Khomeini went further by suggesting that the British reconfigured the Middle East in the Westphalian spirit of sovereign states, paved the way to a Jewish state and erased the umma (the nation of Islam). Not incidentally, the Iranian leader declared that the Islamist rule of the faqih should be expanded to the entire umma, hinting that he should assume the role. His numerous followers cheered on, calling him the Mahdi.²

Once enthroned as the Supreme Leader, the international relations-savvy Ayatollah Khomeini calculated that the eschatology-ordained redemption of Jerusalem offered considerable political benefits. Helming the fight to liberate Palestine from the “Zionist usurpers” would give Iran legitimacy in the largely Sunni Middle East. He also updated Kashani’s anticolonial narrative to focus on the new superpower, the United States, which in his

view was the bearer of colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and other assorted “sins.” Using a universally recognized imagery, Khomeini labeled the United States the Great Satan. Israel, the alleged “poisonous spawn” of the Great Satan, was named the Little Satan, making the Jews and the Zionist enemy the targets of the largest antisemitic campaign since the collapse of Nazi Germany.³

The antisemitic arsenal of the Islamic Republic was made up of a huge number of confusing constructs, with little regard for consistency or logic, exacerbated by a tendency toward circular thinking. To introduce some analytical clarity, four major components will be discussed.

First, Khomeini's novel reading of the Qur'an and Shiite theology formed the base of the anti-Jewish belief system. Ayatollah Mohammed-Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, arguably the most radical cleric in Iran, used his influential Haqqani circles, a network of

high-ranking officials and religious leaders, to propagate these antisemitic teachings. Yazdi postulated that Jews should not be tolerated because of their hostility toward Islam and persistent efforts to distort the Qur'an. The arch-conservative cleric urged the cleansing of Islam and, most particularly, Iran of the Judeo-Christian impurity. Navvab Safavi, the founder of the violent *Fadā'iyān-e Islam* in 1945, influenced Khomeini's antisemitism as well.⁴

Second, Khomeini was inspired by the writings of Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian founders of the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Banna revolutionized traditional thinking on Islam by calling to Islamize the state, with the Qur'an and the Sunna as the base for political and social order. Qutb, who spent time in the United States in the fifties, believed that only a strict Islamic order would protect Muslims from the moral degradation of a secular

society. Both founders were influenced by Nazi propaganda and saw the Jews as a major obstacle to realizing the vision of an Islamist state. In the highly influential pamphlet *Our Struggle with the Jews* (*Marakutuna Ma 'a al Yahūd*), Qutb Islamized Nazi antisemitism in ways that comported with Khomeini's views. The latter ordered their writings translated into Farsi and annotated for popular reading.⁵

Third, the Nazi propaganda, which influenced the Egyptian Islamists, was given a Farsi spin when Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda chief, ordered a Farsi-language campaign. His office distributed thousands of pages of printed material in Farsi, along with short-wave broadcasts of Radio Zeesen. The gist of the message was that Hitler, like the Prophet Mohammed, was waging a war against the Jews; alternatively, the German dictator was said to be the Shiite Messiah, the disappeared Twelfth Imam. Large placards in Tehran's markets proclaimed,

“In heaven, Allah; on earth, it is Adolf Hitler.” After Germany's defeat, Ahmed Fardid, a professor at Tehran University who admired Martin Heidegger and the National Socialist Party, provided a vital philosophical continuity. Although Fardid was a secularist, the Iranian Islamists appreciated his contempt for the Jews. He believed in conspiracy theories, stressing that Jews controlled all global events and secretly manipulated world affairs. Fardid was described as the “brain” behind Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the virulent antisemitic president of Iran in the early 2000s.⁶

Fourth, a distorted version of essentialism, a perverted version of evolutionary psychology, neo-Marxism, critical theory, race theory colonialism, orientalism, imperialism, and blood libels grounded in medieval Christianity rounded the antisemitic repertoire. Some elements, like neo-Marxist critical theory, could be

traced to Ali Shariati, a prominent Iranian sociologist and the father of the Third Way economic system—a synthesis between socialism and Islamism. Shariati's work impressed Khomeini, who believed humanity was divided into *mustazafeen* (oppressed) and *mustakbareen* (oppressors). In the Ayatollah's reading of this epic clash, Jews featured as leading *mustakbareen*.

Kevin MacDonald was another favorite in Tehran. The retired professor of evolutionary biology claimed that Jews had evolved biologically to undermine the societies in which they lived by adopting liberal philosophies and sexually transgressive behavior. Carl Schmitt, the Nazi-era jurist who determined that Jews were fundamentally outside the German political and legal community because law should arise from the homogenous “people” (*Volk*) was a good fit as well, especially as he accused Jews of “spiritual imperialism.” In the Islamist version, the Jews allegedly

polluted the spiritual and cultural realms, a brazen moral transgression.⁷ The interplay of these conceptual elements can be best represented as a three-tier structure.

Iran's Antisemitic Architecture: The Three-Tiered Litany of Perceived Jewish Offenses *Maleficence Against Humanity*

The top tier contains the stereotypical characteristics of Jews. Terms related to evil and evildoing seemed to be particularly popular, including villainous, depraved, heinous, malevolent, loathsome, obscene, insult to humanity, Satan's design, bloodthirsty, and engaged in blood rituals, among others. The latter accusations were included in recycled stories of medieval Christianity, suffused with Persian lore, where Jews were accused of mixing the blood of Christians with unleavened bread on Passover. Other charges were no less pernicious—sexually promiscuous, inveterate schemers, fanatics,

megalomaniacs, arrogant, belligerent, malicious, stubborn, cunning, racist, full of lust, angry, aggressive, vindictive, autocratic, hostile, wild, rebellious, heavy-hearted, cruel, torturous, superstitious, humiliating others, covenant-breaking, oppressors, destroyers, terrorists, bullies, aggressors, possessors of other people's property, welfare seekers, educational and social climbers, exterminators, executioner, captors and prisoners of the innocent, and enslavers and exploiters of humankind. Three comparisons drawn from medicine—cancer, viruses, and microbes—were very popular too.⁸

In addition, the Jews and their religion were described as profoundly perverted and depraved, so much so that in this view, “psychologists and psychotherapists can observe many of their theories about healthy and unhealthy behaviors in practice.” Topping the list of alleged Jewish depravity was

homosexuality.⁹ Homosexuality has been a taboo in other religions, but Khomeini leaned on *Molla Nasraddin*, a Marxist-leaning newspaper, and Ahmad Kasravi, who had founded in 1931–1932 the Pak Dini (Purity of Religions) movement that crusaded against homosexuality. Not incidentally, these charges were also part of Nazi-era propaganda, which had accused Jews of propagating homosexuality on a global scale. This accusation was based on the blistering condemnation of Magnus Hirschfeld, a Jewish German sexologist and homosexual, who, according to the Nazi papers, was said to be the pioneer of this “depraved sex.” Occasionally, however, Jews were accused of having sexual relations with pigs, a double libel rooted in Jewish dietary laws and intercourse with animals, an offense punishable by death.¹⁰ The Jews were said to be behind all important events in world history, ranging from the Stuart Restoration in England and

the Partition of Poland to the main revolutions—the American, French, and Russian ones. They were also alleged to be behind World War I and World War II, the production of nuclear weapons, and espionage against the United States for the Communist Soviet Union.¹¹ Tehran propagandists explained that Jews enjoyed a close relation with the global centers of decision-making and could draw on the riches of the Rothschilds to push their global domination agenda successfully. Still other antisemitic screeds noted that Jews formed the “fifth column” in their countries of residence. In this capacity, they were said to finance terror groups around the world to generate chaos and take over the globe. Needless to say, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and fanciful accounts of the Rothchild brothers’ riches were widely disseminated.¹²

As a way of explaining why Jews were so depraved, many of the writings

concluded that “one of the most obvious characteristics of the Jewish people is anti-religiousness, or hostility towards God, including insulting God and even killing divine prophets.” Several articles claimed that a “devil undercurrent” ran through the mystical Jewish school of Kabbalah. In this view, the Kabbalists “do not deny their fundamental relationship with the Devil and admit that for centuries, the Devil has been guiding and planning their course.” The Iranian version of “spiritual imperialism,” of the kind postulated by Schmitt, saw Jews promoting secularism and subverting global culture through Jewish Hollywood, modern (Jewish) psychology, and Charles Darwin’s evolution. Jews dominated international society through music—jazz, rock, and heavy metal. Many Jewish wine merchants were said to use wine as a propaganda tool toward the same end. Borrowing from medicine, conspiracy theorists held that Jews unleashed epidemics and pandemics,

such as SARS, AIDS, and, in the latest iteration, COVID-19, to reduce the world's non-Jewish population.¹³

Scholars of ethnolinguistic discourse point out that vituperative and vulgar language is useful in “othering” the enemy. Such a vocabulary helps to create an “intimidating monster, expected to generate fear” among the population. Others noted that “outrageous obscenities” were used against other “infidels” but took a particularly vicious tone about the Jews. In some extreme cases, allegations amounted to “chimerical stereotypes”: that are “never observed empirically but rather fantastic, hallucinatory, and obsessive” fruits of antisemitism.”¹⁴ Linguistic anthropologists added that certain words went beyond the abusive in the sense of forming thought patterns that became embedded in the cultural sediment of a society. For instance, referring to the Jews as “parasites” had deep

roots in medieval Christianity, which were transferred into Islamism.¹⁵

Last but not least, vituperative language extended beyond the cognitive domain. It stimulated hatred, loathing, and disgust because it bypassed higher cognitive reasoning centers. The inversion of the moral code, expressed in the vilest of tones, helped to position the Islamist regime as a paragon of Islamic purity and virtue. The Jews were seen as an embodiment of the “rotten-to-the-core Western civilization,” an artificial construct that nurtured values abhorrent to the Islamist Revolution. In the words of one observer, the Jew was a convenient stand-in for “an alienated, rotten, artificial, immoral, materialistic” Western community. The formulaic rehashing of these ideas and slogans created ideographs—a political consciousness that reinforced the regime's ideology.¹⁶

Maleficence Against Islam

Allegations of Jewish maleficence against the Muslim community comprised the second tier of the antisemitic construct. Islam recognizes the Jews, along with Christians, as the People of the Book, but Khomeini and other high-ranking clerics claimed that the Jews forfeited this honor because of grievously injuring Islam. Their “original sin” was the stubborn rejection of the Prophet Mohammad and subsequent immersion in sin, bringing down God’s frequent reprimands. Because of their corruption, the Prophet ordered the extermination of the Jewish tribe of Banu Qurayza. However, the “brazen” Jews were not deterred and began to “afflict Islam to destroy it.” They “established anti-Islamic propaganda and engaged in various stratagems against the Muslims.” Jews were said to have produced false translations of the Qur’an and disseminated deceitful information to slander Islam. These nefarious practices were alleged to have a

double goal: to sow confusion and strife among the Muslims and to create a schism between Islam and Christianity. The latter was said to bring about the “Judeo-Christian” alliance, whose ultimate goal was to destroy Islam. In one memorable claim, “cross worshippers of the West and the Jews who guided them have only one objective, to eliminate Islam.”¹⁷

In line with the regime’s conspiratorial beliefs, there were frequent allegations that Jews operated against Islam through the so-called crypto-Jews (or secret Jews). This idea was apparently derived from the history of the *Anusim*, Jews who were forcibly converted to Christianity in medieval Spain and subsequently disappeared as identifiable Jews. In the Iranian narrative, however, an unspecified number of crypto-Jews pretending to be Muslims have continued to harm the umma, the Muslim collective. Not surprisingly, the regime used the label to target its opponents. For instance, the Saudi

royal family, Iran's archrival in the region, was often described as crypto-Jewish. Alireza Tangsiri, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) navy, was typical in expressing this view: "The Saudis are not Muslims, but actually Jews." Hojjat al-Islam Seyyed Mohammad Yazdani claimed that "al-Saud is from the tribe of Anza bin Assad, which were the Jews of Khyber, whom Imam Ali defeated and killed." According to the IRGC-linked media, "Some attribute the Al Saud family to the Bani Qurayza Jews, whom Prophet Mohammad expelled from Medina and who settled in Al-Yamamah, while others believe their lineage traces back to the Jews of Yemen."¹⁸

Another theory held that Jews acted as a fifth column against Muslims during the early years of Islam. The Jewish Studies Center (JSC)—*Andishkadete Motāle'āt-e Yahud*—a leading fabricator of antisemitic propaganda, published articles asserting that

Jews consider shedding the blood of Muslims permissible and alleged that "Jews were responsible for the death of Prophet Mohammad, who Jews poisoned in Khyber." Several reports suggested that Jews had a mental propensity for murder. In one of the stories, a JSC report quoted a hadith from Prophet Muhammad stating, "Whenever two Jews and one Muslim are alone somewhere, the two Jews will conspire to kill the one Muslim." In the same article, Imam Ali is quoted as saying, "A Muslim is not safe from six types of people, the foremost being a Jew."¹⁹

Above all, the Jews were considered the most dangerous enemies of the disappeared Twelfth Imam (the Mahdi) and his companions.²⁰ The Mo'oud Center, associated with the IRGC and ostensibly devoted to research on the Mahdi, has pushed this theory. The Jews were said to have killed several Shia Imams, according to an article written by an official working in

the media office of the Basij, an IRGC auxiliary. Jews were blamed for all the hardships imposed on Imam Ali, the first Shiite Imam, and for all the bitter events at the end of his reign, including the Jamal, Siffin, and Nahrawan wars. According to one of the JSC articles, “Jews even played a key role in the assassination of Imam Ali, as Ibn Muljam, the assassin of Imam Ali, had Jewish origins, and his mother was a Jew.” Having considered all these alleged sins and transgressions, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, an ultraconservative cleric and a pillar of neo-Shiite jurisprudence, declared the Jews to be *najes*, ritually unclean, and likely to contaminate the purity of the Muslims. Jannati and his many followers were particularly fond of explaining the meaning of names through zoomorphisms. They likened the Jews to animals such as dogs, pigs, and apes, considered unclean in Iran; the latter was also a symbol of ugliness. Labels like “filthy creatures” and “germs”

were also commonly used. The regime used *najes* to institute discriminatory policies to protect against possible contamination by the Jews. Jewish storeowners, especially in the food sector, were forced to post prominent signs warning that they were ritually unclean.²¹

Maleficence Against Iran

An assortment of fanciful interpretations of biblical sources, strange historical narratives, and even a defunct Nazi linguistic-racial theory informed the roster of Jewish maleficence against the Iranians. For instance, the Book of Esther was presented as evidence that the Jews massacred Persians during the reign of Achaemenid Xerxes. As Majlis member Zohri Lajevardi stated, the hostility between Jews and Iranians went back to the “brutal massacre of Haman on Purim,” in which “75,000 innocent people died.” The Mo’oud Center, an IRGC-sponsored research institute, published a report claiming that the

real Holocaust was perpetrated by Jews in Iran against Iranians, alleging a massacre of up to 500,000 Iranian opponents (more than half of Iran's population at the time) in three days. Mo'oud Center further claimed that Esther and Mordecai's conspiracy against Iranians did not end with the massacre. In the Center's narrative, Mordecai had Haman and his ten sons killed and their bodies hanged in the city to instill terror and demonstrate the fate of the Jews' enemies and opponents. Fars News Agency, a media outlet associated with the IRGC and other outfits, propagated the Mo'oud Center's "research." They also emphasized that Jews worldwide celebrated the historical three-day event in the form of the Purim holiday with various ceremonies, such as fasting, stomping, drinking wine, and exchanging gifts. Mo'oud was also involved in the narrative that "Jews were enemies of the Iranian Achaemenids."²²

Abdullah Shahbazi, a historian connected to the Ministry of Intelligence and Security and the founder of the Political Studies and Research Center, spun conspiracy theories about the alleged harm that Jews had inflicted on Persia. In his best-known work, the five-volume *Jewish and Parsi Plutocrats; British Imperialism and Iran*, Shahbazi completely ignored the history of British Petroleum to claim that the Jews were behind the British colonial drive in the region.²³

The Shah, declared to be "the ultimate crypto-Jew," was said to have been subverting Iran through several policies. *Kayhan* newspaper, known as the mouthpiece of Ayatollah Khamenei, wrote that "one of the most significant plots by Jewish-Zionist movements in contemporary Iran was the costly and corrupt 2500-year celebration of the Persian Empire. It aimed to preserve the memory and history of Jews in Iran from the time of Cyrus in 539 BC."

The White Revolution, an attempt to modernize and secularize Iran, was another malicious attack on Islam. Having been supported by international Jewry and Israel, the shah's reforms were responsible for the poverty and moral degradation of the Pahlavi period. A widely popular conspiracy theory held that Israeli troops helped the shah to kill scores of protestors during the so-called Black Friday in September 1978.²⁴

Most bizarrely, the regime embraced claims that Iranians were the true Aryans because of Persian affinity to the proto-Indo-European languages. Mirza Agha Khan Kermani, a nineteenth-century intellectual, developed this theory, which Germany adopted to undermine the British influence in the region. Fritz Grobba, the German diplomat in charge of Iraq and Iran, known as the German Lawrence of Arabia, was its main proponent. He urged the adoption of the idea of the German-Aryan master race, persuading Reza Shah Pahlavi to rename his

country Iran, the Farsi name for Aryan, in 1935. After the outbreak of WWII, the claims of Aryan ancestry became strongly antisemitic. Accordingly, by aligning themselves with the British, the Jews joined a front against the German and Iranian Aryans.²⁵

Holocaust Denial and Revisionism:

Bridging Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism

Almost immediately after WWII ended, right-wing circles in Europe launched a campaign to either deny or minimize the Holocaust. Revisionism by the Left, however, took longer to mature. According to Theodor Adorno, the social philosopher who was among the original neo-Marxists whose Critical Theory became popular on both sides of the Atlantic, the European Left became uneasy about the rising Holocaust discourse. Many in this circle were concerned that the Jews were exploiting the guilt over the catastrophe to advance their

interests. They also worried that the enormity of the Holocaust would eclipse other injustices, most notably the anticolonial struggle in Africa and beyond.²⁶

Franz Fanon, a rising star of the anticolonial movement, was among the first to claim that the struggle in the former colonies needed to be given as much prominence as the Holocaust. Roger Garaudy, a prominent Marxist intellectual who grew disillusioned with the Soviet Union and turned his attention to the independence war in Algeria, became a leading advocate. Garaudy's 1982 conversion to Islam introduced antisemitism into his writing. In the same year, Garaudy published a book depicting Zionism as a racist ideology that profited from the Holocaust to manipulate international discourse. In 1992, he followed up with a book that accused the Zionists of fabricating the “myth” of the six million to justify the creation a Jewish state.²⁷ In the United

States, the California-based Institute for Historical Review became a focal point for Holocaust denial. Its founding figures—Willis Carto, Lewis Brandon, and Mark Weber—embraced denialism as a means to amplify their violent antisemitism and gain wider public attention. Ernst Zundel, the notorious publisher of denial literature, went one step further in his pamphlet, *The West, War and Islam*. He suggested that because the Holocaust was an invention, Jews received the right to create a state on the backs of the Palestinians.²⁸ Although critics lamented that the regime “presented their [Jewish] worst tragedy as a scam,” Iran’s foreign policy was built around it.²⁹

Ali Shariati, the prominent sociologist and the author of the *Third Way*, a fusion of Islam and socialism, used his friendship with Ali Khamenei, the future President and Supreme Leader dating to the days of the Movement of God-Worshipping Socialists in the 1960s. Garaudy’s high-profile trial for

Holocaust denial in France in early 1998 helped popularize Holocaust denial in Iran. Even before the trial concluded, a group of approximately one hundred and sixty members of parliament (the Majlis) and some six hundred journalists publicly supported him and took up his case. Khamenei met Garaudy in April 1998, shortly before his appointment as Supreme Leader in June, turning denialism and revisionism into the regime's official policy. On April 24, 2001, he noted that "the Zionists had close ties with the Nazi Jews" and that "the exaggerated statistics released after the war" paved the way for the "occupation of Palestine. In January 2002, Khamenei referred to gas chambers in concentration camps as a story whose truth was "not clear" and that was being used as "Zionist propaganda" to gain the sympathy of the world. Not to be outdone, former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani

claimed that Hitler killed only 20,000 Jews, not six million.³⁰

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, elected president in 2005, became a prominent supporter of Holocaust denial. A former senior official in the Guards, he became close to Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi and his virulent antisemitic teachings. The President referred to the Holocaust as a "myth" fabricated to legitimize the creation of Israel and, as will be discussed in Part 2, helped the Supreme Leader to build an infrastructure to propagate the theory. Although his successor, Hassan Rouhani, felt that Ahmadinejad's flamboyant revisionism was damaging Iran's international standing, he could not override Khamenei's revisionist campaign.³¹

On January 27, 2016, coinciding with International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the Ayatollah's website published a video, "Holocaust: Is the Age of Ignorance Over?"

The presentation covered his 2014 statements that questioned the mass killing of more than 6 million Jews during World War II by the Nazis. In the video, Khamenei stated that “no one in the European countries dares to question the Holocaust, while it is not clear whether the principle of this case is true or not, and if so, in what form it occurred. Commenting on the Holocaust, or doubting it, is considered one of the greatest sins. Whoever questions the Holocaust is stopped and imprisoned. Yet, they [the West] claim they have freedom. This is the ignorance that exists in the world.” On January 21, 2022, after the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution condemning the denial and distortion of the Holocaust, the Islamic Republic’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement describing the resolution as “completely baseless.”³²

Holocaust denial was essential for Iran’s Palestinian agenda. In the regime’s

version, there were four themes: the “Holocaust is a lie”; “a Holocaust myth was created to legitimize the creation of the State of Israel”; “Israel misuses the Holocaust to justify killing the Palestinians”; and “Israel is committing a Palestinian Holocaust.”³³ Shariati, while not a Holocaust denier, advanced this agenda when, shortly after the Six-Day War (’67), he denounced Israel and Zionism for their approach to Palestinians. The much-quoted described Israeli behavior “so beyond brutality and ultra-fascist, that even Hitler and Mussolini would renounce it.” He advocated for a new foreign relations paradigm in which the Palestinians would serve as a symbol of Israeli-Western colonialism and domination. As one of his interpreters put it, Shariati wanted to make Palestinians a “sacred symbol of uprising against injustice and domination.” Although Jewish critics lamented that the regime “presented their [Jewish] worst

tragedy as a scam,” Iran’s foreign policy was built around it.³⁴

Anti-Zionism and Anti-Israelism:

Adapting Antisemitism to the

International Arena

To recall, Ayatollah Khomeini’s eschatology placed the Palestinians at the heart of neo-Shiism. Accordingly, the Islamist Revolution was the first step toward the liberation of Jerusalem. The war with Iraq was considered the next step, epitomized by the slogan, “The road from Karbala leads to Jerusalem.” Still, the regime was realistic enough to understand that its eschatology, no matter how appealing to the true believers, had little traction in the Muslim world and was a nonstarter in the international arena. The anticolonial/Holocaust denial movement provided a more compelling *raison d’être* to present Iran as the true champion of the

Palestinians, the victims of the Holocaust lie. To appeal to the international community, Ayatollah Khamenei office’s—the Rahbar’s Office—published his sayings in an English-language book, *The Palestinian: Most Important Problem of the Islamic World*.³⁵

Having to prove that Jews were colonial latecomers with no prior connection to the land, Iranian propagandists amalgamated several theories with their customary disregard for logic and consistency. One theory known as Crusader-Zionism alleged that the Crusaders were precursors of the Jewish elites who initiated the Zionist project. Another theory claimed that notable Protestant Christians—John Milton, Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon, and John Locke—mobilized to create a Greater Israel. Arguably, the most popular view was based on the book by Shlomo Sand, a Tel Aviv University professor who argued that Jews were descendants of the

Khazars, a medieval Turkic tribe who allegedly converted to Judaism. Sand claimed that these Jews were “invented” as a people by nineteenth-century Zionist entrepreneurs. His book *The Invention of the Jewish People* (2008) was translated into Farsi and Arabic and sold in bookstores. Having thus “demonstrated” that Jews had no legitimate rights to their homeland, the regime could claim that Israel was a colonial, racist state that had adopted the apartheid practices of South Africa.³⁶

Not surprisingly, the regime applied many derogatory descriptions of the Jews to their collective, the Jewish State. The medical terminology mentioned above was liberally applied to portray Israel as a cancerous tumor, a contagious disease, a collection of dirty microbes, or an abscess, as in “abscess of corruption on the heart of the Muslim nation.” Some of the terms of alleged Jewish evil were recycled to demonize Israel. Portraying the country as

greedy and corrupt, a kind of international mafia that manipulated the American political system, was very popular. In the words of one observer, “By recycling the antisemitic tropes, the regime turned Israel into a kind of ‘super Jew’.”³⁷

To recall, vituperative and vulgar language was useful in “othering” the enemy—in this case, Israel. In a classic sequence of demonization and dehumanization, calls to eliminate the Zionist enemy / Little Satan/ Israel came next. All societal sectors—the Supreme Leader and officials in his office, the Revolutionary Guards, the political elites, the media, and the propaganda apparatus—were keen to offer suggestions.

Ayatollah Khamenei set the tone. In 2000, he stated that “the cancerous tumor called Israel must be uprooted from the region.” A year later, in 2001, the Supreme Leader said that “the perpetual subject of Iran is the elimination of Israel from the

region.” In 2013, Khamenei labeled Israel a country “doomed to failure and annihilation” and an “illegitimate regime led by untouchable rabid dogs who cannot be called human beings.” In 2014, he outlined a nine-point plan on “why should and how could Israel be eliminated,” suggesting that the “cancerous tumor” could be eliminated by using ballistic missiles. Khamenei used Qur’anic scriptures to calculate that Israel would be destroyed by the year 2040. The authorities erected a clock in Tehran, displaying the countdown to the appointed date; a digital version was available online. In an X (formerly Twitter) comment, the Supreme Leader alluded to the “final solution” of Israeli Jews. Ayatollah Jannati pitched in with his own prediction, proclaiming that young Iranians will soon witness the downfall of the “illegitimate regime of Israel” and will celebrate its collapse.³⁸

Rather than drawing from the Qur’an, President Ahmadinejad, an enthusiastic advocate of destroying Israel, was inspired by contemporary international relations. Musing on the changes in the world, he asserted that “the Zionist regime will be wiped out soon the same way the Soviet Union was, and humanity will achieve freedom.” In 2021, a group of hardline legislators presented a bill to the Majlis demanding that Israel be destroyed by 2041.³⁹

Officials openly articulated scenarios envisioning Israel’s destruction. The IRGC spokesman, Brigadier General Abolfazl Shekarchi, declared that Iran can “level Haifa and Tel Aviv in the shortest possible time.” He previously promised that the regime would “not back from the annihilation of Israel, not even one millimeter.” Missiles bearing signs “Death to Israel” were paraded during armed forces celebrations and Quds Day rallies.

Rafsanjani, frequently characterized as a pragmatic or moderate figure within the regime, argued that Israel's small geographic size rendered it a "one-bomb country," implying that a single nuclear strike could prove decisive. The popular website Aparat, linked to the Ministry of Information and Security (MOIS), carried hundreds of specific recommendations for eradicating the "Little Satan." Many of the suggestions were in the form of cartoons depicting bombs, fire, and other mayhem.⁴⁰

The October 7 attacks prompted the regime to take steps that intensified, normalized, and publicly amplified ideas already embedded in the ideological framework of the Islamic Republic. Hostile rhetoric became more frequent, more explicit, more celebratory of violence against Israel. This represented a shift from long-standing hostility to more openly eliminationist discourse.

Conclusion

This article has traced the historical evolution of Iranian antisemitism and anti-Zionism, highlighting the diverse ideological strands—from European right-wing denialism to left-wing anti-colonial discourse—that converged within the intellectual and political framework of the Islamic Republic. It has shown how these currents, initially disparate, gradually coalesced into a more coherent and institutionalized narrative, reinforced by key figures and events over time. The intensification of rhetoric and its increasing normalization in recent years suggest the ever-increasing importance of this phenomenon.⁴¹

In Part 2 of the article, which will appear in the next issue, we will examine how the regime created a multimillion industry to disseminate these ideas.

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Endnotes

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