

# Historical and political issues behind Iranian president's anti-Semitic campaign

Justus Leicht, Stephan Steinberg  
30 December 2005

In recent months, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has repeatedly gone public with anti-Semitic declarations. He has described the Nazi genocide of 6 million Jews during the Second World War as a “myth” concocted to justify the existence of Israel, refused to accept the claim that “Hitler killed millions of innocent Jews,” called for the state of Israel to be “wiped off the map” and demanded that Jews currently living in Israel be moved to Canada or Alaska.

Against the background of a growing social crisis and divisions within the ruling elite in Iran, Ahmadinejad's remarks are aimed at dividing working people along national and religious lines, mobilising reactionary political elements, and diverting social tensions into chauvinist channels. It is the response of a tiny but enormously wealthy ruling elite seeking to maintain control of a society wracked by profound internal conflict.

Behind Ahmadinejad's anti-Semitic remarks and his threats against Israel is a calculated attempt to create an atmosphere of siege, where any form of social or political opposition can be prosecuted as high treason and violently suppressed. Far from opposing imperialism and the oppressive policies of the Israeli government, Ahmadinejad's outbursts are directed fundamentally against the Iranian working class.

In particular, they are a direct threat to the small community of Jews living in Iran, numbering some 30,000, whose origins go back to the sixth century B.C. With increasing frequency, the Iranian leadership has sought to mobilise anti-Jewish sentiment in order to obscure the political bankruptcy of the ruling clerical elite.

At the same time, Ahmadinejad's anti-Semitic remarks play into the hands of the most reactionary forces worldwide. In America, President George W. Bush used the comments by the Iranian president to revive his claim that Iran was part of an “axis of evil,” together with Iraq and North Korea. The Israeli foreign ministry spokesman, Mark Regev, responded with a veiled threat, declaring, “The combination of fanatical ideology, a warped sense of reality and nuclear weapons is one that nobody in the international community can accept.” According to an article in the British *Sunday Times*, Israel has developed detailed plans for an attack on Iranian uranium enrichment facilities by the end of March.

Ahmadinejad, a former mayor of Tehran, is a right-wing demagogue who presents himself as a representative of the poor while loyally supporting the religious hard-liners, who have little credibility among the population but control large parts of the economy, the state apparatus, the judiciary and national television.

He began his political career as an officer in the Pasdaran, the paramilitary wing of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard established by Ayatollah Khomeini. Ahmadinejad was also an instructor in the *basij*, the militia that enforces Iran's extreme Islamist code of moral conduct. In keeping with his role as a *basij* instructor, he used his powers as Teheran's mayor to curb social and cultural liberties.

Since his installation as president, Ahmadinejad has systematically filled government posts, the state-run media, the diplomatic corps and the state's financial institutions with his own supporters. Many of them are

associated with the Pasdaran, and many entered politics in the course of the 1980-1988 war between Iraq and Iran. In short, Ahmadinejad bases himself a group of religious reactionaries and nationalists who have no hesitation in launching bloody confrontations and pogroms against other ethnic and religious groups.

Notwithstanding the divisions and vicious infighting among the Iranian elite, the ascent of such a right-wing figure to the highest office of the Iranian state and his resort to open anti-Semitism are expressions of the crisis and political impasse facing the entire Iranian bourgeoisie, and that of the Middle East as a whole. This social elite is organically incapable of establishing democratic conditions at home or waging a consistent and serious struggle against imperialism internationally.

The resort to various forms of communalist politics, with all of its reactionary implications, is a phenomenon that increasingly characterises the national bourgeoisie in countries throughout the so-called “Third World.” The period when bourgeois nationalist movements and left nationalist regimes in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America could present themselves as the leadership of anti-imperialist “national liberation movements” of the oppressed masses of the world, often adopting a socialist coloration, is long past. It ended definitively with the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, upon which the bourgeois nationalists relied as a counterweight to US imperialism. The breakup of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European client states, with their autarkic economies, was itself bound up with the growing globalisation of production and the intensified conflict between world economy and the nation state system.

The rise of Ahmadinejad ultimately expresses the character of the social forces that were able to take the leadership of the 1979 revolution, a mass uprising that brought down the despised and brutal dictatorship of Shah Reza Pahlavi, the main pillar of US dominance in the region. While the revolution was based on a popular mass movement, the working class remained subordinated to the dissident faction of the national bourgeoisie represented by clerical figures and led by Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini.

Khomeini's main social base was among the more traditional bourgeois layers, especially the bazaar merchants, who were antagonised by the Shah and his close economic ties to Western imperialism. The Khomeini regime massacred thousands of left-wing militants, quashed every independent movement of the working class, and brutally suppressed any attempt by the Kurds to win national rights.

The ability of the mullahs and bazaar merchants to dominate the 1979 revolution was the result of the policies of the Stalinist Tudeh Party and other left-wing forces, which held back the working class and impoverished peasants. On the basis of a so-called “united front of progressive nationalist forces” against the Shah, the Tudeh Party, in the name of “Islamic socialism” and “anti-imperialism,” supported Khomeini as well as Bani-Sadr, the first president of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This was not the first time that the Tudeh Party, and its predecessor, the Communist Party of Iran, betrayed the Iranian working class, which has a

long and militant political history. Founded in 1920, the Communist Party came under the influence of Stalinism by the mid-1920s and rejected the theoretical basis of the Russian revolution of October 1917, the theory of Permanent Revolution.

This theory, first formulated by Leon Trotsky in 1905, maintained that in the epoch of imperialism, the national bourgeoisie in backward countries was incapable of resolving the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution. Confronted with an emerging working class, it would inevitably form an alliance with feudal elements, the military and imperialist forces in order to defend its property and rule.

As a result, Trotsky insisted that “the complete and genuine solution of their tasks of achieving democracy and national emancipation” was conceivable only if the working class established its political independence from all sections of the bourgeoisie, won the leadership of “the subjugated nation, above all of its peasant masses,” and took power into its own hands, establishing a workers’ state and carrying out not only democratic measures, but also the initial steps in the socialist transformation of the economy. Trotsky emphasised that this strategy could succeed only on the basis of an international revolutionary, rather than a national, perspective.

Under the influence of Stalinism, the sections of the Communist International adopted, in opposition to Permanent Revolution, a two-stage theory of revolution. According to this essentially nationalist conception, the working class was obliged to cede the leadership of revolutionary struggles in countries with a belated capitalist development to the “progressive” national bourgeoisie, which would overthrow the feudalist ruling elites and establish bourgeois democratic regimes, under which capitalism would develop and the working class would grow. Only at some future, unspecified point would conditions be “ripe” for the working class to take power in a socialist revolution.

The political meaning of this ahistorical and schematic distortion of Marxism was the collaboration of the Communist parties in the disarming of the working class and its subordination to bourgeois forces that inevitably turned violently against the working class. The most tragic and disastrous example of the application of this policy in the 1920s occurred in China, where the Communist Party was obliged to work under the discipline of the bourgeois Kuomintang, leading to the bloody defeat of the 1927 revolution.

In Iran, the Stalinist bureaucracy proclaimed Reza Khan Pahlavi a “revolutionary leader.” Reza Khan was a Cossack colonel, backed by the political leaders of the bourgeoisie, who carried out a coup d’état in 1921 with the help of British imperialism. He made use of “left” and “anti-imperialist” demagoguery in his efforts to inaugurate a capitalist development of the economy on the basis of a strong state. In 1925 he awarded himself the “peacock throne.”

Confronted with the problem that economic development not only increased the social weight of the working class, but also intensified social differences between the propertied classes and the broad masses, in both the cities and the rural areas, Pahlavi resorted to oppression and chauvinism. Instead of breaking the power of the clergy, the big landowners and the petty-bourgeois bazaar merchants, Pahlavi leaned precisely on these social layers to suppress the working class and ban all independent organisations of workers and peasants. His model was Atatürk’s Turkey and Mussolini’s fascist Italy.

When, in the early 1950s, a mounting social and national movement forced the Shah’s son and successor, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, into temporary exile, the Tudeh Party once again betrayed an emerging revolutionary movement by subordinating itself to the national bourgeoisie. First it supported the government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq, who nationalised the country’s oil industry, up until then owned by British Petroleum. Mossadeq, who incurred the wrath of British imperialism, sought to play off the United States against Great

Britain.

Following American advice, Mossadeq turned brutally on the masses—including those who constituted his own base—with the use of military force. It was easy in the aftermath of this repression for the military and the Shah to deal with Mossadeq himself. He was overthrown by a CIA-backed military coup in August 1953.

This was possible because the Tudeh, after Mossadeq’s National Front had rejected its offer of a “broad front,” abstained from mobilising independent resistance against Reza Shah Pahlavi, who was then able to assume dictatorial powers. His secret police, the SAVAK, soon became internationally infamous for its brutal torture techniques.

It should be noted that the majority of the clergy supported the Shah at the time of the coup and in the following years. This only began to change when, under the Shah, modernisation and the opening up of the national economy to international companies began to threaten the economic interests of the clergy itself.

The main base of this layer was the “bazaar”—the traditional traders and merchants who were incapable of competing internationally. Only a small clique around the Shah, national and foreign capitalists, and the large landowners benefited from the so-called “white revolution” of modernisation and industrialisation that began in 1963. But this process also integrated Iran into the world economy and strengthened the social force capable of overthrowing the rule of the native bourgeoisie—the urban proletariat, which underwent enormous growth until the middle of the 1970s.

Already, in the early years of the Islamic Republic, there were violent disagreements within the ruling elite over economic policies, the role of the state in the economy, and the opening up of the country to foreign investment.

In accordance with the interests of his social base amongst the bazaar merchants, Khomeini tried to curb the impact of the world market on the Iranian economy by nationalising the banks and key industries, including the oil industry. However, within the framework of the increasing globalisation of the capitalist world economy, it was impossible to sustain economic development on a purely national basis.

The Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) bled the country white and further deepened its economic problems. In the war, the US generally supported Iraq but at times tilted towards Iran, encouraging the mutual bloodletting so as to weaken both regimes. In spite of the propaganda against the United States and Israel, the Iranian leadership secretly collaborated with the United States and Israel, as was disclosed in the Iran-Contra affair. The Reagan White House secretly organised arms shipments to Iran, using the revenue to finance the dirty war of the Contras against Nicaragua.

In the 1990s, the Tudeh Party set its hopes on the so-called “reformist” wing of the Iranian regime, led by Mohammed Khatami and supported by the various organisations making up the Islamic Iran Participation Front. Khatami was elected president in 1997.

But the Khatami camp was unwilling to mount any significant defence of democratic rights. Whenever the new government felt threatened by a mass movement from below, Khatami and his reformist supporters closed ranks with their hard-line opponents to suppress workers and students, while hectoring against the dangers of “extremism of the left and right.” Even when reformist journalists, intellectuals and politicians were persecuted, jailed or killed, Khatami did nothing other than urge calm and moderation.

Khatami pursued a pro-imperialist and neo-liberal policy hostile to the interests of the broad masses of the population. He was looking for improved relations with Europe and the US even as the Bush administration invaded and occupied the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan and Iraq and issued open threats of military intervention against Iran.

As a result, the Khatami camp, which had originally aroused

considerable illusions amongst young people and opponents of the Mullah regime, was utterly discredited and no longer able to keep the mounting social and political contradictions under control. It was under these conditions that the Mullah regime advanced Ahmadinejad as Khatami's successor.

While Ahmadinejad assumed the presidency on the basis of combating an ill-defined "mafia" and establishing a certain degree of social justice, his recourse to chauvinism and anti-Semitism is a sure sign that he and his supporters have no solutions to Iran's enormous social problems. Although Iran is rich in oil reserves and has been able to profit somewhat from rising oil prices, the infrastructure of its oil industry is thoroughly dilapidated and huge investment is necessary to continue the flow of oil revenues.

The official unemployment rate in Iran is currently pegged at 16 percent, but many observers say it is closer to 30 or 35 percent. Among those under 25, the jobless rate is placed at 42 percent. Under conditions where millions of young people are coming onto the job market every year, this percentage is bound to increase. Forty percent of the country's population, according to unofficial estimates, lives below the poverty line. Strikes and other forms of labor unrest against poor conditions and low wages are commonplace.

On the other hand, a small layer of mullahs and businessmen has amassed enormous wealth by plundering the country's resources, in particular, its oil reserves. This process of enrichment is broadly seen to be personified in the figure of Ayatollah Rafsanjani, Ahmadinejad's major competitor in the presidential election, who is said to command a personal fortune of more than \$1 billion.

Such social contradictions are taking an increasingly violent form. Ahmadinejad's first half-year in office has already been marked by incarcerations, executions and bloody clashes between protestors and security forces in Iranian Kurdistan. Earlier this month, a member of the personal bodyguard of the Iranian president was reported to have been killed under yet-to-be-explained circumstances in southeastern Iran.

For their part, the Bush administration and the Israeli regime have used the provocations of Ahmadinejad to step up their own preparations for a military strike against Iran. The logic of chauvinism and religious fanaticism employed by the Iranian elite to control its domestic political and social crisis inevitably raises the threat of the balkanisation of the entire region and war in the Middle East.

During the Cold War period, the Arab and Iranian bourgeoisie were able to use the antagonism between Western imperialism and the Soviet bloc to obtain a certain degree of national autonomy and maintain some degree of control over their own natural resources. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist satellite countries at the start of the 1990s, this room for manoeuvre disappeared.

Increasingly, the entire Middle East resembles a powder keg. Under the combined pressure of globalisation, enormous social divisions and a new offensive by Western imperialism—led by the US—to redivide the region and monopolise its resources, the state structures set up after the Second World War are breaking apart in one country after another. None of the pressing problems in the region can be resolved on a national basis.

If Iranian history has proven anything, it is the complete inability of any wing of the national bourgeoisie to offer a progressive solution to the social problems of the broad masses—whether the hard-line faction associated with Khomeini, the reformist wing of Khatami, or the "progressive" elements defended by such organisations as the Tudeh Party. Although at different times such wings within the Iranian bourgeoisie have engaged in their own bitter factional struggles, they have repeatedly dropped their differences and combined to oppose the threat from below.

The social and political crisis brewing throughout the Middle East urgently requires the adoption of a new international perspective by

workers and the oppressed masses that breaks fundamentally with the nationalism of all sections of the Iranian and Arab bourgeoisie. The anti-Semitic propaganda of the Mullah regime in Iran only serves to isolate Iranian workers from their class brothers and sisters in Israel, driving the latter into the arms of reactionary Zionism and splitting the entire working class of the Middle East along ethnic and religious lines. This development can be opposed only through an offensive of the working class aimed at the social and economic reorganisation of the entire region on the basis of the fight for a United Socialist States of the Middle East.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**