Jaw, Jaw is Better Than War, War

The Arab world just ticks differently. As measured by a clock in the Gulf, time itself seems slower in the cooler climes of the West. That's perhaps why so much more can happen in five years in the Middle East – especially the five that have just passed. In 2003, a barrel of oil cost $30, the region known historically as Mesopotamia was still under the control of a shepherd's son from Tikrit, and a reform-minded president was at the helm in Iran.

Last week, with oil prices virtually at $150, Iran's oil minister warned the West that, if attacked, Tehran would "react fiercely, and nobody can imagine what would be the reaction of Iran."

His words were especially aimed at ad hoc think-tanks in the capitals of the West, which have been assigned the unenviable task of doing precisely that: predicting the repercussions of such an assault. In the more apocalyptic of two gloomy outcomes – there is either dismal or horribly dismal – the eventual fallout from a bombing mission on Iranian soil would set history on a new course, entering the annals along with such earth-changing events as the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914, or the destruction of the World Trade Centre in 9/11.

War, as Lenin said, can be a great accelerator of events. The Middle East is now in such extraordinary ferment that it is possible to imagine that the system of states carved out of the Ottoman Empire following World War I could collapse altogether as a direct result of this war on terror and, more specifically, with the addition of a Persian front.

The old categories have changed or have morphed into new ones. For instance, that old reliable, the Arab-Israeli conflict, has shifted from the related objectives of regional peace and the creation of a viable Palestinian state. Instead, the media is now fixated on the armed movements in the region, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, which transcend national boundaries and pay lip service to the formal and invariably weak governments of the states where they reside. At the same time, conflicts within Islam are overshadowing the fights between states. Foremost among these is the emerging division between the Sunni and Shiite worlds, exemplified by the sectarian bloodletting in Iraq and to a lesser degree in Lebanon.

Behind the Sunni-Shiite conflict, say Western and some Arab observers, is the region's most troubling challenge: an Iranian regime that is bent on challenging the status quo. Tehran is leading a fundamental reordering of the balance of power that is coming at the expense of the Sunni world. With the rise of the Shiites in Iraq on the heels of the American invasion, and in Lebanon following Hezbollah's pyrrhic victory against Israel, some Arab states would be quietly jubilant if the US or Israel were to bomb Iran.

But in the maelstrom that is the Middle East on a good day, a war against Iran would breed a host of immediate and long-term catastrophes. Besides the Shiites, entire ethnic groups, from the Pashtuns in Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Kurds in Iraq, Turkey and Syria, need little goading to become further radicalized. Iraq, which is almost certainly set to break apart, could represent a bleak microcosm of the fate of the entire Middle East.

Of course, we've been at this historical juncture in the recent past: five years ago to be precise, when much of humanity excoriated the Bush administration for failing to deal with Iraq's

alleged WMD programme through diplomatic channels. There should now be an even more compelling argument to tackle the Iranian affair tactfully and – especially – peaceably.

To negotiate with Iran and the likes of Hamas and Hezbollah is too daring a proposition for some, particularly in the West. That smacks of appeasement, conjuring up images of Chamberlain waving a hollow agreement with Hitler. Unfortunately, it's a measure of how dire things are right now that neither course of action can inspire much hope. But taking the long view, the alternative to negotiating directly with Iran is substantially worse. It's not difficult to imagine a rather wretched future; one need only take full measure of the state of the Middle East since the American invasion of Iraq.

Even a less apocalyptic outcome of an attack on Iran would result in Arab towns and cities that are fractured by terrorism and religious strife; and security checkpoints at every hotel and shopping mall, where armed antiterrorist troops check every vehicle for traces of explosives and banned toxins. Moreover, time itself would slow down to a crawl across the world. For in such a future, the manufacture of cars and aircraft would decline as a result of the third and final oil shock, which would send oil prices into uncharted territory and herald the end of the internal-combustion era.

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Iran's Nuclear Programme

Prometheus brought the gift of fire to man, having stolen it from Zeus' lightning; in Persian mythology, that honour goes to a legendary character called Hushang who introduced fire to the Iranians after a run-in with a dragon.

For many analysts on both sides of the political divide, there is a modern-day parallel to that legend. From a western and even Arab perspective, it is all too easy to heap scorn on President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as an intransigent despot who relishes in playing with fire.

To be sure, Iran's quest for nuclear energy is a perilous adventure, with grave regional and international repercussions. However, there is in truth something far deeper in Iran's story than the extremist ramblings of a president or the calculated manoeuvres of the hard-line clerical clique that supports him.

Even his opponents in Iran – largely silenced by the heavy-handed crackdowns – readily agree with Iran's sovereign right to develop nuclear power. It is seen as a national pursuit for empowerment aimed at righting the wrongs of the past – that is, a pursuit informed by at least two hundred years of skullduggery, domestic meddling and, not least, technological denial by the West.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Iran served as a playground for superpower rivalries: the Cold War and, before that, the Great Game, which was the term coined for the conflict between the British and Russian Empires for supremacy in the Caucasus.

For modern states, like those in the West that are built on paradigms of progress and pragmatism, it may seem absurd to base policy on events that occurred two centuries ago. But

the Iranian collective psyche is infused with themes of defeat and deprivation at the hands of foreigners.

For example, every Iranian schoolchild learns that Czarist Russia and Victorian Britain deprived Iran of the railroad during the latter half of the nineteenth century, which was the internet of its age in that the technology was key to economic development. At various times, both powers jealously opposed a trans-Iranian railroad because they thought it would threaten their growing imperial frontiers. The railroad was eventually built during World War II only to help the Allies defeat Nazi Germany, after which Winston Churchill forced the man who built it – Reza Shah Pahlavi – to abdicate.

The Shahs returned to power not long after, in the early 1950s, because Iran's oil nationalization was opposed by Britain and its partner in profit, America, with the same self-righteousness that today colours their views of the Iranian yearning for nuclear energy. Few would argue that Mohammed Reza Shah came to power largely to safeguard western geopolitical interests and with little regard for the wishes of the Iranian people. And if the West suffers from historical amnesia, for many Iranians, among them Ahmadinejad and the ayatollahs, the thread of memory leads indelibly from the Great Game to the Great Satan – symbolically akin to the fire-spewing dragon that was defeated by Hushang.

This visceral and partisan attachment to history can also explain why Ahmadinejad denies the events of the Holocaust and continues to call for the obliteration of Israel. After all, two centuries ago, a homeland for Jews in Palestine was still little more than a Zionist dream, as espoused by a handful of wanderlusts.

Since then, Iran has been involved in several devastating civil wars and a conflict with Iraq's Saddam Hussein that resulted in more than a million casualties. Even before the eighteenth century and the arrival of western powers, Iranians held bitter memories of the Ottomans, the Mongols and the Arabs.

The West, including Arab states in the Gulf, must learn to grasp the mythical and psychological dimensions that continue to shape Iranian policy: conspiratorial fears that only serve to feed into the cult of the fallen hero. It is crucial to understand Iran's historical narrative because it translates directly into the modern pursuit of nuclear energy; and as a national symbol of defiance, it transcends the motives of the current Islamic regime.

If the West resorts to sanctions, or worse, to some military response, the outcome would be disastrous. More to the point, it would ultimately also be transient. Just as the West hampered Iran's oil industry and railroad, it can deny Iran nuclear technology for a while, but it cannot wipe out a collective grudge. Besides, there is little doubt that the Islamic regime would soon capitalize on such public rancour in order to advance its nuclear programme even as it continued to stifle domestic dissent. Iran will succeed in finding its nuclear holy grail, despite all the obstructionism the West can muster. The real issue, therefore, is whether outside powers will act such that Iranians will carry on to blame them for their misfortunes, or so that they will turn instead to focus on their own troubled road to modernity.

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The Colour of People Power

Lately, it seems, you can't have a decent political upheaval unless you colour it or find a suitably emotive symbol. The pro-democracy movement that swept across Ukraine in 2004 was famously known as the Orange Revolution, after its emblematic hue. It came fast on the heels of Georgia's Rose Revolution of 2003, which was named after the major opposition parties stormed the parliament with roses in their hands.

When Iraqi voters dipped their fingers in purple ink to signify that they had cast their ballots, the neoconservatives in the Bush administration proudly – and prematurely – declared it the Purple Revolution. And in Lebanon, the Cedar Revolution is still alive in a sense, even if it has morphed into a shadow of its former self; there are considerably fewer mass demonstrations and the independence movement aims more at curtailing the growing influence of Hezbollah rather than of Syria.

In Iran, the revolution is green. Every single Iranian man or woman who has broken through a personal barrier of fear to protest peacefully on the streets of Teheran wears some strip of green. In fact, it is soft power rather than hard military power that is slowly painting the new political landscape of the Middle East: that is, a growing network of institutions, such as clubs, online forums, women's groups and schools, that make up the fabric of civil society.

Indeed, the main lesson in this latest manifestation of people power is the success of Web 2.0 in leading the struggle. Given the rise of satellite dishes, camera phones and other means of instantaneous visual communication, it was perhaps inevitable that mass movements would embrace eye-catching colours that transcend language barriers and make messages recognisable around the world. Details of demonstration venues, tactics and slogans are regularly posted and circulated via Twitter, such social networking sites as Facebook and text messages.

The hundreds of thousands of protesters in Teheran wearing green scarves or ribbons do not even need the international press to report on the demonstrations and shootings; they can do it themselves and broadcast to the world via YouTube and other websites. And despite the often grainy, low-resolution images, a global audience immediately recognises what the protesters stand for thanks to the flashes of green.

Colour is a uniquely effective arrow in the political arsenal. In fact, as a weapon against repressive regimes, it is perhaps the hardest thing to defeat. Even the most dedicated apparatchik or brutal thug in an authoritarian state cannot go around making people take off their clothes. Moreover, colour shows incredible solidarity. Alone, each individual is powerless. But en masse, by the sheer smack of numbers, the powerless can utterly confound the most despotic states in the world – even if it is just for a few hours, a day or a week.

To be sure, colour and political conflict are old bedfellows, sharing a venerable history. In 218 BC, as he prepared to cross the Alps and invade Italy, Hannibal gathered his troops under the imperial purple standard – after the purple-red dye that was first produced by the Phoenicians, the cultural forefathers of Punic Carthage. England had its Wars of the Roses in the fifteenth century, with white representing the House of York pitted against the red House of Lancaster. The Bolshevik Red Army fought the White Russian royalists during the Russian civil war; while European fascism in the 1930s and 1940s was partial to brown and black shirts.

There are no hard-and-fast rules about what colour works for which national struggle. However, cultural touchstones tend to help determine a revolution's tone and character. In the Philippines, for example, yellow is a sign of homecoming; and in 1986, it became associated with the

people power – sometimes regarded as the first of modern-day mass movements – that ousted President Ferdinand Marcos (yellow was used out of respect for the leading figure in the political opposition, Benigno Aquino, who was assassinated upon his return from exile).

Still, that does not mean that the masses of young Iranians clamouring for change will succeed, or that the West should precipitate to label the unrest as a green revolution on par, for example, with Georgia's Rose Revolution. The reality, of course, is that people power movements often fail or fizzle into nothingness. Take, for instance, Tiananmen Square or the all but forgotten protests in Burma.

However, the demonstrations in Iran remain a source of great hope, particularly for a region where the stakes are as high as the inspiration is in short supply. While the outcome and eventual legacy of this revolt still hang in the balance, Iran has already written a new chapter in the history of people power. And that is history at its most noble.

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