

COMMENTARY

Holocaust Denial and Tehran

By **ROYA HAKAKIAN**
November 3, 2007; Page A8

Dictatorships bear paradoxes. I came across a set of them 10 years ago, when I hosted a dinner for two female Iranian medical students who'd come to Yale Medical School on a rare academic exchange program. These impressive women had climbed to the top 10th percentile in a man's profession, in a man's country. But I was stunned to learn that -- despite 16 years of education at some of Iran's premiere schools -- neither had ever heard of the word "Holocaust," or thought of Hitler as anything but the German equivalent of Napoleon.

Tehran's Holocaust denial did not begin with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. It began in 1979 with the Islamic Revolution and the subsequent miseducation of the entire post-revolutionary generation. The Holocaust did not exist in the textbooks of my two young guests, and there was hardly any literature about it in Persian.

Now, millions of Iranian youths are hearing about the Holocaust for the first time through the airing of a government-sponsored soap opera called "Zero Degree Turn." In it, the Islamic Republic's handpicked director, Hassan Fatthi, breaks the regime's taboos. Beautiful women appear without the Islamic dress code. Men and women also come together, hold hands, and even fall into a fleeting embrace.

In the end, however, the program offers little more than an aesthetically pleasing venue for the regime's usual diatribes. Its linchpin is a conspiracy theory: Two Israeli agents assassinate the chief rabbi of Tehran to frighten the Iranian Jewish community into leaving Iran for Israel. The noble chief of the Iranian embassy in France, Abdol Hossein Sardari, who facilitated the escape of hundreds of Iranian and French Jews by providing them with Iranian passports, is portrayed as a mere opportunist motivated by bribes.

The good news is that Iran is now home to a highly rebellious young generation that is deeply disenchanted with the status quo and suspicious of government propaganda in all its forms, including misinformation about Jews and Israel. Iranians actually possess a healthy curiosity toward Israel. In the 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah, for example, young Iranians were reportedly not interested in supporting Hezbollah, and were vehemently against their government's investment in it.

Unfortunately, Mr. Ahmadinejad steals the spotlight. With his threats toward Israel and his dreams of a nuclear Iran he has engendered a fear, however legitimate, that too often blinds Western and Israeli leaders of the broader, more complex realities of the Iranian people. American, European and Israeli media are full of dire warnings about the threat

of a nuclear Iran. There is little mention of the plight of the Iranians themselves, or the ripe opportunity presented by a nation disenchanting with 30 years of theocratic rule: A people that has historically been friendly to Jews, can, with some effort, be so once again.

Mr. Ahmadinejad, along with his coterie of fundamentalist radicals, is already a threat to Israel and the region. But they do not represent everyday Iranians. And as much as the regime in Tehran would like to deny it, a more accepting, rational view of Israel was once held by Iranian leaders.

In the early 1960s, several leading Iranian intellectuals traveled to Israel on the invitation of the Israeli foreign ministry and for the most part, the travelogues of their trips amounted to what may be the longest love letter to Israel ever to be penned in Persian. That sentiment, of course, would change dramatically. But for several years at least, it seemed that it would determine the attitude of an entire generation toward Israel.

Iran's Holocaust education could begin in Iran itself. Through the Port of Pahlavi in 1942, tens of thousands of Polish refugees, Jewish and non-Jewish, escaped the Nazis found a safe haven in Iran. Eventually, the majority of them relocated to other parts of the world. Yet, hundreds fell in love with "Persia" and stayed. Iranians could learn of their shared history with the Jewish people by visiting the hundreds of Polish graves in Tehran's Doulab cemetery alone.

Despite the regime's anti-Semitic rhetoric, the people have held fast to the values of their ancient civilization. They pride themselves on the idea that they have accepted members of other religions and ethnicities as equals, and as Iranians.

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