

Reports shed new light on irrational Iran debate

"Netanyahu spun out his frightening scenario about Iran's alleged nuclear bomb-making that lacked a shred of evidence."

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Nearly two weeks ago, Ted Koppel contributed some desperately needed perspective to the irrational debate about Iran and its so-called nuclear threat. It was something we did not hear days before, listening to Binyamin Netanyahu and Ehud Olmert at the General Assembly (GA) of the United Jewish Communities in Los Angeles.

Koppel's two-hour documentary on the Discovery Channel was followed, quite coincidentally, by Seymour Hersh's assertion in the Nov. 27 issue of the New Yorker Magazine that "the CIA has found no conclusive evidence, as yet, of a secret Iranian nuclear weapons program."

Here were two respected journalists whose reporting stands in sharp contrast to the irrational boombah voiced by Netanyahu, Israel's own Prince of Darkness, that was seconded, if somewhat mildly, by Prime Minister Olmert. How could anyone think Netanyahu's absurd comparison between Nazi Germany in 1938 and the whacko leaders in Tehran today had any merit whatsoever?

Why, I wondered, did the saber-rattling of our two guests from Israel so excite the audience? Assume that most of the delegates who devoted three fascinating days to the gathering in Los Angeles were intelligent and otherwise reasonably informed Jews. It was beyond me to hear the conversations in the hallways, to watch the nodding heads of approval and to hear the loud applause as Netanyahu spun out his frightening scenario about Iran's alleged nuclear bomb-making capability that lacked a shred of evidence.

Was his or Olmert's information provided by Israeli intelligence? Need we forget that Israeli intelligence entirely misjudged the capacity of Hezbollah last summer? Haven't Americans had their minds bent out of shape enough these past six years by lies and more lies about the so-called weapons of mass destruction in the hands of Saddam Hussein?

While there is no reason to trust the Iranian regime or its intentions with regard to developing a nuclear bomb-making capability, the threat cited by the Bush administration is one of those exaggerated myths that requires the kind of examination Sen. William Fulbright (D-Ark.) conducted after we went to war against North Vietnam in 1965.

Contrary to these gloom-and-doom prophecies, Koppel focused on Iran and Iranians. He gave American viewers an opportunity to evaluate a country honestly by listening to people we have not heard from since the 1979 hostage crisis. It was a sobering experience most General Assembly (GA) delegates probably did not see or hear because of cable television's

relatively small audience. But it was a startling contrast to the fearful pronouncements voiced by the axis of babel in Washington and Jerusalem.

Koppel's portrayal was not that of a country hell-bent on building a bomb or an arsenal of bombs that threaten ours or Israel's existence now or in the near future, even though he did not rule out that possibility. Rather, his was a candid examination of how the two governments in Washington and Tehran and their people have come to misunderstand each other so grossly, both before and after the 1979 hostage crisis that first brought Koppel to national attention with his broadcasts on "Nightline."

The Iranian voices were both serious and absent the claptrap of their president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Koppel described Iran's culpability in several acts of terrorism against the United States or U.S. interests over the past several years.

But he also reflected on the history of U.S.-Iranian relations that many of the delegates to the GA just possibly were too young to remember — or else have just plain forgotten. Specifically, how we conspired with the British to overthrow the last democratically elected government in Tehran in 1953; how we and the European powers provided Saddam Hussein with the capacity to make chemical weapons for his war against Iran in the 1980s; how we armed and supported the shah of Iran for more than 25 years, ignoring the terror his secret police used to silence the voices of opposition, and how we pledged to return the monarch to power after he had been overthrown by the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979.

If you were a middle- or upper-class Iranian with any pride, who did not flee the country when the shah did, who endured the reign of the mullahs and was aware of the saber-rattling from inside the Bush White House, you sure as hell might think that building nuclear bombs made perfectly good sense — especially since the United States, Israel and all the other countries that have them are insisting that Iran should not.

In his New Yorker article, Hersh cites "the technical intelligence collected by overhead satellites and other empirical evidence collected by American and Israeli agents placed near suspected nuclear weapons facilities inside Iran in the past year or so. No significant amounts of radioactivity were found." The White House dismissal of the report is well known among intelligence sources in Washington, he said.

"There are, however, other possible reasons for Iran's obstinacy" and the resistance to further inspections of their nuclear facilities. The nuclear program — peaceful or not — is a source of great national pride and President Ahmadinejad's support for it has helped to propel him to enormous popularity," according to Hersh.

As for a proposed American threat to attack Iran, he quotes a former senior intelligence official as saying it would only serve to unite Sunni and Shiite populations. It would "paper over any differences in the Arab world, and we'll have Syrians, Iranians, Hamas and Hezbollah fighting against us, and the Saudis and Egyptians questioning their ties to the West. It's an analyst's worst nightmare."

Keep this in mind as well: For the duration of the Cold War, much of which I covered, the Soviet Union's nuclear power was reigned in by the United States because of its weapons superiority. There is no reason to believe that Iran would act any differently, unless its rulers were prepared to self-destruct.

Somehow, listening to Olmert's fantasy to "do what we need to do to remove the threat," I have to ask myself: Isn't it time to get real and stop the craziness over Iran?

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