



Will Iran Pay a Price for Denying Holocaust?

(Published in [*The International Herald Tribune*](#), January 23, 2006)

[John Vinocur](#)

Colaboraciones n° 1455

January 25, 2007

By the end of the week, if things go the way the United States has planned, the United Nations General Assembly will have approved an American-sponsored resolution condemning denial of the Holocaust.

The vote was expected to come in time to mark the commemoration of the entry of Soviet forces into the Auschwitz death camp on Jan. 27, 1945.

Iran, its conference of Holocaust negationists last month, its contest of Holocaust cartoons, its calls for the destruction of Israel, its drive for nuclear weapons, its more actively disturbing in Iraq - none are mentioned in the resolution.

Yet the linkage is there, an obvious although unwritten subtext, part of a verbally firmer U.S. approach toward Iran that Secretary of Defense Robert Gates told leaders from Saudi Arabia and Qatar last week was meant to demonstrate that "the Iranians are overplaying their hand."

If the Americans can put together the votes - a diplomat informed of the U.S. effort thinks they can finesse Arab difficulties in demarcating Israeli policy from the historical fact of the Holocaust - then the UN resolution would serve, in theory, as an incremental warning signal to Iranians on President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's leadership.

It would say, in effect, that the world was ready to consider him

increasingly dangerous, and that Iran merited sanctions and even isolation as a country in the grips of disreputable radicals. This gets entered on the diplomatic ledger as effective pressure.

Theoretically effective, because world public opinion, as opposed to tougher sanctions, has no certain or easily measurable impact on Iranian internal politics.

In fact, you could ask: Apart from insisting that denial of the Holocaust is a universal abomination - coldly effective words from President Jacques Chirac of France on the subject last week called it "a crime against the truth, the absolute perversion of the soul and spirit" - what could the UN resolution accomplish in terms of Ahmadinejad's threat of nuclear-armed hatred?

Not very much. For Olivier Roy, the widely respected French expert on Iran, the reality is that Ahmadinejad's denial of the Holocaust doesn't play to Iran but a targeted audience beyond the shame of international reproach.

Roy believes that Iranian anti-Semitism is part of a broad political undertaking, profiting from the perceived weakness of the United States and Arab regimes, and aimed at Iran's securing a leading role in a "front of refusal" of Arab maximalists that rejects any place for Israel in the Middle East's future. Hezbollah and Hamas are obvious elements in that clientele.

For other analysts, Holocaust denial is a symbolic guarantee of compatibility offered the Arab nation by Ahmadinejad as Iran seeks regional hegemony.

Far from any clash of civilizations involving the West and Islam, Roy says Ahmadinejad's anti-Semitism functions as a remake of old, now-punishable European prejudices, and is "shared by a lot of secular Arab intellectuals."

In fact, Tehran's approach, according to two French historians of the Arab world, says that the West invented the genocide of the Jews with the goal of creating a state that would divide the Muslims.

Benjamin Stora and Pierre Vermeren, in an article in *Le Monde*, deplored that "the scientific reality of the Holocaust" was so threatening to Arab regimes, that Arab historians were denied the means to explore its reality.

Stora, in a conversation, said he had no illusions about a change in course that would challenge Ahmadinejad's position. "Rather than opening to a greater universality," he said, the Arab intellectual world was "increasingly confining itself in its own identity" and "not going to the sources or contemporary history."

So it's fair to ask, beyond the sense of having done the right and decent thing, what comes out of a UN condemnation of Holocaust denial that avoids language (or politicians'

voices) expressly tying it to Iran's nuclear threat.

In France, in a presidential election year, there is the hope that even a minimalist resolution would combat the specter of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the rightist extremist candidate, winning a score big enough to influence the vote's outcome. In his most ogre-like years, Le Pen called the Nazi gas chambers a "detail of history."

Chirac returned to those black years last week to say that their lesson was that "if you accommodate extremism, sooner or later you pay the price. Only one attitude works in facing it down: refusal and intransigence."

In Germany, the Holocaust denial issue goes to the deepest vein of self-respect in the national psyche. In announcing that the Merkel government would propose a law in the European Parliament creating penalties for negationism, Brigitte Zypries, the justice minister, said flatly: "There are limits to freedom of expression. It must not be possible in Europe to consider the Holocaust a myth and say that six million Jews were never killed."

But in this moment's onstage political discourse, it just isn't part of the acceptable vocabulary to say that in lying about the existence of the Holocaust, in calling for the destruction of another UN member state and in running from the apparent truth of your own nuclear weapons

ambitions, Ahmadinejad's Iran has joined these three facts together into an inescapable, menacing reality.

Merkel avoids this explicit triple-connection; Chirac, thinking of Iran's role in Lebanon, seems conflicted by it, while Tony Blair comes the closest to saying unmistakably that Iran is an intolerable threat.

In spite of the Democrats' new, preemptive accusations that his administration is giving signs of doing an Iraq on Iran, President George W. Bush, if you look closely, is offering nothing particularly coherent on the subject.

The reality is that Iran should be forcing the United States to react. The result instead is a haphazard series of steps and pronouncements getting called a strategy without having its substance.

American ideas like skirting Russia in future Iran sanctions discussions at the UN, or setting up "coalitions of the willing" to levy those sanctions, coming without a context, only make the Democrats and the Europeans nervous. And no more than a condemnation of Holocaust denial do they contain the certain prospect of shaking Ahmadinejad from his course.

The Iranians may be "overplaying their hand," as the administration says. But nobody out there, at this stage, is really calling their bluff.