

October 31, 2005

IRAN SAYS IT WANTS TO DESTROY ISRAEL. WHY IS EVERYONE SHOCKED?

Repeat Offenders

by Efraim Karsh & Rory Miller

Last week, in an address to the delightfully named "World Without Zionism" conference in Tehran, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called for Israel to be "wiped off the map." On one level it was refreshing to see that Iran's new president, unlike many Western politicians, does not view elevation to high political office as mutually incompatible with expressing deeply held convictions. But even more unusual than a politician speaking honestly was the international community's rush to condemn a Muslim leader's call for the destruction of the Jewish state.

Of course the responses from individual world leaders--such as Kofi Annan, who expressed "dismay," and Tony Blair, who proclaimed his "real sense of revulsion" at Ahmadinejad's "completely unacceptable" words--are to be welcomed. So too is the response of the 25-member European Union, whose leaders, meeting at the time in London, issued an immediate condemnation noting that "calls for violence, and for the destruction of any state, are manifestly inconsistent with any claim to be a mature and responsible member of the international community."

All this does beg a question, however: Why single out Iran for such exceptional opprobrium at this particular moment? Annan portrayed the comments as contrary to the spirit of the international body he leads, saying that "under the United Nations Charter, all members have undertaken to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state." Blair, meanwhile, argued that Ahmadinejad's statement was unprecedented. "I have never come across a situation of the president of a country saying they want to wipe out--not that they have got a problem with or an issue with, but want to wipe out--another country," Blair explained.

Both men could use a history lesson. The U.N. Charter was introduced in 1945, and since that time Arab and Muslim leaders have expressed the desire to obliterate the Jewish state with impressive regularity. No sooner was the State of Israel proclaimed on May 14, 1948 than it was invaded by neighboring Arab states, with Arab League Secretary-General Abdel Rahman Azzam proclaiming that "this will be a war of extermination and a momentous massacre which will be spoken of like the Mongolian massacres and the Crusades."

Such rhetoric has been used by a long line of Arab leaders. During the 1950s and '60s it was Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, the self-styled champion of pan-Arabism, who led the call for Israel's destruction. "During the crusaders' occupation, the Arabs waited seventy years before a suitable opportunity arose and they drove away the crusaders," he proclaimed in late May 1967. "Recently we felt that we are strong enough, that if we were to enter a battle with Israel, with God's help, we could triumph ... our main objective will be the destruction of Israel."

Nasser's goal was ultimately frustrated when Israel routed its Arab adversaries in the shortest war in modern history. But the baton passed to a new generation of aspiring pan-Arab champions, notably Syrian president Hafez Assad and Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. For his part, Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini emphasized the need to destroy the Jewish state well before coming to power in 1979; and during his reign the destruction of Israel evolved into one of the most fundamental tenets of his revolutionary creed. Since Khomeini's death in June 1989, Iran's approach toward Israel has remained uncompromising, with both conservatives and leading reformers in total agreement on the issue. After meeting Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmad Yasin in 1998, Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, vowed that Iran would not recognize Israel "even for one hour" and would "continue to struggle against this cancerous growth." In 2000, he explained that the only "remedy" for Israel was "to destroy the root and cause of the crisis," and in a statement reported by Reuters later in the year he called Israel a "cancerous tumor" which "should be removed from the region." The next year, former Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, widely regarded as a pragmatist, noted that Israel was more vulnerable to nuclear attack than Muslim countries "because the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything." Then he added, "It is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality." For his part, former president Mohammed Khatami, often held up as Iran's leading moderate, has described Israel as "a parasite

in the heart of the Muslim world" and argued that "all of Palestine must be liberated."

And let's not forget the PLO. Since its establishment in 1964, the organization's publicly stated objective has been the destruction of Israel. In June 1974, the group introduced a new phased strategy whereby it would use whatever land Israel surrendered as a springboard for further territorial gains, until the "complete liberation of Palestine"--in other words the destruction of Israel--"could be achieved." Yet in November 1974, Yasir Arafat became the first non-head-of-state to address the U.N. General Assembly; and in 1975, the year Israel suffered the ultimate indignity of the Zionism-is-racism resolution, the PLO established another precedent when it was invited to sessions of the U.N. Security Council on the same basis as member states. In 1980, just weeks after Fatah, the PLO's dominant constituent group, had reiterated its objective of liquidating Israel, the European Community issued the Venice Declaration that called for the PLO's "association" with the political process.

Given this history, it is hardly surprising that despite their official commitment to peace with Israel within the framework of the Oslo process, Arafat and his PLO successors have never truly abandoned their commitment to Israel's destruction. Instead they have embarked on an intricate game of Jekyll-and-Hyde politics, constantly reassuring Israeli and Western audiences of their peaceful intentions while at the same time denigrating the peace accords to their Palestinian constituents as a temporary measure to be abandoned at the first available opportunity. Neither this duplicity nor the war of terror launched in September 2000 seems to have much discredited the PLO as a peace partner in the eyes of the international community.

Against this backdrop of six decades of international acquiescence in the face of constant calls for Israel's destruction Mahmoud Ahmadinejad would have legitimate reasons to feel that he has been singled out a bit unfairly these last few days. Indeed, while the international community's uncharacteristically harsh response to his comments was certainly welcome, one wonders whether it was motivated by real concern for Israel's safety--or by the West's growing frustration with Iran's dogged drive toward nuclear weapons. Whatever the reason, we can all hope that the West will now take a stand against *all* those who call for the destruction of Israel. Otherwise, there will be only one lesson from this tawdry affair: that countries should feel free to advocate genocide against the Jewish

people--as long as they aren't developing weapons that can be turned on London, Paris, or Moscow once they've finished the job in Tel Aviv.