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Lost in translation

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Experts confirm that Iran's president did not call for Israel to be 'wiped off the map'. Reports that he did serve to strengthen western hawks.

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My recent [comment piece](#) explaining how Iran's president was badly misquoted when he allegedly called for Israel to be "wiped off the map" has caused a welcome little storm. The phrase has been seized on by western and Israeli hawks to re-double suspicions of the Iranian government's intentions, so it is important to get the truth of what he really said.

I took my translation - "the regime occupying Jerusalem must vanish from the page of time" - from the indefatigable Professor Juan Cole's [website](#) where it has been for several weeks.

But it seems to be mainly thanks to the Guardian giving it prominence that the New York Times, which was one of the first papers to misquote Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, came out on Sunday with a defensive piece attempting to justify its reporter's original "wiped off the map" translation. (By the way, for Farsi speakers the original version is available [here](#).)

Joining the "off the map" crowd is David Aaronovitch, a columnist on the Times (of London), who [attacked](#) my analysis yesterday. I won't waste time on him since his knowledge of Farsi is as minimal as that of his Latin. The poor man thinks the plural of casus belli is casi belli, unaware that casus is fourth declension with the plural casus (long u).

The New York Times's Ethan Bronner and Nazila Fathi, one of the paper's Tehran staff, make a more [serious case](#). They consulted several sources in Tehran. "Sohrab Mahdavi, one of Iran's most prominent translators, and Siamak Namazi, managing director of a Tehran consulting firm, who is bilingual, both say 'wipe off' or 'wipe away' is more accurate than 'vanish' because the Persian verb is active and transitive," Bronner writes.

The New York Times goes on: "The second translation issue concerns the word 'map'. Khomeini's words were abstract: 'Sahneh roozgar.' Sahneh means scene or stage, and roozgar means time. The phrase was widely interpreted as 'map', and for years, no one objected. In October, when Mr Ahmadinejad quoted Khomeini, he actually misquoted him, saying not 'Sahneh roozgar' but 'Safheh roozgar', meaning pages of time or history. No one noticed the change, and news agencies used the word 'map' again."

This, in my view, is the crucial point and I'm glad the NYT accepts that the word "map" was not used by Ahmadinejad. (By the way, the Wikipedia entry on the controversy gets the NYT wrong, claiming falsely that Ethan Bronner "concluded that Ahmadinejad had in fact said that [Israel](#) was to be wiped off the map".)

If the Iranian president made a mistake and used "safheh" rather than "sahneh". that

... the human presence made a mistake and used "stage" rather than "page", that is of little moment. A native English speaker could equally confuse "stage of history" with "page of history". The significant issue is that both phrases refer to time rather than place. As I wrote in my original post, the Iranian president was expressing a vague wish for the future. He was not threatening an Iranian-initiated war to remove Israeli control over Jerusalem.

Two other well-established translation sources confirm that Ahmadinejad was referring to time, not place. The version of the October 26 2005 speech put out by the Middle East Media Research Institute, based on the Farsi text released by the official Iranian Students News Agency, says: "This regime that is occupying Qods [Jerusalem] must be eliminated from the pages of history." (NB: not "wiped". I accept that "eliminated" is almost the same, indeed some might argue it is more sinister than "wiped", though it is a bit more of a mouthful if you are trying to find four catchy and easily memorable words with which to incite anger against Iran.)

MEMRI (its text of the speech is available [here](#)) is headed by a former Israeli military intelligence officer and has sometimes been attacked for alleged distortion of Farsi and Arabic quotations for the benefit of Israeli foreign policy. On this occasion they supported the doveish view of what Ahmadinejad said.

Finally we come to the BBC monitoring service which every day puts out hundreds of highly respected English translations of broadcasts from all round the globe to their subscribers - mainly governments, intelligence services, thinktanks and other specialists. I approached them this week about the controversy and a spokesperson for the monitoring service's marketing unit, who did not want his name used, told me their original version of the Ahmadinejad quote was "eliminated from the map of the world".

As a result of my inquiry and the controversy generated, they had gone back to the native Farsi-speakers who had translated the speech from a voice recording made available by Iranian TV on October 29 2005. Here is what the spokesman told me about the "off the map" section: "The monitor has checked again. It's a difficult expression to translate. They're under time pressure to produce a translation quickly and they were searching for the right phrase. With more time to reflect they would say the translation should be "eliminated from the page of history".

Would the BBC put out a correction, given that the issue had become so controversial, I asked. "It would be a long time after the original version", came the reply. I interpret that as "probably not", but let's see.

Finally, I approached Iradj Bagherzade, the Iranian-born founder and chairman of the renowned publishing house, IB Tauris. He thought hard about the word "roozgar". "History" was not the right word, he said, but he could not decide

100zgar . history was not the right word, he said, but he could not decide between several better alternatives "this day and age", "these times", "our times", "time".

So there we have it. Starting with Juan Cole, and going via the New York Times' experts through MEMRI to the BBC's monitors, the consensus is that Ahmadinejad did not talk about any maps. He was, as I insisted in my original piece, offering a vague wish for the future.

A very last point. The fact that he compared his desired option - the elimination of "the regime occupying Jerusalem" - with the fall of the Shah's regime in Iran makes it crystal clear that he is talking about regime change, not the end of Israel. As a schoolboy opponent of the Shah in the 1970's he surely did not favour Iran's removal from the page of time. He just wanted the Shah out.

The same with regard to Israel. The Iranian president is undeniably an opponent of Zionism or, if you prefer the phrase, the Zionist regime. But so are substantial numbers of Israeli citizens, Jews as well as Arabs. The anti-Zionist and non-Zionist traditions in Israel are not insignificant. So we should not demonise Ahmadinejad on those grounds alone.

Does this quibbling over phrases matter? Yes, of course. Within days of the Ahmadinejad speech the then Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, was calling for Iran to be expelled from the United Nations. Other foreign leaders have quoted the map phrase. The United States is piling pressure on its allies to be tough with Iran.

Let me give the last word to Juan Cole, with whom I began. "I am entirely aware that Ahmadinejad is hostile to Israel. The question is whether his intentions and capabilities would lead to a military attack, and whether therefore pre-emptive warfare is prescribed. I am saying no, and the boring philology is part of the reason for the no."



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