

Kosher in Tehran

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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Iran is the new Nazi Germany and its president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the new Hitler. Or so Israeli officials have been declaring for months as they and their American allies try to persuade the doubters in Washington that an attack on Tehran is essential. And if the latest media reports are to be trusted, it looks like they may again be winning the battle for hearts and minds: vice-president Dick Cheney is said to be [diverting the White House](#) back on track to launch a military strike.

Earlier this year Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's opposition leader and the man who appears to be styling himself as scaremonger-in-chief, [told us](#): "It's 1938 and Iran is Germany. And Iran is racing to arm itself with atomic bombs." Of Ahmadinejad, he said: "He is preparing another Holocaust for the Jewish state."

A few weeks ago, as Israel's military intelligence [claimed](#) – as it has been doing regularly since the early 1990s – that Iran is only a year or so away from the "point of no return" on developing a nuclear warhead, Netanyahu was at it again. "Iran could be the first undeterrable nuclear power," [he warned](#), adding: "This is a Jewish problem like Hitler was a Jewish problem ... The future of the Jewish people depends on the future of Israel."

But Netanyahu has been far from alone in making extravagant claims about a looming genocide from Iran. Israel's new president, Shimon Peres, has compared an Iranian nuclear bomb to a "flying concentration camp". And the prime minister, Ehud Olmert, [told](#) a German newspaper last year: "[Ahmadinejad] speaks as Hitler did in his time of the extermination of the entire Jewish nation."

There is an interesting problem with selling the "Iran as Nazi Germany" line. If Ahmadinejad really is Hitler, ready to commit genocide against Israel's Jews as soon as he can get his hands on a nuclear weapon, why are some 25,000 Jews living peacefully in Iran and more than reluctant to leave, despite repeated enticements from Israel and American Jews?

What is the basis for Israel's dire forecasts – the ideological scaffolding being erected, presumably, to justify an attack on Iran? Helpfully, as George Bush defended his Iraq policies last month, he [reminded us](#) yet again of the menace Iran supposedly poses: it is "threatening to wipe Israel off the map".

This myth has been endlessly recycled since a [translating error](#) was made of a speech Ahmadinejad delivered nearly two years ago. Farsi experts have [verified](#) that the Iranian president, far from threatening to destroy Israel, was quoting from an earlier speech by the late Ayatollah Khomeini in which he reassured supporters of the Palestinians that "the Zionist regime in Jerusalem" would "vanish from the page of time".

He was not threatening to exterminate Jews or even Israel. He was comparing Israel's occupation of the Palestinians with other illegitimate systems of rule whose time had passed, including the Shahs who once ruled Iran, apartheid South Africa and the Soviet empire. Nonetheless, this erroneous translation has survived and prospered because Israel and her supporters have exploited it for their own crude propaganda purposes.

In the meantime, the 25,000-strong Iranian Jewish community is the largest in the Middle East outside Israel and traces its roots back 3,000 years. As one of several non-Muslim minorities in Iran, Jews there suffer discrimination, but they are certainly no worse off than the one million Palestinian citizens of Israel – and far better off than Palestinians under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza.

Iranian Jews have little influence on decision-making and are not allowed to hold senior posts in the army or bureaucracy. But they [enjoy many freedoms](#). They have an elected representative in parliament, they practice their religion openly in synagogues, their charities are funded by the Jewish diaspora, and they can travel freely, including to Israel. In Tehran there are six kosher butchers and about 30 synagogues. Ahmadinejad's office recently made a donation to a Jewish hospital in Tehran.

As Ciamak Moresadegh, an Iranian Jewish leader, [observed](#): "If you think Judaism and Zionism are one, it is like thinking Islam and the Taliban are the same, and they are not." Iran's leaders denounce Zionism, which they blame for fuelling discrimination against the Palestinians, but they have also repeatedly avowed that they have no problem with Jews, Judaism or even the state of Israel. Ahmadinejad, caricatured as a merchant of genocide, has in fact called for "regime change" – and then only in the sense that he believes [a referendum should be held](#) of all inhabitants of Israel and the occupied territories, including refugees from war, on the nature of the government.

Despite the absence of any threat to Iran's Jews, the Israeli media recently reported that the Israeli government has been trying to [find new ways](#) to entice Iranian Jews to Israel. The Ma'ariv newspaper pointed out that previous schemes had found few takers. There was, noted the report, "a lack of desire on the part of thousands of Iranian Jews to leave". According to the New York-based Forward newspaper, a [campaign](#) to persuade Iranian Jews to emigrate to Israel caused only 152 out of these 25,000 Jews to leave Iran between October 2005 and September 2006, and most of them were said to have emigrated for economic reasons, not political ones.

To step up these efforts – and presumably to avoid the embarrassing incongruence of claiming Iran's genocidal intent while thousands of Jews live happily in Tehran – Israel is now [backing](#) a move by Jewish donors to guarantee every Iranian Jewish family \$60,000 to settle in Israel, in addition to a host of existing financial incentives that are offered to Jewish immigrants, including loans and cheap mortgages.

The announcement was [met with scorn](#) by the Society of Iranian Jews, which issued a statement that their national identity was not for sale. "The identity of Iranian Jews is not tradeable for any amount of money. Iranian Jews are among the most ancient Iranians. Iran's Jews love their Iranian identity and their culture, so threats and this immature political enticement will not achieve their aim of wiping out the identity of Iranian Jews."

More important than the welfare of Iranian Jewish families, it seems, is the value of Iranian Jews as a propaganda tool in Israel's battle to persuade the world that coexistence with the

Muslim world is impossible. For those who want to engineer a clash of civilisations, the 3,000-year-old Jewish legacy in Iran is not something to be treasured, only another obstacle to war.

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