

The sickness bequeathed by the west to the Muslim world

The Iranian president's support for Holocaust denial is a measure of how far the infection of Jew-hatred has spread

Jonathan Freedland
Wednesday December 14, 2005

Guardian

There were few memorable moments in the election campaign of 2005, but there's one I won't forget. It came when I was interviewing a group of Muslim voters in Edinburgh, asking how the Iraq war had unsettled their political allegiances. One older man began telling me that he did not blame Tony Blair or even George Bush for the way things had turned out, because they were mere dupes of a more powerful force. The calamity of 9/11 was not all it seemed: the authors of that event were not the 19 hijackers, but more shadowy players, unknown even to Bush. Later, as he gave me a lift to the station, I asked who these secret powers might be. The answer was "rich Jewish people".

I told him that just as there were plenty of lies told about Muslims, so there were lies told about Jews - and that neither of us should accept either. I put the comments to one side, dismissing them as the ramblings of one man.

Again and again in recent years, I've made the same move. I've read the reports of sermons in the Arab world, denouncing Judaism and Jews, and tried to see a wider context.

So I saw the vox pop on Saudi TV asking people on the street whether they would ever shake hands with a Jew - unanimous answer: no - and guessed that perhaps this was an exceptional item, hardly indicative. I read the transcript of an interview with Basmallah, a three-year-old girl, again aired on Saudi TV, who was introduced as a "Muslim girl, a true Muslim". Here's the exchange:

Host: Basmallah, do you know the Jews?

Basmallah: Yes.

Host: Do you like them?

Basmallah: No.

Host: Why don't you like them?

Basmallah: Because they are apes and pigs.

I shuddered to read such a thing. But it was translated and distributed by the Middle East Media Research Institute, and, like others, I wondered about the group's motives: Memri was founded by a veteran of Israeli military intelligence. (On the other hand, few challenge the accuracy of Memri's translations: unpalatable though they are, the texts Memri finds are all too real.)

Such has been my standard operating procedure, constantly trying to see if there's a way to contextualise these incidents, to see them in proportion. My motivation was not complicated: I prefer my Jewish identity to be positive, rather than defined by a perennial defence against anti-semitism.

But everyone has their limits and last week I reached mine. On Thursday the president of Iran chose to stand with the cranks, neo-fascists and racists who deny the factual truth of the Holocaust.

"Some European countries insist on saying that Hitler killed millions of innocent Jews in furnaces," said Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. "Although we don't accept this claim..."

Suddenly, the usual apologetics won't work. No one can say Iran's president was really complaining about Israel or Zionism, rather than Jews. No one can say he was talking about the west's colonial crimes. He was peddling, instead, one of the defining tropes of the racist hard right: Holocaust denial. It is a stance that seeks to deny Jews their history, their suffering, almost their very being. Like denying that African-Americans were ever slaves, it is a move made by those who wish only harm.

In this light, Ahmadinejad's previous musings look rather different. When, in October, he stood beneath a banner that promised "A world without Zionism" and called for Israel to be "wiped off the map", many Jews felt a chill at what seemed an annihilationist fantasy. Cooler heads said no, this was merely the hyperbolic style of the region, deployed to press a robust anti-Zionist rather than anti-semitic case. What he wanted, they explained patiently, was a world without Zionism, not a world without Jews.

Well, now I'm done with the charitable explanations. A man who refuses to believe the historic truth is capable of anything. This is not an Arabic cable TV station or an obscure Egyptian newspaper. This is a head of government, the leader of a nation of 70 million - a country that aspires to lead the Muslim world. And, lest we forget, Iran has nuclear ambitions. So now it's not paranoid to worry about a president with annihilationist dreams - it's smart.

Unfortunately, it doesn't end with Ahmadinejad, a man with no experience outside Iran, a hick who, Iranian analyst Dr Ali Ansari concedes, is a "monumental embarrassment". For he has given voice to a sentiment that runs deep in Iran and in the wider Muslim world.

Just look at this week's Iranian press. "Many revisionist historians believe the story of the Holocaust is fake and have proved it by much evidence and documents," says the conservative paper Resalat. Hardline Siyasat-e Ruz applauds the leader for "revealing the truth".

It's hardly a surprise. TV stations across the Muslim world have been running this garbage for ages, along with lurid anti-semitism. Jordanian TV's Ramadan special this year was Al-Shatat, a Syrian-produced series that speaks of a "global Jewish government" and depicts the ancient blood libel: the accusation that Jews use the blood of Christian children in preparing food for Passover. That was a follow-up to Egyptian television's Ramadan treat in 2002: Horseman without a Horse, whose central theme was the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the century-old forgery concocted by the Tsarist secret police which alleged a Jewish plot to take over the world.

We can deny it no longer: the virus of anti-semitism has infected the Muslim world. And virus it is, for Jew-hatred on this scale, as Christian Europe can testify, is a kind of sickness. This is one of the grossest legacies bequeathed by the west: that Muslims have taken to heart a form of anti-semitism alien to their own lands, borrowing a language and iconography that was made in Christendom. Blood libels and the Protocols were dreamed up in Norwich, Mainz or Moscow - yet now they breathe anew in Cairo, Riyadh and Damascus.

This represents a menace to Jews, of course, but also a tragedy for Muslims. Theirs is a tradition that historically valued learning, and when an ignoramus like Ahmadinejad denies the overwhelming weight of historical evidence he makes a mockery of that tradition. In a period Jews still look back on as a golden age, Muslims were the people of scholarship, of science, of tolerance and coexistence - a contrast with the Crusader barbarians. Yet now many lap up the myths and lies that were once fed to the peasants of Europe, lies which endured through to the last century - and which led all the way to Treblinka.

Today's Muslims should want no part of such ignorance or bigotry. It demeans them. So Azzam Tamimi of the Muslim Association of Britain is to be applauded for his implicit condemnation of Ahmadinejad at the Stop the War conference at the weekend, telling his audience that, whatever their views, they could not deny the fact of the Holocaust. Now the Muslim Council of Britain should follow his lead, and that of the Muslim Public Affairs Council in the US, which also condemned this preacher of hate. And those non-Muslim progressives who have made alliances with Islamists should do the same. It may mean some uncomfortable conversations - but the days of denial must end.

freedland@guardian.co.uk

Guardian Unlimited © Guardian Newspapers Limited 2005