

# Who is to blame for Iran?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I was never an admirer of the Shah of Iran. I was never a fan of monarchies nor of autocracies in general, any more than I am of democracy when there are no institutions of civil society to sustain it. But Persian Jews owed the Pahlavis, father and son, a great deal. For the first time in Persian history since it came under Shia Muslim control, the Jews were allowed the freedom, the equality before the law, and the opportunities they had been denied for a thousand years.

I remember how in the 1950s Britain, Russia and America interfered and battled for control of Persian affairs. To this day resentment against the arrogance of the Imperial powers for the way they tried to control Iranian oil, lingers. Internally Reza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavis, was a modernist. He tried very hard to battle the primitive medievalism of the Mullahs and their grip mainly on the rural, less educated classes. He promoted education, liberated women, and helped create a dynamic, industrial country that went a long way towards dragging Iran out of the typical backwardness that we see to this day in Afghanistan and elsewhere in that benighted part of the world.

The conflict between religious medievalism and modernity in Iran was made more complex because of Soviet interference through the powerful Tudeh Communist Party. The Shah, under the pressure of the cold war, was forced into a balancing act in which he courted the Mullahs, retracted many of the anticlerical moves of his father, and employed his cruel secret police organization, SAVAK, to clamp down on left-wing and communist dissidents. In the end the combination of left-wing antipathy towards the Shah's autocracy combined with Muslim religious opposition triumphed.

The Shah was ousted by the Americans. They and the French brought Khomeini (whom the Shah had exiled for his extremism) back from exile because he promised moderation. However as soon as he returned, he and his cronies set about killing opposition, removing moderate, pro-Western leadership and anticlerical voices, and letting loose the oppressive ideology that now inspires, funds, and arms the violence around the world that strengthens their cause.

American foreign policy has always veered between right-wing interference and naïve left-wing idealism. Whereas the Republicans allowed the CIA to interfere in Iranian affairs, Jimmy Carter, on the other hand, believed that if you were nice to Khomeini and gave him a chance he would spread tolerance and good will and become Jimmy's best friend. Carter has gone on in a similar vein to preach the left-wing gospel of Hamas reasonableness in the face of Israeli intransigence.

We are now once again in a similar situation. The Democrat President believes that being nice to Iran will blunt their revolutionary zeal. Making

concessions will “bring them back into the community of nations” and reduce their aggressiveness. Allowing them to have a nuclear bomb will bring peace to the Middle East. It is an exact replay of the mentality of the Carter years.

There is no doubt that there will be a deal regardless. Obama wants it. He will buy it. He probably genuinely believes in it as much as he believed in the Arab Spring and in the benevolence of the Brotherhood. Iran will keep its capacities and its warheads and its plutonium enrichment and, within a few years, its nuclear bombs. There is nothing Israel or anyone else can do. Even if Israel has the capacity to bomb some of the targets, it cannot get them all. The targets are so many, so diffused, and so deep underground that without an alliance of major powers the effort will not be able to be completed. Besides, bombing Iran will only bring its disparate groups more strongly together in patriotic unity in the face of an external threat.

Despite all this I do not see the coming deal as the end of the world. Yes, Iran will get the bomb. Pakistan has the bomb. India has bomb, and so does North Korea. No doubt the Sunni states will get their bombs too. Proliferation will be inevitable. But that does not necessarily mean they will be used or that lunatic extremists will get hold of them in ways that they can be used in localized conflicts.

I remember the fear we all had in the fifties of a nuclear war between the East and the West. It never happened despite all the mischief the USSR got up to. Iran has its own problems. It is dependent on Russia and China and world finance and trade. Its Mullahs know well enough that if they cannot improve their economy and provide jobs, they too will face millions of disaffected citizens, however devoted religiously they may be. And launching nuclear bombs whose spillover will decimate the Shia Hezbollah, or even the Sunni Palestinians, will not bring about the appearance of the Twelfth Imam, the Mahdi. Besides they couldn't even defeat Saddam Hussein and his notoriously cowardly Iraqi army. So no—perhaps irrationally—I do not believe that Iran is the Great Satan.

Now that doesn't mean I would trust those brutes who kill and rape student protestors any further than I could smell them. And the doctrine of “Taqiyya” (lying to your opponents to achieve your long term political and religious ends) will continue to be an essential part of their great Muslim tradition.

But I do not think the leaders are stupid either. They have, after all, learned to use the very social media they ban at home to win friends abroad. And they know how to smile. There will of course be anti-Semites and Holocaust deniers like Ahmadinejad in Iran, just as today there are everywhere else in the Arab world and beyond.

For all we Jews have to contend with, we have not been stronger since the days of the Maccabees (nor any more loved). Greeks hated us then too. So long as Israel is capable of defending itself, I have no fear. I am indeed amazed at the delusions of politicians, well meaning or not. I do not trust princes. But that is world politics for you. In the end I suspect they will cancel each other out. We must at least concentrate on improving our own societies.

How to go forward? As the Israeli proverb goes “Kabdehu V’Chashdeyhu”–Respect him but suspect him!