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How They Stole The Bomb From Us

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IT WAS like an atom bomb falling on Israel.

The earth shook. Our political and military leaders were all in shock. The headlines screamed with rage.

What happened?

A real catastrophe: the American intelligence community, comprising 16 different agencies, reached a unanimous verdict: already in 2003, the Iranians terminated their efforts to produce a nuclear bomb, and they have not resumed them since. Even if they change their mind in the future, they will need at least five years to achieve their aim.

SHOULDN'T WE be overjoyed? Shouldn't the masses in Israel be dancing in the streets, as they did on November 29, 1947, sixty years ago? After all, we have been saved!

Until this week, we have been regularly hearing that - any minute now - the Iranians will produce a bomb that threatens our very existence. Nothing less. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the new Hitler of the Middle East, who announces every second day that Israel must disappear from the map, was about to fulfill his own prophecy.

A small nuclear bomb, even a teeny-weeny one like the ones dropped on Japan, would be enough to wipe out the whole Zionist enterprise. If it fell on Tel-Aviv's Rabin Square, the economic, cultural and military center of Israel would be vaporized, together with hundreds of thousands of Jews. A second Holocaust.

And lo and behold - no bomb and no any-minute-now. The wicked Ahmadinejad can threaten us as much as he wants - he just has not got the means to harm us. Isn't that a reason for celebration?

So why does this feel like a national disaster?

A TWO-BIT psychologist (like me) might say: Jews have become used to anxiety. After hundreds of years of persecution, expulsions, inquisition, pogroms and then the Holocaust, we have little red warning lights in our heads, which come on at the slightest sign of danger. In such a situation, we feel at home. We know what to do.

But when the lights stay off and no danger appears on the horizon, we get the feeling that something suspicious is going on. Something is wrong. Perhaps the lights are out of order. Perhaps it's really a trap!

There is one little consolation in the new situation. While it seems as if the immediate danger of annihilation has disappeared, there is a feeling that we are alone, on our own again.

That is another sign of Jewish uniqueness: We are facing the entire world alone. As in the days of the Holocaust, all the Goyim have forsaken us. Face to face with the Iranian monster which threatens to devour us, we now stand here alone.

All our media are repeating this in unison, like an orchestra which does not need a conductor, because it knows the music by heart.

True, other peoples, too, can derive satisfaction from standing alone. Engraved in my memory is a British poster that

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was hanging on our walls in Palestine in the dark days after the fall of France to the Nazis, when Britain was left quite alone in the war. Under the grim face of Winston Churchill the slogan proudly proclaimed: "Alright then, Alone!"

But with us this has almost become a national ritual. As we used to sing in the good old days of Golda Meir: *"The whole world is against us / That is an old melody / ...And everybody who is against us / Let him go to hell..."* At the time, one of the army entertainment teams even turned it into a folk dance.

In the last few years, a broad coalition against Iran has come into being. The Iranian bomb has become the heart of an international consensus, led by America, Queen of the World. With the consent of all its five permanent members, the UN Security Council has decreed sanctions against Tehran.

Now, before our very eyes, this coalition is crumbling. President Bush is stammering. Gone is the excuse for an American military attack on Iran, the dream of the Israeli government and the neocons. Gone is even the pretext for more stringent sanctions. God knows, perhaps even the existing feeble sanctions will be abolished tomorrow.

THE FIRST reaction of the Israeli leadership was vigorous and determined: total denial.

The American report is simply wrong, all the media proclaimed. It is based on false information. Our own intelligence community is in possession of much better data, which prove that the bomb is well on its way.

Really? All the intelligence in the hands of the Mossad is automatically transferred to the CIA. It is part of the mass of data on which the American report is based. It must be remembered that the published part of the report constitutes only 3% of the complete document.

So the American intelligence agencies must be deliberately lying. There is no escaping the conclusion that murky political motives must lie behind their unequivocal findings. Perhaps they want to make up for the false reports which President Bush employed to justify his invasion of Iraq. Then they overestimated, now they underestimate. Perhaps they want to take revenge on Bush and believe that the time is ripe, since he has become a lame duck. Or they are adapting themselves to American public opinion, which cannot stomach another war. And, besides, their chiefs are, of course, all anti-Semites.

Even if the American intelligence operatives innocently believe that Iran has stopped work on the Bomb, it just shows how naive they are. They cannot imagine that the Iranians are fooling them. Who knows better than us how easy it is to hide an atomic bomb and deceive the whole world? After all, we have been at it for years.

But all this does not change the fact: this report pushes American policy in a new direction and changes the entire international constellation.

The war on Iran, which was to be the defining event of 2008, has turned for the time being into a non-event.

WHAT ARE the results, as far as Israel is concerned? Why have our leaders been in a state of shock since the publication of the report?

The possibility of an independent Israeli military strike against Iran has vanished. Israel cannot wage war without the unreserved backing of the US. We tried once - the Sinai War of 1956 - and then President Dwight D. Eisenhower kicked our ass. Since then we have taken great care to obtain the blessing of the US before every war.

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For the military and intelligence services, the report is an unmitigated disaster for another reason too. The Iranian bomb plays an indispensable part in the army's annual fight for its massive chunk of the budget cake.

For right-wing demagogues, the effect is even more disheartening. Binyamin Netanyahu has built his whole strategy on the Iranian scare, hoping to ride the Bomb right into the Prime Minister's office.

Furthermore, when the Iranian issue cools down, the Palestinian issue warms up. That is especially true in Washington DC. President Bush is in trouble, his fiascos in Afghanistan and Iraq are still dragging on. Any American effort to install a stable government in Iraq, with its Shiite majority, depends on the backing of Shiite Iran. Bush's dream of delivering a lightning stroke against Iran and thus leaving his imprint on history is going up in smoke.

What can he do in order to leave any positive legacy at all? The default alternative is Israeli-Palestinian peace. Perhaps he will now give stronger backing to poor Condoleezza. Perhaps he himself will get more involved. Fact: he is soon going to visit Israel for the first [time] since entering the White House.

True, this effort has not much chance of success, but people in Jerusalem are worried nonetheless. That's just what we need - Bush acting like that anti-Semite, Jimmy Carter, who twisted Begin's arm and forced him to make peace with Egypt!

So what to do? One can instruct Israeli diplomats abroad to redouble their efforts to convince the governments that the situation has not changed, that one must fight against the Iranian bomb, whether it exists or not. But tell that to the Russians and the Chinese! The world's governments are happy to see the end of Bush's pressure - all except that happy couple, Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel, the new White House poodles now Tony Blair has gone.

THE NEW situation poses a thorny dilemma for Ehud Olmert.

On the way back from Annapolis, he uttered some amazing statements. If the "two states solution collapses," he declared, "the State of Israel is finished". Nobody in the peace camp has yet dared to go as far as that.

Does he believe what he says, or is it just a new spin? That is the question that is now dominating the discourse in Israel. In other words: is he just trying to win time, or is he really going to work for a peace settlement?

All indications suggest that he is in no position to take any step whatsoever. If he tries to carry out the first phase of the Road Map and dismantle some settlement outposts, he will face not only the determined opposition of the settlers and their supporters, and the silent (but highly effective) opposition of the military, but also obstruction by his government colleagues. Before the first outpost is dismantled, his coalition will break apart.

Olmert has no other coalition handy. Ehud Barak has been trying again and again to outflank him on the right and cannot be relied upon in a crisis. The Labor Party is a chaotic, spineless and unprincipled body. The shrunken Meretz party has a faction of only five Knesset members, four of whom are competing with each other for the party leadership. The ten members of the Arab factions (that's what they are generally called, even though one Hadash Knesset member is a Jew) are outcasts, and no "Zionist" government could be seen to rely openly on their support. And in Olmert's own faction there are several extreme-right members who would obstruct any peace effort.

In such a situation, the natural tendency of a real politician like Olmert is to do nothing, to issue pronouncement left and right (in both senses) and try to gain time.

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This week, the government announced plans to build 300 new homes in the odious Har Homa settlement, near Jerusalem. For someone like me, who has spent many days and nights demonstrating against the building of this particular settlement, that is bitter news indeed. It certainly does not indicate a turn for the better.

On the other hand, I have heard an interesting thesis from one of Olmert's inner circle. According to this, knowing that he is going to lose power, Olmert may tell himself: if I must fall, why not enter history as somebody who has sacrificed himself on the altar of a lofty principle, instead of just vanishing as a good-for-nothing political hack?

If he has no other way out, he might choose this solution - particularly as his immediate family is pushing him in this direction.

I would evaluate this possibility as "unlikely" - but stranger things have happened.

In any case, perhaps the peace forces should overcome their understandable reservations and try to influence public opinion in a way that would help Olmert turn in this direction.

EITHER WAY, one thing is certain: that son of a bitch, Ahmadinejad, has screwed us again.

He has stolen our most precious possession: the Iranian Atomic Threat.

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