

Israel in the Iranian Media: Demonizing the “Zionist Regime”

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The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) espouses an official policy of anti-Zionism, which is frequently punctuated with blatant antisemitism.¹ Although the Imperial State of Iran enjoyed diplomatic and strategic relations with Israel, following the 1979 Islamic Revolution all bilateral relations were severed by the newly established Islamic Republic. Tehran vocally supports Palestinian sovereignty over the whole of present-day Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, while periodically calling for the destruction of the Jewish State. It systematically refers to Israel by demeaning terms such as the “Zionist regime” and “Occupied Palestine,” and positions both Israel and Jews as posing a threat to Iran, Muslims, and the world more generally.² Iran’s fervent anti-Zionist/antisemitic position has drawn support from other Arab and Muslim countries, and condemnation from much of the Western world.³

Much of the social science research into the development and deployment of anti-Zionism/antisemitism in Iran has examined the political functions of this ideological stance.⁴ Moreover, there is emerging evidence that both antisemitism and anti-Zionism have infiltrated public thinking in Iran.⁵ The regime is keen to “export” its ideology beyond its own borders, which is exemplified by its support of English-language Iranian newspaper outlets such as *The Tehran Times* and *Press TV*. These outlets aim to reach out to English speakers in the West, while promising to provide an “alternative,” non-biased perspective on global, especially Middle Eastern, issues that counter what is regarded as “Western bias.”⁶ Although the circulation of these outlets is largely unknown, it is argued that they may have at least some influence in shaping discourse concerning Israel, particularly among specific ethnic and religious minority groups in the West. More generally, the aforementioned English-language Iranian media outlets reflect the regime’s discourse on Israel, given that they are closely aligned with the government. Thus, the analysis of the English-language press provides insight into the themes and discourses that Iran itself wishes to disseminate to an international readership.

It is worth examining textual representations of Israel in the English-language Iranian press in order to elucidate how Iran's anti-Zionist ideology is "exported" beyond the country's national and linguistic borders in an apparently more socially acceptable manner.⁷ Indeed, as Canadian researcher Pierre Pahlavi has argued, Iran invests heavily in the foreign-language media "to spread the image of Iran as a 'moderate Islamic country' to a target audience of millions."⁸ Yet, there are inherent difficulties in advancing this positive image while at the same time maintaining a long-standing, seemingly non-negotiable anti-Zionist stance. Drawing on Intergroup Threat Theory, some analytical insight into the media's portrayal of Israel, outlining the ways in which Israel is constructed as threatening, illegitimate, and in decline, can be drawn. These themes are discussed in terms of their potential implications for intergroup relations.

Intergroup Threat Theory

Intergroup Threat Theory⁹ is a socio-psychological framework that posits that the perception of threat from outgroups can have consequences at both the psychological and intergroup levels. Outgroups can be perceived as posing two basic types of threat to the ingroup: Realistic threats are posed by factors that could cause the ingroup physical harm or loss of resources, while symbolic threats represent threats to the worldview or meaning system(s) of the ingroup, such as challenges to ingroup norms and values. This writer and Marco Cinnirella have argued that some stigmatized minority groups in society can be represented "in such a way that they represent a *hybridized* kind of threat that combines both realistic (e.g., physical well-being) and symbolic (e.g., cultural) threats to the dominant ethno-national ingroup."¹⁰ Although this model has commonly been used to understand how threats are perceived at a psychological level, there is certainly scope for examining how such threats are constructed in text, as well as their implications for shaping social and political discourse.

The results of a critical study of representations of Israel in the English-language Iranian press are revealed here. That research examines how Israel is described, evaluated, and positioned rhetorically in relation to other groups, and how these rhetorical constructions can potentially affect intergroup relations.¹¹ The examples presented here, drawn from hundreds, demonstrate how the themes of threat construction, delegitimization, and imminent demise are presented and communicated to the readership.

Constructing Israel as a Hybridized Threat

Consistent with Tehran's ideology, articles in the corpus construct Israel as posing both realistic and symbolic threats to Iranians, Muslims, and the entire world.

For example, the construction of a realistic threat ensues from depicting Israel as being a key player in global terrorism:

Assassin of Iranian physicist admits connections with Mossad

Defendant Ali Jamali Fashi, who was arrested after the assassination of Ali Mohammadi, was charged with *moharebeh* [enmity against God]... any attempt to undermine national security would be regarded as an instance of *moharebeh*... Jamali Fashi said he exchanged information with Mossad and received training... in order to conduct terrorist acts... [Fashi] met with Mossad's agents at the Zionist regime's consulate in Istanbul, Turkey.¹²

This quote describes the trial of Ali Jamali Fashi, who was accused of collaborating with the “Zionist regime” and assassinating Ali-Mohammadi, an Iranian nuclear scientist. The defendant was found guilty and executed on May 15, 2012. This is a fairly typical example of how the Iranian press attributes internal crimes, assassinations, and other apparent acts of terrorism to Israel in order to construct it as a harmful terrorist entity.¹³ The Mossad, as an Israeli institution, is constructed as harboring harmful intentions against Iran — “terrorist acts” and the “attempt to undermine [Iranian] national security” are attributed to the organization. Crucially, although the assassination of Ali-Mohammadi was perpetrated by an Iranian citizen, Fashi was pervasively branded as an “Israeli spy,” essentially stripping him of his “Iranian-ness” and presenting him instead as part of the global “Zionist conspiracy.”¹⁴ The allegedly malevolent intentions of the “Zionist regime” and Fashi serve to portray Israel (and its institutions) as posing a harmful and dangerous realistic threat not only to the political system in the IRI but also to the Iranian people. Indeed, it is the “Iranian nation” that is depicted as being the actual victim of the “Zionist threat.”¹⁵

Interestingly, examples from the corpus rhetorically entwine the realistic *and* symbolic threats allegedly posed by Israel. This is exemplified in the quote above, which refers to “any attempt to undermine national security” (that is, a realistic threat) as *moharebeh* (a more symbolic threat). Tehran depicts realistic threats against Iran as simultaneous threats against the ideological system of Islam (and by extension, God), in that any individual who attacks Iran cannot possibly be a true believer in God. Both Iranian national security and the regime’s worldview are portrayed as being imperiled. This purported threat functions at various levels and affects multiple dimensions of everyday life.

The “Zionist threat” implicitly rationalizes Iran’s fervently anti-Zionist position, which has been moderately criticized in the West. That threat is used to provide

some justification for its stance, so that some readers do indeed perceive Iran as a “moderate” country with legitimate cause to oppose the State of Israel.¹⁶

Denying Israel’s Right to Exist

The “Zionist entity,” which allegedly threatens Iran’s continuity, well-being, and dominant worldview, is habitually delegitimized in the corpus.¹⁷ The notion that the Jewish State should threaten Iran, Muslims, and the world in general is seen in Islamic eyes as being particularly outrageous primarily because the threatening stimulus (that is, Israel) is portrayed as being an illegitimate one. In short, according to the corpus, not only does Israel pose a multifaceted threat to Iran, but it also has no legitimate right to exist.

Social categorization provides one means of contesting Israel’s legitimacy and its right to exist. The use of demeaning terms such as the “Zionist regime” rather than the “State of Israel,” which are frequently qualified by adjectives such as “fake” and “illegitimate,” serves to delegitimize Israel: “The interception of a Gaza-bound French aid ship by Israeli naval forces was a ‘political ignominy on the record of the fake Zionist regime.’”¹⁸

Indeed, Tehran refers to the Jewish State in these demeaning terms, sometimes employing the metaphor of a “cancerous tumor” in order to further depict Israel as an illegitimate, though growing, hybridized threat.¹⁹ There are endless examples of such language, which the Iranian media employ in order to deny the legitimacy of the State of Israel. These include “Tel Aviv regime,” “Hebrew regime,” and “Occupied Palestine,” to name but a few. The message behind all of them is that Israel is an illegitimate presence among the nations of the world and the Jews have no right to their own nation state.

Moreover, articles in the corpus regularly reproduce assertions and sermons, usually from high-ranking officials in Iran’s theocratic and political system, which deny Israel’s right to exist. The discourse of these religious and political figures tends to juxtapose Israel’s existence with the plight of the Palestinians, thereby making clear that the co-existence of the two peoples is impossible:

“Palestine has, since the beginning, belonged to the Palestinians and we do not agree with partitioning Palestine under no circumstances [sic]... We will never recognize the Zionist regime [of Israel] and this has been the Islamic Republic’s position since the Islamic Revolution [in 1979] until now,” the Iranian minister [Ali Akbar Salehi] said.²⁰

That text strategically reproduces the discourse of the Iranian minister in order to disseminate and promote the notion that Israel has no right to exist. This is attributed primarily to the long-standing message advanced by Tehran that “Palestine has, since the beginning, belonged to Palestinians.” This gives the impression that Israel is a foreign colonial presence in Palestine.²¹ Indeed, articles explicitly refer to the Jewish population of Israel as a “foreign occupation by some Ashkenazi Zionist Jews from Europe,” thereby rhetorically denying Israel’s right to exist. Furthermore, the recognition of Israel as an independent sovereign state would entail a “partition” of Palestine, which is deemed to be unacceptable. Crucially, this obscures the fact that Palestine was in fact “partitioned” over sixty years ago.

This reiterates the point made earlier that articles delegitimize Israel by referring to it as an illegitimate “regime” rather than as a state. Moreover, the newspaper outlets seem to present readers with the image of an illegitimate entity with no right to exist, which engages in acts of terror and brutality against the Iranian people and the Muslim world. This strengthens the case that Israel has no right to exist and perpetuates the official ideological position that the State of Israel should be dismantled in order to accommodate an (Islamic) Palestinian state in the whole of present-day Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank.²²

Israel’s Demise in the “Islamic Awakening”

These news outlets aim to provide English-language readers with an “alternative” perspective on Middle East affairs. Accordingly, they tend to re-conceptualize what has commonly been referred to as the Arab Spring in terms of an “Islamic Awakening.” This is consistent with the observation that in Iran, social and political factors are frequently viewed through an Islamic ideological lens in order to safeguard the theocratic *raison d’être* of the regime in Tehran. Indeed, there is evidence that Iran is attempting to “Islamicize” the Israeli–Arab conflict, portraying it in terms of an Islamic resistance to “Zionist atrocities.”²³ Similarly, Tehran presents the so-called “Islamic Awakening” as the inclination of Muslims (in Arab countries) to reject “Western interference” in their internal affairs by overthrowing “regional dictators” and establishing rapprochement with Islam. Some articles attribute the “demise of Israel” to the Islamic Awakening: “He [Ambassador Ahmad Mousavi] also said the unprecedented uprisings of Muslim nations, especially in North Africa, herald the decline of the Zionist regime and the liberation of the occupied Holy Qods.”²⁴

The State of Israel is itself portrayed as a “Western intrusion,” that is, an infiltration of Western, primarily Ashkenazi, Jews into “Muslim lands.”²⁵ The “unprecedented uprisings” of Muslim, rather than Arab, nations is said to

symbolize the “imminent” demise of Israel and the “liberation of the occupied Holy Qods” (that is, Jerusalem). Moreover, there is a reconceptualization of the political reasons underlying the Arab Spring—the destruction of Israel and the “liberation” of Jerusalem are represented as underlying these anti-government revolutions. Moreover, by establishing a link between the “uprisings of Muslim nations” and the “decline of the Zionist regime,” articles link the leaders of these Muslims nations (who have been or are in the process of being toppled) with the State of Israel, portraying them both as “regional despots.”²⁶

Similarly, the threatening character of Israel, as described above, is reiterated by “warning” the revolutionaries not to allow future infiltrations of the “Zionist regime”: “We should all take great care not to jump out of the frying pan into the fire,” he pointed out, adding that the nations should not allow US and the Zionist regime (Israel) to “be thrown out of one door and return from another.”²⁷

This quote exemplifies the media tendency to anchor the Arab Spring (or “Islamic Awakening”) to the overarching “aim” of the Muslim world to defeat Zionism. It presents the removal of the “Zionist regime” from the Middle East as a goal of the revolutions, and therefore warns them not to allow Zionism (and the US) to exert any future influence on the internal affairs of these countries. This passage suggests that the aims of Israel are inherently malevolent and harmful to the Islamic world, in accordance with the theme of threat outlined above. On the other hand, the Islamic ingroup is rhetorically empowered and positioned as being capable of defeating the “Zionist regime.” In short, Israel is optimistically depicted as being on the verge of demise due to unified Islamic opposition.

Conclusions

As we have seen, not only does anti-Zionism constitute a key political building block of Iran’s Islamic regime; it is also a significant media agenda. Indeed, politics and the press are mutually complementary, given the prevalence of state censorship.²⁸ Thus, rather than providing an “alternative” perspective on global issues, as it claims to do, the English-language Iranian press in fact serves as a mouthpiece for the regime. It regurgitates well-known social representations created and encouraged in Tehran’s political rhetoric.²⁹ Moreover, it provides greater reach to key figures of the country’s theocratic and political establishment by disseminating their controversial anti-Zionist assertions. This is significant because the assertions of these political figures tend not to be given much attention in mainstream global media outlets such as the BBC and CNN. Conversely, they are quite central to the dissemination of societal information in the English-language Iranian press.

As Moshe Ma'oz (and many other scholars) has observed, “[o]ver the last few decades, manifestations of hatred of Jews and Israel have increased in the Arab and Muslim world.”³⁰ That hatred of Israel may not necessarily be confined to the Arab and Muslim world. Rather, there is a clear attempt to globalize Iran’s anti-Zionist agenda. The Iranian media promote the view of Israel as a hybridized threat to the Islamic world (including Iran). The realistic threat is accentuated by referring to Israel as advocating terrorism against both the Iranians and the Palestinians, while symbolic threat constructions result from Israel’s alleged attempt to destroy the Islamic worldview. It has been argued that the accentuation of a hybridized outgroup threat can result in an imperiled identity,³¹ negative emotions, and a proclivity to derogate and discriminate against the threatening outgroup.³² The social representation that Israel has no right to exist encourages the struggle against the “Zionist threat” because not only does Israel threaten Muslims, but it has no right to exist in the first place. Moreover, the seemingly justifiable, long-standing anti-Zionist position of Iran’s leaders is put forward as being effective in its goal to destroy Israel through advancing the idea of Israel’s imminent demise in the “Islamic Awakening.”

Although the newspaper outlets discussed here claim to target an international readership, their repeated assertion that Islam and Muslims are threatened and their frequent call for Islamic mobilization against Israel suggest that the target readership is actually Muslims outside of Iran. Constant appeals for the protection and continuity of Islam and Islamic identity may constitute a means of convincing Muslims of the legitimacy and necessity of Tehran’s stance on Israel, while more generally promoting the values and ideologies of the regime.³³ While there are no reliable statistics on the readership of these outlets, preliminary research suggests that some young British Muslims of Pakistani descent feel increasingly alienated by the mainstream British and US media outlets and are therefore turning to “alternative” outlets, such as *Press TV* and the *Tehran Times*, which are viewed as being more accommodating of Muslims.³⁴

Faith in these outlets and constant exposure to anti-Zionist imagery that depicts Israel as a threat may result in negative attitudes toward Israel and Jews, with potentially dire consequences for intergroup relations. Indeed, Daniel Bar-Tal of Tel Aviv University has convincingly argued that the context of intergroup relations (here, the constructed threat of Israeli to Muslim) informs the beliefs, images, attitudes, emotions, and behaviors that groups in turn manifest toward each other.³⁵ By using the English-language media, a major channel of societal information, in order to construct a negative context of intergroup relations, Iran attempts to produce negative attitudes toward Israel, to evoke fear of the Jewish State, and to dispel any support for peace. Given that negative attitudes toward

Israel and Jews are already observable among sections of the Muslim community in the West,³⁶ it seems reasonable to fear that the related problems of anti-Zionism and antisemitism could be further exacerbated. However, at this stage, there is a need to examine empirically the potential impact of English-language Iranian media reporting of Israel and attitudes among the readership.

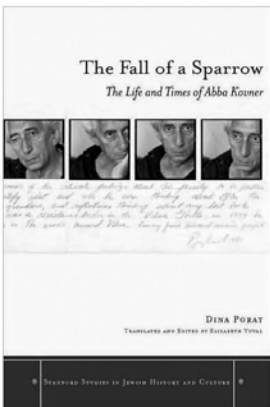
The portrayal of Israel as a threatening and illegitimate state on the verge of destruction contributes to the rhetorical normalization of anti-Zionism. It portrays Iran's widely criticized anti-Zionist program as a reasonable and justifiable response to threat, aggression, and illegitimacy. By anchoring Israel to negative characteristics and objectifying it in terms of a "cancerous tumor," the outlets rationalize widespread negativization, "otherization," and delegitimization of Israel. A key function of these outlets is to convince the Western world of the legitimacy of Tehran's position, to export its values and ideology, and to encourage wider acceptance of anti-Zionism as an appropriate response to the "Zionist threat."

Notes

- ¹ Soli Shahvar, "The Islamic Regime in Iran and Its Attitude towards the Jews: The Religious and Political Dimensions," *Immigrants e Minorities*, XXVII: 1 (2009), pp. 82–117.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ray Takeyh, "Iran, Israel and the Politics of Terrorism," *Survival*, XLVIII: 4 (2006), 83–96.
- ⁴ Rusi Jaspal, "Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in Iran: the role of identity processes," *Israel Affairs* (in press); Meir Litvak, "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Holocaust: Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism," *Journal of Israeli History*, XXV: 1 (2006), 267–84; Takeyh, op. cit.
- ⁵ Rusi Jaspal, *Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism: Cognition, Representation and Everyday Talk* (Farnham, UK) [forthcoming].
- ⁶ Press TV website, <http://www.presstv.ir/About.html>; see Pierre Pahlavi, "Understanding Iran's Media Diplomacy," *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, VI: 2 (2012), 24.
- ⁷ Yves Pallade, "Delegitimizing Jews and the Jewish State: Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism after Auschwitz," *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, II: 3 (2009), 29–40.
- ⁸ Pahlavi, op. cit.
- ⁹ Walter Stephan, Oscar Ybarra and Kimberley Morrison, "Intergroup threat theory," *Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination*, Todd Nelson (ed.) (New York, 2009), pp. 43–55.
- ¹⁰ Rusi Jaspal and Marco Cinnirella, "Media representations of British Muslims and hybridised threats to identity," *Contemporary Islam: Dynamics of Muslim Life*, IV: 3 (2010), 290.

- ¹¹ Some methodological notes: Critical discourse analysis (Teun van Dijk, "Principles of critical discourse analysis," *Discourse & Society*, IV: 2 (1993), 249–283) is a language-oriented analytical technique for identifying patterns of meaning within a data set. It focuses on how social reality is constructed in talk and text, rather than searching for an "objective" reality. Accordingly, a critical discourse analysis can provide insight into the "context" of intergroup relations, which in turn informs the ways in which people come to think about the Israeli outgroup. This study focuses upon two English-language Iranian news outlets: *The Tebran Times* and Press TV. The websites of both feature an online database of published articles. Using the keywords "Israel," "Zionist," and "Palestine," this writer conducted a search of the online databases for articles published between May 1, 2011 and September 1, 2011, generating a corpus of 214 articles for analysis. The study aimed to explore habitual ways of media reporting on Israel, rather than polarized coverage of particularly contentious events (e.g. Operation Cast Lead). Thus, this author targeted a time period in which there were no reports of major social or political events concerning Israel/the Israeli–Arab conflict. Although there are frequent skirmishes between the Israeli army and Palestinian militants as well as rocket attacks from Gaza that often feature in international news coverage, the aforementioned four-month period was in fact relatively uneventful.
- ¹² "Assassin of Iranian physicist admits connections with Mossad," *The Tebran Times*, August 23, 2011
- ¹³ Jaspal, forthcoming, op. cit.
- ¹⁴ "Ali-Mohammadi assassin will stand trial today: Tehran prosecutor," *The Tebran Times*, August 22, 2011.
- ¹⁵ "Assassination of Iranian academic is a U.S.–Israeli plot: officials," *The Tebran Times*, July 24, 2011.
- ¹⁶ Pahlavi, op. cit.
- ¹⁷ Daniel Bar-Tal, "Causes and consequences of delegitimization: Models of conflict and ethnocentrism," *Journal of Social Issues* XLVI: 1 (1990), 65–81; Jaspal, op. cit.
- ¹⁸ "Israeli interception of Gaza aid ship, a political ignominy," *The Tebran Times*, July 20, 2011.
- ¹⁹ "Recognition of Palestinian state not the final step: Ahmadinejad," *The Tebran Times*, August 26, 2011.
- ²⁰ "Palestine cannot be partitioned: Iran," Press TV, September 18, 2011.
- ²¹ Litvak, op. cit.
- ²² Jaspal, op. cit.
- ²³ Meir Litvak, "The Islamization of the Israeli–Arab Conflict: The Case of Hamas," *Middle Eastern Studies*, XXIII: 1 (1998), 148–163.
- ²⁴ "Israel meddling in Syria to compensate for the fall of allies," *The Tebran Times*, August 28, 2011.
- ²⁵ "Palestinians should not negotiate now!" Press TV, September 21, 2011,
- ²⁶ "Iron cages awaiting regional despots: Iranian cleric," *The Tebran Times*, August 5, 2011.
- ²⁷ "Islamic Awakening meet ends in Tehran," Press TV, September 18, 2011.

- ²⁸ Mehdi Semati, *Media, Culture and Society in Iran: Living with Globalization and the Islamic State* (London, 2008).
- ²⁹ Jaspal, "Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in Iran: the role of identity processes," op. cit.
- ³⁰ Moshe Ma'oz, "Muslims, Jews and the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict," *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, III: 3 (2009), 15–21.
- ³¹ Jaspal and Cinnirella, op. cit.
- ³² Bar-Tal, op. cit.
- ³³ Pahlavi, op. cit.
- ³⁴ Rusi Jaspal, "The Construction and Management of National and Ethnic Identities among British South Asians: An Identity Process Theory Approach," PhD dissertation, University of London (London, 2011).
- ³⁵ Daniel Bar-Tal and Yona Weichman, *Stereotypes and Prejudice in Conflict* (Cambridge, 2006).
- ³⁶ Gunther Jikeli, "Antisemitism Among Young Muslims in London," paper presented at the International Study Group Education and Research on Antisemitism Colloquium I: Aspects of Antisemitism in the UK, December 5, 2009.



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