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ON RECENT COMMENTS OF THE IRANIAN PRESIDENT, MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD

HON. JAMES A. LEACH

of iowa

in the house of representatives

Friday, December 16, 2005

Mr. LEACH. Mr. Speaker, every society has a historian who suggests

that failure to study history is an invitation to repeat its mistakes. With his recent utterances, the newly elected president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, may be presenting the world with a more dangerous conundrum. He has apparently looked at history and denied it, which requires each of us to come to grips with preposterousness as an international reality. To refuse to study history may invite repetition; but to deny it, particularly when it involves the greatest crime in human history, is an assault on civilized values and portends an attack on civilization itself.

Last week, President Ahmadinejad suggested that the murder of six million European Jews by the Nazis did not occur and called for Israel to be "wiped off the map." This week, after time to reconsider, he made it perfectly clear that he did not flippantly, accidentally or remorsefully express a misunderstanding. He again publicly denied the Holocaust, calling it a "myth" designed to be "above God, religion and the prophets."

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Condemning such vitriol is important, but insufficient. Anti-semitism demands rebuttal; but the stakes here are not just one man's prejudice. At issue is the legitimacy and viability of the Israeli state. The United States in this circumstance has no moral option except to make unequivocally clear that Israel's survival is a bedrock **American** commitment.

There can and should be a role and place for a Palestinian state in the Middle East. But there never should be a question about the legitimacy of Israel. Peaceful coexistence is impossible if irrational aspirations such as those flaunted by President Ahmadinejad are perceived as realistic options.

It is false and counter-productive to think that Jewish-Muslim history begins after the Holocaust or that the rationale for a Jewish state comes exclusively from the Shoah. While the holocaust stamps a moral imprimatur on modern Israel, the cause of Israel's statehood predates the world's most capricious act of inhumanity.

The conflict that has emerged around the establishment of an Israeli state involves a multicentury exodus of a people from their homeland. But while the Bible is punctuated with wars and traumas, it is impressive how doing most of the last several millennia, Jews and Muslims have faced less hostility than Jews living in predominantly Christian countries.

Since biblical times, Jewish communities have thrived without interruption in Arab lands, in Persia and in historical Palestine. When Islam arrived in the Middle East in 633 A.D., intermarriage and even conversion were not uncommon. In fact, throughout the Middle East Jews experienced less Persecution and discrimination than they did in Europe. In Palestine, for instance, Muslims repeatedly protected their Jewish neighbors from European crusaders; in one instance at least, Jews fought alongside Muslims to prevent crusaders from landing in Haifa; and Saladin, after re-conquering Jerusalem from the crusaders, invited Jews back into the city.

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The Jews in Spain under Moorish rule flourished and experienced a renaissance mirroring that of the great Islamic civilization and culture at the time. As Christianity spread from the north of Spain, Jews were again protected by Muslim rulers until the fall of Granada--the last Moorish kingdom to pass into Christian hands--when both Jews and Muslims were expelled at the end of the 15th century. Most of the Jews from the Iberian peninsula settled in North Africa and the lands under Ottoman rule and continued their largely peaceful co-existence with Muslims in those countries.

What should be taken from this history is not that there is no case for an Israeli state in the Holy Land, but that individuals of the Jewish and Muslim faiths have a long record of successfully living together respecting each other's beliefs and culture. Yes, President Ahmadinejad, there is a Western responsibility to help and defend Israel. But there is an Eastern imperative to enhance the prospect of a more dignified life for all people in the region.

What should also be taken from the history of the last two millennia is that the Jewish people generally found themselves in a position of vulnerability precisely because they lacked a state of their own. Relations within the Muslim world were usually better than within most parts of the Christian world, but dependency and the potential of violence characterized inter-faith power relationships. Security was always in doubt.

In this historical context, the case for a Jewish state is profound. The only thing that comes from statements like those of President Ahmadinejad is less respect for Iranian leadership, more distrust between peoples, and abundant concerns that violence will accelerate.

History is an accumulated product to which each generation adds. If any generation allows acts of hatred to become the dominant theme of interpersonal relations, it is harder for the next to break out of an angry memory cycle. Thus the challenge in the Middle East today is to give harmony a chance, recognizing that current Jewish-Muslim tension is an aberration. Peace is the historical norm.

Because the past is often more controversial and volatile than current events, it is essential that we study history both from our own perspective and that of others. Denial is not simply obtuse; it is hate inspiring. Iran and the world, deserve better.

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