

“Turkey, Asia and the Iranian Nuclear Crisis”

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In recent weeks, U.S. diplomats and foreign policy experts have expressed their surprise at the reluctance of key Asian powers such as Turkey and India to join their efforts to isolate Iran. Neocon commentators are appalled, they say America has gone soft and that President Obama’s generosity is only being reciprocated by ingratitude from Ankara to Beijing: “the global goodwill President Barack Obama enjoyed on taking office last year has often failed to translate into foreign-policy wins”.⁽¹⁾

Earlier this month, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan met with French officials in Paris for the closing ceremonies of the “Year of Turkey” festival. Erdogan is the leader of the Adalet ve Kalkınma Party (AKP), a relatively moderate Islamist movement, and his visit came at a time when Washington, Paris and London are pushing for a new round of sanctions against Iran in the Security Council- of which two Middle-Eastern countries, Turkey and Lebanon, are non-permanent members. French officials were taken aback by Erdogan’s interview with *Le Figaro*, a leading conservative newspaper, where far from showing sympathy with the European position, the Turkish Prime Minister called for renewed dialogue with Teheran...and insisted that it’s high time for Europeans to realize that “Turkey is ahead of many EU countries in many respects”!⁽²⁾

The fact that US and European officials seem surprised that Asian countries would oppose a new round of sanctions against Iran is probably more important than the Iranian nuclear crisis itself for it will have broader and longer lasting consequences: it reveals the depth of political incompetence and crass ignorance of many Western policy makers, who were led to believe that “Sunni” Turkey, “Hindu” India and “Communist” China could easily be enrolled in their crusade against Iran, a radical Shiite regime....

To understand the behavior of Asian governments, we have to see the world through Asian eyes, to accept and respect that a different cultural and historical background will ultimately bring about different policy outcomes. From Istanbul to Shanghai, modern history isn’t structured around our official Euro-centric narrative: for most Asians, the tragedies of World War I and World War II do not define the 20th century: “For us in Asia there have been two epochal events in this century. The first was Japan’s defeat of Russia in 1905. The second was China’s atom bomb [...] The first lesson was taught by Japan in 1905. It demonstrated that an Asian country could master the West’s weapons and use them to defeat the West. The second lesson was taught by China. It demonstrated that Asia could equal the West even in *the most advanced military technology*”.⁽³⁾

Only by changing our historical focus can we understand why Iran is adamant about gaining full mastery over nuclear technology, and why its neighbors (except for Israel) generally oppose the adoption of a new round of sanctions against Teheran. Here, culture is key: unlike the Hebrew Old Testament or the Gospels, the Koran and the works of early Islamic scholars (many of them Iranian Sunnis such as al-Ghazali and Biruni, the father of modern astronomy) stressed the importance of physics and engineering and adopted a resolutely *atomist worldview* in line with the scientific

tradition of Ancient Greece.⁽⁴⁾ Far from being obscurantist clerics, Iranian, Indian and Arab theologians viewed scientific enquiry as a moral obligation: “Utlub il Eelma wa law fil-Seen”- seek knowledge even if you have to travel to China to find it, says an ancient Islamic Hadith. In this perspective, Asian and Muslim people and their governments simply don’t understand why the West won’t allow them to acquire “the most advanced technology” and resent the condescending attitudes of US and European officials who try to warn them about the “Iranian threat”...

Last month, two female suicide bombers blew themselves up aboard packed subway trains in Moscow, killing 38 people and leaving more than 60 injured, according to the Russian security service. The Russians were astonished to learn that the perpetrators of this horrendous crime were young women from the Caucasus, where Russian troops have been fighting Islamist insurgents for more than a decade. A study of the ideological underpinnings of the Russo–Japanese War of 1904-1905 can help us better understand the current situation in the Caucasus: back then, Islamic scholars across the Caucasus and Asia rooted for General Nogi Kiten, the Japanese ideal of a soldier who defeated the Russians at Port Arthur: Turkish journalists even “gladly informed [their] readership of the Japanese emperor’s alleged conversion to Islam following the Japanese victory over Russia”.⁽⁵⁾ Thus, Nogi’s call for self-sacrifice and holy war against the “white invaders” resonated with many in Edirne (the birthplace of Turkish nationalism), Istanbul, Teheran and Delhi: “when the news was brought to him that his eldest son- the pride and hope of every Japanese household- had been killed in the battle of Nanshan, ‘I am glad he died so splendidly,’ the father said. ‘It was the greatest honor he could have.’”⁽⁶⁾

Reading General Nogi’s words, one cannot but think about the striking similarity with many of the speeches of Sheikh Hasan Nasrallah, spiritual leader of Hezbollah, a pro-Iranian Lebanese party: following the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Nasrallah told his followers to stand fast, insisting that he wasn’t afraid of dying, reminding them that his oldest son, Hadi Nasrallah, was killed by the Israeli occupiers ten years earlier, and that he didn’t “encourage his young son to join the fight [...] but could only be filled with pride on the glorious day he died a martyr”⁽⁷⁾...

Today, neocon foreign policy experts call for new wars abroad in the name of “freedom” and accuse Turkey of being “soft on the Iranian nuclear program and harsh on Israel”⁽⁸⁾ - in the words of Morton Abramowitz, former American Ambassador to Ankara. But we don’t have to listen to the warmongers. Europe must find within itself the courage and wisdom to heed Professor Louis Massignon’s prescient call: only by truly understanding Asian and Muslim culture will Europe succeed where medieval Spain and modern Russia have failed.⁽⁹⁾

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(1) Jay Solomon and Peter Spiegel, “Nations Decline to March to U.S. Beat”, *Wall Street Journal*, March 19, 2010
<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704534904575131791591789392.html>

(2) “Erdogan : Sarkozy doit venir voir la Turquie d'aujourd'hui”, *Le Figaro*, April 4, 2010

<http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2010/04/06/01003-20100406ARTFIG00002-erdogan-sarkozy-doit-venir-voir-la-turquie-d-aujourd-hui-.php>

(3) Harrison Salisbury, “Indians Seek to Counter Power of Chinese in Asia”, *New York Times*, August 18, 1966- Quoted by H. Kahn and A.J. Wiener, ‘The Next Thirty-Five Years: a Framework for Speculation, *Daedalus*, vol. 96, no. 3, Summer 1967

(4) P.L. Schoonheim (ed.), *Symposium Graeco-Arabicum I: the Transmission of Greek Texts in Medieval Islam and the West*, (Bochum: Studienverlag Dr. N. Brockmeyer, 1986), p.3

(5) M.S. Hanioglu, *Preparation for a Revolution: the Young Turks, 1902-1908*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.71

(6) J. Scherer, *Young Japan: The Story of the Japanese People & Especially of their Educational Development*, (London: Kegan Paul, 1905), p. 279

(7) Excerpts of Hasan Nasrallah’s speeches, Al-Manar TV, September-October 2006

(8) M. Abramowitz, and H.J. Barkey, “Turkey's Political Revolution: Ankara's Civil-Military Struggle has Global Significance”, *Wall Street Journal*, March 22, 2010
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(9) L. Massignon, “Conférence au Centre de Documentation de l’Ecole Militaire de Saint-Cyr”, 20 mars 1930- Reprinted in L. Massignon, *Ecrits Mémorables - vol. I*, (Paris : Robert Laffont, 2009), p. 615

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