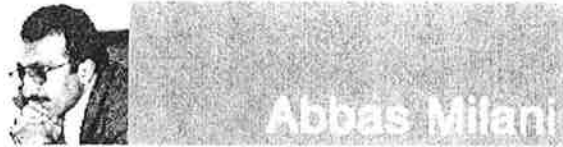


Jews



## Revealing errors

*Iran, Jews and the Holocaust: An answer to Mr. Black*

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*In early January of this year, a prominent American journalist published a strangely inaccurate attack on Iran, making the country complicit in the crimes of the Holocaust. I prepared the response below and sent it to the San Francisco Chronicle, where the original article had appeared. But the editors of the paper told me that they do not publish polemical responses. I prepared another essay, dealing directly with each of the accusations, and the essay was published in the Insight section of the Chronicle on Sunday, February 9, 2006. (p. E 5). But as the accusations in Mr. Black's article are serious, I think publishing the direct response to his attacks is also necessary.*

Even for acclaimed investigative journalists like Mr. Edwin Black, few things are more dangerous than the temptation to conflate fact and fiction, to traffic in hackneyed shibboleths, and to write half-truths based on scant knowledge. His defamatory diatribe against the nation of Iran, published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* of January 8, 2006, is replete with half-truths, gross misstatement of facts and a defiant disregard for known but inconvenient facts of history.

To chronicle every factual error and faulty accusation in the piece would require an essay much longer than the original piece. If nations could have their day in libel court, Mr. Black would now be looking for a whole bevy of lawyers to answer the many libelous accusations he has made against the entire nation of Iran.

The trigger for Mr. Black attack was Mr. Ahmadinejad's odious comments about wiping Israel off the map, and his even more shameful denial of the Holocaust. Surely those comments deserve to be thoroughly condemned. The regime in Iran must be made to understand that the world community has zero tolerance for such anti-Semitic ranting. But it would be a tragic mistake to fall into a racist trap when condemning Mr. Ahmadinejad's racist words, and that, unfortunately is precisely what Mr. Black has done in his essay. He claims that if we look at Iran's "Hitler-era past" we will discover "that Iran and Iranians were strongly connected to the Holocaust and the Hitler regime."

The facts of history are just the opposite of what Mr. Black has claimed. As early signs of the murderous Final Solution became visible, the Iranian government of the time convinced the Nazi race experts in Germany that Iranian Jews had lived in Iran

for over twenty five hundred years and were fully assimilated citizens of the Iran and must be afforded all the rights of such citizens. The Nazis accepted this argument and the lives of all Iranian Jews living under the Nazi yoke was saved. An account of this episode can be found in the *History of Contemporary Iranian Jews*, published by Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History.

Moreover, as I have recounted in my *Persian Sphinx*, Iranian diplomats in Europe and elsewhere offered hundreds of Iranian passports to European Jews and thus saved their lives. And when the Nazi killing machines began their slaughter of innocent Polish Jews, 1388 Jews, including 871 children were moved to Tehran where they lived in relative safety till they moved to Israel. Again History of Contemporary Iranian Jews has provided an account of what are called "Tehran Children."

Mr. Black goes on to claim that Iran and its leaders were not only aware of the "Holocaust, they played both parts ... the country offered escape routes for refugee Jews ... but only in exchange for extortionate passage fees." The man responsible for the transfer of Jewish refugees in Iran -- who went on to become Israel's ambassador to Iran--has an entirely different story to tell. He writes, "As the Shah of Iran had particular affinity for the Jews, the military and bureaucratic institutions of the country spared no effort in helping refugees reach Israel." (Moir Ezry's *Yadnameh*, vol. 1. p. 52). He goes on to say, "countries like Bulgaria, and Rumania asked for great sums of money from Israel in order to set their Jewish population free. But the Iranian government never asked for any money."(p. 60)

With little to besmear the people of Iran with, Mr. Black eventually performs a conjurer's trick. In the middle of the narrative, he introduces the notorious figure of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and then the Iranian nation is blamed for every step taken by that despicable figure. But as an acclaimed investigative journalist. Mr. Black should know that Iran was at the time of World War Two about eighty-percent Shiite, and that Muftis are unique to the Sunni sect of Islam. Considering the long simmering tension between Shiites and Sunnis, and between Persians and Arabs, an Arab Mufti, would be hardly a popular character in Iran.

Mr. Black's story about Reza Shah and his affinity for the Nazis and his decision to change the name of the country to Iran suffers from revealing errors of omission and commission. Contrary to Mr. Black's claim, Reza Shah's affinity for Germany predates the rise of Nazis by almost two decades. During World War One, when Reza was just a colonel in the Cossack Brigade, he contacted Germany's embassy in Tehran and solicited their help in fighting British and Russian encroachments on Iran. He was wooed by the Nazis who agreed to sell him the steel factory he coveted and considered a sine quo non of progress and modernity. Nevertheless, according to the British embassy reports from Tehran in 1940, the total number of German citizens in Iran -- from simple technicians to sinister spies -- was no more than a thousand.

Even when Mr. Black writes about the issue of the country's change of name, he gets it only half right. He writes, "So intense was the Shah's identification with the Third Reich that in 1935 he renamed his ancient country Iran." But Iran has been called Iran for over twenty-five hundred years. Reza Shah did was not to rename his country; he asked the world not to call it Persia, but to use the country's own name for itself. It was, as I have written elsewhere, a mistake. But it was not a wholesale

recreation of a country's identity that Mr. Black insists.

After mixing fact and fiction about the Nazi era, Mr. Black conveniently overlooks the next thirty-seven years and jumps to Mr. Ahamadinejad's time. Here are a few facts overlooks.

Iran was the first Moslem country in the world to establish diplomatic and economic ties with Israel. Throughout the fifties, sixties and seventies, Iran supplied oil to Israel, and after the rise of Nasser's Pan-Arab nationalism in the Middle East, Israel, along with Iran's secret police, operated a radio station in the Southern provinces of Iran and beamed their anti-Nasser message to the entire Arab world.

David Menashri, one of the most eminent Israeli scholars of modern Iran, calls the sixties and seventies "the Golden Age of Iranian Jewry when Jews enjoyed almost total cultural and religious autonomy, experienced economic progress and had no less political freedom than their Muslim counterparts." (David Menashri, "The Jews or Iran: Between the Shah and Khomeini," in *Anti-Semitism in Times of Crisis*, ed. by Sander L. Gilam and Steven Katz, p. 356) He adds that, "On per capita terms, they may well have been the richest community in the world." (Menashri, p.358). But these facts are inconvenient for Mr. Black and forfeiting his responsibilities as an investigative journalist, he includes in his narrative only those facts and fictions that fit the tortured image he wants to give about Iran and Iranians.

Inside and outside Iran, the Iranian people are held hostage by the theocratic regime and leaders like Ahmadinejad. It is bizarre to hold the hostages responsible for the sins of the hostage takers. It is grossly unjust to fabricate a false past for the hostages and hold them responsible not only for the vices of their hostage takers, but also for crimes they never committed. Sadly, Iranian history, like the history of almost every other nation, is not free from the blemish of anti-Semitism.

The Bible tells us of the time when Esther was the queen of Persia, and the demonic anti-Semitism of the vizier, Haman threatened the lives of Iranian Jews. But Esther succeeded in saving her people -- and thus the feast of Purim. The bible is also replete with praise for Cyrus, the Persian king and God's "anointed" and "Chosen" ruler, who liberated the Jews from their Babylonian captivity and helped rebuild Jerusalem. Mr. Black's rendition of Iranian history overlooks the Esthers of the past and focuses his angry gaze only at Hamans.

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