


## Commentary

### Why did he call for Israel's obliteration?

**The answer to the Iranian President's vitriolic remarks lies in the enduring legacy of European colonialism, says political scientist NADER HASHEMI**

By NADER HASHEMI

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What explains last week's incendiary remarks by Iran's new hard-line President that Israel "must be wiped off the map"? Such sentiments from the Muslim world are certainly not new -- they have been a staple of Arab nationalist and Islamist political rhetoric for decades. Why the ongoing vitriol toward Israel? Is it an affirmation of ancient ethno-religious hatreds? Or is it more proof of the persistence of Muslim anti-Semitism? The evidence suggests a compelling alternative interpretation.

When Islamists comment on Israel, they routinely invoke its human-rights record as a justification for their moral censure and rejection of the Jewish state. Given the persistence of this theme in their rhetorical flourishes, they appear to be suggesting that Israel is the worst human-rights violator in history. The problem with this position is that it is both factually inaccurate and morally dishonest. Yes, when judged by international human-rights standards, Israel's record leaves a lot to be desired, but, in truth, Arab and Muslim regimes have a more deplorable human-rights history as any cursory reading of the annual Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports will reveal.

If human rights is the standard, why not condemnation from Islamists at far greater human-rights disasters afflicting fellow Muslims in Darfur, Algeria, Chechnya or among the Kurds (just to name a few)? Why the double standard? The answer lies not in ancient ethnic hatreds or Muslim anti-Semitism but primarily in the trauma and enduring legacy of European colonialism and Israel's perceived connection with this legacy.

For much of the 20th century, opposition to European colonialism -- and later American imperialism -- has been the most powerful organizing theme in the Muslim world. No topic can galvanize and rally the masses more than the issue of national independence and self-determination. Such sentiment has dominated the politics of many Muslim societies for a large part of the 20th century and has subsequently sunk deep roots within Muslim political culture. Concomitantly, there is widespread belief that, had it not been for foreign intervention, Muslim societies would have been more internally united, economically successful and politically advanced than they are today.

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Arabs and Muslims perceive Israel fundamentally as a European colonial settler state formed on the ruins of Palestinian society. The occupation of the West Bank -- with its escalating settlement construction, land confiscation and human-rights violations -- serves as a constant reminder of the impact of colonial and imperial policies on the region. In other words, the conflict in Israel/Palestine is perceived from within the region as "in-your-face colonialism" not from a bygone era, but of the contemporary period. This sentiment has been heightened in popular consciousness as a result of satellite technology that brings the occupation to people's homes every day, albeit through the skewed lens of Al-Jazeera and other state-controlled media in the Arab-Islamic world.

The impact of colonialism also explains why there is widespread sympathy for the plight of Palestinians in much of the developing world. Asians, Africans and Latin Americans instinctively relate to Palestinian victimization because of its similarity to their own colonial and imperial experiences. The fact that the final borders of Israel/Palestine remain to be determined, that most of Israel's political leaders have been European and that Israel is generously supported by a global power (the United States) gives to the conflict a decided colonial spin of powerful white Europeans versus a subjugated indigenous population. The Third World has seen this script before and experiences the Palestinian question with a sense of *déjà vu*.

The unresolved conflict in Israel/Palestine, therefore, acts as a constant reminder of the carve-up, humiliation, defeat and setback faced by Muslim societies as a result of Western intervention. The American occupation of Iraq has served to exacerbate these feelings. Palestine, in a sense, has now morphed into a core "identity issue" for Arabs and Muslims precisely because of its perceived link to the 19th- and 20th-century Middle Eastern experience with European colonialism. For most Islamists today, accepting the state of Israel while the Palestinians remain a largely refugee population is tantamount to giving colonialism a moral stamp of legitimacy.

A close reading of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's speech makes this abundantly clear. The conflict with Israel is explained in the context of a grand battle between Western powers and the Muslim world. The establishment of Israel "was a major move by the world oppressor [the U.S.] against the Islamic world" and it was for this reason that "we cannot compromise over the issue of Palestine. . . . This would be a defeat and whoever accepts the legitimacy of this regime [Israel] has . . . signed the defeat of the Islamic world."

What about the future? Is there any hope of change in Islamist thought on the question of Israel?

Evidence from Iran suggests there is. A minority school of thought among reformist Islamist thinkers and politicians believes Iranians should not be "more Palestinian than the Palestinians." It is frequently argued by these advocates that if democratically elected

representatives of the Palestinian people agree to a final peace settlement with Israel, then Iran is obligated to honour such a treaty. Arguably, the small moves toward a negotiated settlement in the 1990s have produced this fissure within Islamist ranks in Iran.

Imagine what might happen if a just and lasting settlement between Israelis and Palestinians could be negotiated. While it wouldn't convince hard-liners such as Mr. Ahmadinejad to have a change of heart and accept Israel's right to exist, it would prevent people like him and those who share his views from reviving deeply held feelings related to the trauma of colonialism. Political leaders from within the region will thus be forced to look inward and account for their domestic policies instead of blaming, in Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's phrase, the Great Satan (the U.S.) and the Little Satan (Israel) for all the ills afflicting Muslim societies, past and present.

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