

Crafting Israel in the Iranian Media: Potential Implications for Intergroup Relations

Rusi Jaspal, Ph.D.

De Montfort University, Leicester, UK

rusi.jaspal@gmail.com

Rusi Jaspal is Lecturer in Psychology at De Montfort University, Leicester, UK. He has published widely on identity, intergroup relations and the media, including articles on antisemitism and anti-Zionism in Iran and the Muslim world. Dr. Jaspal is the author of Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism: Representation, Cognition and Everyday talk, which is to be published by Ashgate in 2013.

The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) espouses an official policy of anti-Zionism, which is frequently punctuated with blatant antisemitism.¹ Although the Imperial State of Iran enjoyed diplomatic and strategic relations with Israel, following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, all bilateral relations were cut by the newly established IRI. Today, the IRI vocally supports Palestinian sovereignty over the whole of present-day Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, while periodically calling for the destruction of the Jewish State. It systematically refers to Israel by demeaning terms such the “Zionist regime” and “Occupied Palestine,” and positions both Israel and Jews as posing a threat to Iran, Muslims and the world more generally.² The fervent anti-Zionist/anti-Semitic position of the IRI has drawn support from other Arab and Muslim countries, and condemnation from much of the Western world.³

There has been social sciences research into the development and deployment of anti-Zionism/ antisemitism in the IRI, much of which has examined the political functions of this ideological stance.⁴ Moreover, there is emerging evidence that both antisemitism and anti-Zionism have infiltrated public thinking in Iran.⁵ The IRI is keen to “export” its ideology beyond its own borders, which is exemplified by its support of English-language Iranian newspaper outlets, such as *The Tehran Times* and *Press TV*. These outlets aim to reach out to English-speakers in the West, while promising to provide an “alternative” non-biased perspective on global, especially Middle Eastern, issues that “counters” what is regarded as “Western bias.”⁶ Although the circulation rates of these outlets are largely unknown, it is argued that they may have at least some clout in shaping discourse concerning Israel, particularly among specific ethnic and religious minority groups in the West. More generally, the aforementioned English-language Iranian media outlets reflect the IRI’s discourse on Israel, given that they are closely aligned with the government. Thus, the analysis of the English-language press provides insight into the themes and discourses which the IRI itself *wishes* to disseminate to an international readership.

This paper examines textual representations of Israel in the English-language Iranian Press in order to elucidate how the IRI’s anti-Zionist ideology is “exported” beyond the country’s national and linguistic borders in an apparently more socially acceptable manner.⁷ Indeed, as Pierre Pahlavi has argued, the IRI invests heavily in the foreign-language media “to spread the image of Iran as a “moderate Islamic country” to a target audience of millions.”⁸ Yet, this positive image cannot be constructed at the expense of the long-standing, seemingly non-negotiable stance of anti-Zionism. Drawing on Intergroup Threat Theory from social psychology, this paper provides some analytical insight into the media’s construal of

Israel, outlining the ways in which Israel is constructed as (i) threatening; (ii) illegitimate; (iii) being in decline. These themes are discussed in terms of their potential implications for intergroup relations.

Intergroup Threat Theory

Intergroup Threat Theory⁹ is a socio-psychological framework, which posits that the perception of threat from outgroups can have consequences at both the psychological and intergroup levels. Outgroups can be perceived as posing two basic types of threat to the ingroup. *Realistic threats* are posed by factors which could cause the ingroup physical harm or loss of resources. *Symbolic threats* represent threats to the worldview or meaning system(s) of the ingroup, such as challenges to valued ingroup norms and values. Rusi Jaspal and Marco Cinnirella have argued that some stigmatized minority groups in society can be represented “in such a way that they represent a *hybridised* kind of threat that combines both realistic (e.g. physical well-being) and symbolic (e.g. cultural) threats to the dominant ethno-national ingroup.”¹⁰ Although this model has commonly been used to understand how threats are perceived at a psychological level, there is certainly scope for examining how such threats are *constructed* in text, as well as their implications for shaping social and political discourse.

This short paper outlines emerging results from a critical discourse analysis study of representations of Israel in the English-language Iranian Press. It examines how Israel is described, evaluated and positioned rhetorically in relation to other groups, and how these rhetorical constructions can potentially impact intergroup relations.

Some methodological notes

Critical discourse analysis¹¹ is a language-oriented analytical technique for identifying patterns of meaning within a data set. It focuses on how social reality is constructed in talk and text, rather than searching for an ‘objective’ reality. Accordingly, a critical discourse analysis can provide insight into the ‘context’ of intergroup relations, which in turn informs the ways in which people come to think about the Israeli outgroup.

This study focuses upon two English-language Iranian news outlets, namely *The Tehran Times* and *Press TV*. The websites of both feature an online database of published articles. Using the keywords “Israel,” “Zionist” and “Palestine,” the author conducted a search of the online databases for articles published between 1st May 2011 and 1st September 2011, generating 214 articles for analysis. The study aimed to explore *habitual* ways of media reporting on Israel, rather than polarized coverage of particularly contentious events (e.g. Gaza War). Thus, the author targeted a time-period, in which there were no reports of major social or political events concerning Israel/the Israeli-Arab conflict. Although there are frequent skirmishes between the Israeli army and Palestinian militants as well as rocket attacks from Gaza, which often feature in international news coverage, the aforementioned 4-month period was in fact relatively uneventful.

Although this article is based on an analysis of 214 articles, space constraints permit the presentation of only a few illustrative extracts below with the aim of demonstrating *how* the themes of (i) threat construction, (ii) delegitimization and (iii) imminent demise are constructed and communicated to the readership. In the extracts below, three dots indicate where material has been excised. The sources of the extracts are presented as endnotes.

Constructing Israel as a hybridized threat

Consistent with the ideology of the IRI, articles in the corpus construct Israel as posing both realistic and symbolic threats to Iranians, Muslims and the world, more generally. For example, the construction of a realistic threat ensues from depicting Israel as being a key player in global terrorism:

1. Assassin of Iranian physicist admits connections with Mossad... Defendant Ali Jamali Fashi, who was arrested after the assassination of Ali Mohammadi, was charged with moharebeh (enmity against God)...any attempt to undermine national security would be regarded as an instance of moharebeh... Jamali Fashi said he exchanged information with Mossad and received training...in order to conduct terrorist acts... [Fashi] met with Mossad's agents at the Zionist regime's consulate in Istanbul, Turkey.¹²

This extract describes the trial of Ali Jamali Fashi, who was accused of collaborating with the “Zionist regime” and assassinating Ali-Mohammadi, an Iranian nuclear scientist. The defendant was found guilty and executed on 15th May 2012. Extract 1 is a fairly typical example of how the Iranian Press attributes internal crimes, assassinations and other apparent acts of terrorism to Israel in order to construct it as a harmful terrorist entity.¹³ Mossad, as an institution associated with Israel, is constructed as harboring harmful intentions against Iran – “terrorist acts” and the “attempt to undermine [Iranian] national security” are attributed to the organization. Crucially, although the assassination of Ali-Mohammadi was perpetrated by an Iranian citizen, Ali Jamali Fashi was pervasively branded as an “Israeli spy,” essentially stripping him of his “Iranian-ness” and constructing him instead as part of the global “Zionist conspiracy.”¹⁴ The allegedly malevolent intentions of the “Zionist regime” and Ali Jamali Fashi serve to construct Israel (and its institutions) as posing a harmful and dangerous realistic threat not only to the political system in the IRI but also to the Iranian people. Indeed, it is the “Iranian nation” which is depicted as being the actual victim of the “Zionist threat.”¹⁵

Interestingly, extracts in the corpus rhetorically entwine the realistic *and* symbolic threats allegedly posed by Israel. This is exemplified in extract 1, which refers to “any attempt to under national security” (that is, a realistic threat) as “moharebeh (enmity against God)” (a more symbolic threat). The IRI represents realistic threats against Iran as simultaneous threats against the ideological system of Islam (and by extension, God), in that any individual who attacks Iran cannot possibly be a true believer in God. Both national security and the worldview of the IRI are depicted as being threatened, thereby constructing a superlative threat, which functions at various levels and affects multiple dimensions of everyday life.

The constructed certainty of the “Zionist threat” implicitly rationalizes the fervently anti-Zionist position of the IRI, which has been moderately criticized in the West. It appears to provide some background to this stance, so that readers do indeed perceive the IRI as a “moderate” country with legitimate cause to oppose the State of Israel.¹⁶

Denying Israel's right to exist

The threatening “Zionist entity” which allegedly threatens the continuity, well-being and dominant worldview of the IRI is habitually delegitimized in the corpus.¹⁷ The notion that Israel should threaten Iran, Muslims and the world in general is represented as being particularly outrageous primarily because the threatening stimulus (that is, Israel) is constructed as being an illegitimate one. In short, according to the corpus, not only does Israel pose a multi-faceted threat to Iran, but it also has no legitimate right to exist.

Social categorization provides one means of contesting Israel's legitimacy and its right to exist. The use of demeaning terms such as the “Zionist regime” rather than “State of Israel,” which are frequently qualified by adjectives such as “fake” and “illegitimate,” serves to delegitimize Israel.

2. The interception of a Gaza-bound French aid ship by Israeli naval forces was a “political ignominy on the record of the fake Zionist regime”¹⁸

Indeed, the IRI refers to the Jewish State in these demeaning terms, sometimes employing the metaphor of a “cancerous tumor” in order to further construct Israel as an illegitimate, though *growing*, hybridized threat.¹⁹ There are endless examples of such demeaning terms, which the Iranian media employ in order to deny the legitimacy of the State of Israel. These include “Tel Aviv regime,” “Hebrew regime” and “Occupied Palestine,” to name only a few. These categories all converge in denying the statehood of Israel, thereby constructing it as an illegitimate presence among the nations of the world.

Moreover, articles in the corpus regularly reproduce assertions and sermons, usually from high-ranking officials from the IRI's theocratic and political system, which deny Israel's right to exist. The discourse of these religious and political figures tends to juxtapose Israel's existence with the plight of the Palestinians, thereby constructing the co-existence of the two peoples as impossible:

3. “Palestine has, since the beginning, belonged to the Palestinians and we do not agree with partitioning Palestine under no circumstances [*sic*]... We will never recognise the Zionist regime [of Israel] and this has been the Islamic Republic's position since the Islamic Revolution [in 1979] until now,” the Iranian minister [Ali Akbar Salehi] said.²⁰

The article strategically reproduces the discourse of the Iranian minister in order to disseminate and encourage the notion that Israel has no right to exist. This is attributed primarily to the long-standing social representation in the IRI that “Palestine has, since the beginning, belonged to Palestinians,” which serves to construct Israel as a foreign, colonial presence in Palestine.²¹ Indeed, articles in the corpus explicitly refer to the Jewish population of Israel as a “foreign occupation by some Ashkenazi Zionist Jews from Europe,” thereby rhetorically denying Israel's right to exist. Furthermore, the recognition of Israel as an independent sovereign state would entail a “partition” of Palestine, which is deemed to be unacceptable. Crucially, this obscures the fact that Palestine was in fact “partitioned” over sixty years ago.

This reiterates the point made earlier that articles delegitimize Israel by referring to it as an illegitimate “regime” rather than as a state. Moreover, the newspaper outlets seem to present readers with the image of an illegitimate entity with no right to exist nonetheless engaging in acts of terror and brutality against the Iranian people and Muslim world, more generally. This facilitates an outright rejection of Israel’s right to exist and perpetuates the IRI’s official ideological position that the State of Israel should be dismantled in order to accommodate an (Islamic) Palestinian state in the whole of present-day Israel, Gaza and the West Bank.²²

Israel’s demise in the ‘Islamic Awakening’

These outlets aim to provide English-language readers with an “alternative” perspective on Middle East affairs. Accordingly, they tend to re-conceptualize (what has commonly been referred to as) the Arab Spring in terms of an “Islamic Awakening.” This is consistent with the observation that social and political factors are frequently viewed through an Islamic ideological lens, in order to safeguard the theocratic “raison d’être” of the IRI. Indeed, there is evidence of an “Islamicization” of the Israeli-Arab conflict, which constructs it in terms of an *Islamic* resistance to “Zionist atrocities.”²³ Similarly, the so-called Islamic Awakening is depicted by the IRI as the alleged inclination of Muslims (in Arab countries) to reject “Western interference” in their internal affairs by overthrowing “regional dictators” and establishing rapprochement with Islam. Articles in the corpus attribute the “demise of Israel” to the Islamic Awakening.

4. He [Ambassador Ahmad Mousavi] also said the unprecedented uprisings of Muslim nations, especially in North Africa, herald the decline of the Zionist regime and the liberation of the occupied Holy Qods.²⁴

The State of Israel is itself constructed as “Western interference,” that is, an infiltration of Western, primarily Ashkenazi Jews in “Muslim lands.”²⁵ The “unprecedented uprisings” of *Muslim*, rather than Arab, nations is said to symbolize the “imminent” demise of Israel and the “liberation of the occupied Holy Qods” (that is, Jerusalem). Moreover, there is a re-conceptualization of the political reasons underlying the Arab Spring - the destruction of Israel and the “liberation” of Jerusalem are constructed as underlying these anti-government revolutions. Moreover, by establishing a link between the “uprisings of Muslim nations” and the “decline of the Zionist regime,” articles homogenize both the leaders of these Muslims nations (who have been or in the process of being toppled) *and* the State of Israel, constructing them both as “regional despots.”²⁶

Similarly, the threatening character of Israel, described above, is reiterated by “warning” the revolutionaries not to allow future infiltrations of the “Zionist regime”:

5. Islamic Awakening meet ends in Tehran... “We should all take great care not to jump out of the frying pan into the fire,” he pointed out, adding that the nations should not allow US and the Zionist regime (Israel) to “be thrown out of one door and return from another”²⁷

This extract exemplifies the media tendency to anchor the Arab Spring (or “Islamic Awakening”) to the overarching “aim” of the Muslim world to defeat Zionism. The extract represents the removal of the “Zionist regime” from the Middle East as a goal of the revolutions, and therefore warns them not to allow Zionism (and the US) to exert any future influence on the internal affairs of these countries. This extract suggests that the aims of Israel are inherently malevolent and harmful to the Islamic world, which reiterates the theme of threat outlined above. On the other hand, the Islamic ingroup is rhetorically empowered and positioned as being capable of defeating the “Zionist regime.” In short, Israel is optimistically depicted as being on the verge of demise due to Islamic unity in opposition against it.

Conclusions

The aim of this short article was to summarise some of the key findings of a critical discourse analytical study of the English-language Iranian Press, rather than to provide a comprehensive overview of the Iranian media.²⁸ An additional focus of the article lies in identifying some of the repercussions of disseminating anti-Zionist propaganda for intergroup relations.

In addition to constituting a key political building-block of the IRI, anti-Zionism clearly constitutes a significant media agenda. Indeed, political and media representations in the IRI tend to be mutually complementary, given the prevalence of state censorship.²⁹ Thus, rather than providing an “alternative” perspective on global issues, as it claims to do, the English-language Iranian Press in fact serves as a “mouth-piece” of the IRI. It reproduces well-known social representations created and encouraged in the political rhetoric of the IRI.³⁰ Moreover, it provides greater “voice” to key figures of the country’s theocratic and political establishment by disseminating their controversial anti-Zionist assertions. This is significant because the assertions of these political figures tend not to be given much attention in the mainstream global media outlets such as the BBC and CNN. Conversely, this paper shows that they are quite central to the dissemination of societal information in the English-language Iranian press.

As Moshe Maoz observes, “[o]ver the last few decades, manifestations of hatred of Jews and Israel have increased in the Arab and Muslim world.”³¹ Crucially, this paper suggests that hatred of Israel may not necessarily be confined to the Arab and Muslim world, but rather that there is an attempted globalization of the IRI’s anti-Zionist agenda. This paper shows that the Iranian media encourages the social representation that Israel poses a hybridized threat to the Islamic world (including Iran). The realistic threat is accentuated by referring to Israel as espousing terrorism against both the IRI and the Palestinians, while symbolic threat constructions result from Israel’s alleged attempt to destroy the Islamic worldview. It has been argued that the accentuation of a hybridized outgroup threat can result in threatened identity,³² negative emotions and a proclivity to derogate and discriminate against the threatening outgroup.³³ The social representation that Israel in fact has no right to exist encourages mitigation of the “Zionist threat” – not only does it threaten Muslims, but it has no right to exist in the first place. Moreover, the seemingly justifiable, long-standing anti-Zionist position of the IRI is constructed as being effective in its goal to destroy Israel through the representation of Israel’s imminent demise in the “Islamic Awakening.”

Although these newspaper outlets claim to target an international readership, the repeated construction of threat against Islam and Muslims and the frequent call for Islamic mobilization against Israel, collectively, suggest that the target readership is primarily Muslims outside of Iran. Constant appeal to the protection and continuity of Islam and Islamic identity may constitute a means of convincing Muslims (outside of the IRI) of the legitimacy and necessity of the IRI's stance on Israel, while more generally promoting the values and ideologies of the IRI.³⁴ While there are no reliable statistics on the readership of these outlets, preliminary research suggests that some young British Muslims of Pakistani descent feel increasingly alienated by the mainstream British and US media outlets and are therefore turning to "alternative" outlets, such as *Press TV* and the *Tehran Times*, which are viewed as being more accommodating of Muslims.³⁵

Faith in these outlets and constant exposure to anti-Zionist imagery that constructs Israel as a threat to one's valued ingroups may result in negative attitudes towards Israel and Jews, more generally, with potentially dire consequences for intergroup relations. Indeed, Bar-Tal has convincingly argued that the *context* of intergroup relations (here, the constructed threat of Israeli to Muslim) informs the beliefs, images, attitudes, emotions and behaviours that groups in turn manifest towards each other.³⁶ By using the English-language media, a major channel of societal information, in order to construct a negative context of intergroup relations, the IRI attempts (i) to produce negative attitudes towards Israel, (ii) to evoke fear of the Jewish State, and (iii) to dispel any support for peace. Given that negative attitudes towards Israel and Jews are already observable among sections of the Muslim community in the West,³⁷ it seems reasonable to fear that the related problems of anti-Zionism and antisemitism could be further exacerbated. However, at this stage, there is a need to examine empirically the potential impact of English-language Iranian media reporting of Israel and attitudes among the readership.

In conclusion, the portrayal of Israel as a threatening and illegitimate state on the verge of destruction contributes to the rhetorical normalization of anti-Zionism. It constructs the widely criticized anti-Zionist program of the IRI as a reasonable and justifiable response to threat, aggression and illegitimacy. By anchoring Israel to negative characteristics and objectifying it in terms of a "cancerous tumor," the outlets rationalize widespread negativization, otherization and delegitimization of Israel. A key function of these outlets is to convince the Western world of the legitimacy of the IRI's position, to export its values and ideology and to encourage wider acceptance of anti-Zionism as an appropriate response to the "Zionist threat."

Notes

¹ Soli Shahvar, "The Islamic Regime in Iran and Its Attitude towards the Jews: The Religious and Political Dimensions," *Immigrants & Minorities*, XXVII: 1 (2009), pp. 82-117.

² *Ibid.*

³ Ray Takeyh, "Iran, Israel and the Politics of Terrorism," *Survival*, XLVIII: 4 (2006), pp. 83-96.

⁴ Rusi Jaspal, "Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in Iran: the role of identity processes," *Israel Affairs* (in press); Meir Litvak, "The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Holocaust: Anti-

Semitism and Anti-Zionism,” *Journal of Israeli History*, XXV: 1 (2006), pp. 267-84; Takeyh, op. cit.

⁵ Rusi Jaspal, *Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism: Cognition, Representation and Everyday Talk* (Farnham, UK, forthcoming)

⁶ Press TV website, <http://www.presstv.ir/About.html>; see Pierre Pahlavi, “Understanding Iran’s Media Diplomacy,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, VI: 2 (2012), pp. 24.

⁷ Yves Pallade, “Delegitimizing Jews and the Jewish State: Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism after Auschwitz,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, II: 3 (2009), pp. 29-40.

⁸ Pahlavi, op. cit.

⁹ Walter Stephan, Oscar Ybarra and Kimberley Morrison, “Intergroup threat theory,” *Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination*, Todd Nelson (ed.) (New York, 2009), pp. 43-55.

¹⁰ Rusi Jaspal and Marco Cinnirella, “Media representations of British Muslims and hybridised threats to identity,” *Contemporary Islam: Dynamics of Muslim Life*, IV: 3 (2010), pp. 290.

¹¹ Teun van Dijk, “Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society*, IV: 2 (1993), pp. 249-283.

¹² “Assassin of Iranian physicist admits connections with Mossad,” *Tehran Times*, August 23, 2011

¹³ Jaspal, forthcoming, op. cit.

¹⁴ “Ali-Mohammadi assassin will stand trial today: Tehran prosecutor,” *Tehran Times*, August 22, 2011

¹⁵ “Assassination of Iranian academic is a U.S.-Israeli plot: officials,” *Tehran Times*, July 24, 2011

¹⁶ Pahlavi, op. cit.

¹⁷ Daniel Bar-Tal, “Causes and consequences of delegitimization: Models of conflict and ethnocentrism,” *Journal of Social Issues* XLVI: 1 (1990), pp. 65-81; Jaspal, op. cit.

¹⁸ “Israeli interception of Gaza aid ship, a political ignominy,” *Tehran Times*, July 20, 2011

¹⁹ “Recognition of Palestinian state not the final step: Ahmadinejad,” *Tehran Times*, August 26, 2011

²⁰ “Palestine cannot be partitioned: Iran,” *Press TV*, September 18, 2011

²¹ Litvak, op. cit.

²² Jaspal, op. cit.

²³ Meir Litvak, “The Islamization of the Israeli-Arab Conflict: The Case of Hamas,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, XXIII: 1 (1998), pp. 148-163.

²⁴ “Israel meddling in Syria to compensate for the fall of allies,” *Tehran Times*, August 28, 2011

²⁵ “Palestinians should not negotiate now!” *Press TV*, September 21, 2011

²⁶ “Iron cages awaiting regional despots: Iranian cleric,” *Tehran Times*, August 5, 2011

²⁷ “Islamic Awakening meet ends in Tehran,” *Press TV*, September 18, 2011

²⁸ Pahlavi, op. cit.

²⁹ Mehdi Semati, *Media, Culture and Society in Iran: Living with Globalization and the Islamic State* (London, 2008).

³⁰ Jaspal, in press, op. cit.

³¹ Moshe Maoz, “Muslims, Jews and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, III: 3, pp. 15-21.

³² Jaspal and Cinnirella, op. cit.

³³ Bar-Tal, op. cit.

³⁴ Pahlavi, op. cit.

³⁵ Rusi Jaspal, "The Construction and Management of National and Ethnic Identities among British South Asians: An Identity Process Theory Approach," Ph.D. dissertation, University of London (London, 2011).

³⁶ Daniel Bar-Tal and Yona Weichman, *Stereotypes and Prejudice in Conflict* (Cambridge, 2006)

³⁷ Gunther Jiheli, "Antisemitism among young Muslims in London," Paper presented at the International Study Group Education and Research on Antisemitism: Aspects of Antisemitism in the UK, December 5, 2009.