

The Classic Blood Libel Against Jews Goes Mainstream in Iran

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A recent article on a high-profile political website shows how even the most primitive anti-Semitic slurs and conspiracy theories have found their way into all levels of Iranian discourse.

On April 18, the prominent Iranian website Alef published an article whose title roughly translates to "[Who Are Human History's Most Bloodthirsty People?](#)" The long, detailed essay, complete with footnotes, pictures, and video clips, accuses Jews of killing non-Jews to use their blood for ritual purposes.

Alef is owned and supervised by Ahmad Tavakkoli, a member of Iran's parliament who formerly served as minister of labor and social affairs and president of the parliamentary research center. A prominent conservative figure who received his PhD in economics from Nottingham University in Britain, Tavakkoli is also cousin to the Larijani bothers -- Mohammad Javad Larijani, head of the human rights council in the judiciary, Sadeq Larijani, chief of the judiciary, and Ali Larijani, speaker of the parliament. Soon after the article appeared in Alef, other hardliner websites such as Mashregh News (mashreghnews.ir) republished it.

A CLASSIC BLOOD LIBEL

The essay, bylined as the product of "Alef's foreign affairs section," makes its anti-Semitic intentions clear from the start: "Blood shedding by Jews is not a new theme. By looking at what is happening in occupied territories, one can know the rapacious and savage spirit of this people [*qowm*, meaning ethnicity or race], but by examining Jewish history in past centuries, it becomes evident that they insist on blood shedding and even bloodthirstiness based on their altered religion and teachings." The word "altered" refers to the Islamic belief that parts of the Bible's Old and New Testaments were falsified.

The article claims to be based on the "Encyclopedia of Judaism" (no further reference information is provided on this source) and four books in Arabic by Egyptian writers. It also quotes an anti-Semitic German orientalist and linguist named Erich Bischoff, as well as Richard Burton, the well-known and notoriously anti-Semitic British orientalist and diplomat:

"Dr. Erich Bischoff says about Jewish people that 'killing foreigners is [justified] in Jewish wisdom and teachings, and there is no difference between them and animals. This killing and murdering should take place in a religious way, and those who do not believe in Jewish teachings should be offered to the Jewish great goddess as a sacrifice'...In his book *Jews, Light, and Islam* [presumably a mangled version of the title *The Jew, the Gypsy, and El Islam*] published in 1898, Richard Burton, who studied the Talmud for a long time, writes, 'According to the Talmud, there are two bloody rituals that satisfy Jehovah: the feast of breads mixed with human blood [Passover] and the circumcision ritual for Jewish children.'"

Although Alef's quote is inexact, Burton's book does make very similar inflammatory statements that completely misrepresent the Talmud.

The article goes on to quote Rafat Mustafa, a member of the Syrian Baath Party and a prolific anti-Semitic writer. According to Alef, he wrote the following in a December 1 essay in the Egyptian newspaper *El Shaab*: "Jews are human history's most bloodthirsty people...Yes, these are Jews, those whose religion asks them to 'offer those who do not believe in Jewish religion as a sacrifice to our God Jehovah'...Research shows that following the falsified teachings of Judaism was the main factor behind all the miseries and misfortunes that Jews suffered from in their history. In the past, Jewish witches were using human blood in their conjurer ceremonies."

The Alef article then provides a long description of several occasions in which Jews use and drink human blood with religious justification. It also mentions several examples of Jews stealing children, killing them, and using them for Passover rituals. According to Alef, such incidents have taken place in Port Said, Aleppo, Damascus, Tripoli (Lebanon), and numerous places in Europe.

The article concludes: "The aforementioned crimes may seem strange today, but the Jewish tradition of bloodthirstiness has not changed. Given today's legal restrictions and the possibility of quickly detecting crimes, it has taken another form. Nowadays, newborns are victims of this people's bloodthirstiness...The rabbi immediately drinks the blood of the newborn after circumcision. This behavior makes children sick and causes death." This is apparently a perverted description of the controversial ultraorthodox practice *metzitzah b'peh*, which involves

cleaning a circumcision wound by sucking the blood and spitting it out immediately after the ritual is completed. The Alef article contains several photographs, paintings, and video clips illustrating this practice.

Judaism includes a very strong prohibition against consuming the blood of any living thing; this prohibition is mentioned seven times in the Torah, and observant Jews are careful not to transgress it. Yet the Alef article shows that the centuries-old blood libel lives on.

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC'S ANTI-SEMITISM

In her seminal work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt distinguishes between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, calling the latter an entirely independent phenomenon: "Anti-Semitism, a secular nineteenth-century ideology -- which in name, though not in argument, was unknown before the 1870s -- and religious Jew-hatred, inspired by the mutually hostile antagonism of two conflicting creeds, are obviously not the same; and even the extent to which the former derives its argument and emotional appeal from the latter is open to question." Arendt holds that since the political ideology is different from the various Christian doctrines that spurred hatred of Jews, it would therefore be useless to search for the "Christian roots of anti-Semitism."

This distinction can also be applied to Iranian attitudes toward Jews. Although anti-Judaism is well known in Iranian Islamic tradition and literature (even in the works of well-known classical poets such as Saadi), this is fundamentally different from modern anti-Semitism, which was imported into Iran by leftist and Islamist intellectuals and political activists before and after the 1979 revolution. Secular intellectuals were heavily influenced by anti-Semitic trends in Europe and the Soviet Union, while Islamists were influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood and other Arab anti-Semitic writers. In addition, some Iraqi Shiite clerics transmitted anti-Semitic literature from the Arab world to Iran. For instance, Sayyed Muhammad Shirazi -- head of the Shirazi family, who are known for their ultraconservative tendencies and run dozens of satellite television networks, websites, organizations, and mosques in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East -- published several anti-Semitic books in the 1960s. One of these, titled *The World As Jews' Plaything*, was translated by Sayyed Hadi al-Modarresi, an Iraqi cleric who is now a Shiite religious authority (*marja*).

Judaism is an official minority religion in the Islamic Republic, and Jews have a representative in the parliament and are free to practice their religion in synagogues across the country, including in Tehran -- a city whose hundreds of thousands of Sunni residents are not allowed to have a mosque of their own. Nevertheless, Iranian officials are known to make implicitly and explicitly anti-Semitic statements against Israel and Jews, and the government makes no effort to curb anti-Semitic propaganda by local extremists. In the past, such statements were generally political, with some element of the traditional Muslim complaints about Jews falsifying God's message and rejecting the true prophet Muhammad. Since 1979, however, the spread of more primitive anti-Semitic lies has increased, especially the blood libel. Googling such accusations in Persian turns up many related articles, particularly on apocalyptic websites. More disturbingly, the blood libel has been creeping into mainstream media for some time, with occasional statements made by commentators on important websites or even state television. Although no Iranian officials have made such statements, none of them have reacted to the spread of this libel, including this week's prominent Alef article. Similarly, no Iranian clerics have denounced this libel against what is officially regarded as a divine religion, i.e., Judaism.

In today's Iran, anti-Judaic and anti-Semitic discourses are sometimes mixed in textbooks, media, religious/political propaganda, and secular intellectual literature. This helps the regime justify its anti-Israeli agenda in the region, casting Jews as genuine enemies who do not want to see the Islamic Republic progress, especially with regard to nuclear technology. What matters most is that such mixed discourse cannot easily be criticized inside Iran by those intellectuals who are concerned about the long-term negative ramifications of anti-Jewish sentiment.

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