




THE TWELFTH IMAM

SNEAK PREVIEW • UNEDITED EDITION • SNEAK PREVIEW • UNEDITED EDITION • SNEAK PREVIEW

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The Twelfth Imam Sampler

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The Twelfth Imam was a real, flesh-and-blood person who lived during the ninth century AD. Like the eleven Shia leaders who went before him, he was an Arab male who, as a direct descendant of the founder of Islam, was thought to have been divinely chosen to be the spiritual guide and ultimate human authority of the Muslim people. His name was Muhammad Ibn Hasan Ibn Ali, and it is generally believed by Shias that he was born in Samarra, Iraq, AD 868, though few details of his brief life are certain or free from controversy. Sunnis, for example, believe he was born later.

Before he could reach an age of maturity, when he could teach and counsel the Muslim world as was believed to be his destiny, Ali vanished from human society. Some say he was four years old, while others say five and some say six. Some believe he fell into a well in Samarra but his body was never recovered. Others believe the Mahdi's mother placed him in the well to prevent the evil rulers of the time from finding him, capturing him, and killing him—and that little Ali subsequently became supernaturally invisible. This is where the term "Hidden Imam" is derived, as Shias believe that Ali is not dead but has simply been hidden from the sight of mankind—Shias refer to this as occultation—until the End of Days, when Allah will reveal him once again.

Shias believe the Mahdi will return at the end of history—during a time of chaos, carnage, and confusion—to establish righteousness, justice, and peace.

FROM INSIDE THE REVOLUTION
BY JOEL C. ROSENBERG

“Let there be no mistake—I am coming back soon.”

The Twelfth Imam will return when the last pages of history are being written in blood and fire . . . for he is coming with great power, and glory, and with the terrible judgment of hell fire for all those who disobey, or stand in his way.

FROM *THE IMAMS OF HISTORY AND
THE COMING OF THE MESSIAH*
BY DR. ALIREZA BIRJANDI

BEGINNINGS . . .

SAMARRA, IRAQ

JUNE 3, 1989

The news swept through the Iraqi city of Samarra.

As word of Ayatollah Khomeini's death spread through the Shia Muslim stronghold, it eventually reached Najjar Malik and hit him like a thunderbolt.

Only nine years old, Najjar had long been sheltered from national or world events by his uncle and aunt, who had taken him in after his parents' death in a tragic car accident several years earlier. They didn't let him watch television or listen to the radio. They didn't let him read anything but his schoolbooks. For little Najjar, incredibly bright but also incredibly small for his age, life consisted of mosque and school and nothing else. If he wasn't memorizing the Qur'an, he was memorizing his textbooks.

But today was different. Suddenly, it seemed as if every one of the 350,000 Shias in Samarra had heard what Najjar had just heard from a woman shrieking in the hallway.

“The Imam has died! The Imam has died!”

Najjar was too much in shock to cry.

It couldn't be true. It had to be a vicious rumor, started by the Zionists or the Sunnis. The Ayatollah Khomeini was larger than life. He simply could not be dead. Wasn't he the long-awaited Mahdi? Wasn't he the Twelfth Imam, the Hidden Imam? Wasn't he supposed to establish justice and peace? How then could he be dead if he was, in fact, the savior of the Islamic world and all of mankind?

Every Friday night for years, Najjar's aunt and uncle had made him listen to the latest taped sermon from the Ayatollah Khomeini that had been smuggled out of Iran and into Iraq. Then his aunt would tuck him into bed, kiss him good night, turn out the light, and shut the bedroom door. Then, when the apartment was quiet, Najjar would stare out the window into the moonlight, meditating on the Ayatollah's words and his fiery insistence that a Muslim's duty was to perform *jihad*—holy war—against the infidels. It wasn't exactly the stuff of childhood dreams, but it stirred something deep within Najjar's heart.

“Surely those who believe, those who wage jihad in God's cause—they are the ones who may hope for the mercy of God,” the Ayatollah would declare, citing Sura 2:218 from the Qur'an. Jews and Christians are the ones whom God has cursed, he would explain, saying the Qur'an taught that they “shall either be executed, or crucified, or have their hands and feet cut off alternately, or be banished from the land.”

“Kill them!” Khomeini would insist, pointing to Sura 9:5. “Wherever you may come upon them, and seize them, and confine them, and lie in wait for them at every conceivable place. The Prophet and his followers are commanded to wage jihad against

the unbelievers and the hypocrites and be stern against them,” the Ayatollah argued year after year, “for their final refuge is Hell.”

Infidels, he insisted—citing Sura 22—will spend eternity in a blazing fire, “with boiling water being poured down over their heads. All that is within their bodies, as well as their skins, will be melted away.

“Have nothing to do with them,” he argued. “Don’t befriend them. Don’t negotiate with them. Don’t do business with them.” After all, he loved to say—citing Sura 5:59-60—“Allah has cursed the Christians and the Jews, and those whom He has utterly condemned He has turned into apes, and swine, and servants of powers of evil.”

Najjar had been transfixed by Khomeini’s courage and conviction. Surely this man must be the Mahdi. *Who else could it be?* he had wondered. True, his aunt conceded when Najjar occasionally asked innocent questions, Khomeini had not yet brought justice and peace. Nor had he yet established an Islamic empire that would transform the globe. But all this, she said, was just a matter of time.

Now what? Najjar thought. If Khomeini had really died, who would lead the Revolution? Who was the real messiah, and when would he come?

No one else was home, and Najjar felt scared and alone. Desperate to learn more, he fled his aunt and uncle’s cramped high-rise flat and ran down all seventeen flights of stairs rather than wait for an elevator. He ran out into the dusty street in front of their dilapidated building, only to find huge crowds of fellow Shias pouring out of their apartments as well. Seeing a group of older men huddled on a nearby corner near a fruit stand, smoking cigarettes and listening to a small transistor radio, Najjar ran to their side and listened in.

“Radio Tehran can now confirm that the revered Imam—peace be upon him—has died of a heart attack,” he heard the announcer say in Farsi, the man’s voice faltering as he relayed the news. “The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution has been in the hospital

for the last eleven days. He was suffering from internal bleeding. But a government spokesman has confirmed what hospital officials indicated just a few minutes ago. Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini is dead at the age of eighty-six.”

Najjar’s mind reeled. *How can the Promised One be dead?* It was not possible.

With few other hard facts to report, Radio Tehran broadcast excerpts from Khomeini’s speeches. In one from 1981, Khomeini declared to his fellow Shias, “We must strive to export our Revolution throughout the world.”

Najjar heard a thunderous roar erupt from whatever crowd had been listening to the imam. He closed his eyes and pictured the scene and suddenly wished his parents had never left Iran. Perhaps then they would still be alive. Perhaps Najjar could have actually seen the Ayatollah with his own eyes. Perhaps he could have heard the master’s words with his own ears. Perhaps he could have even served the Revolution in some small way.

“The governments of the world should know that Islam will be victorious in all the countries of the world, and Islam and the teachings of the Qur’an will prevail all over the world,” bellowed Khomeini in another radio clip. Najjar knew that line by heart. It came from a sermon the Ayatollah had delivered in Paris, just before returning to Tehran to be greeted by millions of faithful followers shouting, “*The Holy One has come! The Holy One has come!*”

Disoriented by this sudden turn of events, Najjar backed away from the crowd of men and out of earshot of the radio broadcast. He had heard more than he had wanted. His slight body trembled. His filthy cotton shirt was drenched with sweat, and he suddenly felt parched. He had no idea where his uncle and aunt were. But he desperately didn’t want to be by himself.

Perhaps they were at the mosque. He decided that was where he should be as well. He took off in a dead run for six blocks, slowing

only when he could see the side door of the al-Askari Mosque just a few hundred meters away.

But suddenly, without warning, three teenagers—much larger than Najjar—came rushing out of the bushes and tackled him from the side. Blindsided, Najjar crashed to the ground with the wind knocked out of him. Before he could catch his breath, the three began beating him mercilessly. Two balled up their fists and landed blow after blow upon Najjar’s stomach and face. The third kicked him repeatedly in the back and the groin. He shrieked in pain, begging them to stop. He knew who they were, and he knew what they wanted. They were friends of his cousin, who owed one of them a few dinars. His cousin had been late in paying.

Soon blood was pouring from little Najjar’s broken nose and from his left ear. His face began to swell. His vision blurred. All colors began to fade. He was sure he was going to black out. But then he heard a voice that shouted, “Stop!”

Suddenly the beatings stopped.

Najjar didn’t dare open his eyes. Bracing for the next blow, he remained in a fetal position. After a few moments, he heard the boys walking away. Why? Where were they going? Was it really over? Mustering just enough courage to crack open one eye, Najjar wiped away the blood and tears and saw the three bullies standing around someone, though he could not tell who. Was it a parent? a policeman? Najjar opened the other eye. He wiped more blood away and strained to hear what was being said.

“The Holy Qur’an says, ‘Whomever Allah guides, he is the rightly guided,’” declared a commanding voice. “But what does the Prophet—peace be upon him—say of those who go astray, of those rebels who go far from the teachings of Allah? He says, ‘We will gather them on the Day of Resurrection, fallen on their faces—blind, dumb and deaf. Their refuge is Hell. And every time it subsides, we will increase them in blazing fire.’”

Najjar knew that verse. His aunt had made him memorize Sura 17:97 on his fifth birthday, and it haunted him to this day. He scanned the crowd that had gathered, hoping to see a friendly face, or at least a familiar one. But he recognized no one, and he wondered whether the mob was there to see a fight or a punishment.

“You’re saying we are all going to Hell?” asked one of the bullies.

Najjar was surprised to hear a trace of real fear in the boy’s faltering voice.

“It is not I who say it,” said the stranger with quiet authority. “The Qur’an says, ‘The weighing of deeds on that Day of Resurrection will be the truth. Those whose scales are heavy with truth and good deeds, it is they who will be the successful. As for those whose scales are light, because of evil deeds, those are the ones who have lost their souls, causing them to travel towards the Fire, because they mistreated; they knowingly denied Our signs.’”

Najjar knew that one, too. It was Sura 7:8-9.

He watched the shoulders of the teenagers sag. Their heads hung low. It wasn’t clear the boys had ever heard those verses before, but they certainly seemed to grasp the stakes. Suddenly, they weren’t so tough, or so cruel. Indeed, horrified by the wrath that could be awaiting his tormentors, Najjar almost felt sorry for them.

Since his earliest childhood, Najjar had deeply feared the fires of Hell. He was convinced that his parents’ death in a car crash on a weekend trip to Baghdad when he was only three was punishment from Allah upon him for his own sins. He had no idea what sins he could have committed at so young an age. But he was painfully aware of all he had committed since. He didn’t mean to be such a terrible person. He tried to be a pious and faithful servant of Allah. He prayed five times a day. He went to the mosque every chance he could, even if he had to go alone. He had already memorized much of the Qur’an. He was often praised by his teachers for his religious zeal. But he knew the wickedness in his own heart, and he feared that all

of his attempts to do what was right could end up being for naught. Was he really any better than these boys who had beaten him? No, he concluded. He was probably worse. Surely they had been sent by Allah to punish him, and he knew he deserved it.

The three boys began backing away from their accuser. A moment later, they turned quickly and ran away. It was then that Najjar saw the one who had come to his defense, and he could not believe his eyes. The stranger was not a man but a boy—one not much older than he. He certainly wasn't more than ten years old, and he was short, with a slight build. He had jet black hair, light olive skin, a pointed, angular, almost royal nose, and a small black spot like a mole on his left cheek. He didn't wear street clothes like others his size and age. Rather he wore a black robe and sandals. But what struck Najjar most was the boy's piercing black eyes, which bored deep into his soul and forced him to look away in humiliation.

"Do not fear, Najjar" said the strange boy. "You are safe now."

Najjar's heart sped. How did the boy know his name? They had certainly never seen each other before.

"You are curious how I know your name," the boy said. "But I know all about you. You are Persian, not Arab. Your first language was Farsi, though you also speak Arabic and French fluently. You grew up here in Samarra—as did your parents—but your grandparents were from Iran. From Esfahan, to be precise."

Najjar was stunned. It was all true. He searched his memory. He must know this boy somehow. But he couldn't imagine where or when they had met. He had a nearly photographic memory, yet neither this face nor this voice was registering in the slightest.

"You are a child of the Revolution," the stranger continued. "Your mother, Jamila, bless her memory, was a true servant of Allah. She could trace her family lineage to the Prophet, peace be upon him. Your mother memorized the Qur'an by the age of seven. She was excited by the fall of the Shah and the return of the

Ayatollah from exile in Paris to Tehran on the fateful first day of February, 1979.”

This, too, was true, Najjar realized, but it frightened him.

“Though eight months pregnant with you,” the boy went on, “your mother insisted that she and your father join the millions of Iranians trying to catch a glimpse of the Ayatollah as his flight touched down at Mehrabad International Airport that morning. But they never made it, did they?”

Najjar shook his head.

“Just after sunrise, your mother went into premature labor,” the stranger continued. “She delivered you on a bus on the way to the hospital. Barely four pounds, fourteen ounces, you were on life-support for months. The doctors said you would not survive. But your mother prayed, and what happened?”

“Allah answered her prayers,” Najjar said quietly.

“Yes, he did,” the stranger confirmed. “And then what? Your parents brought you home from the hospital just days before the students seized the American Embassy. Your mother stayed at your side night and day from that point forward. She loved you dearly, didn’t she?”

Najjar’s eyes began to well up with tears, and the stranger moved closer and spoke nearly in a whisper.

“Your father, rest his soul, was a risk-taker.”

Najjar nodded reluctantly.

“Your mother pleaded with your father not to move you and her to Iraq,” the stranger went on. “But he would not listen. He meant well. Raised by merchants, he had a passion for business, but he lacked wisdom, discernment. He had failed at exporting Persian rugs to Europe and Canada. He had failed at exporting pistachios to Brazil and had to borrow money from your uncle. He always seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. And then, convinced the rise of the Ayatollah in Iran would create a boom in business

with the Shias in Iraq, he brought you all here to Samarra, to build a business and make a fortune. Unfortunately, he did not see the Iran–Iraq war coming. His business never took off, and your parents were killed on the twelfth of December, 1983, in a car accident in Baghdad. And aside from your aunt and uncle, you have been all alone ever since.”

The hair on the back of Najjar’s neck stood erect. His face went pale. Forgetting about the extent of his injuries, he struggled to his feet and stared back at this boy. For several minutes, there was complete silence. Then the stranger spoke his final words.

“You are the brightest in your class, Najjar. You love Sheyda, the girl who sits next to you. You will marry her before your twenty-second birthday.”

“How do you . . . ?” But Najjar could say no more. His mouth was as dry as the desert floor.

“Allah has chosen you, Najjar Hamid Malik. You will become a great scientist. You will help the Islamic world achieve ultimate power over the infidels and establish the Islamic caliphate. You will help usher in the era of the Promised One. But you must follow Allah without hesitation. You must give him your supreme allegiance. And then, if you are worthy, you shall live forever in Paradise.”

Najjar hoped it was true.

“Yes, I will serve Allah with all that I am,” he said with all the strength and sincerity he could muster. “I will devote myself to preparing for the Promised One. But who are you? Are you the One that—?”

The stranger raised his hand, and Najjar stopped talking. “When the time is right, you will see me again.”

Najjar stared into those black eyes. And then, without warning, the stranger vanished into the crowd.

SOME YEARS LATER . . .

CIA HEADQUARTERS
LANGLEY, VIRGINIA

“You’re going to Iran,” said Murray.

The sentence just hung in the air for a few moments. David Shirazi stared at Murray in disbelief, then at Zalinsky, and back to Murray.

“When?”

“Seventy-two hours,” Murray said. “Your code name is *Zephyr*.
God of the west wind? They had to be kidding.

“What’s the mission?”

“Jack and Eva here will walk you through the specifics,” Murray explained. “But the short version is this: we need you to penetrate the highest levels of the Iranian regime, recruit assets, and deliver solid, actionable intelligence that can help us sink or at least slow down

Iran's nuclear weapons program. We're currently positioning NOC teams throughout the country ready to sabotage facilities, intercept shipments, you name it. What we don't have is someone inside giving us hard targets."

David tried to process what his boss was saying, but it was such a radical departure from what he had been doing that he couldn't imagine it working. Sure, his family was Iranian, but he had never set foot in the country. Yes, he spoke Farsi, but so did eighty million other people in the world. What's more, he'd just spent the last several years studying Pakistani, Afghani, and al Qaeda leaders, organization, and culture. He was increasingly an expert in such matters and thus increasingly valuable in an intelligence agency that still hadn't caught bin Laden all these years after 9/11. As for Iran, he neither understood the first thing about Persian politics nor really much cared.

"I'm sorry, sir," David said after a few more moments of reflection. "That's not what I signed up for."

"I beg your pardon?" asked Murray, clearly in no mood for a discussion on the topic.

"Sir, with all due respect, I was recruited to hunt down Osama bin Laden and bring you proof of his death," David told the agency's number two official with a depth of conviction that surprised even him. "That's what I was trained for. That's what I'm finally getting the chance to do. That's what I want to do. That's what I was born to do. I'm sure you have your reasons, and I'm grateful that you would consider me, but I'm not interested in changing assignments. You've got the wrong guy. It's just that simple."

The look on Tom Murray's face said it all. The man was not happy.

"Agent Shirazi, I really couldn't care less why you think you were recruited for this agency," he explained through gritted teeth. "We bought you. We trained you. We own you. Period. You got it?"

This was no time to argue, David concluded. “Yes, sir.”

“You sure about that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” Murray got up, stretched his legs, and walked over to a window overlooking snow-covered woods. “Osama bin Laden is still a serious threat to this country and our allies. Don’t get me wrong, I do want his head on a platter, and this agency is going to get it done on my watch. But while in public this administration is focused on Afghanistan and Pakistan, the director and I believe the most serious threat to our national security and that of our allies in the Middle East at the moment is Iran. We know the Iranians are rapidly enriching uranium. We know they are planning to use that uranium to build nuclear weapons. We know time is running out. And if we don’t stop the Iranians from building the Islamic Bomb, do you have any idea what’s going to happen?”

David took a deep breath; glanced at Zalinsky, who was now once again expressionless; and then looked back at Murray.

“Well, Shirazi,” Murray pressed, “do you?”

David shifted in his seat. “Well, sir, I’d say the mullahs are probably going to try to rebuild the Persian Empire under the cover of a nuclear umbrella,” he ventured. “And I’d guess they’ll try to blackmail the Saudis and the Iraqis to do their bidding.”

“Or?” asked Murray.

“Or Iran will try to drive up the price of oil to unheard-of levels and try to bankrupt us and the West.”

“Or?”

“I guess that, uh, well . . . Iran could try to give a small, tactical nuke to al Qaeda, or Hezbollah, or Hamas, or Islamic Jihad, or some other terrorist organization and try to sneak it into Tel Aviv or Haifa and take out an Israeli city.”

“Or?”

David didn’t like where this was headed. “Worst-case scenario?”

Iran could try to launch a barrage of ballistic missiles—fitted with nuclear warheads—over Syria, over Iraq and Jordan, and into the major cities of Israel to ‘wipe the Zionist entity off the face of the earth,’ as they have promised to do for years.”

Murray nodded but asked one more time, “Or?”

This time, David drew a blank. “I’m sorry, sir,” he said. “Isn’t that all bad enough?”

“It is,” said Murray. “But aside from the fact that the creation of the Persian Bomb will force the Arab states into a nuclear arms race so they have the Bomb too, you’re still missing one catastrophic scenario.”

“What is that, sir?”

Murray picked up a remote control off the conference table and pushed a button, illuminating a video screen which began showing a computer simulation of an Israeli first strike, followed by the retaliation of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas.

“The most immediate—and arguably the most likely scenario—is that Iran will never get the Bomb,” Murray explained as all eyes were riveted to the digital display. “Instead, the Israelis, hoping against hope that they can neutralize the Iranian nuclear threat before the ayatollahs are truly able to destroy their country, will launch a massive preemptive strike.”

On the screen, missiles were suddenly flying in every direction throughout the Middle East. Not a single country in the region remained unaffected. The simulated Iranian response to Israel’s first strike showed Persian missile strikes against every major Israeli city, but also against oil fields, refineries, and shipping facilities throughout Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the Arab emirates in the Gulf. At the same time, Iranian missiles were hitting cities and military bases in Iraq and Afghanistan. Israel, meanwhile, was not simply being hit by hundreds of Iranian missiles, but also by tens of thousands of missiles, rockets, and mortars from Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza. With

Israeli missiles and fighter jets firing back, it was clear the entire region was going to be set on fire.

Murray hit another button, enlarging the scope of the digital map, and David saw flashes in cities throughout Europe as well as the Middle East. These, the deputy director of operations explained, represented suicide bombers being unleashed in force. Then David noticed a series of digital counters in the lower right corner of the screen, estimating casualties from the entire conflict. Hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians would die, David realized—Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Millions more would be wounded or left homeless by the devastation. And not only would the Middle East and Europe be affected, the United States would be as well. It was almost impossible to imagine sleeper cells not being activated and Americans and Canadians being hit by a blizzard of terrorist attacks.

Zalinsky saw David focused on the casualty projections and decided it was time to broaden the young man's perspective.

"As bad as the human toll would be, it would not be limited to death and injury," Zalinsky explained. "The economic analysts over in the Directorate of Intelligence tell me they expect oil prices would skyrocket in this scenario."

"How high?" David asked.

"No one really knows—\$200 a barrel? \$300 a barrel? Maybe more."

Such a dramatic spike in oil prices—overnight but also sustained for months and possibly years on end—could sink an already-fragile global economy. Soaring energy prices could quickly trigger hyperinflation, David surmised. Skyrocketing prices would send the cost of many goods beyond the reach of the poor and lower middle class. Millions would be pushed into poverty. People would stop spending on almost anything but food and basic staples, triggering massive business failures. Tens of millions of people would soon be out of work. As the dominoes fell, a global depression could ensue. And

this, of course, was assuming the conflict was simply a conventional war, not one that actually went nuclear. David wasn't sure that was a safe assumption, but the point wasn't lost on him.

He glanced at Eva. At the moment, she was looking down, jotting notes, but she clearly wasn't reacting to all this with much emotion. Assuming she was a thinking, feeling, rational person, that could only mean one thing: she had heard this information before. She had already run the various scenarios and processed them at length.

Then another thought dawned on him: he wasn't going into Iran alone; Eva was going with him. She wasn't an agency analyst. She was a NOC operative. He supposed she might have helped Zalinsky construct some of David's cover stories in the past, but if she were simply helping design his new assignment going forward, why would Murray and Zalinsky have her in the room? There was no other reason than for the two of them to become acquainted prior to embarking on a mission that might cost both of them their lives.

David looked back at the images flickering on the display and knew in that instant that his dream of killing Osama bin Laden and avenging the death of Marseille Harper's mom was evaporating in front of his eyes. But to his surprise, he wasn't angry or depressed. Rather, he found himself unexpectedly exhilarated. His country needed him. He was one of the few Persian-Americans in the CIA's clandestine services. He spoke Farsi like a native. He would have an airtight cover story. He didn't yet know exactly how Murray was going to use him, but he'd learn soon enough. The bottom line was clear. He was heading into Iran. His mission was to stop the ayatollahs before they got their hands on the Bomb. Before the Israelis took matters into their own hands. Before Armageddon. Better yet, he was going with a beautiful, intelligent girl he looked forward to getting to know. All that, and he was leaving in seventy-two hours.

The phone rang.

The DDO answered it, then turned to the others and said,

“Another massacre in Yemen—I need to take this. Jack, I trust you and Eva can proceed from here.”

Zalinsky nodded and quietly signaled David and Eva to gather their papers and follow him downstairs to the Near East Division.

* * *

Back on the sixth floor, they signed out a conference room, ordered some Chinese food from the commissary, and locked themselves away for the rest of the day. Only then did Zalinsky hand each of them a thick briefing book on the mission ahead of them.

“Memorize it, both of you,” Zalinsky said when they had finally settled in. “I’m sure you’ve already figured this out, David, but Eva is going in too. Her cover will be the MDS project manager. In reality, she’ll also be running the agency’s operation on the ground and reporting back directly to me. Her code name is *Themis*.”

The Greek goddess of divine law and order? She was going to be insufferable, David concluded.

Zalinsky, however, didn’t give David time to ponder the implications. He cut straight to the bottom line. “Time is of the essence. I can’t stress this enough. I’ve talked to all of the agency’s best Iran analysts in the Intelligence Directorate. Most believe Tehran could have functional nuclear weapons in two to three years. Some say it will take them longer. But the problem is, the Israelis don’t trust our analysis. They’re worried we’re making another catastrophic error of judgment.”

“You mean 1998—India and Pakistan,” David said.

Zalinsky nodded. “We knew both countries had been racing to build the Bomb for decades, but we were caught completely off guard when they both tested nukes within days of each other. We had no idea they had crossed the nuclear finish line and built dozens of nuclear weapons until it was too late to do anything about it. And that’s just one example. The agency had no idea the Soviets were so

close to testing their first nuclear weapon in 1949 until the test actually occurred. And don't forget Saddam Hussein in 1981; we didn't realize just how close he was to building nuclear weapons until the Israelis took out the Osirik nuclear reactor just before it went hot.

"And then there's Iraq again in 2003," Eva chimed in.

No kidding, David thought. Arguably the agency's most disastrous mistake to date was having convinced President George W. Bush that Iraq had large and dangerous stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction—and that the case for proving it to the international community was, in the now infamous turn of phrase by the director of central intelligence at the time, "a slam dunk." To be sure, some WMDs were found in Iraq after the liberation of the country by U.S. and coalition forces. But the weapons that were discovered were neither the types nor quantities of WMD the U.S. and the world had expected to find. Nor were they the types and quantities the CIA had warned about. As a result, the credibility of the CIA and her sister agencies throughout the American government had been so badly damaged that they still had not fully recovered.

"So the problem," Zalinsky concluded, "is that we now have to be very careful about assessing the WMD capabilities of enemy nations, Iran included. The analysts in the CIA's Intelligence Directorate are terrified of making mistakes and of being accused of overstating what they know. So they hedge their written and oral assessments. No one wants to sound too concerned about Iran getting the Bomb for fear of looking like they're goading the president into another war."

"So let me get this straight," David said. "The Israelis think we blew the call in the past by not realizing just how close Saddam and India and Pakistan and others were to getting the Bomb. And the Israelis think we blew the call a few years ago by thinking Saddam was closer to building the Bomb and stockpiling WMDs than he really was. So when our best analysts say Iran is still several years away from getting the Bomb, the Israelis think we're smoking crack?"

“Let’s just say they’re not brimming with confidence,” said Zalinsky. “But it’s even worse than that.”

“How so?”

“A few weeks ago—while you were in Karachi, David, and you, Eva, were in Dubai—I had lunch in Jerusalem with Israel’s top spook at the Mossad. He told me, look, the world already knows Iran is building nuclear facilities. The world already knows they’re training nuclear scientists and enriching uranium at a breakneck pace and building ballistic missiles that can reach not only Israel but Europe as well. The world has already heard the Iranian leadership repeatedly threaten to annihilate Judeo-Christian civilization and wipe Israel and the U.S. off the map. So why isn’t the world taking decisive action to stop Iran from getting the Bomb? Why isn’t the U.S. building a coalition to invade Iran and change this fanatical regime? The world, he noted, went to war with Iraq in 2003 with far less evidence. I told him there is simply no appetite—and no money—in the U.S. or Europe or anywhere for another war in the Middle East. So he asked, doesn’t Israel, then, have not only the legal right but the moral responsibility to go to war with Iran now, if the world is just going to sit on its hands and do nothing?”

“I hear his point,” David said. “But given the fact that a war between Israel and Iran could set the region on fire and seriously impact the global economy, do we really want Israel to be deciding the fate of the region and the world all by itself?”

“No, we don’t,” Zalinsky said. “And that’s what I told him. President Jackson ought to be driving the agenda, not the Israelis. That’s why the secretary of defense is en route to Tel Aviv as we speak to warn the Israelis not to take matters in their own hands. That’s why President Jackson has had no less than three phone conversations with Prime Minister Naphtali in the past month urging him to let us ramp up covert efforts rather than drag the world into a war no one wants.

Which brings the three of us to this room. Last week the president quietly signed a highly classified national intelligence directive. It authorizes the CIA ‘to use all means necessary to disrupt and if necessary destroy Iranian nuclear weapons capabilities in order to prevent the eruption of another cataclysmic war in the Middle East.’”

Zalinsky then reached into his briefcase, pulled out a copy of the directive, and slid it across the table for David and Eva to read for themselves.

As David read the one-page document, Eva asked, “How much time does the Mossad think they have before Iran has an operational nuclear weapon?”

Zalinsky took back the eyes-only directive and returned it to his briefcase, then answered the question. “They’re convinced Iran will have the Bomb by the end of the year . . . and an operational warhead by the end of next year.”

David tensed. Even if the Israelis were wrong, even if they were being too pessimistic, their assessment could mean only one thing—if the United States did nothing, the Israelis were going to launch a massive strike against Iran, and soon.