

Economist Conferences The Economist

The Emerging Markets Summit



September 17th-18th 2009
Park Plaza Riverbank, London

Economist.com
BOOKS & ARTS

Iran and the bomb

How late it is, how late

May 21st 2009

From The Economist print edition

IRAN must be stopped in its tracks now. This stark message from two new books on Iran's nuclear threat is bound to raise cheers in Israel and among Washington's more hawkish Middle East watchers just as Binyamin Netanyahu paid his first visit to President Barack Obama since the two men took office.

Both authors, Amir Taheri and Emanuele Ottolenghi, believe Iran is working to overturn the existing regional order, though each approaches the subject from different vantage points. Mr Taheri explores in detail the historical, cultural, social and political roots of the Islamic Republic and the threat that he claims it poses to the West, whereas Mr Ottolenghi is little concerned with the history and internal dynamics of the country. Iranian-born Mr Taheri, a former executive editor-in-chief of *Kayhan*, Iran's largest newspaper, and a frequent contributor to newspapers in Europe and America, is, perhaps not surprisingly, implacably opposed to the Khomeinist regime; Mr Ottolenghi is more immediately concerned with the prospect of an Iranian bomb and calls for a robust sanctions package against the country as the best hope for bringing about change.

Mr Taheri views the Islamic Republic as an aberration. He argues that the leader of the 1979 revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, saw Iran as a part of the broader Islamic nation and had little regard for Iranian history or civilisation. He describes its government as a "fascistic regime" controlling all aspects of daily life. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to dismiss Mr Taheri's book as merely a diatribe against the Shia mullahs. The author believes Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, to be a relatively cultured and pragmatic man, and he takes care to mention his unsuccessful attempt to cancel the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie.

Mr Taheri is adept at puncturing received wisdoms. He points out, for example, that it was Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Muhammad Khatami, both supposed moderates, who supported terrorist attacks against Israel and did much to advance Iran's nuclear programme. He raises important questions over how to accommodate a regime that openly expresses its wish to see the end of Israel and remove all Western influence from the region.

Yet Mr Taheri has faults too. He overlooks the shah's shortcomings. More significantly, he tends to view American actions through rose-tinted spectacles. He underplays the role of the CIA in the 1953 coup against the prime minister, Muhammad Mossadegh. And he views Iran's co-operation with America in the 2001 overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan more as an act of Iranian opportunism than an opening gambit to better ties between the two countries. Furthermore, the author sheds little light on how the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 affected Iranian thinking. These weaknesses undermine the credibility of Mr Taheri's case.

Reuters


Head in the mushroom clouds

The Persian Night:
Iran Under the
Khomeinist
Revolution
By Amir Taheri



Encounter Books; 413 pages; \$25.95

Buy it at
Amazon.com
Amazon.co.uk

Under a Mushroom
Cloud: Europe, Iran
and the Bomb

By Emanuele Ottolenghi



Profile Books; 278 pages; £9.99. To be published in America by Profile in September

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Mr Ottolenghi's book, "Under a Mushroom Cloud", has a different flaw. The author, an academic who taught Israel studies at Oxford University before heading the Transatlantic Institute in Brussels, approaches the subject as an outsider. When he does discuss the internal situation in Iran, focusing on its poor human-rights record, this is largely with a view to bolstering his case for action against Tehran. Mr Ottolenghi is more of an expert on Israel than on Iran and the arguments he deploys appear to reflect Israeli concerns rather than insider knowledge of the Islamic Republic's decision-making process or the intentions of its leadership. Occasionally, the book reads more like an instruction manual for stopping Iran.

Nevertheless, Mr Ottolenghi is persuasive in his claim that Iran is very close to acquiring a nuclear bomb, which would allow it to act with impunity against moderate governments in the Middle East and step up the arms race in the region. Some may bridle at the apocalyptic scenarios he raises but these often serve a legitimate purpose. He points out, for example, that the Soviets and Americans maintained a nuclear hotline at the height of the cold war to avoid misunderstandings. There is no prospect of such an arrangement between Israel and the Iranians.

Although the author has not broken any new ground, he presents a convincing and well-crafted argument for robust, concerted and carefully targeted sanctions to deal with Iran's nuclear expansionism. Europe is well placed to tackle this issue since Iran's dependence on European technology and trade can help Europe exert pressure and bring about an Iranian climbdown without resorting to military force. If Europe wishes to avoid military action, Mr Ottolenghi argues, it must forgo short-term economic gains in return for longer-term regional stability.

Both authors may be sketching out a frightening scenario, yet they inject much-needed urgency, colour and clarity into the debate on Iran.

The Persian Night: Iran Under the Khomeinist Revolution.

By Amir Taheri.

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