

Iranian Holocaust Cartoon Competitions and Exhibitions: Goals, Sponsors, and Themes

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Summary

1. *Iranian Holocaust cartoon competitions and exhibitions are part of a broader propaganda effort run and supported by the military and religious establishment, both of which are directly managed by Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei;*
2. *The government, through various mechanisms and institutions, provides the permissions, financial and material support, and the locations necessary for implementing these activities; it is incorrect to call the contest organizers NGOs;*
3. *The main objective of these contests is to deny the Holocaust and the existence of Israel as a legitimate state; it is not primarily a reaction to the cartoons of Prophet Mohammed published in the West;*
4. *The themes of the cartoons are intended to instigate hatred against Jews and the citizens of Israel, and the ideas expressed are not supported by historical, social, or political observations and research;*
5. *Although some prominent Iranian cartoonists have denounced the contests and independent art critics have ignored them, political groups and civil society institutions in Iran have been silent;*
6. *Political propaganda does not only belong to one faction in Iran; all factions are in line with the Supreme Leader's positions;*
7. *The change of presidential administration in Iran has not resulted in significant changes in the foreign and media policies of the state, including with respect to distortion of the Holocaust, which are determined by the Supreme Leader; any changes have been small and tactical, rather than substantial and strategic.*

Background

The first international Holocaust cartoon competition in Iran was held in 2005, right after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's inauguration as President. The competition was organized and sponsored by the Hamshahri Institute, which publishes the *Hamshahri* newspaper (Tehran municipality's official news outlet), and the Iran House of Cartoon. According to the competition organizers, they received 1193 cartoons from cartoonists living in 63 countries. A selected number of cartoons were shown to the public in an exhibition in August 2006.

In December 2006, the Iranian Foreign Ministry's Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) held a conference promoting Holocaust denial titled "Review of the

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Holocaust: Global Vision.” President Ahmadinejad attended its closing [ceremony](#). These activities, launched in the beginning of the new presidential administration, were signs of a specific and comprehensive plan for denying the Holocaust.

The Iran House of Cartoon and the Sarcheshmeh Cultural Complex in Iran held the second international Holocaust cartoon competition in 2015. According to the organizers, the contest drew participants from 50 countries and they [received](#) 845 entries from 312 cartoonists. The Owj Media and Art Institute first declared that it would pay for prizes worth US\$5,000, \$8,000, and \$12,000 to the top three winners of the contest. Later it doubled the prizes. The 50 thousand dollars in prizes will be paid by a governmental institution, while two-thirds of Iranian families live on US\$7.50 a day.

The second Holocaust cartoon exhibition will be held in May 2016 as the main event of the 11th International Cartoon Biennale in Iran. The exhibition will include 102 Holocaust cartoons, as well as 50 cartoons depicting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and will be [held](#) in the art section of the Islamic Propaganda Organization.

The Goals of the Contests

Three sets of goals are mentioned in statements of the contest organizers, which are reflected in the works presented in the competitions and exhibitions:

- a. *Reaction to the European publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed.* According to the organizers, the first and foremost objective of holding these competitions and exhibitions is to react to events in Europe: “Ten years ago a Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, published 12 insulting cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed. In reaction to this claim that media are free in the West and they have no limitation and everything could be the subject of work, we held the first round of the Holocaust cartoon contest. In a second event, *Charlie Hebdo* published a very insulting drawing of the Prophet Mohammed. In response to this decision we held the second contest after 10 years,” [said](#) Mas`oud Shoja`i Tabataba`i, the spokesman for the cartoon contest organizers.
- b. *Denial of the existence of Israel as a legitimate state.* The main theme of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s propaganda targeting Middle Eastern audiences is to deny the existence of Israel as a legitimate state. The Islamic Republic seeks to be the most prominent global voice of antisemitic and anti-Israel sentiment and in doing so has made connections with and promoted individuals espousing these views from across the world. The Holocaust is just a subject of a set of cartoons in this effort. Why focus on the Holocaust in order to deny the existence of Israel? “Because the Zionist regime is based on the idea of the Holocaust. ... The Holocaust is the Zionist’s great lie to occupy Palestine” [says](#) Mas`oud Shoja`i Tabataba`i. For Shi`ite Islamists in Iran (which include the ruling clerics, high-ranking officers in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and their loyalists), the murder of millions of European Jews is a pretext that Zionists use to convince the world of the need for a Jewish State.

The three sets of goals listed above are not equal. The first objective has nothing to do with the claimed or expected result. The appropriate reaction to cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed is not drawing Holocaust cartoons. There are hundreds of ways to react to those cartoons. For this reason, in my view the main objective of the contest is not in reaction to the Prophet Mohammed cartoons, but to deny the Holocaust and the existence of Israel as a legitimate state. Because the denial of Israel's existence is a pillar of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, it is obvious that it should be seen in Islamists' propaganda.

The Sponsors of the Conference and Their Connections to the Government

The nature of activities such as these Holocaust cartoon contests and exhibitions is propaganda in an authoritarian state. There is nothing in these cartoons for increasing awareness, entertainment, or transferring information. The expenses of these activities are totally paid by governmental institutions, whether military, cultural, municipal, or religious. These institutions, their pseudo branches, and seemingly private affiliates (with deceiving names such as Apex, *Owj* in Persian) may have misleading titles, but they are all organized, financed, and managed under the Supreme Leader's office, his appointed bodies, and the executive branch headed by the President. There are no private or independent non-governmental institutions active in this area. The government and its varied set of institutions are the only ones that pay for these types of ideologically oriented activities. There is no channel for private funds, and no provision in Iran's tax code, to support these activities.

The Hamshahri Institute, which sponsored the first Holocaust cartoon contest, is a propaganda-oriented institution financed and managed by the Tehran municipality. Under the Ahmadinejad mayorship (2003-2005), this Institute was transformed into a propaganda machine for Islamists who have military and security backgrounds. Another sponsor of the first contest was the Iran House of Cartoon, which was [financed](#) by the Tehran municipality.

Tehran and other municipalities in Iran are not public institutions under the control of the local citizenry. The Supreme Leader's office, Khamenei himself, and the executive authorities under the President directly interfere in the selection of mayors in metropolitan areas such as Tehran, Mash-had, and Shiraz. The executive power has the power to dismiss members of city and village councils. Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the mayor of Tehran since 2005, was handpicked by Khamenei. As an ex-commander of the IRGC, he has been very close to the Supreme Leader. Every city or village council candidate who is not considered an "insider" is disqualified from the elections. Khamenei micro-manages municipal affairs very much in the same way as he does everything in the country. When Gholamhossein Karbaschi was the mayor of Tehran during the Rafsanjani administration, he tried to dismiss Mohammad Va`ezi, who was head of the Art and Culture Organization of the Tehran municipality, without success. Va`ezi was close to Khamenei.

The Saba Art and Culture Institute, which hosted the first exhibition, works under the Iranian Art Academy, which is a governmental institution; its budget is approved by the Majles (Islamic assembly or parliament) and its board members are appointed by the [government](#).



Saba Art and Culture Institute in Tehran

The second competition is sponsored by the Owj Media and Art Institute and the Sarcheshmeh Cultural Complex. Owj is funded by the IRGC and managed by members of the IRGC and Basij (a militia under the IRGC); Sarcheshmeh is funded by the Islamic Propaganda Organization (IPO), a governmental institution that works under Khamenei. These are not independent NGOs, because they are funded and managed heavily by the IRGC and IPO. The cartoons of the second competition will be presented as a part of Iran's Cartoon Biennale, which is funded and organized by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The second exhibition will be [held](#) in the Palestine Museum. Similar to the Saba Institute, the Palestine Museum is [a section](#) of the Iranian Art Academy.

The Owj Institute's website does not give any information about its founders, board members (if any), and sponsors, but its products and its goals (as well as its lack of commercial advertisements and a line in the government's yearly budget) show that it is dependent on the military establishment. This Institute was totally and adamantly against the Iran and 5+1 nuclear deal, and it reflected the IRGC commanders' ideas on this issue. On other cultural and social issues, such as the *hejab*, promoting virtue and prohibiting vice, and women's issues, this Institute reflects the militarist Islamists' points of view. Looking at the extent of its publications, movie productions, graphic arts, banners and street billboards, it is clear that its budget should be in the range of ten million dollars.



Owj Media and Art Institute headquarters in Tehran

When asked about the relationship between the IRGC and the Owj Institute, Ramezan Sharif, the spokesperson of IRGC public affairs [said](#): “from the beginning, the Owj Institute declared its specific orientation toward activities regarding the Revolution, Sacred Defense, and Islamic awakening, and all of these three areas have a very special adhesiveness to the IRGC. From this point of view, without close cooperation and support of organizations such as the IRGC and Iranian Armed Forces, this activity would not be brought to full fruition. Based on its definition of its activities, this institution has been able to receive more of IRGC’s material and financial resources. If other people do the same kind of activities, they will receive this support too.” According to Iranian news agencies and news websites, the Owj Institute [implements](#) IRGC and Basij’s propaganda projects.

The Sarcheshmeh Cultural Complex (also known as the Cultural Institute for Islamic Revolutions’ Martyrs; Sarcheshmeh is a neighborhood in Tehran) does not give any specific information about its financing on its [website](#). Similar to the Owj Institute, this complex has no line in the government’s yearly budget and no private company or foundation has declared that it is going to fund it. All managers and known figures of this institution have a military background and have worked for the military establishment. According to its website, the “Cultural Complex for Islamic Revolutions’ Martyrs [another name for Sarcheshmeh Cultural Complex] was launched in 2011 in the location where dozens of members of the Islamic Republic Party were killed [in 1981]. The mission of this complex is to protect the culture of sacrifice and martyrdom in the society and to transfer sublime values of the Islamic Revolution from risen generation to inheriting generation.... This complex was built with the help of Ahmad Ghadirian and the Tehran municipality and is managed under the Islamic Propaganda Organization.” The IPO receives its budget from the government.



Sarcheshmeh Complex in Tehran

All of the expenses of Iran's International Cartoon Biennale, which will include the Holocaust cartoon exhibition in 2016, are paid by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. No competition or exhibition is possible without receiving permission from this Ministry. The organizers of the Holocaust competitions and exhibitions are so close to Khamenei's office that this Ministry cannot refuse to grant permission to them.

If a competition, exhibition, or concert has the Ministry's permission, but the Supreme Leader, the IRGC, or important Friday prayer leaders are against it, there is no way for it to happen. Therefore, Iranian officials cannot claim that a cultural event, such as this competition, could take place without their permission.

Organizers and managers of institutions such as Iran's House of Cartoon, Owj Institute, and Sarcheshmeh Complex are all people who call themselves "Hezbollahi" (members of God's party) in Iran. They have an active role in silencing and oppressing other voices and are supported by the Leader's office and the military and security establishment. Iranian Hezbollah has a long history of arson attacks on bookstores, attacking cinemas, closing concert halls, beating journalists, and bombing newspapers' headquarters. The head of the Sarcheshmeh Complex has a long history of [working with](#) Lebanese Hezbollah when he lived in Lebanon.

Most of the Hezbollahis work for the military and security establishment as profiling officers. Khamenei calls them "military officers of soft war," and by "soft war" he means oppressing other voices. The main subjects of their so-called "cultural activities" are preventing the "cultural invasion of the West" and "promoting the Islamic lifestyle," the "war against the West," and the "expansion of Islamism in Iran and all over the world."

A number of institutions involved in the Islamic Republic's propaganda and indoctrination efforts have been active in Holocaust denial activities. The Islamic Propaganda Organization (*Sāzmān-e Tablighāt-e Eslāmi*), the Qum Office of Islamic Propaganda (*Daftar-e Tablighāt-e Eslāmi-ye Qom*), and the Islamic Culture and Communications Organization (*Sāzmān-e Farhang va Ertebātāt-e Eslāmi*) have clear and

distinct missions of propaganda and indoctrination inside and outside the country. Ministries of Education, Islamic Culture and Guidance, and Justice, the Judiciary, seminaries that now are all funded by the public budgets, Radio and TV channels, Basij (militia), IRGC, IRA (military forces), and the Disciplinary Forces (police) directly work as sections of an undeclared ministry of propaganda and indoctrination. Other governmental ministries, departments, and offices are indirectly involved in Islamist propaganda and indoctrination through ideological recruitment, training, ombudsman, and ceremonies. In the last two decades, the governmental institutions have established fake private or non-profit institutions to do their jobs. These institutions are launched by close allies of Ali Khamenei and people with close ties to them.

In his interview with Robin Wright in *The New Yorker*, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif [claimed](#) that the Holocaust cartoon exhibition is organized and funded by an NGO and that the Iranian state has no authority to stop it: “It’s not Iran. It’s an N.G.O. that is not controlled by the Iranian government. Nor is it endorsed by the Iranian government.... It doesn’t need a permit to hold the function. The Iranian government does not support, nor does it organize, any cartoon festival of the nature that you’re talking about.”

This statement needs fact checking. He claims that NGOs do not have to get permission for their activities in Iran, while every cultural and social activity in Iran requires such permission. The [condition](#) for receiving this permission is “to avoid insulting beliefs and opinions” through “audio, video, painting, and cartoon.” In this case, Holocaust denial is insulting other people’s beliefs through cartoons and the permission should not have been granted.

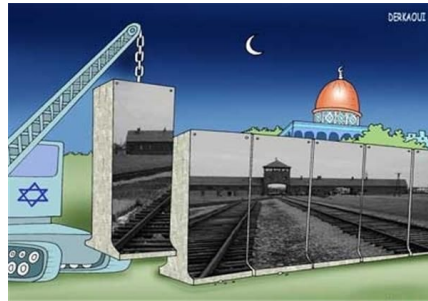
The second factual twist to Zarif’s statements comes from confusing “non-state” and “governmental.” Some of the organizers are not receiving funds from the “state” (i.e. the executive power under President Rouhani), but they are funded by other governmental organizations (under Khamenei). The IRGC, the Tehran municipality, and the Islamic Propaganda Organization, which fund these activities, work under Khamenei. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which also funds and gives approval and facilities to these contests and exhibitions, works under Rouhani. None of these are independent nongovernmental organizations.

The third factual problem is the comparison between Iran and the United States regarding free speech. Iran is an authoritarian state in which the idea of an NGO with the right to act against the regime's preferences is unbelievable. The state-sponsored pathological hatred toward the Jewish people could not be promoted without the approval of Iran’s Supreme Leader. He spreads hatred in virtually every public speech; therefore Zarif’s comparison of the “exhibition’s” sponsors with America’s Ku Klux Klan in terms of promoting hatred is his only accurate statement.

Themes of the Cartoons

The themes of the cartoons from the first competition can be categorized into six subjects (samples are given below under each category):

1) There is a Palestinian Holocaust being committed by Israel;



2) Zionism is Nazism;



3) Israel misuses the Holocaust to justify killing Palestinians;



4) A Holocaust myth was created to legitimize the State of Israel;



5) The Holocaust is a lie; and



6) There is no freedom of speech in the West.



None of these statements are supported by historical, social, or political observations and research. All of them are based on engineering reality by cartoonists who hate Israel. They are not drawn to make a point or to entertain. These are bad and ugly jokes intended to instigate hatred and to justify violence against Jews and citizens of Israel. The cartoons are using art to make lies and twist reality.

The audience does not know if s/he should take these cartoons seriously or as a joke. An ideological propaganda machine, whether Islamist, communist, or fascist, uses any medium including comedy to fabricate the truth while claiming to transfer information. The border between publishing and broadcasting information, and propaganda in authoritarian states is regularly blurred.

Holocaust Denial in the Context of Iranian Propaganda and Indoctrination Policies

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, propaganda (*tablighāt*) and indoctrination (*hoqneh kardan, elqā'*) are essentially the primary and most important functions of the Islamic government. Iranian Shi'ite clerics, as the founders and protectors of the Islamic regime, are indoctrinated to be indoctrinators. The main mission of the regime's Shi'ite clerics and the people who work for them is to propagate and spread Shi'ite Islam by preaching and persuading believers that Shi'ite Islam is the only religion that carries the truth and

salvation, and that other faiths are wrong and misleading. Their main aim is to dehumanize and create hatred toward a supposed enemy, either internal or external. The regime's external enemy is a vague perception of the West, focusing primarily on the United States, Israel, and some European countries, especially the United Kingdom; the internal enemy is any entity that does not agree with the pillars of Islamist ideology, the Islamic regime and government, and the administration. The objective of the propaganda is to produce a false and confusing image of the so-called enemies.

Propaganda and indoctrination exist and are pursued and institutionalized in the Islamic regime because they serve various social and political purposes. They help the regime to mobilize its base, which has been shrinking since the 1980s; they are reactions to the regime's legitimacy crisis and a cover up for the decreasing popularity and influence of the unelected leaders of the regime.

The ruling clerics of Iran look at Iranians as minors; this is the basic idea of the theory of guardianship of the jurist (*velāyat-e faqih*). The guardian decides what the minor needs and which way s/he should be headed in her/his life. This idea is supposed to be indoctrinated into the hearts and minds of Iranians. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran gives priority to propaganda and indoctrination by founding the Islamic regime on the basis of Islamic ideology and putting the Islamic jurist above the law. According to the preamble of the Constitution, "the mass-communication media, radio, and television must serve the diffusion of Islamic culture in pursuit of the evolutionary course of the Islamic Revolution." Article 175 gives the upper hand in this respect to the jurist/leader: "the appointment and dismissal of the head of the Radio and Television of the Islamic Republic of Iran rests with the Leader."

Propaganda and indoctrination are pursued as inseparable from politics. Radio and TV stations are run by the government and the press is controlled by high-ranking officials; all news items, analyses, and reports are directed toward satisfying the ruling clerics. The free flow of information has no place in this media system: the regime considers propaganda as the only function of media outlets. Education, entertainment, and their mixtures (i.e. edutainment, infotainment) are reduced to propaganda and indoctrination.

Each of the cartoons presented in the first Holocaust exhibition manipulated the reality to indoctrinate an ideology of hatred toward the West and Israel. This hatred is supposed to legitimize the government and to justify the absolute power of the clerics in the country.

Why is the Islamic Republic using cartoons to spread its lies? The answer is clear: to avoid responsibility and accountability by resorting to a medium that is usually used to distort and exaggerate reality. This medium is not to tell lies, but to make a point or to entertain.

Iranian Society's Reaction to the Cartoon Contests

The number of people who visited the first exhibition has not been made public. It should be noted that there is no survey to indicate that the visitors to these kinds of exhibitions in

Iran believe in the mission of the exhibitions. People do not have to pay anything to visit, therefore students are encouraged to attend. Most of the middle- and high-school students in attendance are bused to these exhibitions.

There are no surveys of Iranians regarding their knowledge and attitude towards the Holocaust and the government's promotion of Holocaust denial.

No independent graphics analyst has written a review of this exhibition or of the cartoons. It seems that Iranian independent cartoonists look at the cartoons as mere propaganda. Prominent Iranian cartoonists, such as Nikahang [Kowsar](#) and Mana [Neyastani](#), have denounced them. Art critics have completely ignored them. This is strong evidence of the low quality of the cartoons.

Unfortunately, political groups and civil society institutions have been silent on the competitions and exhibitions. The Islamists and secular left still carry the baggage of their anti-imperialist past and have anti-Israeli and even antisemitic opinions. This political approach still treats Israel as a U.S. base in the Middle East and not as an independent country. Even secular nationalists who have a populist orientation believe that the Iranian people have anti-Israeli attitudes, and hence avoid criticizing anti-Israeli propaganda and policies, even though Israel could be the most important ally of Iran in the region.

Has the Change of Presidential Administrations Brought a Change in Policy?

After 2012, when Rouhani was elected President, some groups expected to see Holocaust denial sidelined by the Iranian government. They believed Rouhani's administration was going to mend relationships between the Islamic Republic and the West, and would see issues such as Holocaust denial as an obstacle. Rouhani and Zarif were aware of this situation and kept their silence and did not call the Holocaust a "myth." They even tried to show respect toward Jewish people, but their animosity toward the state of Israel remained intact.

This expectation of the government was due to a lack of knowledge of the Islamic Republic's ideology and structure. Holocaust denial is the official position of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and no Iranian official can do anything against it. Considering this official position, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance [said](#): "there was a misinterpretation of Zarif's comments. We support any program that enlightens people about the Holocaust." He did not specifically talk about cartoons, but his statement included the cartoon contest.

Since Foreign Minister Zarif's interview in *The New Yorker*, contest spokesman Mas'oud Shoja'i has confirmed that his group has been cooperating with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance for the cartoon exhibition. This is consistent with the general situation in Iran: cultural events such as this one require the permission of the Rouhani administration. Mr. Shoja'i [criticized](#) Zarif for distancing himself from the exhibition: "the Foreign Minister in his *New Yorker* magazine interview states that this exhibition is

not confirmed by the administration. This is his personal opinion.... We are cooperating with the Ministry of [Culture and] Islamic Guidance. This Ministry is responsible for graphic arts and they are aware of what we are doing. Everybody knows that we are doing this from a dignified position; the Foreign Minister's position is not consistent with the Minister of [Culture and] Islamic Guidance." Knowing Khamenei's position, Zarif's practical position was to declare that he will not attend the exhibition. Mr. Shoja'i responded by saying: "you are not welcome."

The reformist camp does not have a consistent position on this issue. Some of the reformist figures, such as Mohammad Qoochani (editor of several reformist newspapers and magazines), attended a news conference to promote the Holocaust exhibition. The city council that approves the budget of the Tehran municipality has always had a few reformist members and could have challenged financing Holocaust cartoons, but they did not. The will to wipe Israel from the map and to deny the Holocaust do not belong to just one political faction in Iran. Religious reformists have always supported the principles of the Islamic Republic's foreign policies, one of which is denying the existence of Israel. All Shi'ite Islamists, even religious reformists who have been jailed for their ideas, support Hezbollah and Hamas.

The only difference between the reformists (Rouhani, Khatami, and Hashemi Rafsanjani as their leaders) and non-reformists (Khamenei and Ahmadinejad as their leaders) is their tactics: reformists believe that denying the Holocaust is not a priority and should be sidelined, while the non-reformists believe that hatred against Israel and Jews will increase the Islamic Republic's influence in the region. They believe that exhibitions of Holocaust cartoons help the Islamic Republic to promote its objectives and strategies to be a force in global issues.