On the Roots and Branches of Shi’a Anti-Semitism

The Islamic Republic of Iran was founded on an extreme interpretation of Shi’a Islam. Hatred of Jews played a central role.

In January 2008, I was visiting the predominantly Shi’a city of Tyre in southern Lebanon, completely unaware of the day’s Islamic date. I was taken aback by the city’s somber mood. Seeing the various signs of mourning across the city, I had a realization: It was Ashoura, the annual Shi’a commemoration of the passion and death of Hussein at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE.

I was struck by the fact that, across the city, the mournful cries and black banners of Ashoura mixed wither banners proclaiming ferocious hostility towards Israel. One banner called Israel “an absolute evil.” And as I perched atop a half-constructed building on Tyre’s Ramel Street, watching the traditional Ashoura procession, in which the faithful thump their chests, flagellate themselves, and engage in bloodletting to mourn Hussein’s murder, I heard strident calls of “al mawtu li Israil!”—“Death to Israel!”—mixing with the agonized cries of the faithful over the death of their beloved Imam. Papier-mâché floats with anti-Israel and anti-Semitic themes were just as common as those portraying Hussein’s passion.

I was slightly confused. I knew that there was no love lost between Israel and south Lebanon’s Shi’a. But what did Israel have to do with Ashoura? After all, none of those responsible for Hussein’s death were Jews. They were all Umayyads, progenitors of a Sunni Caliphate.

What I failed to realize was that this conflation of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism with Ashoura had nothing to do with the Battle of Karbala, or with Shi’a Islam, or even with the bloody history between Israel and Lebanon, for that matter. Its source was the Shi’a Islamist ideology of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Anti-Semitism is central to this ideology, and it portrays the Jews and Israel as the principal enemy of Shi’a Muslims. The grief and anger over Hussein’s passion at Karbala was simply the most convenient vehicle for imparting this anti-Semitism to average Shi’a.

Exported by proxies like Hezbollah and others, Khomeini’s ideology has transformed the traditionally apolitical and quietist Shi’a into cadres of revolutionaries controlled by Iran. With its conflation of Israel and Hussein’s killers, it has turned communities traditionally indifferent or even friendly to Israel and Jews into virulent and unyielding enemies of the Jewish people.

Shi’a religious beliefs and practices differ slightly from those of the Sunni. However, the Shi’a have a completely independent system of religious interpretation and political authority. The sect arose out of an early schism within Islam over the identity of Muhammad’s rightful successor. The Shi’a, as their name implies, have their origins in the “faction” that supported the Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law. But Ali was passed over in favor of the first three “Rightly Guided Caliphs.” As a result, the Shi’a reject the legitimacy of these Caliphs. Instead, they see Muhammad’s family, called Ahl al-Bayt, and—starting with Ali—the line of Imams it produced as the prophet’s rightful successors.

The Caliphs’ rejection of Ali’s leadership and that of his successors led to a civil war. In the end, Muhammad’s grandson, Hussein, was severely injured during the climactic Battle of Karbala and later beheaded while offering the evening prayer. This passion and martyrdom spawned the tradition of Ashoura, quite possibly the central event in the Shi’a religious calendar and Shi’a religious identity.

Because of this history of rejection, oppression, and rebellion, the Shi’a were a perfect recipient for Khomeini’s Islamism. From the outset, they were rebels, partisans of Ali, and the perpetual Islamic “other.” With a few exceptions, Shi’a were an oppressed minority under Sunni rule. Traditionally, their powerlessness led them to adopt political quietism as a survival mechanism. Instead of militancy, they passively awaited divine deliverance through the return of the messianic Imam Muhammad ibn Hassan and, through this, their religious justification.

An Ashoura ceremony in Bahrain. Photo: Allan Donque / flickr

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Khomeini’s ideology changed that. His absolute Wilayat al-Faqih (“Rule of the Jurisprudent”) concept, which vested totalitarian power over all religious, political, and military affairs in a learned cleric, demanded that the Shi’a turn to activism to improve their worldly lot. It drew on the image of Ali as the victor of the Battle of Khaybar—a 7th century battle between Muslims and an Arabian Jewish tribe—instead of the rejected successor of Muhammad who passively waited his turn in the line of Caliphs, and Hussein’s armed rebellion rather than his martyrdom. These icons of Shi’a passivity thus became rallying calls of rebellion. Under Khomeinism, Ashoura changed from a day of mourning to a day of Shi’a strength and rage. The Shi’a would now act to bring about the divine deliverance, rather than await it passively.

But Khomeini’s ideology contained a furious and often violent strain of anti-Semitism, which he worked to cultivate among all of his Shi’a followers.

Khomeini’s brand of Shi’a Islamism derives its hostility toward the Jews from a mix of the often-negative portrayal of Jews in Islamic holy texts, Islamism’s unique take on Jews, and Khomeini’s own anti-Semitic teachings.

The Qur’an and the hadith, as well as later narratives of Muhammad’s life, codified for all time the tensions and hostilities between Arabia’s Jewish communities and Muhammad. This atmosphere of conflict was fostered by the Muhammad’s inability to accept the Jews’ rejection of his claims of prophecy and the multiple battles Muhammad fought against them. Moreover, much like Christianity before it, Islam had to negate Judaism’s continuing validity in order to establish its legitimacy as a successor faith. And just like Christianity, this rejection was canonized in Islam’s holy texts through harsh invective and polemic against Jews and Judaism. In fact, some accusations against Jews in the Qur’an, such as being murderers of the prophets or having incurred God’s wrath, were derived from Christian texts.

These negative portrayals of Jews were meant to be time-and-place specific, however, and traditionally they were of minor importance. Centuries of interpretation blunted their impact. As a result, claims scholar Martin Kramer, the negative portrayals of Jews in Islamic holy texts were not seen as archetypes of all Jews in all places and times. Fears of Jewish conspiracy and domination, portrayals of the Jews as diabolically evil, accusations of well-poisoning, and even the blood libel found their way into the Muslim world through European sources. Jews were treated with contempt across the Islamic world, and Islam and its culture viewed Jews negatively—attributing to them characteristics such as humiliation, deceit, and cowardice—due to religious and social reasons. But the Jews were not considered a cosmic source of evil, let alone the cosmic source of evil.

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But Islamism of the reactionary Salafist variety—which influenced Khomeini’s thought—rejected Islam’s accumulated interpretive tradition as “innovation.” It preferred a return to what it saw as the pristine Islam of Muhammad and his Companions. As a result, the mitigating effect of those centuries of interpretation in regard to the Jews was lost. Salafism replaced it with a new ideology that conflated Biblical Jews and their rebelliousness, Arabia’s Jews and their conflict with Muhammad, and future Jews in Islamic eschatological literature, with the present-day Jewish people.

This theological novelty mixed with Salafism’s anti-Jewish teachings, European anti-Semitism’s near-demonic view of Jews as imported into Islamic lands, and the hostility born out of the Israeli-Arab conflict. It created the uniquely Islamist and Middle Eastern view of the “Eternal Jew,” which is familiar today. It transformed Islam’s classical contempt for Jews, itself reprehensible, into virulent hatred, framing “The Jew” as Islam’s archenemy and its evil antithesis.

Islamists then imposed their revisionism on the classical sources, claiming support for their anti-Semitism in Islam’s holy texts. They portrayed Islam’s current relationship with Judaism as a continuation of the early conflict between the two religions in Arabia. Jews were presented as the central evil in the world against which Islam must struggle and ultimately overcome.

In Iran, this process is on obvious display. Before Khomeini took power, Iran and Israel enjoyed close relations. Prior to the Iranian Revolution, they extensively cooperated in a variety of fields, including the military sphere. During his visit to Israel in 1977, Iranian Minister of War Gen. Hassan Toufanian told his counterpart Ezer Weizmann that, in the Middle East, Iran and Israel could only rely on each other. This was representative of the closeness between the two countries.

With Khomeini’s takeover, friendship turned to enmity overnight. Heavily influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood’s Islamism and the anti-Semitism of Salafist thinker and father of modern Islamism Sayyid Qutb, Khomeini and his successor Ayatollah Ali Khamenei made Jew-hatred official state policy, turning Iran into Israel’s most implacable foe.

A recurrent theme in Khomeini’s teachings, culled from his book Islamic Government and from the Sahifa-yi Nur, a collection of his many speeches and writings, was that the Jews—and not merely Israel or Zionism—are Islam’s eternal enemies and rivals. In turn, Islam is “threatened by Judaism and the Jewish Party.” Khomeini considered Jews a historically “troublesome group, causing corruption in Muslim society and damaging Islam and the Islamic State.” He asserted that “from the beginning … Islam has had to contend with the Jews, for it was they who first established anti-Islamic propaganda and engaged in various stratagems, and as you can see, this activity continues down to the present.” Jews, he claimed, are a “satanic” source of evil and corruption, divinely cursed for having “meddled with the text of the Qur’an.” They are “attempting to distort the truth of Islam and lead Muslims astray,” since they are “opposed to the very foundations of Islam.” The “satanic” Jews are believed to collude with other imperialist forces in order to extirpate the Islamic religion.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini greets followers.

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Although he considered Jews “wretched” occupiers of Islamic land and accused them of having burned and destroyed the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, Khomeini did not claim that their evil nature and enmity toward Islam were caused by Zionism or the political struggle over Palestine. To Khomeini and his successors, Judaism itself was the problem, while Zionism was only a manifestation of it.

Because of his anti-Semitism, Khomeini went so far as to break with the traditional Islamic veneration of the Hebrew prophets. One hadith quotes Muhammad saying, “My brother Moses was blind in his right eye [his revelation was focused on this world] and my brother Jesus was blind in his left eye [his revelation was entirely otherworldly], but I have two eyes [my revelation combines the spiritual and the material].” Khomeini twisted this hadith into proof text of Jewish greed and materialism, saying,

Moses was blind in his right eye because his teachings as laid out in the Torah concentrate mainly on the material world and political and worldly affairs—and as you see the Jews have grasped the world with both hands and are devouring it with an insatiable appetite, they are devouring America and have now turned their attention to Iran and still they are not satisfied.

Despite being the world’s richest people, Khomeini said, Jews “have faces that manifest debasement, poverty, indigence, beggarliness, hunger, and wretchedness. They spend all their lives in indignity, destitution, and squalor. This is nothing but their inner poverty and spiritual abasement.”

Khomeini’s attacks extended to Judaism itself. He stated that the “Torah current amongst Jews is a corrupted and altered one,” which does “not meet the standard of even the speech commonly acceptable of a human being.” Khomeini also claimed that Judaism was a racist creed that led Jews to believe they were “superior to other races.” As a result, he held, the Jews felt entitled to conquer all land between the Nile and the Euphrates as a first step toward world domination. This insatiable territorial lust, Khomeini said, made him duty-bound to inform “the people of the danger of international Zionism,” which is a movement led by “world-devouring bloodsuckers” that threatens “all freedom-bestowing revolutions of the world, including the … Islamic revolution in Iran.”

As a result, Khomeini considered the State of Israel, the political manifestation of Judaism, “a merciless listless viper.” It is an enemy of Islam and all Arabs, a “germ of corruption,” and an “evil … black incubus of colonialism.” It is “dangerous and harmful” to the entire region. It was planted in the heart of Islamic countries by the imperialist powers. And it is now planning the “domination and supremacy of Zionism” over the entire Islamic world. Using rhetoric now familiar from his successors and proxies, Khomeini described Israel as a “degenerative tumor … planted in the heart of the Islamic states… [which] must be removed.” The Jewish state is a malicious tool of the United States (the Shaytan-e Bozorg, or “Great Satan”) and its “corrupt offspring.” Its ultimate fate, therefore, was to be obliterated by Islam itself.

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Khomeini believed that Israel could not be satisfied with the “occupation of Palestine.” It was planning “to make all Arab countries share in Palestine’s fate.” Zionism would not shy away from “any shameful crime” in order to achieve the “base and greedy desire” of a Greater Israel. This unquenchable territorial lust, from which Israel could not be dissuaded, made Israelis “inhuman.”

To achieve its goal, however, Zionism had to weaken Islam. It is doing so with the aid of other nefarious groups, like the Baha’is. It works to “lead people astray and make them abandon the ordinances and teachings of Islam with the intent to … Allah forbid! … one day achieve their goal … and [have] a Jew rule over us one day.” He prayed that, by God’s mercy, the Muslims would be “saved from Jewish atheism [kufr-e juhudi].”

Khomeini extended this theory into a paean to mass murder, praising the Islamic prophet Muhammad for having “eliminated them [the Jews]”—a reference to the massacre of the Banu Qurayzah, an Arabian Jewish tribe.

For Khomeini, the only response and solution to Israel is adherence to Islam and the construction of a “righteous and respectable [Islamic] government” which would roll back the advances of the Jews in the lands of Islam. This Islamic force would be spearheaded by an Islamist Iran, which because of Israel’s evil nature “has been and is the diehard enemy” of the Jewish state. This new Iran would resolutely set itself against Israel, which “must be eradicated from the pages of history.” Israel’s destruction, however, is not an Iranian duty alone. “It is incumbent on all Muslims,” said Khomeini, “to do away with this core of corruption [Israel] any way possible.” Every Muslim is duty-bound to arm himself against Israel and “it is obvious that the heads of the Muslim governments, and in particular the Arab governments, should unite and try to get rid of Israel, this corrupt entity.” Had Muslims been united from the outset, Khomeini said, “It would not be possible for the powerful imperialist governments to penetrate their countries, let alone a bunch of Jews.”

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini denounces the Shah of Iran on Ashuora 1963.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini denouncing the Shah of Iran in 1963.

Accordingly, Khomeini attacked the Shah of Iran for giving “recognition to this government [Israel] of infidels—and Jewish infidels at that.” This, he said, was an affront to “Islam, the Qur’an, the Muslim governments, and the entire Muslim people.” He decried the fact that, in the Shah’s Iran, “whilst elsewhere Muslims are uniting, those here are making pacts with Judaism!” Iran’s advisers and “counselors are Jews” and “it’s wrong for a country to rely on the Jews.” Instead of aligning themselves with “the Jews, with Israel,” Iranians should be uniting with other Muslims and “throwing the Jews out of Palestine.”

There is little doubt as to Khomeini’s intentions toward Israel, which were forthrightly genocidal. He stated clearly, “We must rise, destroy Israel and replace it with the heroic Palestinian nation.” Indeed, Khomeini made this central to his ideology and expended considerable effort in rallying the Muslim world against the Jewish state. When Ebrahim Yazdi, then Iran’s foreign minister, suggested the idea of a day to rally around Jerusalem, Khomeini seized upon the idea as if it were his own. On August 7, 1979, he declared the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan to be International Quds Day, on which Muslims worldwide would unite in solidarity with the Palestinians. The day has become a rallying point for Iran and its proxies during which Israel is demonized and delegitimized, reinforcing the desire for its destruction among their followers.

Khomeini’s death on June 3, 1989 did not end Iran’s enmity toward Israel. His successor Ali Khamenei picked up Khomeini’s mantle of Supreme Leader, and continued his official campaign of hatred toward Israel and the Jews. In the same vein as Khomeini, Khamenei’s claims that Israel, among other things, is the “sinister, unclean rabid dog of the region” are a result of his genuine belief that Israel “is a threat to the world.”

Khamenei has repeatedly called for the destruction of Israel, telling a Revolutionary Guards rally in 1997 that Iran will erase Israel from the pages of history. In 2000, during a Friday sermon, Khamenei described Israel as a “cancerous tumor” in the Middle East. “Iran’s stance,” he said, “has always been clear on this ugly phenomenon. … [Israel] should be removed from the region. … All should strive to return that piece of land to Islamic hands.” He went on to describe Israelis as “a bunch of thugs, lechers and outcasts from London, America and Moscow.” He emphasized that “[armed] struggle is the way to victory [over Israel], not negotiations.” In 2012, he called Israel a “malignant cancerous tumor in the heart of the Islamic world.”

Despite his claims that he wants the dissolution of Israel through a “referendum,” rather than “throwing the Jewish immigrants into the sea,” Khamenei has repeatedly called for the destruction of Israel through “resistance.” And he has made it clear that this “resistance” is not directed at the Israeli government alone, but extends to the Israeli people. All Israelis are enemies, he says, since they are, “responsible for usurping houses, territory, farmlands, and businesses. They are combatants at the disposal of Zionist operatives. [Iran] cannot remain indifferent vis-à-vis such people who are stooges at the service of the arch foes of the Muslim world.”

These words were intended to “spell an end to any debates” regarding Iran’s relationship with the Israeli people. It was, in fact, a response to supposedly moderate remarks by Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei—a senior cabinet member—and, surprisingly, former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to the effect that Iran was a friend to Israel’s citizens. Khamenei corrected them, saying, “It is incorrect, irrational, pointless, and nonsense to say we are friends of [the] Israeli people. … We are on a collision course with the occupiers of Palestine, and the occupiers [are one and the same as] the Zionist regime. … This is the position of our regime, our revolution, and our people.”

After the nuclear deal with Iran was signed, Khamenei, as well as the spokespeople for the regime, made clear that Iran’s policies on Israel will not change. Indeed, he has said that Israel’s security will never be ensured, posting a video on his Facebook page of himself making the statement, with video in the background showing missiles being launched.

Iranian ascendancy has run parallel with the deterioration of Israeli and Jewish relations with Shi’a across the Middle East, demonstrating the centrality of anti-Semitism to Khomeini’s ideology of Wilayat al-Faqih. Indeed, where Khomeinism has been absent, Israeli relations with Shi’a have been stable and even friendly.

The Shi’a community in Lebanon is a prime example. It once coexisted peacefully with Lebanon’s Jewish community and even with Zionist settlers in the Galilee during the British Mandate. Later, when Israel invaded south Lebanon in 1982 during the First Lebanon War, Lebanese Shi’a initially greeted the IDF as liberators from the occupying PLO. Israeli soldiers who served in the early days of the campaign recall Shi’a villagers showering them with rice and flowers, offering them cold drinks along with their gratitude, and waving Israeli flags. Yet as Israel’s occupation of south Lebanon dragged on, and as the Shi’a death toll at the hands of their erstwhile liberators steadily rose, the Shi’a began to stir against the Israelis.

The final break came on October 16, 1983, during an Ashoura commemoration in Nabatiye. An Israeli military convoy attempted to make its way through the streets, which were crowded with as many as 60,000 Shi’a faithful. They saw the IDF military vehicles as an insult to their religious sensibilities and reacted with anger and violence, stoning the convoy and overturning trucks. The Israeli soldiers, oblivious to the religious significance of the day, became frightened and began firing their weapons, killing at least two Shi’a and wounding a number of others.

The Shi’a community in Lebanon once coexisted peacefully with Lebanon’s Jewish community, but as Israel’s occupation of south Lebanon dragged on, the Shi’a, exacerbated by Iran, began to stir against the Israelis.

Because of the religious significance of the date on which the clash occurred, the resulting hostility and anger naturally took on religious overtones. Iran quickly saw an opportunity to drive a permanent wedge between Israel and Lebanon’s Shi’a, turning this friction into permanent hatred and enmity. Iran’s ideological proxies, which had by then coalesced into an embryonic Hezbollah, seized upon the Ashoura incident to inject Khomeini’s political ideology into Lebanon’s Shi’a community, giving Israel’s actions and presence in south Lebanon the sinister and malicious veneer of Khomeini’s anti-Semitism.

As a result, confrontation with Israel was no longer a matter of ejecting an occupying power that had overstayed its welcome. The connection was now made between Israel and the Umayyad killers of Imam Hussein. This made the conflict with Israel a religious and existential war, which was precisely as Khomeini saw it. Israel was now sinful by its very existence, and there was a divinely commanded duty to destroy it for being a Jewish State.

Hezbollah, the Lebanese creation of Khomeini’s Wilayat al-Faqih ideology and perhaps its most successful export, has thoroughly imbibed his unyielding dedication to Israel’s destruction and made it the cornerstone of its ideology. As Hezbollah’s all-embracing hold over Lebanon’s Shi’a community tightens, so does their enmity toward Israel. Every action undertaken by the Israelis against Hezbollah is seen through the prism of Khomeinism, taking on a diabolical meaning.

True to its Khomeinist roots, Hezbollah’s 1985 Open Letter claims that the objective of driving Israel out of Lebanon is “a prelude to its final obliteration from existence and the liberation of Jerusalem” and, echoing Khomeini, says,

[Israel] is a hated enemy that must be fought … our primary assumption in our fight against Israel states that the Zionist entity is aggressive from its inception, and built on lands wrested from their owners, at the expense of the Muslim people. Therefore, our struggle will end only when this entity is obliterated.

Hezbollah’s enmity toward Israel is not connected to the occupation of Lebanese territory. Hezbollah has repeatedly admitted that this is a mere pretext for fighting the Jewish state. Its former secretary-general Sheikh Subhi al-Tufayli stated, “If the whole world makes peace with Israel, Hizb’allah will continue to fight the Jews—even if Israel withdraws from south Lebanon. The peace documents will be torn up, there will be no normalization with the enemy, and the resistance will continue.” Despite al-Tufayli’s disgraced removal from Hezbollah’s ranks, his words remain a fundamental pillar of Hezbollah’s ideology. Na’im Qassem, deputy secretary-general of Hezbollah, has stated that the struggle against Israel is one of Hezbollah’s core beliefs and the primary reason for its existence.

In fact, Hezbollah has been just as obsessive as Khomeini in regard to Israel. This is for both ideological reasons and because it buttresses the group’s legitimacy. This was demonstrated quite recently, when the International Union of Resistance Clerics (IURC)—a nominally cross-sectarian group—held a conference called, “United … for Palestine’s sake … Israel to non-existence,” at which Hassan Nasrallah, secretary-general of Hezbollah, was a keynote speaker.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah delivers a 2013 speech entitled “Palestine, from River to Sea, Must be Returned to Real Owners.” Photo: TheKeysToEternity / YouTube

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Sounding more aggressive than usual, Nasrallah claimed that the Islamic world is “facing a Zionist project that works to spread across the world and now possesses a base, origin, and entity named Israel which occupies Palestine.” He lamented the lack of attention paid to Palestine and to combating Israel due to regional instability—which he appeared to blame on Israel—and beseeched all Muslims and Arabs to put aside their differences and unite in combating Zionism. He pledged, “We, the Shi’a of Ali ibn Abi Talib, will never abandon Palestine or the Palestinian people. … Israel, the cancerous tumor, will be wiped out and Jerusalem will return to its owners. This is only a matter of time.”

The IURC is an offshoot of the International Conference of Islamic World Scholars in Defense of Palestine Resistance, which held its first meeting in September of 2014 in Tehran. That meeting was also aimed at directing the Islamic world’s attention back to Palestine and combating Israel. Upon the founding of the IURC, a participating cleric called it “a continuation of what we began in Tehran.”

Hezbollah has also framed the civil war in Syria and the sectarian conflict in Iraq as part of its war against Zionism and Israel, and as precursors of a final showdown with the Jewish state. It portrays its battle against Sunni Islamists as a war against takfiriyun—Sunni Muslims who accuse other Muslims of apostasy—and a modern-day Karbala. The real enemy, however, is Israel, which is controlling these takfiris. Shi’a victories are thus likened to Ali victoriously leading the battle against the Jews of Khaybar, since the victory against the takfiris is ultimately a victory against the Jews.

Hezbollah’s leadership likes to claim that its hostility toward Israel does not extend to Jews and Judaism as a religion. This differentiation between Jews and Zionists is common among Shi’a Islamists, who attempt to give their desire to destroy Israel a “respectable veneer.” Despite using the terms “Jew,” “Zionist,” and “Israeli” interchangeably, Khomeini himself claimed that Iran considered,

The Jewish community to be completely separate from the issue of Zionism and the Zionists. … We know that the Jewish community is quite different from the Zionist community; we oppose the latter. … Arising from the fact that they oppose all religions, they are not Jews. … The Jews despise them, as all people should.

Ayatollah Khamenei has echoed this, claiming that he sees the “issue of the Zionists [as] different from that of the Jews” and “there is no racial and religious fanaticism” animating Iran’s “anti-Zionist” struggle.

Hezbollah has also adopted this verbal sleight of hand. For example, Hezbollah came out in support of renovating the Maghen Abraham Synagogue in Beirut. Its spokesman Hussain Rahal said, “We respect the Jewish religion just like we do Christianity. The Jews have always lived among us. We have an issue with Israel’s occupation of land.’’ Nasrallah has echoed such claims. In a 1998 interview with the Lebanese newspaper al-Moharrer, Nasrallah claimed, “Our war is not against Judaism or Jews but against Zionism. … The war between ourselves and Israel is a war against Zionism and its plans, and not against Judaism as a religion” or its adherents. In a speech he gave in late 2009, he repeated this claim, telling his audience, “Our problem with [Israelis] is not that they are Jews, but that they are occupiers who are raping our land and holy places.”

Scholar Nicholas Noe is skeptical of Nasrallah’s sincerity. In his book Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Hassan Nasrallah, he comments on an Ashoura speech given by Nasrallah on May 7, 1998. Noe writes that it contained “pronounced vilifications directed at Jews as Jews” and was evidence of “Nasrallah’s and Hezbollah’s apparently uncompromising and totalizing hatred of adherents of the Jewish faith.” This antipathy “may have run so deep as to become dangerously mired in what amounts to racial hatred.” The speech, Noe says, directly contradicted Nasrallah’s previous statements about separating Judaism from Zionism.

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Interestingly, Hezbollah’s denials of anti-Semitism have also been refuted by some of its most vocal supporters, such as the Lebanese writer Amal Sa’ad Ghorayeb. Ghorayeb contends that Hezbollah’s anti-Jewish animus is not anti-Semitism in the strictest sense, since it maligns Jews as a religious group and lacks the racial undertones of European anti-Semitism. Nonetheless, she admits that Hezbollah’s ideology is “as vituperative against Jews, if not more than, conventional anti-Semitism.” She further characterizes Hezbollah’s ideology as containing a deep antipathy toward Judaism and its adherents arising out of the Khomeinist claim that Judaism is a racist creed that espouses the idea of Jewish racial superiority over non-Jews.

Zionism, Ghorayeb says, has merely become another factor in an existing, if latent, anti-Semitism derived from classical Islamic attitudes toward the Jews. This is only partially true. Martin Kramer states that the idea that modern Islamist anti-Semitism is authentically Islamic “touches on some truths, but misses many others.” For Muslims to arrive at the concept of the “Eternal Jew,” Kramer believes that more was at play than Islamic tradition, although its selective and distorted use provides a basis for Muslim anti-Semitism. In the case of Hezbollah and other pro-Wilayat al-Faqih Shi’a Islamists, this was a result of Khomeini’s ideology.

Ghorayeb states,

Although Zionism and Judaism are synonymous in Hizb’ullah’s lexicon, the resulting confluence of the party’s anti-Zionism and anti-Judaism does not render the latter contingent on the former. … The anti-Judaism of Hizb’ullah is detached from Zionism insofar as Islam is staunchly anti-Judaic. … As odious as Zionism is to Hizb’ullah, the party insists that its strong aversion to Judaism is unrelated to its abomination of Zionism, and hence exists irrespective of the existence of Zionism. … while Hizb’ullah’s anti-Judaism is … influenced by Zionism, it is not contingent upon it.

Ghorayeb dismisses the idea that Hezbollah’s interchangeable use of “Zionism” and “Jews” is because so many Jews are Zionist. “To do so, she says, “would be to ignore the party’s extensive derogation of Judaism as a religion, irrespective of its Zionist offshoot.” In light of Hezbollah’s hostility to the Jewish religion itself, “Its claims to differentiate Judaism from Zionism become purely academic.” Whether a Jew champions Zionism is therefore immaterial to Hezbollah, since “their religion is still rejected.” It is hostile to Zionism because Zionism is “the political outgrowth of Judaism.” Insofar as fighting and destroying Israel is Hezbollah’s raison d’etre, “Hizbu’llah’s anti-Judaism therefore emerges as intrinsic a part of its intellectual structure as is its anti-Zionism.”

Hezbollah leaders frequently refer to Khaybar, the site of a battle in which Muslims defeated Jews, when discussing Judaism, Zionism, and Israel.

Ghorayeb’s analysis is confirmed by the words of Hezbollah’s own leadership. In Nasrallah’s 1998 Ashoura speech, Judaism and Zionism are referred to interchangeably. Nasrallah spoke of the 50th anniversary of the “historic catastrophe … the establishment of the state of the Zionist Jews, the descendants of apes and pigs.” The reference to “apes and pigs” is taken from Qur’anic verses (2:65; 5:60; 7:166) traditionally used as derogatory terms for the Jews. Echoing another Qur’anic theme in which Jews are “stamped with wretchedness” (2:61), Nasrallah called the Israelis “a few million vagabonds from all over the world, brought together by their Talmud and their Jewish fanaticism” who celebrate their “victory over 1.4 billion Muslims.” He then likened Israel to Khaybar, an oasis in Arabia inhabited by Jewish tribes until it fell to Muslim forces led by Imam Ali in 629 CE: “When this Muslim nation was small, the Jews were unable to defeat it, and the Jews … of Khaybar were forced out of their castles and fortresses.” Muhammad and Ali’s defeat of the Khaybar Jews, Nasrallah said, foretells the defeat of the modern-day Khaybar Jews—i.e. the Israelis—by Muhammad’s modern army, Hezbollah. “But let us return to Khaybar,” he said, “the army of Mohammad has returned … full of resolve and determination, with its leaders being martyrdom seekers, just like Ali and Hussein. … So wait for the dream of the Khaybarites [Israelis] to collapse, just as Khaybar collapsed.” He concludes by stating, “We should say in the face of the killers of the prophets and the descendants of the apes and pigs: We hope we will not see you next year. The shout remains: Death to Israel!”

Making the connection between the Jews and Israel clear, Hezbollah is profligate in its use of the Khaybar analogy in regard to its conflict with the Jewish state. This is because the story brings together their veneration of Ali’s victory over the Jews and their own desire for victory over Israel. In addition, the fall of Khaybar also destroyed Jewish independence in Arabia, bringing the Jews under Islamic political dominance.

Khaybar is deeply important to Shi’a culture. Traditional Islamic sources relate that Muslim forces were unable to breach the Jewish fortress at Khaybar. Imam al-Bukhari, the compiler of the collection known as Sahih al-Bukhari, relates a hadith that says Muhammad then proclaimed, “Tomorrow I will give the flag to a man with whose leadership Allah will grant [the Muslims] victory.” He gave the flag to Ali, who breached the gate of Khaybar’s most heavily fortified Qamus Fort and killed the Jews’ most skilled warriors. The story became the basis for the Shi’a view of Ali as an archetype of heroism.

In accordance with these beliefs, Nasrallah often expresses his party’s deep antipathy toward Jews explicitly. He has called Jews “a cancer which is liable to spread again at any moment,” with whom there can be no coexistence. He has described them as the most greedy and miserly people on earth and stated, “If we searched the entire world for a person more cowardly, despicable, weak, and feeble in psyche, mind, ideology, and religion, we would not find anyone like the Jew. Notice I do not say the Israeli.”

After the Nabatiye incident in 1983, Israeli Arabist Moshe Sharon received a warning from a Lebanese Shi’a friend, telling him that Israel must not become the enemy of the Shi’a by symbolically joining the killers of their martyred Imam Hussein. “Do not join those who murdered Husain,” he warned,

Because if you bring the Shi’is to identify you with the history of [their] suffering, the enmity that will be directed at you will have no bounds and no limits. You will have created for yourselves a foe whose hostility will have a mystical nature and a momentum which you will be unable to arrest.

Khomeini and his adherents realized this long before Israel’s first Lebanese misadventure, and seized on that fateful day in Nabatiye. Its evocative symbolism, the connection between the commemoration of Hussein’s martyrdom and the Israeli transgression, was Iran’s opportunity to create and solidify the connection between the Jews and Hussein’s murderers in the minds of countless Shi’a faithful. This connection has become the driving force of the Iranian regime. It has provided Iran with foot-soldiers for its campaign to dominate the region and fulfill Khomeini’s vision of exporting his Islamic revolution. It has also become the lifeblood and almost a secondary faith to its proxies. Nasrallah has said that he has no apprehensions over his war with Israel, because, “This struggle is our religion, prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and life. It is our Hussein and [his younger sister] Zeinab, and our infants. We will never bargain over it.”

Khomeini’s imperialist ideology sees the Jews and Israel as the source of all evil, manipulating and supporting every enemy of Islam. Every war and conflict, even against fellow Muslims, is justified as a fight against the ultimate Jewish enemy, because all who stand against his Revolution must, by necessity, be serving the Jewish forces of evil. By convincing Shi’a across the region that the State of Israel is the new Yazid, Iran employs the Zionist specter to motivate the Shi’a to see any enemy of Khomeinism as a Jew or their servant, and has used that specter, so far, to spread its influence throughout the Arab world, destabilizing one country after the next on its road to regional hegemony.

That is not to say that Khomeini’s anti-Semitism, or its continued use by the Iranian regime, is purely a matter of realpolitik. It is certainly genuine. But the belief that “the Jew” and Israel are the incarnation of evil and the target of the Islamic Republic’s hatred served a dual purpose. That the march of Iran’s loyal cadres on the road to Jerusalem happens to run through every Arab capital is a matter of convenience for the Islamic Republic. It in no way blunts the vehemence and violence of its anti-Semitism.

That is what I did not immediately realize on that Ashoura in 2008.