



THE 'INFIDEL RETREAT'

ISLAMISTS' WAR ON CULTURAL CONTACT

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By: Amir Taheri

February 18, 2008 -- WHEN it announced its formation last year, the North African terrorist group Al Qaeda in Maghreb (AQM) promised to "throw the infidel out" as prelude to recasting the region as the kernel of a new caliphate.

In January, that promise got a boost from an unexpected source: The Paris-Dakar Rally's organizers decided to cancel the event after AQM killed four French tourists in Mauritania and threatened massacres along the motor race's route.

This month, race organizers said goodbye to Europe and Africa, now regarded as too unsafe, and announced the transfer of the event to Chile and Argentina, where al Qaeda is not (yet) present.

This isn't the first strategic retreat by "infidels on wheels." Indeed, it's not the first time *this* event has retreated.

Originally launched in 1931, the race was revived in 1971 in a new format - an 8,400-mile trek between Paris and Persepolis, the capital of ancient Persia, in southern Iran.

In those days, Iran wanted to be a meeting place of East and West - a forum for what Empress Farah Pahlavi called "a dialogue of civilizations." Coinciding with the rally for a decade was the Shiraz-Persepolis festival - a "must-attend" for the global glitterati of art and culture. Anybody who was anybody in music, ballet, cinema, theatre and more showed up at least once.

At the time, nearly a million "infidels" worked in Iran, while a quarter of a million young Iranians attended school and university in "infidel" lands.

By 1978, however, the Khomeinist revolution was well under way - and the expulsion of the "infidel" one of its key themes. The Shiraz-Persepolis festival and the international car rally were cancelled at short notice.

The next year, the event was revived, thousands of kilometers away from Iran, in the form of the Paris-Dakar Rally. And now it is retreating further, all the way to South America.

But this is hardly the only example of the "infidel" fleeing the Islamic lands. The annual Baalbeck festival in Lebanon once celebrated ancient and modern art from East and West. But the town has been a stronghold of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its local Hezbollah allies since 1983. So now

Baalbeck each year celebrates the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's cult in ceremonies known as "The 10 Days of Dawn" with "Death to America!" as the main slogan.

Each passing year sees another international event vanish from a Muslim country. Egypt hosted scores of such events until just a few years ago, but that calendar is emptying out.

Even Morocco, arguably the most open of Muslim countries, has been quietly closing itself off. The Marrakech film festival still draws some "infidel" stars, but the number is falling fast and those who come aren't among the best known.

Nor is the retreat limited to culture and arts. Other than Dubai (the last bastion of East-West encounter in many domains), few Muslim countries now host international economic, business or scientific gatherings. Time and again, the authorities cite concerns for the participants' security and fears of terrorist attacks.

Even ordinary tourism has declined. The Web sites of European Union foreign ministries show that 32 Muslim countries have been described as "unsafe" over the last five years. This month, a leading French tour operator cancelled visits planned for 2008 to Iran by some 14,000 customers after Tehran expressed anger with Paris' position on Iran's nuclear drive.

Figures for such once popular destinations such as Morocco, Turkey and even Tunisia show a decline (or at best a flattening-out) in the number of visitors from the West. Recent efforts to make Libya a new Euro-tourist destination collapsed when Tripoli announced a series of measures designed to make the "infidel" as uncomfortable as possible.

As for Algeria's announcement last week of *its* plans to become the new Mediterranean playground, the initial reaction in Europe has been puzzlement - partly because the tourist project is to be managed by Tareq bin Laden, one of Osama's brothers.

Another aspect of the "infidel retreat" is a diaspora of Christians from the Islamic world. Starting in the 1950s, nearly 2 million Egyptian Christians left their native homeland for Europe, North America and Australia. Almost a million Christians and Jews were expelled from Algeria after it became independent in 1962.

In the 1940s, Christians were the largest religious community in Lebanon, some 45 percent of the population. Today, it's 25 percent, below Shiite and Sunni Muslims in numbers. And an estimated 4 million Iranians have fled their homes since 1979, at least a quarter of them Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians.

The closing of Muslim lands has many aspects. With a few worthy exceptions, there's more censorship in Muslim countries today than in the 1950s. The average movie buff can't see foreign films in a cinema where his grandparents viewed freely half a century ago.

And the number of Western novels translated into the languages of Muslim countries has also fallen - partly because translators and publishers fear having a *fatwa* issued against them. (The translator and publisher of the latest novel by the Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez face prison terms in Iran.)

Al Qaeda, the Khomeinists and other radical ideologies in contemporary Islam are concerned that direct people-to-people contact between Muslims and non-Muslims could contaminate "the true believers" with the same love of life and fear of death that they believe has doomed Western civilization to ultimate extinction.



As direct human contact between the two visions of existence declines, virtual contact through satellite TV and in cyberspace is increasing exponentially. The two sides watch each other from afar - strengthening the feeling that the "other" is a fictitious character in an exotic tale.

The latest "infidel" retreat in Africa, a sure sign of cowardice, is bad news for everyone except the terrorists.

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