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Iran May Need an 'America Free' Day

1. Opinion



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The United States is on the verge of losing its position as the global superpower. Even worse, it may be heading for disintegration as a nation with its most populous state California seeking secession while the African-American minority set up an independent black state, probably in Mississippi. One thing is certain: by 2025 the US will no longer be the world's biggest economic power.

This is the picture that the daily "Kayhan", believed to reflect the views, or the fantasies, of "Supreme Guide" Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, portrays of the current position of the American "Great Satan."

For the whole of the week just ending, the paper has devoted at least one sensational front-page headline each day to "America's imminent collapse."

One may wonder where Kayhan gets what it calls "best information" about the "Great Satan."

One headline runs like this: “Richard Haas: Corona Has Accelerated America’s Downfall!” The Iranian reader may wonder who this Haas is. Kayhan presents him as head of Council on Foreign Relations.

Another headline shrieks: “Total Economic Shutdown in America!”

A third headline claims: “All 50 States of America in the Grip of National Catastrophe!”

Another headline says that “America Is in Its Coffin” while its admirers are still begging for its attention.

To support the headlines, the paper quotes a number of “eminent American scholars” among them Noam Chomsky, Farid Zakaria, Barbara Slavin, Louis Farrakhan, Bernie Sanders, and Emanuel Wallerstein.

To the Iranian reader who might wonder who these characters are, Kayhan provides no answer.

This obsession with America has been a key feature of the Khomeinist mindset that has dominated Iranian politics since 1979.

Working on a biography of Ayatollah Ruhallah Khomeini in the 1980s, I was surprised to see that more than 60 percent of his speeches contained at least one disparaging reference to America. I have not done a similar study on Khamenei, Khomeini’s successor, but have the impression that America bashing has been a key feature of all his speeches, at least in the past four or five years at least.

Hate-America is not a new phenomenon; in fact, it was born almost at the same time as the United States.

Even in the 19th century, some European intellectuals, especially in Great Britain and France, saw the US as a challenge to the world order which they assumed to be natural, and concluded that the new power across the pond could only be a transient feature in history.

The literature of anti-Americanism in English and French includes all sorts of outlandish ideas, including the claim that people and animals grow smaller in the “New World” and that the American system of government is nothing but “managed chaos” and thus bound to be short-lived.

The very newness of America as a concept was, and to some extent, remains, a threat to all strands of retrograde thought from Joseph de Maistre to Khamenei’s darling Noam Chomsky.

With the exception of this year, since 1989 Tehran has hosted an annual “End of America” conference attended by anti-Americans from across the globe.

Although, America has consistently failed to “end”, the obsession has remained and, as we now see in Kayhan, is pivoting out of control. This is because when a narrative acquires a certain internal consistency it can run on its own obtuseness forever.

Over decades of reporting, we have encountered many who predicted “the end of America”. Some even made a career out of foretelling it. In the old Soviet Union Igor Panarin, the Politburo’s house intellectual, wrote an “end of America” paper every year. Nikita Khrushchev, the mercurial boss of the Kremlin after Grigori Malenkov fixed the year 2000 as the end of America with the promise “We shall bury you!”. In 1971, Yao Wen-yuan, Mayor of Shanghai and the “brain” of the Gang of Four, told us in an interview that the American “paper tiger” would not see the next century. In a less malevolent mode, in the 1970s, futurologist Hermann Kahn of the Rand Institution predicted that by 2000 the US would lose its world leadership position to France!

The “end of America” dream has not been, and may never be, realized, for at least two reasons.

The first is that America is not just a nation endowed with the usual paraphernalia of a great power. Nor is it a classical empire in the mold of the ancient Persian or Roman empires or the more recent ones such as the Tsarist and British. America, perhaps above all, is an idea that, even if formulated as a myth as most great ideas are, continues to appeal to a large segment of mankind across cultural, racial, and socio-economic borders. Only pseudo-ideologues like Chomsky could speak of “American Imperialism” where America has never been, in fact, cannot be, an empire in the sense that Lenin and others intended.

The second reason is that, paradoxically, the anti-American obsession gives the United States a central position in all political discourse, a position that, based on facts, it may not deserve.

Khamenei and his Kayhan may not realize it but by perpetuating the myth that America is the root cause of all of the Islamic Republic’s miseries and failures, they elevate it as a magician holding the keys of heaven. This is why opportunists, like President Hassan Rouhani, have made a career of promising “deals “with the US that would solve all of Iran's problems with a single blow. When the mullahs say their revolution could succeed only if America did not oppose it, they transform themselves into mere objects in their own history.

Rather than bombarding Iranians with America-bashing discourse, Khamenei and his associates might be better off designating an “America free” day every month, a day in which the very word “America” is not spoken, written, or heard anywhere in Iran.

On that day, Iranians could devote their intellectual energies to pondering the question: Apart from further digging, is there something that we can do to creep out of the hole we have dug for ourselves?

Forty-one years of “End of America” fantasies have produced nothing useful for Iranians; maybe they would do better with one “America free” day.