

Iran's Second Holocaust Cartoon Exhibition and Its Aftermath

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The second Holocaust cartoon exhibition was held May 14 - 30, 2016. The exhibition featured 150 cartoons, including 100 Holocaust-themed cartoons and 50 cartoons depicting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Many of these cartoons portrayed Israel as misusing the Holocaust to distract from the suffering of the Palestinians, while others compared Netanyahu to Nazi leader Adolf Hitler.

Since closing in Tehran, the exhibition has been [displayed](#) in other province capitals. [According](#) to Mas'oud Shoja'i Tabataba'i, the main spokesperson for the contest, the art sections of the Islamic Propaganda Organization in the provinces intended to hold exhibitions on al-Quds day (i.e. early July, 2016) and will continue to sponsor the exhibition until every Iranian citizen has a chance to see the cartoons. The Islamic Propaganda Organization is fully funded by the government, and its director is appointed by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In Lorestan, the cartoons were shown July 2 - 10, 2016. The exhibitions in Qazvin and Kermanshah provinces opened on July 1 and July 6, respectively. Kohgilouyeh va Buyerahmad, Hormozgan, Qom, Bushehr, and Chahar Mahal va Bakhtiari followed.

A selection of cartoons from the exhibition was also shown at some universities, such as Tehran University (see image below), which is a public institution funded by the government. These exhibitions are usually held in locations where everybody is able to see them.



In addition to the exhibitions, the organizers have published and distributed a 10-page [brochure](#) in provinces country-wide showcasing selected cartoons from the contest and asking anyone who sees the brochure to write 25-word reactions to the cartoons. The winners of the essay contests will win a [trip](#) to Mash-had, where Imam Reza, the eighth Shi'i imam, is buried. Municipalities

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all over the country co-sponsored this program. The municipalities had to co-sponsor the contest, otherwise they would be labeled as not loyal to the Palestinian cause.

In news briefings, the contest and exhibition organizers explicitly said that they do not deny or confirm mass killings of Jews during WWII. They have changed their narrative about the Holocaust from explicit and total denial to questioning the number of Jews killed by the Nazi regime. In their narrative, the Holocaust was created by powerful and wealthy Jews to justify the existence of the State of Israel.

Conflicting Messages for Domestic and Foreign Audiences

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's administration has sent conflicting messages regarding the contest to different audiences. While the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance completely supported the contest and exhibition by issuing licenses and providing funds and publicity, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs tried to distance itself from the contest and exhibition to show the international community that President Rouhani's administration is different from its predecessor. To placate the Islamist base of the government and to reassure Ayatollah Khamenei of the Ministry's support for the exhibition, Husein Noushabadi, the speaker of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, said that Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarif's comments in an interview with the *New Yorker* were only for a foreign audience.

During the exhibition, the official website of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance published an article that criticized Holocaust denial. After complaints from Islamist opponents, the speaker of the Ministry said that the officials do not agree with the ideas reflected in the article.

On August 16, 2016, three months after the close of the Holocaust exhibition, Foreign Minister Zarif was questioned in the Parliament about his "negative" position on the Holocaust contest and exhibition. He explained: "I have always believed that this position [i.e. denying the Holocaust] has no benefit for the Islamic Republic; the Zionist regime uses it as an excuse to ask for ransom from Western countries. Regarding the exhibition, it was held without any coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I said, this is not a government action and I will not show up. The exhibition was the work of an NGO and there was no need for officials to attend.... As an expert I declare that talking about the Holocaust does not harm the Zionist regime." This statement suggests that Zarif is adamant to reiterate his position about the sponsors of the contest and exhibition, despite the facts to the contrary.

Government Involvement in the Contest

According Tabataba'i, Ayatollah Khamenei's office called him with a message from the Ayatollah describing the work of the Holocaust contest and exhibition as "excellent."

The following high-ranking governmental and public officials attended the opening or closing exhibition ceremonies or the awards presentation:

1. Mohammad-Husein Saffar-Harandi, a member of the Expediency Council;

2. Majid Mullanowrouzi, the head of Iran's Center for Graphic Arts, a section of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and Deputy Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance;
3. Morteza Goudarzi Deebaj, the art director of the graphics unit of the Islamic Propaganda Organization's art section;
4. Mohammad Reza Za'eri, the director of the Sarcheshmeh Center (funded by the government);
5. Hamid Reza Moqaddamfar, media and cultural advisor to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Commander in Chief.

The gathering of these high-ranking officials indicates that the exhibition was supported by the government, and was nurtured by the government's propaganda about the Holocaust and against the Jewish people.

Awards

French cartoonist Pascal Fernandez (*Zeon*) won first prize in the contest. *Zeon's* cartoon depicted a cash register filled with money totaling the number six million and topped with the entry gates of Birkenau.

Interestingly, the contest spokesman Mas'oud Shoja'i Tabataba'i also received a prize in the cartoon contest and was at the same time the executive director and one of the judges of the contest. In addition to Shoja'i Tabataba'i, Iranian cartoonists Mohammad Husein Niroomand and Mohsen Nouri Najafi were members of the jury.

According to the organizers, six prizes were given to Iranian cartoonists, two to Brazilians, two to Indonesians, two to Frenchmen, and one each to cartoonists from Turkey, Morocco, India, and Portugal. Some prize winners were listed under pseudonyms or nicknames. The award money distributed totaled \$50,000.

Publicity and Public Reaction

During the second exhibition, even the base of the Islamist regime was not enthusiastic to attend. This time contest organizers were not successful in busing schoolchildren to the exhibition for free, due to lack of funds and support from the Ministry of Education. From the beginning it was clear that the military and intelligence establishment were the main supporters of the contest and exhibition. For example, most of the publicity for the contest and exhibition was carried by Tasneem and Fars news agencies, both established and run by the IRGC. The number of visitors to any of the exhibition venues was not disclosed.