

State-Sanctioned Incitement to Genocide in Ahmadinejad's Iran: The Responsibility to Prevent

Irwin Cotler

Member of Canadian Parliament

Law Professor (on leave) at McGill University

Special Folio: GPN Genocide 2010 Year in Review

G P N O R I G I N A L

The enduring lesson of the Holocaust and that of the genocides that followed is that they occurred not simply because of the machinery of death, but because of state-sanctioned incitement. Today, the epicentre of state-sanctioned incitement to genocide is President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Iran. In it, one finds a toxic convergence of advocacy of the most horrific of crimes embedded in the most virulent of hatreds. The threat is dramatized by parading in the streets of Teheran a Shihab-3 missile draped in the words "Israel must be wiped off the map" while assembled thousands are exhorted to chants of "Death to Israel." The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, makes it clear that the annihilation of Israel is the basic premise upon which the State operates. The incitement to genocide thus committed is not only the prelude to a preventable tragedy; it is a crime in itself under international law.

In other cases of state-sanctioned incitement to genocide – the Holocaust, Rwanda, the Balkans, Darfur – the genocides have already occurred. Only with respect to Ahmadinejad's Iran can we still act so as to prevent the genocide foretold from occurring. State Parties to the Genocide Convention have not only a right but a responsibility to prevent genocide and to punish direct and public incitement to genocide. As a former Minister of Justice in Canada who was involved in the prosecution of Rwandan incitement, I can state that the precursors of incitement in the Iranian case are more threatening than were those in the Rwandan one. It is astonishing that this criminal incitement has yet to be addressed, and that the immediate and practical steps available under international law are yet to be taken.

Genocide is the most insidious and destructive threat known to humankind. It is the ultimate crime against humanity—the unspeakable crime whose name one should shudder to mention; a horrific and unspeakable act whereby state-sanctioned incitement transforms hatred into catastrophe. The enduring lesson of the Holocaust and that of the genocides that followed is that they occurred not simply because of the machinery of death, but because of the state-sanctioned incitement to hatred. As international tribunals have recognized, the Holocaust did not begin in the gas chambers; it began

with words. These are the chilling facts of history. This enduring lesson finds contemporary application in the state-sanctioned incitement to genocide whose epicenter is President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Iran. Indeed, today, in Ahmadinejad's Iran, one finds the toxic convergence of the advocacy of the most horrific of crimes embedded in the most virulent of hatreds. It is dramatized by the parading in the streets of Teheran of a Shihab-3 missile draped in the words "Israel must be wiped off the map" while the assembled thousands are exhorted to chants of "Death to Israel." In all other cases of state-sanctioned incitement to genocide – the Holocaust, Rwanda, the Balkans, Darfur – the genocides have already occurred. Only with respect to Ahmadinejad's Iran can we still act so as to prevent the genocide foretold from occurring.

Genocidal Incitement in Ahmadinejad's Iran: The Evidence

We have been witnessing for some time a state-sanctioned incitement to genocide whose epicenter is Ahmadinejad's Iran. I take care to distinguish Ahmadinejad's Iran from the peoples of Iran who are themselves increasingly the target of the Iranian regime's massive repression of human rights—a fact underscoring the principle that countries that violate the rights of their own citizens will surely violate those of neighbouring countries. Ahmadinejad's Iran is increasingly resorting to incendiary and demonizing language, including epidemiological metaphors reminiscent of Nazi incitement. Moreover, calls by the most senior figures in the Iranian leadership for the destruction of Israel are also frighteningly reminiscent of calls for the Rwandan extermination of Tutsis by the Hutu leadership. The crucial difference is that the Hutus were equipped with machetes, while Iran, in defiance of the world community, continues its pursuit of the most destructive of weaponry: nuclear arms. Iran has already succeeded in developing and testing a long-range missile delivery system for that purpose, recalling former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's infamous declaration that "the employment of even one atomic bomb inside Israel will wipe it off the face of the earth." The hate propaganda and incitement emerging from Ahmadinejad's Iran lamentably follows a pattern established in past genocides, as victims are delegitimized, dehumanized and demonized before their intended extermination. Indeed, hate speech fitting each of these categories is both public and pervasive in Ahmadinejad's Iran.

Genocide is a crime almost unfathomable in its cruelty and its scale. It is impossible to perpetrate against victims that appear, to the genocidaires, as worthy of any respect. As genocide scholar Helen Fein notes, potential victims must be seen in the minds of the genocidaires as beyond "the boundaries of the universe of obligation." The first step, therefore, is to classify the "other" – the targeted State and its people – as illegitimate and unworthy of that universe of obligation. The delegitimization of Jews and Israel in Ahmadinejad's Iran finds expression in the rhetoric treating Israel as a foreign and alien entity that has no rightful place in the Middle East. It is exemplified by the comments of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ("What are you? A forged government and a false nation. They gathered wicked people from all over the world and made something called the Israeli nation.") and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (who, in front of the United Nations General Assembly, labeled Israel a "criminal" and "forged" regime of

“murderers” created on “other people’s land by displacing, detaining, and killing the true owners of that land.”).

Dehumanization

Against this context of the singling-out and delegitimization of the alien “other” Israel, the next genocidal precursor is the dehumanization of Israelis and Jews through the use of epidemiological metaphors reminiscent of the dehumanization of the Jews during the Holocaust and the dehumanization of Tutsi during the genocide in Rwanda. In the genocide-fostering process, biological euphemisms are not just rhetorical tools; they seek to preclude the intended victims from even being considered human to begin with. Thus, just as Jews were labeled as “vermin” by the Nazis and the Tutsi were labeled as “cockroaches” in Rwanda, so too have Israelis and Jews been dehumanized and labeled in Iran as: a “filthy germ” and “savage beast;”

a “cancerous tumour;”

a “stain of disgrace” on the “garment of the world of Islam;”

a “stinking corpse;”

a “cancerous bacterium;”

stuck in a “cesspool created by itself and its supporters;”

“like cattle—nay, more misguided;”

a “rotten, dried tree;” and

an “unclean regime.”

Demonization

Related to the dehumanization process is the demonizing process. Under this paradigm, the would-be victims of genocide are portrayed as inspirations of the devil. Dehumanization coupled with demonization accomplishes the dual purpose of making the would-be victim appear not only to be less than human (if not sub-human), but also to appear more threatening, thereby providing a warrant for genocide. Demonized, Israelis and Jews are portrayed in Ahmadinejad’s Iran as “the true manifestation of Satan.” They are “bloodthirsty barbarians” with “no boundaries, limits, or taboos when it comes to killing human beings,” who are fighting a “war against humanity.” Age-old conspiracy theories – according to which a secretive cabal of Jews brings horror and tragedy to the world – are resurrected. Before the international community at the United Nations, President Ahmadinejad declared that “the dignity, integrity and rights of the American and European people are being played with by a small but deceitful number of people called Zionists... [who] have been dominating an important portion of the

financial and monetary centers as well as the political decision-making centers of some European countries and the US in a deceitful, complex and furtive manner.” Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has taken this demonizing conspiracy theory even further by declaring that: [T]he occupation of Palestine [by the Jews] is part of a satanic design by the world domineering powers, perpetrated by the British in the past and being carried out today by the United States to weaken the solidarity of the Islamic world and to sow the seeds of disunity among us.

Ultimately, the strategy of demonization seamlessly leads to prophecy and incitement, and President Ahmadinejad declared: A Zionist organization with 2,000 [members] and with 7,000 or 8,000 activists have brought the world to a state of confusion. Let me tell them that if they themselves do not wrap up Zionism, the strong arm of the peoples will wipe these germs of corruption off the face of the earth.

From State-Sanctioned Hate to State-Sanctioned Incitement to Genocide

Empowered by the culture of hate it has planted with impunity, Ahmadinejad’s Iran feels no need to leave its genocidal intentions as an unspoken conclusion. To the contrary, the calls for Israel’s destruction by Iranian officials are explicit and without ambiguity. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has thus publicly called for Israel to be “wiped off the map.” Despite international condemnation, when given the opportunity to retract his statement, President Ahmadinejad chose instead to add to their weight, remarking: “My words are the Iranian nation’s words.” In his call for annihilation, President Ahmadinejad referenced the former Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. On June 2, 2008, speaking at the shrine where the Ayatollah is buried, President Ahmadinejad repeated: [Ayatollah Khomeini’s] ideal is about to be materialized today... The Zionist regime is in a total dead end and, God willing, this desire will soon be realized and the epitome of perversion will disappear off the face of the world.

It is not only President Ahmadinejad who calls for the annihilation of Israel. The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, makes it clear that this is the basic premise upon which the State operates, stating on different occasions that “[i]t is the mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to erase Israel from the map of the region,” “[t]here is only one solution to the Middle East problem, namely the annihilation and destruction of the Jewish state,” and “we are on a collision course with the occupiers of Palestine and the occupiers are the Zionist regime. This is the position of our regime, our revolution and our people.” Repeated calls for the destruction of Israel, and “prophecies” of its demise, all work to normalize the idea of genocide to the Iranian population. Articulated in the context of demonizing rhetoric implying a clash of civilizations, calls for the annihilation of the Jewish State begins to appear not only moral and justifiable, but natural as well. Chillingly, all this incitement appears to be sinking into the popular consciousness. President Ahmadinejad’s audience responds to his words instantly with chants of “Death to Israel.” And the media follows the Government’s lead in inciting genocide as well. For instance, Resalat, an Iranian newspaper, mirroring a Qods (Jerusalem) Day speech by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2006, wrote in an editorial: The nation of Muslims must prepare for the

great war, so as to completely wipe out the Zionist regime, and remove this cancerous growth. Like the Imam [Ayatollah] Khomeini said: 'Israel must collapse'.

Delegitimization

Genocidal Incitement in Ahmadinejad's Iran: The Remedies

The failure to stop past genocides, as in the unspeakable, preventable genocide of Rwanda, caused the then-UN secretary general Kofi Annan to lament in 2004 on the 10th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide: "We must never forget our collective failure to protect at least 800,000 defenseless men, women and children who perished in Rwanda 10 years ago. "Such crimes cannot be reversed. Such failures cannot be repaired. The dead cannot be brought back to life. So, what can we do?" The answer is for the international community to pay heed to the precursors of genocide in Ahmadinejad's Iran, and to fulfill its responsibilities under international law. For what is so often ignored – or surprisingly is not even known – is that State Parties to the Genocide Convention have not only a right, but a responsibility to enforce the Convention—a landmark treaty that recently celebrated its 60th anniversary, and which obliges its signatories to act to prevent genocide, and to punish direct and public incitement to genocide. Indeed, as one involved as Minister of Justice in Canada in the prosecution of Rwandan incitement, I can state that the aggregate of precursors of incitement in the Iranian case are more threatening than were those in the Rwandan one. The remedies in international law are established and ready to be exercised. They include: The criminal incitement to genocide by President Ahmadinejad and other Iranian leaders should be referred to the appropriate UN agencies. It is astonishing that this criminal incitement has yet to be addressed by the UN Security Council, the UN General Assembly, or any other body of the UN.

State Parties to the Genocide Convention should initiate an inter-state complaint against Iran before the International Court of Justice for its "direct and public incitement to genocide" in violation of the Genocide Convention, to which Iran is also a State Party.

Ahmadinejad and other designated Iranian leaders should be placed on a watchlist by concerned countries, preventing their entrance as "inadmissible persons."

State Parties to the Genocide Convention should call upon the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to refer Ahmadinejad's genocidal incitement to the UN Security Council as a matter threatening international peace and security, pursuant to Article 99 of the UN Charter. Such action is not a mere policy option; it is an international legal obligation. Voices against intolerance and impunity must work to initiate one or more of the above options. As the United Nations General Assembly was told last fall, "The rallying cry 'Never again!' can only be used so often before it loses credibility." The time to act is now.



The Honourable Irwin Cotler, P.C., O.C., is a Canadian Member of Parliament and Special Counsel on Human Rights and International Justice to the Liberal

Party. The former Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Cotler is a leading legal scholar and expert on human rights. He founded and chairs the All-Party Save Darfur Parliamentary Coalition, led the Canadian delegation to the Stockholm International Forum on the Prevention of Genocide, and co-founded the Inter-Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Anti-Semitism.

Cotler is currently on leave from the Faculty of Law at McGill University, where he is a law professor and chair of InterAmicus, an international human rights advocacy centre. Cotler has also been called “Counsel for the Oppressed” for his work on behalf of prisoners of conscience such as Andrei Sakharov, Nathan Sharansky, and Professor Saad Eddin Ibrahim.

Cotler has been at the forefront of international efforts to hold Ahmadinejad’s Iran to account for state-sanctioned incitement to genocide and is among the over-50 internationally-renowned jurists, genocide experts and survivors endorsing “The Danger of a Genocidal, Rights-Violating and Nuclear Iran: The Responsibility to Prevent Petition.”