

Antisemitism of the Ayatollahs: Holocaust Denial and Hatred of Israel in Khamenei's and Rouhani's Iran

Stephan Grigat*

This article argues that the constant threats to annihilate Israel and the denial or relativization of the Shoah are not rhetorical but essential elements of the Iranian regime. Conspiracy theories are analyzed as structural features of the specific ideology of Iran's rulers. Under Hassan Rouhani, the regime's eliminatory anti-Zionism still plays a crucial role in the formulation of its foreign policy.

What distinguishes the Iranian regime from other despotisms conditioned by Islam, and makes it especially dangerous, is the combination of a revolutionary-activist Islamism centered on belief in the Mahdi, the state-driven effort to obtain the technology for weapons of mass destruction, and a radical anti-Zionism shared by all currents within the regime. The Mahdi is the hidden Twelfth Shi'ite Imam who, it is believed, will one day return. Under the Iranian Constitution, it is he, rather than the Supreme Leader, who is the head of state in Iran.¹ *Vilayat-e Faqih*, "guardianship of the Islamic Jurists" is intended through puritanical terror within and the export of the Islamic revolution abroad, to pave the way for his return.

The regime that has ruled Iran since 1979 openly proclaims its religious-ideological goal of world rule. Proving the existence of this claim does not require sophisticated critical techniques. A brief look at the explicit content of the writings of the regime's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, is quite enough.² Moreover, his successor and current holder of the office of Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who has described Israel as a "cancerous tumor that should be cut and will be cut"³, has also made clear statements in this respect.⁴

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1. See Özuguz, *Verfassung*, 5.
 2. See "Reden des Ayatollah Chomeini," 242.
 3. "Iranian MP Lauds Hezbollah's Anti-Israel Stance."
 4. See Khamenei, "Grundzüge der islamischen Ideologie," 17.

The regime's antisemitism – expressed in traditional Jew-hatred, a worldview based on conspiracy theories and projection, Holocaust denial and relativization, and hatred of the Jewish state – is routinely downplayed in scholarly and political discussions.⁵ Breaking with this practice, it will here be argued that the constant threats to annihilate Israel and the denial or relativization of the Shoah are essential elements of the regime, that Khomeini already espoused traditional Jew-hatred, and that conspiracy theories and projection are structural features of the ideology of the Iranian rulers. Against this background, we will address the questions of whether there have been any substantial changes under the new Iranian president Hassan Rouhani and what role the regime's antisemitic ideology plays in the formulation of its foreign policy. Finally, some recent statements by leading figures in the regime will be discussed in relation to the negotiations over the Iranian nuclear and missile programs that took place at Vienna's Theodor Herzl Square until July 14th 2015.

TRADITIONAL ANTISEMITISM AND ELIMINATORY ANTI-ZIONISM

For the Iranian dictatorship, the Middle Eastern conflict is not about improving the lot of the Palestinians, a two-state solution, or any kind of agreement or compromise, but explicitly about destroying Israel. This position is neither new nor confined to particular Presidents or officials. The destruction of Israel has been the official policy of the Islamic Republic since 1979. It is advocated not only by the fanatical supporters of ex-President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, but also by conservatives and those Mullahs and Ayatollahs that the West treats as pragmatists, moderates or reformists. In 1997 Ali Khamenei proclaimed in an address to the Revolutionary Guards that Israel would be expunged from the pages of history. In a meeting with Sheikh Yassin, he assured the then leader of Hamas that Iran would “not recognize this cancerous ulcer for a single hour”.⁶ In Iran, the slogan “death to Israel” has since 1979 been a staple of Islamist state propaganda and has been daubed at military parades on missiles that are already capable of reaching Tel Aviv. Wahied Wahdat-Hagh has aptly described the program of the Iranian regime as “eliminary anti-Zionism”.⁷

In order to deny the antisemitic character of the Iranian regime, much is often made of the still existing Jewish community in Iran. Admittedly, the Jews in Iran are not currently suffering the kind of systematic

5. See Grigat, “Delegitimizing Israel in Germany and Austria.”

6. Quoted by Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran*, 290.

7. Wahdat-Hagh, “Die Herrschaft des politischen Islam im Iran,” 44.

persecution meted out to, for example, the Baha'i.⁸ However, this line of argument consciously downplays the fact that the small Iranian Jewish community faces systematic discrimination and has no choice but to constantly dissociate itself from Israel.⁹

Khomeini was not only hostile to the Jewish state, but openly proclaimed his enmity towards the Jews. He considered Islam to have been at war with them since its inception. In a classic case of projection of his own megalomania, Khomeini believed himself engaged in a struggle against an unfolding plan for Jewish world domination about which he had already fantasized in his central text, *Islamic Government*, a collection of lectures that he gave while in exile in Iraq in the 1970s. "We must protect and make the people aware that the Jews and their foreign backers are opposed to the very foundations of Islam and wish to establish Jewish domination throughout the world"¹⁰ Elsewhere he asserts:

"And as you see the Jews have grasped the world with both hands and are devouring it with an insatiable appetite, they are devouring America and have now turned their attention to Iran and still they are not satisfied [. . .]"¹¹

A major role in the spread of antisemitism in Iran has been played by the Persian translation of the antisemitic screed, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. First published in 1978, large print runs of several new editions have since been issued by official Iranian bodies, sometimes with modified titles such as *The Protocols of the Jewish Leaders for the Domination of the World*.¹² This modified title is in itself enough to show that the sporadic efforts by the Iranian leadership to draw a sharper distinction between Jews and Zionists have had little effect. Moreover, when Iranian propaganda talks about "Zionists" it almost always associates the term with the conspiracy theories characteristic of traditional antisemitism against Jews. In the Iranian regime's ideology and propaganda, Zionism is attacked not as an everyday political opponent, but as the root cause of virtually all the world's problems, whose destruction would pave the way to salvation.¹³

Virtually all the *topoi* of modern antisemitism can be demonstrated in the Iranian Islamists' ideology, in particular the glorification of a

8. See *ibid.*, 49-50, and Wahdat-Hagh, "Drangsaliert, gedemütigt, verfolgt," 193-204.

9. Before 1979 between 60.000 and 150.000 Jews lived in Iran. Today the estimated number is 20.000. As non-Muslim citizens of an Islamic state they are treated as *dhimmi*, with special laws and restrictions.

10. Khomeini, "Islamic Government," 127.

11. Khomeini, "Speech, September 28, 1977," 368.

12. See Posch, "Juden im Iran," 32.

13. See Schiedel, "Heiliger Hass" 170-173.

concretely transfigured, organic, authentic, destiny-fulfilling and harmonious community seen as the opposite of a chaotic-abstract, alienated, rotten, artificial, immoral, materialist, conflict-ridden and, in the last analysis, Jew-associated social model. Ulrike Marz places special stress on the resentful anti-capitalism of Islamist ideology which has hitherto attracted too little attention: “The belief in the possibility of excluding exploitation from the capitalist economy and laying the blame for it on an enemy of Islam leads the Iranian religious leaders to a critique of capitalism that is not only religious, but also antisemitic.”¹⁴ While the Nazis drew a distinction between “rapacious” [“raffendes”] and “productive” [schaffendes] capital and identified the former with the Jews and the latter with the Aryan folk community, the Ayatollahs proclaim, as the alternative to “parasitic capitalism”, an “Islamic economy” that is only “an ethically and morally overlaid variant of capitalism that no more breaks with wage labor, exploitation and surplus value than do other ideologies that attempt to manage capitalism”.¹⁵

Marz rejects both explanations of Islamic antisemitism based on the exegesis of religious texts that find the root of the Jew-hatred of the 20th and 21st centuries in Koranic verses, and the “import thesis” according to which antisemitism was simply injected into the Islamic world from Europe at the start of the 20th century. Instead, she offers an analysis of the modern-regressive tendencies in Islamic society itself: in her view, Iranian antisemitism draws firstly on “explicitly Islamic attitudes to and accusations against the Jews”, secondly on a “specific Iranian social context” and thirdly on features borrowed from modern Western antisemitism and Islamically reinterpreted.”¹⁶ The Iranian Islamists “try to combat the crises of modernity with a religiously-referenced construction of a collective identity.”¹⁷ Marz shows the extent to which the Iranian regime’s ideology is a “regressive-modern phenomenon” and Iranian Islamist antisemitism a modern ideology that employs an anti-modern content and modern means in pursuit of its realization.¹⁸ This ideology is one of the main reasons for the Ayatollahs to spend billions on fighting Israel, and it repeatedly produces overtly antisemitic actions, such as the bombing of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA), the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, the Argentine capital in 1994.

14. Marz, *Kritik des islamischen Antisemitismus*, 138.

15. *Ibid.*, 151.

16. *Ibid.*, 378-379.

17. *Ibid.*, 15.

18. *Ibid.*, 35. It would be fruitful to compare this analysis with Jeffrey Herf’s characterization of Germany’s National Socialism as “reactionary Modernism”. See Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*.

ALL CHANGE WITH ROUHANI?

Eighty five people were killed and hundreds seriously wounded in the AMIA attack, making it one of the bloodiest antisemitic incidents since 1945. The Argentinian judiciary continues to accuse the Tehran regime and Hezbollah of this outrage, and Interpol has issued arrest warrants against senior Iranian officials in relation to it. According to Argentinian special prosecutor Alberto Nisman, who died, allegedly murdered, at the beginning of 2015 and Abolghasem Mesbahi, a former Iranian secret service officer who defected in the late 1990's, the decision to commit this massacre was approved by a special committee closely linked to the Iranian regime's Supreme National Security Council. Hassan Rouhani, the victor in the Iranian Presidential elections of June 2013 was, as a member of Ali Khamenei's inner circle, at that time the Secretary of the Council.

According to Nisman, the Special Committee that decided on the attack in Argentina and allegedly also on the murder of Iranian oppositionists in Europe also included then President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani —deemed “moderate” by the West, Secret Services Minister, Ali Fallahian (in the 1990's an official guest at the German secret service HQ in Pullach and of the German Chancellery), Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati (still active in Khamenei's inner circle) and – Hassan Rouhani.

Moreover, above and beyond his role in the murder of 85 people in the Argentinian capital and numerous Iranian oppositionists in Europe, Rouhani is by no means the “man of compromise and reconciliation”¹⁹ depicted in a number of media reports or the “bearded bringer of hope with a heart”, portrayed in the German daily newspaper *taz*.²⁰

The election of Rouhani has not changed anything essential vis-à-vis the constitutional commitments of the Islamic Republic - in which the Supreme Leader has, in any case, the final say in all decisive matters - neither as regards the anti-Israeli policy nor as regards the effort to achieve a nuclear military capability. The only novelty is the employment of a new tactic for the pursuit of these goals: Rouhani favors a more restrained rhetoric than his predecessor.

After Rouhani's election, the commander of the paramilitary Basij, Brigadier-General Mohammad Reza Naqdi, once again proclaimed the approaching end of Israel²¹ and the announcement by Pasdaran leader Mohammad Ali Jafari, that the Jewish state would face “imminent

19. Frey, “Reform und Charakter.”

20. Nirumand, “Irans neuer Präsident.”

21. “Basij Commander.”

destruction” if the USA and France were to intervene militarily in Syria,²² once again made the antisemitic logic of the Iranian regime crystal clear to everyone – and was, like previous such statements, shrugged off. In 2013, 2014 and 2015 Rouhani, like his predecessors, attended the annual military parade in which banners in front of the proudly displayed Shahab-3 missiles carried the message that Israel must “cease to exist”. In July 2014, again like his predecessors, he took part in Tehran in Al-Quds Day, on which, at Khomeini’s behest, demonstrations calling for the destruction of the Jewish state have been held throughout the world at the end of Ramadan since 1979. For Rouhani, as for every other representative of the Iranian regime, Israel is “an old wound that has been sitting on the body of the Islamic world”²³, “a miserable country,”²⁴ and a “festering tumor.”²⁵

Rouhani stands for a change of tactics, not of strategy. The goals remain the same, but the rhetoric has changed from that employed during Ahmadinejad’s presidency. Even were Rouhani prepared to adopt a more moderate approach to some issues, the dominant position of the Supreme Leader, the influence of figures such as Chief Justice Sadegh Larijani, and the power of the Revolutionary Guard — which increased massively under Ahmadinejad and exercises wide-ranging control over the nuclear and missile programs — would prevent him from getting his way.

PRAGMATISM AND “STRATEGIC VISION”

Time and again, the question arises as to what role the antisemitic ideology and hatred of Israel play in the Iranian regime’s political decision-making. The Islamic Republic’s foreign policy has from the outset been characterized by equal measures of pragmatism and destructive irrationality, and this has enabled Western observers to continually downplay the significance of the latter — the destructive fantasies towards Israel — by reference to the former. In fact, however, as Menashri puts it, “Iran’s attitude to Israel [has been] one of the rare examples of adherence to dogma.”²⁶

On the one hand, the commitment to a “revolutionary foreign policy” is inscribed in the Islamic Republic’s Constitution. The Iranian Constitution, following the conception of the Iranian Islamists, is meant to apply beyond the borders of Iran. If it is to remain true to the letter of its own Constitution, the regime is obliged consistently to pursue an activist

22. “IRGC Commander.”

23. IRIB News.

24. “Iran’s Rouhani Dismisses Israeli Threats.”

25. “Takfiris, Zionists.”

26. Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics*, 281.

foreign policy based exclusively on the dictates of revolutionary political Islam.

On the other hand, in order to achieve the best possible balance between ideology and pragmatism, the requirement to obey even the Supreme Leader has been explicitly lifted precisely as regards discussions about foreign policy issues. The results can be seen in the publications of Iranian think-tanks such as the *Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies*, in which, within the framework of the Islamic Republic's ideology, sharply contrasting positions on international political questions are sometimes expressed.²⁷

Representatives of the Realist school of International Relations, refer to the concept of *Realpolitik*, and conclude from this that it should be possible to pragmatically integrate the Iranian regime into an international or at least regional security architecture. Such conclusions overlook the fact that the Ayatollahs have seized every opportunity to expand their sphere of influence, and they also ignore the fact that, as regards the threat to Israel, pragmatism can have no meaning for Tehran other than waiting for the right moment to go on the offensive.

When Khomeini took power in 1979 in Iran, he took a purist view of foreign policy, the thrust of which was documented by one of his first prominent visitors, Yasser Arafat, who, in a festive ceremony, was given the keys to the former Israeli Embassy in Tehran after many future Pasdaran officers had received their initial military training in PLO camps in southern Lebanon. If Khomeini had had his wish, his credo that his Islamic revolution was neither "western nor eastern", e.g. neither capitalist nor socialist but some kind of an Islamic "third way", would have been applied to the foreign policy of the newly established Islamic Republic. However, even a fanatic like Khomeini had to yield to the facts of the situation facing the regime in the first decade of its existence. While he still lived, the regime established good economic ties with several West European states, notably West Germany²⁸ and Austria,²⁹ and close relations with one of the most important "eastern" countries, the People's Republic of China. A decisive role in developing the pragmatic response to the existential threats to the regime – which involved no change in the hostility to Israel and the USA - was played by two politicians who still today play a crucial part in determining Iran's destiny: the then President Khamenei and his successor Rafsanjani.³⁰

27. See *Institute*, <http://en.cmess.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=66>.

28. See Küntzel, *Germany and Iran*.

29. See Grigat, "In die Bresche springen," 136-142.

30. See Garver, *China and Iran*, 59.

In the current situation, many observers are once again pondering the question of how far political pragmatism might affect the revolutionary goal and whether *maslahat* – expediency over and above any ideological principles or goals – a principle that the Iranian Islamists have always recognized, will ever entail a renunciation of eliminatory anti-Zionism as part of the basic core of the regime’s ideology.

Even a mainstream German-Austrian Iran expert such as Walter Posch accepts that there is no chance of this. When it comes to Israel self-interest, *maslahat* only means that the Islamic republic is currently not looking for an all-out war with the Jewish state but prefers to support its proxies, like Hezbollah in Lebanon and Islamic Jihad in Gaza and the West-Bank, with weapons and billions of Dollars. *Maslahat* means “not defeating ideology, but at most restricting its scope.”³¹ Moreover, Posch clearly explains what the core of this ideology is: a “strategic vision” based on the “paradigm of the illegitimacy of the state of Israel.”³² In another article Posch points out that the recent noises about Iran having the same right as other countries to the peaceful use of nuclear energy cannot hide the original aim of the nuclear program. In the early 1990s the argument was quite openly advanced that, “nuclear weapons are necessary in order to wipe Israel off the map. Such arguments were even put forward by political figures now advocating a moderate approach.”³³

However, this understanding has not prevented Posch from proposing that the West work with the very same figures who have presented the “end of Israel” as a strategic goal. In particular, he advocates the establishment of relations with that very “Iranian think-tank scene” in which such strategic visions of destruction are expressed in the sober language of international relations analysis. So, the acceptance by the West of the “moderate, constructive foreign policy”³⁴ that Posch thinks the Iranian regime could adopt would also mean the acceptance of the “strategic vision” of the destruction of Israel and “paradigm of the illegitimacy of the Jewish state” as legitimate positions in international politics.

RESTABILIZATION OF THE REGIME - REFORMED HOLOCAUST DENIAL

Internally, the Islamic Republic is marked by the existence of parallel state and “revolutionary” institutions, organized in the form of competing,

31. Posch, “Dritte Welt,” 18. For further discussion of the doctrine of *maslahat*, that includes the possibility for the Supreme Leader to overrule Islamic law when such action is considered necessary for the survival of the Islamic Republic, see Eisenstadt and Khalaji, “Nuclear Fatwa.”

32. Posch, “Dritte Welt,” 26.

33. Posch, “Zwischen Ideologie,” 754.

34. Posch, “Mäßigung statt Neuanfang,” 1.

gang-like factions. However, the antisemitic and conspiracy-theorizing worldview and the threats of destruction against Israel, shared by all factions of the regime, play a decisive and indeed necessary role in integrating the hostile gangs and the factional fight is not only over who is to get the biggest share of the pie, but also over who can best advance the program of eliminatory anti-Zionism.

In the original and for a long time operational conception of the Islamic Republic, the Supreme Leader ruled over the factions and mediated between them. The “Prince of the Believers” — as one of the many titles held by the Leader describes him — embodies the awareness that, as Khomeini once put it, the regime needs two wings in order to achieve its goals and would be in danger of falling if one of them were simply to be cut off.

This conception was called into question by Khamenei’s clear and early support for Ahmadinejad during the 2009 electoral farce. Since Rouhani’s election, it has once again become operational. One expression of this restoration has been the composition of Rouhani’s government. In choosing his ministers, Rouhani took into account the wishes of almost all the factions to create a kind of grand coalition in order to broaden the base of the regime and so strengthen it for the prospective annihilation effort. Admittedly, supporters of Ahmadinejad and his longstanding spiritual mentor and political promoter Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, who has declared that “the Jews are the most corrupt in the world, . . . the most seditious group among all human beings and they will not leave Muslims alone until they destroy Islam”³⁵, are not represented in Rouhani’s cabinet. However, the fact that Khamenei has appointed Ahmadinejad a member of the influential Expediency Council shows that even this faction, which stands for an especially radical interpretation of the Mahdi doctrine, will continue to play a role.

The struggle for official positions and influence between the spiritual, political, and military leaderships, the Revolutionary Guards, Secret Services and economic elites, and the Larijani brothers, the Khamenei circle and the Rafsanjani clan has calmed down a bit under Rouhani. The various factions must now pay somewhat more heed to the overall interests of the regime. However, the interest groups have not disappeared and further such conflicts are inevitable, particularly in relation to efforts to contain the power of the Revolutionary Guards.

Immediately after the election of Rouhani, the Guards, the very name of whose “Quds Unit” expresses the goal of all their efforts, made it clear that they would not let their efforts be impeded. A Pasdaran general, Massoud Jazayeri, not only informed the USA and the “Zionist forces in

35. Quoted by Litvak, “Anti-Semitism in Iran.”

the region” that they were within the action radius of the Iranian regime, but also that “the major policies of the Islamic Republic would not be affected by nuclear talks or negotiations about other issues”.³⁶

Nonetheless, Khamenei himself is now clearly determined to rein in the Pasdaran’s power somewhat, following speculation during Ahmadinejad’s term of office about whether the Guards, who had been extending their control over ever widening spheres of economic and political life, really needed the clergy any more and whether the theocracy might turn into an open military dictatorship. As a result, there are only three Pasdaran ministers in Rouhani’s government whereas over half of the members of Ahmadinejad’s first cabinet were recruited from the Revolutionary Guards or Basiji. However, this shift has nothing to do with some kind of wind of moderation. It represents merely a shift between power centers, in this case towards the traditional security apparatus, which is in competition with the Pasdaran, and in particular in favor of the VEVAK security service, which is more strongly represented in Rouhani’s government than in any since 1979.³⁷

The clear, if surprise, winner of the battles over the composition of Rouhani’s government is Rafsanjani. Despite unexpectedly being excluded from running in the recent presidential election by Khamenei – among other things as a punishment for his maneuverings during the protests following the 2009 election – the composition of Rouhani’s cabinet, which includes numerous Rafsanjani supporters, is a kind of comeback for the “Richelieu of Iranian politics”.

Against all the evidence, Rafsanjani, identified in the 1997 Mykonos judgment in Germany as one of the prime movers behind Iranian state terrorism in Europe³⁸, was dubbed a “moderate” during his Presidency by both the Western media and governments in just the same way as Rouhani, who in a sense stepped into Rafsanjani’s shoes after the latter’s exclusion, is being now. Rafsanjani’s statement that only a single nuclear bomb would be needed to destroy Israel while the Islamic world would only be harmed by the anticipated counter-strikes is notorious.³⁹ Less well known is his Holocaust denial.

36. *Tehran Times*, <http://www.tehrantimes.com/component/content/article/110129>, 19.8.2013.

37. See Alfoneh, “President Rohani’s Cabinet.”

38. In 1992 Sadegh Sharafkandi, chairman of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, and three of his associates were murdered by agents of the Iranian regime in the restaurant Mykonos in Berlin.

39. See Hashemi-Rafsanjani, “Quds Day Speech.”

According to the Anti-Defamation League, he stated on Iranian radio that his personal researches had led him to the conclusion that Hitler had murdered only 20,000 Jews.⁴⁰

His successor, Mohammed Khatami, a vehement supporter of the death penalty for homosexuals⁴¹ is still regarded as a shining example of a “reformist Islamist” maintained the tradition when he positioned himself as one of the most passionate defenders of the French Holocaust denier Roger Garaudy.⁴² The current President wants to tone things down in this respect and has developed a kind of “moderate Holocaust denial”: when asked in an interview whether he believed the Shoah was a “myth”, Rouhani reaffirmed his position as a politician and unable to comment on the “dimensions of historic events.”⁴³

Rafsanjani, who, sidelined during Ahmadinejad’s Presidency, will now once again play a role in Iranian politics, has for the past 35 years been promoting what even before the 1979 revolution he declared to be the sacred duty of all Muslims in his book *Israel’ il va Qods-e Aziz*⁴⁴: the struggle against Israel, for which he was all too keen to gain allies in Germany. Not only Ahmadinejad, but also his perennial opponent Rafsanjani saw German reunification, which took place at the same time as the consolidation of the rule of the Mullahs in Iran following the end of the war with Iraq, as the beginning of a new era. According to him, not only Germany, but also Iran had suffered decades of Allied domination. The breaking of the “strategic alliance between the two countries during the Second World War” had enabled the Allies to divide Germany into West and East, wrote the pistachio magnate in a preface to a study by the former Iranian Ambassador to Germany.⁴⁵ In Rafsanjani’s view the most important development at the end of the Cold War was the restoration of a sovereign Germany independent of the victors in the Second World War, which had enabled the two countries to restore their “historical ties”. This restoration would go further, with a clear end in view: in Posch’s summary, Rafsanjani advocates the “strategic goal of Iran, through its nuclear activities, achieving nuclear parity with Israel, as a result of which the Muslim world, based on its demographic advantage and strategic depth, would finally gain the upper hand⁴⁶ The recent successes of Rouhani’s charm offensive in the USA and Europe, which must surely have exceeded even the high hopes of

40. See Anti-Defamation League, *Holocaust Denial*, 8.

41. See “Iran’s Ex President Responds.”

42. See Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics*, 279.

43. Karami, “Rohani’s Holocaust Comments.”

44. See Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics*, 290.

45. Mousavian, *Iran-Europe Relations*, VII-VIII.

46. Posch, “Dritte Welt,” 24.

Khamenei and his tacticians, bring the Iranian regime a big step closer to the achievement of this “strategic goal”.⁴⁷

Under Rouhani, this goal is now being pursued using somewhat more moderate rhetoric. However, the position of the key figure in the regime on the Holocaust is crystal clear: long before Ahmadinejad’s Holocaust denial caught the world’s attention, Ali Khamenei had described the existence of gas chambers in the Second World War as “fairy tales”.⁴⁸ On Khamenei’s official English language webpage one could for years and can to this day read about “the myth of the massacre of Jews known as the holocaust”.⁴⁹ At the start of 2014, Khamenei once again questioned the historical reality of the Shoah.⁵⁰

The 2006 Holocaust denial conference in Tehran was officially opened by Manouchehr Mottaki, the pre-predecessor of Rouhani’s current Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif. Despite this, Mottaki shortly afterwards got a friendly reception from his German and Austrian counterparts. Zarif strives for “moderation” in this area too. Nevertheless, during his initial charm offensive in the USA he could not bring himself simply to reply “yes” to the question of whether he believed the Nazis had murdered six million Jews, but resorted repeatedly to the rhetoric of “moderate” Holocaust relativization that talks about the Nazis’ “major atrocities” to which many Jews also fell victim.⁵¹ The essence of this prattle was clearly exposed when in September 2013 Zarif announced that “we condemn the massacre committed by the Nazis against the Jews and we condemn the massacre committed by the Zionists against the Palestinians.”⁵² Absurdly, this was interpreted throughout the world as a clear break with Ahmadinejad’s ideas and a generous recognition of Jewish suffering, although the statement boils down to nothing more than the antisemitic smear that the Israelis are the new Nazis.

The fact that this “change”, from the pro-active courting of Western Holocaust deniers to the equation of the Shoah – reduced to a “massacre” – with the state of its survivors and their descendants, was greeted in the West as an “important signal”, “major progress”, a “hopeful sign”, etc., showed how easy it was going to be for the new-style Iranian regime to dazzle Western public opinion while work on decisive components of the nuclear and missile programs proceeded almost uninterrupted. The same goes for the eager reception of the report, swiftly categorically denied by

47. See Larise and Schmidinger, *Zwischen Gottesstaat und Demokratie*, 243.

48. “Leader Recives Air Force Servicemen.”

49. “Khamenei stellt erneut Holocaust in Frage.”

50. “Columbia University Student Takes on Iranian Ambassador.”

51. “Irans Außenminister verurteilt ‘Massaker an Juden.’”

52. See “Iran Denies Media Reports.”

Fars News, that Rouhani had congratulated the world's Jews on Rosh Hashana in 2013. It is not in fact of much importance whether the greeting did or did not in fact come from Rouhani, since, despite the various openly anti-Jewish statements by senior regime figures, it was in no way out of line with the Islamic Republic's ideology to send a few friendly words to the Jews and such things happened from time to time even under President Ahmadinejad. The insistence on the difference between religious Jews who are granted the right to live as a discriminated minority in the *Umma* so long as they make clear their hostility to Israel, on the one hand and, on the other, Zionists, who are talked about in exactly the same terms employed to describe the Jews in traditional antisemitic discourse, is part of the regime's basic ideological equipment – and creates points of contact with sections of the anti-Zionist left in Europe and the USA. The extent of the susceptibility of parts of this milieu for the friendly face of the Iranian terrorist regime became evident when 70% of respondents in a *Guardian* online poll agreed that Rouhani deserved the Nobel Peace Prize for 2013.⁵³

NEGOTIATING TOWARDS THE BOMB AND REGIME IMMUNITY

The systematic whitewashing of Rouhani is the precondition for the nuclear talks with the Iranian regime that have been ongoing since 2013 and resulted in 2015, not in a halt to the Iranian nuclear program, but in its institutionalization, since its infrastructure would remain more or less intact. Immediately after Rouhani's election, both Brussels and Washington indicated a readiness to reach wide-ranging compromises with Khamenei, who, a few days before the Geneva talks opened in October 2013, called again for the "liberation of Palestine" and identified the "criminal Zionist network" as, alongside the USA, the "main enemy"⁵⁴ and even when the talks were under way assailed Israel as an "illegitimate and bastard" regime⁵⁵ — none of which was even mentioned, let alone criticized, by any of the participating governments.

Here we are already up against one of the basic problems of such negotiations: almost no one is talking any more about the regime's antisemitic character, a situation about whose implications the historian Jeffrey Herf has emphatically warned.⁵⁶ The negotiations and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), announced in July 2015 in Vienna, not only lend the Ayatollahs a legitimacy that they lost a long time

53. See "Readers' Nobel Peace Prize Winners."

54. "Supreme Leader's Hajj Message."

55. "Khamenei: Zionist Regime Is an Illegitimate and Bastard Regime."

56. See Herf, "Taking Iran's Anti-Semitism Seriously."

ago in the eyes of significant layers of the Iranian population, but also immunize them against criticism.

Just one day after the Geneva agreement, in a meeting with the Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, Nabih Berri, Rouhani inveighed against the “artificial regime of Israel”, whose existence was due to colonialism and had led to a “redoubling of the problems” in the Middle East. “Over the past 65 years, the tracks of the Zionists have been traceable in every trouble and problem in the region.”⁵⁷ Shortly thereafter, the Speaker of the Iranian pseudo-Parliament, Ali Larijani, declared Israel to be the “modern face of fascist racism.”⁵⁸ Only days before the announcement of the JCPOA Rafsanjani declared, according to the *Islamic Republic News Agency*, that Israel “will be wiped off the map.”⁵⁹

Once the Iranian regime had learned that it could strengthen its position vis-à-vis the West and in the region with little likelihood of criticism from the EU or USA, the momentary cautiousness regarding Holocaust denial vanished. Between 29 September and 1 October 2014, the Ayatollahs once again gave a platform to the Conspiracy Theorists and Antisemites International at the 2nd New Horizon Conference in Tehran. Billed as an international meeting of “independent thinkers and filmmakers,”⁶⁰ alongside the old school Holocaust deniers, a large proportion of the “independently thinking” speakers were 9/11 Truthers.

Among the participants were the longstanding head of *Radio Islam*, the Swedish-Moroccan Ahmed Rami, who has been found guilty of hate speech, and the Italian history professor, Claudio Moffa, openly presented on the Conference website like this: “He achieved international fame through revisionist statements, in particular by the public denial of the Holocaust”⁶¹ In 2006, former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke had been a guest in Tehran. Now the regime could celebrate the appearance of Medea Benjamin, co-founder of Code Pink and a key activist in the American “peace” and BDS movement. From France came former Front National member, Olivier Lemoine, who has lately been active in smaller far-right organizations. Before the conference, according to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the participation of the antisemitic comedian and activist Dieudonné M’bala M’bala was announced. However, on the website, only

57. “Die Diplomatie der Regierung.”

58. “Iranian Parliament Speaker.”

59. “Rafsanjani.”

60. *New Horizon*,
http://newhorizon.ir/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=159&Itemid=139.

61. *New Horizon*,
http://newhorizon.ir/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=155:prof-claudio-moffa&catid=34&Itemid=31.

the names of cartoonist Joe le Corbeau, presented as “closely related” to Dieudonné⁶², and Holocaust denier Maria Poumier, who took part in the film *L’antisémite* produced by Dieudonné with the support of the Iranian Institute of Cinema, were to be found.

One of the topics raised at the conference was the supposed Zionist subjection of Germany. Manuel Ochsenreiter, active over the past two decades as a writer, editor and interviewer for a variety of German far-right publications, was there to explain about the “Israeli lobby in Germany”. Ochsenreiter has for many years been identified as an intermediary between the German-language far-right scene and the Iranian regime and in particular the Lebanese Hezbollah.

Senior government officials attended the conference. Saeed Jalili, an unsuccessful candidate in the 2013 Presidential election as well as a former chief negotiator for the nuclear program and Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, took part as did Alaeddin Borojerdi, the current President of the Iranian pseudo-Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee and Ali Asghar Soltanieh, the regime’s longstanding representative at the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna.

The difference from the 2006 Holocaust denial conference is striking. While the earlier event drew condemnation from almost the entire world and attracted a great deal of media attention, the only noteworthy protest in the age of Rouhani came from ADL Director, Abraham Foxman. In October 2013, Rouhani had taken care to prevent such a conference happening shortly after his assumption of office. Back then it would have hindered the charm offensive against the West. Now, however, the Iranian regime has clearly ceased to feel the need for such caution.

CONCLUSION

As regards the conspiracy-theorizing and projective worldview, Holocaust denial and relativization, and the Iranian regime’s threats to destroy Israel, nothing substantial has changed under Rouhani, nor have things improved in other relevant areas. The regime still spends billions to support and arm the sworn enemies of Israel like Hezbollah, and it will be able to spend much more money for the fight against Israel if the sanctions are lifted according to the JPCOA. The key figure in the regime, Ali Khamenei, has repeatedly threatened Israel’s destruction e.g., on 9 November 2014, the anniversary of “Kristallnacht”,⁶³ and most recently in

62. *New Horizon*,

http://newhorizon.ir/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=137:joe-le-corbeau&catid=34&Itemid=31.

63. “Why Should & How Can #Israel Be Eliminated?”

his book *Palestine*, published in 2015. This book again clearly highlights the centrality of the desire for the destruction of Israel for the Iranian regime. The annihilation of the Jewish state, which Khamenei again calls “a cancerous tumor”⁶⁴, is not mere rhetoric from the early times of the revolution, but a non-negotiable doctrine. There are still voices in the West like British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond who see in Iran a “more nuanced approach” to Israel after the JPCOA.⁶⁵ He got his answer directly from Hussein Sheikholeslam, foreign affairs adviser to Ali Larijani, who declared: “Our positions against the usurper Zionist regime have not changed at all. Israel should be annihilated and this is our ultimate slogan.”⁶⁶ Also Seyed Mahmoud Nabavi, a representative of Ali Khamenei, and Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Marziyeh Afkham openly contradicted Hammond’s assertion.⁶⁷

In other relevant areas the situation in Iran has not only not improved under Rouhani but to the contrary further deteriorated compared to Ahmadinejad’s presidency: The number of executions has dramatically increased since Rouhani’s inauguration.⁶⁸ The death penalty for homosexuality continues to be implemented. Oppositionists and religious minorities such as the Baha’i are being persecuted just as mercilessly as in previous years. The alliance with the Lebanese terrorist militia, Hezbollah, remains intact, that with the radical Islamists of Hamas has been restored⁶⁹ and the rulers in Tehran can now proudly announce that they dominate the politics of four Arab capitals: Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad and Sanaa.

For Khamenei’s nuclear drive, Hassan Rouhani is the right man in the right place at the right time. For the West he is a comforting excuse for not taking any serious action against the Iranian regime. In Israel, the response to Rouhani’s election and the course of the nuclear negotiations with the JCPOA as its result has stimulated discussion about how the Jewish state should now prepare itself to act independently, if necessary, to stop Iran getting nuclear weapons. The JCPOA was not only strongly criticized by the current Netanyahu government, but by all important political mainstream parties in Israel, e.g. by Yair Lapid from the liberal Yesh Atid party and by Eitan Cabel and Jitzhak Herzog of the center left Zionist Union. It is widely discussed in Israel what would be the best way of

64. “Palästina aus der Sicht Ajatollah Khomeinis.”

65. “Philip Hammond Defends Thaw.”

66. “Parliament Adviso.”

67. “Leaders Representative.”

68. United Nations General Assembly, “Situation of Human Rights.” According to Amnesty International Iran executed at least 743 people in 2014 and nearly 700 in the first half of 2015. “Iran Executions.”

69. See Al-Mughrabi, “Hamas’ Deputy Chief.”

dealing with the Iranian threat now and in the future, but the warnings against any appeasement towards the Iranian regime are almost unanimous. Also, former high-ranking security officials who criticized Netanyahu for the way he handled the Iran issue do not preclude a military option for the future. Notwithstanding the controversial discussion in Israel about how to react to the Iranian threat, almost all mainstream politicians in Israel act on the assumption that nuclear weapons would not only help the Ayatollahs to stay in power but would be an existential threat to Israel even if Teheran might not have the intention to immediately use them against the Jewish state.⁷⁰

*Stephan Grigat is visiting professor for Israel Studies at the Moses Mendelssohn Center for European-Jewish Studies, University of Potsdam/Center for Jewish Studies Berlin-Brandenburg, lecturer for Political Science at University of Vienna and co-founder of *Stop the Bomb* campaign.

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70. See Klein-Halevi and Oren, "Israel's Worst Nightmare." For global consequences of a nuclear armed Iran see Kroenig, *A Time to Attack*.

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