

Why Is Ahmadinejad Smiling?

The intellectual sources of his apocalyptic vision.

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Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is often smiling, as if he knows something we don't, or at least not yet. It is tempting to view him as a madman. That way, when he speaks of wiping Israel off the face of the earth, we might convince ourselves that he is no more than a fanatical front man for the Iranian Republic's desire to possess nuclear weapons so as to assert itself in the manner of China or any other aspiring great power.

Unfortunately, whether mad or not, Ahmadinejad has a coherent ideological vision in which the call to wipe out Israel is no ordinary manifestation of anti-Semitism. Instead, it is the beckoning of an apocalyptic event that will usher in a millennium of bliss for all believers, indeed all mankind. Nuclear weapons are the indispensable means to this end since they are the most reliable way of exterminating the Jewish state. They are therefore not to be negotiated away in exchange for other economic or security benefits. The revolution needs nuclear weapons to carry out its utopian mission.

How dangerous is Ahmadinejad? He has made his aims clear many times in public. At a "World Without Zionism" conference in Tehran in October 2005, at which his supporters chanted "Death to America," he said: "They [ask]: 'Is it possible for us to witness a world without America and Zionism?' But you had best know that this slogan and this goal are attainable, and surely can be achieved." At the same conference, he called for Israel to be "wiped off the map," adding that "very soon, this stain of disgrace will vanish from the center of the Islamic world. This is attainable." Iran's senior-most Islamic leaders gave their full support to this genocidal aim. Ahmadinejad has announced that he intends to return Iran to the purity of the revolution that brought the Ayatollah Khomeini to power in 1979. The annihilation of Israel, he claimed, was a goal first announced by Khomeini himself, thus a project endowed with the highest possible revolutionary authority.

We would do well to take the Iranian president seriously, for he is proving himself a charismatic and clever leader. As he demonstrated recently at the United Nations, Ahmadinejad is adroit at putting aside Islamist themes when convenient and joining secular dictators like Hugo Chavez and Robert Mugabe in their Marxist cant protesting American imperialism and economic hegemony. Like many totalitarian rulers, including Hitler and Stalin, he professes a love for mankind and world peace. In these ways, Ahmadinejad reflects the Iranian revolution's assimilation of traditional Islamic categories of faith to a Marxist lexicon of violent revolution. It is therefore more important than ever to realize that the Iranian revolution's brand of jihadism has close structural similarities to--and is historically descended from--strains of European revolutionary nihilism, including that of the Jacobins, the Bolsheviks, and the Nazis, and extending to later third world offshoots like the Khmer Rouge.

All of these revolutionary movements have a common set of genocidal aims, now reemerging in Ahmadinejad's lethal rhetoric. They all envision a return to what the Jacobins called the Year One, a

grimly repressive collectivist utopia in which individual freedom is obliterated in the name of the common good, and people are purged of their vices, including property, freedom of thought, and the satisfactions of family and private life. Returning to a past so pure and distant requires the destruction of all received tradition, including religious traditions, extending back centuries, and so is, paradoxically, at the same time a radical leap into the future. That is why neither the purportedly Sunni vision of the Taliban nor the purportedly Shiite vision of the Iranian revolution bears any close resemblance to the traditions and restraints imposed by those faiths, especially restraints on this-worldly political extremism, terrorism, and the slaughter of noncombatants.

The second aim that all these revolutionary movements share is the identification of one class or race enemy whose extermination is the crucial step necessary to bring about the utopian community where all alienation and vice will end forever. The class or race enemy becomes the embodiment of all human evil, whose destruction will cleanse the planet. In Ahmadinejad's flirtation with nuclear Armageddon, the destruction of Israel plays the same apocalyptic role that the Nazis assigned to the destruction of European Jewry. Stalin assigned the identical role to the destruction of the "kulaks," the so-called rich peasants--an utterly fictitious category bearing no closer resemblance to actual Russian peasants than the Nazis' demonized Jews bore to actual Jews. Now it is the Jews' turn again. When Ahmadinejad promises Muslims "a world without Zionism," he means it quite literally.

A number of writers including Bernard Lewis and Paul Berman have stressed connections between al Qaeda and European ideologies of revolutionary extremism. The Iranian revolution's connections with these ideologies are, if anything, even better documented. The key figure here is the acknowledged intellectual godfather of the Iranian revolution, Ali Shariati. To understand Ahmadinejad's campaign to return to the purity of the revolution and why it leads him to flirt with nuclear Armageddon, it is necessary to understand Ali Shariati.

Ali Shariati (1933-1977) was an Iranian intellectual who studied comparative literature in Paris in the early 1960s and was influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon. He translated Sartre's major philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness*, into Farsi, and coauthored a translation of Fanon's famous revolutionary tract *The Wretched of the Earth*. Sartre and Fanon together were responsible for revitalizing Marxism by borrowing from Martin Heidegger's philosophy of existentialism, which stressed man's need to struggle against a purposeless bourgeois world in order to endow life with meaning through passionate commitment. By lionizing revolutionary violence as a purifying catharsis that forces us to turn our backs on the bourgeois world, Sartre and Fanon hoped to rescue the downtrodden from the seduction of Western material prosperity. Fanon was even more important because he imported from Heidegger's philosophy a passionate commitment to the "destiny" of "the people," the longing for the lost purity of the premodern collective that had drawn Heidegger to National Socialism.

This potent brew of violent struggle and passionate commitment to a utopian vision of a collectivist past deeply influenced Ali Shariati, just as it had influenced another student in Paris a few years earlier, the Cambodian Pol Pot. Fanon in effect replaced the international proletariat of classical Marxism with the existentialist *Volk* of Heidegger's Nazi period, repudiating both liberal democracy and Marxist-Leninist politics as too materialistic. As applied in practice by the Khmer Rouge, this led to the bloodbath of 1975-1979 in which the cities of Cambodia were forcibly evacuated and the Cambodian people were purified of the taint of Western corruption by being reduced to a primitive collective of slave labor. Just as the the Jacobins had literally started the calendar over at the Year One, so Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot, on assuming power, proclaimed the Year Zero.

Ali Shariati aimed to politicize the Shiite faith of his fellow Iranians with this same existentialist creed of revolutionary violence and purification. He sought to turn Shiism from pious hopes for a better

world to come to the creation of a political utopia in the here and now. Although one cannot look into another man's heart and assess the sincerity of his religious beliefs, Ali Shariati's critics argue with some plausibility that Islam was in many ways no more than a religion of convenience for him. It was the most powerful social force in Iran, these critics contend, so Ali Shariati subverted its categories with a neo-Marxist agenda alien to true faith. Following Fanon, Ali Shariati believed that "the people" had to return to its most distant origins and so create what Fanon termed a "new man" and a "new history." Like Fanon as well, Ali Shariati defined a people as sharing "a common pain" inflicted on them by Western oppression.

Frequently citing Sartre, Ali Shariati proclaimed existentialism superior to all other philosophies because, in it, "human beings are free and the architects as well as masters of their own essence." This assertion of man's absolute control over his own destiny violates all three Abrahamic faiths, which stress that human beings are servants of God and powerless without Him. When Ali Shariati was criticized in 1972 by traditionalists among the Iranian clergy, he wrote to his father arguing that those who had fought French colonialism in Algeria like his teacher at the Sorbonne, Victor Gurovitch--also much influenced by Sartre and Fanon--were closer to the true revolutionary spirit of Shiism than traditionalists like the Ayatollah Milani, who avoided all involvement in politics.

Throughout Ali Shariati's discussions of Shiism, religion is harnessed to revolutionary politics. He tried to assimilate Shiites' hopes for a better world achieved through the return of the Hidden Imam, the Mahdi, to revolutionary agendas of mass struggle and historical progress. The return of the Mahdi, Ali Shariati proclaimed, will bring about "a classless society," a Marxist slogan. An unconventional Muslim at best, Ali Shariati was deeply interested in Sufi mysticism, including the poetry of Rumi, and he loved Balzac and other European writers. Like Sartre and later Michel Foucault, Ali Shariati had a passion for literature that seemed to go hand in hand with a passion for revolution. Political struggle becomes a beautifying myth of heroic valor and the triumph of the will, the delusion that "the people" can achieve through revolutionary violence the aesthetic wholeness and unity of a work of art.

Returning to Iran in 1964, during the rule of Shah Reza Pahlavi, Ali Shariati began to organize for the coming revolution. While he repudiated Marxism-Leninism because of its atheism and materialistic interpretation of history, he expressed admiration for the revolutionary fervor of Iranian Marxists and occasionally supported their protests against the regime. His lectures at the Hosseiniyeh Ershad Institute, in Tehran, which set forth his fusion of Shiism and revolutionary struggle, were wildly popular. He had several run-ins with the shah's secret police, SAVAK, who monitored his classes.

He also tried to forge links with the Iranian religious establishment. Many of its most reputable theologians continued to regard his attempt to blend Shiism with third world revolution as heretical. One important figure, however, refused to condemn Ali Shariati when called upon to do so in 1970 by his fellow clerics: the Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini and Ali Shariati were not direct allies. But Khomeini--who once said that "Islam is politics"--was no traditionalist either, and he wanted to harness the popular energy Ali Shariati had stimulated among Iranian students to help fuel his own political movement.

Ali Shariati died of a heart attack in 1977, two years before the Iranian Revolution, but largely thanks to his influence, the ideology brought to power by Khomeini's rule is an Islam distorted by European left-wing existentialism and the romanticization of violence. Unlike mainstream Sunni Islam, Shiism has a strong messianic strain. Shiites rejected the institution of an earthly caliphate intertwining secular and religious authority, such as the Ottoman sultans, in favor of the rule of the descendants of the Prophet. The last of these, the Hidden Imam, left the world in 874, and devout Shiites faithfully await his return. When he does return, he will lead the righteous in a war against the wicked and establish a kingdom of perfect justice on earth. In the meantime, since the prospects for true justice reside with the

Hidden Imam, in his absence the world is a sad and empty place, providing less of an institutionalized link between believers and God than is the case in Sunni Islam, with its more direct involvement in earthly government.

Ali Shariati took the messianic strain that distinguishes Shiism from mainstream Islam and secularized it, making it the vehicle for Heideggerian existentialist commitment, resolve, and willpower on behalf of the oppressed people. Messianism became the impetus for collective political struggle. The eschatological Last Days, which traditional believers can only await in faith, hope, and pious devotion, could be brought about in the here and now by human action, creating a regime capable of achieving the purity of the collective, the return to the Year One.

In traditional Shiism, the blessings of the return of the Hidden Imam cannot be hastened by this-worldly political action. Because of the vast gap between the imperfect world of now and the perfect realm to come when the Hidden Imam returns, there can be no earthly government of mere men claiming to rule directly on behalf of the faith. That is why the very notion of a ruling mulloc racy is a distortion of Shiism, which is even more skeptical about the idea of an earthly religious authority than is Sunni Islam with its tradition of the caliphate. The present Iranian theocratic racy, with its ceaseless drive for the centralization of power and regimentation of every aspect of life, is a departure from traditional Islam but bears a strong resemblance to the totalitarian party of the Jacobins, Bolsheviks, Nazis, and Khmer Rouge.

Since Ali Shariati died before the revolution, we cannot know for certain what his reaction would have been to the Ayatollah Khomeini's reign of terror. Would he have been appalled, disillusioned, or willing to hang on and give the revolution a chance? Some argue that, with his third world socialist credo, Ali Shariati was not, strictly speaking, a Khomeinist or supporter of theocracy. But how much of a genuinely Islamic ruler was Khomeini himself? Before him, ayatollahs had never wielded the instruments of state power to execute thousands of ideologically defined enemies, force hundreds of thousands into exile, confiscate property, and launch wars. As Bernard Lewis has observed, "all this owes far more to the examples of Robespierre and Stalin than to those of Muhammad and Ali. These methods are deeply un-Islamic; they are, however, thoroughly revolutionary." Before Khomeini came to power, direct political authority had never been exercised by the men of religion. The Iranian mullahs did not restore an ancient order. Rather, following Ali Shariati and Fanon, they tried to create a "new man" and a "new history" through a dictatorship with no Islamic precedent.

In his murderous fantasy of destroying Israel, Ahmadinejad has drawn together all the strands of Ali Shariati's jihadist ideology and added his own contribution, which makes it far more dangerous. Although a utopian in his belief that a politicized Shiism might bring about a regime in which the dignity of the people could be rescued from the corrupting influences of the West, Ali Shariati did not contemplate, as far as one can tell, actually bringing about the Last Days, the apocalyptic struggle between the righteous and the wicked, through a worldwide military cataclysm. Ahmadinejad apparently does. "Our revolution's mission," he declared last year, "is to pave the way for the reappearance of the 12th Imam." A rumor denied by the government but widely believed in Iran holds that Ahmadinejad and his cabinet have signed a secret "contract" pledging themselves to work for the return of the Mahdi. Ahmadinejad believes that the apocalypse is imminent and that he can accelerate the divine timetable. He is not content, as a traditional believer would be, to wait for the Hidden Imam to return. He plans to *make* the Last Days come on his own schedule, by using nuclear weapons to destroy the wicked as soon as possible.

And in this, the cost to Iranians themselves is of no consequence. When Iran's Islamic leadership--including supreme religious leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani--hastened to support Ahmadinejad's call last October for Israel's annihilation, Rafsanjani, a

former president of the Islamic Republic, added a mad detail: The Iranian leadership would be happy to see Iran devastated by an Israeli nuclear retaliatory strike if it meant they could wipe Israel off the map. "The application of an atomic bomb," Rafsanjani sanguinely remarked, "would not leave anything in Israel, but the same thing would just produce damages in the Muslim world."

This willingness to see Iran absorb the "damages" of an Israeli nuclear response (surely millions of casualties) is only a variation of Hitler's willingness to divert resources needed to win the Second World War and expose Germany to catastrophically destructive bombing and invasion in order to speed up the Holocaust. Hitler was willing, even thrilled, to see Germany go down in the flames of his own *Götterdämmerung* in exchange for the chance to kill millions of Jews. Something of the same demented mirth sparkles in Ahmadinejad's eyes as he makes his cryptic little jokes about coming "surprises."

He does not represent all political forces in Iran, not even all radical forces. Doubtless, Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons is, for many Iranians, a question of traditional national pride or a bid for great power status. But as long as he is president, Ahmadinejad represents an important dimension of the Iranian revolution we cannot afford to ignore. As long as Iranian policy is dominated by Ahmadinejad and his allies among the senior clerics of the Islamic Republic, Iran cannot be negotiated with. Their commitment to the destruction of the Jews is a matter of principle, just as the implementation of the Holocaust was for the Nazis and the liquidation of the kulaks was for the Bolsheviks. Genocide through nuclear weapons is designed to bring about the happiness of the Year One for all of us. I believe that is why Ahmadinejad is almost always smiling.

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