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A Shah with a Turban

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

I'd like to thank Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, for his observation that the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews was just a "myth." You just don't see world leaders expressing themselves so honestly anymore -- not about the Holocaust, but about their own anti-Semitism and the real character of their regimes.

But since Iran's president has raised the subject of "myths," why stop with the Holocaust? Let's talk about Iran. Let's start with the myth that Iran is an Islamic "democracy" and that Ahmadinejad was democratically elected.

Sure he was elected -- after all the Iranian reformers had their newspapers shut down, and parties and candidates were banned by the unelected clerics who really run the show in Tehran.

Sorry, Ahmadinejad, they don't serve steak at vegetarian restaurants, they don't allow bikinis at nudist colonies and they don't call it "democracy" when you ban your most popular rivals from running.

So you are nothing more than a shah with a turban and a few crooked ballot boxes sprinkled around.

And speaking of myths, here's another one: that Iran's clerics have any popularity with the broad cross-section of Iranian youth.

This week, Ahmadinejad exposed that myth himself when he banned all Western music on Iran's state radio and TV stations.

Whenever a regime has to ban certain music or literature, it means it has lost its hold on its young people. It can't trust them to make the "right" judgments on their own.

The state must do it for them. If Ahmadinejad's vision for Iran is so compelling, why does he have to ban Beethoven and the Beatles?

And before we leave this subject of myths, let me add one more: the myth that anyone would pay a whit of attention to the bigoted slurs of Iran's president if his country were not sitting on a dome of oil and gas.

Iran has an energetic and educated population, but the ability of Iranians to innovate and realize their full potential has been stunted ever since the Iranian revolution. Iran's most famous exports today, other than oil, are carpets and pistachios -- the same as they were in 1979, when the clerics took over.

Sad. Iran's youth are as talented as young Indians and Chinese, but they have no chance to show it. Iran has been reduced to selling its natural resources to India and China -- so Chinese and Indian youth can invent the future, while Iran's young people are trapped in the past.

No wonder Ahmadinejad, like some court jester, tries to distract young Iranians from his failings by bellowing anti-Jewish diatribes and banning rock 'n' roll.

What is a fact is the danger someone like Ahmadinejad would pose if his country developed a nuclear weapon. But that is where things are heading. Iran has so much oil money to sprinkle around Europe it doesn't worry for a second that the Europeans would ever impose real sanctions on Tehran for refusing to open its nuclear program.

"The West has lost its leverage," notes Gal Luft, an energy expert at the Institute for the Analysis of Global Security. Europe is addicted to Iran's oil and to Iran's purchases of European goods. At the same time, the Iranian regime has been very clever at petro-diplomacy.

After the United States invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, "the Iranians knew they needed an insurance policy," Luft added. "So they did two things: they concentrated on developing a bomb and went out and struck gas deals with one-third of humanity -- India and China," the world's two fastest-growing energy consumers.

So it is highly unlikely that China would ever allow the UN Security Council to impose sanctions on Iran.

The whole world seems to be getting bought off these days by oil. Gerhard Schroder, the former German chancellor, just became chair of a Russian-German gas pipeline project -- controlled by the Russian government -- that he championed while in office.

The man just stepped down as the leader of Germany and now he's working for the Russians! I guess Jack Abramoff was not available.

The word from the White House is that President Bush is trying to figure out a theme for his State of the Union speech and for his next three years.

Mr. President, what more has to happen -- how many more Katrinas, how much more reckless behaviour by Iran, how many more allies bought off by petro-dollars -- before you realize that there is only one thing to do for the next three years: Lead the United States and the world in an all-out push to conserve energy, reduce dependence on oil and develop alternatives?

Because three more years of \$60 US a barrel oil will undermine everything good in the world that the United States wants to do -- and that's no myth.