

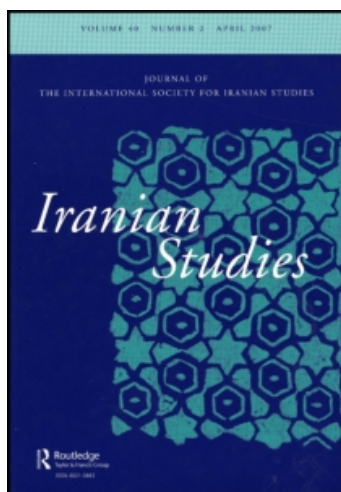
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Iran and the US in the shadow of 9/11: Persia and the Persian question revisited

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Ali M. Ansari

Iran and the US in the Shadow of 9/11: Persia and the Persian Question Revisited

“The aide said that guys like me were ‘in what we call the reality-based community,’ which he defined as people who ‘believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.’ I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. ‘That’s not the way the world really works anymore,’ he continued. ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.’”¹

In a recent trip to Europe, the new US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, sought to heal the wounds which had emerged over the US decision to overthrow Saddam Hussein. She found a receptive Europe, anxious to avoid the rifts of the past and keen to accentuate the positive. In the aftermath of the elections in Iraq, there was even room for some agreement on how best to deal with Iran, and her ambitions for a nuclear programme. Everyone agreed that Iran was not Iraq, and by all accounts, the Bush Administration appeared content to allow the Europeans to pursue their negotiations with a view to resolving ‘Iran’ through diplomatic means. Indeed, it now seemed that far from sitting on the sidelines – waiting for the negotiations to fail – the United States had agreed to actively support the EU negotiations with offers of their own. Yet behind all the smiles, there was an air of discontent and barely disguised disagreement. The Americans were proving reluctant partners and their rediscovered faith in diplomacy, and the UN for that matter, seemed less a result of deliberate policy and more a consequence of its absence.² What the Bush administration lacked

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¹Recounted by Ron Susskind, ‘Without a Doubt’, in *The New York Times*, 17th October 2004.

²See for example National Security Council member, Bob Blackwill quoted in the *Financial Times*, March 16th 2004, ‘Washington Hardliners wary of engaging Iran’, Guy Dinmore: “Bush has a vision for the Greater Middle East but not a policy.” The notion that US policy towards Iran, inasmuch as it exists, has failed is of course not new, see for example, S Chubin & J D Green *Engaging Iran: A US Strategy Survival* Vol 40, no 3 Autumn (1998): 153–169.

in detail it nonetheless made up with ‘vision’, and Rice’s characterization of Iran as a ‘totalitarian’ state not only highlighted differences in appreciation between the US and her European allies of the reality of Iran but, perhaps more significantly, marked a distinct shift in emphasis within the United States itself. The State Department was clearly under new management, and the diplomatic ambiguity of the past, along with the flexibility this afforded, had been replaced with theological certainty.³ It reflected a broader shift in US policy approaches since 9/11, away from ‘traditional’ realism and towards an ideological construction of international relations driven emphatically by myths.⁴

This paper is an investigation of the dialectical nature of US-Iran relations looking in particular at relations since the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Iranian responses to President Bush’s State of the Union address in January 2002, which classified Iran as a member of the ‘Axis of Evil’. The paper argues that the events of 9/11 fundamentally altered the nature of US foreign policy making, away from the bureaucratic rationality of the past which had been understood under the rubric of a ‘realist’ interpretation of international relations, towards a charismatic justification with a revolutionary message.⁵ This transformation of US attitudes stood in marked contrast to the tendency in Iran for a routinization of the revolution, and more towards rationalisation and international order. That this process of *normalization* was being encouraged at the very time that the founder and guardian of the global order was engaged in a radical transformation of its relationship with that order – with a view to changing it – resulted in a critical tension and a continued failure of communication which may be defined as an epistemological gap.⁶ A gap which may only be overcome through the exercise of decisive leadership. Iranian policy makers, steeped in American international relations theory have been seeking to engage the ‘realist’, and have been disconcerted to discover the revolutionary.

³Contrast Rice’s comments with those of Richard Armitage after the State of the Union address in 2002, “The axis of evil speech was a valid comment [but] I would note there is one dramatic difference between Iran and the other two axes of evil, and that would be its democracy. [And] you approach a democracy differently . . . I wouldn’t think they were next at all.” Richard Armitage quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* 15th February 2003.

⁴In this paper, ‘realism’, and the ‘rationality’ that it implies are culturally defined and determined, and therefore reflect particular interpretation as opposed to general laws. ‘Myth’ is here used as a concept in the social sciences. See for example, P Ricouer *Science and Ideology in Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, (Cambridge 1981): 222–246. My reading of myth draws extensively on R Barthes, *Mythologies* (London, 1970).

⁵See for example, Leon Harder, ‘Operation Iranian Freedom?’ *The American Conservative* 25th April, 2005: 3–4; “. . . the neocons are more entrenched in the power centres while the realists have been cleansed from the CIA and other government agencies.”

⁶As Philippe Sands notes in *Lawless World: America and the Making and Breaking of Global Rules* (London 2005): xi, “The rules which were intended to constrain others became constraining of their creators.”

Foundation Myths

Throughout the 1990s, Iranian leaders had been grappling with the issue of the United States. Ever since the Hostage Crisis in 1979, diplomatic relations had been severed, and officially at least, the United States had imposed a series of embargos on the Islamic Republic with a view to bringing the revolution the heel. Nonetheless, in the absence of formal, 'real' relations, both Iran and the United States retained a very real presence in each other's political life, which took on mythic proportions. While American politicians may have been reluctant to indulge in the rhetoric of the 'Great Satan', there is little doubt that the experience of the Hostage Crisis and the subsequent Iran-Contra affair placed Iran in a category all of its own as far as US policy makers were concerned.⁷ This emotive element within US attitudes towards Iran may have been vigorously denied by the bureaucratic rationalists within successive US administrations, but it was increasingly apparent to outside observers who were struck by the depth of the animosity. Indeed, this was not simply a popular antipathy but one which affected many members of the Washington elite and transcended party politics. Democrats bemoaned the fall of the Carter Presidency and noted with some bitterness that Iran's revolutionaries appeared determined to sabotage Carter's re-election prospects by very deliberately holding the hostages until after President Reagan's inauguration.⁸ While Republicans were to prove equally unforgiving over the debacle of the Iran-Contra affair, which added criminal proceedings to the indignity of political embarrassment.

Indeed while American politicians were to emerge from the 1980s with their prejudices affirmed, in Iran the harsh reality of war was beginning to temper the ideological zeal of the revolution. The new President, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, seemed to be inaugurating a period of 'pragmatism', and it was apparent that a cadre of hitherto marginalised *ancien régime* diplomats and intellectuals were being reconciled to the Islamic Republic, with a view to encouraging a rational reconstruction of international affairs.⁹ This was, to be sure, an incremental process which labored under the diplomatic fiasco that was the Rushdie Affair, but there is little doubt that Rafsanjani was seeking a routinization of the revolution. A number of institutes and think-tanks were established, with government support and funding, staffed in large part by International Relations experts trained in the United States, with a view to producing a rational (and 'realist') interpretation of the international order, and more specifically, the

⁷See for example, W Beeman @Double Demons: Cultural Impedance in US-Iranian Understanding', *Iranian Journal of International Affairs* Summer-Fall (1990): 319–334.

⁸For details of this interpretation see Gary Sick, *October Surprise: America's Hostages in Iran and the Election of Ronald Reagan* (London, 1992).

⁹The notion of 'national interest' became more prominent in discourse, see for example Hossein Seifzadeh 'Estrateji-ye Melli va Siyasatgozari-ye khareji' (National Strategy & Foreign Policy-Making), *The Journal of Foreign Policy*, Vol VII, (1994): 705–722.

United States.¹⁰ The conclusion they unsurprisingly drew, true to their training, was that the United States was a rational international player who pursued its 'interests'. These 'interests' were somewhat simplistically defined in economic and/or geo-political terms. Any sense of cultural or ideological determination in American foreign policy was dismissed as methodologically unsound, a view reinforced by those very bureaucratic rationalists who populated the US policy making establishment – ideology was quite obviously something *others* had. Thus, among the strategies to engage the United States which circulated in the early 1990s was one which sought to position Iran, ironically, as an 'island of stability' within a region that, after the fall of Soviet Union, was to all intents and purposes, increasingly unstable. This strategy was however unsustainable for the very reason that the Soviet Union was no longer a threat, so it was decided to seek engagement on economic terms. This suited the mercantile world view of the Rafsanjani administration which actively encouraged the notion that Iran was 'open for business'. While anticipating domestic criticism from hardliners in the regime, Rafsanjani was less prepared for the cool reception from the United States to the various economic enticements on offer.

Both offers lay in the oil sector, thought by many to be Iran's main source of economic leverage. In the first place, Iranian policy makers sought to capitalize on their geopolitical position as a transit route for oil and gas out of the Caspian basin towards the Persian Gulf, emphasising with much justification, the economic sense of running pipelines through Iran, as opposed to Turkey and/or Russia, a route which could take advantage of the extensive pipeline network already constructed throughout the country, and which it was argued, could be a force for stability throughout the wider region as countries became inter-dependent through the network. The second strategy was to target the United States directly by offering US oil companies, in this case Conoco, a stake in Iranian oil development. Not only did these offers come to nothing, they resulted in a remarkable reaction, which saw on the one hand, the United States seek to circumvent the Iranian pipeline offer, by heavily underwriting the expensive alternative routes, including in this case, a dubious (on geographical as well as political grounds) route through Afghanistan, and the imposition of extensive sanctions through both Executive Order and legislation (the Iran Libya Sanctions Act – ILSA), which sought to introduce secondary sanctions on any foreign company investing in the Iranian oil and gas sector. There is little doubt that Iranian policy makers were somewhat perplexed by this reaction, but they were

¹⁰See the editorial in the *Tebran Times*, February 23rd 1993, which boldly proclaimed now to be the time for 'realism'. There was also an attempt to out-intellectualise and out-rationalise the West, which often took some striking turns. For example one of the key proponents of this movement, Mohammad-Javad Larijani, could offer the following assessment of the Islamic Republic: "While an Islamic society is not at ease with technical rationality, it finds itself quite in harmony with the authentic one. Therefore, Islamic modernity goes far beyond historical modernity and is basically a post-modern phenomenon." 'Islamic Society & Modernism', in *The Iranian Journal for International Affairs*, VII, 1, (1995): 58.

comforted by the fact that this was a Democratic administration and, as such, traditionally beholden to the Israeli lobby. President Clinton's decision to block the Conoco contract following intense pressure from the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and his announcement of further sanctions at a meeting of the World Jewish Congress seemed to confirm this suspicion. Moreover the Clinton Administration's antipathy towards Iran had already been revealed by the imposition of 'Dual Containment', and of course the appointment of Warren Christopher as Secretary of State in 1993. It was an open secret that Warren Christopher, as a result of personal experiences during the Hostage Crisis, was no friend of Iran. Iranian 'realists' were therefore reassured that this was an anomaly born from Democratic prejudice, and that one had to wait for the Republicans to bring back pragmatic realism (a view reinforced by the Republicans in opposition). After all, in a curious effort to emphasize continuity over change (ie *normalization*), even the Shah had had difficulty with Democratic presidents. This was nonetheless a willful if convenient misreading of the political situation in the United States. Attempts to broker a deal with the first resident Bush in 1991–2 had foundered on the potential embarrassment of the 'October Surprise' revelations, as well as the President's knowledge of the Iran-Contra affair, suggesting that the problem of Iran was not a party political issue in the United States. While the Clinton Administration's cautious initial welcome to the Taleban take-over in Kabul in 1995 hinted to those who cared to notice that America's problem was not with radical (revolutionary) Islam.

Khatami

One person who recognized the depth of the problem confronting Iran was Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, who understood that 'realism', far from representing the scientific objective reality its proponents proclaimed, was itself constructed by and a product of distinctive cultural values and prejudices. If Iran was unable to communicate its message, however tempting, to the United States, this was perhaps because the cultural assumptions were different and while the words may be the same, the meaning imparted was not:

... In its contemporary, complex forms, information technology represents one of the highest achievements of modern culture which uses its control over information to solidify its domination of the world. Thus, inquiry into the nature of the information world is inseparable from uncovering the nature of modern civilization itself. And until we address this important question we will not be able to muster the confidence and wisdom to understand our relationship to modern civilization. Otherwise, we will live in a world whose rules have been set by others, at the mercy of circumstance, not as masters of our fate.... The flood of information in our age saturates the

senses of humanity so extensively that the ability to assess and choose is impaired even among Westerners who are producers of information, let alone us who have a peripheral role in the information world. Electronic information is the brainchild of modern civilization. Thus, the power of today's information-based mass culture is tied to the legitimacy of the values of Western civilization for which the information revolution counts as the most prominent achievement¹¹

Khatami, a student of Western philosophy, was likewise seeking an engagement with the West, but the tool at his disposal, the means by which he intended to deconstruct the US hegemony,¹² was not the 'analytical' method of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, but the hermeneutic philosophy of the Continent:

True dialogue will only be possible when the two sides are genuinely aware of their roots and identity, otherwise the dialogue of an imitator who has no identity, with others, is meaningless and is not in his interest.¹³

In other words, material 'interest' could neither be communicated nor sustained outside a common cultural framework. Khatami's first systematic attempt to broach this problem was in his interview on CNN in January 1998, where he stressed the commonality of interests between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States while acknowledging areas of disagreement. It would be fair to say that the initial reaction from the United States was confused. They had been caught off guard, were unclear what it all meant, and consequently not sure how to respond. For all the discussion of the Pilgrim Fathers and Alexis de Tocqueville, Khatami nonetheless provided some distinctly practical suggestions about how to proceed:

There is a bulky wall of mistrust between us and American administrations, a mistrust rooted in improper behaviour by the American governments. As an example of this type of behaviour, I should refer to admitted involvement of the American government in the 1953 coup d'état which toppled Mosaddeq's national government, immediately followed by a \$45 m loan to strengthen the coup government. I should also refer to the capitulation law imposed by the American government on Iran.¹⁴

¹¹See M Khatami 'Observations on the Information World' in *Hope and Challenge: The Iranian President Speaks*, trans. A Mafinezam, (Binghamton 1997): 61–71.

¹²'Hegemony' is here used in the Gramscian sense.

¹³SWB ME/3099 S1/6 dated 11th December 1997, Khatami's speech to the OIC conference dated 9th December 1997. See also BBC SWB ME/3339 MED/2 dated 23rd September 1998, President Khatami addresses Iranian expatriates in the USA, dated 20th September 1998: "the first rule of dialogue . . . is to know yourself and identity. The second rule is to know the civilisation with which you want to maintain a dialogue . . .".

¹⁴BBC SWB ME/3120 MED/5 dated 9 January 1998, CNN interview dated 8th January 1998.

Tentative steps were taken to address this 'wall of mistrust' a few months later and, encouraged by different types of sporting diplomacy, there was a sense in some quarters that Khatami's dialogic offensive had made a modest breach in the wall. Nevertheless, despite the greater receptiveness to Khatami's message in Europe, there was little sign, beyond a sympathetic hearing, that the Western bureaucratic elites took him seriously. There is nothing to suggest for example that Khatami's proposition of a Dialogue of Civilizations was anything but a genuine attempt to engage and communicate meaningfully with the West. Unfortunately, the vast majority of his interlocutors regarded him as little more than a well meaning 'philosopher-president', whose intellectual meanderings were to be tolerated rather than understood. It is important to recognize that Khatami's detractors in this respect, were not only his ideological opponents, domestically and abroad (those, who it may be argued espoused a theological absolutism), but those for whom 'ideology' was a term of abuse and merely the consequence of an unkempt mind. This somewhat dismissive perspective was in some ways more damaging to Khatami, for while its proponents may have had much in common with Khatami with respect to the ends to be achieved, they disagreed sharply on the means to be used. Khatami's natural allies, both at home and abroad, therefore found it difficult to take him seriously, and his inability to secure his political agenda at home only served to confirm this view of him as woolly and ineffectual.

Indeed, by the time the Democratic Administration of President Clinton stooped to take up the gauntlet thrown down by Khatami in 1998, the political situation in both countries had taken a turn for the worse. Despite a triumphant election victory in the Majlis (February 2000), domestic pressures faced by Khatami were mounting and Iranian policy makers were becoming increasingly frustrated at the failure of his policy of engagement to yield concrete results. There were as yet no dramatic economic gains, despite a series of high profile visits to the EU, while in the US itself the campaign season had begun in earnest. The consequence of these developments was that the unprecedented apology by the new Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, in March of that year for US involvement in the overthrow of Dr Mohammad Mosaddeq went largely unheeded in Iran.¹⁵ Instead it was argued that it would be imprudent to negotiate with an administration which may not be in power following the November elections. In any case, pointed out the 'realists', a Republican administration would be easier 'to do business with.'¹⁶

¹⁵The importance of the myth of Mosaddeq to contemporary Iranian political culture can hardly be exaggerated. See for example the Persian periodical *Nameh*, 25, Mordad 1382/August 2003, Special Issue on the 50th anniversary of the Coup; or the previous year's issue, Mordad 1381/August 2002, special issue on 'National Unity', in which the spectre of Mosaddeq looms large.

¹⁶The notion (myth) that 'conservatives' are easier 'to do business with', would in turn be replicated by the Europeans. The standard mantra of this myth is the argument, 'Only Nixon could go to China'.

The Bush Administration and 9/11

This suggestion was of course not without its merits. Charting the developments in US-Iran relations throughout the 1990s, few would have disagreed with the view that the Clinton Administration had on balance done enormous damage to the possibility of rapprochement. It was under Clinton, after all, that the policy of Dual Containment had been developed and implemented; sanctions policy had been extended to include secondary sanctions; and crucially, US policy towards the Middle East had become intimately tied to the desires of Israel in a way that was inconceivable under the first President Bush. On the other hand, it was President Reagan who had explored contacts in what was to emerge as the Iran-Contra scandal, and there were tantalizing hints that had he won a second term, he would indeed have instructed his pragmatic Secretary of State, James Baker, to investigate an opening towards Iran. This was pure speculation of course, verging perhaps on wishful thinking, and it completely omitted to account for the fact that it had been a Republican Congress which had bound Clinton's hands with respect to the sanctions on Iran. Nonetheless, Iran's realists confidently predicted that a Republican victory in November 2000 would continue where Bush senior had left off, with a pragmatic 'interest' based foreign policy dominated by that most traditional of US interests, oil. The nomination as Vice President of Dick Cheney, with his links to the oil services company, Halliburton, which was rumored to have business interests in Iran, appeared to confirm this view, as did the comments of European businessmen and civil servants. Only one concern served to sour this generally rosy picture: the assumption that the Republicans would be so ruthless in pursuit of their vision of US interests that security and economic advantages would far outweigh any desire to see political reform in Iran. This, ironically enough, was a charge that the Democrats had leveled at the Europeans, accusing them of lacking principle in dealing with Iran and putting economic interests first. With a Republican presidency, such idiosyncrasies could be put aside, although some Europeans were undoubtedly worried at the potential competition American companies represented. From the Iranian perspective, a Republican victory would confirm the veracity of the realist methodology by removing the anomaly that was Clinton, provide an avenue for detente, which it could be admitted, Khatami's dialogue had facilitated if not opened, and by extension enhance the prestige of the 'pragmatists'.

However, much to Iranian consternation, the election of George W Bush in November 2000 did not provide the opportunities some had predicted, in large part because it took the Bush Administration some considerable time to settle into the job of government. The momentum of the last few years, however slow, was now halted while the new administration officials took up their posts. While Iranians waited to see what would emerge, the indications were proving less than auspicious. The President himself seemed disinterested in foreign policy, espousing what some considered to be the traditional conservative

tendency towards isolationism, although the extent to which this was being taken was viewed with genuine concern in some European capitals, especially with respect to the Arab-Israeli Peace Process.¹⁷ More seriously, however, were the people Bush was appointing to positions of importance on Middle Eastern affairs. Indeed, a number of officials had been involved and, in the case of Elliot Abrams, convicted for, their part in the Iran-Contra scandal, while others, such as John Bolton were noted for their zealous, even ideological adherence to a particular world view.¹⁸ Still, the decision to host the Taleban in Washington with a view to developing an oil and gas pipeline from Central Asia through Afghanistan could be considered reflective of the new ruthless realism at work. If the Bush administration could work with the Taleban, went the recycled argument, then economic interests predominated over ideology. As noted above however, the decision to work with the Taleban, had previously been investigated by the Clinton administration, with a view to circumventing the economically rational choice of Iran, and could be more convincingly presented as an ideologically determined decision. In sum, the advent of a new Republican presidency did not fill the realist mould carefully crafted by Iranian analysts – however hard they tried.

Then the events of 9/11 took place. It is in periods of crisis that tensions expose themselves, and 9/11 was no exception. While Americans struggled to come to terms with what had happened and provide an explanation, the tensions between those who sought to ‘judiciously study discernible reality’, and those who wished to ‘create’ their own realities, came to the fore. What had hitherto been a trend (albeit a clear one where Iran was concerned) now sought to dominate. But it was by no means clear in the first months after the 9/11 attack that this particular world view would succeed in establishing its hegemony over US foreign policy. In Iran, on the other hand similar internal tensions were resulting in an unprecedented expression of sympathy which was greeted with some incredulity in the United States. Indeed, some US commentators noticed that there was considerably more public sympathy in Iran than in many of America’s allies in the region. There was a moment, indeed, when it appeared that the ideological facade with respect to Iran was about to crack, especially when the rash attempt to blame the 9/11 attacks on radical Shi’as (the ubiquitous Hizbollah) was blatantly contradicted the

¹⁷For a traditional conservative critique of the neo-conservative agenda see Pat Buchanan ‘*No End to War*’ in *The American Conservative* 1st March 2004.

¹⁸Abrams was initially appointed National Security Council Staff Chief for ‘Democracy, Human Rights, and International Operations, before moving up in 2002, to become Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director on the NSC for SW Asia, Near East and North African Affairs. See David Corn, ‘Elliot Abrams. Its Back!’ *The Nation* July 2 2001; Terry J Allen, ‘Public Serpent: Iran Contra villain Elliot Abrams is back in Action’ *In These Times* August 2001; ‘The Return of Elliot Abrams’ TomPaine.com, www.tompaine.com/feature.cfm/ID/6895 11th December 2002; see also ‘Iran-Contra, Amplified’ www.tompaine.com/feature2.cfm/ID/8625 18th August 2003.

facts.¹⁹ Khatami sought to capitalize on this moment by delivering Iranian assistance to the emergent US war against the Taleban. He had assiduously cultivated the cultural framework in which trust could now be contemplated. Now it was time to convert this into a concrete reality by exploiting the obvious coincidence of interests in Afghanistan, and by all accounts Iranian assistance to the coalition both during and after the Afghan war, was not insignificant. Khatami was able to deliver because Reformists and pragmatists (conservative or otherwise) within Iran likewise enjoyed a coincidence of interests and real merits in pursuing this policy. Hardliners in Iran were less easy to convince.

Their counterparts in the United States were similarly less than enthralled by the tentative detente, and steps were taken to derail the potential rapprochement. As one Conservative commentator has noted, “from the perspective of Bush and the neocons, the US has been at war with Iran since 1979 and the time [had] come to settle the score.”²⁰ A delegation of Israelis was dispatched to Washington to remind the Bush administration of the obvious dangers of the Islamic Republic, a perspective that was enthusiastically amplified by neo-conservatives within and around the government, who rushed to the airwaves to accuse Iran of harboring al Qaeda operatives. There was indeed some confusion in Iranian circles about the presence or otherwise of Al Qaeda, and the final admission that Al Qaeda members had escaped across the border and were now in Iranian prisons did not do much to assuage suspicions of complicity and their conversion into fact in an American consciousness traumatized by 9/11.²¹ More conclusive however, as far as the US administration and their Israeli guests were concerned, was the sudden and timely capture of the *Karine A*, a ship loaded with weapons for the Palestinian Authority. As the Israeli authorities and Prime Minister Sharon in particular made the most of parading the captured weapons, happily emblazoned with Persian lettering, they were initially confronted by an air of diplomatic incredulity. Not only was the timing of the find highly convenient, but even analysts ill disposed to the Islamic Republic, found it remarkable that a regime hitherto experienced in shipping arms and munitions overseas should choose to do this particular delivery via slow boat journey around the Arabian Peninsula. Caution was eventually thrown the wind when even the skeptics concluded that the source of the shipment was, at the very least, the ‘rogue elements’ in the regime determined to undermine Khatami. For those who had never been

¹⁹It was noticeable for example that the standard chants of ‘death to America’ at Fridays prayers were suspended; see the interesting reflection on the attack and Iranian sympathies for Americans in M Hajizadeh ‘Aqazadeh-ha’ (Their Excellencies’ Sons) (Tehran, 1381/2002): 143–146. Popular sympathy for the United States continued, see *Aftab-e Yazd* 5th Esfand 1382/24th February 2004, p 5.

²⁰Leon Hardar *op cit* p 4; see also A Killgore, Neocons ‘Concentrate on Promoting US-Iran War’ in *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* March 2005: 32–33.

²¹The United States Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, publicly made the claims on 18th January 2002, see Iran Press Service 18th January 2002, www.iran-press-service.com/articles_2002/Jan_2002/afqanestan_iran_qaeda_18102.

convinced by the ‘totalitarian’ description of Iran, here was the ready alternative: Khatami, the author of dialogue of civilizations, was not really in charge. Either way the explanation fits the prejudice, and by the beginning of 2002, Khatami’s domestic and international policies were in tatters.

Much ink has been spilt debating the causes and consequences of Bush’s State of the Union address on January 29th 2002, especially with regards to the inclusion of the theological motif ‘axis of evil’, a phrase which was to have political reverberations, particularly in Iran. Yet the speech is probably as interesting for what it did not include, and it is striking that ‘al Qaeda’ merited one, almost marginal mention, and Bin Laden, none at all.²² It was as if the war in Afghanistan signaled the end of one chapter, and that now it was time to move on – to other targets. The reaction in Iran to this abrupt hardening of American attitude is revealing in both indicating the plurality and sophistication of views with respect to the United States, and the sheer bewilderment of many Iranian analysts who discovered that the real world did not match their *realist* assessment.²³ Even ordinary Iranians who could agree with Bush’s criticism of the ‘unelected minority’ found it difficult to recognize themselves as part of an unholy alliance with Iraq and North Korea.

To be sure, there were some recognizable, if regrettable reactions. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamene’i immediately responded with characteristic rhetoric of his own, noting that, “The Islamic Republic of Iran is proud to be the target of the rage and hatred of the world’s greatest Satan,” while hardliners, particularly in the Revolutionary Guards, sought to exploit the event by imposing a state of emergency.²⁴ Despite the absence of formal relations, America had never left Iran. The ‘Axis of Evil’, ensured that it returned to center stage. The specter of America had been realized; regular politics, frequently subjected to douses of American interference (real or imagined), was now put on hold; the nation united against the ‘foreign threat’; and conspiracies were amplified.²⁵ Politicians, meanwhile, became engrossed in the problem of ‘who lost America’? Indeed, far from launching diatribes against the United States, Majlis deputies turned their attention to the alleged ineptitudes of the

²²See www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/print/20020129-11.html; the ‘terrorist underworld’ highlighted by President Bush was limited to *Hamas*, *Hizbollah*, *Islamic Jihad*, and for good measure *Jaish-e-Mohammad*.

²³See commentary in *Nowruz*, 2nd February 2002, BBC SWB Mon MEPol. For an interesting exception to the standard line (albeit written abroad), see G Qoreishi & M Soleimani ‘Iran va Amrika: Bazi-ye na-tamam’ (Iran & America: The unfinished game), *Aftab*, 2, 15, Ordibehesht 1381/April–May 2002: 14–21, trans J Kheirkhahan.

²⁴*Khamenei calls Bush ‘thirsty for human blood’* AFP 31st January 2002. See for example, BBC SWB Mon ME1 MEPol, *Nowruz* website 18th March 2002, on continuing calls by conservatives for a declaration of martial law.

²⁵See for example, BBC SWB Mon ME1 MEPol, IRIB, 12th July 2002, *Demonstrators support Khamene’i, call for trial of ‘fifth columnists’*; also, *Etemad*, 29 Mordad 1381/20th August 2002: 2. There was of course, plenty of public scepticism, see the reader’s comment, *Aftab-e Yazd*, 25 Ordibehesht 1381/15th May 2002: 11.

Foreign Ministry.²⁶ Others, in their eagerness to absolve the United States of such ‘irrational’ behavior, could see instead the hand of ‘Perfidious Albion’.²⁷ According to the reformist deputy, Hojjat-ol Islam Alisaghar Rahmani-Khalili:

By taking such a stance, George Bush is trying to test public opinion. And when the public opinion would correspond to his, he would then act. [The] European Union and a number of Asian and European countries have criticized Bush’s position describing it as inappropriate and wrong. Only England has supported Bush. England is behind those crises created in our country and the outside movements that support them. England is the one who motivates America to act brutally. We must discover England’s footprint in these events. In truth, England is the one who fuels events.²⁸

While hardliners relished the possibility of further antagonism, Reformist politicians along with their pragmatist allies, were desperate to discover the realist core at the heart of American rhetoric. Grasping at straws, they were encouraged by the apparent discomfort in the United States at the implications of Bush’s comments. The ‘realist’ old guard in the State Department and Congress, clearly shaken, had sought to soften the rhetoric and even hinted at the possibility of dialogue, a prospect seized upon by reformists.²⁹ As one reformist journalist commented:

There is no rational strategic explanation for refusing to hold talks with America. The sooner Iran begins to hold public and official talks with America, the sooner it will be able to further its own interests. However, the longer Iran postpones the talks, the greater the losses it will incur. In fact, if we had started to hold official talks publicly a few years ago, we would not have faced many of the problems in the bilateral relations between the two countries. Postponing the talks means that Iran has hardened its position. Eventually, Iran and America will have to negotiate. The longer such talks are postponed, the greater the losses Iran will incur and this will primarily serve America’s interests.³⁰

²⁶see Elahe Koulaee’s comments in *Nowruz*, 24 Ordibehesht 1381/14th May 2002, p 2; also *Aftab-e Yazd*, 21 Khordad 1381/11th June 2002: 1.

²⁷The alternative was of course Israel, despite the best attempts of overseas observers, see A Sheikhzadeh Iran va Emrika: taqabul ya tafahum (Iran and America: confrontation or understanding) *Aftab*, 2, 17, Tir-Mordad 1381/July–August 2002: 16–25.

²⁸ISNA website, 2nd February 2002, BBC SWB Mon MEPol.

²⁹Majlis deputies welcomed the possibility of inter-parliamentary talks following comments by Senator Joe Biden, *Hambastegi* website, 16th March 2002, BBC SWB Mon MEPol. Ahmad Zeydabadi quoted in ISNA website 16th March 2002, BBC SWB Mon MEPol; See also Jala’ipour’s comments in *Bonyan* 18th March 2002, BBC SWB Mon MEPol. See for example, *Nowruz*, 31 Ordibehesht 1381/21st May 2002: 1.

³⁰Ahmad Zeydabadi quoted in ISNA website 16th March 2002, BBC SWB Mon MEPol; See also Jala’ipour’s comments in *Bonyan* 18th March 2002, BBC SWB Mon MEPol.

Ironically, efforts at a public dialogue were to be rapidly overtaken by news that a number of private initiatives appeared to be underway. The precise nature of these initiatives, secret and sensitive as they were, is likely to remain clouded for some time, but according to leaks in the Iranian press, it appeared as if the Chairman of the Expediency Council, Hashemi Rafsanjani, had been exploring the possibilities of a 'grand bargain' with the United States.³¹ In retrospect, this may have been an attempt by the arch-realist in the Iranian establishment to broker a deal with like-minded ruthless realists in the United States. Rafsanjani's problem, however, was that this move was unlikely to win him friends among the hardline conservatives (who eagerly anticipated his failure), nor among reformists who suspected Rafsanjani's definition of 'interest' to be narrowly centered on issues of mutual security and stripped of any association with human rights and democracy. Indeed, Rafsanjani's gambit revealed a significant flaw in this particular realist conception. It failed to take into account the changes in political culture among Iranians (or for that matter within the United States). Neglecting the democratic imperative, it lacked a moral core and, with supreme irony, handed the moral high ground, on a platter, to the neo-conservatives. 'Realists', whether in the US or Europe, were quite clearly, unprincipled. In Iran, indignation was rife.³² Their indignation was fuelled by calculated leaks from the hardliners, such as Ayatollah Jannati's unsubtle response to an apparently 'clever' question from an AFP reporter, "Rafsanjani is not involved in this, but a number of associates are involved in it."³³ To further muddy the waters, it was unclear who was involved in the negotiations, and which particular factions were represented. In the United States, despite initial rejections, it was later revealed that old Iran-Contra networks were being re-vitalized, along with all the usual suspects – leading some in Iran to conclude that the neo-cons were reassuringly realist to the core, while in Iran, Rafsanjani's association with the conservatives led people to conclude that despite all the harsh rhetoric, this was an initiative with widespread conservative backing. The more damning conclusion drawn by many reformists was that for all the rhetoric, America was quite happy to deal with Iran's 'unelected minority'.³⁴ Anti-Americanism, like anti-Iranianism, was rapidly becoming a bi-partisan affair.

Indeed, contrary to their political leanings, it was the reformists who were protesting that now was not the time to begin negotiations with the United States, while the conservatives increasingly stewed in the embarrassment of further

³¹*Nowruz*, 19 Ordibehesht 1381/9th May 2002: 5.

³²For a later analysis of these developments see Guy Dinmore 'Washington Hardliners wary of engaging with Iran' *Financial Times* March 16th 2004.

³³See the detailed analysis of the various claims in *Nowruz* 26th May 2002, BBC SWB Mon MEPol.

³⁴See Armin's comments in *Nowruz*, 24 Ordibehesht 1381/14th May 2002:2, and Rafsanjani's reply in *Nowruz*, 25 Ordibehesht 1381/15th May 2002: 2; see also, Guy Dinmore *op cit* *Financial Times*, March 16th 2004. See also K Royce & T M Phelps 'Secret Talks with Iranian', *Newsday.com* 8th August 2003.

revelations and sought to stifle debate.³⁵ Ultimately, each tried to outdo each other in their repeated denial of any desire to open a dialogue while public opinion reacted with characteristic irritation at the obvious lack of any progress.³⁶ The end to this steady debasement of political life came with an intervention from the Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, urging all parties to desist from further debate. The comment proved highly counter-productive and took the public obsession with the United States to the point of ridicule. The head of Tehran Justice Office, Abbas Ali Alizadeh, a medium level cleric of moderate education, on apparently no authority or initiative but his own, abruptly announced, via a judicial decree broadcast on State television, that henceforth, any discussion about negotiations with the United States would be considered a criminal offence.³⁷ Quite apart from the insight it provided into the means by which Iran's 'autocracy' operated, this proved a highly unusual intervention – the Judiciary, let alone regional branches had not been in the habit of issuing decrees – which took many Iranians by surprise. Shock however, very rapidly gave way to ridicule as some conjectured that perhaps the decree applied only to Tehran, and that discussions could continue outside the province of Tehran. By the next morning however, farce gave way to anger as Majlis deputies lined up to lambast the hapless Alizadeh and his 'ignorance' of the law.³⁸ Even President Khatami was moved to condemn the Judiciary's actions:

I am surprised with all the fuss made over a matter that has not yet happened. More or less all those who speak about talks with America are either opposed to them or agree that now is not the time for such talks. Why must we create the impression that this is the time for talks? I follow the political system's overall policies. Let us not do anything that will threaten the country's interests and dignity and the system's overall policies. Then somebody announces that whoever negotiates has committed a crime, as if people are queuing in Iran to talk to America, and we have to stop them by force or through the judiciary. What kind of behaviour is this? We must be wise and run this country with intelligence, and God Willing, we are blessed with intelligence.³⁹

³⁵Mirdamadi, the Head of the Majlis National Security Commission, had been at the forefront of the charge that 'conservatives' had initiated un-authorized talks, see for example, *Entekhab* 23rd May 2002, BBC SWB Mon MEPol. He was charged with putting the country's national security at risk by the head of the Tehran Judiciary, Alizadeh! See *Resalat* website, 27th May 2002, BBC SWB Mon MEPol.

³⁶See Mohajerani's comments in *Bonyan*, 14 Ordibehesht 1381/4th May 2002: 2; for public frustration see, *Aftab-e Yazd*, 25 Ordibehesht 1381/15th May 2002: 11; Comment by Habibollah Asgarowladi, 15th June 2002, BBC SWB Mon MEPol.

³⁷*Nowruz*, 5 Khordad 1381/26th May 2002: 1.

³⁸*Nowruz*, 6 Khordad 1381/27th May 2002, pp 1–2; Editorial in *Hadis-e Qazvin* 2nd June 2002, BBC SWB Mon MEPol. See also Mehdi Karrubi's press conference, *Nowruz* 12 Khordad 1381/2nd June 2002: 1–2; *Hayat-e No*, 12 Khordad 1381/2nd June 2002: 1.

³⁹*Hayat-e No* website, 1st June 2002, BBC SWB Mon MEPol. See also *Nowruz*, 19 Khordad 1381/9th June 2002: 7; *Hayat-e No*, 11 Khordad 1381/1st June 2002: 1.

Conclusion

For all the ridicule that mounted, the hardline conservatives were in effect able to close down any suggestions of a detente with the United States. Within months, the Judiciary moved, with great secrecy and to the ill-disguised frustration of the government, to arrest individuals involved in polling public opinion with a view to assessing the public reaction to any dialogue with the United States.⁴⁰ Despite the nuanced nature of the responses – Iranians remained on the whole distrustful of US intentions but thought dialogue a positive and worthwhile step – the hardliners dismissed the entire exercise as psychological warfare intended to weaken the revolutionary resolve of the Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Jannati reiterated the revolutionary dogma to a weary public, stressing that antagonism against the United States remained a *raison d'être* of the state.⁴¹ As an exercise in the status quo, it revealed a continued absence of decisive leadership in the Islamic Republic, and popular frustration was increasingly making itself felt.⁴² Others openly directed their criticism at the Leader himself, lamenting his inability to seize the initiative on this issue, despite the urging of advisers.⁴³ Indeed, a sympathetic view of the United States and its policies remained among the general public and some reformist politicians all the way up to the Iraqi invasion, with few tears shed for the fall of the Baathist regime.⁴⁴ Even among intellectuals, articles discussing US policy continued to define it in terms of realism and

⁴⁰For details see, *Mardomsalari*, 18 Dey 1381/8th January 2003: 4/9; there was some evidence of Ministry of Information collusion, see *Entekhab* website, 24th December 2002, BBC SWB Mon ME1 MEPol; *Babar*, 19 Dey 1381/9th January 2003 p 1; it was indeed February 2003, before the Judiciary provided details to President Khatami, ISNA website, 2 February 2003, BBC SWB Mon ME1 MEPol.

⁴¹See Jannati's speech, IRIB, 8th November 2002, BBC SWB Mon ME1 MEPol.

⁴²See for example the reader comment, *Aftab-e Yazd*, 17 Shahrivar 1381/8th September 2002, p 5, "In my opinion America has provided the greatest help to Muslims and Iran..."; also reader comment, *Aftab-e Yazd*, 28 Azar 1381/18th December 2002, p 5; see also a critique of the 'myth' of America, see Bana S 'Bar gharari rabeteh bah amrika: faseleh gereftan ba romantism-e siyasi (Establishing links with America: moving away from political romanticism), *Aftab*, Farvardin 1382/April 2003: 84.

⁴³'Letter of Sholeh-Saadi to Khamenei' December 2002 www.web.peykeiran.com/iran/news/ir_news_92.asp.

⁴⁴For details see the editorial in the magazine, *Aftab*, Farvardin 1382/April 2003, along with the interview with Habibollah Peyman. For Elahe Koulaie's criticism of bias of Iranian television against the Americans see Tehran Times website, 7th April 2003, BBC SWB Mon ME1 MEPol. There was of course a certain amount of anxiety in official circles about the rapidity of the fall of Iraq, *Hayat-e No*, 16 Shahrivar 1381/7th September 2002: 1; *Aftab-e Yazd*, 25 Ordibehesht 1381/15th May 2002: 11; see President Khatami's press conference, *Jaam-e Jam* 28th August 2002, BBC SWB Mon ME1 MEPol. Discomfort at US policies gradually emerged after the war, see R Mostaqim *Iranian Reformers Back Hardliners Against War* Inter Press Service News Agency, April 2nd 2003. See also the concerns expressed in the Editorial in 'Jang va Ghodrat menhayeh Mardom' (War and power without the people) *Jame'eb No*, 2, 15, Ordibehesht 1382/April 2003: 1–2, these views were reflected in the tone of the rest of the special issue.

rationality, whether in critiquing a prospective war in Iraq or explaining it.⁴⁵ Indeed, having absorbed one understanding of realism, Iranians were now digesting another which explained that the policy of regime change was simply an extension of the realist interpretation of international relations which regarded the world as essentially lawless.⁴⁶ Few, if any, commentators within Iran were willing to concede a cultural paradigm for the determination of what constituted US interests, in part perhaps because in acknowledging the ideological aspect of US foreign policy, one conceded ground to the ideological hardliners in Iran itself, and paradoxically fed the logic of structural determinism.⁴⁷ Iranian realists had all the difficulty of communication with the new American idealism, and none of the reassuring conviction of their ideological compatriots. Dismissive of Khatami, they had no alternative strategy to deconstruct the ‘wall of mistrust’, while Iranian hardliners relished its construction. The Bush administration for its part, settled into the political comfort of prejudice and myth, increasingly employing theological motifs which would unsettle their compatriots, but resonate with their opponents. As the current nuclear impasse indicates, neither side has been willing to recognize a cultural and ideological dimension to the construction of interest, or to see their positions as anything but real and rational. The focus on particularities has obfuscated the wider problem of cultural communication and disguised the reality that myth is just as important to US policy making as it is to revolutionary Iran. Perhaps Iran had exported her revolution after all?

⁴⁵ Among observers of US policy that continued to be translated into Persian were the standard bearers of ‘realism’, whether as proponents or critiques. See for example, N Chomsky ‘Tahlil-e Eqdam Bush dar Araq’ (An analysis of Bush’s actions in Iraq), *Aftab*, 3, 21, Azar 1381/Nov–Dec 2002: 84–85 trans M Malekan; A Bigdeli ‘Amrika: Ostoreh ta Vagheyat’ (America: myth to reality) *Jame’eb No*, 2, 13, Esfand 1381/March 2003: 27–28.

⁴⁶ See for example in this vein, F Fukuyama ‘Mohafezeh-kari-ye Emrakayi’ (American conservatism) *Aftab*, 3, 22, Dey-Bahman 1381/Jan–Feb 2003: 88–89 trans M Malekan; particularly pertinent to this interpretation is the following article: G Nassri ‘Tammoli marafat shenakhti bar falsafe-ye siyasi-ye Habbs va mabna-ye qodrat va amniat dar’ an (An Epistemological Meditation on the Political Philosophy of Hobbes) *Etele’at Siyasi-Eqtisadi* Vol 16: 177–178 Khordad-Tir 1381/June–July 2002: 18–31.

⁴⁷ A view which panders to the *inevitable* ‘clash of civilisations’. This perspective was admirably critiqued by Abdolkarim Soroush in *The Three Cultures in Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam: essential writings of Abdolkarim Soroush* trans & ed by M Sadri & A Sadri, (Oxford, 2000): 156–170. See also Richard Bulliet *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilisation* (New York, 2005).