

GETTING IRAN WRONG

GEOFF DYER: THE FOLLY AND THE GLORY OF SPORT

GLORY OF SPORT

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HARPER'S MAGAZINE/NOVEMBER 2012

HOW TO STEAL AN ELECTION

THE G.O.P. AIMS TO PAINT THE COUNTRY RED



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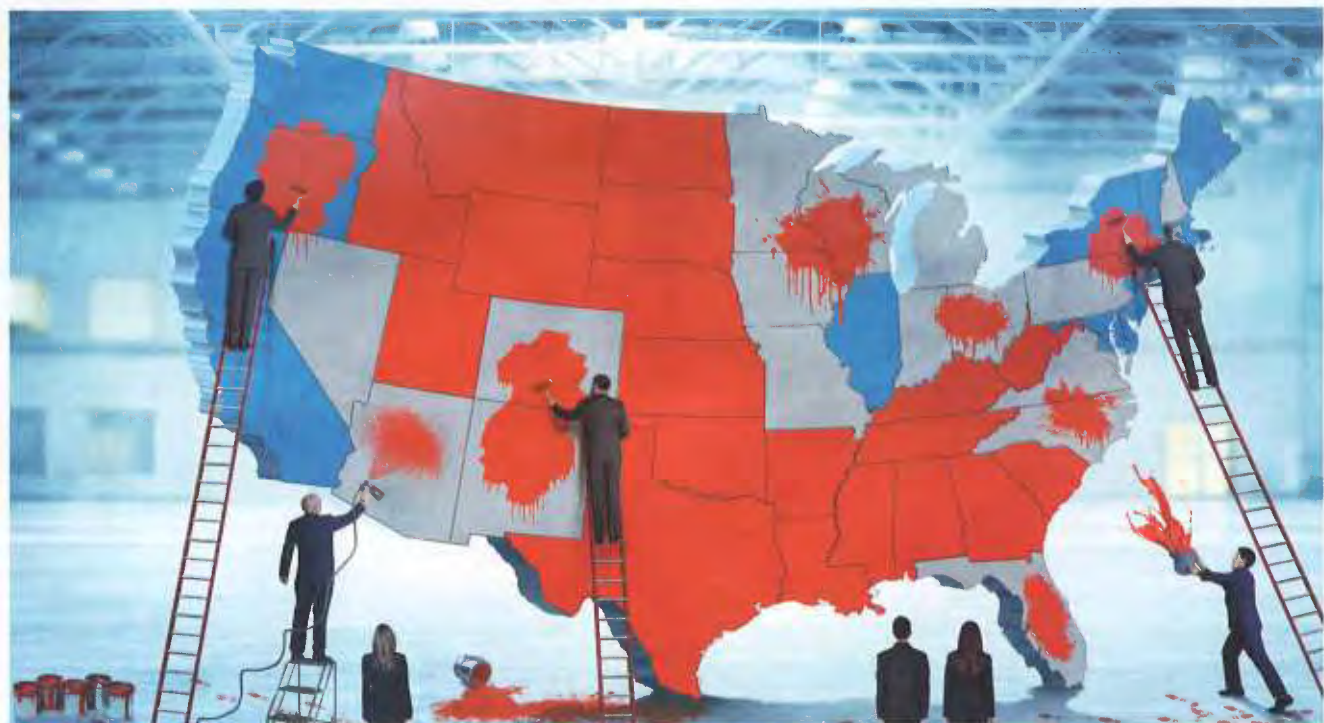


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By Victoria Collier

THE INVISIBLE STIMULUS
In Search of What Obama Built
By Ian Volner

THIS FEELS SO REAL
A story by Heidi Julavits

*Also: Andrew J. Bacevich and
Ludmilla Petrushevskaya*

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M A G A Z I N E

FOUNDED IN 1850 / VOL. 325, NO. 1950

NOVEMBER 2012

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Cover by William Duke.
Cover art direction by Roger Black.

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THE MAD MULLAH MYTH

The dangers of misunderstanding Iran's strategy

By *Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett*

In the more than thirty years since the Iranian Revolution, Western analysts have routinely depicted the Islamic Republic as an ideologically driven, illegitimate, and deeply unstable state. From their perspective, Iran displayed its fanatical character early on, first in the hostage crisis of 1979–81, and shortly afterward with the deployment of teenage soldiers in “human wave” attacks against Iraqi forces during the 1980s. Supposedly the same Shia “cult of martyrdom” and indifference to casualties persist in a deep attachment to suicide terrorism that would, if Iran acquired nuclear weapons, end in catastrophe. Allegations of the Iranian government’s “irrationality” are inevitably linked to assertions that it is out to export its revolution across the Middle East by force, is hell-bent on the destruction of Israel, and is too dependent for its domestic legitimacy on anti-Americanism to contemplate improving relations with the United States.

Images of Iran as a radical state are often conveyed through analogies with the twentieth century’s most criminal regimes. Some—including former British prime minister Tony Blair, former

Flynt Leverett’s and Hillary Mann Leverett’s Going to Tehran: Why the United States Must Come to Terms with the Islamic Republic of Iran will be published by Metropolitan Books in January.

House Speaker Newt Gingrich, and a host of Israeli officials—have compared the Islamic Republic with Nazi Germany. For Walter Russell Mead, a prominent historian of American foreign policy, “It’s a legitimate argument and subject for discussion about whether the Iranians are jerks like Franco who will settle down to peacefully hang homosexuals and torture dissidents at home if left to themselves, or whether they are megalomaniacal nutcases who will interpret our forbearance as weakness—if we let them have Czechoslovakia they will start reaching for Poland.” The *Wall Street Journal’s* Bret Stephens has compared Iran with the “Japan of the 1930s and World War II—another martyrdom-obsessed, non-Western culture with global ambitions.” Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has looked to the Soviet Union for parallels, arguing that “the Islamic Republic is a corrupt, inefficient, authoritarian regime” with a “bankrupt ideology,” whose leaders, “like the men who once ruled Moscow ... derive their internal legitimacy from thumbing their noses at Uncle Sam.”

Even more extreme is the rhetoric about “mad mullahs” conspiratorially “chuckling behind their beards” as they work to acquire nuclear weapons, which they and/or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran’s lay president, will use to attack Israel, the United States, and other en-

emies of Islam. Bernard Lewis and his neoconservative acolytes have asserted that Iran would launch such an attack to hasten the reappearance of the Mahdi, the twelfth Imam, thus setting the stage for God’s final judgment and a more conclusive “end of history” than Francis Fukuyama ever imagined. In 2006, Lewis even identified a religiously significant date, August 22, which in that year corresponded to the twenty-seventh day of the Islamic month of Rajab, when Muslims believe that the Prophet Mohammed began his prophetic mission, as the time Iran might detonate its first nuclear weapons. As Ahmadinejad has mockingly noted, many Americans seem to think that all Iranians are “sitting in the desert, turned toward Mecca and waiting to die.”

If Western political elites were to make an effort to understand Iran and its motivations, they would discover that the Islamic Republic has shown itself to be a highly rational actor in the conduct of its foreign policy. The Iranian government did not launch a holy war against Iraq in the 1980s; rather, it struggled to defend the Iranian people against a brutal Iraqi invasion that was directly supported by many of Iran’s neighbors as well as by Western powers, including the United States.

When in the course of that war Iran was subjected to years of chemical-weapons attacks, Grand Ayatollah Seyed Ruhollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic's founding father, and his associates chose not to weaponize Iran's stockpiles of chemical agents, a move that would have enabled it to respond in kind. And for years now the Islamic Republic's most senior political and religious leaders have rejected the acquisition and use of nuclear weapons, both on strategic grounds and because, in their view, nuclear weapons violate Islamic morality.

Tehran's support for terrorism is another persistent theme in Western narratives. Yet the most comprehensive study of suicide terrorism to date, Robert Pape and James Feldman's *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It*, has determined that there has never been an Iranian suicide bomber. While Iran backs groups that the United States considers terrorist organizations—Hezbollah and Hamas—or that have threatened American military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, its support for such groups is concentrated in theaters where the United States, Israel, or Sunni states allied to Washington are working to undermine important Iranian interests. For years after 9/11, some neoconservatives even claimed that Osama bin Laden was “living in luxury” in Iran, an assertion elaborated in a 2010 “documentary” extensively touted on Fox News. The allegation was picked up by more centrist journalists such as ABC's George Stephanopoulos, who pushed Ahmadinejad in an interview to say whether Iran was, in fact, harboring bin Laden. (Ahmadinejad retorted: “I heard that Osama bin Laden is in Washington, D.C.”) But beyond the absurdity of this claim, public statements by Al Qaeda leaders as well as documents obtained by American Navy SEALs from bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in May 2011, show that the relationship between Al Qaeda and the Islamic Republic has been deeply antagonistic.

If Westerners looked soberly at the record, they would discover that Iran is not aggressively exporting revolution.

Although it is true that in the years immediately following the Shah's overthrow, *sudur-e enqelab* (“exporting the revolution”) was proclaimed a principle of Iranian foreign policy by Khomeini himself, what this phrase actually meant was hotly debated: should the Islamic Republic actively work to replicate the Iranian Revolution elsewhere, disregarding international norms of sovereignty, or should it concentrate on making itself an exemplary model of Islamic governance from which other states might draw inspiration? Khomeini made statements that seemed to support both positions. But the postrevolutionary constitution—in which the phrase “exporting the revolution” never appears—notes that the Islamic Republic must scrupulously refrain “from all forms of aggressive intervention in the internal affairs of other nations.” Moreover, all the major figures in Iran's post-Khomeini leadership—including Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who succeeded Khomeini as supreme leader, and Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the first president of the Islamic Republic elected after Khomeini's death—have been clearly committed to the exemplarist approach. Early in his tenure as supreme leader, Khamenei declared that “the Islamic Revolution of Iran has taken place and was simultaneously exported throughout the world. The revolution was exported once, and that is the end of the story.”

Likewise, Iran is not out to destroy Israel. One of the more pernicious legends about Ahmadinejad is that he threatened to do so—a claim so entrenched in mainstream Western discourse as to seem to be a fact. But the claim is false, as Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's intelligence minister admitted in April 2012. It is based on a poor translation of a speech Ahmadinejad delivered in October 2005, shortly after he became president, and was given international currency by irresponsible articles in the *New York Times* and other news outlets. These accounts quote Ahmadinejad declaring that Israel must be “wiped off the map,” evoking a Nazi-like campaign to exterminate the Jewish state and its people. In fact, Ahmadinejad cited Khomeini's statement: “*Een rezhim-e ishghalgar-e qods bayad az*

safheh-ye ruzgar mahv shavad”—literally, “This regime occupying Jerusalem must disappear from the page of time.” For those who insist on equating anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, this may seem a distinction without a difference. But there is no threat to destroy Israel in that sentence or anywhere else in the speech. Later, Ahmadinejad compares the eventual disappearance of the “Zionist regime” from the page of time with the collapse of the Soviet system—the result of internal failures, not external aggression. Iranian policymakers take a long view of their standoff with Israel, expecting that the unsustainability in the twenty-first century of apartheid-like arrangements will lead to the fall of Israel's current political structure—not to the annihilation of the Jewish people. Such an expectation, although disturbing to many Israelis, does not constitute a threat to liquidate Israel's Jewish inhabitants.

Westerners should consider that, from Tehran's perspective, Israel is effectively at war with the Islamic Republic. Israeli officials regularly threaten to use force against it, and Iranians know that Israel is sponsoring a wide range of covert actions against their country, including assassinations of its scientists and lethal terrorist bombings. Westerners might also recall that, before Anwar Sadat was hailed as a “man of peace” by Israel and the United States, he made more virulently anti-Semitic statements than anything Ahmadinejad has uttered and that he launched a war that killed thousands of Israelis. Before Israel and the United States enshrined Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas as a “partner for peace,” he published a book on “the secret relationship between Nazism and the Zionist movement,” in which he called the Holocaust a “fantastic lie.” After Israel and the PLO signed the Oslo Accords in 1993, he said of his book, “When I wrote [it], we were at war with Israel. Today I would not have made such remarks.”

The record also shows that Iran has not been stubbornly antagonistic toward the United States. Over the past two decades, Tehran has consistently cooperated on issues when Washington has

requested its assistance, and it has frequently explored the possibilities for improved American-Iranian relations. It is the United States that has repeatedly terminated these episodes of bilateral cooperation and rebuffed Iranian overtures, reinforcing Iranian leaders' suspicion that Washington will never accept the Islamic Republic.

The Islamic Republic continues to frame its foreign policy around principles that reflect its religious and revolutionary roots. But for many years now it has defined its diplomatic and national-security strategies in largely nonideological terms, on the basis of national interests that are perfectly legitimate: to be free from the threat of attack and from interference in its internal affairs; to have its government accepted by its neighbors and by the world's most militarily powerful state. For more than twenty years, the Islamic Republic has shown itself to be capable of acting rationally to defend and advance these interests. Americans may not like Tehran's strategic and tactical choices—its links to political factions and their associated militias in Afghanistan and Iraq, its support for Hamas and Hezbollah, its pursuit of nuclear-fuel-cycle capabilities. But these choices are far from irrational, particularly in the face of continuing animosity from Washington.

Stereotypes depicting Iran as an aggressively radical country are not merely wrong but, worse, dangerous, because they skew Western thinking toward the inevitability of confrontation. In January 2011, Tony Blair told a British government inquiry into the Iraq war that the Islamic Republic was a "looming challenge," "negative and destabilizing," and that it had "to be confronted and changed." In his call for regime change in Iran, Blair has been backed by a chorus of neoconservative leaders in the United States, senators and representatives on both sides of the aisle, and a growing body of European elites. Hence the importance of understanding accurately Iran's foreign policy and national-security strategy. For if the myth of the Islamic Republic's irrationality is not dispelled, the Western belief that war with Iran is inevitable will turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. ■

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Published by Franklin Square Press
ISBN 978-1-879957-58-9
Softcover \$14.95

Distributed through Midpoint Trade Books