

Iran and the Bomb: A Psychoanalytic Study

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During the past decade, the entire world has been preoccupied with the Iranian government's attempts to obtain nuclear bombs. Such weapons of mass destruction in the hands of a fanatical and tyrannical religious regime which considers the "Western" world, and above all Israel and the United States, the embodiment of evil, and that has repeatedly declared its intention of wiping Israel off the map, seem to pose the most serious threat to world peace, if not to the very existence of our species, that exists today (alongside those of North Korea, Al-Qaeda and other fanatical rogue states and terrorist organizations). Nor are these terrible fears unrealistic. The Iranian regime is clearly bent on obtaining nuclear weapons and becoming a world power. It makes no secret of its wish to destroy Israel and punish America. The Italian journalist Arturo Diaconale has published a book about a nuclear holocaust involving a war between Iran and Israel (Diaconale 2006).

The Middle East, of which Iran is part (and which it wants to dominate), is considered the most unstable, dangerous and volatile part of the world today. Gilles Keppel, a French scholar of the Arab and Islamic world, saw the Middle East as a nexus of international disorder and attempted to interpret "the complex language of war, propaganda, and terrorism that holds the region in its thrall" (Keppel 2004, 2005). How do we understand the fact that one Muslim regime threatens the security of our world and the existence of our species? There are several avenues to explore this problem: studying the minds of Islamic fanatics and terrorists (Falk 2008), attempting a psychobiography of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran (Boyles 2006, Küntzel 2006, Leeden 2006, Hitchcock 2007, Jafarzadeh 2007, Alexander & Hoenig 2008, Naji 2008), examining the long history of Iran from a psychoanalytic viewpoint (to the best of my knowledge this has yet to be done), studying the minds of those who contemplate nuclear warfare (Kull 1988), and studying the roots of Iran's rage at America (Lewis 1990, Kull 2011). In the pages that follow, I shall attempt to walk some of these avenues into a psychoanalytic exploration of this terrifying puzzle.

In a classic example of ethnocentrism, the ancient Persians thought of themselves as noble and of other people as common. The Avesta is the collection of the sacred Persian texts of Zoroastrianism. In the Avesta the word *arya* meant noble, and the modern

Persian name *Iran* derives from the ancient Persian word *aryana* meaning “Land of the Nobles.” This is by no means unusual, as most ancient peoples thought of themselves as superior to all other people, if not as the center of the universe and their God’s chosen people (Strauss 1959, Falk 2010a). The ancient Greeks called anyone who could not speak their language *barbaroi*, the Slavs called the Germans *nyemtsi* (mute), the Romans called all the “savage” people on the eastern outskirts of their empire *saraceni*. It is a major problem, however, when the political and military leaders of modern Iran consider their nation superior to all other nations, and when this ethnocentric group narcissism becomes a moving force for the wish to wipe out their real or perceived enemies.

Pride and humiliation are among the key psychological issues we face here (Falk 2008, pp. 65-70). The notion of honor and dignity (*sharaf* in Arabic) is crucial to our understanding Arab and Muslim culture, in which everything must be done to erase one’s humiliations and to maintain one’s honor. Many fanatical Muslims terrorists speak of their wish to avenge their humiliation and to restore their pride by waging holy war on the infidel who have injured them or their people.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (born 1956), the controversial president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, who has repeatedly called for Israel’s destruction, denied the Holocaust of the Jews, pursued the development of a nuclear-power program which can be used for military ends, and has sworn to “humiliate the United States” and Iran’s other enemies, seems deeply preoccupied by the emotional issues of pride, dignity, shame and humiliation. It seems that not being humiliated is more important to him than life itself, that he is prepared to sacrifice millions of his countrymen to secure his country’s pride and dignity, as, in fact, he did during the Iran-Iraq war, when he sent the young Iranian *basijis* to certain death on the Iraqi minefields. The current president of Iran identifies himself completely with his country, as his many public pronouncements testify. If this is so, and if we wish to save our human civilization from destruction by an irrational and fanatical Islamic regime that is developing nuclear weapons, we need to understand the mind of its president, as well as its culture.

People in the “West” have been puzzled by Ahmadinejad’s seemingly-irrational behavior. He has repeatedly denied the Holocaust in which six million Jews were murdered by Hitler’s Germans and their collaborator, called for the destruction of the “Zionist entity” (his name for Israel), denounced the “Christian World” and the “American Crusaders,” denied the existence of homosexuals in Iran, stubbornly attempted to develop nuclear weapons under the guise of civilian nuclear power, rejected all proposed compromises with the “Great Satan” (America) and with the “Little Satan” (Israel), and relentlessly pushed for Iranian hegemony in the Middle East. As a young *basij* leader during the Iran-Iraq war he sent many Iranian youths to their death in the Iraqi minefields. Overall, he has displayed an extreme Islamic fanaticism with a black-and-white view of the world.

By early 2008 a power struggle was emerging between Ahmadinejad and Iran’s Supreme Religious Leader, Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Hosseini Khamenei (born 1939), suggesting

that the president no longer enjoyed the backing of Khamenei, as he did in the years after his election in 2005. In the fall of 2008 Mohammad Ismail, a parliament member and friend of Ahmadinejad, told the world that the Iranian president had fallen ill under the stress of his position. Ahmadinejad reportedly worked a twenty-hour day and had not appeared in public for several days. Within Iran, there have been several attempted revolts against him, all of which were ruthlessly and bloodily suppressed, and some prominent Iranians have bitterly denounced Ahmadinejad.

Some experts believe that Khamenei is no less fanatical about Israel's destruction than Ahmadinejad. As one of my colleagues has put it, "many observers have noted that Ahmadinejads can come and go, but Khamenei and the whole coterie around him and the basic fundamentalist ideology to which they dance are committed to the principles and Draconian destructiveness that Ahmadinejad has pushed forward so theatrically and disgustingly successfully ... Khamenei and Iranian theological mysticism ... are out to destroy Israel – and more – that is the grave concern". Be that as it may, it is clearly Ahmadinejad who voices the paranoid Iranian and Muslim hatred of Israel most frequently, and that is no accident.

From 2008 to 2012 the power struggle between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad gradually intensified, with no resolution in sight. In 2008 Khamenei's representative on Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Hasan Rowhani (born 1948), the former Iranian negotiator with Europe and with the International Atomic Energy Commission, publicly said that during his three years in office Ahmadinejad's policies had done more harm than good. Rowhani told a meeting of the Iranian Moderation and Development Party that Ahmadinejad had missed out on "golden" opportunities to develop the Persian state. "Why are people's pockets empty and their dignity [is] on sale?" Rowhani asked. "Careless, uncalculated and unstudied remarks and slogans [by Ahmadinejad] have posed many costs on the nation and the country." (AP & MSNBC news report).

After the Iranian presidential election of 2009 Ahmadinejad seemed to have rigged the election and stolen the presidency from their popular candidate, the elder Mir-Hossein Mousavi (born 1942) Millions of Iranians angrily demonstrated against their president. Many demonstrators were killed, jailed and tortured. A bitter father-son struggle then erupted between the elder Khamenei and the younger Ahmadinejad, his former protégé. Before the Iranian parliamentary election of March 2012 Khamenei publicly warned Iranian "officials" who had defied his authority "not to be fooled by the conspiracy of the enemy." The forty-year-old Iranian-American journalist Babak Dehghanpisheh thought that "by warning against a repeat of the protests that followed the 2009 vote, Khamenei was taking aim at his once favorite political son, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who betrayed no emotion as he sat with dignitaries in the front row of the crowd" (Dehghanpisheh 2012).

The power struggle between the elder ayatollah and the younger president had peaked at a very dangerous time for Iran and for the world, when Israel was quite seriously

considering a military strike on Iran to destroy its nuclear-weapons capability. In early March, just as the Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu prepared to visit U.S. President Barack Obama, Dehghanpisheh tried to predict the outcome of the forthcoming Iranian parliamentary election:

Few are betting on Ahmadinejad. Says Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: "Iran has become a one-party system, the party of Khamenei, [and] the most important qualification for aspiring members of parliament in Iran is obsequiousness to the Supreme Leader." But a critical sector of Tehran's power structure is showing signs of restiveness: the Revolutionary Guards Corps, the dominant military force in the country, some 120,000 strong, which happens to oversee vast business interests. Though the corps is not monolithic, it has been supportive of Khamenei since he assumed the role of Supreme Leader in 1989. Now, however, some [Revolutionary] Guards commanders, faced with biting new international sanctions, are increasingly critical of Khamenei's brinkmanship. If Ahmadinejad and his allies somehow win a majority in the 290-seat parliament, the beleaguered President could once again try to chip away at Khamenei's authority, perhaps even advocating radical policy goals like dialogue with the U.S. or more-transparent nuclear negotiations. It is not that Ahmadinejad loves Washington. He just happens to be betting that most Iranian voters want to see an improvement in ties. (Dehghanpisheh 2012, p.22).

The Iranian *majlis* election of March 2012 was won by Khamenei's supporters, who immediately summoned Ahmadinejad to answer their "tough" questions about the failings of his government. Far from playing the penitent, the Iranian president arrogantly mocked the parliamentarians for their "simple" questions on this "test" and asked them to "give him good marks" for his answers. The lawmakers criticized his acerbic remarks as offensive but left him in his job. Some commentators expected Khamenei to order Ahmadinejad's arrest; others thought the two leaders had reached an accommodation. In fact, Khamenei and Ahmadinejad have had an uneasy truce since then, each trying to weaken the other's power base.

As with every political leader, to understand the Iranian president we need to know his early-life story. It is hard to discover Ahmadinejad's biography. The official website of the Iranian president, which conceals more than it reveals, gives the following "Biography of H. E. Dr. Ahmadi Nejad, Honorable President of Islamic Republic of Iran":

Dr. Mahmoud Ahmadi Nejad was born in 1956 in the village of Aradan in the city of Garmsar. He moved and stayed in Tehran together with his family while he was still one-year old and completed his primary as well as his low and high secondary education there. In 1975, he successfully passed the university entrance exam with high marks and started his academic studies on the subject of civil engineering in the Science and Technology University in Tehran. In 1986, he continued his studies at MS level in the same university. In 1989, he became a

member of the Board of Civil Engineering Faculty of the Science and Technology University. In 1997, he managed to obtain his Ph.D. on transportation engineering and planning from the Science and Technology University. Dr. Ahmadi Nejad is familiar with English language. During the years when he was teaching in the university, he wrote many scientific papers and engaged in scientific research in various fields. During the same period, he also supervised the theses of tens of students at MS and Ph.D. levels on different subjects of civil engineering, road and transportation as well as construction management. While still a student, Dr. Ahmadi Nejad engaged in political activities by attending religious and political meetings before the Islamic Revolution. With the victory of the Islamic Revolution, he became a founder and also a member of the Islamic Association of Students in the Science and Technology University. During the war imposed on Iran [by Iraq], Dr. Ahmadi Nejad was actively present as a member of the volunteer forces (*basij*) in different parts and divisions of the battle fronts particularly in the war engineering division until the end of the war.

In a classic instance of historical denial, this official biography studiously omits the years 1993-1997, in which Ahmadinejad governed Ardabil province, only to be removed by the elder President Sayyid Mohammad Khatami (born 1943).

Ahmadi Nejad's actual biography is quite different from the official one. The Israeli journalist Yossi Melman and his Iranian-born colleague Meir Javednifar have found that the Iranian prime minister was born the fourth child of a family named Saborjhan. The name Saborjhan designated an occupation of thread painting, which as used in carpet weaving. "On October 28, 1956, Seyyede Khanom Saborjhan gave birth to her fourth child, a boy named Mahmoud, during a difficult time for the Saborjhan household." (Melman and Javednifar 2007, p. 1). *Seyyede* is the Persian equivalent of "Mrs." Mahmoud's father, Ahmad Saborjhan, had failed in two previous jobs as a grocer and as a barber. His wife's brother had moved to Tehran, and done well there. On his advice, Ahmad decided in 1957 to do likewise, moving with his wife and children to the capital. He at first taught the *Koran*, but that did not provide enough to feed his family, so Ahmad Saborjhan became a blacksmith in the poor Pamanar neighborhood of Tehran.

Being a blacksmith, his fourth job in two years, gave Ahmad Saborjhan enough income due to the construction boom in Tehran at that time. With a partner, he opened a blacksmith shop in the better Narmak neighborhood. His wife Khanom was deeply religious, and they prayed regularly at the nearby mosque. They moved to Narmak, and Ahmad changed his last name to Ahmadinejad. The reason for the change was that name Saborjhan had unpleasant connotations of sweatshops employing children in carpet weaving for next to nothing, and Ahmad wanted a good name that would not turn off clients. The name *Ahmadi Nejad* means "righteous race" and alludes to one of the names of the Prophet Muhammad as well as to Ahmad himself as the *paterfamilias* who

“sacrificed his past ... to better his descendants’ lives” (Melman & Javednafar 2007, p. 2). So the father made himself feel more respectable and worthy, and provided for his family.

After they moved to Tehran, there were three more Ahmadinejad children, so Mahmoud was sandwiched between three siblings on each side. He was an intelligent, studious, and dutiful child. His mother was attached to him, and he to her. But he may well have suffered personal humiliations, first from his older siblings, who may have envied or resented him for his mother’s love, then from his father, as is common in Muslim families, where the father is all powerful and must be respected, and can inflict physical and emotional punishment on his sons. When he was excluded from *Koran* studies for being too young, he protested and did not give up, showing his “determination and stubbornness.” (Melman & Javednafar 2007, p. 3). In the family, however, Mahmoud had to fight for his self-esteem and life-space, to find himself a niche in a crowded household. Later on, he identified himself with Mother Iran, as he may well have identified with his religious, rigid mother. His Islamic fanaticism is very similar to hers.

Also, Ahmadinejad was involved with the *basij* as more than a member. The *basij* is a volunteer Iranian paramilitary force founded by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979. The *basij* are subordinate to, and obey the orders of, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. There is a local *basij* organization in nearly every city in Iran. They engage in auxiliary law enforcement, emergency management, providing social services, organizing public religious ceremonies, policing morals and suppressing dissidents. But they also provided the child volunteers that made up the human wave attacks against the Iraqis during the Iran–Iraq War (1980-1988) in which tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, were killed. During the war with Iraq, Ahmadinejad served as a *basiji* instructor who trained children to go into the Iraqi minefields singing songs about the ancient battle of Karbala. He came to power as the candidate of the *basij*. Ahmadinejad is proud of his *basij* role and wears a *basiji* headgear when he covers his head. (Küntzel 2006).

In 2005, when he was running for president of Iran, Ahmadinejad announced that his father had died in 1993 (Melman & Javednafar 2007). In fact, his aging father would only die the following year. Why would Mahmoud “kill” his aging father? Was he ashamed of him? Or was it his identification with his fanatically religious mother and his negative identification with his father that caused him to make that strange statement? In 1993 he had been appointed an advisor for cultural affairs to the Iranian Minister of Culture and Higher Education, then was named governor of Ardabil province, where he served until 1997, when he was removed by the relatively-liberal President Mohammad Khatami. Did Mahmoud see his elevation in 1993 as a triumph over his father? In any event, he seems to have identified more with his mother against his father.

The Canadian political psychologist Blema Steinberg has shown how personal experiences of *shame* and *humiliation* deeply affect leaders’ decision making in international conflicts and wars, and may lead to disastrous and even catastrophic consequences. A leader who

has been personally humiliated is more likely to order military strikes against a country which he perceives as having humiliated his own country. Lyndon Johnson, “the humiliated narcissist,” escalated the U.S. bombing of Vietnam, and Richard Nixon, “the angry narcissist,” ordered the bombing of North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia, whereas Dwight Eisenhower, the “healthy narcissist,” who had not suffered any deep humiliations, turned down the French request for U.S. intervention at Dien Bien Phu. In other words, a leader with a secure ego and healthy self-esteem will not need to be preoccupied with his own or his country’s “humiliations” in making his political or military decisions. In Ahmadinejad’s mind, however, humiliation is paramount. Perhaps due to his personal experiences, Ahmadinejad is deeply preoccupied with Iran’s real and imaginary humiliations.

It seems that a military attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities by Israel or the U.S. would entail missile retaliation, with hundreds of thousands of military and civilian casualties on both sides, and untold destruction and suffering, and would cause Iran’s leadership to feel humiliated even further. If Ahmadinejad’s need to repair his feelings of shame and humiliation by achieving his country’s nuclear power is so deep and so strong, then perhaps the only way to avert this very grave threat to our human civilization is to find a way to make him feel dignity and pride without resorting to such extremely dangerous measures. While it is true that Ahmadinejad does not have the final say, his views and feelings often reflect those of the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, and his fellow mullahs, who, after all, helped him become President.

Modern Iran sees itself as the natural successor to ancient Persia, a country and a civilization that have existed for millennia. But this culture is very different from our “Western” one. The American journalist David Ignatius has pointed out that what matters most to Iran, and one of the chief reasons for its building its nuclear program, is *honor, respect* and *dignity*. He wrote:

A word that recurs in radical Muslim proclamations is ‘dignity.’ That is not a political demand, nor one that can be achieved through negotiation. Indeed, for groups that feel victimized, negotiation with a powerful adversary can itself be demeaning. That’s why the unyielding Yasser Arafat remained popular among Palestinians, despite his failure to deliver concrete benefits. He was a symbol of pride and resistance. Hamas, too, gains support because of its rigid steadfastness, and a strategy that seeks to punish pro-Hamas Palestinians into compromise will probably fail for the same reason. *The Muslim demand for respect isn’t something that can be negotiated, but that doesn’t mean the West shouldn’t take it seriously.* For as the Muslim world gains a greater sense of dignity in its dealings with the West, the fundamental weapon of Iran, *al-Qaeda* and *Hamas* will lose much of its potency.

Can we help the Muslim world gain a greater sense of dignity in its dealings with the West? It is clear that Ahmadinejad feels that Iran has been victimized and humiliated by

the “West.” The big question left unanswered by Ignatius, however, is whether the “West” can in fact help the Muslim world, and above all Iran, gain a greater sense of “dignity” that would make it desist from building nuclear weapons or engaging in murderous terrorist activity. For Muslims who suffer from a painful sense of shame and humiliation, an insult to their honor, the traditional way of repairing that damage to their dignity is through humiliating those who they feel inflicted the shame and humiliation in the first place. And as Ahmadinejad perceives it, those who need be destroyed and humiliated are first and foremost Israel and the U.S.

In 2006 Iran’s president Ahmadinejad sent a personal letter to U.S. President George W. Bush, ostensibly to propose “new ways” to end the unending dispute between Iran and the U.S. over Iran’s continuing program to develop nuclear power. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley reviewed the letter and dismissed it as a “negotiating ploy” and “publicity stunt” that did not address U.S. and world concerns about Iran’s nuclear program. Had they read the letter psychologically, however, they might have noticed the striking and frequent recurrence of the theme of *humiliation*, especially all the wrongs and injustices which have been done to Iran in the past few decades:

The brave and faithful people of Iran too have many questions and grievances, including the coup *état* of 1953 and the subsequent toppling of the legal government of the day, opposition to the Islamic revolution, transformation of an Embassy into a headquarters supporting the activities of those opposing the Islamic Republic (many thousands of pages of documents corroborate this claim), support for Saddam [Hussein] in the war [that Iraq] waged against Iran, the shooting down of the Iranian passenger plane, freezing the assets of the Iranian nation, increasing threats, anger and displeasure *vis-à-vis* the scientific and nuclear progress of the Iranian nation (just when all Iranians are jubilant and celebrating their country’s progress), and many other grievances that I will not refer to in this letter. (Ahmadinejad 2006).

Ahmadinejad accused “the Christian world” of perpetrating all these wrongs on Iran. A few days later, at a meeting in Indonesia, Ahmadinejad said, “the letter was an invitation to monotheism and justice, which are common to all divine prophets.” Scholars of Islam believe that for a fanatical Islamist like Ahmadinejad, “monotheism” is synonymous with Islam, that fundamentalist Muslims consider Allah the god of all people, and all people to be born Muslim but to be raised erroneously by their parents on other faiths.

Shortly thereafter, Ahmadinejad sent a similar letter to Bush’s German counterpart, Angela Merkel, the federal chancellor of Germany. Once again, the issues of pride, dignity, shame and humiliation were paramount. In 2007 Ahmadinejad scorned the United Nations sanctions imposed against his country for its nuclear program, telling an Iranian crowd that Iran had “humiliated the United States” in the past and would do so again. He probably meant the Iranian seizure of the U.S. Embassy and Iran’s shooting

down of the U.S. helicopter-rescue mission. The so-called "Iran hostage crisis" was a diplomatic crisis between Iran and the United States where 52 U.S. diplomats were held hostage at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran for 444 days (from November 4, 1979 to January 20, 1981) after a group of terrorists (which may have included Ahmadinejad himself) took over the U.S. embassy in support of Iran's Islamic revolution. The ordeal reached a climax when President Jimmy Carter authorized the U.S. States military to attempt a helicopter-rescue operation, Operation Eagle Claw, on April 24, 1980, which failed when the U.S. helicopters crashed in the Iranian desert and resulted in an aborted mission and the deaths of eight American servicemen.

Humiliation is very much on Ahmadinejad's mind. The American psychoanalyst and political psychologist Stanley Renshon, the author of a highly laudatory biography of George W. Bush (Renshon 2004), seems to have overlooked the crucial importance of this issue when devoted his "Political Psychology" blog of May 10, 2006 to refuting Ahmadinejad's statements in his letter to Bush:

It's not only that the letter is framed in large religious and political terms like "needs of humanity," "rational behavior, logic, ethics, peace, fulfilling obligations, justice, service to the people, progress, property, service to the people, prosperity, progress *and respect for human dignity*," and calls on Mr. Bush to "follow the teaching of divine prophets." Words like peace, justice, progress and prosperity have many meanings of course. However, in Mr. Ahmadinejad's view they all lead in one direction – that Mr. Bush and the United States have, by their behavior both at home and abroad strayed from the path of virtue as defined by Mr. Ahmadinejad and reaped the just rewards of world hatred as a result ... And, *along with the grand but vague terms noted above the letter is riddled with misinformation, misunderstanding and disingenuousness that makes it hard to follow much less fully understand ...*(Renshon 2006, May 10, italics added).

It is not the task of a political psychologist to point out the errors in a political leader's statement and to refute them. It is rather to try to explain the psychology of the writer of this "erroneous" statement. In the second part of his blog, Renshon did try to do so, but missed the main point:

The issue is not the virtue of scientific progress in history, but Iran's apparent quest to develop nuclear weapons. I take Mr. Ahmadinejad's letter and views as sincere and that is precisely the problem. His list of grievances is laid at the door of a single villain – the United States. His motives and those of his country are pure, without guile, artifice, or self-interest ... The letter is *presumptuous* and, because of its lecturing without any hint of real humility or perspective, *insulting*. But its real importance lies elsewhere. *The letter is a window into a mindset of a man whose piety easily slides into sanctimony. It is the mindset of a man who, in spite of the high-minded appeal to religious aspirations, treats the real world in decidedly black or white terms in which his word is the final judgment.* The

question is not whether he is “crazy,” a word the *Wall Street Journal* used in the title of an editorial about him. In the clinical sense, he is as sane as the leadership he represents, and that is our problem. (Renshon 2006, May 10, italics added).

Unfortunately, Renshon ignored the crucial importance of the emotional issues of dignity and humiliation in Ahmadinejad’s letter. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad may not be crazy by our ordinary “Western” standards, and certainly not by those of his own Iranian Muslim culture. At the same time, his preoccupation with the pride and dignity and with the humiliations of his country, which, in his unconscious mind, is himself, and with inflicting humiliation on the enemy, is striking in his letter to Bush, as it is in his letter to Angela Merkel, the chancellor of Germany. The words “humiliation” and “dignity” appear over and over again in those letters. And to the current president of Iran, the acquisition of nuclear power and nuclear weapons is the symbol of pride and dignity, the antidote to the unbearable shame and humiliation that he feels his country has suffered.

Whether, when, how and why Mahmoud Ahmadinejad personally suffered painful feelings of shame and humiliation we do not exactly know at this point. The biographies of his that are publicly available say next to nothing on this subject, except that he was removed by Khatami as governor of Ardabil province in 1997. We know that he was the fourth of seven children, born in 1956. My feeling is that shame and humiliation were his lot already as a child, both from his older siblings and his father. Even Melman and Javednifar tell us next to nothing about the early relations in the family. But, in view of the insights of psychoanalysis, we know how a leader’s internal and external worlds intertwine and interact. A man who is so wholly preoccupied by humiliation, and who sees the world in black and white, may well have suffered humiliations himself.

Iran itself boasts a continuous millennia of self-rule, including that of Cyrus the Great and Darius the Great, and calls itself a great country and a great civilization. Yet the present Islamic government of Iran constantly remembers its humiliations by the “Western” powers, especially the recent ones. Persia had suffered worse humiliations and defeats in its wars with Imperial Russia during the rule of the Qajar dynasty (1794-1925), resulting in Persia losing almost half of its territories to Imperial Russia and to the British Empire via the treaties of Gulistan, Turkmenchay, and Akhal. The later humiliations mentioned by Ahmadinejad in his letter to Bush pale beside such losses.

Repeated foreign intervention in Persia resulted in Iran’s constitutional revolution establishing the nation’s first elected parliament in 1906 within a constitutional monarchy. It was then that Iranians like Ahmadinejad’s father were required to take last names. During most of the twentieth century the Pahlavi dynasty (reigned 1925-1979) was a puppet regime for foreign powers. In summer of 1941, During World War II, the Allies Great Britain and the Soviet Union invaded Iran to prevent it from allying itself with the Axis powers (Germany, Italy and Japan). In 1953 the revolutionary Mossadegh regime

was overthrown by a *coup d'état* led by the U.S. Shame and humiliation were inflicted upon Iran by foreign powers. Ahmadinejad sees himself as part of the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Shah and restored “dignity” to Iran. He wants to undo all of Iran’s humiliations, and, perhaps, vicariously, his own, which he may have forgotten or displaced to his country.

On May 30, 2006 Ahmadinejad was interviewed by the German magazine *Der Spiegel* about a wide variety of subjects, including Germany, Iran, Israel, the U.S., the Holocaust, and nuclear weapons. The next day, the neoconservative American scholar Michael Arthur Leeden correctly noted the repetition of the theme of “humiliation” in Ahmadinejad’s answers to the *Spiegel* interviewers. Leeden’s conclusions were ominous:

“Why must the German people be humiliated today because a group of people [the Nazis] committed crimes in the name of the Germans during the course of history?” [said Ahmadinejad]. The *Spiegel* journalist doesn’t have the wit to ask Ahmadinejad why *jihadis* like him base their actions on events that took place centuries ago, and then have the *chutzpah* to condemn the Germans for feeling guilt about the actions of their parents. *The use of “humiliation” tells us a lot about the way the mullahs think about the world; they look at international events as a matter of domination or humiliation*, and he hammers away at this theme: “Saying that we should accept the world as it is would mean that ... the German people would be humiliated for another 1.000 years. Do you think that is the correct logic?” *You can be quite certain that the mullahs are not going to accept anything less than the humiliation of the West, and Ahmadinejad’s hatred for the Europeans oozes from every verbal exchange.* When the *Spiegel* interviewer asks him whether he wants nuclear weapons, Ahmadinejad treats him with total contempt. If you know how to parse the language, you will see that he says “yes. Hell yes!” But instead of putting it in the context of the pursuit of Iranian national interests, he treats it as part of his hatred of the West: “In our view, the legal system whereby a handful of countries force their will on the rest of the world is discriminatory and unstable ... there are a number of countries that possess both nuclear energy and nuclear weapons. They use their atomic weapons to threaten other peoples ...What we say is that these countries themselves have long deviated from peaceful usage. These powers have no right to talk to us in this manner. This order is unjust and unsustainable.” (Leeden 2006, May 31; italics added).

The following day, Renshon echoed Leeden’s observations in his “Political Psychology” blog post entitled “Iran’s ‘dignity’ and the bomb”:

Reading through the *Spiegel* interview with Iran’s President Ahmadinejad *the theme of being humiliated and meting out humiliation is invoked several times.* There are echoes of this theme in his development, and certainly in Iran’s modern history, but it is the implications of these themes for Iran’s quest for nuclear

weapons that is my focus here. David Ignatius recently raised an interesting question about why the Iranian government wanted to develop a nuclear arsenal. He noted their “implacability” and attributed it to three sources: divisions in the ruling elite, their theocratic view that mandates from God can’t be negotiated, and their elevation of “dignity” as an irreducible essential of the regime’s goals. (Renshon 2006, June 1; italics added).

On the individual level, malignant narcissism and paranoid megalomania are unconscious defenses against unbearable feelings of worthlessness. There is a constant interplay, however, between the public and private spheres in Ahmadinejad’s statements. His paranoid public pronouncements betray his private megalomaniac feelings. As he perceives it, he and Iran, which, to him, unconsciously, may be one and the same, must avenge their shame and humiliation and achieve pride, honor and dignity by humiliating the “West.” Destroy Israel, humiliate the U.S., and Iran’s dignity will be restored; the Great Good Mother will be avenged. In early August 2012, on Al-Quds Day, the date fixed by his mentor Khomeini to commemorate “the crimes of Zionism,” Ahmadinejad declared to the assembled ambassadors of Muslim countries in Tehran that Zionism was the ultimate Evil controlling the world for the past four centuries, and that it had to be annihilated.

U.S. President George W. Bush warned that an Iranian attack on Israel or the U.S. could lead to World War III with its unthinkable toll of death and destruction. The sanctions imposed on it are making Iran feel more isolated and humiliated – and more defiant. So we seem to have David Ignatius on the one hand searching for ways to give Iran and the entire Muslim world the feeling of “dignity” that they so badly crave, so as to make them desist from trying to achieve it through catastrophic nuclear violence, and Michael Leeden on the other hand saying that “the mullahs are not going to accept anything less than the humiliation of the West.”

After Barack Obama became president of the United States in early 2009, U.S.-Iranian relations had their ups and downs. At first Obama tried to form bridges to the Iranian leadership, as he does with his political adversaries (Falk 2010). When he realized that this would not work, and that the Iranian leaders were doggedly pursuing their nuclear-weapons program, Obama formed an international coalition to block Iran’s nuclear-weapons program by imposing sanctions on it, freezing its assets, refusing to buy its oil, and isolating it economically and politically. The American journalist Michael Gerson believes that Obama’s policy is not working very well:

By building a broad international coalition against Iran and applying effective sanctions, the Obama administration has raised the stakes of the confrontation. More accurately, it has built a broad coalition by raising those stakes. After an initial period of naivete [sic], the administration concluded that inducements would not be enough to hold back Iran’s nuclear ambitions. *The only hope is the application of costs that Iran cannot bear* [italics added]. The resulting sanctions

are biting ... [The sanctions] have not caused Iran to back down, but the approach is not yet exhausted. *It is worth another twist of the tourniquet to reduce significant exceptions and exemptions.* The Iranians have traditionally used diplomatic meetings as a method to weaken sanctions in exchange for the promise of more meetings. *A negotiation conducted by America and Europe that eases pressure only as a reward for compliance would send a final signal of seriousness* (Gerson 2012).

Unfortunately, Gerson's analysis is based on the implicit assumption of rationality on the part of the current Iranian leaders. It ignores their profound feelings of humiliation and their need to undo them. The importance of this emotional issue cannot be exaggerated. The sanctions are only making the Iranian leaders more stubborn. Negotiations with Iran that will not undo its humiliations, redress its grievances, and give it a sense of pride, dignity and honor, will go nowhere. And bombing Iran may aggravate the humiliation problem and entail fearsome consequences, such as tens of thousands of missiles raining on Israel from Lebanon, Syria and the Gaza Strip, with retaliatory strikes by Israel that will wreak havoc and sow death and destruction in these countries.

*Is there any way for us to give the Iranian leaders the feelings of dignity and honor they crave so much, to undo their feelings of shame and humiliation, so as to remove their need to develop nuclear weapons, to destroy Israel and to humiliate the United States? Can we avert a catastrophic missile dominated showdown in the Middle East that may leave hundreds of thousands of people killed or crippled in Iran, Lebanon, Syria, the Palestinian Territories, and Israel? Whatever the answer, David Ignatius and Michael Leeden were right: *we are misreading the enemy.* His feelings of shame and humiliation and his need for honor and dignity are paramount, more important, perhaps than any economic, political, or other considerations. Without addressing this issue we have little hope of averting a catastrophe in the Middle East.*

I am no wild-eyed optimist. I am not at all certain that it is possible to "appease" the Iranian leaders, to "soften" their hatred of us, or even to give them the dignity that they crave. In the case of such malignant paranoid thinking, rational attempts at mollification are obviously futile. On the other hand, if the deepest emotional needs of the enemy are ignored, the result can only be further enmity, hatred, war and catastrophe, if not a nuclear holocaust. A former Israeli security chief has just declared publicly that if he were an Iranian he would be deeply worried about the next 12 weeks, implying that Israel or the U.S. would soon launch a pre-emptive strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. It is not clear whether that warning was intended to scare the Iranian leaders or to goad the U.S. into action. What is clear is that the consequences of such a strike – thousands of explosive missiles raining on Israel from Lebanon, Syria, Gaza and Iran itself – are as terrible to contemplate as a nuclear bomb in the hands of the fanatical Iranian leaders. We do not have any "good" choices here, only hard psychological, political and military realities that must be confronted.

Editor's Comment: Avner Falk is a well-respected psychoanalytically-oriented psychohistorian. In his study of Iran and the Bomb he quite correctly looks at pride and humiliation as key psychological factors in the mess of Iranian strivings for nuclear military power, and one might add in general for a huge imperialist place in the sun of the large area of the Middle East, if not more. In this connection the reader is also referred to the very meaningful and sensitive writings of Evelyn Lindner such as her books, "Making Enemies: Humiliation and International Conflict" (2007) and "Emotion and Conflict: How Human Rights Can Dignify Emotion and Help Us Wage Good Conflict" (2009).

GPN's point of view is that Falk is very accurate in identifying the irrational basis of Iranian thinking - meaning their powerful unconscious drives to satisfy emotional needs and not only rational political, economic, and military interests. And we clearly agree that profound feelings of humiliation are at work that need to be thoughtfully addressed in world strategies to stop Iran on the march to becoming a nuclear monster.

However, it is our notion that the unconscious needs of the Iranians especially include dynamics that are best described as an evil thrust for excessive power, and in our judgment even a brilliant and sensitive attempt "to give the Iranian leaders the feelings of dignity and honor they crave so much" will not be sufficient "to remove the need to develop nuclear weapons, to destroy Israel and to humiliate the United States" as Falk concludes with some degree of well-intending hopes - though he does not do so naively.
- Israel W. Charny



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1985 ביוגרפיה פסיכואנליטית [Moshe Dayan, the Man and the Myth: a Psychoanalytic Biography]. Jerusalem: Cana. Tel Aviv: Ma'ariv Library.

1987 דוד מלך ישראל: ביוגרפיה פסיכואנליטית של דוד בן גוריון [David King of Israel: a Psychoanalytic Biography of David Ben-Gurion]. Tel Aviv: Tammuz Publishing.

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See also <https://sites.google.com/site/avner1943/>

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