

Stolen Wars

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IF SOMEBODY STEALS something precious from you, say a diamond, you may be angry.

Even God himself said so. When He sent a worm to kill the gourd which provided shade for the prophet Jonah in the desert, He asked him maliciously: “Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd?” (Jonah 4:9)

And now somebody has stolen from us something much more precious than a diamond or a gourd.

A war. Perhaps even two wars.

So we have every right to be furious.

WAR No. 1 was to have taken place in Syria. The US was to attack the regime of Bashar al-Assad. A medical operation: short, clean, surgical.

When Congress hesitated, the hounds of hell were let loose. AIPAC sent its parliamentary rottweilers to Capitol Hill to tear to pieces any senator or congressman who objected. In Israel it was said that Binyamin Netanyahu unleashed them on the express request of Barack Obama.

But the whole exercise was cockeyed right from the beginning. The Americans said that they were not aiming to overthrow the Assad regime, God forbid. On the contrary, Assad was supposed to stay on. It was not only a case of preferring the devil you know to the devil you don't—it was clear that the second devil was much worse.

When I said that the US, Russia, Iran and Israel had a common interest in propping up Assad, I noticed a few raised eyebrows. But it was simple logic. None of these unseemly bedfellows had an interest in bringing to power in Syria a motley crew of violent Islamists, who seemed to be the only alternative if the fighting went on.

So, attack somebody you really want to stay in power? Doesn't make much sense. Ergo, no war.

THE ISRAELI fury at a good war brazenly stolen was even stronger.

If the Americans were mixed up, we were practically schizophrenic.

Assad is an Arab. A bad Arab. Worse, he is an ally of the big, bad wolf—Iran. He provides the corridor for the transfer of arms from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Verily, the center of the Axis of Evil.

All true, but the Assads—father and son and their unholy spirit—have kept the peace on their border with Israel. Not a single bullet in decades. If he falls and his place is

taken by crazy Islamists—what will happen?

So the Israeli gut says: Hit him, hit him hard. But the Israeli brain—yes there is one, somewhere—says: keep him where he is. A real dilemma.

But there is another consideration, a much more serious one for Netanyahu and Co.—Iran.

IT IS one thing to be deprived of a little surgical strike. But quite another matter to be robbed of a real big operation.

A recent Israeli cartoon showed the President of Iran sitting before the television screen eating his popcorn and watching with relish how Obama is being beaten in Syria.

How can Obama pressure Iran, Israeli commentators and politicians ask, if he has given up on pressuring Syria? After he has let Assad cross the thin red line unpunished, how will he prevent the Iranians from crossing the much thicker red line he has drawn there?

Where is American deterrence? Where is the awe inspired by the mighty world power? Why would the ayatollahs abstain from building their nuclear bomb after the American president has fallen into the primitive trap laid by the Russians, as Israelis see it?

TO BE honest, I cannot restrain a touch of *schadenfreude* at the plight of our commentators.

When I stated categorically that there would be no American military strike against Iran, and no Israeli one either, some of my acquaintances thought that I had gone off my rocker.

No war? After Netanyahu had promised one? After Obama has followed suit?

There must be a war!

But lo and behold, the war is receding into the distance.

In Israeli eyes, Iran is ruled by a crazy gang of religious fanatics, whose main aim in life is to annihilate Israel. They are hell bent on producing The Bomb, which will enable them to do so. They don't care that the Israeli second strike is assured, and Iran will be destroyed for ever. That's the kind of people they are. So the production of the bomb must be prevented at all costs. Including the collapse of the world economy, as a result of the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

That is a clear picture, consistent in every detail. Fortunately for us, it has no connection with reality.

RECENT EVENTS have painted a different picture altogether.

It started with the elections in Iran. The slightly de-ranked Ahmadinejad, the pathological holocaust denier, has disappeared. Instead, a modest-looking moderate, Hassan Rouhani, was elected.

Such a choice would have been impossible without the approval of the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. He has to approve all candidates. It is obvious that Rouhani was his personal choice.

What does that mean? To Israeli commentators, it is quite clear: the sly, devious Persians are cheating the whole world again. They will continue, of course, to build their bomb. But the naïve Americans will believe their lies, precious time will be lost, and one day the Iranians will say: Now we have got the bomb! From now on, we can do what we want! Especially, destroy the Zionist Entity!

All this is built on complete fantasy. The Iranians are far removed from being a primitive, self-destructive people. They are very conscious of being the heirs of a glorious civilization, at least as ancient and as rich as the Jewish past. The idea of exchanging queens—we destroy you, you destroy us—is ridiculous, especially since chess is a Persian game (the very word “Chess” is believed to derive from the Persian Shah, king).

Actually, the Iranian leaders are a very cautious, thoughtful lot. They have never attacked their neighbors. The terrible, eight-year long war with Iraq was started by the reckless Saddam Hussein.

The impetus for building the bomb came when the power-drunk neo-conservatives in Washington, most of them Zionist Jews, spoke quite openly about attacking Iran next, right after the short, little war they expected in neighboring Iraq.

It seems that the Iranian leadership has decided that it is now far more important to upgrade the economy than play with the bomb. Being natural traders—bazaar is a Persian world—they may give up the bomb in return for the lifting of sanctions, and use the riches of their country for the good of their citizens, who aspire to become an advanced modern society. That’s why Khamenei and the people elected someone like Rouhani.

THIS WEEK Israeli TV screened a documentary film about the life of the Israelis in the Shah’s Iran. It was sheer

paradise (“paradise” is also a Persian word). The Israelis lived off the fat of the land. They built the Shah’s dreaded secret police (the Savak, not to be confused with Shabak, its Israeli model). They befriended his generals, most of whom were trained in Israel. They built his industries and started to construct his nuclear installations. Sheer nostalgia.

Persian oil was exported to Europe through Israel, by way of a pipeline laid between Eilat and Ashkelon financed by the Shah. The American-Israeli-Iranian deal known as Irangate was concocted in the early days of the Ayatollahs (literally: signs of Allah).

Those who want to go back in history will be reminded of the fact that it was the great Persian emperor, Cyrus, who let the Jews return from Babylonian captivity to Jerusalem, as duly recorded in the Bible (the books of Ezra and Nehemiah).

The modern alliance between Israel and Iran was built on the joint enmity towards the Arabs, and could easily come to the fore again. Politics, like pornography, is a matter of geography.

THE WAR-WEARY American population seems to be inclined to accept the Iranian peace challenge. Businessmen will meet Bazaar traders, and hopefully work out a deal. No war.

At the same time, a positive development is also possible in Syria. Now that the US and Russia have discovered that they can work together in this critical area, the two sides in the civil war may get tired of massacring each other and agree to a political solution (such as the one I outlined last week).

That would make two stolen wars—stolen from those who hold on to the primitive belief that the only solution for any problem is the use of naked force.

A quite different view of life is presented by these words of Bertrand Russell, sent me by a lady in Pakistan:

“I have a very simple creed: that life and joy and beauty are better than dusty death, and I think when we listen to [music] we must all of us feel that the capacity to produce such music, and the capacity to hear such music, is a thing worth preserving and should not be thrown away in foolish squabbles. You may say it's a simple creed, but I think everything important is very simple indeed.”