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Who is Afraid of the Iranian Bomb?

AT THE height of the epic Battle of Britain in 1940, when British airmen were killed at an appalling rate ("never was so much owed by so many to so few"), an official in charge of propaganda had a bright idea to raise morale. On the walls at the Royal Air Force bases a poster appeared with these words: "Who is afraid of the Ju-87?" (At the time, one of the most effective German planes.)

An anonymous pilot penciled in: "Sign here!" Within a few hours, all the pilots of the base had signed.

If today someone were to hang a poster with the slogan "Who is afraid of the Iranian nuclear bomb?" I believe that all the people in Israel, and many beyond, would sign.

IT SEEMS that we Israelis are always in need of something to be afraid of. When we open our eyes in the morning, we must see the danger-of-the-day. Otherwise, what is there to get up for? Perhaps it's not the public that is to blame, but the politicians who use fear as a means of control.

Not so long ago, it was Hizbullah. Muslim fanatics, crazy Shiites, who want to annihilate Israel. A huge arsenal of rockets. God protect us!

In the meantime there was a war, the rockets were launched, the damage to life and property was comparatively slight (for those who were not hit, of course). The terrible danger of Hizbullah was pushed into a corner. True, Hizbullah remained where it has been, the rockets are being replenished and Nasrallah continues to infuriate, but all this has ceased to evoke any real interest. A used danger is not exciting anymore.

Now the army chiefs, bankrupted in Lebanon, are making a big effort to create a new fear: Hamas in the Gaza strip. Now, here we have an immediate and terrible danger. Tons and tons of "regular explosives" are coming in through the tunnels. Any moment now, Hamas will be equipped with modern anti-tank weapons, as well as anti-aircraft missiles. Hamas is building underground fortifications. Isn't that scary?

The military and political parrots in the media are fully mobilized. This entire media parrotry is repeating the bloodcurdling message morning, noon and night: Gaza is becoming a second South Lebanon! Something has to be done! We cannot wait! The army must go in, occupy the Strip, or at least parts of it!

Bur the public is not really buying it. It is hard to create fear when the enemy is not able to shoot back. Our aircraft and tanks and brave boys are killing there without hindrance. So what is there to fear?

BUT THE Iranian story is something else altogether. There is indeed cause for fear.

Here we have an enemy who declares that he is opposed to the very existence of our state, and who may soon be facing us with weapons of mass destruction.

The elected president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is really enjoying letting loose provocative declarations. That's his private hobby, but also a successful domestic political ploy. He has said that the Holocaust did not happen at all, and if it happened, it was smaller than announced, and the whole thing has to be researched. He also prophesies the destruction of the "Zionist regime".

To tell the truth, he did not quite say that he intends to "wipe Israel from the map", as was reported. According to the most accurate translation that I have seen, what he actually said was "Israel will be wiped from the map of the future". But that is scary enough.

It is scary because in a few years, Iran may well have a nuclear bomb. It seems that this cannot be prevented. 25 years ago, Israel bombed an Iraqi nuclear reactor. Iran has learned the lesson and has distributed its nuclear facilities in many different places. Israel's capabilities are not sufficient for their destruction. The appointment of Avigdor Liberman, a proponent of Fascist ideas, as "Minister in Charge of the Strategic Threat", does not change anything in this respect.

If Israel, which is only the fourth or fifth military power on earth, cannot do it, what about the US, the No. 1 in almost everything? Well, they are not able to, either. Installations buried deep in the earth may not be destroyed, and the ensuing war cannot be won without putting forces on the ground. And after the fiascoes in Iraq and Afghanistan, there are not many sane American generals who long for that.

So it is quite possible that in a few years, the Iranian president will not only have boasts on his lips but also nuclear weapons in his hands. And if that isn't scary, I don't know what is scary.

IF SO, why am I not scared?

I live in Israel, and I fully intend to continue living here. Israel is a small country, and a large part of its population lives in Greater Tel-Aviv. I live in the center of the city, in what the Americans would call Ground Zero.

If a small and primitive nuclear weapon of the Hiroshima type falls on the building where I live, a large part of the Israeli population will be annihilated. Two or three such bombs are enough to put an end to Israel (together with the neighboring Palestinian territories).

But I don't believe this will happen.

In order to believe in such a possibility, one has to see the leaders of Iran as a bunch of lunatics. In spite of the efforts of Ahmadinejad to convince us that he is mad, I am not so sure.

I believe that the Iranian leadership, and especially the religious-political leadership, is composed of very sane people. Since assuming power, they have trodden with caution and competence. They have not started any war. On the contrary, they boast that in the last 2000 years Iran has not started any war at all. And in the Iranian establishment, the president is just a politician who is completely subservient to the Ayatullahs, who are in effective control. (Curiously enough, the same system prevails in our own fundamentalist parties, Agudat Israel and Shas.)

I do not ignore what Ahmadinejad has said. After Adolf Hitler and Mein Kampf, who would dare to ignore such statements of intent? But the Iranian president does not have the power of the German Fuehrer, the two countries are completely different, and so are the historical circumstances.

The annihilation of Tel-Aviv would inevitably bring about the annihilation of Tehran and the precious treasures of the ancient and glorious Persian culture. In chess terms, it would not be an exchange of queens, but an exchange of kings. It is much more reasonable to assume that between Iran and Israel a "balance of terror" will be established, like the one that prevented World War III between the US and the Soviet Union, and that is now preventing a renewal of the Indian-Pakistani war.

IN SPITE of this, we should not wait inactively for the creation of a situation in which Israel, Iran and perhaps Arab states like Egypt and Saudi Arabia will possess nuclear bombs. The nuclear genie is out of the bottle, and is spreading throughout the world.

If there is no military option, what can be done?

In order to forestall the danger, the main effort should be to make peace with the Palestinian people, and with the entire Arab world. People like Ehud Olmert may delude themselves that the Palestinian problem can be isolated from global and regional processes. But the problem is influenced by many factors, which are in constant flux.

The relative strength of the US, our only ally in the world (except for Fiji, Micronesia and the Marshall islands), is decreasing slowly but

persistently. Iran is becoming a regional power. The nuclear aspects give the historic conflict a new dimension. As the Greek philosopher said: panta rhei, everything is flowing.

Generals can hallucinate about a huge victory over Hamas in Gaza, Olmert can ask himself Hamlet-like "to talk or not to talk" (with Mahmoud Abbas), but in the meantime things are happening that ought to accelerate the achievement of a historic reconciliation between the two peoples.

If the elected leadership of the Palestinian people signs an agreement with us announcing the end of the conflict, and if the entire Arab world makes peace with us along the lines of the "Saudi initiative", the rug will be pulled out from under the Ahmadinejads everywhere. If the Palestinians themselves accept the idea of the coexistence of Israel and Palestine, and if Egypt, Jordan and most of the Arab world endorse it, on behalf of whom will the Iranians liberate Palestine?

In the framework of the process of achieving Israeli-Palestinian peace, it will also be necessary to examine the idea of creating a nuclear weapons-free region. Is effective mutual inspection possible? Can there be iron-clad guarantees? At the moment, that is difficult to assess. But it's worthwhile to find out.

ANYWAY, THERE is no reason for apocalyptic nightmares. Even a nuclear bomb in Tehran's hands is not the end of the world, and not even the end of Israel. A new situation will arise, and we must live with it.

The fathers of Zionism called on the Jews to take their fate into their own hands and return to the stage of history, and those who followed took upon themselves all the dangers involved. The world is a dangerous place, there is no existence without danger. I only hope that we shall have the good sense not to increase the dangers that are out there anyhow.

Like those brave British airmen, we have the right to be afraid. But we must face the new situation with a clear mind and sober resolution.