

**JANUARY 06**

# Israel and Iran's axis of fanatics

**W**ith Ariel Sharon out of the picture, Benjamin Netanyahu has a better chance to become prime minister of Israel. He's media savvy. He knows how to spin on American television. And he's very dangerous.

Netanyahu spent a lot of his early years in the United States. Later, during the 1980s, he worked at the Israeli Embassy in Washington and then became Israel's ambassador to the United Nations. By the time he moved up to deputy foreign minister in 1988, he was a star on U.S. networks.

The guy is smooth – fluent in American idioms, telegenic to many eyes – and good at lying on camera. So, when Israeli police killed 17 Palestinians at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque in October 1990, Netanyahu led a disinformation blitz asserting that the Palestinians were killed after they'd rioted and pelted Jewish worshipers from above the Wailing Wall with huge stones. At the time, his fable dominated much of the U.S. media. Later even the official Israeli inquiry debunked Netanyahu's account and blamed police for starting the clash.

Now, with Netanyahu campaigning to win the Israeli election for prime minister in late March, he's cranking up rhetoric against Iran. His outlook seems to be 180 degrees from the world view of Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Yet in tangible political ways, they're well-positioned to feed off each other's fanaticism.

The election that gave the presidency of Iran to Ahmadinejad last summer was a victory for repressive fundamentalism. Results have included a negative trend for human rights in the country and a more bellicose foreign policy.

When Ahmadinejad declared in late October that "Israel must be wiped off the map," he did a big favor to the most militaristic of Israel's major politicians – Benjamin Netanyahu – who demanded that Prime Minister Sharon take forceful action against Iran. Otherwise, Netanyahu said in December, "when I form the new Israeli government, we'll do what we did in the past against Saddam's reactor, which gave us 20 years of tranquillity."

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Netanyahu was referring to Israel's air attack on the Osirak reactor in June 1981 to prevent Iraq from developing nuclear weapons. But now the idea of bombing Iran is nonsensical even to many analysts who are enthusiastic about Israel's large nuclear arsenal, estimated at 200 warheads.

"Preemptive military attack is not a strategy for stopping the spread of nuclear weapons anymore; the changes in technology have made it obsolete." That's the current assessment from Larry Derfner, who often writes about Israeli politics for the Jerusalem Post. "Concealing a nuclear start-up is so much easier now than it was in 1981 and it's only going to get easier yet. Throwing fighter jets, commandos and what-not at Iran is more than risky; it's almost certainly futile if not altogether impossible. Better for Israel and Israelis to forget about it and instead meet the Iranian threat by making this country's deterrent power even more intimidating than it already is."

Derfner added: "A nuclear Iran isn't a cause for indifference but neither is it a cause for dread and certainly not for recklessness. A nuclear Iran is actually acceptable. We can live with it. The truth is we've been living here with threats very much like it all along."

But Netanyahu has repeatedly emphasized that he wants to launch a military strike on Iran. "This is the Israeli government's primary obligation," he said. "If it is not done by the current government, I plan to lead the next government to stop the Iranians."

The specter of Netanyahu and Ahmadinejad fueling each other's madness as heads of state is frightening. In such a circumstance, the primary danger of conflagration would come from nuclear-armed Israel, not nuclear-unarmed Iran.

Candidate Netanyahu is a standard bearer for nuclear insanity. He's also an implacable enemy of basic Palestinian human rights. Many Israelis understand that Netanyahu is an extremist, and polls published on Jan. 6 indicate that the post-Sharon era may not be as hospitable to Netanyahu as initially assumed.

For that matter, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad may not serve out his full four-year term as Iran's president. Evidently the hardline clerics who dominate the Iranian government got more than they bargained for when they threw their weight behind the Ahmadinejad campaign last June. In recent months, Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, has shifted more power to the governmental Expediency Council headed by the shady magnate Hashemi Rafsanjani, a relatively moderate political hack who lost in the presidential runoff last year.

Ahmadinejad is good at making statements that cause international uproars, but he's having a difficult time exercising presidential leverage. "Even in Iran's mostly conservative parliament, the hard-line president has found himself unable to get traction,"

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the Los Angeles Times noted on Jan. 2. "In a first for the Islamic Republic, lawmakers turned down four of the ministers Ahmadinejad asked them to approve. It took him three months and four candidates to seat an oil minister. Some reformist legislators even agitated for hearings on the president's 'lack of political competence.'"

Using religious claims to bolster their quests for power, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Benjamin Netanyahu each stand to gain by pointing to the menacing fanaticism of the other. Yet many Iranians and Israelis recognize the grave dangers of such posturing.

As tensions mount and pressures intensify, the White House might end up acceding to an Israeli air attack on Iran. Or the Bush administration may prefer to launch its own air strike against Iran.

Iran. Israel. The United States. Each country has the very real potential to move in a better direction – away from lethal righteousness. But in every society, that will require more effective grassroots efforts for peace and justice.

Norman Solomon's latest book is "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."

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