

Knowing Thy Enemy: Decisionmaking of Regional Adversaries

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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On January 22, 2007, Washington Institute Wexler-Fromer fellow Martin Kramer addressed the [Seventh Annual Herzliya Conference \(http://www.herzliyaconference.org/Eng/_Articles/Article.asp?CategoryID=33&ArticleID=1596\)](http://www.herzliyaconference.org/Eng/_Articles/Article.asp?CategoryID=33&ArticleID=1596) on the balance of Israel's national security. These are his remarks.

My role here this morning is to serve as a proxy for "the enemy." Now it might have been more interesting to invite "the enemy" and have him speak for himself. But Israel has so many enemies that one wouldn't know quite where to start. And once one goes beyond "enemy" to include "regional adversaries," as our panel title does, the list grows long. Then if I define these adversaries from a dual perspective, American and Israeli, the list becomes a who's who. It includes states like Iran and Syria, an array of Islamist movements, Sunni and Shiite, and insurgents and terrorists of all stripes. As someone once said, friends come and go, but enemies accumulate.

In a mere ten minutes, then, all I can do is give you a flavor of how Israel and the United States might look to a composite enemy, someone you couldn't invite because he doesn't exist. And to get you in the proper mood, I'll do it in first person. I know it's hard, but imagine me as some sort of composite of Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad, Hassan Nasrallah, Osama bin Laden, Bashar al-Asad, Muqtada al-Sadr, and Khaled Mashal. You'll admit it's a good disguise; good enough to get me through the security cordon outside this hall.

Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim.

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. I'm flattered that you wish to know me better. As it happens, the phrase "know thy enemy" isn't in our Holy Quran, but it comes from the ancient Chinese general Sun Tzu. The full quote goes like this: "Know thy enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles, you will never be defeated. When you are ignorant of the enemy but know yourself, your chances of winning or losing are equal. If ignorant both of your enemy and of yourself, you are sure to be defeated in every battle."

Now it's true that your societies are self-critical. The purpose of your famous conference is to look hard at yourselves. We follow it most closely, for what it tells us of your strengths and weaknesses. This self-knowledge works in your favor. But fortunately for us, your knowledge of us is deeply flawed. That's the prime reason why you've been losing every other battle.

It's not that you don't understand our decisionmaking processes. Your intelligence agencies probably have a good

idea of who answers to whom in Damascus and Tehran, and among our brothers in Hamas, Hizballah, the Sunni mujahidin in Iraq, and al-Qaeda. What you don't begin to understand is how we see the world.

To summarize your problem in a sentence: you don't give us credit for having what you have, which is vision. In America and Israel, you keep your greatest thinkers in tanks, where they come up with grand visions and strategies. These minds produce fresh ideas of how to engineer a "new Middle East" to your liking. Then you give these ideas imposing names: the peace process, globalization, democratization. Your ideas usually fail, but you keep generating them, because you have a sense of destiny. And your destiny, so you think, is to remake the world in your image.

Too often, you aren't prepared to give us credit for having visions of our own. And when you overhear snippets of our own big ideas -- a map without Israel, a resurrected caliphate, and so on -- you say: oh, that's not really serious. No, you assure yourselves, all that the Muslims want is that we address some of their grievances and accommodate a few of their interests. A gesture by you here, a concession by you there, and before you know it, you think you've turned us into your servants.

We find it amusing how you persuade yourselves that just one more gesture, just one more concession, is all that's needed to impose your will.

Here are some examples we've collected from your press, mostly from Haaretz. If only Israel would give up the Shebaa Farms, our brethren in Hizballah would surrender their weapons. If only our imprisoned fighters were released by Israel, we would allow your "peace process" to be renewed. If only the United States would wink at Syria over the Golan, our brother Asad would ditch Iran. If only Iran were given economic incentives, it would ditch its nuclear program. If only Hamas were recognized, it would recognize Israel in return. If only Israel acknowledged responsibility for the plight of the refugees, the Palestinians would shelve the "right of return."

And on and on. There's even someone at Harvard who claims that al-Qaeda "is likely to bring an end to the war it declared in return for some degree of satisfaction regarding its grievances." Our brothers in al-Qaeda felt insulted: just what do they have to do to be regarded as visionaries, and not as angry Arabs with so-called "grievances"?

Not a single one of these "if-thens" is true; time and again, we've told you so. Yet still you're disappointed when your "generous offers" are spurned. The offers are generous, so you think; but to us, such "generosity" is a mark of weakness, a signpost reassuring us that we're on the road to realizing our grand vision.

And we do have a grand vision. It's as deeply rooted in our hearts as the idea of liberty and freedom is rooted in yours. Our leaders, thinkers, intellectuals, and clerics have spread it to millions of people. Untold numbers are prepared to fight for it. It exists in several versions -- Islamist, Arabist, nationalist. But in the end, all of these versions revolve around the same idea, and it's this:

We Arabs and Muslims can and must seize control of our destiny. This means wresting the Middle East away from America and its extension, Israel. Every move we make thus has the ultimate purpose of pushing you back, out, and away. We have no interest whatsoever in "final settlements" or a "new Middle East" that would fortify the status quo. We're out to defeat you -- and to replace your vision with our own.

You may think this is impossible. We admit it: the Arab and Muslim world isn't a seat of great technological achievement. It struggles with poverty, illiteracy, and ignorance on a daunting scale. But our cadres have taken Sun Tzu to heart. We know ourselves, and we've made a careful study of you, from Bint Jbeil to Baghdad. We demand of our followers sacrifice, but we promise them victory, and we prepare for it. Of course we make mistakes; we're human too. But on balance, we've played a weak hand with skill, while you've played a strong hand ineptly.

Now you may enjoy a brief respite from us, because Sunnis and Shiites are regrettably at each other's throats. Your diplomats whisper to you that this is an opportunity. Don't rejoice. If Sunnis and Shiites can demonize and massacre

one another -- fellow Muslims who profess the same faith, speak the same language, share the same culture -- what does this portend for you? The Sunni-Shia strife is a warning to you: our visions, our history don't ever go away, they always come back.

Let's set aside the Chinese general, and end with a quote from our own bin Laden. "When people see a strong horse and a weak horse, by nature, they will like the strong horse." He's right. We sense, not that you're weak, but that you're weakening. We see America's "wise men" produce an alternative plan for Iraq comprised of gestures to us, disguised under the thin euphemism of a "new diplomatic offensive." We hear America's best-placed foreign policy analyst declare that "the American era in the Middle East has ended." And Israel, defeated in the summer, now debates concessions and initiatives toward us, all of which suggest that Israel is anxious to forestall further defeats.

We know you will launch more offensives, to reverse your decline, or at least create the illusion of its reversal. We expect many "surges." We can't defeat you yet in a straight confrontation. But you are already defeating yourselves, in your think tanks, in your universities, in your editorial boardrooms, in the conclaves of your "wise men."

Finally, you ask us about the place of Iran's nuclear program in our vision. It's an excellent question. Unfortunately for you, Martin Kramer's time is up. We return him to you -- unharmed. ❖

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