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HAMAS, HEZBOLLAH AND IRAN

THE CHALLENGES
FOR ISRAEL AND THE WEST

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AND IRAN: THE CHALLENGES FOR ISRAEL AND THE WEST

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About ten years ago, on my first visit to Sydney, I spoke here on Islamic fundamentalism. Since that time, the problems that it poses have grown all the more acute. The reason is that confusion has come to surround our understanding of the subject. Some of that confusion is suggested in the title of my lecture, which I didn't choose. I was struck immediately by one word in it: challenge.

A challenge is a problem you have to solve. Building a bridge can be a challenge; forming a government can be a challenge. A challenge is an obstacle that has to be overcome. If I had chosen the title of my lecture, I would have replaced the word challenge with another word. That word would have been "threat". A threat is something that you must defeat, or it will defeat you. And, together, Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran pose what I believe is a serious threat to the stability of the Middle East, to American primacy in the Middle East, and to the security of America's allies - the West's allies - both Israeli and Arab. If we downgrade this threat to a mere challenge we're very unlikely to muster the resources to defeat it. If that happens, the Middle East will become an even more dangerous place than it is today.

My title presents Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas as challenges for Israel and the West. Why focus on these three - Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran - as a group? After all, there are other Islamists who obviously pose threats. In Iraq there are the Sunni insurgents of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and the Shiite militia men of Muqtada al-Sadr. The Taliban aren't finished; they have resurfaced in Afghanistan. There are a lot of strains of Islamism and some of them are very dangerous. Day and night they plan terrorism and subversion, so why focus on Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran?

The answer is that these are Islamists who have power or a share of it. Their leaders aren't insurgents hiding in the shadows or terrorists hunkered down in caves; these are Islamists who are presidents, prime ministers, cabinet ministers. Hamas and Hezbollah are officially designated terrorist movements by the United States,

and Iran is considered a sponsor of terror. They have used terror to advance themselves and they have never renounced it. Many of their ideas are in fact indistinguishable from those of Al Qaeda, but they have something that Al Qaeda and Zarqawi don't have, and that the Taliban don't have: they have some share of power.

In Iran, Islamists have been in total power since 1979 and they show no inclination or willingness to share it with anyone. In the Palestinian Authority, Hamas came to power earlier this year and every minister in the Palestinian government is a Hamas member. In Lebanon, Hezbollah is a member of the ruling coalition with ministerial portfolios, and it controls a swathe of territory in the south of Lebanon, in tacit agreement with the Lebanese government.

Now we take it for granted that we must wage war against terrorists and insurgents who send aircrafts into buildings or cut off the heads of foreigners. There is at least some measure of clarity about that. But the minute Islam's radicals manage to take power, the minute they control the state apparatus as in Iran or with a parliamentary majority, as in the Palestinian Authority, or a few cabinet posts, as in Lebanon, the clarity is lost. Instead of clarity we get equivocation; we hear policy makers and intellectuals say these enemies, however abhorrent to us, are now legitimate actors. We have to talk to them, persuade them, conciliate them, defuse their grievances. They may have sent suicide bombers to kill innocents, they may inveigh against "Satanic America", they may deny the Holocaust and threaten a new one - no matter. They are powers to be reckoned with, and we must accept the fact that their power compels us to deal with them. And if we do so perhaps they will stop the terrorism and hate mongering that got them in our bad books to begin with. Now that they have power, they are bound to moderate - so the argument goes.

This tendency also draws on another argument which is very much a presumption of post-modern self doubt. It is this: if they hate us so much, if they are so determined to harm us, then perhaps they have a legitimate grievance, perhaps their very existence is our fault. Is Khomeini not the product of our reckless interventions on behalf of the Shah? Is Hezbollah not the result of our misguided attempts to intervene in Lebanon and dominate it? Is Hamas not the result of our refusal to use all of our leverage to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? We are to blame for their excesses; *mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. We now reap what we have sown. And in penance for our crimes we must appease the genies we have released and so perhaps entice them back into their bottles. This attitude is quite widespread in intellectual, academic, and in policy circles. The far left of course takes it to extremes; it projects on Iran, on Hezbollah and Hamas all of its longings for some popular surge that will defy us and so gratify

the self-contempt of those who are alienated from the idea of the West.

Some quite famous intellectuals have made pilgrimages to the Ayatollahs and Sheiks who run these movements. One of the most famous was the French philosopher Michel Foucault who met with Khomeini during the Ayatollah's exile in Paris and then visited Iran twice and wrote pieces in the newspapers hailing the spirituality of the new revolution. This was so at least until it started executing homosexuals and imposing the veil on women. But you don't have to go back a quarter of century. For example, just last month the man recently voted the most influential living intellectual, Noam Chomsky, visited Beirut where he had an audience and a photo op with Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah. Chomsky took that opportunity to praise Hezbollah for defying the United States and to denounce the UN resolution that calls for Hezbollah to disarm.

I could regale you with a long list of other intellectuals who just can't find a flaw in Hamas and who won't allow a few bloodstained buses filled with victims of its suicide bombings to distract them from the schools and kindergartens that it sponsors. Of course, as ample precedent for this, Western intellectuals conducted the same sort of romance with Soviet Russia, Communist China and Castro's Cuba. (I recommend Paul Hollander's book *Political Pilgrims* that covers all this very well.) Islamism has replaced communism as the great hope of the anti-West brigade of American and European intellectuals. It is hailed as a force for progressive change and as we fail to see it, that is, so we are told, because of our prejudice against Islam.

You will have gathered from my derisive tone that I regard such ideas to be folly. And there is growing evidence that these ideas are anathema to wider public opinion in America and Europe. They are anachronistic throwbacks to the times that produced Foucault and Chomsky, times when the West looked upon the Islamic world with a measure of post-colonial guilt. The events of 9/11, the terror attacks, the social unrest associated with Islamism in Europe have made for a dramatic shift in public opinion. This is the case not only in America. We see it in a steep falling off in support for the Palestinian cause in parts of Europe, as that cause increasingly becomes identified with Islamism. We see it in the somewhat firmer European attitude towards Iran, especially since Ahmadinejad's election. What is more patchy is the leadership and the policy to translate this sentiment into a strategy for reversing the gains made by extreme Islam and in all three states, Iran, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority.

Now what is the nature of the threat they pose? Let's enumerate them in the name of clarity. First, there is Iran's bid to become a nuclear military power. Iranian leaders constantly threaten Israel and cast their nuclear effort as somehow designed to counter Israel.

This is a bid to make Iran's nuclear ambitions popular in the Islamic, particularly the Arab, world. But the threat posed by an Iranian nuclear capability much exceeds the threat it would pose to Israel. What is called the Persian Gulf by Iran and the Arabian Gulf by the Arabs is in fact neither. It is an American Gulf, in which the United States preserves order with an overwhelming political and military presence in order to facilitate the free trade of oil, the life blood of developed and developing economies. The Pax Americana in the Gulf serves Europe, India and China. Without it they would have to create a "Pax" of their own. And it also serves the interests of the oil producing states themselves, especially the smaller ones that are not able to defend themselves against aggressive nationalist neighbours. One of them was Saddam Hussein; had the US not intervened to expel him from Kuwait, he would today sit astride the Gulf like a colossus, and it is doubtful there would have been an effort to remove him later.

This is Iran's real objective. It seeks the status of a regional hegemony, transforming the phrase "Persian Gulf" from a description of geography to a reality of power politics.

This would be the second phase of Iran's revolution. The first phase was ridding Iran itself of foreign power influence to the institution of an Islamic system of government. Despite all predictions, that system has proven resilient and entirely resistant to moderating or liberalising reform. The second phase is to transform Iran from an independent Islamist state to a hegemonic Islamist power in an area of vital geo-strategic and economic significance: the oil-soaked gulf. Nuclear weapons are a short-cut to achieve this objective.

Now there are those who argue that Iran seeks nuclear weapons only to preserve the regime against the threat of regime change made by American neo-conservatives. The recent US decision to enter into talks with Iran alongside the EU3 - Britain, Germany and France - is going to be a test of that thesis. The United States, by recognising Iran's right to peaceful nuclear power, by holding up the carrot of economic co-operation, is effectively saying to Iran, "Give up your nuclear plans and we will recognise the rule of your regime in Iran, just as we recognised Kadafi's rule in Libya when he gave up weapons of mass destruction." That is a major concession on the part of the United States, given the record of the Iranian regime in promoting international terror and crushing internal dissent. A lot has been given to Iran already in return for possible reconsideration of its nuclear drive.

But if my analysis is correct, this won't suffice to get Iran off the nuclear track because it isn't why Iran got *on* the nuclear track in the first place. Iran sees itself as a regional power that should dominate the Gulf by right. The nuclear drive is not a bid to preserve the regime; Ahmadinejad is not worried that his regime is any way in danger.

His purpose is to expand Iran's sway. A nuclear Iran would lead to a coalition comprised of Shi'ite-dominated Iraq plus the Gulf countries, eager that Iran not intervene on behalf of their own disaffected Shi'ite populations. Iran in this coalition would be the natural counterweight to US influence in the Gulf, and Iran with a major say in matters of Gulf security would be an entirely different Iran - the first Islamic and Islamist power to be reckoned with in world politics. The last to try and gain this stature for a Muslim country were Nasser, who promoted Egypt as a nucleus in the united Arab world, and Saddam, whose invasion of Kuwait was meant to give Iraq dominance over the Gulf.

A shift of this magnitude in the power alignment around the world's key pool of energy would have unpredictable consequences for the lives of each and every person who depends on the free flow of oil at reasonable prices. Today this includes not just the West, but also China, whose growing demand for oil assures that the Gulf will remain a prize well into the twenty-first century.

As we know, it doesn't take much to disrupt price. The price of oil is supersensitive to political risk, and at the end of the day there is a direct correlation between US-guaranteed stability and reasonable price. If the Pax Americana frays in a series of crises over an empowered Iran, prices will rise to new heights, economies will face a crunch, developing countries and maybe even Europe will fawn over Iran, and Iran will use the windfall income to fund even more ambitious military projects. That's the threat posed by Iran's nuclear ambitions.

When I read in the press that only Israel is pressing for a confrontation with Iran over its nuclear plans, that the rest of the world can live with a nuclear Iran, and that a nuclear Iran wouldn't constitute a threat to US and Western interests, then I know I'm reading someone who is short on imagination, short on an understanding of economics, and short on geo-strategic sense. This is why I believe that, in the end, Iran's drive will compel the West to impose a regime of sanctions and that, if that regime fails, to embark on some form of military action. Iran - certainly this Iran - cannot be allowed to cast a nuclear shadow over the Persian Gulf, over the American Gulf, for if it does Iran will inevitably blackmail the West over smooth access to its most essential commodity.

Hezbollah is a smaller threat but it is an extension of the Iranian threat. Hezbollah is that Shi'ite movement in Lebanon that was established over 20 years ago under Iranian impetus. It is the oldest extension of Iranian-style Islamism into the Arab world. Hezbollah also likes to justify itself as the vanguard of Islamist resistance to Israel; it played that role while Israel occupied part of Southern Lebanon. Some five years ago, Israel withdrew from Lebanon to

the Israeli-Lebanese international border as certified by the United Nations. The resistance should have ended. Yet Hezbollah refuses to abide by UN Security Council resolution 1559, which calls on all militias to disarm in Lebanon. Hezbollah also continues to deploy militarily along the Israeli-Lebanese border, a zone that should have been made over to the Lebanese army on Israel's withdrawal. Hezbollah's excuse is that Israel might attack, and to make that more likely, Hezbollah continues to provoke Israel along a particular stretch of that border. Hezbollah also independently controls what it claims are over 12,000 rockets and missiles that can be fired at Israel or at anyone else in range.

One reason Hezbollah remains armed is to deter Israel and the United States, not from attacking Lebanon, but from striking Iran over its nuclear ambitions. This would turn Lebanon from a sovereign state, a great majority of whose citizens have no interest one way or another in Iran's nuclear plans, into an Iranian missile launcher. The extent to which Hezbollah would lend itself to such an offensive is very much an open question, and it complicates calculations not only for Israel but for the United States.

But even if these worst scenarios don't materialise, Hezbollah poses another threat. By keeping its weapons, Hezbollah means to dominate Lebanon itself and to keep it out of the orbit of the United States. Lebanon is a small country but it is an important entry point for Western and American influence in the Arab world. There is also a very large Lebanese diaspora. Beirut is home to such institutions as the American University of Beirut. It has also been an arena of profound French influence and interest. In the 1980s, Iran and Syria succeeded in driving out the United States and France through bombings and abductions. Now both countries are seeking to return Lebanon to its historic role as a bridge between the West and the Arab Middle East. It is also a place where a tradition of tolerance and democracy and a free press might be revived under the right circumstances. That could influence other parts of the Arab world.

Over the past few years the United States and Europe and particularly France have worked together to engineer the departure of Syrian forces and the restoration of Lebanon to sovereignty. Lebanon is again on the rise. Iran and Hezbollah would seek to hold it back by taking the country hostage to intimidation and fear and keeping it needlessly on a war footing. The bottom line, then, is that Hezbollah is a very real threat to a number of Western objectives in the Middle East, from containment of Iran through democratisation. It isn't merely Israel's problem by any means.

I come now to the third element of the threat: Hamas. The major achievement of several generations of diplomats - from America, Europe, even some Australians - has been to move Israelis and

Palestinians in the direction of two states for two peoples. This is the solution envisioned as the problem all the way back to 1947 in the United Nations Partition Resolution. It is the only solution with any international legitimacy. Partition was rejected by the Arab states and the Arabs of Palestine back then, and Jordan and Egypt prevented the emergence of a Palestinian state on the territory allotted to it. Since 1967, Israel has occupied that territory, and since 1993 and the Oslo accords, Israel has committed itself to a two-state solution, to be negotiated with a legitimate Palestinian leadership committed to the same.

But while the world community and Israel see the two-state solution as the ultimate objective - that is, the creation of a Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel - the Palestinians themselves continually waver. As many as half of them in the West Bank and Gaza, and perhaps more elsewhere, believe that they can somehow eliminate Israel at some future point in time. In anticipation of that point, they refuse to recognise Israel or endorse a process that would lead to a permanent settlement of the conflict.

There were elements of this kind of thought also in the approach of Yasser Arafat, although he was careful to conceal them at key moments in his stewardship of the Palestinian cause. But the Islamist Hamas movement has never hidden its vision of a Middle East without Israel. It has used this to encourage waves of suicide bombers whom it sent out to destroy any vestige of a peace process. In an appalling set of miscalculations by the United States, by Israel and by the Palestinian Authority of Abu Mazin, the door was thrown wide open to Hamas in the Palestinian political process without demanding a single quid pro quo. Hamas entered elections, armed and dangerous and totally and irrefragably opposed to any kind of agreement with Israel that would constitute Palestinian acknowledgement of Israel's own rights. The result has been a political disaster of the first order and one that will be difficult to reverse. All the diplomatic magicians are now busy trying to come up with some magic formula that will turn the Hamas frog into a Palestinian prince or at least into a frog that looks kissable.

So far these efforts have failed abysmally. There is a struggle underway to see who will blink first, which reality is stronger. Is it the reality of the international community which has demanded Hamas must change its attitude to Israel, or is it the reality of an elected Hamas which demands that the international community change its attitude to Palestinian Islamism? Which fissures are more significant? Those governments that have a stake in the peace process, the United States and Europe, have been steadfast in putting up a boycott of the Hamas regime while Russia, Turkey and China have moved to legitimise it. Or are the fissures that allegedly exist among the different wings and leaders of Hamas more significant still? Will they

break under the pressure, to say and do what international consensus demands of them? All of these questions are open.

What is certain is that if Hamas continues in power and is allowed to spread its message of a world without Israel to the next generation of Palestinians, through its control and domination of the education system, then Palestinian and Israeli relations will enter a new phase. In that scenario, Israeli unilateralism will become a habit and the international interest in a Palestinian state - effectively a Hamas state - will wane. This will compel all the parties to look for new approaches. Israel will continue to survive and flourish even in this scenario, but the loss of the peace process will be a blow to the international consensus and to international legitimacy. For that reason, manoeuvring Hamas out of power is a prime Western interest.

Let me return to what I said earlier. The threats posed by Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas are especially dangerous because they are posed by extremists who hold power and who enjoy some legitimacy as such. But all three of them, it is important to remember, are also serial defiers of international law and international legitimacy. Iran has deceived the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and has done so systematically over years. Hezbollah continues to defy UN Resolution 1559 calling for the disarming of all militias in Lebanon and the restoration of control of all Lebanese territory to the sovereign government of Lebanon. Hamas has rejected all the agreements entered into and signed by the Palestinian Authority with Israel, and rejects the most basic UN resolutions that call for peace based on mutual recognition.

Those who defy international legitimacy should in turn be denied international legitimacy, and those who credibly threaten to destroy what order there is in the Middle East should be met by credible threats from those whose supreme interest is upholding that order. If that is to happen, we need to perceive the matter with clarity. Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas wish to dominate the Middle East and to wrest control from the United States and its regional partners. They wish to do that by building up arsenals while we deliberate, by insinuating themselves in political systems, by presenting an ideological alternative to the Pax Americana which I would call the Pax Islamica, and which is ultimately predicated on driving the West from the Middle East, on ending its military supremacy, its system of alliances, and its cultural influence. The West deludes itself if it approaches these threats individually, or sees them as Israel's problem, or relegates them to second place while chasing Osama and Zarqawi.

This is a broad offensive which, if it succeeds, will leave the West weaker in every respect and which will empower the most radical forces on the world stage today. I confess to a bias. I am not a follower of Chomsky or Foucault. I happen to believe that a Middle East

dominated by America and its allies, for all its problems, is much to be preferred to a Middle East dominated by Iran and its allies. This is the choice. It is a stark one. And there is no way to avoid it. I simply ask you: will we have the clarity of mind to see the choice and then make it?