

# Iranian Holocaust Denial and the Internet<sup>1</sup>

## Why Facebook's permission to deny the Holocaust is wrong

by Matthias Küntzel

Iran's policies now lie at the center of world politics. Far too little attention, however, is being paid to the unique ideological atmosphere that makes the Iranian nuclear weapons program so dangerous.

Holocaust denial is certainly the cruelest aspect of this ideology, for whoever denies the Holocaust kills the victims a second time. The denial of the Holocaust is also its most bewildering aspect – no other crime in history is better documented.

It is human nature to shy away from things that are especially cruel or incomprehensible. When Mahmoud Ahmadinejad first embarked on his Holocaust-denial campaign, there were protests and even expressions of outrage. Subsequently, however, the issue was quickly dropped. It plays next to no role in the current controversy over the Iranian nuclear weapons program, as if Holocaust denial were no more than a temporary mental aberration of the Iranian president.

This attitude is understandable, yet unjustified. It is essential to take the Iranian leader's Holocaust denial seriously, since it embodies an entire worldview with its own principles, history and internet presence. We have to discuss its effects even if this involves facing up to facts that may send a shiver down the spine.

Mahmud Ahmadinejad's portrayal of the Holocaust is neither a new nor a personal obsession but rather an intensification of themes long prominent in the Islamic Republic's ideological discourse.

From the 1990s onward, Iran has gone further than any Arab country in hosting and officially endorsing Western Holocaust deniers who are shunned in their home countries. In 1998, President Mohammad Khatami grieved over the prosecution of "a thinker" like French Holocaust denier Roger Garaudy, and

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was delivered at the conference "Holocaust Denial and Freedom of Speech in the Internet Era", organized by the International Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists (IAJLA) in Berlin/Germany on November 15-18, 2011, see: [http://www.intjewishlawyers.org/main/files/Resolution-combined\\_November%202011-logo.pdf](http://www.intjewishlawyers.org/main/files/Resolution-combined_November%202011-logo.pdf)

Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei even met Garaudy in person. In 2001, the *Tehran Times* among others called the findings of the Nuremberg trials about Auschwitz „the biggest lie in history“.<sup>2</sup>

Under Ahmadinejad, however, Iranian Holocaust denial has taken a substantive leap forward. Since 2006, he has developed a new style and added a new dimension to this abhorrent phenomenon that warrants further scrutiny.

### **Holocaust Denial as Liberation Struggle**

Addressing a rally on February 11, 2006, Ahmadinejad mocked the Europeans by proclaiming that, “it is a crime [in Europe] to ask questions about the myth of the Holocaust. ... They are allowed to study anything except for the Holocaust myth. Are these not medieval methods?”<sup>3</sup> Here, Ahmadinejad had found the theme to which he would subsequently return at every opportunity: the fusing of Holocaust denial with a rhetoric of liberation. This attitude not only masks Holocaust denial with academic and scholarly respectability, but also celebrates the deniers as freedom fighters.

Before 2006, Holocaust deniers, ostracized by society as obscurantists, had to struggle for every iota of respectability. Since then, Ahmadinejad has reversed the customary roles. It is not the Holocaust denier who must now struggle for his personal freedom; in his discourse, it is the non-deniers who are deemed unfree.

Thus, in January 2006, the Iranian government invited then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair to participate in a Holocaust seminar in Tehran, because, as the Iranian Foreign Ministry explained, only here would Blair be able to “say the kind of things he cannot say in London” – because of Zionist pressure.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, as we know, Holocaust deniers are anything but free. They are trapped in the ideological straitjacket of antisemitism, which systematically distorts their grip on reality. Thus, in a conversation with the editors of the German news weekly *Der Spiegel*, the Iranian President reacted as follows to the remark that Israel’s right to exist is not questioned by the magazine: “I am

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<sup>2</sup> David Menashri, *Iran, The Jews And The Holocaust*, Reseach Paper, Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism, Tel Aviv 1997, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Special Dispatch Series, No. 1091, February 14, 2006 Middle East Media Research Institute (henceforth: MEMRI).

<sup>4</sup> “Iran Sends Blair Invitation to Holocaust Conference”, Deutsche Welle, January 18, 2006.

glad that you are honest people and say that you are required to support the Zionists.”<sup>5</sup>

This sort of circular reasoning is not susceptible to refutation. The louder the liberal West protests against Iran’s Holocaust denial or threats to destroy Israel, the clearer for Ahmadinejad is the proof of Zionist domination. Only when we, too, finally accept that the Holocaust is a Jewish lie will Ahmadinejad be convinced that we are academically credible and politically free.

However ridiculous all this may seem, it would nevertheless be a mistake to underestimate the effects of this liberation rhetoric. It may well have contributed to the fact that now even the people running Facebook no longer view Holocaust denial as an expression of intense antisemitism, but as a normal, albeit controversial, opinion.

In July 2011, Facebook spokesman Andrew Noyes said, “We have come to the conclusion that the mere statement of denying the Holocaust is not a violation of our terms. We think that there is a meaningful difference between advocating violence against a group of people and expressing an opinion on ... historical events.”<sup>6</sup>

Here, Facebook seem to be viewing Holocaust denial as an expression of ignorance - a kind of intellectual error, to which counter-speech is the best response. However, in the world of social networking, ideas gain legitimacy simply because they are discussed. Here, bizarre notions that would never be taken seriously in the mainstream media are accepted as “possible truths.” In permitting Holocaust denial, Facebook has made a major concession to the Iranian leadership’s demagogic campaign to “at last” be allowed to start. This is not only wrong, but also dangerous, as becomes clear when we look at the motives behind Iranian Holocaust denial.

## **Holocaust Denial and Israel**

Why does the Iranian leadership call into question the reality of the Holocaust? The answer should be looked at on two planes: The regional and the global. The regional one is most obvious and admitted by the regime: The direct purpose of Holocaust denial is to contribute to the destruction of Israel.

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<sup>5</sup> “Wir sind entschlossen,” Interview with Mahmud Ahmadinejad, Der Spiegel 22/2006, May 29, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Suzanne Choney, Holocaust survivors ask Facebook to ban denial pages, on: <http://digitallife.today.msnbc.msn.com>, July 27, 2011.

Up until now, Holocaust deniers have wanted to revise the past. Today, Iran's Holocaust deniers want to shape the future by eradicating Israel. "Breaking the padlock of the Holocaust and reexamining it will be tantamount to cutting the vital arteries of the Zionist regime," explained the Iranian president in 2009.<sup>7</sup>

Tehran was the venue of the infamous Holocaust deniers' conference, which took place in December 2006. The destruction of Israel was the common denominator uniting all the participants in this conference, including the crackpot followers of the Jewish Neturei Karta sect. In his opening speech, Iranian Foreign Minister Manucher Mottaki described the conference's rationale as follows: If "the official version of the Holocaust is called into question", then "the nature and identity of Israel" must also be called into question.<sup>8</sup> In his closing speech, Ahmadinejad took this idea one step further: "The life-curve of the Zionist regime has begun its descent, and it is now on a downward slope towards its fall. ... The Zionist regime will be wiped out, and humanity will be liberated."<sup>9</sup>

This sentiment - liberation through destruction – is the one for which the celebrated Holocaust historian Saul Friedlaender coined the term "redemptive antisemitism". It is not so far from that expressed in a Nazi directive of 1943: "This war will end with anti-Semitic world revolution and with the extermination of Jewry throughout the world, both of which are the precondition for an enduring peace."<sup>10</sup>

True, Ahmadinejad is not a racist Social Darwinist, who wants to eliminate every last trace of "Jewish blood" as Hitler did. He does not attack "the Jews," but rather "the Zionists." He does not say "Jews" are conspiring to rule the world. Instead he says, "Two thousand Zionists want to rule the world."

However, the Iranian leader invests the word "Zionist" with exactly the same sense as that with which Hitler once invested the word "Jew": namely, that of the incarnation of all evil. Thus, just as Hitler's utopia, his "German peace," required the extermination of the Jews, so too does the Iranian leadership's "Islamic peace" depend upon the elimination of Israel.

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<sup>7</sup> "In Speeches This Week, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Discusses Holocaust," MEMRI Special Dispatch, No. 2221, January 30, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Boris Kalnoky, Iran versammelt die Holocaust-Leugner, Die Welt, December 12, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Yigal Carmon, "The Role of Holocaust Denial in the Ideology and Strategy of the Iranian Regime," MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis Series, No. 307, December 15, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey Herf, The Jewish Enemy. Nazi Propaganda During World War II And The Holocaust (Cambridge, MA, 2006), p. 209.

Here we see again that Holocaust denial is not an “opinion,” but an integral part of an exceptionally aggressive program. Denying the Holocaust is the means, and “advocating violence against a group of people” the purpose. Israel, however, is just the Middle-Eastern facet of the matter. The title of the Holocaust denial conference of December 2006 was “Review of the Holocaust: Global Vision”. One shudders to think of just what kind of “global vision” its organizers had in mind.

### **The Holocaust Denier’s “Global Vision”**

Foreign Minister Mottaki complained at the start of the Holocaust denier’s conference that “the wording of historical occurrences and their analysis [are written from] the perspective of the West”. As against this “Western” historiography, Islamism seeks to create a new historical “truth.”

Thus, on January 8, 2007, Iran filed a complaint with the United Nations Human Rights Council against those who do not deny the Holocaust. “History cannot be rewritten as it pleases the Israeli regime,” Alireza Moayera, Iran’s representative to the Council, wrote in his letter to its president. “It cannot be manipulated and hand-picked selectively and it cannot be reformatted based on the political agenda or historical ambitions of this [Israeli] regime.”<sup>11</sup>

Iran was also the only country to attack UN Resolution 61/255 against Holocaust denial, which was passed some weeks later by the United Nations General Assembly.<sup>12</sup> Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor of the *Kayhan* daily published by the Supreme Leader’s office, claimed that this resolution “is preparing the UN’s corpse for burial in the graveyard of history”, since it was “clearly opposed to the most basic recognized principles of human rights.”<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, Iran is turning everything upside down and inside out. The UN, of all organizations, which was founded in the 1940s in response to the horrors of the World War II, is being urged to oppose all those who do not deny the greatest horror of that war.

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<sup>11</sup> Letter to Ambassador Luis Alconso De Alba, President of the Human Rights Council, from Ambassador Alireza Moayera, Permanent Representative of Iran to the Council, Geneva, January 8, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Matthias B. Krause, Ohne Abstimmung. Erstmals verabschiedet die UNO eine Resolution gegen die Leugnung des Holocaust, Jüdische Allgemeine, February 1, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> *Kayhan*, January 28, 2007, cited in Memri Special Dispatch No. 1443, January 30, 2007.

It is bad enough when Holocaust denial is used as a means of anti-Israel propaganda or as a manipulative tool to attract the applause of the Arab world. However, in this case, the reality is worse: The denial of the Holocaust reflects the genuine conviction of its propagators. For them, the delusional system of Holocaust denial is to be elevated to the norm and any divergence from it is denounced as a symptom of “Jewish domination”. If we want to decipher the mind-set behind such strange behavior, a short excursion into Islamist epistemology becomes unavoidable.

In this context it must be stated clearly that for most of us the employment of reason is the most self-evident thing in the world. For Islamists, however, the use of reason (apart from in the natural sciences) is an offence against God and an expression of arrogance – hence our castigation as the “World of Arrogance”. Their starting point is that the Quran must be interpreted and applied literally. From their perspective, any sort of reason-based doubt undermines such an approach to the Quran. As a result, doubt and conjecture are opposed.

On the occasion of his 2007 talk at Columbia University, Mahmud Ahmadinejad frankly articulated this aversion to the Western concepts of “reason” and “reality”. The Iranian leader stated that science is permitted only to the strict believer: “Science is the light which illuminates the hearts of those who have been selected by the Almighty. . . . Science is the light and scientists must be pure and pious.” At the same time, he demonstrated that he also defined his notion of “reality” in religious terms. Just as only the “pure and pious” can be scientists, so, too, only those who have fully subordinated themselves to the Quran can grasp what “reality” is. At Columbia, Ahmadinejad declared: “Corrupted independent human beings resist acceptance of reality and even if they do accept it, they do not obey it.”<sup>14</sup>

We are dealing here with an Islamist “Newspeak,” in which words such as “reality”, “scholar” and “science” mean the exact opposite of what secular societies understand them to mean.

This helps explain why so many observers of Iran are unable to grasp the full meaning of the Iranian rulers’ mindset. It is this release from the shackles of reality that enables them to dub the Holocaust a lie and at the same time believe the Twelfth Imam to be a living reality.

Holocaust denial has nothing to do with an exchange of opinions or a dialogue in the traditional sense, as Facebook spokespersons such as Richard Allan would

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<sup>14</sup> The transcript of Ahmadinejad’s speech at Columbia University is available at [www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=6889](http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=6889)

have us believe. “We recognize people’s right to be factually wrong about historical events,” he maintains. “We believe in Facebook’s mission that giving people tools to make the world more open is the best way to combat ignorance and deception.”<sup>15</sup> But Holocaust denial has nothing to do with ignorance or misunderstanding.

We are dealing here with a phantasmagoric parallel universe, one in which the laws of reason have been suppressed and all mental and emotional energy is harnessed to the cause of antisemitism.

The Iranian leadership does not only want to destroy the so-called “Jewish-Christian conspiracy,” that is, the system of international relations that was created after 1945. It also wishes to overturn the reason-based historiography of this system and replace it with the regime’s lunatic “global vision” of the Holocaust.

### **Holocaust Denial as Humor**

It is perhaps this sense of mission that explains the breathtaking malevolence of Iranian Holocaust denial on the internet, an example of which is a series of animated cartoons to be found at “Holocartoons.com.” Any child can find them on the net, download them, and have a good laugh, since, with no spoken dialogue, their effect is not language-dependent.

These are ten short and “amusing” animations that all begin in the same way: A Nazi – recognizable by the swastika on his shirtsleeve – pushes a big spray can with the word “gas” written on it and activates it. At once the whole screen is filled with gas clouds. At this moment, a Jew depicted as a hook-nosed worm makes a merry entrance, sniggering loudly. Greedily and gleefully he sucks the big gas clouds into his lungs. Finally, he loudly belches out two small gas clouds which form the word “Holocaust”. Then the episode begins.

Just as in the 1930s the German antisemites pioneered radio and film techniques in order to perfect the dissemination and inculcation of Jew-hatred, so, too, today’s Iranian antisemites use the most advanced technology to disseminate their propaganda, in particular via the Internet.

The “Holocaust International Cartoon Contest” heralded by the Iranian newspaper *Hamshahri* in February 2006 unveiled the new style of Iranian

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<sup>15</sup> Letter by Richard Allan, Director, Public Policy, Facebook to David Matas and André Oboler, August 29, 2011.

Holocaust denial for the first time: creative, modern, unrestrained, and, again, funny.

As Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno wrote in 1944 in their book *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, “Organized laughter has always been the method of antisemitic reaction. ... The crueller the accusations and threats, ... the more effective the mockery.”<sup>16</sup> The cartoon contest marked the beginning of the Iranian effort to mobilize this mockery and laughter.

*Hamshahri* has the largest circulation of any newspaper in Iran and is publicly owned by the city of Tehran. The newspaper received over 1,000 cartoons expressing Holocaust denial from sixty-two countries. In fall 2006, a selection of 200 cartoons was exhibited in the Palestine Museum in Tehran. This may well have been the first public exhibition of antisemitic art since 1945.<sup>17</sup>

In October 2008, on al-Quds [Jerusalem] day, the Iranian government unveiled its next provocation with great fanfare: *Holocartoons* - a new book by cartoonist Maziar Bijani deriding the victims of the Holocaust in fifty-two cartoons, with accompanying text by Omid Mehdinejad. Mohammad Ali-Ramin, one of Ahmadinejad’s key advisers, hosted the ceremony on Tehran’s Quds Square at which giant versions of the cartoons, reminiscent of the earlier efforts of *Der Stürmer*, were displayed.<sup>18</sup>

In 2009, the English translation of this book came out. In the same year, a new book, entitled, *The Collapse of the Myth of the Holocaust*, based on Ahmadinejad’s Holocaust denial, appeared. The book’s introduction boasts that his Holocaust campaign has become a key focus among Muslims around the world and has helped them put aside their differences to focus on the Palestinian/Israel situation.<sup>19</sup>

In 2010, *Holocartoons* was published on the internet in Farsi, Arabic and English. 2011 saw the appearance of Spanish and Turkish translations. At the same time, the regime enhanced the effectiveness of its propaganda by turning parts of this book into the above-mentioned animated features now available on the internet.

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<sup>16</sup> Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996), p. 193f. .

<sup>17</sup> Baham Nirumand, „Holocaust-Ausstellung in Teheran“ in Tageszeitung (taz), August 16, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> M.A. Ramin, October 10, 2008, Holocaust-Satire Book on Al-Quds-Day at [www.video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-4524780747198247822#](http://www.video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-4524780747198247822#)

<sup>19</sup> The Simon Wiesenthal Center, Iranian Regime Ratchets Up Its Antisemitism And Holocaust Denial, July 9, 2009.

Not only the depiction of “Jews,” but also the content of these films is disgusting. One features a strange steel edifice with the words “gas chamber” on it, which the same ten Jews continually enter from the front and exit from the back. As this is happening, a counter records the number of those passing through until it stops with a loud ring at the figure of six million, at which the ten Jews fall into each other’s arms laughing hysterically.

In another, the “Holocaust” is produced from a hat by a Jewish magician. In a third, the number of Jews in a gas chamber increases rather than decreases and in the fourth a “Jew” cures an asthma attack by inhaling Zyklon B. In other episodes, Jews are seen to be literally sucking the European continent dry, flattening a Palestinian village and being swamped by banknotes from a Holocaust memorial that is also a cash dispenser. The animations are professional, amusing, and accompanied by appropriate music. They have even earned a Wikipedia entry that reads: “Holocartoons is an Iranian website critical of Zionism.” Here, the unknown author managed to interpret even this most hateful version of Holocaust denial as merely a critique of Zionism.<sup>20</sup>

While Facebook acts as if the social networks were a venue for fair and balanced debate, these Iranian animations show how suggestively and entertainingly the worst imaginable incitement can be conducted there. Antisemites do not hesitate to use manipulative techniques. Those who produce such antisemitic films do not wish to enhance understanding, but to mobilize feelings in order to direct our darker instincts onto the desired track. Even in Germany, where Holocaust denial is illegal, any child can download, store and distribute [Holocartoons.com](http://Holocartoons.com).

The Iranian leader’s denial of the Holocaust must be taken seriously as a specific worldview with its own principles and history. Never before has the leadership of a nation made denial of the Shoah a governmental policy at every level of society. Never before has the self-image of the UN, forged in the shadow of Auschwitz, been more provocatively called into question.

Whoever declares Auschwitz to be a “myth” implicitly portrays the Jews as the enemy of humankind, who for filthy lucre have been duping the rest of humanity for the past sixty years.

Whoever talks of the “so-called” Holocaust suggests that over 90 percent of the world’s media and university professorships are controlled by “the Jews” and thereby sealed off from the “real” truth.

It was precisely that sort of genocidal hatred that helped pave the way for the Shoah. Every denial of the Holocaust thus tacitly contains an appeal to repeat it

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<sup>20</sup> [wikipedia.org/wiki/Holocartoons](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Holocartoons) .

– as is evident in the case of Iran which calls openly for the destruction of a UN member state. The specific danger presented by the Iranian nuclear option stems from the unique ideological atmosphere surrounding it – a mixture of Holocaust denial and weapons-grade uranium, of death-wish and missile research, of Shiite messianism and plutonium.

The connection between Holocaust denial and Holocaust repetition is indicated in UN General Assembly resolution 61/255 of January 2007, which “urges all Member States unreservedly to reject any denial of the Holocaust as a historical event, either in full or in part, or any activities to this end” since “efforts to deny the Holocaust” and to ignore “the historical fact of those terrible events increase the risk they will be repeated”.<sup>21</sup>

However, insofar as this decision only receives lip service, Iran’s disgrace will become a disgrace for the whole civilized world; a disgrace for the United Nations, which offers Ahmadinejad a platform; a disgrace for the European Union countries which – with Germany, regrettably, in the forefront – consider trade and good relations with Iran more important than respect for the victims of the Holocaust; and a disgrace also for the young management of Facebook, which contributes to the erosion of the ostracism of Holocaust denial by using threadbare arguments.

**Published in: THE ISRAEL JOURNAL OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, Volume Six, 2012/5772, Number One, pp. 43-52.**

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<sup>21</sup> Resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly on Holocaust Denial (A/RES/61/225, 26 January 2007).