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Some Thoughts on Radical Islam

Yad Vashem, as you know, is dedicated to memorialization, education, and research on the genocide of the Jews, which we call Holocaust, or Shoah, a word which means 'catastrophe'. The denial of the Holocaust as proposed by the 'conference' that just took place in Teheran, has been with us since the Holocaust itself, when, as we know from testimonies of survivors, the concentration guards used to tell the inmates that even if they survived, no one would believe in their testimonies. The background of denial has been, for the past sixty years, the desire to justify the National Socialist regime as against the democratic regimes within which the deniers lived and live. In order to justify Nazism, one had to deny the genocide. But, since the trial in London of the main Western denier, the Englishman David Irving, and his condemnation by a British court as a liar, a racist, and an antisemite, Holocaust denial in Western countries has become a marginal phenomenon. Not so in many Moslem countries, where it has become part and parcel of anti-Western and, mainly, anti-Jewish propaganda. But Holocaust denial in Moslem countries is embedded in radical Islam, and one has to understand that context if one wants to deal with denial, and the new genocidal threat posed by the Iranian regime.

There are great differences between National Socialism, Soviet Communism, and radical Islam, but there are also some important parallels. All three are or were religious or quasi-religious movements. Unquestioning, quasi-religious belief in Nazi ideology was central to the existence and policies of the regime, and it was Nazi ideology that was the central factor that produced the Holocaust; Marxist-Leninism was the quasi-religious dogma that everyone in the Stalinist empire had to swear by. The same applies to radical Islam. Radical Islam is not Islam. Islam is a religion which can and should be legitimately interpreted as a peace-loving, universalist creed. Radical Islam, on the other hand, is a relatively new development that radicalizes accepted interpretations of Islam. All these three ideologies aspire or aspired to an apocalyptic utopia of world rule: the Nazis dreamt of a Thousand-Year Reich which, with the help of its allies, would establish a world domination based on a hierarchy of races, with the Nordic peoples of the Aryan race on top, and all the others below it. There would be no Jews, because they would all

be annihilated. This would end history as such, and establish a wonderful utopia of peace and prosperity. The Communists dreamt about the world dictatorship of the proletariat, which would establish a classless society that would in effect terminate conflicts and contradictions forever, thus also in effect ending history. Radical Islam desires world domination by God, through Islamic clerics, that would eliminate all “pagan” belief systems such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, etc.; Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and whatever would be left of Judaism, would be religions practiced by unbelievers under strict Moslem control and rule. That would establish the ultimate, just society, and constitute the end of history, as nothing can supersede the rule of God (Allah). All three are thus religious utopias. All utopias kill; universal, apocalyptic utopias kill radically.

All three ideologies were developed more or less at the same time, in the first part of the 20th century. Hitler entered the world of politics in 1919; the Bolshevik revolution took place in 1917; and the first radical Islamist movement, the Moslem Brotherhood, was founded by an Egyptian teacher, Hassan el-Bana, in 1928.

National Socialism and Communism did away with parliamentary democracy and free expression of political opinion, and wanted to eliminate or subject all national states to their direct or indirect rule, leaving them as empty shells that would be filled with National Socialist or Communist content. Radical Islam sees parliamentary systems as blasphemy, because in them humans decide on laws: but God has decreed how men (women don't count as political creatures) should be ruled, through His word in the Qur'an, in the Prophet's traditions (Hadith), and through the medieval laws of the Shari'ah, the Islamic law code. Radical Islam wishes to abolish all national states, especially Arab ones, and substitute for them Islamic states that will unite in a world Islamic government. And all three target Jews as their main, or immediate, enemy: the Nazis murdered them; the Soviets planned, in 1952, to deport all Soviet Jews to Siberia, with the obvious intention that most of them should die. The genocidal message of radical Islam to the Jews is loud and clear: “You should know that seeking to kill Americans and Jews everywhere in the world is one of the greatest duties, and the good deed most preferred by Allah...your brethren... continue to pursue the way of Jihad, targeting the Jews and the Americans” (Osama Bin Laden in a message on February 11, 2003). This is a clear repetition of the language of National Socialism; and it is

absolutely crucial to realize that when radical ideologues utter what they fanatically believe in, they will act out their beliefs if they only can. Sheikh Abd Al-Rahman Al-Sudayyis, an Imam at the most important mosque in the Moslem world, the Al-Haram mosque in Mecca, declared in 2002: “Read history and you will understand that the Jews of yesterday are the evil fathers of the Jews of today, who are evil offspring, infidels, distorters of God’s words, calf-worshippers, prophet-murderers, prophecy-deniers...the scum of the human race whom Allah cursed and turned into apes and pigs”. Preachers everywhere, by the way even in Baghdad during the secular regime of Saddam Hussein, quote a widely popular tradition that says that before the Day of Judgment, the Moslems will fight the Jews and kill them. Seeking refuge, the tradition, the hadith, says, the Jews will hide behind stones and trees, but the stones and trees will call out, “Oh, Muslim, oh servant of God, a Jew is hiding behind me. Come and kill him.” This is not a call for an attack on Israel, or a statement regarding Palestine. This is an incitement to genocide, and I could quote reams and reams of this stuff as it was spread during the last three or four years. Our problem is that radical Islamic ideology finds its way into mainstream Islamic discourse, and the regimes in many Moslem countries are afraid to counteract this trend. But we should remember that Article III of the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, of the United Nations of 1948, ratified in 1951, says that “direct and public incitement to commit genocide” is a punishable crime of genocide.

The main teachings of the Moslem Brotherhood were developed over time, and spread all over the Moslem world. The most important ideologue was Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian official who wrote a Stuermer-like pamphlet against the Jews, which is the basis of today’s anti-Jewish propaganda, in 1950. This, by the way, was seventeen years before Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza. It therefore seems to me illusory to think that a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will automatically disarm radical Islam. However, there is no doubt that the conflict serves as a trigger for the radical, anti-civilizational ideology, and that an Israeli-Palestinian compromise would help in fighting Radical Islam though, as Bin Laden and others repeat, the main issue would still remain: the defeat of Western and East Asian civilizations.

Radical Islamic antisemitism is a central part of the ideology; but this antisemitism did not arise from Islam. It is true that Jews – and Christians – were and are discriminated against in Islamic societies, and have to submit to being second and third-class citizens. Only Moslems are full members of such societies. However, Jews and Christians were, at least historically, groups whose physical, cultural-religious and social existence was protected and who had a fairly wide measure of internal self-government. This does not mean that Jews were not sometimes persecuted, or that there were no killings; but they were rare, compared to the persecutions Jews underwent in Christian Europe. Modern Islamist antisemitism did not arise in the Islamic world – it was introduced into it by European colonial powers as part of the cultural package that came to dominate the Moslem world. It became a central factor in molding the anti-Western stand of dissatisfied Moslem intellectuals. These intellectuals, and in their wake the ruling elites, were faced with the fact that eight hundred years ago Islam was the most advanced civilization in the West, whereas Christian Europe was a barbaric borderland. But in the 19th and 20th centuries, Christian Europe and America had gained a revolutionary technological ascendance, which enabled it to, in effect, conquer the world. Moslem societies, with some exceptions, became backwaters ruled, directly or indirectly, by foreigners. Progressive Moslems saw this as a challenge that had to be met by learning from the West, and adapting Western concepts to Islamic traditions. But radical Islamicists, frustrated by the reality they faced, interpreted it differently: we are backward and subject to the humiliation of foreign rule and cultural domination because we have not obeyed the word of God. Islamic religious teachings were interpreted by them in the most radical way possible. If, so they said and say today, we will obey God's will as manifested in the Islamic Holy Scriptures and as interpreted by the radicals, God will grant us victory over the West and enable us to dominate the world. The West, they say, is ruled by the Jews – an exact replica of Nazi and Soviet propaganda. You can see this in the latest letter the Iranian President sent to the President of the United States, where he accused the Jews of controlling everything of value in the US. Jews, and not just Israel, the Jewish collective, are the spearhead of Western imperialism, and must be destroyed. For the first time since World War II, Jews are, again, threatened by a genocide. We must remember: radical Islamic ideology is not just propaganda designed to attain political

goals; they believe in what they say, and they fully intend to act on these beliefs, given the chance to do so.

The sense of frustration that spawned the radical approach is directed also against East Asian societies that are today wresting the leadership from the Euro-Americans. Japan, China, South Korea, Singapore, and now India, became or are becoming leaders in the economies and societies of our world. The US is no longer the only superpower. And Malaysia, Tunis, and tomorrow Indonesia, are Moslem societies that are on the way to compete with Western domination. But the fact that parts of the Moslem world are catching up does not change radical Islam, because as we know, ideology persists even when the basis from which it sprang has changed or is changing. The danger of this worldwide murderous ideology will be with us despite these changes.

Holocaust denial is an integral part of this ideology. Two arguments are put forward: one, that the Holocaust is a myth. The other, that Israel was created by the West because of guilt feelings resulting from the Holocaust, and that the Palestinians, and the whole Moslem world, was made to suffer because of the sins of the Europeans. The fact that the two arguments contradict each other, does not matter. Out of the tremendous number of such statements, let me quote only a couple: Dr. Rif'at Sayyed Ahmad, of the al Liwaa al-Islam journal in Cairo, a journal of the government National Democratic Party, wrote on June 24, 2004, about "the lie about the burning of the Jews in the Nazi gas chambers. When these means", he wrote, "were scientifically examined, it was proven that they were untrue." In Iran, Ayatollah Ali Meshkini, head of the Assmebly of Experts in Qom, said on December 17, 2005, that "the Zionists...invented a false claim. They said that Hitler, the Germans, the Austrians, burned six million Jews in crematoria...They tried very hard to convince the world that this issue, this lie, was true..I am not sure if the word holocaust comes from Hebrew or French, but it means to burn human beings in crematoria." The Iranian President said, as we all know, that the Holocaust was a myth, but even if it were true, and he does not believe it, why should Palestinians and Moslems pay for what happened in Europe. One must say that not only Islamic radicals believe that Israel is the result of the Holocaust; others, including many Jews, also believe this. But this is demonstrably false. Before World War II there was tremendous pressure of millions of Jews to enter Palestine. They were murdered, and that

meant that the chance of creating a Jewish State became remote. The Jewish survivors, a few hundreds of thousands, undoubtedly were a central factor in enabling the Jews in Palestine to fight for their independence. Had the war continued for another year or two, there can hardly be a doubt that very few Jews would have survived, and thus the chance of the establishment of Israel would have been nil. The Holocaust almost eliminated the hopes for a Jewish State. The British opposed a Jewish State. So did President Truman, and the Department of State. But pressure from American Jews and non-Jews alike caused a change in US policies. The Holocaust had nothing to do with American, or any other, policies at the time. The establishment of Israel was motivated by completely different factors. Holocaust denial, in both its forms, is therefore based on counter-factual statements. It is, in the Moslem world, part of a radical ideology, opposed by Moslem liberals, that threatens not only Jews, but civilization as such.

The main difference between the three totalitarian ideologies is that radical Islam is a diffuse movement. Bin Laden is important, even if he were no longer alive or active, and his deputy, the Egyptian pediatrician Ayman el-Zawahiri, even more so. But he is no dictator, and the movement is decentralized. From their point of view, this is much better, because any radical, whatever his ethnic background, will find a warm welcome in Islamicist cells all over the globe, based on shared religious fanaticism. There are differences within the movement, to be sure: within the majoritarian Sunni societies, the Islamicist regime ruling the Sudan has a different complexion from El-Qaida groups in Iraq, though the basic ideology is the same. There is, as we all know, a serious division between the Sunni and the Shi'ite forms of Islam, and therefore also within radical Islam. Sunnis and Shi'ites are engaged in a bitter and murderous battle in Iraq. Iranian radical Shi'a is not as anti-nationalist as the Sunni version is, and radical Islam there is combined with an empire-building nationalist agenda. Iran is seeking to control the Persian Gulf, against the Sunnis, by a combination of political, economic and military means as part of the aim of Islamic world rule, by controlling the sources of energy that the rest of the world depend on. But when it comes to basics, divergencies are overcome, as we can see by the enthusiastic reception of Sunni Hamas leaders in Teheran. The direct contact between Iran and Hezbollah is well-known. The Hezbollah master mind, Imad Mughniyeh, works from within the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security and the

al-Qods (or: Jerusalem) unit within the Iranian Security Service, the Pasdaran. Mughniyeh was the person responsible for the Buenos Aires bombing in 1992. In Beirut, the Hezbollah Shura, or Council, consists of seven members, and is regularly attended by two Iranians, from Beirut and Damascus. Hamas, which of course is Sunni, had a permanent representative in Iran in the person of Osama Hamdan, who now is the Hamas representative in Beirut and coordinates between the Sunni Hamas and the Shi'ite Hezbollah. Sunni-Shi'ite rivalry is real and often murderous. But when it comes to attacking the West, and especially the Jews, this can be overcome.

A successful fight against radical Islam can, it seems, only be achieved by an alliance with Moslem anti-radicals, because they of course are the main immediate targets of Islamic radicalism; they are seen as heretics who have to be eliminated. A four-pronged approach may be suggested here: one, massive propaganda not against Islam, but against radical Islam, with moderate Moslems in the forefront – there are millions of such people; second, socio-economic measures directed towards ordinary people and not administered through the present corrupt and authoritarian regimes in most (not all) Moslem countries; third, political alliances with Moslem and non-Moslem forces throughout the world, explicitly directed against radical Islamic movements; fourth, a possible use of force wherever targets can be identified, but only as an absolutely last resort, to be avoided wherever and whenever possible. Usually, though not always, the use of force is counter-productive.

Many Europeans and others believe that if they don't cooperate with those who oppose radical Islam, they will escape being targeted. This is the same tragic mistake that similar well-meaning people made vis-à-vis Nazis and Communists in their time: today we are all targeted; and if the radicals succeed in defeating one of us, they will turn against the other. We are all in the same boat. We should forge a united front against an existential, genocidal, universal danger, for they target Jews and Americans first, and all the others will follow.