

Publishing Editor's column

A FEW YEARS AGO a military expert wrote a book in which he purported to give an account of various wars breaking out over the world in the years following. Two main flash-points concerned China and Taiwan in Asia, and Russia and the Baltic States in Europe. The final conflict outlined in the book was in the Middle East, however, and centred on Iran and Israel. An Islamic fundamentalist ruler takes over in Iran and wages war on Israel by means of missiles, culminating in a nuclear warhead that explodes just off the coast of Israel. Israel retaliates with its own nuclear weapons, and the USA, concerned about its oil supplies, ends the conflict by bombing Israel out of existence.

None of these wars have in fact broken out, but the latter scenario has come to look more and more realistic, with certain modifications, of course. There has been growing concern in recent years over Iran's apparent desire to develop nuclear weapons. Last summer the fanatical Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president of Iran, and immediately took a strongly anti-Israel position, stating that the Holocaust never happened and that Israel must be wiped off the map. Even without developing nuclear weapons, Iran has missiles capable of reaching Israel. We must not be carried away by these things. Iran appears in latter-day prophecy as part of the Gogian host that invades Israel, not as the leader of such an attack, and I do not think that Scripture supports the idea of nuclear war in the Middle East. An attempt will indeed be made to wipe Israel off the map, but it will not succeed, neither will it involve the USA.

Nevertheless, the Iranian situation is widely regarded as the greatest threat to world peace today, and we must consider its possible significance. An American political commentator, Seymour Hersh, wrote a long piece called, "Would President Bush go to war to stop Tehran from getting the bomb?", which was published in the *New Yorker* magazine in April. He asserted that the USA is making preparations for an attack on Iran to pre-empt the production of nuclear weapons. This would not involve invading Iran but would be done by means of a massive air attack. Israel managed to destroy Iraq's attempt to develop nuclear weapons twenty-five years ago by such means and could be involved in such action now. The situation is more difficult today,

however, for Iran's nuclear plants are scattered round the country rather than being all in one place as was Iraq's.

An American attack on Iran would aim both to destroy as much as possible of the nuclear installations and to bring about a change of régime, but this could go horribly wrong. If it does then there is scope for two situations to develop which could be of great significance: a Middle East war and a blockade of oil supplies. Either or both might happen, and both could be of great significance in the fulfilment of end-time prophecy.

A Middle East war stirred up in response to American air strikes on Iran could well involve Israel, especially if Israel is involved, or perceived to be involved, in the attack. There are a number of views as to how Israel could be 'dwelling safely' when Gog invades, but Ezekiel 28:24-26 indicates that they do so when God judges the nations round about them. These nations could well become involved in a war against Israel triggered off initially by Iran. Some such triumphing of Israel over her enemies is indicated by Psalm 83, and this victory could be achieved by Israel in the manner of the Six-Day War of 1967, with no open Divine intervention being required, only angelic work behind the scenes. It would prepare the way for the more comprehensive attack on Israel that will bring Christ back to the earth.

As for oil supplies, the recent rise in oil prices has partly been triggered by fears of a cutting off of Iranian oil in a war situation, but a much worse loss of oil supplies than this can be envisaged. Most of the oil from the Middle East is shipped from the Persian Gulf through the narrow Straits of Hormuz into the Indian Ocean. Iran has the capacity to blockade these straits, or even block them entirely by the sinking of several supertankers. The consequences of such a loss in oil supplies would be devastating and far reaching.

Potential threats to the present way of life have appeared in a number of different ways of late. Not all will come about as predicted, but we know that enormous problems will afflict the earth before our Lord comes. As one of our new hymns (No. 383), already much loved, puts it, "Shadows of dread brood above every nation", but we should be "Rejoicing in hope", knowing that, though "Dark is the night", nevertheless "the vision is clear" of the coming Kingdom.

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