

The Iranian Ticking Bomb

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Articles & Testimony

After US President George W. Bush declared Iran part of an "Axis of Evil," many European diplomats, American academics, and journalists ridiculed him. French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine called Bush's speech "simplistic."

France's objections aside, the Iran of recent weeks is far from the democratizing country so many outsiders like to pretend it is.

On December 14, former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, once labeled a moderate by The Washington Post and State Department officials, threatened Israel with nuclear annihilation. Speaking at Teheran University, Rafsanjani declared, "The use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything." Either Rafsanjani fooled diplomats and pundits alike, or moderate in Iran implies first-strike use of nuclear weapons.

The Karine A affair showed that Rafsanjani's tirade cannot be dismissed as rhetorical excess. By attempting to smuggle 50 tons of sophisticated Iranian weaponry to the Palestinians, the Islamic Republic demonstrated its willingness to back up its virulently anti-Israel rhetoric with action.

Clearly, the State Department was correct when its latest Patterns of Global Terrorism report labeled Iran "the most active state sponsor of terrorism." Iran's recent actions underline the failure of Europe's policy of critical engagement. Ten years of talk and trade have not moderated Iran; freedoms have, in fact, decreased under President Muhammad Khatami, a so-called reformist. Only public executions and anti-government protests are on the rise.

Last October, during the largest anti-government protests in 20 years, Iranians chanted "Death to Khatami" in the streets of Teheran.

Two months ago, reformist students heckled Khatami as their fallen idol tried to speak.

The Islamic Republic is crumbling. More than 70 percent of Iran's 68 million people were born or came of age after the Islamic Revolution. Whether religious or secular, the vast majority of Iranians oppose clerical rule of any sort. And so the threat from Iran has never been greater.

A peaceful transition to democracy in Iran is wishful thinking. Never in history has an ideological dictatorship voluntarily relinquished power. As China demonstrated at Tiananmen Square in 1989, an unpopular few can suppress the many so long as the few control the guns and tanks.

What makes Iran so dangerous is that the ayatollahs realize their control over the guns and tanks is slipping. Iranian authorities no longer trust the paramilitary Basij to quell protests. Once the vanguard of revolutionary fervor, sending 14-year-old boys through minefields in defense of the revolution, Basij volunteers today have families to feed just as do ordinary Iranians.

More significant, though, is that the elite Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, the muscle upon which the ayatollahs' theocracy rests, is also beginning to show signs of unrest. Numbering 120,000 men, the Revolutionary Guards are not immune from a stagnating economy. Where in the 1980s, the Revolutionary Guard helped repel Saddam

Hussein's invasion, in the 1990s, many turned to Baywatch and other American programs on satellite television.

Rather than establish an Islamic democracy, the Revolutionary Guards' sacrifices have led to a plummeting standard of living and an increasingly corrupt and unresponsive regime. Iranians say the time is nearing when Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei will no longer be able to trust his elite troops to obey if they are called upon to put down the increasingly frequent anti-government riots.

As the ayatollahs' popularity plummets, Iran's leaders see only one way to maintain power: They must foment a military crisis in order to return to the golden age of the Iran-Iraq War, when Iranians rallied around their rulers in the face of an enemy's challenge. The Islamic Republic wants enemies. In order to maintain their waning power, expect the ayatollahs to push the Middle East to the brink of war.

What might the Islamic Republic do? Khamenei wants the Palestinians to have missiles capable of hitting jetliners at Ben-Gurion Airport. He wants a mass casualty incident that will draw Israeli retaliation. Khamenei may also try to provoke an American strike. While the United States did not react to Iranian involvement in the 1996 truck-bombing of the Khobar Towers military barracks in Saudi Arabia, Washington may not remain so passive if Iranian-backed terrorists strike at America's new bases in Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan.

The Iranian government is unraveling, and a new Iran may be around the corner. Diplomats and policymakers may hope for the best in Iran, but they must prepare for the worst. The Islamic Republic is a ticking bomb. Israel and the United States must expect things to get worse before they get better. ❖

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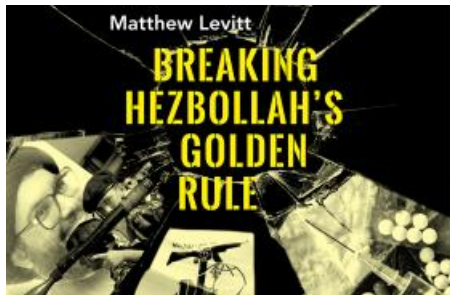
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