

Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in Iran: the role of identity processes

Rusi Jaspal

De Montfort University, Leicester, UK

Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism constitute two important ideological building blocks of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Yet, there is no existing research into the psychosocial motives underlying the manifestation of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism at the institutional level in Iran. Here it is argued that there is much heuristic and predictive value in applying tenets of identity process theory (IPT), a socio-psychological model of identity threat and action, to the primarily socio-historical literature on anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in Iran. The paper provides a summary of anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism and ‘new anti-Semitism’ and IPT. The substantive section of the paper explores (i) how anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism may restore feelings of belonging in the Muslim world and beyond; (ii) the inter-relations between ingroup and outgroup self-efficacy; (iii) the psychosocial motivation to maintain Shiite ideology and Khomeini’s legacy; and (iv) the construction of Jews and Israel in terms of a threat to group continuity. It is suggested that insights into the motivational principles underlying anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism at the institutional level may inform empirical research into social representations of Jews and Israel in Iran. More broadly, this paper highlights the potential contribution of social psychology to existing work on anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in the humanities.

Keywords

anti-Semitism; anti-Zionism; Iran; Israel; Jews; identity process theory; social representations; social psychology

Correspondence

Dr Rusi Jaspal, Division of Psychology, School of Applied Social Sciences, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, De Montfort University, Leicester LE1-9BH, United Kingdom. E-mail: rusi.jaspal@gmail.com

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Rusi Jaspal*

De Montfort University, Leicester, UK

Anti-Semitism is a peculiar socio-psychological phenomenon. It is often subsumed under general psychosocial phenomena such as ‘prejudice’, ‘discrimination’ or ‘racism’ and there is little agreement in the literature regarding the most accurate way of defining it.¹ Although there is some overlap between these constructs, anti-Semitism is a unique and highly complex phenomenon in its own right. Anti-Zionism is a similarly broad construct. It can refer to opposition to Jewish nationhood and/ or the rejection of ideologies underlying the State of Israel.² Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism constitute two important ideological building blocks of the Islamic Republic of Iran, with important real-world consequences for its citizens and the broader Middle East region. While these constructs are conceptually delineable, there is evidence to suggest that they are inextricably entwined in social representations encouraged and disseminated by the Islamic regime in Iran. This highlights the possibility that anti-Semitism is increasingly manifested through the more ‘socially acceptable’ anti-Zionist route.³ Through the interpretive lens of socio-psychological theorising on identity processes, the present paper explores the motivational principles of identity underlying anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in the specific national context of Iran.

Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism

In its broadest sense, anti-Semitism refers to prejudice and hostility towards Jews on the basis of their ethno-cultural and/ or religious group membership. More specifically, anti-Semitic doctrine attributes to the Jews an exceptional position in the broader social matrix, dehumanises them as an inferior group and generally excludes them from dominant society.⁴ There has been little temporal or cross-cultural consistency in anti-Semitism; negative stereotypes of Jews have mutated radically in accordance with temporal and socio-cultural context. For instance, while Nazi Germany and the Argentinean dictatorship accused the Jews of siding with socialists and communists, the Soviet Union persecuted the Jews for their alleged sympathies with the capitalist West.⁵ Anti-Semitism has a history of several millennia and can plausibly be thought of as one of the most enduring forms of prejudice against any single group. Indeed, Jewish history is fraught with acts of persecution. The Jewish people were exiled from their homeland of Judah during the rule of the Babylonian Empire. Moreover, the Jewish exile that followed the Roman Occupation in the 1st Century AD gave rise to a Jewish Diaspora all over the world.⁶ In their new host countries in the Christian world, Jews were accused of deicide (the killing of Christ) and the ritualistic murders of Gentiles. These charges were frequently invoked as a justification for the exclusion and persecution of the Jews.⁷ The historical charge of deicide, coupled with the attribution of localised social ills to the Jews, culminated in their eventual expulsion from several European countries: England in 1290; from Spain in 1492; and from Portugal in 1497. Since then, Anti-Semitism was consistently manifested in a variety of media. For centuries, Jews have been demonised in the visual arts, in Modern European thought, in Muslim thought, and in contemporary European culture.⁸

* E-mail: rusi.jaspal@gmail.com

Undoubtedly, the most devastating and historically salient act of anti-Semitism by any single group was the Holocaust, which was perpetrated by the Nazis and their collaborators from the early 1940s until 1945.⁹ During this time, at least six million Jews were murdered, which devastated the European Ashkenazi Jewish community. In many cases, the Holocaust has become a metaphor for Jewish history.¹⁰ Paradoxically, the most destructive act of persecution against the Jews is often employed by anti-Semites in order to further demonise the Jews. Holocaust denial may legitimately be regarded as a form of anti-Semitism, since this ‘distorts and denies Jewish history and deprives the Jews of their human dignity by presenting their worst tragedy as a scam’, while charging ‘the Jews with unscrupulous machinations in order to achieve illegitimate and immoral goals, mainly financial extortion’.¹¹

‘New anti-Semitism’ constitutes a newer version of Jew-hatred, which is habitually manifested in the guise of anti-Zionism. In Europe this is associated largely with ‘leftists, vociferously opposed to the policies of Israel, and right-wing antisemites, committed to the destruction of Israel, [who] were joined by millions of Muslims, including Arabs, who immigrated to Europe [...] and who brought with them their hatred of Israel in particular and of Jews in general.’¹² However, this amalgamation of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism is most conspicuous in the Middle East, given the recent history of intergroup relations between Jews and Muslims. In the early days of Jewish settlement in Palestine, violent confrontations broke out between Zionist Jews and Arabs regarding Jewish rights to settle in the land.¹³ Moreover, multiple recurring conflicts have arisen between Israel and the neighbouring Arab nations regarding the legitimacy of the State of Israel. This has given rise to an antagonistic psychological intergroup repertoire between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East.¹⁴ Accordingly, anti-Semitic diatribes in the form of theological allusions to Jews as ‘pigs’ and ‘apes’ are frequent in the mass media in the Arab and Muslim world. These negative comments tend to be grounded in several, arguably misunderstood, Koranic verses and other Islamic theological sources such as ‘Ahadith’.¹⁵

Many Arab and Muslim politicians attempt to highlight their opposition to the state of Israel rather than to Jews as a religious group, which is supported to evidence their ‘differentiation’ between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. However, scholars have argued that the two social phenomena may in fact be highly inter-related in the political rhetoric of Arab and Muslim leaders.¹⁶ Speakers frequently employ the categories ‘Jew’ and ‘Zionist’ more or less interchangeably, suggesting an underlying prejudice towards Jews.¹⁷ The effects of both anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist social representations, at the institutional level, for meaning-making in the general population in Arab and Muslim societies are difficult to ascertain, particularly in the absence of any conclusive quantitative data regarding the extent and acceptance of anti-Jewish representations. However, an opinion poll in Jordan, which incidentally maintains diplomatic ties with the Jewish state, reveals that 99 per cent of respondents hold unfavourable opinions about Jews.¹⁸ Thus, it is reasonable to predict that in those nations, in which anti-Semitic imagery is commonplace and encouraged by the national institutions, endorsement of anti-Semitic prejudice will be high.

New anti-Semitism in Iran

Unlike most other countries in the Middle East, the Islamic Republic of Iran openly endorses anti-Semitism, which it incorporates within its anti-Zionist program. In fact it has been argued that ‘no other regime in the world is as anti-Semitic as that of the Mullahs in Tehran’.¹⁹ The origins of Iranian anti-Semitism lie in the installation of Islam as the state religion in Iran in the

7th Century AD, which resulted in the ‘inferiorisation’ of the socio-political status of Jews in Iran.²⁰ Jews were segregated, forced to pay poll tax and pervasively regarded as inferior to the Muslim majority, as exemplified by their ‘Dhimmi’ status. The arrival of the Safavid dynasty in Iran in the 16th century AD further aggravated Muslim-Jewish relations. Modern anti-Semitism in Iran can be linked to *Shiite ideology*, which reflects institutionalised processes of social influence and the collective attempt to achieve and maintain a ‘shared reality’ and world-view.²¹ Indeed, Shiite Islam has a long history of radical anti-Semitism. Even until the nineteenth century, there were harsh social restrictions on Iranian Jews, who were, at best, regarded as second class citizens. Moreover, they were subjected to pogroms and forced conversions to Shiite Islam. During the reign of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-79), Iranian Jews enjoyed a short interval of social prosperity, and there were warm relations between the Imperial State of Iran and Israel.²² However, from the 1960s Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the future Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, publicly denounced and demonised the Jews, referring to them as *inter alia* ‘infidels’ and ‘impure creatures’.²³ Moreover, since the overthrow of the monarchy and establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, Iran’s clerics and politicians have consistently denounced Israel, questioning its legitimacy as an independent state and, repeated, called for its destruction.²⁴ Even during the paradoxical Iran-Contra Affair (1985-1987), in which Iran allegedly purchased arms from the State of Israel with US authorisation, despite Iran’s official opposition to the USA and its refusal to recognise Israel, there was no cessation of anti-Zionism at the level of the Iranian regime. This demonstrates that, despite any potential economic and military benefits of Iranian relations with the State of Israel, the regime’s anti-Zionist stance does seem to perform some important socio-psychological functions. These functions are explored in the present paper.

There are various important reasons for focusing upon the Iranian national context. Firstly, the regime is unique in overtly subscribing to a hybrid anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic political agenda. Although the Islamic regime attempts to differentiate between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, the underlying anti-Semitic agenda frequently surfaces. This is manifested subtly through the interchangeable use of the categories ‘Jew’ and ‘Zionist’ in political discourse and, more overtly, through the Iranian regime’s blatant denial of the Holocaust.²⁵ Secondly, Iran presents a unique demographic situation, since it constitutes the Muslim country with the highest Jewish population (approx. 25,000).²⁶ Thus, while Iran’s overt anti-Zionism impinges upon international relations, its more covert anti-Semitism has implications for the Jewish community within its borders.²⁷ Thirdly, the Islamic regime is the most vociferous critic of Israel, repeatedly calling for its destruction and for the displacement of its people. It is important to investigate the socio-psychological motives potentially underlying anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. This may provide a more accurate account of why the Islamic Republic, despite never having engaged in military conflict or border or economic disputes with Israel, adamantly maintains its anti-Zionist agenda.

Aims

There have been a number of important writings examining anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in Iran, primarily from a socio-historical perspective.²⁸ Here it is argued that this detailed and insightful work may be complemented by theorising from social psychology. Few studies have considered the socio-psychological motives for anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, instead outlining the strategic benefits of this discrimination in localised contexts (e.g. Iran’s ambitions regarding influence in the region). The present paper addresses this lacuna through a review of

this existing literature on anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in Iran through the lens of socio-psychological theorising on identity processes. It theorises anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism as socio-psychological phenomena and proposes predictions regarding the manifestation and acceptance (at the social level) of these forms of prejudice. More specifically, the aim of the paper is to highlight those motivational principles of identity likely to be associated with, or served by, the construction and manifestation of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism at the institutional level of the Iranian regime. Furthermore, it outlines how the principles of identity may be affected by social representations of Jews, which are prevalent in Iran. The theoretical framework consists of identity process theory and social representations theory.

Identity processes and social representations: threat and coping

The primary focus of this paper lies in the identification of those identity principles potentially underlying anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism within the Iranian regime, since they motivate social behaviour.²⁹ The Islamic regime constitutes the focus since it is a major source of societal information in Iran and is, thus, in a position to shape social representations concerning Jews and Israel in the general population. It has been argued that identity processes can best be understood through the exploration of how individuals and groups respond to threatened identity. Identity process theory (IPT) provides an integrative theory of identity threat and coping.³⁰ It outlines (i) the necessary components of a positive identity; (ii) the psychosocial contexts, in which identity may be susceptible to threat; and (iii) the strategies, which will likely be implemented by the individual or group in attempting to cope with threat. The individual or group needs to perceive appropriate levels of self-continuity across time (*continuity*); uniqueness and differentiation from relevant others (*distinctiveness*); competence and control over their lives and future (*self-efficacy*); feelings of worth and value (*self-esteem*); significance and purpose within their lives (*meaning*); belonging within social groups (*belonging*); and compatibility and coherence between elements of their identities (*psychological coherence*). It is noteworthy that these principles may be construed at both individual and collective levels, so it is possible to talk of individual distinctiveness and intergroup distinctiveness, for instance.³¹ Indeed, the present paper is concerned primarily with how identity principles function at the *institutional level* of the Iranian regime.

IPT holds that if the individual or social group cannot perceive appropriate levels of these principles, identity is threatened, which is aversive for psychological well-being. Previous research into the relations between group-level identity threat and coping suggests that, in the presence of perceived realistic and symbolic threats from outgroups, some identity principles may be more susceptible to threat than others.³² In previous work, IPT researchers have presented a 'typology' of group-level threat and the likely consequences for the self-concept by drawing upon relevant concepts from IPT and intergroup threat theory.³³ They argue that (i) realistic threats, which are posed by factors which cause the ingroup physical harm or loss of resources, and (ii) symbolic threats, which contradict the meaning system(s) or worldview of the ingroup, will likely affect the self-concept in different ways. Here, it is suggested that the belonging, self-efficacy and continuity principles of identity are most susceptible to influence in thinking about Jews and Israel.

Although all of the principles may be construed at the individual or group levels, the continuity principle functions differently in accordance with the level of human interdependence. Perceived changes in the surrounding social environment (symbolic threats) may disrupt the unifying psychological thread between past, present and future, threatening *intrapsychic*

continuity. Conversely, the perception of an outgroup as a realistic threat to the ingroup may be seen as a threat to the survival of the ingroup as a ‘potent distinctive and collective social entity within intergroup contexts’.³⁴ This threatens *group continuity*. Here it is argued that Jews may be positioned and perceived as posing both symbolic *and* realistic threats to Muslims, engendering the perception of a ‘hybridised threat’.³⁵

A key tenet of the theory is that the individual or social group will attempt to alleviate identity threat by engaging in various coping strategies, such as denial, re-conceptualisation of the threatening situation or group mobilisation against the threatening stimulus.³⁶ In addition to outlining the possible motives underlying anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, the present paper highlights the possibility that the institutionalisation of social representations which discriminate against Jews and Israel may in fact constitute a strategy for *coping* with identity threat. Identity threat and the strategies for coping are partly determined by social representations functioning in a given social context. IPT acknowledges the importance of social representations in shaping how social phenomena will impact the identity principles.³⁷ According to the theory, a ‘social representation is essentially a construction of reality’, which enables individuals to interpret the social world and to render it meaningful.³⁸ Two key processes of social representation include (i) ‘objectification’, whereby abstract phenomena (e.g. Jewish efficacy, competence and control) are rendered concrete (e.g. Israel); and (ii) ‘anchoring’ which is the means by which unfamiliar phenomena (e.g. anti-Zionism) are integrated into existing ways of thinking (e.g. anti-Semitism).³⁹ Indeed, the state of Israel may be employed as a means of ‘objectifying’ the social ills of the world, providing a tangible, psychologically accessible social entity amid crisis. Moreover, it will be demonstrated how the Iranian regime may anchor social representations of the ‘Zionist threat’ to historical theological representations of the ‘Jewish threat’. Moving beyond social representations, certain ideas regarding Israel and Jews may in fact constitute *nexuses*, which refer to indisputable ideas and symbolic emblems that correspond to ‘prelogical affective knots shared by a large number of individuals’.⁴⁰ Nexuses differ from social representations in that they constitute ‘a more narrow, more radical, more collective and more mobilising modality’ with important implications for social behaviour.⁴¹

The remainder of the paper applies key tenets of IPT to the existing literature on anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in Iran. There will be a focus upon: (i) restoring feelings of belonging in the Muslim world and beyond; (ii) the inter-relations between ingroup and outgroup self-efficacy; (iii) the maintenance of Shiite ideology and Khomeini’s legacy; and (iv) the construal of Jews and Israel as threats to ingroup continuity, and the use of Holocaust denial as a coping strategy.

Restoring belonging in the Muslim world and beyond

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the regime in Iran has been subject to isolation from neighbouring countries in the predominantly Sunni Arab world and from the international community, more generally. Iran’s isolation from the international community stems largely from its antagonism towards the United States, Israel and the West in general.⁴² Indeed, the key tenets of Khomeini’s revolutionary ideology were based around the rejection of Western ‘immorality’, which was regarded as infiltrating and polluting Shiite Muslim Iranian society. These were attributed by Iran’s revolutionaries to the perceived submission of the Shah of Iran to ‘Western hegemony’. On the other hand, Iran’s historical isolation from the rest of the Muslim world may be attributed to the sectarian divide between Iran’s leadership and that of all of the Arab states. Iran is governed by Shiite clerics, while the vast majority of the Arab world is

led by Sunni monarchies and governments. Thus, relations between Iran and neighbouring countries in the Middle East have been affected by underlying sectarian conflict.⁴³ This sectarian conflict has induced fear among some Sunni leaders that the Islamic Republic is engaged in a power struggle, seeking to establish Shiite hegemony over, and to mobilise Shiite minorities in, Sunni-ruled countries. Indeed, this was the primary cause for the Iran-Iraq War, which Iraq initiated by invading neighbouring Iran.⁴⁴ Given the importance of perceived closeness, acceptance and inclusion from relevant others, even at the intergroup level, it is reasonable to assume that the belonging principle may have been chronically threatened since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Iran went from being a nation-state with considerable acceptance and inclusion on the international stage to an ostracised, 'rogue' nation-state subject to political and economic sanctions.⁴⁵ Members of isolated groups will likely counteract perceived opposition from outgroups through the general strengthening of *intra-group* relations.⁴⁶ In short, the more a social group is threatened from the outside, the more united it becomes from within. The very fact that social groups generally seek recognition from and reconciliation with even hostile outgroups highlights the psychosocial importance of belonging at the intergroup level. While individuals belong in social groups, social groups too must belong within a broader social matrix.⁴⁷

The belonging principle may be enhanced through the demonisation of the Jews and Israel. Anti-Semitic social representations are frequently discernible in Iranian diatribes against Israel, which has been attributed to the notion that anti-Semitism is integral to the Shiite religious tradition in Iran.⁴⁸ Khomeini employed and disseminated anti-Semitic social representations in order to exploit their 'mobilising power' among Iranians, enhancing intra-group unity against the constructed aggressor, namely the Shah of Iran. Indeed, it has been observed that the Shah was derogated as a 'Jew in disguise'.⁴⁹ This constituted an effective means of mobilising Iranian society against him, given the pervasiveness of anti-Jewish feeling even during the Pahlavi-ruled 'golden age' of Iranian Jewry. Although the Imperial State of Iran held diplomatic relations with the Jewish State and did not actively discriminate against the Jewish minority, dominant social representations of Iranian Jews were largely negative among the Shiite Muslim majority.⁵⁰ This further demonstrates the potential clout of anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist social representations in mobilising and unifying the Iranian public.

It is argued that the reproduction of anti-Zionist social representations protects the regime's sense of belonging in the Arab Muslim world. After securing power in Iran, Khomeini elevated the theological importance of Jerusalem to a much higher position than it had ever previously occupied in Shiite thought as a means of appealing to the largely Sunni Arab world. Furthermore, the Islamic regime continues to express its solidarity with the Palestinian cause through its symbolic designation of the last Friday of the holy Islamic month of Ramadan as *Yom al-Qods* (Jerusalem Day).⁵¹ This symbolic act is meant to reflect the extent of Iran's solidarity with the Palestinians and with Muslims, in general, thereby attenuating the Shiite-Sunni divide, which has historically been the source of intergroup conflict in the region.⁵² Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, a leading political figure in contemporary Iran, has declared that opposition to the Jewish State is the sacred duty of god-fearing Muslims, which echoes the social representation encouraged by Khomeini that the Muslims are engaged in a 'battle' against Israel.⁵³ The anchoring of anti-Zionism to *Muslim* duty establishes social representational linkage between religious and political categories, further obscuring the conceptual distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. Assertions of this kind against a 'common enemy' highlight the integrity and unity of the ingroup against the designated outgroup. Incidentally, this process has

been found to function among sections of Israeli Jewish society when thinking about intergroup relations with the Arab Muslim outgroup.⁵⁴ The central point is that the accentuation of intergroup (Muslim-Jewish) distinctiveness is conducive to the accentuation of intra-group (Muslim) belonging. Anti-Zionism constitutes a pivotal element of this process of identity management. The aforementioned Iran Contra Affair, in which arms were transferred from Israel to the Islamic Republic with US authorisation, caused much controversy in the Arab world. In fact, the controversy was first reported in the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Shiraa*, providing the potential to ostracise the Islamic regime in the Arab world due to its 'dealings' with Israel.⁵⁵

In addition to anti-Zionism, it is likely that the dissemination of specific anti-Semitic social representations and nexuses (e.g. mythicisation of the Holocaust) perform positive functions for ingroup belonging in the Middle East. It is argued that the conflation of Zionism and Judaism has the effect of 'Islamising' the Arab-Israeli conflict, since the conflict is anchored to religious difference.⁵⁶ Thus, it is constructed in terms of a struggle between 'good' and 'evil'. Senior clerical figures in contemporary Iran have constructed the key goal of the Arab-Israeli conflict as the quest to rid Palestine of *Jews* in their entirety. Since the conflict is constructed as a religious one, in which Muslims will be the victors, anti-Zionist social representations alone do not suffice. Rather, anti-Semitic representations grounded within Shiite religious thought are employed. In political discourse, the 'liberation' of Jerusalem by Muslim forces is constructed in terms of 'an obligation to be undertaken by the entire Muslim world', conducive to 'greater Islamic cohesion and solidarity'.⁵⁷ The emphasis of the collective *Muslim* struggle serves the belonging principle of identity, since it positions Shiite Iranians alongside Sunni Muslims, glossing over the sectarian and ethno-national differences. The Sunni-Shiite sectarian divide no longer constitutes the source of intergroup distinctiveness. Instead, distinctiveness is derived from the Muslim-Jewish religious divide. In short, the employment, dissemination and institutionalisation of anti-Semitic nexuses of this kind may be conducive to greater acceptance and endorsement of the Islamic Republic in a region, where sectarian differences habitually constitute a primary source of distinctiveness and conflict.

Anti-Zionism constitutes one means of accentuating intergroup commonalities and attenuating intergroup differences between Sunnis and Shiites in the Middle East. For instance, Iran has established close links with the *secular* regime in Syria on the basis of their mutual hostility to Israel.⁵⁸ This indicates that subscription to anti-Zionism can indeed constitute the basis for superordinate identification and hence enhanced belonging within the Middle East.⁵⁹ Given the negative social representations of the State of Israel in the Middle East, the endorsement and dissemination of anti-Zionist nexuses will likely stimulate feelings of a shared collective struggle against a common enemy, namely the State of Israel.

Indeed, the anti-Semitic diatribes of the Iranian president, including his frequent problematisation of the reality of the Holocaust, have been warmly welcomed and publicly commended by key figures in the Arab world. In many cases, this has attenuated sectarian and ideological differences between the Shiite Iranians and the Sunni Arabs. Hamas' political leader Khaled Mashaal described Iranian President Ahmadinejad's denial of the Holocaust as 'courageous' while highlighting that 'Muslim people will defend Iran because it voices what they have in their hearts, in particular, the Palestinian people'.⁶⁰ These comments demonstrate admiration for Iran's 'courageous' stance and evidence the superordinate *Muslim* identity, which overrides specific national and sectarian divisions. However, it is noteworthy that some political figures in the Islamic Republic, such as the 'reformist' presidential candidate Mehdi Karroubi, have condemned the Iranian president's denial of the Holocaust, highlighting that it 'only serves

to antagonize the West' and to 'help the rest of the world to stand by Israel'.⁶¹ Karroubi's description of the President's Holocaust denial as 'harmful' to Iran's interests does not necessarily demonstrate his acceptance of the Holocaust as a historical reality. Rather, it exhibits a tension between the need for belonging in the Middle East (facilitated by endorsing anti-Semitism), on the one hand, and the conflicting need for acceptance by the broader Western world (facilitating by rejecting anti-Semitism), on the other.

There is little doubt that Holocaust denial, in particular, has been employed by the Islamic regime as a means of 'uniting' the primarily Muslim Middle East. The 'Holocaust International Cartoon Contest' was organised by the Iranian newspaper *Hamshahri*, and endorsed by the Islamic regime, in February 2006.⁶² Most submissions came from Arab countries and almost unanimously depicted the Holocaust in terms of a Jewish conspiracy and/or Palestinian suffering. For instance, the winning cartoon (from Morocco) made a comparison between Auschwitz concentration camp and the Israeli security barrier, while the runner up (also from Morocco) represented the Holocaust in terms of a Jewish fabrication albeit with real Palestinian victims.⁶³ Competitions of this kind provide an international platform, though a predominantly Arab-Iranian Muslim one, in order to problematise and deny the reality of the Holocaust in creative and accessible ways. Crucially, this platform provides Holocaust deniers with feelings of acceptance, inclusion and belonging within a like-minded community, in which national and sectarian differences cease to be of phenomenological importance *vis-à-vis* the common agenda of demonising Jews and the State of Israel.

The Islamic regime has attempted to legitimise its controversial position regarding the Holocaust, since this constitutes one source of 'otherisation' on the international stage, resulting in threatened belonging. As IPT indicates, challenging the legitimacy of others' evaluations of one's actions may constitute a strategy for coping with identity threat.⁶⁴ Thus, the Iranian media have given wide coverage to the social ostracisation of, and, in some cases, legal action against, European Holocaust deniers, such as Fredrick Toben and the Roger Garaudy. More specifically, the media have strategically constructed the actions of these men as seeking to 'prove the falsehood of this historical allegation [the Holocaust] on the basis of reliable evidence'.⁶⁵ Moreover, it is implied, and often explicitly argued, that Western condemnation of those who question the reality of the Holocaust demonstrates that the Holocaust must constitute a 'Jewish-Western conspiracy'. Thus, while the Western media condemn these men as racist Holocaust deniers, the Iranian regime habitually re-construes the legitimacy of Western evaluations, implying that the Western media too are at the mercy of the 'Jewish-Western conspiracy'. Conversely, the Holocaust deniers are represented as impartially attempting to forward the field of social science by exploring 'scientifically' the reality of a historical event. Indeed, the Holocaust-denying Islamic regime in Iran endeavours to imbue their historically flawed arguments with a 'pseudo-scientific basis' in order to position themselves within discourses of rationality and reason. This may constitute a strategy for minimising those threats to belonging which are associated with voicing denial of the extent and depth of Nazi brutality.

By emphasising the collective opposition of the Western institutions to Iranian attempts to 'forward the field of social science' through their 'critical evaluation' of the Holocaust, the Islamic regime is able to encourage feelings of solidarity and mutual acceptance between Western and Iranian 'researchers' of the Holocaust. The crucial point is that they, an 'oppressed' minority, are allegedly silenced by a much more powerful outgroup committed to the 'Jewish conspiracy'. Even large-scale social groups such as ethnic and national groups need to *belong* within a social matrix. Strategic self-positioning alongside Western Holocaust deniers perhaps

provide these feelings of inclusion and acceptance, which counteract the threats to belonging entailed by ‘otherisation’ from the international community. Crucially, the fact that Western Holocaust deniers are largely considered to be racist, neo-Nazis with little scholarly credibility becomes irrelevant in the Iranian context, given their strategic rejection of ‘Western criteria’ in relation to this particular matter.

Iranian Holocaust denial may plausibly be regarded as a common self-aspect which forms the basis for collective identification with like-minded parties, such as other anti-Semites in the Middle East as well as Western Holocaust deniers. Thus, the Islamic regime is commended by both Hamas’ political leader who is committed to the destruction of Israel, and by Frenchman Robert Faurisson who infamously referred to the Holocaust as a ‘fairy tale’. The regime acquires acceptance and inclusion from diverse social groups. Indeed, ‘the common enmity to Jews and to Israel enables both groups, the Western neo-Nazis and the Iranian Islamists, to gloss over differences between them’.⁶⁶ Crucially, this facilitates a sense of acceptance and inclusion in group terms, as well as the possibility of self-positioning within discourses of rationality and legitimacy. This safeguards the continuity of the Islamic Republic’s anti-Semitism without jeopardising the important sense of belonging, habitually imperilled by this very tenet of the regime. The strategy of the regime is to block the public’s exposure to hegemonic social representations of the Holocaust, arising from historically valid, rigorous academic research into this historical event. Conversely, it provides disproportionate media attention to social representations associated with a small number of racist European neo-Nazi Holocaust deniers.

The inter-relations between Jewish self-efficacy and ingroup self-efficacy

Group vitality theorists argue that in conflictual intergroup situations perceived outgroup vitality (the perception that the outgroup possesses: (i) high social status; (ii) high institutional support; and (iii) a sufficiently large population) may be negatively correlated with perceived ingroup vitality.⁶⁷ Thus, if individuals regard a competing outgroup’s institutional support to be high, they may be inclined to attenuate their own group’s level of institutional support. This will likely apply when the psychological intergroup repertoire is negative.⁶⁸ Similarly, it is possible that, in conflictual intergroup contexts, the perception that a competing outgroup has high self-efficacy (competence and control in a given social domain) will be negatively correlated with perceived ingroup self-efficacy. In short, believing that an ‘antagonistic’ outgroup has more competence and control may undermine belief in ingroup self-efficacy, possibly due to feelings of outgroup threat.⁶⁹ The threatening outgroup may be seen as actively attempting to enhance their own self-efficacy, while jeopardising that of the ingroup. The Islamic regime does indeed hold and encourage a negative psychological intergroup repertoire with Israel and Jews in general. Thus, Jewish self-efficacy may be regarded by the regime as undermining Muslim ingroup self-efficacy. Crucially, the ensuing perception of weak ingroup self-efficacy places identity in a vulnerable position, since self-efficacy is a fundamental human motivation and a defining feature of identity.⁷⁰

It appears that Israel is regarded by the regime as posing threats to ingroup self-efficacy. Ayatollah Khomeini strategically established a link between Judaism and Zionism by anchoring the State of Israel to social representations of Jews’ suppression and exploitation of Muslims.⁷¹ More specifically, he argued that Jews endeavoured to establish control of ‘Muslims lands’, best exemplified by the foundation of Israel, allegedly enabling them to exert religious, political and economic influence over Muslims. Jewish self-efficacy was largely constructed in terms of Jewish-Western ‘tyranny’ and ‘racism’.⁷² In this case, it is likely that the accentuation of

(Jewish) outgroup self-efficacy will have negative outcomes for (Muslim) ingroup self-efficacy, given that outgroup self-efficacy is perceived to limit and actively curb that of the ingroup. Crucially, the abstract notion of Jewish self-efficacy is transformed into a tangible social ‘reality’ through its objectification in terms of the Jewish nation-state, Israel. Indeed, the Islamic Republic regards Zionism as ‘the culmination of a Judeo-Western political and cultural onslaught in the Muslim world’.⁷³

In Iran, as in much of the Christian world, one of the primary accusations historically levelled against the Jews concerns their alleged desire for ‘world control’.⁷⁴ In the Iranian context, this accusation is substantiated primarily through reference to the social representations that (i) Jews have been systematically transferred to Palestine in order to gain control of ‘Muslim land’; and (ii) that Jews have disproportionate control of the global media and are thus able to exert excessive influence over the world. In the 1960s, Ayatollah Khomeini habitually drew upon European anti-Semitic social representations of ‘Jewish world domination’ in order to elucidate the threat allegedly posed by Israel to Muslim ingroup self-efficacy. These representations were employed in order to argue that, since Jews had successfully managed to infiltrate and dominate the Christian world (e.g. the USA and Europe), Iran would be their next target. Indeed, Khomeini infamously described the Jews as ‘devouring’ America and as turning their attention to Iran due to their allegedly insatiable appetite for control and domination. The threat allegedly posed by Israel and the Jews, more generally, is multifaceted; Khomeini accused Israel of seeking to do away with the Koran in Iran, to ‘destroy’ the religious ingroup and to usurp national ingroup resources.⁷⁵ These accusations collectively point to ‘excessive’ Jewish control and competence aimed at dismantling the control, competence and autonomy of the Shiite Muslim Iranian ingroup. Crucially, the self-efficacy of the Jewish outgroup was deliberately accentuated in political discourse in order to construct it as a ‘hyper-threat’ to the ingroup. This was manifested in Khomeini’s declaration that the Jews were a ‘resourceful’ group, capable of achieving their alleged goal of world domination.

The Iranian regime’s accusations against the Jews share a common concern with Jewish *control* of Muslim lands and Muslim people. They are likely to have considerable clout in inducing stigmatising social representations of Jews and Zionists, since they threaten ingroup self-efficacy. The Islamic Republic’s emphasis of Jewish world domination accentuates the perceived threat of Israel. When the Iranian government, media and public commentators anchor Israel to social representations of weak ingroup self-efficacy, they implicitly suggest a strategy for ameliorating ingroup self-efficacy, namely the destruction of the State of Israel. Khomeini infamously declared that ‘a handful of wretched Jews would never have been able to accomplish what they have [the establishment of Israel]’ if Muslims had exerted the control and competence allegedly conferred upon them by God.⁷⁶ Thus, it is implied that the attenuation of ingroup self-efficacy was conducive to the accentuation of Jewish outgroup self-efficacy, culminating in the establishment of the Jewish State. The construal of Muslim self-efficacy as weak perhaps constitutes an example of ‘social complaint’ in order to mobilise the Muslim ingroup to salvage self-efficacy.⁷⁷

This ‘social complaint’ is frequently articulated in Iranian political discourse. This is exemplified in a (religious) Friday sermon of former President of Iran Rafsanjani, who incidentally remains one of the most influential politicians in the Islamic Republic:

The Jews should in truth be expecting the day on which this superfluous limb [Israel] will be torn away from the body of the Muslim region and Muslim world, and all the

people assembled in Israel will once again be scattered all over the world and become refugees⁷⁸

The former president clearly encourages the destruction of Israel and the enforced displacement of its Jewish inhabitants. However, it is implied that *Muslims* will ‘tear away’ the ‘superfluous [Jewish] limb from the body of the Muslim region’, which highlights the much anticipated control and competence of the *Muslim ingroup*. Furthermore, this re-establishment of ingroup self-efficacy through the destruction of a national outgroup is constructed in terms of an inevitable reality. Crucially, while past and present self-efficacy are threatened by the very existence of the State of Israel, which constitutes the objectification of Jewish self-efficacy and the ingroup’s lack thereof, future self-efficacy remains safe.⁷⁹ Future self-efficacy is safeguarded through the social representation that the re-establishment of ingroup self-efficacy, through the imminent destruction of Israel, constitutes an inevitable reality, which ‘the Jews should in truth be expecting’. This is coterminous with Khomeini’s aforementioned ‘social complaint’ regarding the attenuation of ingroup self-efficacy. Indeed, Rafsanjani’s utterance is intended to motivate Muslims to take active measures to ameliorate ingroup self-efficacy through the destruction of Israel. The point is that Israel may threaten self-efficacy but, psychologically, it exists so that it can eventually be ‘removed’ by the Muslim ingroup.

The need to protect future self-efficacy from existing threats to past and present self-efficacy may provide further explanation for the Islamic Republic’s extreme and perplexing insensitivity regarding the Holocaust. The President of Iran highlighted at the end of his Holocaust denial conference that ‘the life-curve of the Zionist regime has begun its descent, and it is now on a downward slope towards its fall [...] The Zionist regime will be wiped out, and humanity will be liberated.’⁸⁰ This implicitly suggests that continued Holocaust denial could lead to the destruction of Israel. The organisation of conferences and events, which are in fact thinly veiled attempts to deny the reality of the Holocaust, are constructed by the Islamic regime as exemplifying the regime’s ‘progressiveness’ and as ‘freedom of thought’. Incidentally, the Islamic regime argues that these crucial values are denied to European scholars. This will likely enhance self-efficacy on two levels. Firstly, the Islamic Republic is able to demonstrate its competence and autonomy from the Western world by defiantly denying a well-documented historical act of genocide against the Jews. Moreover, the regime asserts its self-efficacy by questioning the validity of Western knowledge regarding the Holocaust, by inventing its own criteria for considering the history of the Holocaust. Crucially, these criteria are deliberately naive and open-ended so as to accommodate Holocaust denial, which, as outlined earlier, can enhance the belonging principle. Secondly, the regime denies the Holocaust because it regards it as the *raison d’être* of the State of Israel. This is intended to problematise the existence of the politico-national ‘Zionist entity’, which threatens Shiite Iranian ingroup self-efficacy. The Islamic Republic endeavours to demonstrate the ‘illegitimacy’ of the State of Israel through Holocaust denial. According to the regime, if this event never occurred, then the State of Israel, which threatens Muslim self-efficacy, should surely be dismantled. Incidentally, President Ahmadinejad has argued that ‘even if’ the Holocaust did take place, a Jewish State should be established on European soil rather than on ‘Muslim land’.⁸¹ In short, the regime’s denial of the fact that six million Jews were murdered by the Nazis may be regarded as a strategy for indirectly enhancing the ingroup’s self-efficacy.

It is likely that the Islamic regime’s future self-efficacy depends upon its perpetual commitment to the destruction of the State of Israel. In comparing the general Arab and Iranian positions regarding Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, it can be said that while ‘the Arab

struggle has implicitly acknowledged the reality of Israel and has sought territorial concessions to establish a Palestinian homeland', the Islamic Republic of Iran's stance has been 'to evict the Jewish populace from the Middle East'.⁸² This seems a puzzling ideological position for a state that has never been involved in military, territorial or economic conflict with Israel. However, the answer may partly lie in the threat to Muslim ingroup self-efficacy posed by 'Zionist aspirations'. The partition of Palestine to accommodate a Jewish state symbolises for the regime a lack of ingroup competence and control in retaining sovereignty of 'Muslim land'.⁸³ Moreover, although self-efficacy is habitually conceptualised in terms of competence and control, it is possible that the principle may also encompass a sense of ownership and possession, since psychologically this may *reflect* self-efficacy. Accordingly, the regime's superordinate self-categorisation in terms of Muslim identity means that Israel is regarded not necessarily as a threat to Iran *per se*, but rather as an overt violator of the *Muslim* ingroup's self-efficacy.

Many political commentators have observed Iran's attempts to establish political and economic hegemony in the Middle East.⁸⁴ This hypothesis is most convincingly supported by Iran's hard-line position regarding the Israeli-Arab conflict. As argued above, the Islamic Republic persistently constructs itself as intolerant of the 'Zionist regime' whose very presence in Israel is considered an 'occupation of Palestine'. The Islamic Republic's consistent opposition to any peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians may be attributed to the regime's desire to retain this important means of exerting power and influence over the Middle East. The Islamic theocracy in Iran has 'exploited the Palestinian struggle to assert its influence, garner popular approbation and affirm its claim as a regional power'.⁸⁵ This aggressive position regarding Israel can be pursued at no material cost to the ingroup. Iran's participation in the Arab-Israeli conflict is indirect; there is evidence that Iran provides terrorist organisations such as Hezbollah and Hamas with both ideological and financial support for its anti-Zionist terrorist activity.⁸⁶ Closure to the Israeli-Arab conflict could be conducive to the cessation of Iranian influence in the Middle East, threatening the regime's future aspirations for self-efficacy.

The regime's encouragement and dissemination of the nexus that it constitutes the ideological backbone of Hezbollah performs positive functions for Iran's self-efficacy. Hezbollah itself constitutes a tangible objectification of Iran's attempt to refashion regional norms and values. Iran is thereby constructed as *empowering* Muslims to resist the 'Zionist regime' and to establish control and competence of 'Muslim lands'. For the regime, the (Shiite) Muslim ingroup's 'triumph' over the Jewish Israeli outgroup is symbolised by Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the South of Lebanon in 2000.⁸⁷ Thus, Iran's overt and outspoken demonisation of the State of Israel, which has included calling for it to be 'wiped off the map', constitutes a means of asserting its political influence in the Middle East. In short, anti-Zionism becomes a means of establishing feelings of self-efficacy.

In its quest for enhancing ingroup self-efficacy, the Iranian regime may strategically curb the efficacy of the Iranian Jewish community. There is considerable historical evidence that the Jews of Iran were constructed by the Islamic revolutionaries in terms of a hybridised threat to the Muslim ingroup. Notable examples of this demonisation of Iranian Jews include Khomeini's accusation that Iranian Jews conspired with Israel to defeat Islam in Iran; the threat to annihilate Iranian Jews circulated by the National Front of Young Iranian Muslims in 1978; and the conviction and execution of Iranian Jews for 'spying'.⁸⁸ Possibly as a result of this overt anti-Semitic discrimination, 'the leaders of the Iranian Jewish community outdo themselves in offering gestures of subservience toward the regime'.⁸⁹ This includes the Iranian Jewish community's passive 'endorsement' of the anti-Zionist policies of the Islamic Republic, such as

the condemnation of Israel's defence strategy and foreign policy. Iranian Jews are acutely aware of the fact that any real or suspected allegiance to the 'Zionist entity' is punishable by death. In short, the Jewish minority has largely *lost* its control, competence and autonomy *vis-à-vis* the Muslim majority. There is little doubt that the Islamic Republic exerts its control over the Iranian Jewish minority, which could eventually 'find itself held hostage and vulnerable to acts of reprisal'.⁹⁰ The exertion of control over an outgroup is likely to have positive outcomes for ingroup self-efficacy, since this creates a power imbalance, which favours the ingroup. The threat to self-efficacy (induced by the perception of Jewish 'world domination') may be alleviated by the regime's *control* of the Jewish community in Iran. Thus, the *external* Zionist 'threat' is counteracted by discrimination against *internal* Jews. This is analogous to the process of downward comparison, whereby the derogation of an outgroup on one particular dimension may perform positive functions for ingroup self-esteem.⁹¹ Here the Shiite Iranian ingroup may derive feelings of self-efficacy by undermining the self-efficacy of the Iranian Jewish minority outgroup. The next section discusses anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in relation to the continuity principle of identity.

Continuity of Shiite ideology and the legacy of Khomeini

Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamist ideology underlying the Islamic Republic reflected centuries of Shiite anti-Semitism. It has been convincingly argued that 'anti-Semitism is deeply ingrained in Shi'i Iran, both religiously and historically'.⁹² In many of Khomeini's earlier writings, the Jews were frequently referred to as 'infidels' and 'impure creatures'. Moreover, it was overtly recommended that Muslims refrain from physical contact and business dealings with Jews. Furthermore, 'Khomeini often talked of Jews in the same breath as Israel and Zionism', which resulted in the social representational conflation of both constructs. Khomeini contended that Iran was being 'trampled upon under Jewish boots' and that the Jews intended to seize control of Islamic countries, which was best exemplified by the 'Zionist regime'.⁹³ Clearly, the Islamic Revolution was intended to re-establish a connection between the Shiite Islam and contemporary Iranian culture and to 'undo' the perceived western influence and modernity seen as having infiltrated Iranian society and the Muslim world more generally.⁹⁴ Israel was regarded as being one such Western infiltration in the Muslim world. It is noteworthy that many of the anti-Semitic diatribes are firmly grounded within historical religious social representations originating from the Koran. Thus, it is possible that the continuity principle induces anti-Semitism and that any *revision* of this stance may represent a rupture in continuity between past, present and future.

The prominence of anti-Zionism in Khomeini's domestic and foreign policies in the years preceding the Islamic Revolution resulted in this position becoming a central tenet of the version of 'Iranian-ness' promoted by the Islamic regime. Thus, it is reasonable to regard the maintenance of this central component of Iran's Islamic ideology in terms of an attempt to safeguard continuity. Indeed, the distinctive agenda of Khomeini and his collaborators in the Islamic Revolution depended partly upon the collective rejection of Zionism and of the Jews more generally, partly because this itself was seen as symbolising 'Western imperialism'. Despite the challenges to the ingroup's social, economic and political infrastructure resulting partly from the rejection of and fierce opposition to the state of Israel (e.g. US sanctions and international censure), the Islamic Republic has maintained its anti-Zionist position. This may be attributed partly to the potential benefits of continued anti-Zionism for the continuity principle.

Similarly, the regime is motivated to preserve the perceived central tenets of Shiite Islam. A close consideration of the history of intergroup relations between Shiite Muslims and Jews in

Iran reveals the socially inferior position of the latter, evidenced primarily by the ‘Dhimmi’ status of non-Muslims living in Muslim countries.⁹⁵ Zionism was regarded by the Iranian revolutionaries as a ‘challenge to the ‘correct’ historical order’ which traditionally positioned Jews as an inferior religious group. Moreover, the establishment of Israel ‘in the very heart of the lands of Islam’, which ‘deprives the Muslim people of Palestine’ is likely construed in terms of a threat to the continuity principle.⁹⁶ More specifically, this constitutes an example of undesirable social change, which essentially introduces a rupture in the psychological thread connecting the religious ingroup’s past, present and future. The ascension of a social outgroup, which has traditionally occupied an inferior social position, deprives the ingroup of a suitable ‘Other’ for downward comparison. This produces an undesirable social reality for the historically privileged social group, namely Shiite Muslim Iranians. The continuity principle may well require the maintenance of Khomeini’s anti-Zionist position, consisting of anti-Semitic elements, in contemporary Iranian politics.

Despite the importance of continuity, the most salient challenge to Khomeini’s unambiguous opposition to Israel was manifested in the policy-making of the former reformist president of the Islamic Republic, Mohammad Khatami. In his important CNN interview in January 1998, he denounced the Israeli-Palestinian peace process as ‘flawed and unjust’, although he also stated that the regime in Iran did not ‘intend to impose our views on others or stand in their way [of the Palestinians]’. Moreover, foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Asefi stated that ‘we respect all decisions taken by the majority of the Palestinians’. These official assertions implied that the Iranian government would be willing to accept a two-state solution provided that the Palestinians reached a settlement with Israel. This, in essence, represented a significant shift in foreign policy since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Indeed, massive social change, particularly that which is perceived as entailing less favourable consequences for the ingroup, will likely result in threats to the continuity principle.⁹⁷ Nonetheless, it seems that Khatami’s subtle, elusive position *vis-à-vis* the State of Israel impeded such threats, particularly as Iran’s position was constructed as being consistently supportive of the Palestinians. In short, Khomeini’s ideological support and defence of the Palestinians continued, although his position on Israel did not. This ‘perceptible change from Khomeini’s unrelenting hostility to Israel’ was constructed within the context of a coherent and consistent narrative. Indeed, this is essential for the maintenance of temporal continuity in face of sudden or undesirable change if threat is to be evaded.

Nonetheless, massive social change such as the implied gradual recognition of the State of Israel may be represented in terms of a rupture between past and present. It is noteworthy that post-revolution Iranian politics have been dominated by anti-Zionist social representations and nexuses. Current Iranian leader Ahmadinejad’s presidency has been firmly committed to ‘rekindling the revolutionary fires that seemed long extinguished’. More specifically, the president’s reiteration of Khomeini’s ideals in relation to the State of Israel essentially serves to render salient the hitherto dormant social representations of Israel as an illegitimate ‘evil’ presence in the Middle East and ‘an imperial infringement on the Islamic realm’.⁹⁸ Furthermore, this highlights the incoherence and incompatibility of the implicitly reconciliatory position adopted by Khatami, thereby constructing this as an illegitimate deviation from Khomeini’s ideology and, thus, as a threat to continuity. This line of argument is further supported by Iran’s swift and fervent denial that the Iranian tourism minister shook hands with his Israeli counterpart at a tourism fair in Madrid in 2010.⁹⁹ In short, any eventual recognition of the State of Israel is implicitly construed as rupturing the psychological thread between past, present and future.

Conversely, Ahmadinejad's renewed policy of extreme anti-Zionism, whose central tenet is the unconditional opposition and rejection of any planned or actual peace settlement, reflects an overt revitalisation of Khomeini's legacy. This re-establishes unity between past, present and future. While anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist social representations can be employed in order to safeguard intrapsychic continuity, they can conversely be employed to strategically induce threats to *group* continuity.

Constructing threats to ingroup continuity and Holocaust denial

There are obvious ideological and strategic benefits of manifesting anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism for the Islamic Republic. This may motivate the regime to *construct* threats to ingroup identity by accentuating the realistic and symbolic threats allegedly posed by Jews and Zionists, collectively. The regime regards Israel in terms of a hybridised threat to the Shiite Muslim Iranian ingroup, and this threat can be strategically accentuated in political rhetoric. The threatening aspects of Jews and Israel are construed by the Islamic regime as being inherent and primordial. For instance, Khomeini's ideology held that physical contact and business dealings with the Jews jeopardised the 'purity' of Shiite Muslims, rendering them 'najes' (impure). This suggests that even passive contact with Jews is sufficient to threaten the very 'essence' of Muslims, namely their purity, and that Jews even inadvertently pose a *realistic* threat to Muslims. The social representation that intergroup contact between 'inferior' and 'superior' groups threatens the purity of the 'superior' group has also been observed in work on caste identity in India.¹⁰⁰ The representation that an outgroup somehow damages the 'essence' of the ingroup constructs it in terms of a realistic threat to the ingroup. A realistic threat will likely jeopardise the *group continuity* principle of identity.

Jews have consistently been constructed in terms of a realistic threat. Khomeini disseminated the social representation that the Jews had historically attempted to disrupt and misrepresent the contents of the Koran in order to serve their own needs. This constructed 'Jewish threat' to ingroup continuity is rendered salient by the existence of the State of Israel. Indeed, Khomeini established a rhetorical link between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism 'by stating that the most visible expression of the Jewish-Christian conspiracy against Islam is the establishment of the State of Israel, aimed at suppressing and exploiting the Muslims'.¹⁰¹ Thus, the realistic threat allegedly posed by Jews is *objectified* in terms of the State of Israel, that is, the state constitutes a tangible expression of the abstract phenomenon of the realistic 'Jewish threat'. This essentially serves to accentuate the realistic threat to Muslim group continuity by rendering it psychologically accessible to the ingroup. Since Khomeini's death, Iran's institutions have followed suit. Iranian newspapers such as the *Tehran Times* and *Kayhan* continue to reproduce demonising social representations of Jews, which depict them as falsifying and distorting the message of Islam.¹⁰² The constant reproduction and institutionalisation of these social representations and nexuses, which are anchored to historical representations and attributed to powerful influential figures such as Khomeini, will have considerable clout in encouraging the notion that Jews pose a realistic threat.

Social representations of Jewish barbarity, many of which have been imported into Iran from European anti-Semitism, serve the psychosocial function of constructing Jews as evil, barbaric and threatening for the existence of all other religious groups. For instance, Iranian anti-Semitic propaganda has reproduced the Medieval European representation that Jews utilise the blood of non-Jewish children in the preparation of *mazzah* – unleavened bread eaten over the Jewish Passover festival. There is perhaps no greater realistic threat to group continuity. Here it

is argued that the *constructed* threat to group continuity indirectly serves the agenda of the Islamic regime. The Shiite messiah (Mahdi), the Shiites and, most importantly, the Islamic Republic of Iran can thereby be represented as impeding 'Jewish world domination'.¹⁰³ This bolsters ingroup self-efficacy and endows the ingroup with a sense of positive distinctiveness, since the ingroup is represented as actively challenging the (constructed) 'Jewish threat' to ingroup continuity.

Elsewhere, it has been argued that institutions (e.g. government, the Press) may actively construct realistic and symbolic threats to the ingroup for ideological purposes.¹⁰⁴ Nonetheless, this is likely to result in actual identity threat. Thus, it is common for these institutions to propose, implicitly at least, ways of dealing with these threats to group continuity, which IPT would conceptualise as coping strategies. In order to 'cope' with this threat to group continuity, the regime engages in the intergroup process of delegitimisation against the State of Israel. This essentially entails the problematisation of Israel's right to exist as a legitimate independent Jewish state. Moreover, it serves the purpose of excluding Israel from 'acceptable' nations.¹⁰⁵

One common means of delegitimising the State of Israel is Holocaust denial, as alluded to earlier. In addition to exemplifying the merging of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, this serves to downgrade 'the legitimacy of the Jewish State, which they [Holocaust deniers] claim is based on the Holocaust myth'.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, it has been observed that social representations of the Holocaust feature prominently in Jewish history and that they may be invoked when thinking about Israel's *raison d'être*.¹⁰⁷ This in fact results from the perception of perpetual threats to group continuity among many Israeli Jews. The general prominence of Holocaust representations in thinking about the existence of Israel has indirectly contributed to Holocaust denial in the Middle East, since it comes to be regarded by anti-Zionists as a means of delegitimising Israel.¹⁰⁸

For many years, the Islamic regime in Iran has 'problematized' the Holocaust by attenuating the number of victims, by rendering salient the social representation of a Nazi-Zionist collaborative conspiracy, and by granting extensive coverage to European Holocaust deniers. However, Ahmadinejad was the first Iranian leader to deny overtly that the Holocaust ever happened. The Islamic Republic's problematisation of the Holocaust was vociferously manifested by the state-sponsored organisation of the conference entitled 'Review of the Holocaust: Global Vision' on 11th-12th December 2006 in Tehran. The perception within the Islamic regime that the Holocaust constitutes the primary *raison d'être* for the State of Israel is reflected in Ahmadinejad's demand that 'if' the Holocaust did take place, the Jewish state should be located on the territory of those who perpetrated it, not on 'Muslim lands'.

It is noteworthy that not only official government institutions problematise social representations of the Holocaust, but also other Iranian social institutions such as the Iranian Students' News Agency. The self-proclaimed 'reformist' organisation entitled a 'research project' exploring the reality of the Holocaust 'One of History's Biggest Lies: True Facts Casting Doubt on the Murder of 6 Million Jews by Hitler'. The results of the 'research' encouraged and disseminated the following social representations: (i) since the Jews had declared war on Germany, Nazi retaliation was justified; (ii) that gas chambers never existed in the Auschwitz concentration camp; (iii) Anne Frank's personal account of the horrors of the Holocaust were 'a literary forgery'.¹⁰⁹ Crucially, the findings of this 'research' anchor social representations of the alleged Jewish conspiracy to those of Jewish support for the State of Israel, creating an inextricable, yet distorted link between Zionism and Judaism. The overarching conclusion was that the Holocaust was created by *Jews* in order to justify the creation of *Israel*. Holocaust denial constitutes a form of 'social complaint' in that it seeks to sensitise citizens to the perceived

‘injustice’ and ‘illegitimacy’ of Israel. By questioning the reality of the perceived *raison d’être* of Israel, the Islamic regime seeks to delegitimise the state. This is essentially an attempt to deprecate the social stimulus (the Holocaust), which is seen as *enabling* the Jewish outgroup to threaten Muslim ingroup continuity. The implicit intention is to motivate Iranian citizens to support and join the anti-Zionist cause with the aim of collectively bringing about the destruction of Israel. While anti-Zionism (the rejection of Israel) may be the goal, anti-Semitism (the demonisation of Jews) seems to be the route to this goal. The regime views the Holocaust as a potential obstacle to eradicating the threat to group continuity. Conversely, it regards the destruction of Israel as a strategy for *coping* with identity threat.

Conclusions

The present article set out to explore the potential role of identity motives in the manifestation of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism at the institutional level in Iran. A close consideration of key observations made by historians and political scientists, in particular, through the interpretive lens of IPT reveals the particular prominence of the belonging, self-efficacy and continuity principles of identity. It is suggested that these principles may underlie and motivate anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. Accordingly, anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism may be regarded in terms of strategies for actively enhancing, or for coping with threats to, these principles.¹¹⁰

It has been argued that the manifestation of anti-Zionism may constitute a means of enhancing the vulnerable belonging principle of identity. The principle is chronically threatened due to ‘otherisation’ on various levels: (i) Iran is one of two non-Arab countries in the Middle East; (ii) it is predominantly Shiite Muslim; and (iii) Iran faces international censure. While the manifestation of anti-Semitism is said to have significant ‘mobilising power’ among Shiite Muslim Iranians, both anti-Semitism (e.g. Holocaust denial) and anti-Zionism (e.g. calling for the destruction of Israel) may provide self-aspects for collective identification and solidarity with the rest of the Muslim world. More specifically, this polemical stance provides feelings of acceptance and inclusion of a regime, which is otherwise ostracised in the Middle East. The psychosocial mechanisms essentially include the accentuation of Muslim-Jewish distinctiveness and the attenuation of Shiite-Sunni distinctiveness, resulting in enhanced belonging within the superordinate religious category Muslim. However, while overt anti-Semitism (e.g. Holocaust denial) and irrational anti-Zionism (e.g. calling for Israel to be wiped off the map) may enhance belonging in the Middle East, they frequently induce condemnation from the Western World. This impediment to belonging within the international community may be counteracted by reconstruing Holocaust denial as ‘legitimate’ scientific research. Moreover, the regime may position itself ideologically alongside Western Holocaust deniers and provide them with a platform to voice their conspiracy theories regarding the ‘true reality’ of the Holocaust. Strategic self-positioning alongside other social groups enables the regime to safeguard feelings of acceptance and inclusion, resulting in enhanced belonging. Crucially, the regime employs anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist *nexuses*, in order to obscure intergroup differences and to mobilise the ingroup against a ‘common enemy’.

Anti-Zionism is likely associated with the maintenance of ingroup self-efficacy. The establishment of the Jewish State on ‘Muslim lands’ is construed as a chronic threat to ingroup Muslim self-efficacy. Moreover, the perceived moral transgressions of Israel against the Palestinian people constitute a threat to ingroup self-efficacy, impeding feelings of control and competence. This is accentuated by the reality of Israel’s consistent victories in military conflicts with neighbouring Arab states since 1948. Consequently, the self-efficacy principle remains

vulnerable to threat, and anti-Zionism constitutes a strategy for coping with it. Crucially, the self-efficacy principle may be delineated temporally, providing a distinction between past/ present and future self-efficacy. While the reality of the Jewish State threatens past/ present self-efficacy, future self-efficacy remains exempt from threat, since anti-Zionism is regarded as a means of bringing about the ‘imminent’ downfall of the ‘Zionist regime’. In short, the Iranian regime habitually reproduces the social representation that the Jewish State will be destroyed and that Muslims will eventually regain control of Palestine. In the Iranian psyche, Israel exists in the present so that the Muslim ingroup can eventually recapture ‘Muslim land’, in the future, in a dramatic display of ingroup control and competence.

The Iranian regime derives self-efficacy from its political influence in the Middle East, primarily through its ideological and financial support of Hezbollah and Hamas. Indeed, the ability to exert influence constitutes an important source of the regime’s self-efficacy. Similarly, anti-Semitism plays an important role in the regime’s quest for self-efficacy. By denying the reality of the Holocaust (an anti-Semitic act in itself), the regime is able to question the validity and legitimacy of the ‘Zionist regime’, which threatens Muslim self-efficacy. In short, anti-Semitism is regarded as a *means* of delegitimising and eventually destroying the State of Israel. At a more localised level, the regime’s ability to influence and control Jews in Iran enhances their own self-efficacy. This is consistent with the argument that perceptions of ingroup self-efficacy and outgroup self-efficacy will likely be negatively correlated.

Important historical accounts demonstrate that Iranian anti-Semitism is historically associated with Shiite Muslim ideology. Thus, it is suggested that the maintenance of Khomeini’s overt anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist ideology may constitute a means of safeguarding the continuity principle amid important social and political change in Iran. It is noteworthy that concessions have needed to be made in the regime’s policy and ideology, highlighting the potential for threats to continuity. Khatami’s presidency demonstrated that a gradual acceptance and accommodation of Israel within the Iranian identity structure may be possible, without necessarily threatening continuity. This may be facilitated by decreasing the salience of historical representations of Khomeini’s anti-Semitism and by reiterating the continued support of the Palestinians. However, the current Iranian president’s adamant resurrection of *dormant* historical representations condemning Jews and Israel has meant that any change in ideological position may be construed in terms of a threat to continuity. Indeed, the ‘Jewish threat’ to continuity is actively accentuated by the regime. The regime attempts to motivate Iranians to oppose the ‘Zionist regime’ in order to cope with the realistic threat to group continuity.

In short, both anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism are pertinent to the regime’s quest to enhance identity. However, this is not to suggest that the two forms of prejudice are conceptually indistinguishable. It is acknowledged that legitimate, balanced criticism of aspects of Israeli political policy does not necessarily reflect anti-Semitism.¹¹¹ The present paper supports the assertion that anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism are inextricably related *in the political rhetoric of the Iranian regime, in particular*.¹¹² This is suggested by the interchangeability of the categories ‘Jew’ and ‘Zionist’ in the regime’s political discourse, as well as the strategic demonisation of Jews and Zionists in order to enhance the principled operation of identity processes. For instance, both anti-Semitism (e.g. the persecution of Iranian Jews) and anti-Zionism (e.g. calling for the destruction of Israel) are seen as enhancing Muslim self-efficacy. Moreover, Holocaust denial (anti-Semitism) and unconditional opposition to Israel (anti-Zionism) are employed in order to enhance belonging within the Middle East.

It must be stressed that this paper focuses specifically upon the institutional level, that is, the manifestation of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism by the Islamic regime in Iran. The anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist slurs in the political rhetoric of key figures in the Iranian regime cannot naively be generalised to the Iranian public, since little is known regarding their endorsement or ‘personalisation’ of anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist social representations. Moreover, given that the Iranian media follow an authoritarian press system and therefore represent the government position, it is difficult to make any definitive statements regarding social attitudes towards Jews and Israel among Iranian citizens on the basis of media research.¹¹³ However, government media do constitute a major source of societal information and social representations. This has led some to argue that ‘it is likely that ordinary Iranians, who are not exposed to the Western academic literature on the Holocaust, do believe the propaganda that they are served’ by the Iranian regime.¹¹⁴ This constitutes a worrying reality, in a country with some 25,000 remaining Jews and amid the ‘war of words’ characterising Iranian-Israeli relations. The next step is to explore some of the hypotheses developed in the present paper in the Iranian general population in order to identify possible relationships between anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism and the motivational principles of identity. This would enhance our understanding of the psychosocial motives underlying anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in the general population, allowing researchers to ascertain the level of social influence of the Iranian regime.¹¹⁵

The present paper’s focus on the institutional level provides some preliminary insight into the socio-psychological antecedents of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in the Iranian regime. This complements the existing socio-historical and political research, providing a more detailed, multi-faceted explanation for this complex socio-psychological problem. It is hoped that this paper will stimulate further research into this area. While anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism may have positive outcomes for ingroup Shiite Muslim identity, it is likely to lead to negative intergroup relations between Muslims and Jews in Iran, further ostracisation of the Iranian regime from the international community, as well as greater tensions in the Middle East region.

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Notes on contributor

Dr Rusi Jaspal is Lecturer in Psychology at De Montfort University, Leicester, UK.

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