

## Who lost Iran?

Trita Parsi, THE JERUSALEM POST

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In October 1992, years before Iran enriched uranium or had ballistic missiles, Shimon Peres launched a campaign to portray Iran as "the greatest threat and greatest problem in the Middle East." Peres's premature warnings turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Today, Israel should be cautious not to repeat Peres's strategic mistake by pre-empting Iran's conservative president-elect Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, since history has shown that prophecies can come true.

As the Labor government opted for closer relations with the Palestinians and the Arab states in Israel's vicinity in 1992, Peres turned the decade-long Israeli doctrine of the periphery on its head and went all out against Iran.

Peres's timing was strange. Only six years earlier, at the height of Iran's ideological zeal, he had sought a "broader strategic relationship" with Iran. Peres had been a driving force behind what later became the Iran-Contra scandal and he even sent his aide to Iran together with Robert "Bud" McFarlane and Oliver North to meet with senior Iranian officials.

By 1992, however, when Peres started portraying Iran as a major threat, Teheran's revolutionary fervor had cooled considerably. Iran was struggling with its war-torn economy and it sought a thaw in its relations with Washington. The clerical regime had no uranium centrifuges, no Shahab-3s and no Fajr rockets in Lebanon. Yet it was a "global threat," Peres insisted.

Sensing a shift in Israel, Teheran concluded that Israel was behind the campaign to isolate Iran. Eager to rebuild its economy and regain its position as the gendarme of the Persian Gulf, Iran feared that a successful Oslo process, and Peres's portrayal of Iran as a threat to the Arab world, would result in Iran's permanent isolation and pariah status.

Consequently, Peres's reversal of the periphery doctrine prompted Teheran to annul Ayatollah Khomeini's dictum that Iran should never be a frontier state in the Palestinian struggle. Up until 1992, in spite of its ideological zeal, Iran had been only marginally involved in anti-Israeli activities. Teheran's opposition to Israel was primarily rhetorical, a fact that hadn't escaped Israeli officials in the 1980s.

IRAN EVEN lacked enduring ties to Islamist rejectionists groups due to the Shi'a-Sunni divide. And much to the anger of the PLO, contrary to Teheran's grandiose promises, the Iranian leadership refused to offer material support to secular Palestinian groups, due to their pan-Arab leanings. By 1994, all of that had changed.

Peres's preemptive portrayal of the Iranian threat contributed to the creation of that very threat. To his credit, Binyamin Netanyahu recognized the folly in the Labor Party's approach and significantly lowered Israel's tone, leaving Teheran alone in playing the rhetorical game. Netanyahu also recognized that Peres's vision of a New Middle East left both friends and foes in the Islamic world worried about Israeli hegemonic aspirations.

Today, premature reactions to Ahmadinejad's election risk repeating Peres's mistake. Much concern has been expressed in the media with regard to Ahmadinejad's possible foreign policy inclinations – will he reinstate the export of the revolution and accelerate the Iranian nuclear program, or will he grudgingly proceed with Iran's quest to rehabilitate itself into the region as a status-quo state? Mindful of the lack of information about

Ahmadinejad, most of the speculation is rooted solely in the fact that he defines himself as a conservative.

The conventional wisdom in Washington and Jerusalem reads that the actions of the West have minimal impact on Iran since the clerical regime is acting according to its ideological compass and not reacting to its environment. This is a serious misreading of Iran.

Though the extent of the powers of the Presidency in Iran is debatable, that Iran doesn't formulate its foreign policy in a vacuum is not.

Since the early 1990s, Iran has actively sought to break out of its isolation and win approval and legitimacy for what it considers to be its natural role – a leading state in the Persian Gulf region.

Increasingly, strategic considerations have taken precedence and ideology has become a secondary driving force of Iranian foreign policy. Though its rhetoric hasn't moderated as much as its behavior, there is a clear distinction between Iran's operational policy and the statements coming out of its Friday prayers.

Compared to the mid-1990s, Iran's strategic interest in Israel has decreased significantly. An Israeli-Palestinian settlement will not pose the same strategic threat to Iran's influence in the region today as it would have done in 1994. Consequently, Iran has no compelling strategic reason to escalate tensions with Israel, with or without Ahmadinejad as president.

Unless, that is, Israel and the US escalate first. The harsh rhetoric and preemptive threats coming out of the US and Israel will cause Iran to cling on to its deterrent capabilities. And if Ahmadinejad follows Iran's historic behavioral pattern, Iran will only actualize its deterrence if Israel or the US intensify their efforts to prevent Iran from finding a regional role commensurate with its geo-political weight.

Israel should be careful not to repeat Peres's mistake. The world is a different place today than it was in 1992. Then Israel's military superiority was at its peak. Today, Israel is within the reach of states like Iran.

Israel has nothing to gain from seeing its prophecy on the Iranian threat come true. Escalating tensions with Iran in anticipation of a harsher foreign policy under Ahmadinejad may do just that.

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