

NO MOSQUE AND NO RIOTS! WHY?

A quiz: Which of these 5 major cities – Rome, Tel Aviv, Teheran, Los Angeles, New York - doesn't have a Sunni Moslem mosque? Who was the mayor who stopped the last attempt to build one?

Surprise! It's Teheran and its mayor at the time was the man who is now president of Iran: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad!

Here is another surprise: Sunni Muslims account for more than 10% of the country's population, more than a million of them live in Teheran and, no, they can't have a mosque.

We live in an age of information overload. The popular print and visual media allocate just a few seconds to most important subjects. Interviews with scholars and experts are measured in meager minutes and are routinely preempted by car chases, police chiefs and unimportant activities by unimportant criminals, politicians and eccentrics.

The information that really matters is information that will impact our future and the future of our children. It is available but it has to be patiently amassed from the internet or serious (and mostly boring) publications. Most of us don't have the time or the patience.

The current Iranian problem is a prime example. By now most Americans know of Iran's president Ahmadinejad and his strange ways. We are aware of Iran's intransigence on acquiring nuclear weapons in spite of repeated and so-far futile warnings by the non-united United Nations. The proposed solutions to the impasse range from strong preemptive military action or meaningful unilateral sanctions to, on the other side of the spectrum, more talk, diplomacy, and appeals to common sense by the Iranian leadership. But I bet that even among the few who care about the Iran problem only a tiny minority knew the answer to the question about the city where a mosque is not allowed.

It is essential that we understand our enemies in order to be able to confront and defeat them. The media that measure out information in minuscule superficial sound bites do not supply the knowledge we need. The ethnic and religious tensions faced by Iran are not reported to us and, I would guess, neither

are they known to people in the media or to most of the politicians who decide America's foreign policy.

It is important for us to understand that the Iranian regime is in permanent collision with its national cultures. While almost half of the country's population is non-Persian, Persian nationalism has been the official policy of the country since 1920. Jews and Armenian Christians are the only ones who are allowed to have religious instruction in Hebrew and Armenian, but all the other non-Persians are taught in Persian only; they are doomed to illiteracy in their own languages.

The Kurds, who have their own language, history and ethnic roots account for about 9% of the population. They are just across the border from the virtually independent and prosperous Iraqi Kurds and have recently shown signs of intransigence. Other nationalities – Arabs, about 3% and Baluch, about 2% - have also been violently resisting assimilation into Persian culture. These, plus several other ethnicities – Turkmen, Lurs, Gilaki, Mazandarani – amount to about 20% of the Iranian population.

Turkish-speaking Azeris compose an additional 25%. Since Azerbaijan's independence from the Soviet Union, many Azeris, especially in Teheran, have been affirming their Turkic identity and calling for cultural autonomy or even separation; they feel that Azerbaijan, not Iran, is their national home. Other minorities - Bahais, Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians – compose less than 1% of the population.

The Sunni Muslims are not the only ones to be discriminated against by ultra-extremism exemplified by Ahmadinejad who labels them heretics. Lately, he has been antagonizing his more traditional fellow Shiites by following the teaching of the Ayatollahs who would impose an even more puritanical Islamic regime. Some even fear that by trying to bring about the return of the mystical 10th century 12th Imam as a Mahdi – a Shiite Messiah -, Ahmadinejad may deliberately provoke a foreign attack on Iran so that the Mahdi would return and save Islam.

The most recent incident took place in Teheran, on October 8, when special forces and police units arrested Ayatollah Mohammad Boroujerdi and about 40 of his followers. The senior Shi'ite Muslim cleric has challenged Iran's system of clerical rule.

The Islamic Sufi sect that has been tolerated in the past is also being persecuted. Sufi gathering places are being closed or attacked. A major Sufi center in the holy city of Qum was demolished, with hundreds of protesting dervishes arrested.

Most importantly, there exists the regime's antipathy for the Persian culture itself. An essentially Arab-Islamic culture is favored while cherished pre-Islamic customs are no longer tolerated. Thus, historic Persian culture and its influence on every culture throughout central Asia is denigrated and devalued by emphasizing narrow Islamism.

These cultural tremors may not bring about the end of the regime but it is quite likely that military action against Iran would unite the population in opposing an external enemy. This may well be one of the major reasons for Iran's seemingly senseless provocation of the world community on the nuclear issue.

The surprising details of the nuclear issue will be analyzed in detail in my next column.