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AT WAR

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Does Iran have something in store?

BY BERNARD LEWIS

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During the Cold War, both sides possessed weapons of mass destruction, but neither side used them, deterred by what was known as MAD, mutual assured destruction. Similar constraints have no doubt prevented their use in the confrontation between India and Pakistan. In our own day a new such confrontation seems to be looming between a nuclear-armed Iran and its favorite enemies, named by the late Ayatollah Khomeini as the Great Satan and the Little Satan, i.e., the United States and Israel. Against the U.S. the bombs might be delivered by terrorists, a method having the advantage of bearing no return address. Against Israel, the target is small enough to attempt obliteration by direct bombardment.

It seems increasingly likely that the Iranians either have or very soon will have nuclear weapons at their disposal, thanks to their own researches (which began some 15 years ago), to some of their obliging neighbors, and to the ever-helpful rulers of North Korea. The language used by Iranian President Ahmadinejad would seem to indicate the reality and indeed the imminence of this threat.

Would the same constraints, the same fear of mutual assured destruction, restrain a nuclear-armed Iran from using such weapons against the U.S. or against Israel?

There is a radical difference between the Islamic Republic of Iran and other governments with nuclear weapons. This difference is expressed in what can only be described as the apocalyptic worldview of Iran's present rulers. This worldview and expectation, vividly expressed in speeches, articles and even schoolbooks, clearly shape the perception and therefore the policies of Ahmadinejad and his disciples.

Even in the past it was clear that terrorists claiming to act in the name of Islam had no compunction in slaughtering large numbers of fellow Muslims. A notable example was the blowing up of the American embassies in East Africa in 1998, killing a few American diplomats and a much larger number of uninvolved local passersby, many of them Muslims. There were numerous other Muslim victims in the various terrorist attacks of the last 15 years.

The phrase "Allah will know his own" is usually used to explain such apparently callous unconcern; it means that while infidel, i.e., non-Muslim, victims will go to a well-deserved punishment in hell, Muslims will be sent straight to heaven. According to this view, the bombers are in fact doing their Muslim victims a favor by giving them a

quick pass to heaven and its delights--the rewards without the struggles of martyrdom. School textbooks tell young Iranians to be ready for a final global struggle against an evil enemy, named as the U.S., and to prepare themselves for the privileges of martyrdom.

A direct attack on the U.S., though possible, is less likely in the immediate future. Israel is a nearer and easier target, and Mr. Ahmadinejad has given indication of thinking along these lines. The Western observer would immediately think of two possible deterrents. The first is that an attack that wipes out Israel would almost certainly wipe out the Palestinians too. The second is that such an attack would evoke a devastating reprisal from Israel against Iran, since one may surely assume that the Israelis have made the necessary arrangements for a counterstrike even after a nuclear holocaust in Israel.

The first of these possible deterrents might well be of concern to the Palestinians--but not apparently to their fanatical champions in the Iranian government. The second deterrent--the threat of direct retaliation on Iran--is, as noted, already weakened by the suicide or martyrdom complex that plagues parts of the Islamic world today, without parallel in other religions, or for that matter in the Islamic past. This complex has become even more important at the present day, because of this new apocalyptic vision.



In Islam, as in Judaism and Christianity, there are certain beliefs concerning the cosmic struggle at the end of time--Gog and Magog, anti-Christ, Armageddon, and for Shiite Muslims, the long awaited return of the Hidden Imam, ending in the final victory of the forces of good over evil, however these may be defined. Mr. Ahmadinejad and his followers clearly believe that this time is now, and that the terminal struggle has already begun and is indeed well advanced. It may even have a date, indicated by several references by the Iranian president to giving his final answer to the U.S. about nuclear development by Aug. 22. This was at first reported as "by the end of August," but Mr. Ahmadinejad's statement was more precise.

What is the significance of Aug. 22? This year, Aug. 22 corresponds, in the Islamic calendar, to the 27th day of the month of Rajab of the year 1427. This, by tradition, is the night when many Muslims commemorate the night flight of the prophet Muhammad on the winged horse Buraq, first to "the farthest mosque," usually identified with Jerusalem, and then to heaven and back (cf Koran XVII.1). This might well be deemed an appropriate date for the apocalyptic ending of Israel and if necessary of the world. It is far from certain that Mr. Ahmadinejad plans any such cataclysmic events precisely for Aug. 22. But it would be wise to bear the possibility in mind.

A passage from the Ayatollah Khomeini, quoted in an 11th-grade Iranian schoolbook, is revealing. "I am decisively announcing to the whole world that if the world-devourers [i.e., the infidel powers] wish to stand against our religion, we will stand against their whole world and will not cease until the annihilation of all them. Either we all become free, or we will go to the greater freedom which is martyrdom. Either we shake one another's hands in joy at the victory of Islam in the world, or all of us will turn to eternal life and martyrdom. In both cases, victory and success are ours."

In this context, mutual assured destruction, the deterrent that worked so well during the Cold War, would have no meaning. At the end of time, there will be general destruction anyway. What will matter will be the final destination of the dead--hell for the infidels, and heaven for the believers. For people with this mindset, MAD is not a constraint; it is an inducement.

How then can one confront such an enemy, with such a view of life and death? Some immediate precautions are obviously possible and necessary. In the long term, it would seem that the best, perhaps the only hope is to appeal to those Muslims, Iranians, Arabs and others who do not share these apocalyptic perceptions and aspirations, and feel as

much threatened, indeed even more threatened, than we are. There must be many such, probably even a majority in the lands of Islam. Now is the time for them to save their countries, their societies and their religion from the madness of MAD.

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