



He is an unlikely firebrand: the soft-spoken son of a blacksmith who still sometimes drives a 30-year-old Peugeot. But Iran's new President doesn't shrink from controversy. After winning a disputed election, he said he would continue Iran's nuclear program, called the Holocaust a "myth" and pledged to destroy Israel. Even some of the nation's ruling clerics are nervous about what he will do next. **Time Magazine**, People Who Mattered in 2005

Iran's President on Israel and the Holocaust

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Several times between October and December, Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was admonished for making "politically incorrect" statements about Israel and the Holocaust, and making an already tense situation between Iran and the Jewish state even more stressful. On 26 October 2005, the day preceding the Jerusalem Day in Iran, at a conference on "A World without Zionism" in Tehran, he said Israel must be "wiped off from the map." On 8 December in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, during the meeting of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), he said that Israel should be moved to a place in Europe, Canada, or Alaska. On 15 December, at a rally in Zahedan City in southeast Iran, he rejected the Holocaust as an "*afsaneh*" (a myth, a baseless story). On 1 January 2006, in a meeting with members of the Iranian Parliament (Majlis) Committee on the National Security and Foreign Policy (MCNSFP), he reaffirmed his views on Israel and the Holocaust, and on 4 January he claimed to have wide support for his view on the transfer of Israel to Europe.

These were not the only occasions or the only subjects about which Mr. Ahmadinejad has expressed unconventional or extreme views. Since his surprise and disputed election last June in a tightly controlled election where only the candidates "approved" by the Guardian Council of the Islamic Constitution could run, he has made many militant statements at home and abroad about domestic and foreign affairs of the Islamic Republic. Aside from words, his policies and actions have been also surprising to many, and eccentric even in the context of an unconventional Islamic Republic. Examples include his "cleansing" of the executive bureaucracy, speech on Iran's nuclear technology policy at the United Nations last September, and his words and activities for the imminent return of the Shiite's Twelfth Imam. He has also been holding cabinet meetings in provinces, and has reportedly told his ministers that they have a year to show performance; otherwise they will be removed from their positions! Significantly, on 5 January in Qum, the clerical capital of Iran, he said that "the global Islam has come to change the world and govern it toward justice, and it will and can."

The audience at the three occasions when Mr. Ahmadinejad spoke about Israel and the Holocaust were very different. On October 26, he spoke to an overwhelmingly young and religious Basiji (paramilitary) student crowd, deeply anti-Israel. They cheered the President when he called for a world without Zionism and the destruction of Israel. On December 8, he spoke to the heads of Islamic states in a religiously charged environment. His audience this time was divided among



those who whispered in his support while publicly they tried to distance themselves from his views, and others, who were angered because of his “undiplomatic” performance. This latter group reportedly included the host, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. On December 15, his audience was largely poor and uninterested in Israel or the Holocaust, primarily gathered to listen to the President on his solutions to their debilitating poverty.

The timing, location and the audience he spoke at for the first two occasions appear to have been related and appropriate. However, this cannot be said about the third occasion, when he spoke against the Holocaust at a gathering irrelevant to the subject. This suggests that he had a different but common audience in mind as well: the international community. Mr. Ahmadinejad wanted to maintain the momentum that his previous anti-Israeli statements had created in the West, particularly in Europe, where heads of states had protested his words and proposal. The UN Security Council had also condemned Mr. Ahmadinejad’s statement that Israel be wiped from the map, and condemned him again when he said that the Holocaust was a lie. The Bush Administration used the statements as additional evidence that a nuclear Iran would pose a real danger to Israel and the world. Even the Pope, himself a German soldier during WW II, condemned Mr. Ahmadinejad’s views.

By speaking against the Holocaust in Zahedan, Mr. Ahmadinejad was shooting two targets at once: Israel and Europe. However, the latter was his main target for three reasons: for creating Israel in order to wash off its Holocaust guilt; for joining the US against Iran on the nuclear matter; and for rejecting his views on Israel. In Mr. Ahmadinejad’s view, if the Holocaust was real, then, Europe is doubly guilty: for the massacre of the Jews and for the oppressive “deportation” of Jews to Palestine, where “a Jewish camp” was established in the midst of Muslims. As was reported by the Entekhab News Agency, the Iranian President, responding to questions by unspecified “citizens,” more openly connected the Zionist movement and the creation of Israel to “the massacre of the Jews by the German army.” He also blamed Britain for the initiation of the “camp,” and the US for sustaining it.

Contrary to wide and severe international reaction to Mr. Ahmadinejad’s anti-Israeli and anti-Holocaust statements, domestic retort to them has been mute and largely private. This was in sharp contrast to Mr. Ahmadinejad’s other militant statements and actions, which have received wide domestic critical coverage, but little attention from the outside world. For example, for his UN speech last September, Mr. Ahmadinejad was widely criticized and accused of endangering Iran’s national security. He was even blamed for the anti-Iran resolution that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) passed on 25 September, only days after that speech. In the same vain, for his views on the Twelfth Imam, Mr. Ahmadinejad has been ridiculed and branded as a fanatic who is spreading, in the words of former President Mohammad Khatami, “*khoraafaat*” (superstition) in the name of Islam. His retort: it is not superstition but lack of courage and revisionism that are threatening Iran. His handling of cabinet affairs and his relationship with the Majlis have received equally negative reviews at home.



In addition to the issues of what exactly he has said, when, where and for what audience, the reactions to Mr. Ahmadinejad's anti-Israeli and anti-Holocaust statements have lacked a deeper discussion of their cause and purpose; whether they are literal or rhetorical; and what consequences they can have for him and Iran. One must also consider certain facts or general understanding about the man and his close associates, his background and experiences, his beliefs and ideals, Iran's domestic problems and the promises he has made, the pressure from his political rivals, and the security environment he faces in Iran and beyond. Indeed, as I will briefly demonstrate below, Mr. Ahmadinejad's statements reflect his personal qualities and beliefs, his struggle to enhance legitimacy and mandate, the original oppressed-oppressor dogma of the Islamic revolution, and the growing pressures on his regime and on Iran from home front and abroad.

To begin with, Mr. Ahmadinejad is a radical Islamist who believes in "permanent revolution." As such, he sees the world as black and white, as friends and foes. Hardly any non-Islamic or liberal person is a friend; at best, he/she is a suspect. He has been indoctrinated to view the world in these simplistic terms. He was in his early twenties when the 1979 Islamic Revolution destroyed the ancient regime in Iran. He grew up amidst war and revolution and in the fight against the enemies of the Islamic regime, domestic and foreign. Mr. Ahmadinejad is an idealist utopian ("armaangara"), and a populist ("mardomi") revolutionary who believes in his form of social justice and patronage. He is also an ultra-nativist or ultra-nationalist individual, who believes that the Iranians are the "chosen people." These qualities, given his lack of political sophistication and ultra-religious and paramilitary-security background in the Iranian context, make him a straight shooter. He utters extreme words and ideas without considering or caring about their consequences for Iran or himself.

Contrary to his down-to-earth style, Mr. Ahmadinejad is a very egoistic and name-seeking individual who likes to become popular, controversial and a center of attention at home and abroad. He is trying hard to make a name, and be recognized. Yet, only on a few occasions has he been able to make himself widely heard. Among them are his statements about the imminent reappearance of the Shiite's Twelve Imam in Tehran, about Iran's nuclear policy at the UN in NYC, and about Israel and the Holocaust in Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, it was President Ahmadinejad's statements regarding Israel and the Holocaust that earned him, to his delight, international attention and recognition. He was named by the Time Magazine, along with a host of other politicians, actors, singers, and investors, as a person "who mattered" in 2005 because he "doesn't shrink from controversy." He himself has indicated that during the meetings at the UN in New York City and at OIC in Saudi Arabia, he was at the center of local and world attention!

However, Ahmadinejad is not just an individual. Rather, he is a key member of a particular faction within the Islamic regime. That faction has long believed that a war with the US and perhaps Israel is inevitable because they will never accept the legitimacy of the Islamic revolution or the Islamic regime in Tehran. The Majlis Committee on the National Security and Foreign Policy (MCNSFP) is said to have begun an investigation of the people who advised Mr.



Ahmadinejad on the anti-Israeli and anti-Holocaust statements. It is now revealed that a few years ago, some of these advisors had organized a conference on “A World without the United States,” along the same line as the conference on “A World without Zionism.” Many among this so-called Osoulgaraayaan (fundamentalists) faction have expressed satisfaction at Ahmadinejad’s anti-Israeli and anti-Holocaust statements, which the more moderate elements in the Republic had softly and cautiously criticized. In many ways, the faction is Iran’s equivalent of the neoconservatives in Washington and Tel Aviv.

Mr. Ahmadinejad believes in what he says, and his statements regarding Israel and the Holocaust are literal, not rhetorical. At the same time, these statements, while presenting a new tone, do not indicate a new Iran policy toward Israel or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That policy has wavered between a two-state solution to a one-state formula based on the return of all Palestinian refugees and a national referendum in Palestine (Israel, the territories of the Palestinian Authority, and the occupied lands). The policy is set in the regime’s “macro-policies” as determined by the Supreme Leader and the Expediency Council. Indeed, when Mr. Ahmadinejad was questioned by the MCNSFP about his Israel policy, he confirmed that Iran’s policy toward Israel remains unchanged.” However, he also indicated that his administration would follow a more confrontational style than pursued by his predecessors, and that the new approach would remain at the level of words. The fact is he cannot initiate an action unless authorized by a host of leaders and institutions that stand above him.

The fact that Mr. Ahmadinejad used the word "afsaneh" (which in Persian means myth, untrue, false, without factual base) to describe the Holocaust, or called for Israel to be wiped off the map, should have not come as a surprise to anyone. He, like most senior leaders of the Islamic Republic, past and present, consider Israel and the political Jewish nation (Zionism), as “illegitimate entities” designed by Europe to “oppress the Islamic nation.” In Ahmadinejad’s words, “Zionism is a Western and colonialist concept that was created by Britain with secularist goals and fascist methods. Presently, with the help and leadership of Americans and certain Europeans, it is massacring Muslims.” It is no wonder none of the senior leaders of the Islamic Republic has publicly objected to Mr. Ahmadinejad’s statements. Privately, however, many have expressed concern about the consequences for Iran’s national and security interests. During its meeting with the President, the MCNSFP was very explicit about its objection to this aspect of Dr. Ahmadinejad’s pronouncements, and asked that he stays within the framework set by the previous administrations.

Yet, it will be a mistake to confuse this animosity toward Israel and Zionism with racism or anti-Semitism. None of these leaders is racist in the Western sense of the word; indeed, their attitude does not differ much from the attitude of most religious Iranian Muslims toward the Jewish people. Again, in Mr. Ahmadinejad’s own words, "we must distinguish between Zionism and Judaism. The Jews have ever lived in peace and prosperity in the midst of Muslims, and they have always had, and will continue to have, freedom of religion.” The Islamic leaders dislike Israel and the political Jewish nation because they see them as “oppressors and occupiers” of the Muslim nation of Palestine. None of these leaders is against the Jewish religion; they consider



Judaism as one of the three main religions of the One God -- more important than say Hinduism and Buddhism even if these latter have millions more followers. However, they do consider Judaism inferior to both Islam and Christianity. From their perspective, Judaism is the original thesis, Christianity its antithesis, and Islam the synthesis.

Leaders of the Islamic Republic, from day one, presented themselves as the champions of the oppressed people in Iran, throughout the Muslim world, and beyond, against their oppressors. The oppressors for these leaders have become increasingly restricted to Israel and the US, particularly after the collapse of the USSR -- Israel as the oppressor of the Palestinian nation; the US as the oppressor of the Iranian nation (and the Muslim nation). While a few more moderate and pragmatic Islamic leaders in recent years have been trying to steer the Republic away from the troubles associated with championing such ideas and toward a detente policy with the US and Israel, Mr. Ahmadinejad is trying hard to revive the original dogma as he rejects the established “tension-reduction” policy. He began his campaign during the Presidential elections last June. Lacking legitimacy and political mandate, particularly in the eyes of the Iranian intellectuals and technocrats because of the disputed Presidential elections, he has since intensified that confrontational campaign.

Ahmadinejad’s words may not represent a new Iran policy toward Israel, but they nonetheless signify a departure; they reflect his call for a new global strategy and foreign policy based on the global Islam, justice, and a new sense of determination and courage. In making the statements about Israel and the Holocaust, he said he is “pursuing a definite strategy” against a definite conspiracy. Specifically, he told the Parliament deputies that the OIC meeting in Mecca had been set (he did not say by whom) with the aim of recognizing Israel and propagating the “moderate and flexible Islam.” He told the deputies that “Israel’s withdrawal from the Gaza Strip was the first stage of this plan, which began two years ago.” He asserted that his statements against Israel and the Holocaust were designed to torpedo that plan, and that they indeed helped the Iranian delegation to successfully modify the final resolution of the meeting in favor of the Islamic Republic’s position.

Ahmadinejad and his faction also believe that the policy of detente pursued in the last 16 years by former Presidents Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami has failed to achieve any meaningful gains for Iran. On the contrary, the policy to reduce tensions with the US, Israel, and Europe, as well as to divide Europe and the US, has produced the opposite effect of increasing tensions with these countries and unifying them even more. This happened, in his view, because the policy of detente, while emboldening Iran’s “adversaries,” weakened Tehran by “jumbling its foreign policy, moving Iran away from its revolutionary ideals, and making Tehran remain dormant in the Muslim World.” They cite as examples of wrong detente policy, Iran’s strategy in nuclear negotiations with Europe and Iran’s official position that it would not do anything to undermine proposals for peace between Arabs and Israelis. Instead, he believes Iran must have only worked with IAEA while preparing itself to challenge Israel’s military supremacy.



To change the balance in Iran’s favor, Mr. Ahmadinejad and his supportive faction believe that they must speak tough, remain non-compromising, and change the country’s foreign policy from a reactive to a proactive diplomacy based on Islamic values and the national power. In his estimate, talking tough against Israel is a good starting point because “this wave has many supporters in the Muslim World and will continue its movement.” Besides, his faction has argued that Ahmadinejad’s statements “make Iran the vanguard of the Islamic nations in their struggle against the oppressor US with negligible consequences for Iran.” These arguments smell like “the export of Islamic revolution” dogma that dominated the foreign policy mindset of the Republic in its formative years; the consequences of which were Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Iran, damaged relations with the Arab neighbors, and, of course, continued animosity with the US and Israel. That “Islamic-centered” foreign policy undermined Iran’s national interests beyond repair.

In the eyes of millions who did not participate in the elections or did not vote for Mr. Ahmadinejad, he lacks political legitimacy and governing mandate. Indeed, he is the first president of the Islamic Republic to be elected in a second round of election. In the first round, he received about 5.7 million votes, or less than 14 percent of the eligible votes. In the second round, he received an additional 11 million plus protest votes. In other words, he is in fact the first choice of less than 6 million voting Iranians. Mr. Ahmadinejad realizes that he needs to increase his legitimacy and mandate. Thus, at home and abroad, he has been championing the cause of Islamic social justice and other similar popular causes (e.g., anti-corruption, anti-poverty, a homeland for the Palestinians). Note that his statements against Israel and the Holocaust were made at the OIC in Mecca, the cradle of Islam, and in the very poor Zahedan city, where he also blamed wealthy Iranians for the province’s poverty.

Mr. Ahmadinejad is not operating in a vacuum. At home, he faces insurmountable social, economic, and political problems for which he only has simplistic solutions, and is struggling against his domestic opposition who includes intellectuals, technocrats, and wealthy Iranians – a powerful group to deal with. The pressure on his Government from abroad is even more severe. Iran is in a trap on the nuclear issue after the IAEA resolution. Unless the unexpected happens, sooner rather than later, Iran will be taken to the UN Security Council, and multilateral sanctions, even a war, could be imposed on it. Israelis have been particularly annoying to the Islamic Republic, continuously threatening it with military actions against its nuclear facilities. Mr. Ahmadinejad and his security-military colleagues are particularly angered and feel insulted by these threats, and are trying to retaliate. However, given the established power structure in Iran, the best they can do for the time being is to curse, insult, and agitate. After all, when he was asked on 4 January why he raised the Holocaust issue, his reply was: to initiate a “scientific debate!”

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