

For Jews, there have always been two Irans

Abbas Milani International Herald Tribune

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2005

PALO ALTO, California The Bible is full of praise for Persia (today's much-maligned Iran) and for its rulers. In the Book of Ezra, God speaks through the proclamations of Cyrus, the king of Persia, who declares, "The Lord God of Heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem."

Cyrus acceded to this divine command, and thus was the Second Temple in Jerusalem built. In other parts of the Old Testament, there is ringing praise of Cyrus as God's "anointed" and the "chosen" ruler, who freed Jews from their Babylonian captivity.

The Jewish feast of Purim celebrates the story of how Esther, queen to a Persian king, saved the Jews of the kingdom from annihilation. But along with the benevolence of Cyrus and the wisdom of Esther, there also lurked on the horizon the evil vizier, Haman of the race of Agog, whose mind and heart were darkened by rancor and hate.

Today, there sits in place of Cyrus one who has inherited not the magnanimity of Cyrus, but the malice of Haman: President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who openly calls for Israel to be "wiped off the map."

Even in the modern history of Iran, the two strands, one lofty and humane, the other base, have continued to thrive side by side. In 1941, as Hitler was beginning to put in motion his murderous "final solution," the Iranian government convinced Nazi "race experts" that Iranian Jews had lived in Iran for 2,500 years, were fully assimilated members of the Persian nation and must be afforded all the rights of Iranian citizens.

The Nazis accepted the argument, and the lives of Iranian Jews residing in Europe were saved. Moreover, thousands of European Jews were saved when Iranian diplomats provided them with Iranian passports. And in the years after World War II, the Iranian government and people were exceedingly helpful - according to Israel's first ambassador to Iran - in facilitating the travel of hundreds of Iraqi Jews escaping persecution and heading for what was soon to be Israel.

Iran in fact was the first Muslim country to de facto recognize Israel and established close ties that lasted till 1979. But even then, the dread spirit of Haman was also in the air. As the Iranian government and many of its people were involved in helping Jews in their hour of need, there were also some ayatollahs who delivered fiery speeches against Jews, and against Israel. Clerical support for the oppression of Jews, which often hid its ugly head behind slogans against Zionism, began to emerge at the time.

When Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came to power in 1979, he became the standard-bearer of this tradition. He paid lip service to the idea that Jews would be treated as equals in Iran. Islam, after all, affords Jews many rights as "people of the book." But in fact, Jews were subjected to many cruel and unjust punishments. The first nonmilitary, nongovernmental person sent to the firing squad by the Islamic revolutionary courts was a Jew, Habib Elganian, a prominent Iranian businessman.

In this sense, Ahmadinejad's shameful pronouncement about wiping the state of Israel off the map is more than another slip of tongue by a notoriously incompetent, loose-tongued president. Historically it conjures the spirit of Haman; politically it is the continuation of a policy that does not reflect Iranian history and character but caters to the lunatic fringe of Iranian politics, and of the Muslim world.

Ahmadinejad's comments must furthermore be seen in the context of the crisis the Islamic regime faces. For 25 years, the regime's cure for its own glaring incompetence has been to create a crisis. The European Union, particularly Britain, France and Germany, who had been for two decades dependable allies of the regime, has become increasingly estranged over Iran's nuclear adventurism and allegations of its support for terrorists in Iraq. Syria, the regime's only ally in the Middle East, is now politically on the ropes.

The domestic crisis is no less serious. The economy is in shambles. The stock market has lost about a third of its total value; the banking sector is all but collapsing; \$200 billion dollars of capital has left Iran since the election, and there is increasing acrimony between different factions within the ruling clergy. Ahmadinejad's dangerous rhetoric was meant to energize the "base" and prepare them for the coming battles.

The captive people of Iran, or the millions forced into exile by the regime, must not be held responsible for the sins of the ruling cabal. Instead we must try to find ways to help the Iranian people achieve their hundred-year-old dream of democracy. Only in a genuine democracy can the spirit of Cyrus be truly celebrated and the shadow of Haman expunged.

(Abbas Milani is director of the Iranian studies program at Stanford University and a co-director of the Iran Democracy Project at the Hoover Institution.)