

The Iranians And The Israelis

The Ayatollah Khomeini and his devoted followers overturned the Shah, and established the Islamic Republic in Iran in 1978-79, bringing the first so-called "Islamic revolution" to the Middle East. The Iranians felt then, and continued to feel, that they were at the forefront of the Return of Islam, and that the Islamic Republic would naturally lead the Camp of Islam. It was a crazy idea, because the Iranian Shi'a kept overlooking the fact that they, as Shi'a, were distrusted and disliked, and in some places where Ur- or Uber- Sunnis prevailed, such as Wahhabi Saudi Arabia, openly detested. Yet they continued to allow themselves to believe that Iran could be the paladin of the Muslims, despite the contempt expressed by Arabs not just for Shi'a – including Arab Shi'a – but for the "Safavids," that is the Persians, their historic enemy. And the cause they took on was that of "Palestine" – that is, the destruction of the non-Muslim, and still worse Jewish, state of Israel. Iran would lead the way, and the Arabs would be so impressed, and so grateful, for the removal of this Jewish "cancer" (that is one of the two metaphors used by Muslim Arabs for Israel; the other is that of a knife-blade stuck into the Arab heart. In both cases, that of cancer and that of a knife-blade, the removal – of the cancerous tissue, of the sharp metal – must be complete), that they would willingly forget their own antagonism and accept the Persian Shi'a as their equals, or perhaps even more.

It was a crazy idea. But as always in the Middle East, what should have been obvious was only obvious to a very few,. For several decades the Iranians kept fooling themselves, and spent tens of billions of dollars on a nuclear program which, their successive leaders kept saying, would result in weapons that could or would be used only with one target in mind: Israel. The Iranians did not seem to notice that none of this sword-waving in the direction of Infidel Israel lessened Arab

disturb, dislike, detestation of the Iranians, nor diminish the Sunni belief that Shi'a, being false Muslims, are not only Infidels but for many Sunnis, as bad as Christians and Jews or, as hypocrites, even worse.

What have the last few years demonstrated? That most Sunni Arabs fear and now hate the Iranians, and that hatred extends to Arab Shi'a too, who are seen – rightly or wrongly or exaggeratedly – as agents of the Iranian Shi'a. And that is true even if the local Shi'a are Arabs, and practice a brand of Shi'ism quite different from that in Iran. A few years ago, it is true, that there was a brief display of support for Hezbollah when it was in a brief war with Israel. But Hezbollah knows that it is seen differently today, and that should war with Israel break out, no Sunnis in Lebanon, and few outside, would care if the Israelis maul Hezbollah again, and many would cheer the Israelis on.

Can it be, in Iran, that no one has noticed how, in Syria, the various groups of Sunni rebels treat the Shi'a they capture, regarding – as they do – the Alawites as being Shi'a? Can it be that the steady stream of hatred directed at the Shi'a by the Islamic State is not being heard in Iran? What about the treatment by the Sunni Arab rulers in Bahrain of the protesting Shi'a majority? And how do the Gulf states, and especially Saudi Arabia, treat the Shi'a Houthis of Yemen, who are bombed repeatedly, and often wantonly, because of the exaggerated fear that these Houthis in Yemen are tied to, and would if they could do the bidding of, the Islamic Republic of Iran?

Yet the Iranians continue to stake everything, including their economic wellbeing – spending tens of billions of dollars, and foregoing other tens of billions because of sanctions imposed – on this nuclear project which certain Iranian leaders have said will be used, if used at all, against Israel.

There is another story, another available narrative. In this

story, this narrative, the three oldest nations of the Middle East are Egypt, Israel, and Iran. Egypt includes all of Egyptian history beginning with the pharaohs and the pyramids, that is deliberately embraces and is proud of the pre-Islamic Egyptian past. Israel means the resurrected Jewish commonwealth, that connects to the entire history of Israel, interrupted as it was by Roman, Byzantine, Arab, and Turkish conquest. And Iran means not only the Islamic Iran, which has offended so many Iranians with its brutality and stupidity, but pre-Islamic and non-Islamic Iran, the Iran of Persepolis and other visible signs from the time, not of "Jahiliyya" (pre-Islamic ignorance) but of Persian civilization at its height.

In Israel there is no deep animus toward Iran. Some may be surprised to learn – I was – about the Jewish veneration of Cyrus. I recently read, in Neil McGreggor's (he is the Director of the British Museum) "A History of the World In 100 Objects," the following:

"The most famous beneficiaries of Cyrus's shrewd political judgement after the conquest of Babylon were the Jews. Taken prisoner a generation before by Nebuchadnezzar, they were now allowed to return home to Jerusalem and to rebuild their temple. It was an act of generosity that they never forgot. In the Hebrew scriptures Cyrus is hailed as a divinely inspired benefactor and hero. In 1917, when the British government declared that it would establish in Palestine a national home to which Jews could once again return, images of Cyrus were displayed alongside photographs of George V throughout eastern Europe. Not many political gambits are still paying dividends 2,500 years later. "

Hezbollah, the agent of Iran, threatens Israel with its 100,000 rockets and missiles. But it is not Israel that threatens the existence and wellbeing of the Shia in Lebanon, though if Hezbollah attacks, or is believed to be readying an attack, Israel will certainly do everything it can to inflict

great damage on Hezbollah. The use by Hezbollah of its role as the leader of the Lebanese "resistance" to Israel has backfired on it; it has won no new Sunni support, and lost whatever mild support it might once have had from a few Sunnis; by threatening Israel it is endangering itself, and not only itself, for if Hezbollah is destroyed, how long will the Shi'a in Lebanon hold out against enraged Sunnis, both those who are Lebanese and those, now in Lebanon, who fled Syria and a regime supported by Hezbollah?