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### The Fire in Iran

Forget about diplomacy, this is war.

**F**rom al-Reuters, we have a masterpiece of disinformation:

ISFAHAN — Iranian authorities beat up and tear gassed exuberant young revellers as they breathed new life into a pre-Islamic fire festival with a night of dancing, flirting and fireworks. The Islamic Republic, which has an awkward relationship with its ancient Zoroastrian religion, only gave guarded recognition to the "Chaharshanbe Souri" festival last year.

The Islamic republic does not have "an awkward relationship" with Zoroastrianism. It forbids Zoroastrian practices, including the celebration of the Zoroastrian New Year, Norooz. Forget about "guarded recognition;" there is a ban. The mullahs know something that al-Reuters apparently either doesn't know, or doesn't choose to report: that there is a big Zoroastrian revival under way in Iran, another sign of the hollowness of the Islamic republic, and the hostility of the Iranian people to their leaders. And to say that the authorities "beat up and gassed" some "revelers" is quite an understatement, since, on the evening of March 15h, there were very large-scale demonstrations all over Iran, combining the Norooz celebrations with calls for the downfall of the regime itself. Effigies of top mullahs were burned in the streets. But al-Reuters makes it sound like a frat party that just got a bit out of hand:

Hundreds of people poured onto the streets in Tehran and other cities for a rare night of partying. Public revelry is unusual in Iran where the authorities consider it to be at odds with the country's strict moral codes.

The IRNA news agency said police used tear gas in more than four places in Tehran. Vigilantes were also seen beating up a group of boys in the central city of Isfahan.

The Iranian student group headquartered in Texas provides us with a considerably more accurate — if somewhat ungrammatical — picture:

These clashes happened as brutal militiamen attacked Iranians who transformed the already hardly tolerated celebration into protest action and show of "un-Islamic" joy. Most areas of the Capital and cities, such as, Esfahan, Mahabad, Shiraz, Rasht, Kermanshah, Babol, Sannandaj, Dezful, Mashad, Ahwaz, Marivan, Khoram-Abad, Zabol, Baneh, Tabriz, Hamedan and Oroomiah (former Rezai-e) were scenes of sometimes unprecedented street fights between the regime forces and groups of Iranians.

In fact, according to Iranians with whom I have spoken, there were monster demonstrations in eleven provinces and 37 cities, and many thousands — one source said more than 30,000 — people were arrested, some only briefly, others shipped off to the infamous prisons and torture chambers of the regime. The most dramatic events took place in Shiraz, where the demonstrators directed a chant toward Washington: "Bush, you told us to rise up, and so we have. Why don't you act?"

Which is precisely the right question. The president publicly promised the Iranian people that the United States would support them if they acted to win their own freedom, and the Iranians are now calling on Bush to make good on that promise.

The problem is that the administration may have outwitted itself, as has happened in the past. It seems that our current tactic is to set a series of traps for the Europeans and the terror masters. The Europeans are told that we will support their nuclear negotiations with the Iranian regime for the time being, but they must join with us in strong action if the talks fail. The Syrians are invited to leave Lebanon, and Hezbollah is invited to abandon terrorism, and are warned of harsh consequences if they do not. The president quite clearly doesn't expect the negotiations to succeed, doesn't expect Syria to accept a free Lebanon, and doesn't for a minute think that Hezbollah can renounce its terrorist essence. In each case, we have convinced ourselves that, by taking a sweet and reasonable position today, we will be in a stronger position for tough action tomorrow. It will make it easier for at least some of the Europeans to join with us, whereas they would oppose tough action right away.

All that may well be true, but even so, it is the wrong thing to do. First of all, it enables the terrorists and their masters to buy time, and this is a moment of enormous risk for them. Every day they remain in power encourages them, and discourages the forces of freedom in their countries. When the people of Shiraz ask President Bush "why don't you act?" they are reflecting this reality. *Carpe Diem*, Mister President.

But above all, the clever stratagem adopted by the administration ignores Machiavelli's greatest lesson: Leadership is all about winning and losing, not about elegance and deep thinking. If we win the Europeans and lose the Middle East, we will have lost. But if we win the Middle East, the Europeans will hail us, as we see from their grudging tributes to Bush's successful liberation of Afghanistan and Iraq. "If you are victorious," Machiavelli says in his uncompromising way, "people will always judge the means you used to have been appropriate."

Syria and Iran are tottering, and if they fall, the terror network will break into relatively impotent shards that we will be able to destroy. Forget about diplomacy, this is war. Every day we hear about plans to attack the United States directly, and every day more Americans die in Iraq. Is it not too clever by half to resort to cunning diplomacy at such a time? Is it not immoral to leave American fighting men and women in harm's way an hour longer than is absolutely necessary?

The fires of freedom are burning all over Iran, Syria, and Lebanon. Don't stand back and admire the flames. Push the dictators in, and then cheer as free societies emerge.

Faster, confound it.

— *Michael Ledeen, an NRO contributing editor, is most recently the author of [The War Against the Terror Masters](#). He is resident scholar in the Freedom Chair at the [American Enterprise Institute](#).*

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