

# **Creating Another Imagined “Great Satan” Will Not Absolve Iran Mr. Zarif**

**By**

**Dr. Majid Rafizadeh**

**Dr.rafizadeh@post.harvard.edu**

The more the west and the world reaches out to Iran in an attempt to reintroduce it to the international community, the more Iran finds itself under pressure at home to sustain its revolution, a revolution that is built around creating and fighting off great “Satanic” enemies, be they real or imagined, in order to sustain its theocratic legitimacy.

The effects of this pressure is reflected by Iran’s antagonistic and belligerent behavior since the signing of the Nuclear deal, where they have on numerous occasion harassed US patrols (to the extent that US warships had to fire warning shots towards revolutionary guard warships), to holding US sailors hostage and embarrassing the US government, to the continuous inflammatory and contradictory remarks made by Khamenei and his inner circle against the west and the United States, all of which is meant to sustain the hatred and fanaticism that fuel the legitimacy of the Iranian theocracy and “the revolution” that is being exported regionally at an unprecedented level, leaving exceptional carnage and destruction in its wake.

The United States of America, better known in Iran as the “Great Satan”, the quintessential bogymen, and according to the Iranian theocracy the global patron of global terrorism, has served Iran very well in the past. It provided the all-encompassing enemy that could be blamed for all Iran’s ills and failures to the Iranian people, while providing the “religiously cloaked” narrative that fueled regional recruitment of militias based on religious and sectarian ideals as part of a divine holy mission to defeat this Great Satan; be it in Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Shia militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, in addition to breeding sectarian hate in the Kingdom of Bahrain and elsewhere.

However in order to save face in the international community as part of the current approachment, America it seems can no longer serve the

role of the “Great Satan”, as that will be inconsistent and contradictory to the international re-approachment that is taking place.

But Iran cannot dispense with the role of the Great Satan altogether, as it is a lynchpin of the theocracy’s governing strategy, so the search has been on for a new player to fill this role, and based on Iran’s Foreign Minister latest Op-ed in the New York times, it seems that they have settled on a replacement for America to play the role of the great Satan; Saudi Arabia and what he has dubbed as Wahhabism as the new international patron of global terrorism.

Truth be told, it is an intelligent attempt by Iran to seize the opportunity to ride a wave of international, albeit targeted, criticism that is being hurled at Saudi Arabia as some groups attempt to understand and rationalize the reasons for the uptick in global terrorism, including Islamic inspired terrorism. Such a simple approach to assign blame to a single group for a global phenomenon is very convenient for Iran and fits a well-established pattern, yet it does not add up. The fact is that the so called Wahhabism that Mr. Zarif is alluding to has been around for over 300 years, and Islamic inspired terrorism is only a recent phenomenon. Where was the so called Wahhabi influence of inspiring global jihad during the duration of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which is amongst the dearest causes to every Muslim and Arab citizen? It does not exist because the connection and oversimplification is a fallacy. Global terrorism is inspired by many factors least of which is any religious doctrine. Politics is usually the primary culprit.

There is no doubt that there are concerns when it comes to the role of Saudi Arabia, direct or indirect, in promoting a strict interpretation of Islam, and its implications on how some people are interpreting Islam today. Human rights and women’s rights are causes for concern. Global financing of Islamic charities and organizations leaves room for better monitoring and accountability. However despite any role that Saudi Arabian funding, or wars launched by the United States and the west’s in the region, and the collapse of Middle Eastern governments have contributed to regional instability and the ensuing global uptick in Islamic inspired terrorism, none of them will whitewash the fundamental role that Iran has and continues to play in fermenting hatred and spreading destruction and chaos in the region. Iran is not, cannot and should not be allowed to play the victim once again as it assigns blame to another “Great Satan”.

Iran is a primary culprit and instigator of the upheaval taking place in the Middle East and indeed the primary instigator of sectarianism that has torn the Arab and Muslim world apart and fueled religious extremism. The Sunni-Shia divide that the world knows today was birthed by the 1979 Iranian Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini, who clearly and for the record stated that Iran had the responsibility to export the Shia revolution, which has since become a key tenant of their constitution and foreign policy.

Since the establishment of the Shia theocracy in Iran, they have relentlessly created and supported Shia militant groups and proxies that have sowed discord in Muslim communities along sectarian lines with devastating impact. Their evolving success in this regard ranges from the power of Hezbollah (amongst its oldest creations) in Lebanon and its sectarian stranglehold on the country that has paralyzed its progress, to the setting up of Iraqi militia's that have successfully neutralized and undermined "national state" institutions and which been blamed for so many coalition deaths in Iraq over the past decade and hampered national unity and progress. They created and supported Shia militias in Syria to prop up and support the Alawite regime in Damascus, which allowed and directly fueled the establishment of a counter extreme Sunni militias such as ISIS and AL Nusra to stand up to Shia expansionism, thereby transforming a Syrian national revolution into a sectarian conflict that has torn the country apart. Iran has actively supported Houthi rebels in Yemen that undermined the legitimate national government and further created sectarian divisions to a point where Yemen is becoming a failed state threatening the entire world. It should not be surprising that we are seeing a resurgence of Al Qaeda in Yemen, as the Shia expansionism provides the required fuel to prop up the Sunni –extremism narrative for recruitment. Iran has also been extremely active in supporting Shia protests and militants in Bahrain to further institutionalize the sectarian divide in the country and create the conditions for further strife...and the list goes on. In fact Iran has such a strong interest in promoting sectarian strife that they have been working with extreme Sunni groups such as Al Qaeda and the Taliban as per the leaked documents by WikiLeaks in July 2010.

Therefore when Mr. Zarif talks about the causes of global Islamic terrorism and extremism and tries to assign blame to everybody but

Iran, be it America and now Saudi Arabia or the so called Wahhabism as the new Great Satan, the world cannot ignore the facts and the clear track record Iran enjoys in paving the way for this destructive global phenomenon and their primary role and responsibility in solving or addressing it. Creating a new “Great Satan” will not absolve Iran or address the primary reason why Islamic sectarian fundamentalism is on the rise.

The Islamic faith is innocent from inspiring global terrorism – who isn’t innocent are the political theocratic regimes that thrive on fanning sectarian religious conflict to sustain their legitimacy. Solving this global challenge requires forward thinking and requires real action – not simply assigning blame on others and playing victim.

Indeed Saudi Arabia is not without its challenges and much work needs to be done to address some of its glaring criticisms. However that is exactly what Saudi Arabia is doing, it has taken ownership of its challenges and set out a broad and dare I say courageous reform program that aims to address social, economic and political issues that will further allow Saudi Arabia to play a constructive and positive role in both region and the world and in serving the Islamic faith.

If anything, Iran must follow Saudi Arabia’s example and launch their own comprehensive reform program, and to do so in as transparent a manner that Saudi Arabia has. This will require real leadership and real courage from Iran, but most importantly it will require Iran to rid itself and the world of its self-perpetuating Shia revolution and its mandate of exporting it throughout the world.

Rather than focusing on creating a new “Great Satan” to justify their shortcoming and create more smoke and mirrors for the Iranian people and the international community to cover up their destructive sectarian agenda, Iran should focus on launching a “Great Reform Program” along the lines of Saudi Arabia’s vision 2030 that will allow its citizens to thrive and actively participate in the world based on universal values and norms including respecting the sovereignty of other faiths, people and nations.