

Iran and Everything Else

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Global Research, August 06, 2012

[Michael Parenti Political Archive](#) 6 August
2012

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Occasionally individuals complain that I fail to address one subject or another. One Berkeley denizen got in my face and announced: “You leftists ought to become aware of the ecological crisis.” In fact, I had written a number of things about the ecological crisis, including one called “Eco-Apocalypse.” His lack of familiarity with my work did not get in the way of his presumption.

Years ago when I spoke before the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom in New York, the moderator announced that she could not understand why I had “remained silent” about the attempt to defund UNESCO. Whatever else I might have been struggling with, she was convinced I should have joined with her in trying to save UNESCO (which itself really was a worthy cause).

People give me marching orders all the time. Among the most furiously insistent are those fixed on 9/11. Why haven’t I said anything about 9/11? Why am I “a 9/11 denier.” In fact, I have written about 9/11 and even spoke at two 9/11 conferences (Santa Cruz and New York), raising questions of my own.

Other people have been “disappointed” or “astonished” or “puzzled” that I have failed to pronounce on whatever is the issue *du jour*. No attention is given by such complainers to my many books, articles, talks, and interviews that treat hundreds of subjects pertaining to political economy, culture, ideology, media, fascism, communism, capitalism, imperialism, media, ecology, political protest, history, religion, race, gender, homophobia, and other topics far too numerous to list. (For starters, visit my website: www.michaelparenti.org)

But one’s own energy, no matter how substantial, is always finite. One must allow for a division of labor and cannot hope to fight every fight.

Recently someone asked when was I going to “pay some attention” to Iran. Actually I have spoken about Iran in a number of interviews and talks—not to satisfy demands made by others but because I myself was moved to do so. In the last decade, over a five year period, I was repeatedly interviewed by English Radio Tehran. My concern about Iran goes back many years. Just the other day, while clearing out some old files, I came across a letter I had published over 33 years ago in the New York Times (10 May 1979), reproduced here exactly as it appeared in the Times:

To the Editor of the New York Times:

For 25 years the Shah of Iran tortured and murdered many thousands of dissident workers, students, peasants and intellectuals. For the most part, the U.S. press ignored these

dreadful happenings and portrayed the Shah as a citadel of stability and an enlightened modernizer.

Thousands more were killed by the Shah's police and military during the popular uprisings of this past year. Yet these casualties received only passing mention even though Iran was front-page news for several months. And from 1953 to 1978 millions of other Iranians suffered the silent oppression of poverty and malnutrition while the Shah, his family, and his generals grew ever richer.

Now the furies of revolution have lashed back, thus far executing about 200 of the Shah's henchmen—less than what the Savak would arrest and torture on a slow weekend. And now the U.S. press has suddenly become acutely concerned, keeping a careful account of the "victims," printing photos of firing squads and making repeated references to the "repulsion" and "outrage" felt by anonymous "middle-class" Iranians who apparently are endowed with finer sensibilities than the mass of ordinary people will bore the brunt of the Shah's repression. At the same time, American commentators are quick to observe that the new regime is merely replacing one repression with another.

So it has always been with the recording of revolutions: the mass of nameless innocents victimized by the ancien régime go uncounted and unnoticed, but when the not-so-innocent murderers are brought to revolutionary justice, the business-owned press is suddenly filled with references to "brutality" and "cruelty."

That anyone could equate the horrors of the Shah's regime with the ferment, change and struggle that is going on in Iran today is a tribute to the biases of the U.S. press, a press that has learned to treat the atrocities of the U.S.-supported right-wing regimes with benign neglect while casting a stern self-righteous eye on the popular revolutions that challenge such regimes.

Michael Parenti
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There is one glaring omission in this missive: I focused only on the press without mentioning how the White House and leading members of Congress repeatedly had hailed the Shah as America's sturdy ally—while U.S. oil companies merrily plundered Iran's oil (with a good slice of the spoils going to the Shah and his henchmen).

A few years before the 1979 upheaval, I was teaching a graduate course at Cornell University. There I met several Iranian graduate students who spoke with utter rage about the Shah and his U.S.-supported Savak secret police. They told of friends being tortured and disappeared. They could not find enough damning words to vent their fury. These students came from the kind of well-off Persian families one would have expected to support the Shah. (You don't make it from Tehran to Cornell graduate school without some money in the family.)

All I knew about the Shah at that time came from the U.S. mainstream media. But after listening to these students I began to think that this Shah fellow was not the admirably benign leader and modernizer everyone was portraying in the news.

The Shah's subsequent overthrow in the 1979 revolution was something to celebrate. Unfortunately the revolution soon was betrayed by the theocratic militants who took hold of

events and created their Islamic Republic of Iran. These religious reactionaries set about to torture and eradicate thousands of young Iranian radicals. They made war upon secular leftists and “decadent” Western lifestyles, as they set about establishing a grim and corrupt theocracy.

U.S. leaders and media had no critical words about the slaughter of leftist revolutionaries in Iran. If anything, they were quietly pleased. However, they remained hostile toward the Islamic regime. Why so? Regimes that kill revolutionaries and egalitarian reformists do not usually incite displeasure from the White House. If anything, the CIA and the Pentagon and the other imperial operatives who make the world safe for the Fortune 500 look most approvingly upon those who torture and murder Marxists and other leftists. Indeed, such counterrevolutionaries swiftly become the recipients of generous amounts of U.S. aid.

Why then did U.S. leaders denounce and threaten Iran and continue to do so to this day? The answer is: Iran’s Islamic Republic has other features that did not sit well with the western imperialists. Iran was—and still is—a “dangerously” independent nation, unwilling to become a satellite to the U.S. global empire, unlike more compliant countries. Like Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Iran, with boundless audacity, gave every impression of wanting to use its land, labor, markets, and capital as it saw fit. Like Iraq—and Libya and Syria—Iran was committing the sin of economic nationalism. And like Iraq, Iran remained unwilling to establish cozy relations with Israel.

But this isn’t what we ordinary Americans are told. When talking to us, a different tact is taken by U.S. opinion-makers and policymakers. To strike enough fear into the public, our leaders tell us that, like Iraq, Iran “might” develop weapons of mass destruction. And like Iraq, Iran is led by people who hate America and want to destroy us and Israel. And like Iraq, Iran “might” develop into a regional power leading other nations in the Middle East down the “Hate America” path. So our leaders conclude for us: it might be necessary to destroy Iran in an all-out aerial war.

It was President George W. Bush who in January 2002 cited Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an “axis of evil.” Iran exports terrorism and “pursues” weapons of mass destruction. Sooner or later this axis would have to be dealt with in the severest way, Bush insisted.

These official threats and jeremiads are intended to leave us with the impression that Iran is not ruled by “good Muslims.” The “good Muslims”—as defined by the White House and the State Department—are the reactionary extremists and feudal tyrants who ride high in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirate, Bahrain, and other countries that provide the United States with military bases, buy large shipments of U.S. arms, vote as Washington wants in the United Nations, enter free trade agreements with the Western capitalist nations, and propagate a wide-open deregulated free-market economy.

The “good Muslims” invite the IMF and the western corporations to come in and help themselves to the country’s land, labor, markets, industry, natural resources and anything else the international plutocracy might desire.

Unlike the “good Muslims,” the “bad Muslims” of Iran take an anti-imperialist stance. They try to get out from under the clutches of the U.S. global imperium. For this, Iran may yet pay a heavy price. Think of what has been happening to Iraq, Libya, and now Syria. For its unwillingness to throw itself open to Western corporate pillage, Iran is already being subjected to heavy sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies. Sanctions hurt the

ordinary population most of all. Unemployment and poverty increase. The government is unable to maintain human services. The public infrastructure begins to deteriorate and evaporate: privatization by attrition.

Iran has pursued an enriched uranium program, same as any nation has the right to do. The enrichment has been low-level for peaceful use, not the kind necessary for nuclear bombs. Iranian leaders, both secular and theocratic have been explicit about the useless horrors of nuclear weaponry and nuclear war.

Appearing on the Charlie Rose show when he was visiting the USA, Iranian president Ahmadinejad pointed out that nuclear weapons have never saved anyone. The Soviet Union had nuclear weapons; was it saved? he asked. India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons; have they found peace and security? Israel has nuclear weapons: has it found peace and security? And the United States itself has nuclear weapons and nuclear fleets patrolling the world and it seems obsessively preoccupied with being targeted by real or imagined enemies. Ahmadinejad, the wicked one, sounded so much more rational and humane than Hillary Clinton snarling her tough-guy threats at this or that noncompliant nation.

(Parenthetically, we should note that the Iranians possibly might try to develop a nuclear strike force—not to engage in a nuclear war that would destroy Iran but to develop a deterrent against aerial destruction from the west. The Iranians, like the North Koreans, know that the western nuclear powers have never attacked any country that is armed with nuclear weapons.)

I once heard some Russian commentators say that Iran is twice as large as Iraq, both in geography and in population; it would take hundreds of thousands of NATO troops and great cost in casualties and enormous sums of money to invade and try to subdue such a large country, an impossible task and certain disaster for the United States.

But the plan is not to invade, just to destroy the country and its infrastructure through aerial warfare. The U.S. Air Force eagerly announced that it has 10,000 targets in Iran pinpointed for attack and destruction. Yugoslavia is cited as an example of a nation that was destroyed by unanswerable aerial attacks, without the loss of a single U.S. soldier. I saw the destruction in Serbia shortly after the NATO bombings stopped: bridges, utilities, rail depots, factories, schools, television and radio stations, government-built hotels, hospitals, and housing projects—a destruction carried out with utter impunity, all this against a social democracy that refused to submit to a free-market capitalist takeover.

The message is clear. It has already been delivered to Yugoslavia, Libya, Syria, and many other countries around the world: overthrow your reform-minded, independent, communitarian government; become a satellite to the global corporate free-market system, or we will pound you to death and reduce you to a severe level of privatization and poverty.

Not all the U.S. military is of one mind regarding war with Iran. While the Air Force can hardly contain itself, the Army and Navy seem lukewarm. Former Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, actually denounced the idea of waging destruction upon “80 million Iranians, all different individuals.”

The future does not look good for Iran. That country is slated for an attack of serious dimensions, supposedly in the name of democracy, “humanitarian war,” the struggle against terrorism, and the need to protect America and Israel from some future nuclear

threat.

Sometimes it seems as if U.S. ruling interests perpetrate crimes and deceptions of all sorts with a frequency greater than we can document and expose. So if I don't write or speak about one or another issue, keep in mind, it may be because I am occupied with other things, or I simply have neither the energy nor the resources. Sometimes too, I think, it is because I get too heavy of heart.

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