

# The Debacle

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November 30, 2013

**T**HE GREATEST DANGER to Israel is not the putative Iranian nuclear bomb. The greatest danger is the stupidity of our leaders.

This is not a uniquely Israeli phenomenon. A great many of the world's leaders are plain stupid and always have been. Enough to look at what happened in Europe in July 1914, when an incredible accumulation of stupid politicians and incompetent generals plunged humanity into World War I.

But lately, Binyamin Netanyahu and almost the entire Israeli political establishment have achieved a new record in foolishness.

LET US start from the end.

Iran is the great victor. It has been warmly welcomed back into the family of civilized nations. Its currency, the rial, is jumping. Its prestige and influence in the region has become paramount. Its enemies in the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia and its gulf satellites, have been humiliated. Any military strike against it by anyone, including Israel, has become unthinkable.

The image of Iran as a nation of crazy ayatollahs, fostered by Netanyahu and Ahmadinejad, has disappeared. Iran now looks like a responsible country, led by sober and shrewd leaders.

Israel is the great loser. It has maneuvered itself into a position of total isolation. Its demands have been ignored, its traditional friends have distanced themselves. But above everything else, its relations with the US have been seriously damaged.

What Netanyahu and Co. are doing is almost unbelievable. Sitting on a very high branch, they are diligently sawing through it.

Much has been said about the total dependence of Israel on the US in almost all fields. But to grasp the immensity of the folly, one aspect in particular must be mentioned. Israel controls, in effect, the access to the US centers of power.

All nations, especially the smaller and poorer ones, know that to enter the halls of the American Sultan, in order to get aid and support, they have to bribe the doorkeeper. The bribe may be political (privileges from their ruler), economic (raw materials), diplomatic (votes in the UN), military (a base or intelligence "cooperation"), or

whatever. If it is big enough, AIPAC will help to gain support from Congress.

This unparalleled asset rests solely on the perception of Israel's unique position in the US. Netanyahu's unmitigated defeat on US relations with Iran has badly damaged, if not destroyed, this perception. The loss is incalculable.

ISRAELI POLITICIANS, like most of their colleagues elsewhere, are not well versed in world history. They are party hacks who spend their lives in political intrigues. If they had studied history, they would not have built for themselves the trap into which they have now fallen.

I am tempted to boast that more than two years ago I wrote that any military attack on Iran, either by Israel or the US, is impossible. But it was not prophesy, inspired by some unknown deity. It was not even very clever. It was just the result of a simple look at the map: the Strait of Hormuz.

Any military action against Iran was bound to lead to a major war, something in the category of Vietnam, in addition to the collapse of world oil supplies. Even if the US public had not been so war weary, in order to start such an adventure one would not only have to be a fool, but practically mad.

The military option is not "off the table"—it never was "on the table". It was an empty pistol, and the Iranians knew this well.

The loaded weapon was the sanctions regime. It hurt the people. It convinced the supreme leader, Ali Hussein Khamenei, to completely change the regime and install a new and very different president.

The Americans realized this and acted accordingly. Netanyahu, obsessed with the bomb, did not. Worse, he still does not.

If it is a symptom of madness to keep trying something that has failed again and again, we should start to worry about "King Bibi".

TO SAVE itself from the image of utter failure, AIPAC has started to order its senators and congressmen to work out new sanctions to be instituted in some indefinite future.

The new leitmotif of the Israeli propaganda machine is that Iran is cheating. The Iranians just can't do otherwise. Cheating is in their nature.

This might be effective, because it is based on deeply

rooted racism. Bazaar is a Persian word, associated in the European mind with haggling and deception.

But the Israeli conviction that the Iranians are cheating is based on a more robust foundation: our own behavior. When Israel started in the 1950s to build up its own nuclear program, with the help of France, it had to deceive the whole world and did so with stunning effect.

By sheer coincidence—or perhaps not—Israel’s Channel 2 TV aired a very revealing story about this last Monday—just two days after the signing of the Geneva accord! Its most prestigious program, “Fact”, interviewed the Israeli Hollywood producer, Arnon Milchan, a billionaire and Israeli patriot.

In the program, Milchan boasted of his work for Lakam, the Israeli intelligence agency which handled Jonathan Pollard (since then it has been dismantled). Lakam specialized in scientific espionage, and Milchan did invaluable service in procuring in secret and under false pretences the materials needed for the nuclear program which produced the Israeli bombs.

Milchan hinted at his admiration for the South African apartheid regime and at Israel’s nuclear cooperation with it. At the time, a possible nuclear explosion in the Indian Ocean near South Africa mystified American scientists, and there were theories (repeated only in whispers) about an Israeli-South African nuclear device.

A third party was the Shah of Iran, who also had nuclear ambitions. It is an irony of history that Israel helped Iran to take its first atomic steps.

Israeli leaders and scientists went to very great length to hide their nuclear activities. The Dimona reactor building was disguised as a textile factory. Foreigners brought to tour Dimona were deceived by false walls, hidden floors and such.

Therefore, when our leaders speak of deception, cheating and misleading, they know what they are talking about. They respect the Persian ability to do the same, and are quite convinced that this will happen. So are practically all Israelis, and especially the media commentators.

ONE OF the more bizarre aspects of the American-Israeli crisis is the Israeli complaint that the US has had a secret diplomatic channel with Iran “behind our back”.

If there were an international prize for chutzpah, this would be a strong contender.

The “world’s only superpower” had secret communications with an important country, and only belatedly informed Israel about it. What cheek! How dare they?!

The real agreement, so it seems, was not hammered out in the many hours of negotiation in Geneva, but in these secret contacts.

Our government, by the way, did not omit to boast that it knew about this all the time from its own intelligence sources. It hinted that these were Saudi. I would rather suspect that it came from one of our numerous informants inside the US administration.

Be that as it may, the assumption is that the US is obliged to inform Israel in advance about every step it takes in the Middle East. Interesting.

PRESIDENT OBAMA has obviously decided that sanctions and military threats can only go so far. I think he is right.

A proud nation does not submit to open threats. Faced with such a challenge, a nation tends to draw together in patriotic fervor and support its leaders, disliked as they may be. We Israelis would. So would any other nation.

Obama is banking on the Iranian regime-change that has already started. A new generation, which sees on the social media what is happening around the world, wants to take part in the good life. Revolutionary fervor and ideological orthodoxy fade with time, as we Israelis know only too well. It happened in our kibbutzim, it happened in the Soviet Union, it happens in China and Cuba. Now it is also happening in Iran.

SO WHAT should we do? My advice would simply be: if you can’t beat them, join them.

Stop the Netanyahu obsession. Embrace the Geneva deal (because it is good for Israel). Call off the AIPAC bloodhounds from Capitol Hill. Support Obama. Mend the relations with the US administration. And, most importantly, send out feelers to Iran to change, ever so slowly, our mutual relations.

History shows that yesterday’s friends may be today’s enemies, and today’s enemies can be tomorrow’s allies. It already happened once between Iran and us. Apart from ideology, there is no real clash of interests between the two nations.

We need a change of leadership, like the one Iran has begun to embark on. Unfortunately, all Israeli politicians, left and right, have joined the March of Fools. Not a single establishment voice has been raised against it. The new Labor Party leader, Yitzhak Herzog, is part of it as much as Ya’ir Lapid and Tzipi Livni.

As they say in Yiddish: The fools would have been amusing, if they had not been our fools.