

Is Iran a threat to Israel's existence?

In the Irish Times on 21 February 2011, Israel's ambassador to Ireland, Boaz Modai, wrote that the threat to Israel from Iran "makes any concessions by Israel fraught with risk" [1]. This briefing questions the thesis that Iran is a serious threat to Israel. Some observers have suggested that Israel is deliberately exaggerating the threat to provide an excuse for its failure to make peace with its Arab neighbours, including the Palestinians.

Israel and its allies assert that Iran is a threat to the existence of the Israeli state. The narrative they tell can be summarised as follows:

The Islamic regime in Iran is virulently anti-semitic and is determined to continue Hitler's work by destroying the Jewish state of Israel and wiping out the Jews in the Middle East. This was made clear by its President, Mamoud Ahmadinejad, in October 2005, when he said that Israel must be "wiped off the map". To that end, Iran is developing nuclear weapons and the means of delivering them to targets in Israel. Unless this weapons programme is halted, if necessary by military means, the existence of the Israeli state is in jeopardy.

To be specific, in November 2006, Benjamin Netanyahu, the present Prime Minister and leader of Likud, drew a direct parallel between Iran and Nazi Germany, telling delegates to the annual United Jewish Communities General Assembly in Los Angeles: "It's 1938 and Iran is Germany. And Iran is racing to arm itself with atomic bombs". [1] Of President Ahmadinejad, he said: "He is preparing another Holocaust for the Jewish state."

In November 2007, Benjamin Netanyahu told the Conference on the Future of the Jewish People in Jerusalem that a nuclear Iran would constitute not only a threat to Israel, but to the international community as well, adding: "This is a Jewish problem like Hitler was a Jewish problem ... The future of the Jewish people depends on the future of Israel." [2]

Shimon Peres, Israeli president and former leader of the Labour Party, has also made claims about an imminent genocide by Iran, comparing an Iranian nuclear weapon to a "flying concentration camp". [3]

So has Ehud Olmert, former Prime Minister and leader of Kadima. He told the German newspaper Bild in April 2006 that President Ahmadinejad was "a psychopath of the worst kind" who "speaks as Hitler did in his time of the extermination of the entire Jewish nation". [4]

So, there is near unanimity amongst political leaders in Israel that the Iranian regime is virulently anti-semitic and is hell bent on exterminating Jews in the Middle East and wiping Israel off the map.

This is the narrative that Israel tells about Iran. The purpose of this document is to enter question marks about this narrative.

Question 1 Is Iran genocidal towards Jews?

It is difficult to reconcile the proposition that Iran is genocidal towards Jews with the fact that Iran itself is home to the largest number of Jews in any state in the Middle East outside Israel. Not only that, Iran's 1979 Islamic Constitution recognises Jews as an official religious minority and reserves one seat (out of 290) in the Majlis, the Iranian Parliament, for them.

Jews first settled in Persia in the 6th Century BC, in the reign of Cyrus the Great. The continuous Jewish presence in Iran predates Islam by more than a millennium. In 1948, at the time the Israeli state was established, approximately 150,000 Jews lived in Iran. A large number of them left for Israel in the next few years and another wave of emigration took place after the Islamic revolution in 1979, mostly to the US. Today, there are around 25,000 Jews in Iran, about half of them in Tehran.

They practice their religion openly in synagogues, of which there are about 100 in total in Iran, 26 in Tehran (see the website of the Tehran Jewish Committee [5]). There are five Jewish schools in Tehran. Jewish religious teaching is permitted in public schools at certain times (instead of Islamic teachings).

There is a Jewish hospital in Tehran, which provides services for Jews and non-Jews alike. These days most of its staff is Muslim, but its director is a Jew. It is funded by Jewish charities, mostly from abroad. According to a BBC report, President Ahmadinejad's office donated money to the hospital in 2006 [6].

Iranian Jews have little influence on decision-making in Iran and are not allowed to hold senior posts in the army or bureaucracy. But they are not persecuted, otherwise they would leave. They can travel relatively freely, including to Israel and the US, where many of them have relatives.

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Iran Holocaust drama is a big hit is the title of an article, dated 30 November 2007, on the BBC website [7]. It begins:

"The scene is wartime Paris. Swastikas adorn the Champs Elysees. Jackbooted Nazis are rounding up Jews for the concentration camps, while terrified Parisians look on.

"It is a familiar plot for a television blockbuster. And this time the formula has been as popular as ever, drawing in massive audiences week after week. ...

“The central character is an Iranian diplomat, who provides false Iranian passports to enable Jews to flee the Nazi-occupied France, a sort of Iranian Schindler. He even has a love affair with a Jewish woman.”

The drama, called *Zero Degree Turn* and based on a true story, was showing on Iranian state TV, which commissioned it.

Clearly, Benjamin Netanyahu was mistaken when he said “it’s 1938 and Iran is Germany”.

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On a visit to Iran in February 2009, he wrote a column entitled *What Iran’s Jews Say*, which included the following:

“Perhaps I have a bias toward facts over words, but I say the reality of Iranian civility toward Jews tells us more about Iran — its sophistication and culture — than all the inflammatory rhetoric. That may be because I’m a Jew and have seldom been treated with such consistent warmth as in Iran. Or perhaps I was impressed that the fury over Gaza, trumpeted on posters and Iranian TV, never spilled over into insults or violence toward Jews. Or perhaps it’s because I’m convinced the ‘Mad Mullah’ caricature of Iran and likening of any compromise with it to Munich 1938 — a position popular in some American Jewish circles — is misleading and dangerous.” [8]

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In 2007, Israel made a strenuous effort to persuade Iranian Jews to emigrate to Israel. Substantial financial assistance is available to all Jews who emigrate to Israel, for example, an immigrant couple is eligible for payments totalling around \$7,500 from the Israeli Ministry of Immigrant Absorption in their first 8 months in Israel [9].

In 2007, a large additional package was offered to Iranian Jews. Here’s how the Israeli newspaper Ma’ariv described it in an article entitled *Israel to Iranian Jews: Immigration At Any Price* on 8 July 2007:

“Israel is trying to find new ways of encouraging immigration from Iran in the wake of a lack of desire on the part of thousands of Iranian Jews to leave. In order to do this, an expatriate group of Iranian Jewish donors, which is behind a special fund to encourage aliyah from the land of the ayatollahs, is now offering approximately \$60,000 to every Jewish family that comes to Israel, which will be in addition to the regular absorption basket.

“Only a few months ago, the fund decided to grant an incentive of \$5,000 to every new immigrant, but this did not persuade Iranian Jews, many of whom are comfortably off, to leave. The fund has now decided to double the sum for every new immigrant, and to offer \$10,000 in the hope that it will persuade Iranian Jews to come to Israel.” [10]

Reacting to the offer, Iran's sole Jewish MP, Morris Motamed, said the offers were insulting and put the country's Jews under pressure to prove their loyalty (see *Guardian* report of 12 July 2007 [11]). He continued:

"It suggests the Iranian Jew can be encouraged to emigrate by money. Iran's Jews have always been free to emigrate and three-quarters of them did so after the revolution but 70% of those went to America, not Israel."

The offer had limited success: a total of 207 Iranian Jews emigrated to Israel in 2007 [12].

Question 2: Did President Ahmadinejad threaten to wipe Israel off the map?

No, he didn't. This is a fiction, which arose from a mistranslation from Farsi of a remark President Ahmadinejad made in a speech on 26 October 2005 to a conference in Tehran.

As American Professor Juan Cole, amongst others, has pointed out, the remark was a quote from Ayatollah Khomeini, the father of the Islamic Republic, to the effect that "this occupation regime over Jerusalem must vanish from the page of time" (in *rezhim-e eshghalgar-i Qods bayad as safheh-e ruzgar mahv shavad*) [13].

This was not a threat to destroy Israel by military action, but the expression of a hope that the present Israeli regime will collapse, just as the Soviet Union did. It is not a threat to kill anyone, let alone to commit genocide against Jews living in Israel.

On 19 February 2006, the Iranian Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, was challenged about the President's remark on a visit to Brussels, when he addressed the European Parliament. Here's a Haaretz report of what he said:

"Iran's foreign minister denied on Monday that Tehran wanted to see Israel 'wiped off the map', saying President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had been misunderstood.

"'Nobody can remove a country from the map. This is a misunderstanding in Europe of what our president mentioned', Manouchehr Mottaki told a news conference, speaking in English, after addressing the European Parliament.

"'How is it possible to remove a country from the map? He is talking about the regime. We do not legally recognize this regime', he said." [14]

In a speech on 26 August 2006, President Ahmadinejad himself said that "Iran is not a threat to any country, and is not in any way a people of intimidation and aggression" (quoted by Professor Cole [15]). He went on to say that Iran does not even pose a threat to Israel, and wants to see the problem there resolved peacefully through elections:

"Weapons research is in no way part of Iran's program. Even with regard to the Zionist regime, our path to a solution is elections."

Speaking at Columbia University on 24 September 2007, he again proposed a solution in Palestine based on elections, according to a Washington Post translation [16]:

“What we say is that to solve this 60-year problem, we must allow the Palestinian people to decide about its future for itself. ... We must allow Jewish Palestinians, Muslim Palestinians and Christian Palestinians to determine their own fate themselves through a free referendum. Whatever they choose as a nation, everybody should accept and respect. ... This is what we are saying as the Iranian nation.”

That appears to be an endorsement of a one-state solution, where the government of Israel/Palestine would be determined by all the people – Jews, Muslims and Christians – living in the area. That proposal may or may not be realistic, but it certainly does not involve “wiping Israel off the map” and exterminating the Jews living there.

Question 3 If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, won't Israel's existence be under threat?

First, the IAEA has found no evidence that Iran has, or ever had, a nuclear weapons programme.

It is true that Iran is enriching uranium in a plant at Natanz. But, as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) [17], Iran has an “inalienable right” to engage in nuclear activities, including uranium enrichment, provided they are for peaceful purposes.

As required by the NPT, Iran's nuclear facilities, including its enrichment plant, is under IAEA supervision and the IAEA has confirmed (a) that only low enriched uranium suitable for a power generation reactor is being produced at Natanz and (b) that no nuclear material has been diverted from that plant for other purposes, for example, to be further enriched to produce fissile material for a nuclear weapon.

There is a possibility that Iran has nuclear facilities for military purposes, which it hasn't declared to the IAEA, but the IAEA has found no evidence of this.

Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, confirmed this recently. Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos on 26 January 2011, he stated bluntly that “the international community so far has no information that Iran is building nuclear weapons” [18].

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Whereas Israeli political leaders have often spoken of the imminence of Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons, leaders of Israel's intelligence services have said recently that it is some way off and have even questioned whether Iran has made a decision to develop nuclear weapons.

Thus, for example, Meir Dagan, who has recently retired as head of Mossad, told a Knesset Committee that Iran wouldn't be able to produce a nuclear weapon until 2015 at the earliest (see Haaretz, 7 January 2011, [19]). He claimed that, under his leadership, Mossad had successfully disrupted Iran's nuclear programme.

On the other hand, the newly appointed head of Israeli military intelligence, Brigadier General Aviv Kochavi, told a Knesset committee on 25 January 2011 that “Iran is not currently working on producing a nuclear weapon but could make one within ‘a year or two’ of taking such a decision” [20]. He added that Iran “would then need more time to develop an effective missile delivery system for it” and that “it was unlikely that Iran ... would start enriching [uranium] to the

90 percent level needed for a bomb, because it would be in open breach of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty exposing it to harsher sanctions or even a US or Israeli military strike”.

A few years ago, the US intelligence services made a similar assessment in a National Intelligence Estimate entitled *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities*, key judgments of which were made public in November 2007. These stated, inter alia:

“We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program ... We assess with moderate confidence Tehran had not restarted its nuclear weapons program as of mid-2007 ...” [\[21\]](#)

Subsequent annual threat assessments of the US intelligence community to the US Congress have not materially altered these conclusions. For example, the February 2011 assessment to the House of Representatives intelligence committee stated:

“We continue to assess [that] Iran is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons in part by developing various nuclear capabilities that better position it to produce such weapons, should it choose to do so. We do not know, however, if Iran will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons.” [\[22\]](#)

In other words, in the view of Israel's military intelligence and the US intelligence services, Iran has yet to take a decision to build nuclear weapons.

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But let us suppose for the sake of argument that Iran has a nuclear weapons programme, which will eventually yield effective nuclear weapons and the means of delivering them to Israel. Would Iran then be an existential threat to Israel?

At this point, it is important to remember that Israel possesses a huge arsenal of nuclear weapons and the means of delivering them to targets across the Middle East, including to Iran. The Federation of American Scientists estimates that Israel has 80 warheads [\[23\]](#); other experts on these matters reckon it may have as many as 400 [\[24\]](#).

If Iran were to make a nuclear strike on Israel, it is absolutely certain that Israel would retaliate in kind and overwhelmingly and, as a result, many Iranian cities would be razed to the ground. The rulers of Iran are not suicidal. They don't want to see their cities devastated, and the wonders of Persian civilisation destroyed, and millions of their people killed. So, they would not make a nuclear strike on Israel, if they were in a position to do so.

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The significance of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons is not that Iran would become a threat to Israel or the US, but that Israel and the US would no longer contemplate attacking Iran. Nuclear weapons are the ultimate weapons of self-defence – a state like North Korea, for instance, that possesses rudimentary nuclear weapons doesn't get attacked, or threatened with attack, by other states.

One thing is certain: attacking Iran, ostensibly to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons, would make the case for it acquiring them like nothing else. It would then be abundantly clear that only the possession of nuclear weapons would deter a potential aggressor – and it can be guaranteed that Iran would then make a supreme effort to acquire them.

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