

Double Standards and Deception: How the Left Treats Iran and the Middle East

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In an article that appeared in the New York Post, in early March 2003, prior to the Coalition war on Iraq, Iranian-born journalist Amir Taheri denounced what he felt were the deeply hypocritical position of the peace movement, which had, in the build-up to the 2003 US-led war against Iraqi Pres. Saddam Hussein, organized marches and rallies throughout 600 cities and 25 countries.

Stalin founded this “peace movement” movement in 1946, when the USSR was in a distinctly weak position; he was trying to consolidate the newly conquered empire in Eastern Europe without nuclear weapons to counter the military predominance of the West. Pablo Picasso designed the emblem of the movement, the famous dove, and world-renowned poets such as French Paul Eluard and Chilean Pablo Neruda composed odes inspired by Stalin. The goal of the movement was to extend the influence of the various communist parties over the more moderate center-left political formations, to push the Kremlin’s agenda in the West with the support of forces which would have transcended the meager political weight of the various communist parties operating in what was then described as “the free world”. The symbol was a dove, rather than hammer and sickle; the emblem color was white, rather than red. But the International Section of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), operating behind the scenes in Moscow, orchestrated the “peace movement” to fulfill their goals.

In the course of its existence, the “peace movement” never betrayed its origins.

In his article, Mr Taheri reminds us that the movement was not opposed to all wars indiscriminately, but only to those that threatened the Soviet empire. The “peaceniks” (which is the appellation by which Mr Taheri refers to them) were comfortable with the Soviet annexation of 15 percent of Finland’s territory and the Baltic States, and did not demur when the Soviet tanks entered Budapest and Prague. But when the US led a coalition under a UN mandate to prevent North Korean communists from conquering South Korea, the “peace movement” was “up in arms”, denouncing the “imperialist ambitions” of the US. Peaceniks reached their peak during the Vietnam War. And once again they were silent when the USSR invaded Afghanistan, but became very vocal about the deployment of the Pershing theater-strategic surface-to-surface missiles in Europe in the years which followed that very invasion. The missiles were a response to the Soviet deployment of entire batteries of SS-20 ballistic missiles aimed at European capitals. But the peaceniks never asked for the dismantling of the SS-20s; their protest was only aimed at impeding the deployment of the Pershing SSMs.

While the “peace movement” is probably the most evident example of double standards, tolerated and even encouraged by the left, the recent events which have occurred in Iran and the repercussion which those events had in the Western world are a revival of the hypocrisy and duplicity by those who theoretically should be staunch supporters of democracy and freedom for the Iranian people.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is an extreme-right theocracy, which has increasingly lost consensus even among the clergy. It oppresses the large majority of Iranians, perpetrating what by accepted international standards would be described as “crimes against humanity” on a daily basis. Women are stoned to death, people [especially the young] are tortured and executed in public without trial, tens of thousands of political prisoners populate highly objectionable prisons; the oppressors must resort to Muslim foreigners for help in anti-riot policing, enlisting Palestinians, Afghani Talibans and even Syrians arriving straight from Damascus to Tehran via camouflaged chartered flights, because Iranian police will no longer beat fellow compatriots during demonstrations.

It is clear that Iranians want a secular, representative government ; anything short of that is not acceptable. Surprisingly, both liberals and left wing radicals have, up until now shown little or no support for a secular democracy in Iran. It is difficult to argue that the struggle for a secular democracy in Iran is not “progressive”. After all, the Iranian opposition forces are trying to defeat religious obscurantism, which is definitely not a left-wing ideological asset; they propose a modern democracy instead, which is certainly more in line with left-wing rhetoric.

Historically, whenever a brutal dictatorship teetered on the edge of collapse, left-wing movements and media worldwide stood up in support of the “freedom fighters”. For instance, the autocracy in Nicaragua which lasted until July 1979 and proceeded the fall of the Pres. Anastasio Somoza had liberal media worldwide in a campaign which completely discredited Somoza’s Administration. The turning point was the assassination of journalist Bill Stewart by a soldier of the regular Nicaraguan Army, captured on the video camera of a fellow journalist and promptly distributed throughout the world.

Something similar has recently happened in Iran. A Canadian-Iranian photojournalist, Zahra Ziba Kazemi, was raped and murdered (at the instigation of Tehran prosecutor Saeed Mortezaei) in June 2003 while detained after being arrested for filming anti-Government riots outside the political prison of Evin in Tehran. After an initial pathetic attempt to cover up this assassination, [the Islamic Republic officials injected her body with rapid decomposing chemicals and burying her hastily] essentially refusing to return her body to Canada, in spite of an official request made by her family and demand by the Canadian Government. The murder of Ms Kazemi, however, did not provoke the same amount of public outrage which forced Nicaraguan Pres. Somoza to step down.

For weeks during the month of June 2003 and on the occasion of the July 9, 2003, anniversary of the 1999 University protests in Iran, the opposition movement inside Iran challenged the authority of the Administration, marching and rallying, chanting anti-Government slogans, defying the guns and death squads of the various mullahs in key posts. As a result, thousands of political activists, students, and others, were rounded up and packed into prisons, subjected to torture, and in some cases murdered.

It is instructive to compare and contrast the articles about Nicaragua that appeared in liberal newspapers in 1979 and the articles about Iran today. In 1979 not a single liberal journalist strove to be “neutral”. From the perspective of the political left, there was no doubt: Somoza and his Government had to go.

The situation is totally different today. If it is to succeed, the growing opposition movement inside Iran needs tangible support from the West. Freedom fighters need laptops, fax machines and cellular phones to organize the uprising. If the Iranian opposition is to succeed, it also needs support from international media. But, significantly, that is not happening. The basic ingredients of the political situation in Iran — a growing opposition movement fighting against a leadership which oppresses the vast majority of the population — would normally be considered to be the perfect ingredients for a left-wing recipe to galvanize the masses in the name of freedom and democracy. It worked for Nicaragua, at the end of the 1970s; it worked for Poland and Solidarnosc in the 1980s. The question for analysts today is why the same recipe has failed to take hold in Iran.

Mainstream US liberal media barely reported on the Iranian uprising which occurred at the end of June and beginning of July 2003. Instead of praising the opposition demonstrators who literally risked their lives, soon after the end of the uprising, The New York Times, which in spite of recent scandals still remains one of the most prestigious national newspapers, published an Op-Ed by Mr Reza Aslan, a visiting professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Iowa.

In that article, Mr Aslan argued that the Iranian opposition was fighting for a religious democracy, not secularism, and religion must play a rôle in the country. Mr Aslan completely misrepresented the reality of Iran, and could not be further from the truth. The New York Times, by publishing that article, sided with those who sought to maintain the status quo in Iran. The most prominent Shi'ite scholars, ayatollahs like Taheri and Montazeri, have distanced themselves from the “political” clergy (Khamnei and Rafsajani), openly criticizing the very concept of Islamic Republic. Hossein Khomeini, himself an ayatollah and the grandchild of the Islamic revolution's very leader, recently joined Taheri and Montazeri, criticizing religious interference in State matters, in a significant blow to the theocratic establishment. Mr Khomeini left Iran, and is now in Najaf, Iraq, which has once again become the most prominent Shi'ite theological center, relegating the Iranian holy city of Qom to a secondary rôle. Coalition forces in Iraq recently

discovered a plot to assassinate Hossein Khomeini organized by the Shi'ite extremists sent by Iran's "Supreme Leader", "Ayatollah" Khamene'i and former Pres. Rafsanjani's assassination teams.

Taheri, Montazeri and Khomeini the younger understand that Islam today is losing consensus in Iran and that the harshness of the Islamic revolution backfired. As a result, it is no longer appealing to Iranian youth; they now respond with either religious apathy or by embracing Zoroastrianism [the ancient religion of Iran, before Persians were forced to convert to Islam by the Arab invaders].

The "peace movement" taught us that only wars which were threatening the Soviet Union were worth protesting. Contemporary liberals would like to sell us a similar concept: siding with the "oppressed freedom fighters" against the brutal oppressors is not always politically correct. In the case of Iran, for example, the toppling of the mullahs could potentially benefit the US Bush Administration, simplifying the process of stabilization in Iraq, and extending US and Israeli influence in the Middle East. The perceived Bush-Sharon axis would come out undoubtedly stronger, after HizbAllah and HAMAS were left without their primary source of financial and logistic support, the Iranian clerics.

It is easy to understand why it is in the interest of the left to deliberately downplay the growing opposition movement in Iran. Apart from the more evident reason explained above, as far as Iran is concerned, the left still has a few skeletons in its closet, and must come to terms with past mistakes and faulty assessments.

To begin with, the left significantly contributed to the creation of the Islamic Republic, when US President Jimmy Carter deliberately destroyed the Shah, who had been a staunch ally of the US for 27 years. In the Shah's White House visit of November 1977, Jimmy Carter and his aides — who demanded radical changes in the way the internal affairs of Iran were conducted — met the Shah with open hostility. They asked the Shah to institute the right of free assembly, at a time when the Soviet Union was stepping up a campaign of propaganda, espionage and even sabotage inside Iran, and Islamic fundamentalists were teaming up with the Iranian Communist Tudeh party to overthrow the Government.

Nureddin Klanuri, head of the Tudeh Party, who was living in exile in East Berlin, officially sanctioned the party line in support for Khomeini:

"The Tudeh Party approves Ayatollah Khomeini's initiative in creating the Islamic Revolutionary Council. The ayatollah's program coincides with that of the Tudeh Party."

Furthermore, Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, a key figure in Khomeini's entourage, was known for his strong connections with Soviet and Eastern European intelligence.

The Shah was left with little room for maneuver; he had to succumb to the blackmail of the Carter Administration and release political prisoners, ending military tribunals and granting rights of assembly in order not to lose vital US military supply and training. But the mechanism designed by Carter to provoke an escalation of the opposition to the Shah was already in motion. In addition to the support of the Tudeh party and Eastern intelligence, Khomeini could also count on US leftist radicals like Ramsey Clark, who had served as Attorney-General in the Lyndon B. Johnson Administration. Mr Clark went to Tehran and to Paris, to visit Khomeini. Upon his return to the US, he played a behind-the-scenes rôle to influence prominent senators and congressmen not to allow the US military to back the Shah in case of popular uprising against the Peacock throne.

Mr Clark is today still proud of his crusade of 1979. In a recent interview he talked of overthrowing the Shah as “the” accomplishment of his lifetime, quoting overly exaggerated numbers of supposed Shah’s victims as the moral justification for his actions. The smear campaign orchestrated by left media while the Shah was still on his throne, and which continued well after his fall, depicted the Shah as a mass murderer, responsible for the killing of 60,000 people, who died between 1963 and 1979. That number was fabricated by Khomeini, and never verified, not even by Western media, which took for granted the “official truth” of the newly installed Islamic Administration.

Only recently a respected historian, Emad al-Din Baghi, who had access to the files of the so-called “Martyrs Foundation”, told the truth about the real number of Shah’s victims. For years, The Martyrs Foundation collected the names of the victims of the revolution against the Shah, classifying them by age, sex, education, etc. The findings were never disclosed by the Islamic Republic, in order not to contradict the official number “established by decree” by Khomeini. The statistical breakdown of victims covering the period from 1963 to 1979 adds up to a figure of 3,164. Emad al-Din Baghi left the Martyrs Foundation to write books about his findings. According to his historically accurate account, the worst moment of the uprising against the Shah, culminated in the massacre at Jaleh Square, gave the “revolutionaries” the chance to grossly inflate the number of victims, from 88 to initially 3,000, which later became 4,000. Western media never bothered to verify the accuracy of the numbers, based on rumors and anti-Shah hysteria, and helped perpetuate the inflated figures.

Not only the left contributed to the creation of the Islamic Republic; in more recent years, during the US Clinton Administration, the media and left-wing politicians helped the Islamic Republic propaganda, repeating and magnifying the “Big Lie” about Iran and its “Reformist Leaders”. “Big Lie” is a term originally coined to describe a characteristic form of nazi (and later Soviet) propaganda. The essence of the Big Lie propaganda technique is that if one repeats the lie often enough over enough channels, people will soak it up deep into their pores

and come to believe it as something of “common knowledge” or “fact”.

In this case, the “Big Lie” consisted of portraying current Iranian Pres. Hojjat ol-Eslam (Ali) Mohammad Khatami-Ardakani and his Government as a genuine force capable of reforming the Islamic Republic “from within”, expanding democracy and meeting the requests of Iranians who voted for change against hard-line clerics in 1997. The “Big Lie” remained credible for a short time, and even opposition forces of the Iranian diaspora initially credited Mr Khatami with good intentions. But soon after the electoral victory of May 1997, it appeared evident that Khatami was a mere façade figure, whose task was to restore an image of respectability, which the Islamic Republic had lost when Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsajani, the former President, had ordered the elimination of anti-Islamic Republic activists [carried out by Iranian killers] in Berlin. After several European countries recalled their ambassadors from Tehran to protest against the assassinations perpetrated on European soil and threatened to reconsider business deals with Iran, the clerical apparatus in charge of the Islamic Republic decided to give itself a new and more presentable look.

The Iranian society had already sent strong signals of deep disaffection towards Islamic rule. It was easy to maneuver the elections; spiritual leader Ali Khamene'i handpicked a fossilized, ultra-conservative mullah, Nategheh-Nouri, the Speaker of Parliament (Majlis), as the candidate of the establishment, knowing full well that the electorate would have voted for the alternative candidate.

But what kind of alternative was Khatami? One should not forget that “democratic elections” are in reality nothing more than a farce in Iran. Opposition parties that do not pledge their allegiance to the Islamic regime are banned. And as if that is not enough, the all-powerful Council of Guardians subjects all candidates to a close examination of their loyalty to the “system”. The latter represents the “will of God”, while the Parliament (Majlis) represents the “will of the People”. Needless to say, the will of God always prevails over the will of the people. The “Spiritual Leader” Ali Khamene'i, who presides the Council of Guardians, is, to all intents, an absolute monarch. Of the initial 240 candidates who wanted to run for the May 1997 election, the Council of Guardians chose four who were deemed sufficiently Islamic to run. All women candidate were filtered out, leaving Khatami, carefully screened by the establishment, as the only reasonable choice. With his image of well-spoken, clean-shaven mullah capable of debating without losing his temper, Khatami was the perfect choice to rebuild the shattered image of Iran, especially in the eyes of the European powers.

The fictitious contraposition between “conservatives” and “reformists” and the “electoral victory” of the latter was the PR stunt that allowed the Europeans, anxious to continue usurping cheap oil and gas from Iran, to feel morally justified when they restored diplomatic and business relations with the Islamic Republic. The Western media on both sides of the Atlantic did the rest, generating a false sense of confidence in the “good guys”, the reformists, who, in spite of all the

obstacles erected by the conservatives, would have eventually succeeded in fulfilling the needs and the democratic aspirations of Iranians. In all fairness, it has to be said that all mainstream media, irrespective of political leaning, initially praised Khatami's election, to the extent of giving him the nickname of "Ayatollah Gorbachev". The mullahs benefited from the newly-found line of political credit by cracking down on internal opposition with renewed vigor. A few months after Khatami's "landslide victory", journalists and intellectuals were killed in what went down the annals of history as the "chain murders". In addition, real opposition magazines and newspapers were banned and forcibly closed down.

In spite of the repression of internal dissent, Khatami was invited by the major European powers for State visits. He went to Italy in March 1999, where he delivered a speech to the Parliament, to France in October 1999, where he was welcomed by Pres. Chirac at the Elysée Palace, and to Germany in July 2000, where he met federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Foreign Minister Joseph Fischer.

The Big Lie represented a perfect win-win situation for Iranian officials and European powers. It legitimized the Islamic Republic and its crackdown of the opposition, while justifying the Europeans in their renewed business interests with Iran, because, as German Foreign Minister Fisher claimed: "any opposition to Khatami only benefits his conservative opponents". Khatami visited Germany exactly one year after the July 1999 student protests, during which security forces and Islamic militia murdered several young people. Khatami explicitly supported the repression of the protest, and in spite of receiving thousands of petitions; he did not intervene to stop the tortures and the arrests of students who were then sentenced to death after mock trials. But that was not enough to defeat the Big Lie; the sad reality of Iran was not convenient for liberal media and European politicians, anxious to clear the way to lucrative business deals with Iran.

The latest elections held in Iran on February 2003 also showed that the Emperor had no clothes; in Tehran only 10 percent of voters cast their votes, in other parts of the country the percentage of voters was higher, but in average no more than 25 percent. That sent Iranian authorities and the world a strong message of the distaste the Iranian public felt towards Islamic rule. Initially, only the Council of Guardians was labeled "the unelected few"; today the same can be said about the entire ruling class.

US non-liberal mainstream media finally woke up and started questioning the Big Lie, reporting on the June/July 2003 uprisings, realizing that Iran needed a secular democracy and not the false promises of a better future by a powerless mullah. In several occasions, however, liberal media still described the Iranian situation in terms of internal fighting between reformists and conservatives, demanding that the US State Department open a dialogue with "reformist forces" to reach a compromise on the Iranian interference in Iraq and the nuclear facility

being built in central Iran.

Left-wing radical fringes recently gave birth to a Committee called the “International Committee for Transition to Democracy in Iran”. Radical celebrities like Noam Chomsky, Costa Gavras and the Nobel Laureate Jose Saramago were among the founders of the committee, which mixes anti-US and anti-Imperialist rhetoric with legitimate requests for a genuine democratization in Iran. It is now time for the more moderate mainstream left to start the long overdue process of self-criticism of past mistakes, and to recognize that the only reasonable political position is to side with the growing opposition movement that wants to overthrow the mullahs to create a secular democracy in Iran. The left opposed the war in Iraq using morally charged messages like “no blood for oil”. In order not to lose its credibility, the left can no longer ignore the legitimate aspiration of Iranians for a secular democracy. If the left insists on perpetuating its mistakes as far as Iran is concerned [trading long term benefits for myopic short term anti-Bush gains], it will be caught, once again, on the wrong side of history. It is not too late for the left to recognize its mistakes and to rectify its position on Iran, after a factual and honest debate; but that must begin now.

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