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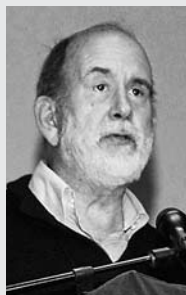
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Understanding Iran

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The following is adapted from a speech delivered at sea on August 4, 2008, aboard the Regent Seven Seas Mariner, during the Hillsdale College "North to Alaska" cruise.

If you read the news carefully, you will find a notable story about Iran every morning. Nine times out of ten it is hilarious. Today's Iran story is that the head of its armed forces announced that it has a new missile with a range of 300 kilometers or more, manufactured with technology that has never been used before in the history of the world. There is neither a picture of the missile nor any information about the nature of the missile, and, in fact, you can be quite sure that there is no such missile at all.

Just within the last month Iran released a photograph of a missile launch that initially caused great consternation in the West. It showed four missiles being launched, more or less simultaneously, with wonderful contrails behind them. This was supposedly a new intermediate range missile that could hit almost any target in the Middle East, including U.S. military bases. Upon examination, that photograph turned out to be a double phony. First, there was only one missile, and the Iranians replicated it to make it seem as if there were four. Second, the missile was two years old and was not an intermediate range missile at all. A few days later, the Iranians announced that they had a fighter airplane and produced a photo of it. Upon examination, this airplane turned out to be a plastic toy made by Mattel with Iranian markings drawn on it.

So the first thing to understand about Iran is that it is a country where lies and deception are a way of life.

Another important thing to know has to do with the seriousness of Iran as a potential military enemy. In that regard, consider a story that originally appeared in *U.S. News & World Report* about two years ago. It concerned a joint Special Forces team of five or six Iraqis and five or six Americans that was patrolling the Iran-Iraq border because the Iranians had been smuggling improvised explosive devices and Iran-trained terrorists into Iraq. Off in the distance, this team spotted an Iranian military officer in uniform on Iraqi soil. They went after him and he quickly hopped back onto the Iranian side. As the team continued along the border, they spotted either the same person or another Iranian officer in uniform and again they went after him. This time he didn't move, and when the Americans started talking to him, the Iraqis on the team disappeared and the Americans realized they had been surrounded by 15 or 20 armed Iranian soldiers. The Iranian officer told them to lay down their weapons or they would be shot, but the young captain in charge of the Americans told his men to open fire. Eleven of the Iranians were killed, no American was injured, and the remaining Iranians fled across the border.

This tells us, first, that the Iranians are tricky. They had arranged with the Iraqi Special Forces to turn the Americans over to be held as hostages, and then lured the Americans

into an ambush. But it also tells us that they are not really prepared to fight—which is, in fact, what our forces have found in Iraq. We have captured or killed an enormous number of Iranian intelligence and military officers, and very rarely have they ever offered any serious resistance.

The Terror Connection

The simple facts regarding Iran are easy to understand. We are dealing with a regime that came to power in 1979, when the Iranian revolution overthrew the Shah. Immediately thereafter, Iran declared war against the United States, branding us “The Great Satan.” The Iranians have been at war against us for 30 years, and prior to 9/11 the Iranian regime was directly or indirectly responsible for

the murder of more Americans than any other country or organization in the world. It also may well be that the Iranian regime was involved in 9/11. In this regard, I call your attention to one of the most forgotten documents in contemporary American history. In the fall of 1998, the American government indicted Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. There is a paragraph in the indictment that reads as follows:

Al Qaeda forged alliances with the National Islamic Front in the Sudan and with the government of Iran and its associated terrorist group, Hezbollah, for

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[Latin]: in the first place

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*Hillsdale guest speaker Jonah Goldberg signs
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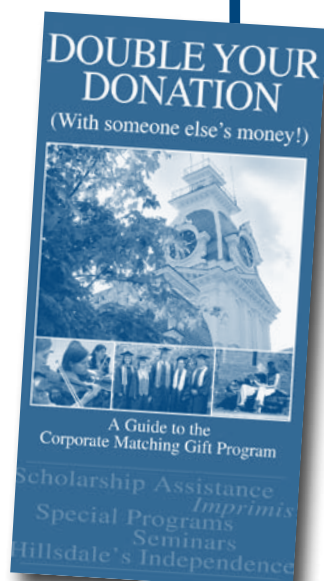


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the purpose of working together against their perceived common enemies in the West, particularly the United States.

When you read the newspapers nowadays you find every now and then someone saying that there is no real evidence that Iran is supporting Al Qaeda. More often than not, this person immediately goes on to say that Iran *would* not ever support Al Qaeda because Iran is Shiite and Al Qaeda is Sunni. This is nonsense.

The current chairman of the Intelligence Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives was once asked the difference between Sunnis and Shiites, and he didn't know the answer. The difference boils down to a historical disagreement about the proper line of succession to the prophet Mohammed. Sunnis and Shiites have been arguing about this since the Middle Ages, and it has played itself out into a very interesting disagreement over the relationship between mosque and state.

In short, Sunnis have long believed that it is legitimate for religious leaders to function in government since Mohammed's successor is known and is with us, whereas Shiites have traditionally believed that the rightful successor to Mohammed is yet to come, and that therefore no religious leader is entitled

to sit in a position of secular power. This is why the Ayatollah Sistani, who is the highest ranking and the most esteemed Shiite figure in Iraq, does not go to Parliament. He and other Iraqi Shiite clergy express their opinions about religious, political, and moral issues, but they don't sit in positions of political power.

This Shiite view on religion and politics broke down in Iran, however, with the revolution of 1979. When the Ayatollah Khomeini took over in that revolution, he said that not only was it allowable for religious leaders to govern civil society, but indeed it was now mandatory. Khomeini's most revealing line, spoken on the airplane from France to Iran when he was about to seize power, came in answer to a question about what his rule would mean for Iran. Khomeini said, in effect, that he didn't care at all about Iran. He was leading all of Islam, not Iran, he said, and he would happily sacrifice everyone in Iran if he could accomplish the global triumph of Islam.

So Sunnis and Shiites traditionally have this theological disagreement, but it isn't an unbridgeable chasm, as Khomeini's example shows. And in the history of the Iranian revolution, Sunnis and Shiites have worked mostly together from the very beginning—indeed, they worked together even before that revolution began.

Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps was created in the early 1970s in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon, and was trained by Yasser Arafat's Al Fatah. Arafat was a super-Sunni who came out of the Muslim Brotherhood. In other words, today's most hardcore armed Shiite organization was trained by hardcore Sunnis. Sunnis and Shiites worked hand-in-glove to create a terrorist alliance that overthrew the Shah, took power in Iran, and has waged war against the U.S. ever since.

The lesson here is that when you hear people saying that Sunnis and Shiites can't work together, you should run, because those people don't know what they are talking about.

Can We Talk?

The Ayatollah Khomeini installed a regime in Iran which is best described as Islamofascist. It has followed, in every major detail, the model laid down by Hitler and Mussolini in the 1920s and '30s. It is a single party regime, and a dictator makes all the key decisions. There are today endless articles in the press about Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the current president of Iran, but Iranian presidents come and go. The successor to the Ayatollah Khomeini, Ali Khamenei, has the title of Supreme Leader. He is the only person who really matters in Iran. He makes all the crucial decisions. The Revolutionary Guard Corps reports directly to him. Furthermore, if you watch Leni Riefenstahl's infamous 1935 film *Triumph of the Will*, about a National Socialist Party day in Nuremberg, full of "Sieg Heils" and programmed events, you'll see the similarity to rallies today in Tehran where tens of thousands of people gather to chant "Death to America." And like the Nazis, the Iranians mean it.

My favorite response to people who say, "Why don't we just sit down and talk with the Iranians?" is to remind them of the movie *Goldfinger*. There's a wonderful scene in the middle of the movie when Sean Connery as James Bond is spread-eagled on a sheet of gold, a laser beam is

cutting through the gold sheet and about to slice him in half, and Gert Fröbe as Goldfinger is standing up on a balcony looking down at him. Bond looks up and asks, "What is this, Goldfinger? Do you expect me to talk?" And Goldfinger replies, "No, Mr. Bond, I expect you to die." That's exactly the Iranian attitude.

In fact, we *have* been talking to the Iranians, almost non-stop, for 30 years. There isn't an American president from Jimmy Carter to the present who has not authorized negotiations with Iran. The classic case occurred during the Clinton administration. We ended all kinds of sanctions against Iran, let all kinds of Iranians into the U.S. for the first time since the 1970s, had sporting matches with the Iranians, hosted Iranian cultural events, and unfroze Iranian bank accounts. Then President Clinton and Secretary of State Albright started publicly apologizing to Iran for this and that. But when all was said and done, Ali Khamenei reminded everyone that Iran is in a state of war with the U.S., and that was the end of negotiations. This is what has happened every single time we have tried talking to or appeasing Iran.

Einstein's definition of a madman is somebody who keeps doing the same thing over and over while hoping for different results. Only a madman can believe that negotiating with the Iranians will produce some result different from what we've had now for 30 years, including very recently under the current administration. But many continue to believe it.

There is a striking tendency among people in modern Western governments not to recognize the existence of evil in the world. My professional career has largely been spent studying evil. My Ph.D. is in Modern European History, and I studied fascism. Before that I was research assistant for a historian named George Mosse, who wrote books on National Socialism. People from my generation studied these things because we were trying desperately to understand how men like Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin came to power, and why nobody saw it coming and understood what was at stake. Why was there the

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humiliation of Munich and then the Nazi invasion of Poland before an appeasement government in Britain fell and Winston Churchill came to power? Why did it require Pearl Harbor for the U.S. to enter World War II? Could we get to the point where we understood these evil regimes so well that when the next one came along we would see it coming and stop it in its tracks? But over the past 30 years we have seen the same situation play out with Iran, and still we dream of negotiation.

In Natan Sharansky's useful formulation, if you want to know how a country will behave internationally, look at the way it treats its own people. The Iranian regime treats its people with total contempt. Consider its treatment of women. Although you will never hear the American women's rights movement complain about it, women in Iran are officially

worth half a man. It is in Iran's Constitution. If a woman who is pregnant with a male fetus gets killed in an automobile accident, Sharia law requires the guilty party in the other car to pay a full fine for the fetus and only half that fine for the woman. This carries through every aspect of Iranian society. Women can't own or dispose of property. If a woman's husband dies, the family of the husband disposes of his estate. That's the contempt that awaits us if the Iranians have their way. In fact, they view the entire non-Muslim world as worth even less than Muslim women.

An Implacable Foe

The U.S. has much to learn about operating in the Middle East. Consider our history with Iraq. We went to war in 1991 to drive Iraq out of Kuwait. Nobody

in the Middle East thought that we had assembled a coalition of 500,000 soldiers just for that reason. They took it for granted that we were going to destroy Saddam Hussein, remove his regime, and replace it with something more civilized. That was true even of the Saudis. People who were at the highest levels of the first Bush administration have told me that Saudi Arabia was begging us to go to Baghdad even though publicly they were saying that we should stop at the borders of Kuwait. Yet stop we did. Even worse, President Bush the elder said how wonderful it would be if the Shiites and the Kurds would rise up against Saddam and liberate the country themselves. The Kurds and Shiites took this as an open invitation and a promise of American support if they did that. So they rose up, we didn't lift a finger for them, and they were massacred. In light of this, it was less than smart for American policy makers to believe in 2003, when we went into Iraq for the second time, that most Iraqis would trust us.

Look also at recent American policy toward Iran. Since 2001, Iran has been identified as part of the “axis of evil” and branded as the world's greatest sponsor of international terrorism. The Soviets always used to say, “If you say A, you have to do B.” That is, if you accept certain kinds of information, that drives you to act. But we have not acted against the Iranian regime, even though, as luck would have it, Iran is tailor-made for the same political strategy that toppled the Soviet empire. If you stop to consider that we brought down that empire with the active support of maybe five or ten percent of its people, how could we possibly fail to bring down the regime in Iran—a country where we know from the regime's own polls that upwards of 70 percent of the people want an

end to their government? But the Iranians, too, have been living in that part of the world and have seen American promises come to nothing. The Iranian people are waiting to see some kind of real action by the U.S. to support them against Khamenei, Ahmadinejad, and the Revolutionary Guard Corps, because they know that the same thing will happen to them that happened to the Iraqi Kurds and Shiites if we are not there actively supporting them. Nor do I mean with ground troops. We should support democratic revolution in Iran.

The bottom line is that Iran is our principal enemy in the Middle East, and perhaps in the entire world. It is also a terribly vulnerable regime, and it knows that—which is why it makes up stories about airplanes and missiles that it doesn't have. As for the question of nuclear weapons, it seems hard to imagine that Iran does not *already* have them. Iranians are not stupid, and they have been at this for a minimum of 20 years in a world where almost all of the major components needed for a nuclear weapon—not to mention old nuclear weapons—are for sale. A lot of these components are for sale in nearby Pakistan. And if the Iranians do have a weapon, it is impossible to imagine that, at a moment of crisis, they will not use it. The point is, we have an implacable enemy which has no intention of negotiating a settlement with us. They want us dead or dominated, just as our enemies did in the 1930s and '40s. You can't make deals with a regime like that.

Our choices with regard to Iran are to challenge them directly and win this war now, to do so only after they kill a lot more of us in some kind of attack, or to surrender. There is no painless way out, and the longer we wait, the greater the pain is going to be. ■



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