

Iran: Pretending to have nukes?

by GWYNNE DYER

The Iranian regime is brutal, fanatical and corrupt. It has just committed the mass murder of its own citizens in the city streets and in their own homes. But the story we are told about Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons is very misleading.

Let's begin with the two President George Bushes. Just 12 years after George Senior defeated Iraq in 1991 and forced dictator Saddam Hussein to destroy all his 'weapons of mass destruction' (just poison gas, really), George W. Bush Jr. invaded Iraq again in 2003. That time round it was completely the wrong country, but he did it anyway.

The main reason Bush Junior believed that Saddam was lying and really had nuclear weapons was that the Iraqi dictator obstructed the work of the UN inspectors. He caused enough delay to rouse everybody's suspicions about Iraqi nuclear weapons. Why did he do that?

Probably because he lived in a very dangerous neighbourhood: Israel, Egypt, Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia were all his enemies. He wanted them to fear that he really did have weapons of mass destruction in order to deter them from attacking Iraq. It might even prevent the United States from having another go.

It was a dangerous game, bound to raise suspicions about Iraqi nukes everywhere, and in the end it did kill Saddam. After the 2003 invasion American experts spent a year searching Iraq for evidence of Saddam's alleged 'weapons of mass destruction' and found nothing, but they hanged him anyway.

Why bring all this up 20 years later? Because a similar kind of logic may apply to Iran's 'nuclear weapons program.'

Iran was not part of the Arab-Israeli confrontation under the Shah's regime, and the nuclear power program he launched (with US approval) in the early 1970s did not seek to create nuclear weapons. Israel's nuclear weapons, acquired in the 1960, did not worry the Shah either.

The 1979 revolution in Iran brought to power an extreme Islamist regime that saw a nuclear-armed Israel as a potential threat. However, the new Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, declared the development and use of weapons of mass destruction forbidden (haram) on moral and religious grounds - and he meant it.

This was not to Iran's advantage. In the 1980s Iraq invaded Iran with American backing in order to destroy the new and destabilizing regime of the ayatollahs. Saddam Hussein's troops were flooding the battlefields with poison gas, while the Iranian defenders were banned from replying in kind.

The episode shows how seriously Iran's Islamic rulers take their own religious decrees. Abstaining from chemical 'weapons of mass destruction' probably caused the deaths of tens of thousands of Iranian soldiers. We too should take the ayatollah's decrees seriously, because that would open the way to an alternative explanation of Iranian behaviour.

There is no evidence that Iran even considered nuclear weapons until Pakistan and India tested their first nuclear weapons in 1998. There was then clearly some dalliance in Tehran with the notion of getting a 'threshold' nuclear capacity (just short of weapons-grade), but that was halted after an opposition group revealed it in 2003.

In 2015 Iran signed an agreement backed by all the great powers that restricted it to 3.67% enrichment of uranium, useful for civil reactors but far below the level needed for nuclear weapons. The sanctions that had been imposed on Iran were removed and all went well - until Donald Trump tore up the agreement in 2018, probably at the instigation of Israel.

Israelis are as obsessed by the threat from Iran, small though it is in practice, as the ayatollahs are obsessed with Israel. They don't even share a border, and Israel has hundreds of nuclear weapons versus Iran's none. They couldn't even have an interesting war, yet they can't leave each other alone.

Trump was able to force the other signatories to reimpose sanctions on Iran (which had meticulously observed the agreed limits), and the Iranian economy crashed. After two years the Iranians began inching up the degree of enrichment, carefully announcing each increase, in an attempt to put pressure on the countries that had let the agreement die.

Five years later a lot of uranium has reached 60 per cent enrichment, the last step before weapons-grade enrichment, and still the same fools are in charge on both sides.

Three Plausible Conclusions:

- 1: Ayatollah Khamenei has followed the same stupid strategy as Saddam Hussein, and is approaching the same ugly consequences.
- 2: The 'nuclear threat' from Iran's enriched uranium may have been deliberately encouraged by Iran in the past to create leverage that evades (but does not violate) a fatwa that bans the manufacture or use of weapons of mass destruction. (It's okay to pretend.)
- 3: Lots of people will be killed for no good reason.