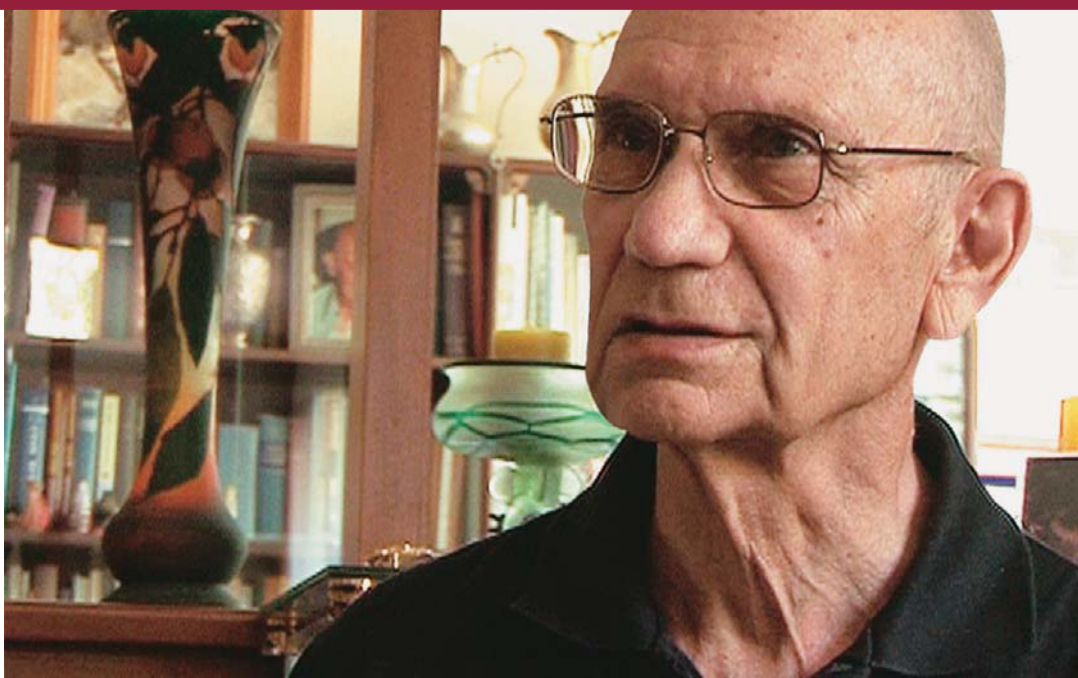


The ancient Persians twice invaded Palestine and also occupied Egypt. President Ahmedinejad is not the only one dreaming of a return to Iran's glorious past. Less extremist sections of Iranian politics also nourish this aspiration: and the West seems unaware of it, says Arieh Levin, who was Israel's ambassador to Teheran for many years. However, Levin excludes the possibility of a preventive nuclear attack

Levin: Ahmedinejad's dreams of Ancient Persia

MIDDLE EAST 2

by Farian Sabahi



“Iranian President Ahmadinejad wants to rebuild the Ancient Persian Empire and fly the Islamic banner over it”, says Israeli diplomat Arieh Levin, who was Israel's ambassador to Teheran in the 1970s and often contributes articles on Iran to Israeli newspapers. Pointing to an old map of the Middle East on the wall of his office, he adds forcefully: “I'm not joking: the Persians invaded Palestine twice and even occupied Egypt!”

How can the distant past condition the present?

Today's Iranians are young, ambitious

and very talented; they have petrodollars in abundance and their leaders are fanatics who know their business. And let's not forget that, Islamic country or not, Persia is still Persia: Ayatollah Khomeini might have wanted to destroy the ancient Persepolis and force the people to give up the Persian language in favour of Arabic, but he did not succeed because the Iranians have very strong ties to their past.

Do you think Iran is really a threat for Israel?

I don't think their speeches are pure rhetoric. Iranian leaders – not only

Ahmadinejad but also the reformer Khatami and the strong Rafsanjani – want to make Khomeini's dream of uniting the Sunnite and Shiite worlds come true, thereby putting Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia in danger. They are convinced that when they have achieved their intentions, Mahdi, the last Imam who died centuries ago, will reappear. And if this does not happen it will be their signal to go on to conquer the whole world.

Who can stop them?

Certainly not the United States, let alone President George W. Bush. I don't know what Barack Obama could do if he were to win the US elections in November. But we are definitely going through a crucial phase: the world will no longer be the same in 10-15 years' time.

Do you hope for Iranian nuclear sites to be bombed?

No, and we Israelis certainly should not do it. Our air force is very strong but we cannot take such a risk. After all, Iran is a problem not only for Israel; it is also a problem for Europe, which is tackling a lot of issues at the moment, including Muslim immigration, and may well collapse under their weight.

When President Clinton came to Israel on an official visit and asked you for advice on what to do about Iran, you said "Nothing". What is the right move now?

The Western world must remain united and stop behaving like Europe which, to paraphrase Lenin's reference to capitalism, is selling Iran the rope to hang it with: Europe continues to do business with Teheran without realising what the consequences will be.

According to one estimate, 250,000 of Israel's total population of 6.9 million are Jews of Iranian origin.

I, too was born and brought up in Iran, where my parents found refuge from Soviet persecution. And I am formally still Iranian because you cannot give up your Iranian citizenship. It is my personal experience that leads me to affirm that there has always been some form of Shiite extremism in Iran, even before the 1979 Revolution.

Saying Israel should be wiped off the map Ahmadinejad wins approval from Islamic fanatics, who are very critical of their leader

Relations with Israel were excellent in the Shah's time. What were your impressions when you were the Israeli ambassador in Teheran?

We had a proper embassy, but we had a lot of irons in the fire and things were not very clear. The Shah had started selling us oil in 1956: it would arrive in Eilat and then be sent via a pipeline across the Mediterranean to Europe. Iran had continued to supply us with oil during the 1973 oil crisis as well. It was a difficult year, because the Shah lost faith in Israel and went to Egypt for discussions with Sadat. He had taken it into his head to make Iran a world power; an objective not very different to the one Ahmadinejad has set himself today.

Was your collaboration a military one too?

Yes, we sold a lot of weapons to the Shah. At one point he wanted to start



_Iranian leaders, not only Ahmadinejad, want to make Khomeini's dream of uniting the Sunnite and Shiite worlds come true, thereby putting Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia in danger

building the long-range missiles he was buying from the US. I told the then Israeli Prime Minister Moshe Dayan that it was dangerous: the Shah was an ally of ours but we knew things could change. Dayan didn't listen to me; a project for a factory near Kerman was drawn up but in the end it didn't get built because the Revolution broke out in 1979. Our relations stopped the night between 10 and 11 February 1979. There were about thirty Israelis left in our ambassador's residence. Khomeini and his men knew it but did not take any action against them. The Americans got them out of the country by putting them on a flight to Germany.

How do you explain the current tension after all those years of friendship?

From the strategic point of view, Ahmadinejad's declarations are ridiculous: it is not in Iran's interest to declare itself our enemy. Saying Israel should be wiped off the map is a way to win approval from Islamic fanatics in Iran, who are very critical of their leader. This is why I think he wants to use Israel as a battering ram to knock down the Arab governments and enter those countries with the objective of restoring the splendour of the ancient Persian Empire.