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## A Window of Opportunity: The War against the Terror Masters Redux

By Michael A. Ledeen

*With the recent outbreak of violence in the Middle East, the mullahs in Iran are aiming to capitalize on the perceived weakness of the United States and Israel. By backing up his strong words with actions, President George W. Bush has an opportunity to humiliate and defeat the terror masters.*

September 11 happened when Osama bin Laden looked at us and thought we were ready to be had. We were politically divided and squabbling over everything. We clearly were not prepared to take casualties in direct combat. The newly elected president seemed unable to make a tough decision. And so bin Laden attacked, expecting to deliver a decisive blow to our national will, expecting that we would turn tail and run as we had in Somalia and that he would then be free to concentrate his energies on the defeat of local apostates, the creation of his caliphate, and the organization of Muslim revenge for the catastrophes of past centuries.

Within a few months he was driven out of Afghanistan, his organization was shattered, the Arab street he had hoped to mobilize was silenced by the shock and awe of the total victory of the Americans, and he became an instrument of forces greater than himself. If he still lives, he is the servant of the Shiite mullahs, making propaganda movies and audiotapes to bolster the morale of the constantly shrinking number of his admirers, while the mullahs order his followers to martyr themselves against Iraqi civilians.

He had earned his humiliation by misunderestimating his enemy.

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He would no doubt recognize the similarities between his own disastrously wrong analysis and the Iranian blunders leading up to the sequence of events in Gaza and northern Israel. As on 9/11, we, along with our Israeli allies, were internally divided—far more so than in 2001. As on 9/11, there was broad and deep public opposition to war, and both our and Israeli leaders had seemingly lost the will to fight, talking openly about exit strategies and negotiated settlements.

In Israel, the hated Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was on life support, gone forever from public life and succeeded by a man of lesser charisma and limited military experience. The political class drifted from withdrawal to withdrawal. Hezbollah lobbed missiles into northern Israel, totally without response in kind, and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert proclaimed yet further withdrawals.

In America, the hated President George W. Bush was at record lows in public opinion, daily excoriated by the major media, and constantly criticized by European leaders buoyed by polls showing their electors' utter contempt for America and for the American president. Indeed, the Europeans had protected Iran from any possibility of American action against the regime in Tehran by playing along with a patently phony negotiating strategy.

## The Terror Masters' Strategy

Who could imagine a forceful response to any escalation in the mullahs' long war against the infidels and crusaders? There was not even a rhetorical response to the daily panegyrics from Iranian president Mamoud Ahmadinejad, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Ali Larijani and the others, calling for death to the Jews, death to the Americans, death to the Iraqi collaborationists, death to the apostate Muslims wherever they were.

The auguries—and the Persians are a superstitious people—were generally good. In some cases, they were spectacularly good. Fanatics with Iranian support, for example, had overrun Somalia, and there was good reason to believe the new government would constitute a valuable staging base for terrorists and for Iranian military operations against the American fleet in the Gulf. Throughout the Muslim world, Ahmadinejad was like a rock star, drawing huge crowds wherever he went, even as far away as Indonesia. A demonstration of strength against the greater and lesser Satans in the Middle East would greatly enhance his appeal. And the legions of death now amounted to twenty-three terrorist groups, plus the obedience of their Syrian puppet, Bashir Assad.

Moreover, escalation was required to address some annoying problems. Demonstrations continued to break out across Iran itself involving virtually all elements of the country's diverse population. A show of strength, and—above all—of American impotence, would weaken the resolve of the mullahs' enemies. Elsewhere, Hamas was having a tough time in Palestine, and the hasty migration of top leaders—obviously concerned about their physical well-being—to Damascus was not the sort of triumphal message one wanted sent to the Islamist masses. Then there was Iraq, where most of the people were openly hostile to Tehran, and where Ayatollah Ali Sistani continued to exercise a substantial gravitational pull on millions of Iranians. Despite several efforts, the mullahs had been unable to have him assassinated. Nor had the thousands of intelligence agents and military officers sent from Iran to Iraq been able to catalyze a civil war, despite spreading around millions of dollars and hundreds of martyrs among all the ethnic and religious groups.

Finally, there was the Divine Message, the promise that the End of Days would soon be upon mankind, and the Hidden Imam would emerge from the bottom of his well, lead the believers to victory, and command the planet. The description of the moment of his return was

well-known: a time of chaos and suffering that could be accelerated by the faithful if they were brave enough.

Not, then, the tactical thinking described by so many—distracting world attention from the nuclear standoff, now headed for the United Nations—but something of an entirely greater order of magnitude. Omar, the insightful blogger at "Iraq the Model," sees it in the streets of Baghdad:

We are seeing some signs here that make us think that Iran and its tools in Iraq are trying to provoke the rise of the imam through forcing the signs they believe should be associated with that rise. One of the things that [does] not feel right is the sudden appearance of new banners and writings on the walls carrying religious messages talking specifically of imam Mehdi. These messages are getting abundant in Baghdad and in particular in the eastern part of the capital where Sadr militias are dominant, and a special number can be seen in the area of the interior ministry complex.

The interesting part is that these banners appeared within less than twenty-four hours after Hezbollah kidnapped the Israeli soldiers. Coincidence? I don't think so.

And so they struck: first in Gaza, then in northern Israel, and, as always, in Iraq and Afghanistan and India. They imagined, just as bin Laden had prophesied five years earlier (almost to the Muslim day; according to their calendar, Wednesday July 19 was the anniversary of our 9/11), that the regional assault would bring our allies and us to our knees. We would lose our will to fight, and abandon the battlefield to the army of Allah, Hamas, Moqtada, the Badr brigades, and all the others.

## A Wondrous Window of Opportunity

It is the same misunderestimation as before, for tyrants have always been unable to imagine the remarkable ability of free people to respond to challenges to organize quickly and voluntarily and to fight their enemies effectively. Hezbollah now risks rout, and Assad, sensing his peril, is whispering promises of betrayal in order to ensure his own survival. The Iranians still threaten Armageddon, but, so far at least, have been unable to demonstrate the capacity to provoke it.

A fine line separates charisma from buffoonery, and, instead of spreading revolutionary hegemony over the region, the mullahs risk being seen as unacceptably

dangerous clowns. Never before have Saudis, Egyptians, Jordanians, Kuwaitis, and Iraqis spoken so forcefully against the terrorists ( Hamas and Hezbollah, Sunni and Shiite) and their state sponsors in Tehran and Damascus. Instead of driving us from the battlefield, they now must contend with the very real danger that their former prey will unite against the mullahs and the Baathist remnant.

The terror masters risk the same terrible humiliation and defeat as befell bin Laden, and as things stand, only we can save them from the logical and moral consequences of their folly.

Stranger things have happened, and powerful forces within this peculiar administration are striving mightily to preserve the Iranian and Syrian regimes. To be sure, they do not exactly put it that way. They sing the chorus of crackpot realism: preserve stability, focus on the immediate problem (Hezbollah), and let the professionals do their diplomatic work. Then there are the brief stanzas set aside for the mellow voices of the Central Intelligence Agency (joined on this occasion by Thomas Friedman, chanting yet another peace-initiative-for-the-innocents): Syria has always helped us; Assad is young; he will improve; we have friends in Damascus; if he falls, the terrorists will take over; let us work with him.

It now lies to President Bush to decide. We must hope that he is not charmed. If he can now recall what he said after 9/11—that the world must make the stark

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choice of being with us or against us and that those who support the terrorists will be treated as terrorists themselves—then the deadly logic of their failed attack will close around the throats of the terror masters. The battle against Hezbollah is part of the broader war, as the mullahs well understood when they unleashed Hassan Nasrallah and Imad Mughniyah against the Israelis. Israel is now conducting that battle; it is up to us to prosecute the rest of the war.

Now is the time to tell our soldiers in Iraq that “hot pursuit” is okay, that the terrorist training camps on both sides of Iraq are legitimate targets, to be attacked in self-defense. Now is the time to tell the Iraqi government to come forward with the abundant evidence of Iranian evil-doing, and that we will support a fight against the mullahs’ foot soldiers in Iraq. These actions will signal the next stage of the war against the terror masters, which is the vigorous support of the pro-democracy forces in Syria and Iran.

It is a wondrous window of opportunity. As so often in our history, it was opened by our enemies. Let’s go for it. Now, please. It may not open again for quite a while.