



# War Without End

The global war against terror from a British perspective


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## Iranian president mistranslated - I hope such is addressed



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<p><b>Alpha</b></p> <p>Joined: 06 Jan 2003 Posts: 42767</p>	<p>Posted: Thu Jan 18, 2007 5:53 pm Post subject: Iranian president mistranslated - I hope such is addressed </p> <p><b>Iranian president mistranslated - I hope that this is addressed by the pro-Israel US media/press before Iran is attacked sooner rather than later</b></p> <p><a href="http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/jonathan_steele/2006/06/post_155.html">http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/jonathan_steele/2006/06/post_155.html</a></p> <p>Jonathan Steele</p> <p>If Iran is ready to talk, the US must do so unconditionally</p> <p>It is absurd to demand that Tehran should have made concessions before sitting down with the Americans</p> <p>Jonathan Steele Friday June 2, 2006 The Guardian</p> <p>It is 50 years since the greatest misquotation of the cold war. At a Kremlin reception for western ambassadors in 1956, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev announced: "We will bury you." Those four words were seized on by American hawks as proof of aggressive Soviet intent.</p> <p>Doves who pointed out that the full quotation gave a less threatening message were drowned out. Khrushchev had actually said: "Whether you like it or not, history is on our side. We will bury you." It was a harmless boast about socialism's eventual victory in the ideological competition with capitalism. He was not talking about war.</p> <p>Now we face a similar propaganda distortion of remarks by Iran's president. Ask anyone in Washington, London or Tel Aviv if they can cite any phrase uttered by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the chances are high they will say he wants Israel "wiped off the map".</p> <p>Again it is four short words, though the distortion is worse than in the Khrushchev case. The remarks are not out of context. They are wrong, pure and simple. Ahmadinejad never said them. Farsi speakers have pointed out that he was mistranslated. The Iranian president was quoting an ancient statement by Iran's first Islamist leader, the late Ayatollah Khomeini, that "this regime occupying Jerusalem must</p>

vanish from the page of time" just as the Shah's regime in Iran had vanished.

He was not making a military threat. He was calling for an end to the occupation of Jerusalem at some point in the future. The "page of time" phrase suggests he did not expect it to happen soon. There was no implication that either Khomeini, when he first made the statement, or Ahmadinejad, in repeating it, felt it was imminent, or that Iran would be involved in bringing it about.

But the propaganda damage was done, and western hawks bracket the Iranian president with Hitler as though he wants to exterminate Jews. At the recent annual convention of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a powerful lobby group, huge screens switched between pictures of Ahmadinejad making the false "wiping off the map" statement and a ranting Hitler.

Misquoting Ahmadinejad is worse than taking Khrushchev out of context for a second reason. Although the Soviet Union had a collective leadership, the pudgy Russian was the undoubted No 1 figure, particularly on foreign policy. The Iranian president is not.

His predecessor, Mohammad Khatami, was seen in the west as a moderate reformer, and during his eight years in office western politicians regularly lamented the fact that he was not Iran's top decision-maker. Ultimate power lay with the conservative unelected supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Yet now that Ahmadinejad is president, western hawks behave as though he is in charge, when in fact nothing has changed. Ahmadinejad is not the only important voice in Tehran. Indeed Khamenei was quick to try to adjust the misperceptions of Ahmadinejad's comments. A few days after the president made them, Khamenei said Iran "will not commit aggression against any nation".

The evidence suggests that a debate is going on in Tehran over policy towards the west which is no less fierce than the one in Washington. Since 2003 the Iranians have made several overtures to the Bush administration, some more explicit than others. Ahmadinejad's recent letter to Bush was a veiled invitation to dialogue. Iranians are also arguing over policy towards Israel. Trita Parsi, an analyst at Johns Hopkins University, says influential rivals to Ahmadinejad support a "Malaysian" model whereby Iran, like Islamic Malaysia, would not recognise Israel but would not support Palestinian groups such as Hamas, if relations with the US were better.

The obvious way to develop the debate is for the two states to start talking to each other. Last winter the Americans said they were willing, provided talks were limited to Iraq. Then the hawks around Bush vetoed even that narrow agenda. Their victory made nonsense of the pressure the US is putting on other UN security council members for tough action against Iran. Talk of sanctions is clearly premature until Washington and Tehran make an effort to negotiate. This week, in advance of Condoleezza Rice's meeting in Vienna yesterday with the foreign ministers of Britain, France, Germany, China and Russia, the factions in Washington hammered out a compromise. The US is ready to talk to Tehran alongside the EU3 (Britain, France and Germany), but only after Tehran has abandoned its uranium-enrichment programme.

To say the EU3's dialogue with Tehran was sufficient, as Washington did until this week, was the most astonishing example of multilateralism in the Bush presidency. A government that makes a practice of ignoring allies and refuses to accept the jurisdiction of bodies such as the International Criminal Court was leaving all the talking to others on one of the hottest issues of the day. Unless Bush is set on war, this refusal to open a dialogue could not be taken seriously.

The EU3's offer of carrots for Tehran was also meaningless without a US role. Europe cannot give Iran security guarantees. Tehran does not want non-aggression pacts with Europe. It wants them with the only state that is threatening it both with military attack and foreign-funded programmes for regime change.

The US compromise on talks with Iran is a step in the right direction, though Rice's hasty statement was poorly drafted, repeatedly calling Iran both a "government" and a "regime". But it is absurd to expect Iran to make concessions before sitting down with the Americans. Dialogue is in the interests of all parties. Europe's leaders, as well as Russia and China, should come out clearly and tell the

Americans so.

Whatever Iran's nuclear ambitions, even US hawks admit it will be years before it could acquire a bomb, let alone the means to deliver it. This offers ample time for negotiations and a "grand bargain" between Iran and the US over Middle Eastern security. Flanked by countries with US bases, Iran has legitimate concerns about Washington's intentions.

Even without the US factor, instability in the Gulf worries all Iranians, whether or not they like being ruled by clerics. All-out civil war in Iraq, which could lead to intervention by Turkey and Iraq's Arab neighbours, would be a disaster for Iran. If the US wants to withdraw from Iraq in any kind of order, this too will require dialogue with Iran. If this is what Blair told Bush last week, he did well. But he should go all the way, and urge the Americans to talk without conditions.

[j.steele@guardian.co.uk](mailto:j.steele@guardian.co.uk)

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Lost in translation

Jonathan Steele

[http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/jonathan\\_steele/2006/06/post\\_155.html.printer.friendly](http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/jonathan_steele/2006/06/post_155.html.printer.friendly)

June 14, 2006 12:49 PM

[http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/jonathan\\_steele/2006/06/post\\_155.html](http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/jonathan_steele/2006/06/post_155.html)

My recent comment piece explaining how Iran's president was badly misquoted when he allegedly called for Israel to be "wiped off the map" has caused a welcome little storm. The phrase has been seized on by western and Israeli hawks to re-double suspicions of the Iranian government's intentions, so it is important to get the truth of what he really said.

I took my translation - "the regime occupying Jerusalem must vanish from the page of time" - from the indefatigable Professor Juan Cole's website where it has been for several weeks.

But it seems to be mainly thanks to the Guardian giving it prominence that the New York Times, which was one of the first papers to misquote Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, came out on Sunday with a defensive piece attempting to justify its reporter's original "wiped off the map" translation. (By the way, for Farsi speakers the original version is available here.)

Joining the "off the map" crowd is David Aaronovitch, a columnist on the Times (of London), who attacked my analysis yesterday. I won't waste time on him since his knowledge of Farsi is as minimal as that of his Latin. The poor man thinks the plural of casus belli is casi belli, unaware that casus is fourth declension with the plural casus (long u).

The New York Times's Ethan Bronner and Nazila Fathi, one of the paper's Tehran staff, make a more serious case. They consulted several sources in Tehran. "Sohrab Mahdavi, one of Iran's most prominent translators, and Siamak Namazi, managing director of a Tehran consulting firm, who is bilingual, both say 'wipe off' or 'wipe away' is more accurate than 'vanish' because the Persian verb is active and transitive," Bronner writes.

The New York Times goes on: "The second translation issue concerns the word 'map'. Khomeini's words were abstract: 'Sahneh roozgar.' Sahneh means scene or stage, and roozgar means time. The phrase was widely interpreted as 'map', and for years, no one objected. In October, when Mr Ahmadinejad quoted Khomeini, he actually misquoted him, saying not 'Sahneh roozgar' but 'Safheh roozgar', meaning pages of time or history. No one noticed the change, and news agencies used the word 'map' again."

This, in my view, is the crucial point and I'm glad the NYT accepts that the word "map" was not used by Ahmadinejad. (By the way, the Wikipedia entry on the controversy gets the NYT wrong, claiming falsely that Ethan Bronner "concluded that Ahmadinejad had in fact said that Israel was to be wiped off the map".)

If the Iranian president made a mistake and used "safheh" rather than "sahneh", that is of little moment. A native English speaker could equally confuse "stage of history" with "page of history". The significant issue is that both phrases refer to time rather than place. As I wrote in my original post, the Iranian president was expressing a vague wish for the future. He was not threatening an Iranian-initiated war to remove Israeli control over Jerusalem.

Two other well-established translation sources confirm that Ahmadinejad was referring to time, not place. The version of the October 26 2005 speech put out by the Middle East Media Research Institute, based on the Farsi text released by the official Iranian Students News Agency, says: "This regime that is occupying Qods [Jerusalem] must be eliminated from the pages of history." (NB: not "wiped". I accept that "eliminated" is almost the same, indeed some might argue it is more sinister than "wiped", though it is a bit more of a mouthful if you are trying to find four catchy and easily memorable words with which to incite anger against Iran.)

MEMRI (its text of the speech is available [here](#)) is headed by a former Israeli military intelligence officer and has sometimes been attacked for alleged distortion of Farsi and Arabic quotations for the benefit of Israeli foreign policy. On this occasion they supported the doveish view of what Ahmadinejad said.

Finally we come to the BBC monitoring service which every day puts out hundreds of highly respected English translations of broadcasts from all round the globe to their subscribers - mainly governments, intelligence services, thinktanks and other specialists. I approached them this week about the controversy and a spokesperson for the monitoring service's marketing unit, who did not want his name used, told me their original version of the Ahmadinejad quote was "eliminated from the map of the world".

As a result of my inquiry and the controversy generated, they had gone back to the native Farsi-speakers who had translated the speech from a voice recording made available by Iranian TV on October 29 2005. Here is what the spokesman told me about the "off the map" section: "The monitor has checked again. It's a difficult expression to translate. They're under time pressure to produce a translation quickly and they were searching for the right phrase. With more time to reflect they would say the translation should be "eliminated from the page of history".

Would the BBC put out a correction, given that the issue had become so controversial, I asked. "It would be a long time after the original version", came the reply. I interpret that as "probably not", but let's see.

Finally, I approached Iradj Bagherzade, the Iranian-born founder and chairman of the renowned publishing house, IB Tauris. He thought hard about the word "roozgar". "History" was not the right word, he said, but he could not decide between several better alternatives "this day and age", "these times", "our times", "time".

So there we have it. Starting with Juan Cole, and going via the New York Times' experts through MEMRI to the BBC's monitors, the consensus is that Ahmadinejad did not talk about any maps. He was, as I insisted in my original piece, offering a vague wish for the future.

A very last point. The fact that he compared his desired option - the elimination of "the regime occupying Jerusalem" - with the fall of the Shah's regime in Iran makes it crystal clear that he is talking about regime change, not the end of Israel. As a schoolboy opponent of the Shah in the 1970's he surely did not favour Iran's removal from the page of time. He just wanted the Shah out.

The same with regard to Israel. The Iranian president is undeniably an opponent of Zionism or, if you

prefer the phrase, the Zionist regime. But so are substantial numbers of Israeli citizens, Jews as well as Arabs. The anti-Zionist and non-Zionist traditions in Israel are not insignificant. So we should not demonise Ahmadinejad on those grounds alone.

Does this quibbling over phrases matter? Yes, of course. Within days of the Ahmadinejad speech the then Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, was calling for Iran to be expelled from the United Nations. Other foreign leaders have quoted the map phrase. The United States is piling pressure on its allies to be tough with Iran.

Let me give the last word to Juan Cole, with whom I began. "I am entirely aware that Ahmadinejad is hostile to Israel. The question is whether his intentions and capabilities would lead to a military attack, and whether therefore pre-emptive warfare is prescribed. I am saying no, and the boring philology is part of the reason for the no."

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