

Fascism, Islamism, and Anti-Semitism

The president of the Islamic Republic is guided in word and deed by the most vicious of ideologies.

by Joseph Loconte

The Weekly Standard 01/03/2006

Hardly anything has infuriated certain critics of the Bush Administration more than the president's vocabulary to describe the war on terrorism. Bush warns of an "axis of evil," in which rogue nations collude with Muslim extremists to acquire nuclear weapons. He regards Osama bin Laden and his cadre of suicide bombers as "evildoers." He compares the theology of radical Islam to that of European fascism and "all the murderous ideologies" of the twentieth century. Intellectuals and others reject this talk as sophomoric and supremely arrogant--just another manifestation of Bush's cowboy diplomacy. Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisor in the Carter Administration, voices a typical note of contempt: "We have increasingly embraced at the highest official level what I think can fairly be called a paranoiac view of the world."

Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that these same critics remain mostly mute over the stunning remarks of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Two weeks ago the Iranian president shocked Western leaders when he claimed that the Holocaust was "a myth" created by Jews and "Zionist historians." This followed a previous slander against Israel as "a tumor" to be "wiped off the map"--or, at best, relocated to Europe. "Anybody who recognizes Israel will burn in the fire of the Islamic nation's fury," Ahmadinejad told the Organization of the Islamic Conference. His anti-Semitic tirade comes as the Iranian leader continues to defy the United Nations to pursue a nuclear weapons program. "I thought, my God, he's a Nazi," a German resident told Knight Ridder. "I couldn't believe that again the world was faced with a Nazi as a head of state. It's beyond comprehension."

The rise of Islamo-fascism in Tehran, in fact, is not at all beyond comprehension. Its emergence is perfectly predictable--given the political theology of radical Islam and the culture of victimization that sustains it. Like his mentor, the Ayatollah Khomeini, Ahmadinejad embraces an extremist Shiite view of purity, obedience, death, and redemption. Bush deserves much credit for recognizing this ideology for what it is: the totalitarian impulse, inspired by utopian illusions and sanctified by the pathology of anti-Semitism.

Osama bin Laden and his allies, after all, have repeatedly expressed their hatred not only of America but of Israel and Jews everywhere. In a tape that surfaced recently in Cairo, bin Laden deputy Ayman Al-Zawahri again urged Muslims to take up arms against the "malignant illness" of Israel and the Christian West. Bush critics imply that this message resonates with the "Arab street" because of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians (and America's support for Israel). More likely is the fact that anti-Semitism rises like a vapor from the political and cultural swamps of the Arab world. Television programs, newspapers, internet cafes, universities, mosques, religious schools--here and elsewhere Jews are regularly depicted as "satanic" enemies of Islam and instigators of U.S. intervention in Muslim lands. Holocaust denial is routine. A columnist for the Egyptian paper *Al-Masaa*, for example, defended the Iranian president's outbursts with these words: "What this truth means is that these massacres . . . never happened. The famous execution chambers were no more than rooms for disinfecting clothing."

It's not just political hacks or cloistered imams who are tutored in this grammar of hate. Last month Lebanon's government-run university, Universite Libanaise, held a nationally televised symposium on the Palestinian question. "My name is Hisham Sham'as, and I study political science," one student began. He then offered this modest political proposal: "Israel should be completely wiped out . . . Just like Hitler fought the Jews, we are a great Islamic nation of jihad, and we too should fight the Jews and burn them." Not long after the 9-11 attack, I met with a dozen Ph.D. students from Jordan, visiting Washington, D.C. in a program sponsored by the State Department. Here were the academic elite of a relatively moderate and prosperous Arab state. They were smart, well-heeled, and fluent in English. Yet every one of them suspected that the 9-11 attack was a Jewish plot to incite a U.S. war against Islam.

Too many critics of U.S. foreign policy betray a profoundly naïve view of human nature: They ignore the ability of propaganda to nullify reason, pervert conscience, and inflame our blackest impulses. People who believe such slurs are psychologically and spiritually prepared to believe almost anything--and, eventually, to act on those beliefs. "Nonsense in the intellect," warned C.S. Lewis, "draws evil after it."

The nonsense of anti-Semitism is the elephant in the Arab living room. At the moment, the elephant is thrashing about most conspicuously in Iran, but he's at home in much of the Muslim world. "Over the last half-century, anti-Semitism has been the essential theology of the Arab world," writes historian Paul Johnson, author of *A History of the Jews*. "The Arabs have wasted trillions in oil royalties on weapons of war and propaganda . . . In their flight from reason, they have failed to modernize or civilize their societies, to introduce democracy, or to consolidate the rule of law."

Take a look, for example, at the groundbreaking Arab Human Development Report, produced in 2002, 2003, and 2004, in which Muslim scholars candidly assessed the lack of economic and political freedom in the Middle East. The authors note that the Israeli occupation of Palestine "continues to impede human development and freedom," but say nothing about the failure of the Palestinian Authority to stop terrorism against Israeli civilians. For all their frankness about political corruption and educational failure, these prominent intellectuals do not challenge the Arab fixation on Israel as the source of the region's problems.

Much more surprising, however, is the silence of the 9/11 Commission Report, the most comprehensive, bi-partisan study to date of the terrorist threat against the United States. The report is praised for its sober analysis of the "catastrophic threat" of radical Islam and its recommendations for improving U.S. security and intelligence systems. It notes that terrorist violence is "fed by grievances" that are "widely felt throughout the Muslim world"--but never discusses the pandemic of anti-Semitism that lurks beneath them. The report rightly concludes that the United States is caught up in a clash within the civilization of Islam: "That clash arises from particular conditions in the Muslim world, conditions that spill over into expatriate Muslim communities in non-Muslim countries." Yet nowhere in the document's 567 pages is there mention of the anti-Jewish hatreds that stoke this cultural conflict.

Tone deafness to the racist fury of radical Islam is bad enough. What makes matters worse is that anti-Semitism is not just a problem in the Arab world, but in Europe and in much of the international community. The U.N. World Conference Against Racism, held in 2001 in Durban, famously degenerated into a platform for Israel-bashing. Since then, reports by non-governmental groups such as Human Rights First have described "a staggering wave" of anti-Jewish violence in Europe. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has sponsored four conferences to address anti-Semitism and xenophobia among its 55 member states. Numerous participants have noted that radicalized Muslim youth are a significant part of the problem. At the first-ever U.N. conference devoted to anti-Semitism, held in 2004 in Geneva, Secretary General Kofi Annan warned of "an alarming resurgence" of violence against Jewish institutions. But Annan failed to mention that a third of the resolutions adopted by the U.N. Human Rights Commission condemning specific states are aimed at Israel, or that U.N. resolutions have countenanced Palestinian terrorism against Israeli civilians.

To its credit, the OSCE has produced documents such as the Berlin Declaration, which insists that no political cause could ever justify intolerance or violence against Jews. This principle was upheld at an OSCE conference I attended in June in Cordova, Spain. "Nazi anti-Semitism produced a genocide 60 odd years ago, and it was one of the central elements in a ideology that destroyed Europe and killed some 35 million people," Yehuda Bauer, an advisor to the International Task Force for Holocaust Education, told the Cordova delegates. "Isn't that enough to make all of us . . . allies against anti-Semitism in its modern form?"

As the standoff with Iran continues, political and religious leaders in Europe and the United States should ponder that question in light of the latent anti-Semitism in their own communities.

The strident anti-Israel tone of European politicians and journalists, for example, surely helps explain the appalling opinion polls showing massive distrust of Jewish political loyalties. Most Europeans now believe that Israel--a democracy--is a greater threat to world peace than North Korea or Iran. There have been similar rumblings in the United States. On the eve of the Iraq war, Democratic Congressman James Moran claimed that "if it were not for the strong support of the Jewish community for this war with Iraq, we would not be doing this." The claim went largely unchallenged by liberal political leaders. Anti-war protests have been similarly debased by racist shibboleths. A recent anti-war rally in Washington, D.C., for example, featured British MP George Galloway, who has described Israel as "this little Hitler state on the Mediterranean."

Many religious leaders seem prone to either silence or confusion about the depth of the problem. Pope John Paul II did much to improve Catholic-Jewish relations during his pontificate, and a senior Vatican cardinal was quick to condemn the Iranian president for his statements. But the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops still has not addressed the anti-Semitism of militant Islam. Neither has the National Council of Churches, which claims to represent 45 million believers in 100,000 congregations nationwide. NCC General Secretary Bob Edgar has denounced the Iranian leader for his "incomprehensible hatred." Yet his organization works closely with left-wing groups such as MoveOn.org, which are reliably anti-Israel. In numerous NCC statements about the "root causes" of Islamic terror--assumed to be economic and political--nowhere does the organization confront the racist illusions of the terrorists.

Some liberal Protestant churches appear to be aping the politics of the Arab League. Last year the Presbyterian Church (USA) began calling for divestment from firms doing business with Israel, while two regional conventions of the United Methodist Church endorsed a similar divestment campaign in June. Neither church, however, makes similar demands on companies investing in the world's notorious dictatorships. According to a 2004 study by the Institute on Religion and Democracy, liberal churches direct most of their human rights complaints against Israel and the United States. Of the 197 human rights criticisms issued by mainline Protestant groups over a three-year period, 37 percent targeted Israel--but not a whisper against the Palestinian Authority or some of the most despotic regimes on the planet.

Even when not brazenly xenophobic, the style of much of the Western criticism of Israel suggests that Jews have themselves to blame for anti-Semitism. This posture makes it easier for political and religious leaders to dismiss the Iranian dictator's tirade as an irrelevant eccentricity. Yet there's a grave problem with winking at the racist theology of radical Islam. For one thing, obsessive criticism of Israel from the West surely makes the vitriol of the Iranian president more credible in the Middle East; it plays into all the old stereotypes of Jews as subversives and conspirators. More importantly, it deflects attention from the most fearsome threat to democratic states--the rise of Islamic fascism and its glorification of murder and martyrdom.

Western statesmen made similar mistakes in the face of European fascism, with disastrous results. Beginning as early as 1933, the year Hitler came to power, American Jewish thinker and activist Stephen Wise tried in vain to alert U.S. leaders to the larger implications of Nazi hatreds, what he called "the Nazi revolt against civilization." Democratic leaders failed to understand--just as many do today--that the Jewish people embody the political and religious ideals of Western culture, and that it was precisely these ideals that had come under attack. "Men heeded not that the Jews were assailed as a symbol of that civilization," Wise wrote, "the values of which Nazism was resolved to destroy." By viewing Hitler's political aims in isolation from his racist ideology, Wise argued, the democracies had persuaded themselves he could be appeased.

Religious leaders helped pave the way. When in 1938 Hitler staged *Kristallnacht*, the beginning of his violent national campaign against the Jews, it sparked protests in New York and elsewhere. Yet the Catholic magazine *America*, which carefully followed Vatican policy, worried that the demonstrations were a ploy to stir up war fever. The editors argued strongly against U.S. intervention: "It is possible for a Fascist state to sign a Concordat," they claimed, "and even to be faithful to it." Albert Palmer, president of Chicago Theological Seminary, dismissed mounting reports of Nazi brutalities as "a haze of Allied propaganda." He suggested instead a massive economic assistance program for Europe. On January 30, 1939, when Hitler delivered his ominous Reichstag address--in which he warned of "the destruction of the Jewish race in Europe"--the religious press ignored it. The liberal *Christian Century* magazine even admitted there was "plenty of extermination" of Jews occurring in Europe, but doubted that any good purpose was served by publicizing speculative numbers; better to focus on diplomatic solutions to Nazism. Wise, who had been watching closely the developments in Hitler's Germany, was appalled. "With singular unintelligence, the world for the most part refused to heed the warning of his theories and his conduct alike, until he embarked upon a career of incredibly brutal conquest," Wise wrote shortly after the fall of France. "No day has seemed darker, no portent blacker than that of this hour."

We haven't yet reached a similarly black hour in the standoff with Iran. But that hour appears to be approaching. The dictator in Tehran shows no sign of backing down, either in his designs against Israel or his lust for deadly weapons. His paranoia seems complete. Indeed, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has emerged as a blistering rebuke to President Bush's cultured despisers. He reminds us that Bush has been right all along--right about the brooding racism of this

threat, its genocidal ambitions, its corrupted spirituality. Yes, this is evil. "We're not facing a set of grievances that can be soothed and addressed," Bush told an audience in October. "No act of ours invited the rage of killers--and no concession, bribe, or act of appeasement would change or limit their plans for murder." Before the next round of negotiations begins, we should consider again the plans, theories, and conduct of this latest strain of the fascist disease.

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