

“Not Gaza, Not Lebanon, My Life For Iran”

by Hugh Fitzgerald



On April 28, at the Azadi (formerly Aryamehr) Stadium in Tehran, the crowd that filled the stadium – it can hold 100,000 spectators – chanted the last thing the ayatollahs wished to hear: “Reza Shah!” “Reza Shah!” over and over again. This chanting was a declaration of longing, of wanting back the late Reza Shah Pahlavi who reigned from 1925 to 1941, and whose son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, cancer-ridden, had fled Iran in February 1979 as his country succumbed to the troglodytic Ayatollah Khomeini. For some, it might have been meant as a wish that the late Reza Shah return. It could also have been meant as a wish that Mohammed Reza Pahlavi’s son, Reza Pahlavi, who left Iran at the age of 17 for flight school in America, would return from exile, overturn the Islamic Republic, and assume his rightful place by resuming the interrupted rule of the Pahlavis, either as the enlightened and secularizing despot that his father had been, or perhaps

as a constitutional monarch on the British model. Whether the crowd was calling for the grandfather, the father, or the son, or all three at the same time hardly matters, for what they were mainly doing was by implication shouting down the present regime: Down with the Ayatollahs and Mullahs! Down with the Islamic Republic of Iran! Give us Reza Shah!

It was a sign of intelligent life, of political dissidence flexing its muscles, and of course the disaffected were able to get away with it, because even had the Revolutionary Guards suddenly surrounded Azadi stadium, they would have had no idea whom to arrest among the nearly 100,000 fans.

This was not the first such demonstration of massive disaffection. In 2017, crowds shouted the same "Reza Shah" at another sports event. And in still another public demonstration of political disapproval, anti-regime students have been holding demonstrations recently at the tomb of the pre-Islamic King Cyrus the Great. The message at the tomb is clear: we are not Muslim fanatics, but Iranian patriots, and we pay homage to those, like King Cyrus, who are part of our storied pre-islamic history and whom the ruling fanatics dismiss as belonging to what they call the Jahiliyya, the pre-Islamic Time of Ignorance. And just now, another symbolic site for the protestors has recently appeared: the place where the mummified body of Reza Shah, the founder of the dynasty, has apparently been discovered, and where demonstrators can assemble and call for a return to rule by the Pahlavis.

Nor are these the only public signs of discontent. In late December 2017, in cities all over Iran, people protested about the poor state of the economy, and expressed their fury over how much money the regime was spending abroad on its various wars: in Iraq (helping the Shi'a militias), in Syria (helping Assad crush the last opposition to his rule), in Yemen (supplying the Houthis with weapons, including ballistic missiles); in supporting its ally Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria. There are also immense sums being poured by Iran into

permanent military bases in Syria, from which attacks on Israel can be launched. Tens of billions are spent annually by Iran to prop up Assad, supply the Houthis in Yemen with weaponry (every few days they lob Iranian-supplied missiles into Riyadh), help Hezbollah wherever its goose-stepping terrorists happen to be making mischief, train the Shi'a militias in Iraq, and of course, build those bases in Syria. Preparing for war against Israel is particularly expensive, because those pesky Israelis insist on carrying out preemptive strikes. In early May, in a single raid on a base in Syria, the Israelis destroyed 211 Iranian surface-to-surface missiles. A week later, advanced Iranian air-defense sites and Iranian weapons depots all over Syria were destroyed in one Israeli raid. What did those two attacks cost Iran? How much money are the mullahs willing to spend on bases that the Israelis have an uncanny ability to find and utterly destroy?

Demonstrators in Iran have reportedly been heard yelling slogans like "The people are begging, the clerics act like God." Protests over the economic mess, and the amounts being spent on expensive military adventures abroad, have been held in a dozen cities across the country, including Iran's second city, Mashhad, and even in Qom, the holy city of the Shia, and the home of many powerful clerics.

In Mashhad, in December 2017, and in many other cities around the country, there was also this ominous chant; "not Gaza, not Lebanon, my life for Iran," a reference to what protesters said was the regime's focus on foreign adventures at the expense of domestic well-being.

That's not something Hamas, which runs Gaza, or Hezbollah, which controls all of south Lebanon, wants to hear. Hezbollah's indispensable supporter has always been Iran; it has no other state supporter. As for Hamas, as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, it is regarded as an enemy by the two most powerful Arab states, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. In Egypt, General El-Sisi came to power by crushing the Muslim

Brotherhood and deposing Mohamed Morsi. Hamas still manages, from its bases in the Sinai (and with some weaponry supplied from Hamas-ruled Gaza) to attack Egyptian soldiers and police in the Sinai, which only serves to strengthen Egypt's hostility to Hamas.

Hamas, as part of the Muslim Brotherhood, has long been regarded with distrust, too, [by the Saudi regime](#). The Muslim Brotherhood is seen in Saudi Arabia as a religious challenger to the Wahhabis and a political threat to the rule of the Al-Saud family, enrolling Islam in their attempt to create a new political order.

The late Prince Nayef Bin Abdul Aziz, the Saudi interior minister, in 2002 became highly critical of their [the Muslim Brotherhood's] attitudes and vocally shared his suspicion of their tendency to "politicize Islam for self-serving purposes."

"I can tell you without the slightest hesitation that the root of all our problems and issues is the Muslim Brotherhood," he said in an interview with Kuwaiti daily Al Siyassah.

"When matters became extremely difficult for them and gallows were readied for them in their home countries, they came to the [Saudi] kingdom that looked after them, took care of them, preserved their dignity and made them feel safe. After some time, they wanted to work and we helped them by opening the schools and the universities, but they unfortunately revived their past links and started recruiting people and founding movements. They turned against the kingdom. They should not have hurt the kingdom. If they wanted to say something, they should have uttered abroad and not in the country that honoured them," he said.

In 2003, the Muslim Brotherhood joined other Islamist societies that objected to the presence of non-Muslims in

Saudi Arabia in the Second Gulf War against the Iraqi regime.

Finally, the Saudis became fed up with the Muslim Brotherhood's attempts to spread its influence at the expense of the Wahhabi clerical establishment, and in March 2014, Saudi Arabia declared the Brotherhood a "terrorist organisation."

Riyadh warned affiliates [as Hamas], supporters and sympathisers of the Brotherhood and all other intellectual or religious groups and offshoots categorised as extremist or terrorist that they would face jail terms varying between 3 to 20 years for disruptive activities, incitement and funding.

The decision was widely welcomed in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries amid concerns that the society [the Muslim Brotherhood] was spreading its tentacles ominously in the region.

With the two most powerful Arab countries declaring war on Hamas – as they had done long before to Hezbollah because the Shi'a terrorist group was understood to be a puppet-ally of Iran – the financial burden on Iran of supporting Hamas as a viable threat to Israel increased, and it now runs annually into the billions. This includes both the cost of weaponry, and money for Hamas to pay its soldiers and civilian members in Gaza. The Iranian people keenly feel this expense, and are increasingly vocal in their complaints about how the regime spends its money abroad. Then there is the cost of Iran's involvement in Syria. Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman has estimated that in Syria alone, the Iranian regime has spent \$13 billion in shoring up Assad. How much has Iran spent in Yemen, supplying the Houthis with expensive rockets, for a proxy war against Saudi Arabia? How much has Iran spent on the Shi'a militia in Iraq? On Hezbollah in Lebanon? Who paid for the 120,000 rockets that Hezbollah in

Lebanon is now said to possess? How much will Iran have to continue to spend in all those countries, since there is no end in sight to the Sunni-Shi'a conflict? Twenty billion dollars a year? Fifty billion?

Meanwhile, the price of oil remains relatively low, at \$70 per barrel (half its historic high), and whenever the price starts to rise, increased production from fracking puts downward pressure on the price. The mass introduction of affordable electric cars, along with ever-increasing advances in solar and wind energy, will also keep the price of oil low. For Iran's economy, none of this is good news. The reimposition by Trump of severe economic sanctions on Iran will further heighten the distress of the Iranian people, and more voices will be added to the chorus of those who shout "Reza Shah!" against the regime, and who shout, too, against all the spending on foreign adventures – "Not Gaza, not Lebanon – My Life For Iran!"

Now that Trump has announced the reimposition of the crippling sanctions that were formerly in place, the mullahs are shouting their defiance and Death-to-America threats, but the Iranian people, suffering economically as their rulers do not, will continue to turn on the regime. Ordinarily when a despotic regime has economic troubles, it can try to distract its people with military adventures. But in this case, it is those very military adventures that are the main cause of that economic distress. If the Iranians were willing to discontinue their adventurism throughout the Middle East, and to halt their ballistic missile program (not covered in the original Iran deal), while keeping the freeze on their nuclear program, the Americans would probably be willing to agree to this new, and better deal. But Iran's rulers cannot stop their mischief-making throughout the region; such aggression is built into their DNA. The more money the Islamic Republic spends on its foreign adventurism, the more its economy suffers, because of both the tens of billions it spends on its

own military and that of its allies, and because of what it loses through the reimposed American sanctions that will only be lifted if that adventurism ends.

The Iranian people are increasingly sick of the expense of all these foreign wars: "not Gaza, not Lebanon, my life for Iran." Many don't want just a change in policy. They want a change in regime: "Reza Shah! Reza Shah!" With Trump having pulled out from the Iran deal, with the price of oil remaining low, the Islamic Republic is economically even more on its uppers. Ordinary Iranians are distinctly unenthusiastic about entering into what would be a hugely expensive conflict with Israel. Dr. Sadegh Zibakalam, a senior lecturer on international relations at the University of Tehran, a sworn critic of the conservative camp in Iran, and a main activist in the reformist Iranian media, wrote recently on his Twitter account that, "If, Heaven forbid, a war breaks out between Iran and Israel in Syria, it won't be possible to explain to future generations in Iran that Iran went to war against a country that is not its neighbor, is 2,000km away from it, never harmed Iran's national interests, and had no claims against Iran. Why does Iran need to waste billions of dollars on military expenses and absorb a lot of fatalities in this war?" That's a question many thoughtful Iranians will be, or already are, asking themselves. For whatever has been, or will be, the cost to Iran of supporting the Houthis in Yemen, the Shi'a militias in Iraq, Assad's army in Syria, and Hezbollah in both Syria and Lebanon, those sums would be dwarfed by the expense of engaging in a hot war with Israel, a country that is capable of inflicting terrible damage on Iranian cities and infrastructure, including, of course, the oil wells in Khuzistan.

Were the Islamic Republic to end its expensive foreign adventurism, including its constant threats, and buildup of forces, against Israel, this would be good news for the people of Iran. It would be grim news, on the other hand, for the

swaggering terrorists of Hezbollah and Hamas, who have counted on, and now would be cut off from, their last state supporter. Meanwhile, the once universal chant in Iran of “Death to America! Death to Israel!” will from now on have to contend with two other, quite different chants that grow ever louder as the economy continues to falter, and may herald the coming end of the aggressive regime which is economically at the end of its tether: “Not Gaza, not Lebanon, my life for Iran!” and – for the ayatollahs an even scarier chant – “Reza Shah! Reza Shah!”

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