

# Iran and “the Axis of Evil”

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# Introduction: Background to the study

## The “War on Terror”

The carefully planned and coordinated terror attack of 11 September 2001 was the bloodiest attack on the American mainland in modern times. At short intervals, three hijacked American Airlines and United Airlines airliners were flown into the World Trade Center in Manhattan and the Pentagon in Washington. A fourth plane crashed in Pennsylvania. The Twin Towers collapsed, thousands of civilians were killed and powerful symbols of American economic and military dominance were brought low.

Live TV coverage – where CNN had the standing title of “America under attack” – enabled the whole world to witness the unprecedented catastrophe. The drama unfolding on their screens showed terrified Americans in a brutal fashion that the USA was no longer unassailable or invulnerable. At the same time as the authorities appealed for calm, emergency measures were taken: airports were closed, the White House, other Federal buildings and the UN were evacuated, and the National Guard put on alert.

In his address to the nation on 11 September, President George W. Bush said among other things: “Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts... These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve.”

With a few exceptions, the entire world condemned the atrocity. The sheer scale of the attacks quickly focused attention on the “al-Qaida” network of the exiled Saudi, Osama bin Laden. In his 11 September speech, Bush continued by saying that all intelligence and police resources would be utilised to bring those responsible to justice: “We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.”

In this way the “war on terror” was put on the international agenda. But how does one make war on terrorism, or for that matter on any other -ism? Time and time again political actors try to eradicate ideologies by force of arms, and usually end up encouraging fresh recruitment.

The ideological cradle of the Islamist movement is *madrassahs* throughout the Muslim world, and Western universities too; in fact, wherever one Islamist is preaching, teaching and agitating, there is a potential “hotbed of terrorism”. As a result of this, actors are tempted to focus on “sanctuaries” and “training camps”, real or alleged, which at least offer the hope of a coherent geographical target – that is, they can be bombed. In his State of the Union address of January 2002, Bush mentioned training camps eight times. The same goes for the concept of “terrorist states”, which are also to be found on the map. If all you have is a hammer, as the proverb goes, then everything looks like a nail.

And so the first fruit of the “war on terror” was the attempt to eradicate Osama bin Laden’s main base of operations and his “training camps” in the

“terrorist state” of Afghanistan. It was highly convenient for the USA that his hosts, a government known as the Taliban (from *talib*, a religious student), inspired by a Deobandi puritanism that makes the Iranian theocrats look positively liberal, had brought law and order to Afghanistan only at the price of a ferocious imposition of Pashtun tribal mores, a price paid most heavily by the women of Kabul. This regime had practically no defenders in the West, and was not even officially recognised by most countries; non-Pashtun warlords still resisted in the north. The USA and its Western allies suddenly rediscovered and glamorised these warlords under the respectable-sounding rubric of “the Northern Alliance”, and used them as its cannon-fodder to drive the Taliban out of the major towns (which is what always passes for “victory” in Afghanistan). A large number of civilians were killed, even more infrastructure was destroyed, the leaders of both Al-Qaida and the Taliban escaped to fight another day in the time-honoured guerrilla fashion, but despite all this, the claim could reasonably be made that the Allied military campaign had in fact deprived Osama bin Laden of his main sanctuary and training base.

The very “success” of this operation in its authors’ eyes may have further encouraged the tendency of the American Administration to conceptualise “terrorism” not so much as something that *people* do, for example when they are sufficiently infuriated with you, but as something that is nurtured in particular *places*. It naturally follows from this conceptualisation that those places where “terrorism” is nurtured are Bad Places and deserve to be dealt with accordingly. Apparent success in dealing with the first such Bad Place will strengthen the hands of those who want to go after the other Bad Places, and weaken the hands of those who think of the terrorist threat as something to be fought with the traditional police and intelligence weapons.

Of course, a counter-terrorist campaign by the security services is by its very nature covert and not very photogenic; it is surely the case that a lot is currently going on behind the scenes that academics, journalists and citizens do not know about and perhaps ought not to know about. That very secrecy, however, creates the danger that a terrified and angry population will imagine that “nothing is being done”. Sending military forces against Bad Places in a blaze of publicity (yet another “CNN war”) is far more effective as a means of reassuring the citizenry – and assuaging their thirst for revenge.

The dynamic is not unlike that of empires that annex neighbouring territories in order to prevent the tribes who live there raiding their provinces or encouraging rebellion, only to find that they have a nice new province that is now being raided from somewhere else even further away. The downside of this approach is that if you run out of Bad Places, without the “terrorism” having ceased, you have to discover or even invent new ones.

The “war on terror” is of great interest as a study in rhetorical technique. Demonisation of the enemy may be considered under two headings: first, the venerable concept of “terrorism” itself, and second, the more recent concept of “the Axis of Evil”. To sit down and analyse these concepts as techniques of rhetorical manipulation is not, of course, to either condone what the “terrorists” do or to ignore the fact that “the other side” is demonising “us” in pretty much the same ways.

## The rhetoric of “terrorism”

### Defining “terrorism” – or not

A major problem for the international coalition against “terrorism” is – or should be – to define what it is fighting against. Such denotative definitions are attempted in government and UN documents.<sup>2</sup> If no attempt is made to do this, the way is open for authoritarian, oppressive and even totalitarian regimes to achieve international legitimacy, respectability and American aid by joining the “war on terror”. These regimes will want to add their own separatists, insurgents and even dissidents to the “hit list” and thus bring down the concerted wrath of the international community on their heads. On the other hand, defining “terrorism” in a scholarly way – that is, creating precise and unambiguous inter-subjective definitions that can then be used to measure the incidence of the phenomenon in the real world – is notoriously difficult.

One reason for this is that the word chosen for definition has the suffix normally associated with an ideology, and definition of an ideology can usually begin with its creator (for instance “Marxism”); yet “terrorism” is not so much an ideology (although both apologias and handbooks certainly exist) as a constellation of different people doing different unpleasant things to different victims for different reasons. In much the same way, “accidents” are a wide variety of occurrences, united only by the fact that they are unwanted and happen to us.

Without presenting any formal definitions here,<sup>3</sup> we would mention that the attempt to delimit “terrorism” from other forms of political violence, including war, has focused inter alia on (1) whether the targets are civilian or military, (2) whether these targets are chosen for their intrinsic nature, or to send a message to and frighten the wider society, and (3) whether the perpetrators are non-governmental organisations or not. The first issue attempts to distinguish terrorism from separatist, insurgent and guerrilla warfare; the second differentiates terrorism from tyrannicide, assassination or strikes at political organisations and economic assets; and the third involves the question of “state terrorism”.

It is worth remembering that the word actually originated in state terrorism, namely the phase of the French Revolution under Robespierre called “the Terror”. In the same tradition, Robert Conquest’s title for his book on the Stalinist purges was *the Great Terror*. During the Second World War, the word “terror bombing” was initially used for air raids on cities, what subsequently became known as “strategic bombing”, then “countervalue strikes” and other coinages of Pentagonese. It would appear that the concept of “state terrorism” is less prominent in public debate than it once was, and Cicero’s forensic question *Cui bono?* offers us an explanation: states are not interested in any definition of terrorism that includes the things they themselves do. Instead of terrorism conducted by states, including ours, we now have “terrorist states”, on which more below.

<sup>2</sup> 9/11 Noam Chomsky, interview. Greg Ruggiero, editor. Seven Stories Press, New York 2001.

<sup>3</sup> But see Bjørge & Heradstveit, *Politisk terrorisme*, TANO 1993.

Another change in recent years is an increasing tendency to subsume separatism, insurgency and guerrilla war into terrorism, so that strikes by uniformed irregulars against purely military targets qualify. People may, on request, define “terrorism” in a particular way, only to abandon that definition by identifying a steadily wider spectrum of acts as they occur as being terrorism. For example, Osama bin Laden’s bombing of the embassies was terrorism because the victims were civilians; but his strike against the USS Cole was also terrorism, because he is a non-governmental actor; but then the irregular operations by the Iraqi army and Ba’ath militias against the invader are also terrorism. The final stopping-point on this slide will have to be that enemy armies fighting in the open field are “terrorists”, probably because they are the armies of “terrorist states”, whereas “our” armies fighting in the open field are naturally not. This disjunction between what we might call the “formal” and the “ostensive” definitions of terrorism, whereby people think one way when asked to consider abstract definitions but quite another way in response to particular events and their media labelling, could be a fitting subject for empirical investigation.

In this present study, however, instead of attempting to define “terrorism” as an objective and measurable phenomenon according to the method of the social sciences, we shall take entirely the opposite tack; we shall view the concept as subjective and fluid, with a content that switches radically both by context and over time. Political events and new contexts will cause a gradual accretion of new connotations to the term. The only factor that remains stable over time is the term’s affective element. It is precisely this strong affective content, allied to the term’s otherwise fluid and ambiguous character, that makes it such an effective rhetorical instrument for political actors in all periods but most especially following 11 September. Our opinion is, therefore, that a study of the frameworks for subjective understanding of the concept in a particular place and time is more interesting than yet another attempt to create a watertight “scholarly” definition.

### **“Terrorism” as political communication**

Denotative language uses many words in a neutral, precise manner to describe a phenomenon. For this reason it functions very poorly as a rhetorical instrument, for rhetoric works best with connotative language, that is, using few words in a loose, diffuse and flexible manner. Rhetorical language is also affective, and there are few words that pack such an emotional punch as “terrorism”.

Manipulation of emotions is not, of course, confined to those who employ the concept of “terrorism”, it is part of the terrorist method – at least under the old-fashioned, conservative definitions that exclude regular and irregular warfare. As well as a functional strike against American political, economic and military power, the 11 September attacks were an outstanding example of symbolic political communication. The Twin Towers were not just a building, not even just a valuable economic asset, but the very symbol of New York, as the Empire State used to be. There was talk of there being a Koranic verse about the enemies of God finding no safety in their “high towers”, and that was indeed the message: there is no sanctuary. Classic terror-

ism aims to communicate to the citizenry that the state cannot protect them. And if the state cannot protect its citizens then it loses its legitimacy; this may be expressed most clearly in Western social contract theory, but is probably a cultural universal.

It should also be noted that the lethality of this action was a new departure and has led some analysts to talk about “the new terrorism” in contradistinction to the old. Traditional terrorism operated on the slogan “few killed, but many who see”, and the anthrax attacks fell into this category, causing half a dozen fatalities but enormous panic and disruption. The destruction of WTC and its concomitant assaults on the Pentagon and White House, however, involved “many killed, and many who see”. It was more like an act of war by a foreign state than a traditional terrorist attack, and was indeed labelled as both “war” and “terrorism” at the same time, an ambiguity whose rhetorical use is of great interest, see further below.

The political challenge of a bloody demonstration of the failure of state protection demands a riposte from the state; it must counter-demonstrate its potency and ability to protect. Since in fact no state can offer absolute security against terrorism, the temptation is for this counter-demonstration to take the form of symbolic acts. The more the state is actually fumbling in the dark against a diffuse and invisible enemy, the more it will feel itself obliged to take specific and visible action to demonstrate its control, whether or not this action actually addresses the problem. This can naturally backfire, and a state turned oppressive in the cause of counter-terrorism will then serve as the recruiting sergeant of the terrorist movement. To provoke the authorities into repression is classic Leninist revolutionary doctrine.

Terrorism and counter-terrorism alike are thus a kind of psychological warfare, in which the amount of ink spilt often exceeds the amount of blood. All wars involve propaganda, but in this case the manipulation of words and images is all the more intense because the parties have trouble getting at one another in the conventional military manner. Neither side is at all interested in lukewarm attitudes, in subtle distinctions or in shades of meaning. Given the nature of the 911 attacks, it was not so difficult for the USA to mobilise its own citizens to support a programme of crushing al-Qaida and catching Osama bin Laden; it was a little more difficult to mobilise other countries, but not very; and more difficult again to mobilise them for the war on Afghanistan. The fact that after that expenditure of so much blood and treasure al-Qaida remained fairly uncrushed and Osama bin Laden very much uncaught made it harder to maintain that mobilisation, at the same time as the mobilisation was more necessary than ever, lest the Administration be obliged to admit failure.

To achieve the desired effect, the authorities’ mobilisation must rest on affective components that engage us, and/or be related to certain core values that are subject to general consensus. To explain how flying planes into the World Trade Center involve such core values and affective components is surely superfluous; of greater interest is the process by which the mobilisation resulting from this is parlayed into a programme of invasion and occupation of a “shopping list” of sovereign states.

### The “extended terrorism concept”

In demagogic terms, the affective reaction to the WTC strike constitutes a propaganda capital that can be invested in other enterprises in order to enjoy the returns of public support for those enterprises. In other words, whatever can be linked to 911 will be reprobated by the public, and whatever can be linked to the punishment of or revenge for 911 will be supported by the public, until and unless that capital is exhausted. The fact that the WTC strike was a real event, as opposed to a possibly fictitious conspiracy (like McCarthy and his Communists in the State Department), and also an act that meets every possible definition of the word “terrorism”, indeed an archetype of “terrorism” that will probably endure for centuries, makes it an ideal point of departure. The game then becomes to see how far the term can be stretched and how long the affective capital can be made to show a return.

We mentioned above that al-Qaida’s attack on the United States is conceptualised as “terrorism” and “war” at the same time. This has several rhetorical consequences. One concerns the treatment of prisoners and detainees – the authorities seem to have invented the new concept of “illegal combatant” in order to argue simultaneously that they are not protected by the Geneva Conventions since they are not prisoners of war but criminals, and that they are not entitled to a trial because they are not criminals but prisoners of war.

An ancestor of the rhetoric of the “war on terror” is the “war on drugs”, which similarly legitimised extraordinary measures with grave consequences for due process and civil liberties. Common to both “wars” appears to be the financing of American police departments by forfeiture of assets considered (but not proven) to be drug- or terrorism-related, which offers certain players a powerful stake in the continuance and development of the system.

Another consequence is the mobilisation of American society as if for war, without the usual conceptualisation of “war” as an affair between parties with equal standing in international law. In limited war the enemy may be negotiated with, in total war one may demand unconditional surrender, but in the “war on terror” the aim is extirpation. That is, extirpation of “terrorism”, but what is that? Extirpation of terrorists, no doubt, but who are they? People who have carried out terrorist attacks, people who are planning terrorist attacks, people who might one day plan terrorist attacks, or people who don’t like us? Allied to the new American doctrine of “preventive war” against all possible future threats, this conceptualisation risks creating a logic that must culminate in a war of extermination of nations or religions. When the enemy is not merely terrorist organisations but now sovereign states, this confusion of the categories is additionally dangerous. The courtesies of 19th-century diplomacy and war are, of course, long gone, but the “terrorist state” appears to take the absorption of international manners by the rhetoric of demonisation even further.

We may note that the rhetorical function of the phrases “states that sponsor terrorism” and “terrorist states” is not the same; first, a state that sponsors terrorism (a concept that has been with us for many decades, and may be traced back to the “pirates” of the Barbary Coast if not further) may conceivably be persuaded to stop doing so, whereas a “terrorist state” is clearly a state that must be destroyed altogether. As ancient and medieval philoso-

phers might have put it, in the first case terrorism is an “accident” of the state, in the second case it is its “essence”.<sup>4</sup>

Second, if terrorism is defined intersubjectively, it is by no means certain that Western states do not sponsor terrorism; the intelligence forces of the major players do “wet work”, ranging from blowing up Greenpeace vessels to devastation of other countries by mercenary forces such as the Contras. However, hard as it might be for an American citizen to admit that his country also “sponsors terrorism”, it is clearly both psychologically harder and more hazardous for him to stand up and call his country a “terrorist state”, as if there were nothing more to be said about it. The “terrorist state” is a separate ontological category, a different order of being, from “our” democratic freedom-loving states, and so comparisons of actual behaviour are both unnecessary and unpatriotic. Cognitive attribution theory may be invoked here: *We* do this “wet work” because we are regrettably obliged to counter the actions of the terrorists, *They* do it because they are Evil.

“One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom-fighter” is an aphorism that has a long history. If this is intended to mean that there are no objective criteria by which the terrorist can be distinguished from the freedom-fighter, the maxim is rather doubtful; if, however, it is meant to be a comment on the partisan use of the terms by the actors themselves, it is perfectly accurate. States may once have called one another “belligerent powers”, using the same terminology for themselves as for their enemies, but they have never done so with respect to insurgents, rebels, guerrillas and partisans. “Now Barabbas was a robber” – John 18:40, in the KJV. It is generally suspected that Barabbas was in fact a Zealot, what we would now call a cadre of the Judean Liberation Front, and that “robber” was the Romans’ rhetorical label.<sup>5</sup> If we jump forward nearly two millennia, we find that the then infant Soviet power called the Central Asian resistance in the 1920s “bandits”, as it later did the Afghan *mujihadeen*. In the Second World War Germans called both the Special Operations Executive and the various Resistances “terrorists”.

The conceptualisation of any armed enemy other than a brother-monarch or a fellow-member of the community of nations as a criminal is thus nothing new, and we have no expectation whatsoever that this usage will ever be abandoned. However, recent years have seen an escalation of this inevitable rhetoric. It used to be that organised and uniformed entities fighting the security forces were called rebels, insurgents or guerrillas. For example, when the Viet Cong blew up a building in Saigon, that was terrorism, but they were not called terrorists when they engaged in a firefight with the US Marines in the Delta, and neither was the North Vietnamese Army. However, the current trend, which actually precedes 9/11, is for states to refuse to admit that they are fighting a “war” against insurgents, even when they are losing. While international news media talked about the “civil war” in Sri Lanka, and called the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam “rebels”, “separatists” or “insurgents”, for instance, successive Colombo governments pre-

4 We may also recall Sartre’s comments on the distancing and dehumanisation involved in saying, “He is a waiter”, as opposed to “He is a man who is waiting at table”.

5 The NIV, a translation for a far less authoritarian age, has sufficient confidence in this speculation to write: “Now Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion.”

ferred the rather bizarre language of attacks on military bases by “terrorist infantry” supported by “terrorist artillery” and even “terrorist naval vessels”. In the same way, Russia is fighting Chechen “terrorists” both in Moscow theatres and on Caucasian battlefields.

As we mentioned above, the civilian-target criterion is forgotten when considering the strikes on the Marine compound in Beirut or the USS Cole, and we have just seen the non-governmental-actor criterion forgotten when considering the resistance of Iraqi irregulars to invasion. The rhetoric is now only a single step away from using the word “terrorist” to denote the uniformed armed forces of a sovereign government, and it is very likely that the neologism of “terrorist state” will be used to take that final step.

The rhetorical capital of the affective reaction to civilian terrorism has thus been invested in the stocks and bonds of the demonisation, not only of organisations that murder civilians, not only of separatists, insurgents and rebels, but also of states that yesterday were considered members of the international community, albeit unpopular ones. All the criteria that once attempted to distinguish “terrorism” from other forms of political violence appear to have been swept away, and most especially the principle that the definition of an act should be independent of who it is who commits it. The variety of acts and actors now stigmatised as “terrorist” by the architects of the “war on terror” is so wide that the only common feature appears to be that *they* are doing something unpleasant or inconvenient to *us*. In other words, “terrorist” has been mapped onto “opponent”.

It is normally the case that when terms are rhetorically extended, they become overextended, overused, worn out and ultimately meaningless. The capital is exhausted. People take to using the terms ironically, as happened to the neologisms of “political correctness”. This happened very quickly to “the Axis of Evil”, which was comprehensively and hilariously mocked from day one (and so replaced by “terrorist states”), but there is little sign of this happening to the “extended terrorist concept”. Perhaps there are exceptions to the rule; for example, in the United States “commie” retained its force from the Bolshevik revolution right up to the fall of the Soviet empire. This may be because the power of the word was rooted in an unusually intense fear, or because communists attracted serious state repression. Both factors are equally applicable to “terrorist”. Should anyone ironically call himself a “terrorist” on the basis of his opposition to the New American Century project, if the outrage of his neighbours will not cure him of this, indefinite detention without trial or counsel may.

Finally, it is worth noting the related rhetorical *topos* of “cowardly”. This word was frequently conjoined with “terrorist” by the British when reproaching the IRA, and was an understandable epithet for pub-bombers who did their best to kill random civilians without getting caught. The application to terrorists who sacrifice their own lives was, however, an immediate Administration response to the World Trade Center strike. Attempts to point out that self-sacrifice for a cause is not the usual meaning of “cowardly” are countered by emphasis on the evilness of the act, so that “cowardly” becomes a synonym of “wicked”, and those arguing that it was indeed wicked but not cowardly are accused of justifying the atrocity. The second phase of the development of this *topos* was seen in the invasion of Iraq, when Iraqi snip-

ing was also “cowardly” and Saddam Hussein was a “coward” for hiding in his bunkers. It would appear that, on the part of the Other, rational modes of resistance to attack are fundamentally illegitimate. The next war, therefore, will be fought against the cowardly criminals of a terrorist state, a member of the Axis of Evil.

### **The rhetoric of “the Axis of Evil”**

In his State of the Union Speech of 29 January 2002, Bush singled out Iraq, Iran and North Korea<sup>6</sup> and continued: “States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.” This phrase promptly became one of the defining concepts of his Administration.

Bush used the word “evil” five times in this speech, three times referring to enemies. He used it also in his speech to the nation on 11 September, and a week later to Congress he described terrorists as “planning evil”. In November of that year Bush told *Newsweek* that Saddam was also “evil”. These are clear examples of demonisation, and one of the reasons the phrase “the Axis of Evil” attracted so much criticism and is said to have done so much damage is that calling other countries Evil is not generally considered to be the language of diplomacy. There is probably an echo of Ronald Reagan’s “Evil Empire” for the Soviet Union, which was equally criticised at the time. It is possible that many Americans semi-consciously imagine that, since the Evil Empire is no longer with us, the application of such a label has a beneficent effect that can be repeated in the case of the new enemies. This may be connected with the rise of fundamentalist Christianity, which is encouraging them to see world politics in eschatological terms.

Certainly Bush himself, as a “born-again Christian”, has an entirely dualistic view of life, as a struggle between Good and Evil, with no middle ground. “Those who are not with us, are against us,” he told the more secular Europeans, who insist on trying to understand the complexities. Although Ronald Reagan called the Soviet Union “the Evil Empire”, and although he was supported by the Religious Right, he was not in fact personally religious; he never gave the impression, as does Bush, that he had been commissioned to do God’s will on Earth.

Although the use of the word “evil” for flying hijacked aircraft into civilian buildings will strike many people as justified, it is the corollary, the other side of the eschatological coin, that is especially dangerous: the assumption that the division of Good and Evil coincides with the division between Us and Them. Consequently, in this dualistic world-picture, the United States is a force for Good, even *the* force for Good. This means that anything it chooses to do is Good and anything that offends or inconveniences it is Evil.

The Axis component can be considered on several levels. In the first place, it is an incoherent metaphor, as an axis is a straight line; the figurative use is, in fact, taken not from Cartesian geometry (the x and y axes on a graph) but from the axis of the Earth’s rotation. An axis around which something revolves is made by two points; you can have three points joined

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<sup>6</sup> A secret Pentagon report later added Syria, Libya and China.

in a triangle, but then nothing can revolve around a triangle. This geometrical nonsense actually derives from a misunderstood modification to the metaphor shortly after it was coined. The original Axis was that between Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy; originally rivals, they were driven together by the Western Powers' hostility to the remilitarisation of the Rhineland and the conquest of Ethiopia. In 1936 they announced that henceforth the world would revolve around the Rome-Berlin Axis. Germany and Italy thus became "the Axis Powers". After the signature of the tripartite Anti-Comintern Pact in the same year, Japan was called an Axis Power too, but in fact there was no strategic collaboration between the European Axis and the Japanese. The metaphor has thus been a logical absurdity but a powerful affective tool since 1936.

Logic, of course, is no answer to rhetoric, and the point is that the word "Axis" evokes "our" enemies of the Second World War. It is a metonym for fascism and nazism. This historical resonance is the second level. Nobody today can in polite society say anything good about the Axis Powers, and anyone compared with them is stigmatised. Comparisons with Hitler have been made before, but employing not so much the theme of Axis as of "appeasement"; the message has been "We must get him now before it is too late!" Sir Anthony Eden, for example, used (and was probably imprisoned by) this metaphor about Gamel Abdul Nasser in 1956. The same message was preached about Saddam Hussein before the Axis of Evil speech. At the end of May 2003 Bush further reinforced this equation of the old and new "Axis" by talking about "evil" at Auschwitz itself.

A third and related level is that the Axis metaphor implies the alliance of the countries included in it. Given the intense antipathy between Iraq and Iran, and the lack of much visible connection between either and North Korea, the trope has occasioned much ridicule, with TV and Internet wits grouping together triplets of countries allegedly offended at being left out of the Axis. In theory, we might speak of the world revolving around an axis of inveterate enemies, in the sense that their quarrel is what powers international politics. That would be a reasonable use of the metaphor, and using it for Iran-Iraq (without North Korea) would not be inappropriate; but the public consensus seems to be that this is not in fact what President Bush meant. Nor would such a use have much mobilising power. It appears rather that Bush was using the Axis metaphor in the original sense, to suggest that Iraq, Iran and North Korea were not only Evil countries in themselves, but were in alliance with one another against the rest of us. In other words, not merely Evil but a *conspiracy* of Evil. Now, demonisation and conspiracy theories always go hand in hand; the human mind appears to be naturally inclined to weave all perceived threats into a single pattern.

In this way the Axis of Evil concept allows a return to the bipolar world of the twentieth century, when all one's enemies were fronts for International Jewry, International Capital or International Communism. It allows Americans to think that "evil" is a feature of particular geographical regions, faraway countries about which they know little, and thus not of Texas or Nebraska, which are part of the kingdom of Good. It suggests that "terrorism" is something that is mostly created or promoted by a list of countries acting in concert, but whose membership is not fixed forever. We can easily

envisage the Axis of Evil in the year 2010 being two or three countries other than Iraq, Iran and North Korea.

Finally, we may note how the use of the tropes of the “war on terror” and “the Axis of Evil” in the same rhetorical discourse serve to imply, without actually stating, that the Axis is *collectively* responsible for the attacks of 11 September. The attempt to acquire weapons of mass destruction, the promotion of radical-Islamic terrorism and acts of general dictatorial unpleasantness are all mixed up together, with the implication that responsibility for any one of them is responsibility for all of them. This we might call the principle of “the indivisibility of evil”.

We are writing this introduction during the fall of Baghdad, and we note how the American people are rejoicing in an imagined revenge for 9/11; thanks to the endeavours of their politicians and media, more than half of the US public now believe that Saddam Hussein was involved in the strike.<sup>7</sup> In the State of the Union Speech, Bush never claimed that North Korea had anything to do with 9/11; its qualifications for Axis membership were the attempt to develop nuclear weapons and the starving of its own people. By the time the Administration turns its attention to North Korea, however, we may be seeing a campaign to insinuate that Kim Jong Il was in league with Osama bin Laden too. In any case a sovereign state’s procurement of the only means of deterring attack from the USA (that is, nuclear weapons) qualifies it for being placed in the Axis of Evil, and being so placed is a powerful incentive to procure said means. This constitutes a positive-feedback loop, so that it is unlikely that the Axis club will have any difficulty recruiting new members. Those Americans who desire enemies appear to be assured a steady future supply.

And Iran? Bush said: “Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people’s hope for freedom.” This is as clear a justification for invasion and regime change as was presented for Iraq.

The present study seeks to illuminate the rhetoric of the “war on terror” and “the Axis of Evil” by charting the attitudes and reactions to it of oppositional members of the Iranian elite.

## Sample and methodology

The data for this study were collected during fieldwork in Iran in March–April 2002. We conducted “in-depth interviews” with 18 members of the Iranian political elite who may currently be considered part of the political opposition (see Appendices for list of interviewees). The survey is based on similar field interviews conducted in April 2000 in which a total of 14 respondents from the Iranian opposition were interviewed. The project is part of a cumulative programme of research into Iranian elite attitudes, where the aim is operate to a greater extent with closed reply categories and thereby save on the time-consuming follow-up work of coding the responses.

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<sup>7</sup> USA Today poll August 2002, see <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines02/0823-02.htm>.

### Definition of the “political opposition” in Iran

Before we embark on the analysis, it is necessary to define what we mean by “the political opposition” in Iran. This country is a strange case, in that the political opposition occupies positions of power. This may seem like a contradiction in terms, but Iran is a hybrid of democratic and theocratic institutions, in which the latter have the upper hand. Uniquely, the ultimate authority is neither the President, nor the Prime Minister, but the supreme religious leader. For the purposes of this analysis, therefore, we are defining the “Iranian political opposition” entirely without reference to the formal relationship to the theoretical structure of government, but in ideological terms.

The political struggle in Iran today is not for or against the Islamic Revolution of 1979 per se, but between the conservatives and the reformers. “Conservatives” include everybody from moderate conservatives to the ultraconservatives<sup>8</sup>; the latter take a more violent line, and are inclined to support a coup d’état as a tool of the internal political struggle. Common to all the conservatives, however, is that they support the theocracy in its present form. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini converted the essentially mystical doctrine of the *velayat-e faqih* theocracy into actual political authority, whereby the legislative, executive and judicial powers were vested in the experts in *shari’a* – of whom he himself was naturally the foremost.

It should be borne in mind, however, that sections of the clergy who are conservative in the *theological* sense of the word were often Khomeini’s bitterest opponents and are now to be found in the ranks of the reformers. What the “conservatives” are conserving, therefore, is not traditional Islam but the specific ideology and power structures of the Islamic Revolution. The ultraconservatives wish to use radical and drastic means to maintain and defend that revolution and Khomeini’s heritage.

“Reformers” are here defined as those who support the rule of law, freedom of expression and pluralism. They want to replace Khomeini’s religious absolutism as an overarching and governing principle with a synthesis of Islamic and democratic principles. Young people in particular are supporters of the reformism of the popularly elected President Mohammad Khatami. Although he is himself of the established clergy, himself helped to make the Revolution, does not polemicise against the *velayat-e faqih*, and accepts Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamenei’s supremacy, Khatami derives his legitimacy from popular election and is the primus motor of the reform process that, if allowed to continue, may neutralise the theocracy. The ultimate paradox of our method is therefore that we count the Head of State as part of the political opposition – although he is not on our list of interviewees.

In sum, the “political opposition” is deemed to be those forces that support reforms tending to strengthen democratic processes and institutions, and thereby weakening the autocratic politics of the *velayat-e faqih*.

A vital question is whether the President can fulfil the expectations of the younger generation. At the moment he has no power to do this. We thus see that the tug of war between conservatives and reformers is replaced by new fracture lines: the youngsters (often called the Revolution’s children) may in

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<sup>8</sup> In Iran’s own political terminology, these are called “radicals”, because they are radical Islamic revolutionaries. However, this usage is at odds with Western nomenclature and so highly confusing.

their disappointment revolt against Khatami, and the most militant of the young people may by-pass the President's synthesis of Islamic and democratic principles and go straight to a secular democracy.

### **An arbitrary sample**

We have made an arbitrary sample of political elites who represent policies and political ideologies that are in competition with the established ones, and that may one day in the future be the mainstream. We have also included representatives of Iran's cultural and artistic elite, a segment of the population that has been an important catalyst in the reform process that the country has been undergoing for the last decade. It should be emphasised that this is not a population sample in the statistical sense. Social science knows of no inter-subjective and consensual definition of "elite", and so no universe of "elite members" can possibly be identified.<sup>9</sup> In other words, it is impossible to take a statistically representative sample, and for our research purposes it is not even desirable.

The interviews were in-depth, and lasted on average an hour and a half; a few questions had closed response categories, while most were open. This methodology involves time-consuming work to code the responses, but the open method was a natural consequence of our not knowing the response universe very well. In other words, we were prepared to be surprised by what the elite said. Open questions provide interesting information, and our surveys have shown that for political elites this procedure is stimulating – the interviews give more of themselves than is the case with closed questions. The problems arise subsequently, when we try to review and organise the data. Categorising and coding of replies is a time-consuming process, but gives the reader a certain quantitative picture of the results in addition to the opportunity to enter the cognitive world of the respondents via the extensive answers.

On the other hand, the questionnaire was standardised, so that all the interviewees were asked the same questions. Here it was a great help that we were able to build upon the knowledge and expertise we had already acquired through a corresponding elite survey undertaken in April 2000.<sup>10</sup> These elite interviews are also a part of a cumulative research strategy involving plans for further Iranian interview rounds. In this perspective it is important to elicit the cognitive universe of the respondents, and for this reason we have chosen to present replies on most topics almost verbatim, which is not usual in such investigations. The objective is next time to operate with closed response categories on the basis of the knowledge garnered from the 2000 and 2002 surveys.

It should be noted that this is not exclusively a matter of "snapshots" of political attitudes as in opinion polls, because our arbitrary sample of respondents includes a dynamic perspective; that is, it tries to look forwards.

9 Heradstveit, Daniel 1981, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict. Psychological Obstacles to Peace*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, p. 40.

10 "Elite Perceptions of Ethical Problems Facing the Western Oil Industry in Iran", *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2001, and "Local Elites Meet Foreign Corporations. The examples of Iran and Azerbaijan", *Cahiers d'études sur la Méditerranée orientale et le monde turco-iranien*, No. 32, 2001.

### **Limitation of the data**

We have limited our survey to the political opposition in both countries and must therefore assume that the statements made in our interviews reflect a political strategy, that is, the rhetoric of the opposition. It must be assumed that the responses are part of a political strategy to discredit the supporters of Ayatollah Khamenei and the revolutionary doctrine of the Islamic republic. The fact that we were foreigners helped to soften this aspect, because conversations with foreigners emphasise the informative (perception-reflexive) at the expense of the agitation and demagogy (instrumental) that dominate the domestic power struggle. However, what is said in oral interviews may easily fail to match the facts. Our survey makes no attempt to measure the “truth quotient”. On the contrary, our aim is to chart not facts but perceptions.

# PART I 11 SEPTEMBER

## Chapter 1 The Iranian political elite's view of terrorism

### **Introduction**

Following our general meditation on the rhetorical use of the terrorism concept, this chapter will turn to the “intuitive” definitions of terrorism, that is, the definitions people use in daily speech and apply politically. Such intuitive definitions do not have the same level of precision as scholarly,<sup>11</sup> but we are here not interested in the terminology of formal political science and international jurisprudence. This book is about rhetoric. Whereas a scholar always endeavours to formulate a definition that is as precise and unambiguous as possible, the rhetorician aims for the exact opposite; as a rule, political actors prefer their terms to be imprecise and fluid. Where the context is to persuade and influence, the objective measurement of what conforms to the definition in the external world is of no interest. Political rhetoric does not make use of scholarly definitions written in denotative language.

Our purpose is rather to chart what Iranian political elites understand by the term. In the first chapter we touched upon Western players' rhetorical extension of the concept of “terrorism” in the “war on terror”. Our aim in this second chapter is to see how the Iranian actors' understanding of the term “terrorism” functions in their own political rhetoric.

### **The respondents' definitions of “terrorism”**

We shall now report on how the respondent sample preferred to define terrorism and the thoughts they had on this subject, working upwards from the bottom.

As will be seen from the table, one of the respondents replied by emphasising the ideological component of terrorism, which may be considered an answer to a different question. Only one respondent chose the definition that is rooted in the etymology of the word, a definition frequently emphasised in the Western literature, that terrorism is acts designed to terrify a populace. Two respondents brought up American economic warfare against Iraq, which was more an attempt to extend the concept than a formal definition;

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<sup>11</sup> Bjørge & Heradstveit 1993, op.cit.

the victims of this economic warfare, it was said, were no less important for not being interviewed by Larry King.

<b>Table 1 The Iranian political elite's intuitive definition of the term "terrorism"</b>	
N = number of statements*	
Political actors determine the definition on the basis of self-interest	13
Political context determines what is terrorism or not	11
Violence against the innocent	8
Economic terrorism	2
Acts that cause fear	1
Ideological terrorism	1
	N=36
*Since we have a non-random sample and a relatively low N, no significance tests are reported, nor are percentages given.	

### **Violence against the innocent**

A substantial proportion of the sample defined terrorism in the same way as many Westerners, in terms of the objective status of its victims. Some respondents explicitly emphasised the commonality between the Iranian and what they considered to be the international definition, as enshrined in conventions, that is, attacks on non-military targets and arbitrary violence against civilians. Many of them thought it was both right and important to escape from provincial thinking and converge on international criteria in this way; it was part and parcel of the reformers' emphasis on human rights.

It was pointed out that Muslim countries that condemned 11 September were silent when Afghanistan was invaded. The Organisation of Islamic Conference, that met in Kuala Lumpur between 1 and 3 April 2002 to discuss terrorism, did not produce any special "Muslim" definition, but did state that such a definition should be global and worked out within the framework of the UN. It is worth noting how moderate Muslim attitudes can be, when expressed in a calm environment.

It was emphasised that this was how President Khatami defines terrorism. Three of those involved in the hostage drama in the American embassy in 1979 now support Khatami; they state approvingly that there is much less violence in Iran than two years ago. The Iranian groups that employ terrorist methods both nationally and internationally no longer dare to say so in public. In this way the respondents' emphasis on the consensus definition serves to distance them from what has been the stereotype since the days of the Revolution; it was said that Iranians had lived such an isolated existence that their ideas about terrorism were not very sophisticated.

The USA and Iran were in agreement on the issue of innocent civilians, but definitions quickly become adjusted in the light of self-interest.

### **Freedom fighters and terrorists: the political context**

In this way the respondents thought 11 September was indubitably a case of terrorism. Blowing up a café in Jerusalem, however, was not quite the same

thing. The majority of the respondents thought it was impossible to say what was and what was not terrorism on the basis of the act alone; it depended on the context and the reasons for the terrorism. It is possible to conceive of acts that harm innocent civilians, but which are nevertheless legitimate because the actors have good reason and their behaviour is legitimate. The Iranian respondents were extremely concerned with the issue of terrorist acts in a just cause, which adds a second dimension at right angles to the civilian-victim criterion.

National liberation movements fighting for their country and people, therefore, are not committing terrorism. Resistance to occupation is legitimate.<sup>12</sup> Iranian opinion, citing international norms, distinguishes acts as non-terrorist when they are committed in a war of liberation and resistance to occupation generally, and the struggle for Palestine in particular. When Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other Palestinians are resisting oppression, therefore, their killing of Israeli civilians is not terrorism. The casualties are intruders; the Palestinians are the true victims. On the other hand, organised violence against the occupied Palestinians by the overwhelming Israeli state power is terrorism. Most of American policy and what Israel is doing in the occupied territories is terrorism, but incidents staged by Libya and Iraq are not considered terrorism by these respondents, and the same goes for Muslim groups. In brief, Muslim action is not classified as terrorism. This is the position of the Iranian conservatives, which we found was shared by many of the reformers too. Officially Iran does not accept suicide bombing, but the readiness of unofficial opinion to justify it in terms of righteous cause constitutes a sharp distinction between Iranian and American thinking.

The most noticeable aspect of this line of argument is the degree to which the focus is on Israel and the USA in the Palestine conflict. The paucity of other specific examples may be that the respondents are confident they know the official Iranian line and the American line in the Palestine issue, but are not sure about Iran's position on other issues.

### **Terrorism is whatever *we* don't like**

While some respondents emphasised the congruity between Iranian and Western views with regard to the innocent-civilian criterion, the strongest current of respondent opinion emphasised a quite different similarity – namely that both parties used the concept of “terrorism” just as long as it suited them and no longer. “Terrorism” was a label that actors applied to acts that were against their own interest.

The main thrust of this line of argument was that the USA was extremely partisan, selective and unjust in the way it uses the “terrorist” label, particularly but not limited to the Palestine conflict. In American and Israeli language, everything the Palestinians do is terrorism but nothing they themselves do is terrorism. If one Jew is killed, the Israelis have no problem with killing 42 Palestinians, and the Americans support them. The American defi-

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<sup>12</sup> Much of what was done by the resisting occupied populations in the Second World War falls under the narrow and act-specific definition, but no one ever calls it terrorism because there is consensus that the goal was legitimate, see Bjørge & Heradstveit 1993, op.cit.

inition of terrorist is the same as the Israeli, namely anyone struggling against the Israeli occupation of their land; the Americans show not the slightest interest in *why* the members of Hamas in Palestine or Hizbollah in Lebanon do what they do. Israeli state terrorism is simply not a concept the Americans recognise. This is because of the Israeli influence over the US; if terrorists blew up a building in Oslo, we were asked, do you think the USA would have come to your support in the same way? Norway does not have a powerful lobby in Washington.

It is the Americans who think narrowly and provincially, rather than universally – whatever injures white people, Christians, Jews, is terrorism. But their own actions never are.

Some of the respondents, however, think that this cuts both ways, and the same mechanisms apply to their own side too. Iran's definition of terrorism in the Palestinian conflict is practically the mirror-image of the American one, they say. Just as the Americans see the Palestinians as a threat, and ergo everything they do is terrorism, so too the Iranians see the Israelis as a threat, and ergo everything they do is terrorism. Every country selectively defines terrorism as something harming its own interests; for example, anyone waging irregular war against Iran itself would be a terrorist, or fighting a war of liberation against countries with which Iran has good relations, or perhaps merely countries with which Iran does not have bad relations. But just as Iran is no better in this respect than the USA, it is no worse either.

Some respondents even claimed that Iranian authorities conducted "terrorism" against their own population, although there was "much less" of this than previously. The violence and bloodiness of Iranian politics in recent history has made the topic of terrorism quite inflammatory. A famous newspaper editor told us that when he wrote that the Palestinian suicide bombers were terrorists, the conservatives became upset and claimed that this was a dangerous line of thought. (It was also mentioned that the Iranian authorities were critical of USA's attempt to censor the al-Jazeera television station, while simultaneously banning 17 of their country's own newspapers.)

To sum up, there is some disagreement about the concept of terrorism among the Iranian oppositional elite. They do not think definitions to be particularly important, one cannot create a precise definition. The differences are not in formal definitions of terrorism, but in the preferred ostensive examples. A few challenge the conservative position that the activity of the Palestinian suicide bombers is not terrorism but a legitimate war of liberation. At the same time, the indignation over tendentious and selective labelling by the USA was universal. In the same way, there was general agreement that it was unacceptable to pontificate about terrorism as a phenomenon without knowing the context of and the motives for these acts. The respondents do not accept "international terrorism" as the point of departure for a discussion; terrorism is not a global conspiracy but a specific local response to specific local conditions. There is no such thing as a global terrorist network, only a multinational terrorism founded on Islamic ideology, as for example bin Laden's (see next chapter).

### **The respondents' perceptions of the causes of terrorism**

Respondents were asked about their opinions of the fundamental causes of terrorism, and their responses were by and large in line with the debate in the West. Much of what they said was already familiar to us. In fact, we were surprised by how little difference there was.

The responses can be grouped into four categories:

- Structural factors globally
- Structural factors locally
- Muslim attitudes
- Western attitudes

#### **Structural factors globally**

One respondent thought it lay in human nature to commit evil acts, and cited the Oklahoma City bombing.

Apart from this truly universalist explanation, however, the respondents focused on world political, economic and social imbalances, the global economic and cultural "class system". A recurrent explanation of terrorism was the clear gulf between rich (that is, Western) and poor (that is, Muslim) countries. This gulf has led to very unhealthy relations of dependency in which the poor countries are the losers, it makes people act abnormally, and in such soil the seeds of terrorism are sown.

Migration from the countryside to the cities creates unrest. Migrants also go to the West, where they see the differences up close, and are enraged by them.

The gulf is not solely one of economics, but also asymmetrical power relations. Superior military power creates terrorism because it makes the West think it can push Muslim nations around. The USA, it was said, will accept nothing less than "the white flag", that is, abject subordination. We are thus talking about the collective and cumulative sense of inequality, in the political, economic or psychological arenas, or any combination thereof; and this frustration is directed against the USA, because it tries to impose obedience by threats. However, many Muslims are willing to suffer martyrdom as Imam Hussein did on the Plain of Karbala; they are not frightened by American military superiority, only enraged. As the Koran says, "I will let my blood flow so that the blood can speak for me".

One respondent cited what we would call alienation: that a sense of humiliation or powerlessness caused by modern society could result in a disposition to terrorism anywhere. Frustration with modernity applies not only to the countries that it has rendered peripheral, but also to the population within the central countries that it has rendered marginal. There is common ground between the marginalised people of the "South" and the marginalised people of the "North", the underclass or "fourth world". Both in this way and with respect to terrorism, the developed countries are entangled in the problems of the periphery. In both locations the response to marginalisation, alienation and frustration is religious fundamentalism.

### **Structural factors locally**

Local structural causes of terrorism are the failure to solve regional crises, such as Palestine, Northern Ireland, Kashmir and the Basque Country. Anyone who feels he is not heard and excluded from dialogue is a potential terrorist. Injustice is exploited by the great haters in their recruitment.

By far the most important local structural factor is the Palestine issue. More than anything else this has become the symbol of Muslim civilisation, the touchstone for relations between the civilisations and the driving-force of terrorism. Arab intellectuals think Sharon is a tool of the USA. Thanks to American backing, Israel can do whatever it likes without paying the price. Iran was originally opposed to the Oslo Treaty, but now supports it, and also supports Crown Prince Abdallah's plan for Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders in return for the acceptance of Israel by the Arab states and peoples. This is a step forward. A just peace that does not humiliate Muslims and is based on the UN's peace principles would improve the situation.

We do not need to say any more about this, the Muslim arguments are well known. Of greater interest would be what the respondents do not mention, internal structural relations in Muslim countries, which invariably have corrupt leaders and where the gulf between poor and rich is generally appalling. In other words, conditions that breed militant and violent Islamists. If we had posed direct questions we would surely have received answers, but our method did not allow it. However, what is of interest here is "what the dog did in the night" – failed to bark. Although they were encouraged to answer freely and at length, the failure of the respondents to mention internal causes reveals an important structural feature of Muslim civilisation – namely the lack of facility at critical thinking and self-criticism. Instead of talking about their own painful failures, they focus on other causes that are much easier to talk about, such as the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. It is not their fault, it is all the fault of the West.

### **Muslim attitudes**

In the border area between structural factors and attitudes, respondents emphasised how globalisation, television and the Internet made it much easier for Muslim peoples to compare themselves with the West. They thus become acutely aware of their own miserable situation, and censorship cannot touch the Internet. The results of such a comparison are deeply tragic, especially for the young people entering the workforce; it leads to frustration and rage that may be turned against their own regime, but equally well against the West.

There is also a cultural class division between traditionalism and modernity. Muslims who cannot reconcile themselves to the march of modernity, also fall into despair and are tempted to commit desperate acts.

Apart from this, there was little talk of Muslim attitudes, but respondents did say that Muslim civilisation was isolating itself and regarding Islam as the solution to all its problems. If rationalism is replaced with religion, modernity will have no chance, and Muslim countries will be even less able to compete with the West.

It was interesting and suggestive, however, that only a single respondent referred to “ideology” as a driving force in terrorism. In contrast, Western analyses treat ideology as the main explanation of 11 September. Perhaps this is because in the West, the word “ideology” is often just code for “Islam”.

### **Western attitudes**

There was more talk about Western attitudes as conducive to terrorism. The greatest indignation is reserved for the West's double standards, as seen in the local conflicts in the area. We saw this for example in the 1991 Gulf War, when Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait was treated far more harshly than Israel's occupation of Palestine. The same applies to possession of weapons of mass destruction, and to discrimination against Muslim migrants to Western countries. The respondents also cited the Western support for oppressive dictatorships in Muslim countries.

The West's glorification of its own culture and ignorance and denigration of Muslim culture is also a form of violence. The West discriminates on both an individual and a collective level – whole Muslim nations are made into outcasts. In other words, Western attitudes lead to collective and individual marginalisation and to the accumulation of bad memories in both the individual and the national consciousness. It is these bad memories that can easily be released in terrorism.

Muslims are simply assigned less importance as a group than others. The life of a Jew is worth more than the life of a Muslim; they are weighed on different scales. A Muslim is punished for what a Jew does with impunity. As long as Americans think that someone's grandchild in the USA is worth more than someone's grandchild in Afghanistan, terrorism will continue.



## Chapter 2

# 11 September: the conspiracy theories

After outlining the Iranian oppositional elite's sentiments on terrorism generally, the logical next step would be to report their attitudes to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida and then their sympathy with or revulsion at the World Trade Center strike. Such a sequence assumes, however, that it was in fact bin Laden who organised the attack, and this is precisely where many people in the Middle East beg to differ. Almost no Westerners harbour any alternative theories, it is axiomatic that "bin Laden did it", but in Iran this is not axiomatic. Instead, we find that some respondents agree that al-Qaida carried out the attack, but many more adhere to the conspiracy theories that are endemic to the region.

### **Iranian conspiracy theories**

Social psychology describes conspiracy theories as comprehensive and internally consistent perceptual systems, vigorously asserted and extremely hard to refute; for the proponent can always argue that his theory *may* be true. In fact, lack of evidence for the conspiracy may be taken to mean that the conspiracy is very well hidden indeed and so is doubly dangerous. Nothing is taken at face value, but whatever happens is interpreted as part of a complex and inimical pattern.

Iran is well known for generating such conspiracy theories to explain political events. The country nurtures two kinds of conspiracy theory: the one focuses on conspiracies of Western colonial powers, and is common to the entire Muslim world. The other involves belief in Satanic forces that have worked against Iran from ancient times to the present.

### **Foreign intervention**

As elsewhere in the Middle East, this phenomenon is rooted in historical experiences involving foreign powers and secret organisations. Intervention by Great Powers in Iranian politics have been many, very real and most alarming; they have had the most profound consequences for the nation. According to Ahmad Ashraf,<sup>13</sup> the Persians have felt helpless against rumours of conspiratorial foreign interference; in the same way, since by their nature conspiracy theories cannot be verified or falsified, foreigners have felt helpless to disprove that they are behind anti-Iranian conspiracies.

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<sup>13</sup> See Ashraf, Ahmad, "Conspiracy theories and the Persian Mind", *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, May 1996, also <http://www.iranian.com/May96/Opinion/Conspiracy.html>.

The country most frequently designated as the conspirer against Iran is the United Kingdom. This began with British interference in the constitutional revolution of 1905–11, continued with the Russo-British convention of 1907 dividing Iran (or Persia as it was then called) into spheres of influence, and resulted in the actual occupation of the country during the First World War by the UK, Russia and the Ottoman Empire. After the war the shah felt compelled by the Bolshevik threat to sign the Anglo-Iranian treaty of 1919 that virtually made the country a British protectorate. Then came the British-supported coup that brought to Pahlavi dynasty to power for the first time (1925–41). The reason for all this meddling was, of course, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which later became British Petroleum.

This changed in 1953, when the nationalist leader Mossadeq was overthrown and the Shah's absolutism reintroduced. When it became clear that the CIA and the British were in league, the Americans began to share and ultimately take over the British role as conspirer-in-chief. The negative attitudes to the West that emerged in our interviews were directed exclusively against the USA. We had expected some anti-British sentiment too, but this country was practically passed over in silence. After 1953 the USA was blamed for everything that went wrong in Iran. This could scale the heights of absurdity, as with the Shah's agricultural revolution, which was regarded as a conspiracy to ruin Iranian agriculture so that the USA could dump its inconvenient agricultural surpluses on Iran.<sup>14</sup>

This is not necessarily the same as hatred of America per se. Recent opinion polls<sup>15</sup> show that the majority of Iranians are actually well-disposed to the USA, as were the majority of our respondents. This positive attitude, however, can and does co-exist with the most fantastical conspiracy theories that discredit and mock the US.

### **Satanic forces**

The ruling idea of the Satanic variant of the conspiracy theory is that Iran has not achieved the status the country ought to have had, politically, militarily or culturally. This is because of Iran's special religious status, which has attracted equally special attention from the Devil. That is, there is a global spiritual conspiracy against Iran. One manifestation of this in the secular world is global Zionism; another is Western man, who has lost his spiritual bearings and has thus fallen into decadence. Unfortunately, the East has lost spiritual power too, which has made Muslim civilisation vulnerable to Western decadence – what, with a label borrowed from Martin Heidegger, is often called “*westoxication*”.<sup>16</sup>

The belief in Satanic forces was strong in the pre-Islamic period, and remains so in Shi'i Islam. Although these Satanic conspiracy theories are ultimately not rooted in history but in religion, they do not live in a vacuum but are mixed together with and reinforce the other variant of conspiracy thinking, the foreign power.

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<sup>14</sup> Ashraf 1996.

<sup>15</sup> *The Economist*, 18 January 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Ashraf 1996, op.cit.

### **Destructive effects**

It should never be assumed that this phenomenon is confined to people with low levels of intelligence and education. Surprisingly, it is equally strong in the elite. As Ashraf sees it, conspiracy thinking has been strengthened rather than weakened in recent years. Iranians of all social classes and different ideological orientations are using conspiracy thinking as an important intellectual tool for understanding history and politics.<sup>17</sup> Our respondents confirm this by asserting that in Iran it is normal to blame the USA for all the country's woes. For example, a former minister in Bazargan's secular government was in deadly earnest when he served us with a detailed explanation and "proof" that the USA was behind Khomeini's Islamic Revolution.

Addiction to conspiracy theories have some unfortunate consequences. One of these is an oversimplified and dualistic outlook on the world, black-or-white thinking that sees politics as a struggle between Good and Evil. This was blatant in Khomeini's rhetoric, in which USA was "the Great Satan" and Saudi Arabia was "the Little Satan".<sup>18</sup> Against this demonic background, Iran itself was a light unto all nations. Our respondents, although they were oppositionals and reformers, appeared themselves to think in the same moralising fashion. It should be obvious how dysfunctional this outlook is in terms of leading Iran to modernity.

A second baleful consequence of conspiracy theories is that they act as collective defence mechanisms to explain away everything that goes wrong. That is, explain them as someone else's fault. It is particularly when something unpleasant or even shameful happens – something which one does not want to admit or take responsibility for – that conspiracy theories flourish. They soothe the distress that is occasioned by the event by disclaiming liability. In his book *What went wrong*, Bernard Lewis has identified this compulsion to find external scapegoats.<sup>19</sup> One of his main points is that, instead of asking the question, "What did we do wrong?", Muslims too easily ask the question, "Who has done this to us?" Such a refusal to ask critical questions and accept responsibility can prevent people drawing the conclusions necessary to make rational decisions.

One of the respondents, however, was courageous enough to complain about the conspiracy mentality and to assign responsibility for it to the authorities. The government's horror of critical thinking leads it to encourage conspiracy theories; this is, as the respondent sees it, the reason why despite the Revolution the social sciences are still weak in Iran. The lack of official interest in the social sciences is because they are critical by nature; and contrariwise, the absence of critical thinking leaves the way open to conspiracy thinking.

The same respondent also mentioned that censorship supported the conspiracy theorising; people who know that they can rarely rely on official explanations are obliged to fill in the gaps by fantasy. He also claims that in no other country is conspiracy theory as strong as in Iran.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Candidates for "Little Satan" vary: Saudi Arabia, Israel and the UK are the main variants.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis, Bernard, *What went wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*. Oxford University Press, New York 2002.

We always think that there is an outside power behind anything that happens. It is like this because we have been dictated to by Russia and Britain for centuries. After the Second World War the USA more or less took over. Historically speaking we find many examples of this kind of conspiracy theorising – in Iran it is continually claimed that it was the USA that was behind the Iran–Iraq war, and that the Islamic revolution was America’s work. Since the Revolution the Iranian people have continually been reminded that the USA is behind all their misery. Because of censorship people never believe entirely in official explanations. These must be subject to secondary interpretation and this is where conspiracy thinking comes in. It is claimed that Muslims cannot have organised such a drastic operation as the attack on the WTC. It is then more reasonable to believe that an organisation in the USA is behind it. It is claimed that the USA wanted an excuse to invade Afghanistan, at the same time as it wanted to distract attention from the Palestinian question. The same thinking recurs in the assertion that the USA needs an excuse to attack Islamic movements globally. Even media that operate freely promote this kind of thinking. The USA is here tarred with the same brush as Zionism – even in the free press.

### **The conspiracy-theory approach to 11 September**

Muslims writing in the Western press attributed the strike to the USA, the CIA or Israel. This is a surprising, and to Western ears improbable, theory, but of course we cannot prove that it is not true. The essence of conspiracy theories is that nothing is what it appears, and actors who do not seem to be on the same side make secret compacts.

### **Conspiracy theories embraced and rejected**

Our working hypothesis was that there would be a cognitive-dissonance connection between the two questions, Did bin Laden do it? and Do you approve? We expected that revulsion against the attacks would lead to a very extensive belief in conspiracy theories implying that the Muslim world was innocent. In addition, such theories are, as we have seen, a common pattern in the region. Our results, however, refused to conform entirely to this expectation.

<b>Table 2 Who do you believe were behind the incidents of September 11th?</b>	
N = number of respondents*	
Bin Laden (al-Qaida)	5
Statements containing conspiracy theories	10
Other	3
	N=18
*Since we have a non-random sample and a relatively low N, no significance tests are reported, nor are percentages given.	

One-third of our respondent sample said straight off that in their opinion Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida were behind the attack -- alone. They were

thus free of the usual Iranian compulsion to accuse foreign powers of complicated conspiracies.

Although none of the respondents approved of the attacks and the great majority thought them an atrocity (see next chapter), they were far from agreed that it was al-Qaida that had in fact carried them out. Or at any rate, not alone. While not the overwhelming majority we expected, more than half the sample attributed responsibility to the USA, in a conspiratorial fashion – the USA was operating behind the scene in collusion with bin Laden and al-Qaida. The action, they said, would never have succeeded without the collaboration of powerful forces within America, for instance the CIA; it was too sophisticated for a Muslim terrorist group to carry out alone. The insistence of many respondents that “we cannot know who was behind the attack” may be a way of avoiding attribution of responsibility to other Muslims, but their supplementary explanations show all the signs of conspiracy theorising, although expressed in a hypothetical and oblique manner.

### Respondent speculations

We shall now illustrate the theme of conspiracy by reproducing some of these speculative attributions. Italics denote coding of the response in the category of conspiracy theory.

11 September has to do with *the military-industrial complex* on which American capitalism is founded. Hollywood films illustrate this. The films have no artistic merit, they are produced solely to show the new super-modern military technology. Hollywood was ahead of the curve. What we saw with the WTC was theatre, a spectacle with a view to justifying the military-industrial complex. We must ask what contextual factors helped to create the bin Laden/al-Qaida phenomenon. The powerful – like USA – have a certain attraction for people round them. The USA’s position has seen Americans able to attract the best minds in the world, the country is therefore ahead of all others as regards science and for this reason among others can preserve world hegemony. Who was it gave weapons to al-Qaida and bin Laden? Pakistan? It was the USA. Bin Laden’s rhetoric is pre-modern. The events of 11 September and all that they have led to are a show in which the inhuman is presented, not just in the USA but also in Afghanistan. Afghanistan was a country in which Buddha statues were destroyed.

Everything we have seen is a *result of the USA’s military machine*.

We can wonder how those who carried out the actions on 11 September had only lived two or three years in the USA. Here there is something that doesn’t fit. There must have been *others involved* who knew the country better than they could have done after only two or three years. All that business with airline schedules and so forth... I don’t say that this means that the CIA or others were involved, but it is highly probable.

I am convinced that we can’t reply on the FBI theories. They scatter so-called facts around and launch theories that don’t make sense. I was in the USA when we were fighting against the Shah. The FBI, who interrogated me, had clearly exaggerated and wrong ideas about the Iranian resistance movement. When bin Laden took part in the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, he was an *agent for the CIA*. *Bin Laden was the bait* that the

USA planted to be able to start its strategic offensive. If the USA was behind the attack on 11 September, the goal was to win absolute hegemony. The fast and effective way the Israelis exploited the situation gives the impression that Israel, the USA's closest ally, had advance notice of what was going to happen. The Israelis are always ready, but this time they acted so fast and deliberately that they *must* have been in part prepared for it.

It is said that bin Laden had serious kidney problems. French and British diplomats claim that he is dead, and the USA knows it, but the Americans are not interested in this being known, as he is *useful for their future offensives*.<sup>20</sup>

You must have a cause you really believe in, be relatively intelligent and at the same time action-oriented (determined) to be able to carry out this kind of action. It wasn't soldiers who were behind it, but they were nevertheless to some extent both rational and sophisticated. *The*

*mystery* is how after only two or three years in the USA they could have such good knowledge of how the country functioned. The Americans must have helped them.

The important thing is not who carried out the attack. The event in itself is the main thing, that it was possible. Asahara<sup>21</sup> and bin Laden have the ability to channel hate in certain directions. They are charismatic and can sway people. But this kind of person is everywhere, in the West as well. It may be difficult to find out who was behind it. The forces behind it operate within a complicated network of *hidden links* between the various actors, which are hard for others to disentangle.

It is too early to decide who was behind it. We have no documents proving one thing or the other, and will probably never have any. In analysing the whole thing we must try to find out who had an interest in it happening. Then none or all of these you mention may be behind it. Bin Laden may have controlled the operations *under CIA guidance*. I would remind you that Atta<sup>22</sup> worked for Pakistani intelligence. More important than finding out who did it is analysing the effects of what happened. What we conclude is that the events have initiated an "American strategic offensive".

I am convinced that bin Laden and al-Qaida were behind it. But I do not ignore the possibility that *someone in the secret services of Israel and the USA* may have assisted in the implementation. It is undeniably strange that one person in Afghanistan can have realised such a big project. He must have had professional help.

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20 *NTB/Reuters* 16.7.02: Osama bin Laden took a wound to the shoulder in the American-led attack on his headquarters in the Tora Bora mountains of eastern Afghanistan in December, but is now fit and well, according to an Arab editor with close ties to bin Laden's circle. Bin Laden will not be making any more videos until al-Qaida mounts another attack on the USA, his supporters are supposed to have told Abdel-Bari Atwan, editor of the London-based magazine *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*.

21 Shoko Asahara, the leader of Aum Shinri Kyo.

22 Muhammad Atta, engineer and town planner, was one of the leaders of the WTC operation. He spent much of his life in Europe and the USA; when living in the US, he received 100,000 dollars from Pakistan, which he shared with the other conspirators and may have spent on flying lessons (Peter L. Bergen, *Hellig krig. Osama bin Ladens hemmelige nettverk*, N. W. Damm & Søn 2002, pp. 45–46).

## CHAPTER 3

# 11 September: Osama bin Laden

In Chapter 2 we looked at the belief not only that al-Qaida and bin Laden were not alone in organising and carrying out the attacks in New York and Washington, but also that “it is not possible to know” who was behind them. In this chapter we will ignore these agnostics and discuss the attitudes of the Iranian oppositional elite to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida as the prime suspects. Assuming that they are indeed the guilty parties, in this chapter will examine the respondents’ support or rejection of the *means*, and their attribution of the *motives*. In the next chapter we will look at their opinion of the *results* achieved.

### Support or rejection of 11 September

As we said in Chapter 2, our working hypothesis was that there would be a cognitive-dissonance connection between the two questions, Did bin Laden do it? and Do you approve?, so that answers to the one could be predicted from answers to the other. This turned out not to be the case.

### The respondents

N = number of respondents*	
Cannot support	11
Support	0
Do not support, but understand the reasons behind	5
No opinion	2
	N=18
*Since we have a non-random sample and a relatively low N, no significance tests are reported, nor are percentages given.	

So as to preserve the nuances in the response universe, we will now reproduce some of the replies, followed by a discussion.

An inappropriate question to ask! I am absolutely against what happened. Iran was the only country in the Muslim world in which there was not a single voice expressing sympathy with or supporting bin Laden. Not even the fact that the USA has bombed Middle Eastern cities to rubble justifies such acts. Not only Americans were affected, there were men and women from more than 60 countries in the building.

I am very strongly against it. I think it is completely inappropriate to ask the question at all. It would have been better if it had never happened. Not

until far in the future – perhaps ten years – will we understand the scope of this.

I am very strongly against. Even if there was just cause for what happened, it can still not be defended. The TV images were enough to make it clear that it was simply horrible.

I am strongly against and get upset when I meet people who defend it. No one supports such acts. What happened was both inhuman and tragic. No one with a grain of sense would support such ideas. Iran has also condemned it.

I am against the events. They are an expression of weakness, desperation and frustration. If it is true that 19 Saudis were behind the attack, it shows that the Muslim world has problems understanding the international system and the logic it rests on. USA emphasised that the events had nothing to do with Islam, but I think religion plays a role, and I think it has to do with Israel.

I am very strongly against the events. Even if we accept that the USA inflicts great damage on the Muslim world and kills Muslims, these acts can nevertheless not be justified. If they had attacked a military base, we could perhaps have defended it, but I disapprove of killing innocent people for no reason.

Of course I am against what happened. The actions did not even have any clear objective.

I am against in the strongest terms. Bin Laden and the Taliban cannot help the Muslims. The most important thing in the time to come is to promote civil society. Perhaps we can, as the Islamists claim, compete with the USA, but then it must be with other means than those the Islamists use.

Fundamentalism, which is a hybrid of a democratic and a populist impulse, has been in decline in the last ten years. The negative consequences of the events of 11 September may accelerate that decline.

In a human perspective, I am against what happened. The acts struck at people who were doing nothing else than living their ordinary lives. The Koran says that doing your daily work is *jihad*. It is unacceptable that such people be deprived of peace and safety.

Everyone says that they are unhappy about what has happened in the USA, but tell me why there have not been the same reactions about Palestine and Bosnia.

11 September represents a turning-point in history. What happened then is of greater significance than the Gulf War. It will be interesting to see what happens in the time to come. I cannot *now* say whether I support the events.

I do not believe in killing of innocents, but I have no problem understanding the motives behind these acts. 11 September has had a negative effect in that it has reduced the threshold for violence in international politics.

The rule must be to be against all murder. But what happened on 11 September is so complicated that it is hard to take a stand. We cannot ignore the possibility that the WTC may be the beginning of a new epoch. It may open the way to something quite new. We must wait and see what happens now before we can pass a final judgement.

For five decades the USA has been humiliating Muslims. 11 September is a reaction to this. I myself hated the USA. My sister took part in the hostage

action in 1979, the family applauded. Now we have fought the USA for 25 years, it's enough.

The WTC is a reaction to the frustration felt in the struggle against the USA. The fundamentalists have no faith in dialogue. They are convinced that a religious code gives them protection and that use of terror is the only way to react. The battle of Karbala and the significance of martyrdom in Shi'a gave them the strength to carry out the acts.<sup>23</sup>

By claiming that "those who are not with us are against us", Bush reacted in line with bin Laden's fundamentalism.

### Discussion

The most striking feature of the respondents' attitude to 11 September is the almost unanimous agreement that, in the struggle of the Muslim world against the West, this is not the way to go. This is despite the fact that many express great understanding for the acts in the light of what they consider to be American harassment of and interference with Muslims.

It was claimed that the action has reduced the violence threshold in international politics – and subsequent events have, of course, proved our respondents right.

There is reason to think that there would not have been such a consensus had not the Iranian government, immediately and in unambiguous terms, condemned the terrorist acts. Most respondents were crystal clear in their condemnation, and some even sounded insulted by being asked the question at all. In Iran, which turned out to be "the only country" in which there was not a single voice raised in defence of bin Laden and his men, the question could appear to be an attempt to cast suspicion.

If we look at the sample as a whole, however, some interesting nuances appear. Among the responses that claim that they do not support the terrorism, but understand the reasons, two different variants recur. One group insists that the reasons are not adequate to justify such horrible acts; the other group argues that, while they themselves could not contemplate performing this kind of act, they nonetheless fully understand those who could. Some respondents are difficult to assign, because they choose to talk instead about long-term consequences, how what happened on 11 September is so complex that it is hard to grasp it, that it is a watershed that inaugurates a new epoch in international politics, and so forth – not very specific. For our purposes we have classified these as "no opinion", even though they can be interpreted as supporting 11 September.

The surprising thing about the results is that not a single respondent comes right out and says that he *supports* the terrorist strike of 11 September. A recurrent theme is that they cannot accept the murder of innocent civilians, though we also hear the subtler argument that they were against it because the casualties of the World Trade Center were not only Americans but people from 60 different countries. The implication is that it would have been more acceptable if Americans alone had died.

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<sup>23</sup> Bin Laden & co. are not, of course, Shi'i, and we can only speculate as to why the respondent said this.

Such a clear condemnation of the 11 September actions deviate from the attitudes we find in most Muslim countries. Even if the secular and religious authorities of the Muslim world officially condemn the strike, it is said, by and large the Muslim in the street has a different opinion. Even though bin Laden was not exactly a hero, there was sympathy for him all over the world; even in Europe there were groups who put his face on their T-shirts. Nothing like this happened in Iran, here there was no one who expressed any sympathy for him. This is probably due to the effect of the Iranian government's quick and very clear condemnation, and also to the fact that the country was at least partly playing on the same side as the USA against the Taliban. Our respondents said that Iran distinguished itself from the rest of the Muslim world in that there was little or no sympathy for bin Laden. It may seem like a paradox, but Iranians who condemned meaningless violence still felt a certain pleasure in seeing peripheral countries playing such an important role in the USA.

Most interesting of all, however, is when we compare the degree of consensus in Table 3 with that in Table 2. The relative consensus on personal condemnation of 11 September in Table 3 is not to be found in Table 2, where the sample divides down the middle on the question of who was responsible. The reason may be that on the question of responsibility the respondents have been less influenced by Iran's unambiguous official policy than on the question of condemnation, which has made for more spontaneous and revealing answers. We had the impression that the question as to who was responsible came as more of a surprise than the question on their attitude. On the second question they could "spout the party line", while on the first question they are tempted to give responses that exculpate Muslim civilisation.

Given the unanimous condemnation of the attacks on moral and political grounds by the elite respondents, our expectation was that they would be at greater pains to exculpate the Muslim world by denying al-Qaida's responsibility or asserting American complicity via conspiracy theories. This they did to some extent (see Chapter 2), but less than we expected.

### **Explaining Osama bin Laden**

Our analysis is based on cognitive attribution theory. The basic premise of this theory is that people tend to explain their own behaviour *situationally* and the behaviour of others, especially opponents, *dispositionally*. That is, we do the bad things we do because we have to, the situation leaves us no choice; but our enemies do the bad things they do because they are by nature wicked and evil. And contrariwise: if our enemies do good things, it is because something is obliging them to do so, but if we do good things it is because we are virtuous and heroic.

In order to see whether the acts of both sides are perceived in accordance with the theory, we also asked the respondents to explain the behaviour of George Bush and the Americans. Since it concerns the post-911 world, however, this is to be found in Chapter 5 introducing the subject of the effects of the attacks.

The coding problems of “dispositional” and “situational” in attribution theory are comprehensively discussed in the literature.<sup>24</sup> The main problem is that the same statement can be seen either way, depending on interpretation. Coding cannot, therefore, be automatic and must be done by someone versed in the theory and trained in coding. In many cases this means a judgment call. Semiotic theory tells us that we cannot understand the meaning of a word in isolation, but must read it in the relevant context, which here means the whole interview.

Moreover, the theoretical framework has subsequently been expanded by the addition of a third type of explanation, the *expressive*. Whereas a pure dispositional attribution asserts that the actors do what they do because of their permanent characteristics (their innate and fixed natures), and a pure situational attribution treats the actors as compelled to do what they do by the situation in which they find themselves, the expressive attribution focuses on characteristics of the actors that are not permanent, innate or fixed. The actor is then led to do what he does by these contingent characteristics, although is not compelled to do so. Whereas the situational attribution is absolutely disculpatory (we have no choice) and the dispositional attribution fixes absolute blame (they are wicked), the expressive attribution is sympathetic up to a point (they shouldn’t have done that, but we understand why they felt they had to). There are serious problems of interpretation and coding here, to which we shall return after looking at the respondents’ statements.

### The respondents’ attributions

Table 4: Causal explanations of September 11th?*		
N = number of causal statements*		
Situational	Expressive	Dispositional
11	6	8
		N=25
*Since we have a non-random sample and a relatively low N, no significance tests are reported, nor are percentages given.		

Below follows a selection of respondent statements, grouped by topic:

#### *Poverty*

The reason is primarily in the divide between poor and rich. In this case a religious person was behind it, but this is not always the case.<sup>25</sup> People support both the religious and the non-religious.

Bin Laden is a rich man, but is seen as a spokesman for the poor. Mohammed’s wife<sup>26</sup> was also rich and did much for the poor.

24 For example Ross, D., 1975, *Distortion in Social PEception Process*, Memeo, Stanford University..

25 Hitler was mentioned as an example of a non-religious terrorist.

26 Khadija, a merchant’s widow, was the Prophet’s first wife. She was ten years older than him, and, after she died, he took several new wives to cement political alliances.

### *Palestine*

The main reason is in Israel's occupation of Palestine and the arrogance the USA has shown in this context.

### *Frustration*

It is conceivable that they were cunning strategists or that they simply did not know what they were doing. They may have acted out of frustration and hopelessness without any plan or sophisticated objectives.

It is an open question whether those who were behind it had clear objectives. But one thing is certain, they must have been determined. That is precisely why they succeeded with the operation.

Deep frustration is behind it. Only those who see no other way out use such means to gain a hearing.

The driving force may have been revenge. The events may have been pure revenge with no other purpose. Religious people will not find any justification for such behaviour in the Koran. No religion offers an ethical platform for such acts.

More than a structured organisation, al-Qaida is a kind of identity. Those who join it are people who have decided to do what they think promotes their cause. The hijackings of 11 September were an expression of frustration without any specific and goal-oriented strategy behind them. The feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness drove them to carry out the acts.

### *Crisis maximising*

If there were rational objectives behind it, the purpose had to be to draw the USA into a confrontation with the Muslim world and in that manner undermine the USA's legitimacy in this area.

Bin Laden knew he was going to die, but because he fully and firmly believed in Huntington's "clash of civilizations",<sup>27</sup> he wanted to implement this plan.<sup>28</sup>

### *Bin Laden's determined intelligence*

Bin Laden is the only person who is both smart enough and determined enough to carry out an action that has so totally changed the image of the USA. He is also a capable businessman.

### *Hatred of the USA*

Their narrow perception of who are the "good guys" and who are the "bad guys" may be the basis.

The motives can be attacks on

- \* the USA's foreign policy
- \* capitalism

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<sup>27</sup> The theories of the American Harvard Professor Samuel P. Huntington are controversial. In his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the remaking of world order* he claims that future conflicts will be between the great world civilisations and that China and the Muslim world are a threat to the hegemony of the West. Religion and language are decisive to the formation of the various civilisations, and it is these two elements that will be the primary fault-lines in humanity in the days to come.

<sup>28</sup> This respondent rarely or never uses the word "terrorism" about the events.

- \* the USA's supreme power position
- \* the USA's military power.

It was a confrontation with the USA and the policy that country pursues in the Muslim world.

#### *The Holy Places of Islam*

The attack was carried out as revenge for the injustice the USA has inflicted on Muslims. Bin Laden considered the USA his arch-enemy, not just because of Palestine, but mainly because of the occupation of the Holy Places. Bin Laden sees Saudi Arabia as occupied by the USA.<sup>29</sup>

Bin Laden is a true son of the opposition to American interference. He is also for the strong Saudi traditionalism symbolised by the cities Riyadh, Mekka and Medina. It is the interaction between these variables – hatred of the West and strong traditionalism – that has created bin Laden.

As a Wahhabi, bin Laden is first and foremost concerned with Saudi Arabia, Palestine is secondary. This priority is characteristic of all Wahhabis. For Muslims, Mecca is “the mother of cities”. As bin Laden sees it, the PLO has compromised itself. He is more in tune with Jihad, Hamas and Hizbollah.<sup>30</sup>

11 September has had the opposite effect on Iran and Hejaz.<sup>31</sup> In Saudi Arabia, the incident has led to a general radicalisation. Arab governments have been radicalised.

The reason was first and foremost the American troops in Saudi Arabia.

#### *Religion is the crucial motive*

For bin Laden, religious conviction is decisive. He launched an attack on some of the main pillars of the capitalist system.

Bin Laden wants Islam, not the USA, to have global hegemony.

Bin Laden is charismatic, but this is not enough. He is relatively harmless because he is not able to mobilise the masses like for instance Khomeini. With the aid of mass movements, Khomeini channelled the hatred of the USA into concrete policy. He was a pragmatist who renounced his pan-Islamic ambitions for the benefit of Iran, but bin Laden stands for pan-Islamic goals.

To answer this question, we have to put ourselves in their place. Bin Laden goes back in history, to the golden age of Islamic civilisation. No other civilisation could compare with the Islamic when we had lofty scien-

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29 Osama bin Laden's role in the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s gave him the status of a hero. After the war ended in 1989, he returned to Saudi Arabia. When, in the following year, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and threatened Saudi Arabia, bin Laden and his holy warriors offered their help. The Saudi government rejected it and allied with the USA instead. American military forces were stationed in the country. Bin Laden takes this as a deadly insult and claims that it is forbidden for infidels to have permanent residence in the country. As the Guardian of the Holy Places (the two cities Mecca and Medina), Saudi Arabia has a special position in the Muslim world, making the offence worse. Bin Laden breaks with the House of Saud.

30 When bin Laden was in Sudan, al-Qaida made alliances with a number of militant organisations including the extremist Islamic Jihad from Egypt. A Palestinian group has the same name, and it is this one that the respondent is referring to.

31 The respondent is using the name Hejaz, the region where Mecca is located, as a metonym for Saudi Arabia.

tific and religious debates and were masters of our own house. As bin Laden sees it, Islamic civilisation has since been marginalised. Western civilisation has oppressed Islam without anyone in the Islamic world being able to stop it. He asks himself why it is that the Muslims make it so easy for the USA to bomb Iraq. And why Israel has been allowed to oppress the Palestinians for 50 years without Muslim countries trying to prevent it. Bin Laden's sense of marginalisation, and his perception of the West as an oppressive civilisation, goes deep. Even if he feels powerless and unable to affect the course of history, 11 September was a way of marking his existence, even if leads to his own annihilation.

## Commentary

### *Expressive attributions*

In this analysis we have departed from the simple dichotomous model of cognitive attribution theory in which causal explanations are seen as the result of characteristics either of the actor or of the situation the actors finds himself in, because in our opinion this dichotomy does not do justice to the causal explanations we find in our material. Characteristics of the actor and contextual explanations cover a lot of ground, it is true, but we are left with a residue of causal explanations that do not fall under either of these categories, and these are important for 11 September.

Examples of this non-dichotomous explanation are statements such as "the cause of what happened is the enormous frustration Muslims feel". *Frustration* is not a situational attribution because it is an inner state of the actor himself, and yet it is a kind of inner state that attribution theory does not regard as a characteristic of the actor. In the theory, actor characteristics have a more permanent nature. For example, that a person is "greedy" may be an explanation of his behaviour that recurs in many contexts, while "frustration" is normally a transitory state that can change quickly with the situation. It is therefore incorrect to code frustration as a permanent characteristic of the actor. And yet frustration is not a situation that creates a framework for the actor's behaviour either, it is after all an inner state. As a causal variable, therefore, it must be tied to the actor, but avoiding generalisation. It is not determined wholly by the actor's nature, nor by the exterior situation, but by both together and in a context. If we observe an actor who is greedy in one situation, it is reasonable to expect him to be greedy in others, but an actor who is frustrated in one situation will not necessarily be frustrated in others.

Being frustrated is not, therefore, a permanent characteristic of the actor but an inner state that arises as a result of the situation in which he finds himself – an inner state created by external circumstances and personality traits. As regards responsibility, this attribution is more akin to the situational than to the dispositional attribution; the actor cannot be held responsible because the roots of his actions are at one and the same time in his inner state and in features of the situation. The "expressive" explanation is thus one that exculpates the actor – he has acted in the same way as others could have acted in the same situation. There is nothing that could be considered

deviant about the behaviour. If we look at Table 4, we see that it is this explanatory model that dominates the respondents' attributions of motive to the actors behind 11 September. The majority of respondents offer explanations that are either situational or expressive, and this implies exculpation of the perpetrators, even though to some degree we also find dispositional explanations.

Some may discern a contradiction here, in that the interviewees express disapproval of the terrorist act at the same time as they exculpate the perpetrators. There is, however, no real inconsistency. In their expressive attributions the respondents are also exhibiting their own empathy and understanding. This is why we call the results the respondents' self-image, their ability to identify with and understand the perpetrators is so great that it is undeniable that they see them as part of themselves. It is as if they are saying, "What they did is not right, but they are nonetheless part of us, we have no problems understanding how they could do it". Desperation, frustration, hopelessness and impotence are terms employed to understand the situational logic that drove the terrorists.

#### *Religion and explanation*

If the debate in the West and our Western prejudices was all we had to go by, we would be tempted to say that *religion* was the main cause of 11 September. It is therefore interesting to note that our interviewees by and large decline to explain bin Laden's actions in purely religious terms. Their explanations are largely contextual, situational, and this implies that they consider bin Laden's behaviour *rational*. This means that they are assuming that everyone who found himself in the same situation as bin Laden would act in the same way, it is not necessary to have a special disposition such as being "evil", "a religious fanatic" and so on.

This attribution is stronger than it appears to Western eyes, because coding for religion requires great care. For example, consider the statement: "As a Wahhabi, bin Laden is first and foremost concerned with Saudi Arabia, Palestine is secondary. This priority is characteristic of all Wahhabis." Taken in isolation, this sounds as if the respondent is saying that bin Laden is acting from religious motives, because he is a Wahhabi, and therefore the attribution is "dispositional". On the other hand, we can easily interpret Wahhabism not in terms of a religious peculiarity but in terms of Saudi Arabian nationalism. One of bin Laden's main objectives is to liberate the Holy Places from American contamination. There is no distinction between the Holy Places and the state, because the state's legitimacy rests on its guardianship of the Holy Places. The state was created as a deal struck between the Wahhabi pietists and the House of Saud; the generally difficult distinction between religion and nation-building does not exist here. If bin Laden's priority is the state of Saudi Arabia, then his motives may be classified as secular, promoting the nation's interest in the normal way, and the respondent's attribution then becomes a "situational" one. That is, his behaviour is a response to the situation in which Saudi Arabia finds itself, and not the result of a permanent characteristic of Osama bin Laden ("dispositional").

That the interviewees perceive bin Laden as aiming primarily to protect and promote Saudi Arabia qua state is interesting in the light of Saddam

Hussein's rhetoric in the Gulf War of 1991. Despite the fact that Iraq has its own holy places, which, though they do not rank as highly as Mecca and Medina, are of great importance for the Shi'a, he made no attempt to exploit them for mobilisation purposes in the war. Saddam Hussein confined himself to what has been rhetorically consensual in the Muslim world since 1948, namely Palestine. He wanted to transfer this emotional capital to his own war, inter alia through a metaphorical process expressed in the slogan "The struggle for Palestine is now in Kuwait". Khomeini tried a similar line with his slogan from the 1980–88 war, "The road to Jerusalem runs through Baghdad".

As the respondents see it, bin Laden is indubitably more devoted to Saudi Arabia than to Palestine. This does not mean that he does not care about the common Islamic struggle, but that Palestine is number two in his hierarchy of values. The sufferings of the Iraqi people also recur with a high frequency, but the above-mentioned values are more central to bin Laden's cognitive structure.

It would seem that the respondents perceive that bin Laden's "master belief"<sup>32</sup> is his anti-Western attitude. His actions are therefore based on "instrumental beliefs" related to this fundamental attitude. He is convinced that the marginalisation and humiliation of Islam is a consequence of the West's unjust policies.

Without quite coming out and saying it, therefore, the respondents with their situational attributions are exculpating the perpetrators. What they did was rational and understandable. When our respondents distance themselves from the acts, it is often because the acts "had no purpose", they were a shot in the dark. The terrorists had no concept of what their acts would lead to in the "liberation" of Saudi Arabia, in Palestine, in Iraq, or for the struggle against the USA and the West. That is, the complaint is not so much that they were wrong as that they were wrong without achieving anything. (Elsewhere, however, several of the respondents claimed the results as a great victory over the USA and the West; the Muslims have attained greater equality with the Americans, because now the latter cannot feel secure.)

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32 George, Alexander L., 1969, "The Operational Code", *International Studies Quarterly*, pp. 190–222.

## PART II AFTER 911

### CHAPTER 4 The world after 911: General

#### Consequences of 911

##### A historic turning-point for Islam

In the same way as in Western countries, the interviewees emphasise the radical effect of 11 September. Only the future can show what the consequences will be, but everyone in the interview sample was agreed that it was a political earthquake.

The most important thing is that Muslims in the heart of capitalism carried out a “successful” attack on the superpower. This takes the struggle of the Muslims against the Western hegemony, oppression, harassment and hypocrisy into a new phase, a line has been crossed, Muslims can now face the Christians more as equals and need not be dominated by the idea of Western superiority.<sup>33</sup> While not approving of the mass murder of innocent civilians, in their hearts the Muslims applaud the attacks because they give a glimpse of hope in what they see as a struggle for equality and justice. Here are some respondents:

The events of 11 September did not create profound changes in the international system, but they accelerated a trend that was already under way. The consequences for this region were great. Among other things, they affected Iran’s national security policy, strategic position and politics generally.

The events marked a turning-point for Muslim intellectuals and radicals. For the first time ever, Muslims dared to mount a direct attack on the USA, and that in the heart of enemy country. Before, the USA and its policies were condemned on the verbal plane, but the radicals did not dare to declare war.

11 September may be a concept that will affect our thinking even more than the Holocaust, because today, unlike the time after the Second World War, there is a process of globalisation under way. Postmodern ideas and the pluralism that follows globalisation affects the way we think.

The events, which are so important that they can be compared with the Industrial Revolution, mark a turning-point in history. Think of the Second World War, the shock changed the course of history. The USA now understands that it cannot rule out an attack on its own territory, in the heart

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<sup>33</sup> See Daniel Heradstveit and G. Matthew Bonham, “The fundamental attribution error and Arab images of the Gulf war”, *Political Psychology*, No. 2 1996.

of modernism. Architecturally New York is exposed. After what happened, the USA will probably not expose itself in the same manner. The country has become humbler. The event is an icon – even architecture will now change.

11 September was a turning-point in that we passed a threshold we had never previously crossed. The question was always whether to return violence for violence. The WTC shows that we are prepared to use violence. Even if what happened was officially condemned, Muslims think it was a correct thing to do, it was popular among Muslims.

It changed our perceptions of the USA. Now we understand that they are vulnerable too.

Even if the Iranian respondents consider that the methods used on 11 September were neither acceptable nor morally defensible, there is little doubt that the dramatic assault on the American people's sense of security and superiority also gave them a good feeling. At last the USA got a dose of its own medicine, the same sense of humiliation and insecurity caused to the Iranians by the CIA coup against Mossadeq in 1953<sup>34</sup>.

### **Positive or negative consequences?**

We asked the respondents whether they thought it probable that the events of 11 September would lead to anything positive.<sup>35</sup> The sample divided: one part championed a very pessimistic view, the other expressed the hope of a better understanding between the USA and the Muslim world. Greater insight into the nature of the conflict would change American policy vis-à-vis the Muslims in a positive direction. However, it was emphasised that such an understanding depended on the Americans beginning to think in a new way.

None of the respondents suggested that 11 September might possibly lead to changed behaviour on both sides; that, as a result of the shock, Muslims would distance themselves more strongly from terrorism. The attribution of the unhelpful attitudes to the USA alone was emphasised by the assertion that the conservative Administration in the USA represented a problem of equal magnitude to terrorism (see "Explaining George Bush" below). 11 September gave the Administration the chance to make the country more powerful yet, the USA has progressed from superpower to hyperpower. It is also said that never has the USA had a more ideological Administration, and in this way it is a mirror-image of bin Laden.

### *American self-examination*

Respondents in the "optimistic camp" claimed that they thought it particularly positive that the USA had for a few months been obliged to reflect on its place in the world. For the first time, American intellectuals penetrated

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34 Prime Minister 1951–53, seen as the foremost champion of freedom and democracy in Iranian history. In his first year in office he nationalised the big British oil interests, but the Iranian wish to control their own resources was not accepted by the West, and he was overthrown in a CIA-sponsored coup two years later. The fact that this also squashed a promising democratic movement was of no interest to the USA and the UK, which preferred a dictatorship that gave them control over Iranian oil. These dramatic events have in many ways determined Iranian attitudes to the West.

35 The replies to this question have been combined with those to more general questions about consequences of 9/11.

the “sound barrier” in the tabloid media and communicated with public opinion about Islam in a sympathetic and understanding manner. For the first time the Americans learnt something useful about Islam. They also realised that events in distant parts can affect them, and in the long run this recognition may have positive consequences for American foreign policy. The day the USA realises that the answer to the question, “Why do they hate us so?” is to be found in the USA’s own behaviour, there is hope that the superpower will change its policies, with beneficial effects on both itself and the Muslim world. We will now quote a couple of respondents:

The USA will naturally do everything it can to prevent something similar happening again, but then it is important to ask the question *why* this happened. Before, there was a kind of indifference, there was talk about civil society, and that was about it. Now, not only does the USA understand that the problems of the world are much closer than they thought, they also realise that it is possible to get involved, that action is needed.

When the USA attacked Afghanistan, even in New York there were protests against the bombing of innocent civilians. This shows that they had become aware that there was something fundamentally wrong and that they can no longer sit on the fence.

#### *American naivety and intellectual laziness*

Not all the respondents, however, were as sanguine about the ability of the American people to learn the right lessons from 11 September. Many respondents insisted, “The Americans are naive”.

What happened caused the Americans to ask the question, “Why do they hate us so?” A natural response to this question, to the smashing of their sense of security, would be to conduct self-examination and pay some attention to other cultures and identities. But, say these respondents, the USA did not react in this way. The critical review was pushed into the background. As usual, the Americans proved a disappointment. This unique chance the attack offered to reshape the USA as a nation with a human face was frittered away – instead they just did PR.

We will now quote four respondents:

Europeans are much more interested in and knowledgeable about the policies of their governments. The USA is a big country with stable conditions, and so Americans have no particular need to ask questions. There has been no permanent change in this attitude.

For the first time people in the USA asked questions about the country’s foreign policy. Even educated Americans who don’t normally take an interest in foreign affairs, began to ask questions. Unfortunately, this behaviour was only short-term and superficial.

If anything positive is to come out of 11 September, the USA must go much deeper into the Islamic culture. In order to find an answer to the question “Why do they hate us so much?” you must know the culture of those who are doing the hating. Understanding in the area of power and economics is not enough, it is equally important to have knowledge of the

culture. And this the USA does not have. Culture is the basis of human behaviour. The USA uses professional PR agencies to change its image in the Muslim world.

At an early state in the crisis there were two schools in the USA. The first questioned the reasons for all the hatred of the USA. This led to a fine public debate, which concluded that a necessary adjustment of policy would reduce the hatred. The other school aimed at a rapid military victory in Afghanistan, which undermined the first school.

#### *American backlash*

Several respondents emphasised the “backlash” angle, the complete opposite of the increased understanding claimed by the optimists. Here are seven respondents:

The right-wingers benefited from 11 September. In the longer term I nourish a certain hope that American opinion will think in new paths regarding certain aspects of USA’s foreign policy.

The Americans rallied round both patriotism and nationalism.

The local and national reactions in the USA show that the country intends to use the events as an instrument to maintain its dominant role in world politics.

The country has exploited the provocation to establish its power politics. They have concentrated exclusively on their narrow national interests and established their hegemony.

After 11 September the international system may appear to be much more advantageous for the USA. The rather fluid system with several centres of power has to a great extent been changed to a monopolar system dominated by the USA, its hegemony has been strengthened. It is thanks to 11 September that the USA is a hyperpower today.

Despite high costs, public opinion has accepted the line that allows the USA to interfere in other states’ politics. The hope used to be that economic strength would create peace, but now they are trying to create peace by military means.

The gulf between tradition and modernity is getting steadily deeper and reminds us of the era of the Crusades. In the same way as previously in history, this gap leads to the strengthening of militant movements and the growth of new ones. That Bush interpreted 11 September as a crusade meant that Iran found itself in sharp opposition to the West, a development it may be difficult to reverse.

#### *Sinister interests*

There were even hints that 11 September was welcomed by certain forces in the USA. Here are eight respondents:

Terrorism is not the only problem we are facing. The conservative administration in the USA has gradually changed the world. The counterweight to this policy must be extended collaboration between all nations.

The WTC has reinforced the problems between Islam and the West and that is dangerous. The USA will exploit the events as an excuse for all kinds of action in the Muslim world. We are afraid that the USA will use the

events as a stalking-horse to impose its own will on our part of the world. So we don't take this event lightly.

We should not forget that the Cold War had a positive effect on the American economy.

The events helped to solve the USA's economic problems. This applies particularly to the defence industry, which in the light of the events has the power to lead the world into a more militaristic track.

The USA exploited the events to promote its economic interests. The Americans know how to create conflict, which then accelerates the sale of their own weapons.

Bin Laden has given Bush a helping hand in the implementation of his political programme. For example, it gives the USA a big technological lead over Europe. In Iran we relate politics to individuals, but here it is more accurate to speak of a system that is always on guard and that competes for international hegemony.

Before 9/11 Bush's agenda was to improve the American economy, but he had difficulties getting his policies through. The WTC gave Bush the excuse to shower money on the military and thereby create jobs. Bush' agenda is almost exactly that of Ronald Reagan, not to mention the eternal Republican programme: spending money on arms instead of welfare and schools.

The events have helped to solve Bush's crisis of legitimacy. He now profiles himself as a strong leader.

The pessimists even suggest that 11 September may, in contrast to the situation in the Vietnam era, give the USA the excuse to attack anyone it likes.

One respondent said, Israel is a hair in the soup for Bush. After 11 September Israel displayed genius in confusing its own agenda with the USA's. Neither Arabs nor Iranians understand how Israel managed this.

### **Explaining George Bush**

In order to balance the cognitive-attribution analysis of bin Laden and al-Qaida (see Chapter 4 and Table 4), we looked also at the respondents' causal attributions of Bush's and American behaviour in the same framework of dispositional, expressive and situational attributions. The results were spectacularly in accordance with the predictions of theory, namely that "the enemy" is explained dispositionally. The results display an absence of pluralistic thinking and nuances, the USA is seen in black-and-white terms, and highly coloured by emotion.

We must emphasise, however, that this table is the result of a specific request to "explain" American behaviour in general; causal attributions of American behaviour in other and particular contexts may be quite different, see Chapter 6 section 1.

### The respondents' attributions

Table 5 Causal explanations of Bush's (the USA's) behaviour generally		
N = number of causal statements*		
Situational	Expressive	Dispositional
4	0	18
		N=22
*Since we have a non-random sample and a relatively low N, no significance tests are reported, nor are percentages given.		

#### Commentary

Whereas bin Laden's behaviour was explained in terms of all three models, but with a preponderance of the "sympathetic" situational and expressive attributions, the behaviour of the USA was explained almost overwhelmingly in terms of dispositional attribution, that is, with an unsympathetic focus on permanent characteristics of the actor rather than the situation in which he finds himself. Moreover, such a focus on the actor's characteristics at the expense of all other causal factors tends to bring in emotion, as these are characteristics one either likes or dislikes, is for or against. We neither love nor loathe situational constraints, only people and peoples.

The intrinsic characteristics of the USA cited by the interviewees reveal a deep hatred of the superpower. What they first and foremost connect with the country, is various forms of humiliation. Statements within this category recur with the highest frequency. Very often the respondents use the word "humiliation", at other times they imply it: we hear about a power that imposes its will on others, that is not willing to negotiate until the other side has raised the white flag, that threatens people into obedience. The word "arrogant" is also used. Among the clearest expressions of a dispositional attribution, however, are phrases like "insatiable hunger" or "burning desire" for absolute hegemony and world empire. The superpower has an almost pathological need to control everybody and therefore behaves in a deviant manner.

Only by way of exception do we hear causal explanations of American policy that are contextual or situational, as for example that the USA is exploiting its superior military position to secure its interests and obtain influence, like any other superpower would.

#### The enemy image

An interesting feature of the enemy image the respondents are drawing is that it is restricted to the USA. Given the European great powers' former colonisation and interference in the oil industry, not least the British, we would have expected the respondents to tar all the Western countries with the same brush. But their picture of the West is actually multifaceted; the USA stands virtually alone as a representative of the evil and abnormal in international politics – in other words, as the "Great Satan" in Khomeini's terminology.

The respondents paint us a picture of a nation with a shallow approach to foreign policy and little knowledge of Muslim cultures. Instead of displaying empathy with and understanding of Muslim culture, the USA is obsessed with doing PR for itself. In contrast to the more aware and reflective Europeans, the Americans do not question this policy. It is true that in the immediate aftermath of 11 September there were signs of a change of heart, but these proved to be transitory.

Frustration at the attack resulted in patriotism, nationalism and jingoism, and thus strengthened the legitimacy of the right-wing president. The new trust that the people reposed in the president, which made it possible for him to continue his policies, was not the result of any election, but a gift from the perpetrators behind the attack on Manhattan. Terrorism gave Washington increased freedom of action, which it used inter alia to award Israel a more privileged position and thereby free hands to conduct a heavy-handed policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians.

Instead of the natural reaction to such a shocking event, namely humility, critical reflection and innovative thinking towards a positive choice of path, the opposite occurred. Instead of trying to solve the problems that underlay 11 September, the superpower is endeavouring to exploit the attack in its own interest, building up its military and economic power in order to do whatever it wants in the Muslim world. The attack was the springboard for an aggressive and blinkered policy, the crudest possible power politics based on military technology.

In short, the interviewees see a superpower dominated by imperatives that resemble the Satanic forces beloved of the conspiracy theorists. The USA has grown from a superpower to a hyperpower that wants to command everybody and cooperate with nobody. It is out of control.

### **Comparison of the two analyses**

These descriptions of the USA's choices and foreign policy after 11 September by and large coincide with analyses in Western countries including the USA itself. In this way the respondents said nothing new. What was striking, however, is the interviewees' stereotyping of "the Americans" as superficial, at the same time as they themselves seem to suffer from the same kind of shallowness and reluctance to criticise their own side.

The strange thing is that none of the respondents saw fit to comment on the fact that the trigger for this negative development in American policy was an act of terrorism carried out by actors from the Muslim world. Instead, they criticise the American national character and style, which suggests that there is something wholly unique about this people, who do not behave like "normal" nations. When terrorism fails to lead to self-searching and studies of Muslim culture, the fault lies with the American people.

We saw in Chapters 2 and 3 how the respondent sample was markedly uninterested in criticising their own culture, the Muslim world, other than by reference to isolation and conspiracy theorising. The same lack of self-examination with which they reproach the Americans is clearly absent in the party with whom they identify, defend and sympathise with.

## The US versus Europe

We asked the respondents whether they thought European reactions to 11 September differed substantially from American reactions. An overwhelming majority, seventeen to four, described European attitudes and policies as quite different from American, although some of this majority emphasised that Europe lacked the power to do anything about it. The way the United Kingdom always follows the USA rather than the Europeans was noted.

One reason for this was an innate European preference for diplomacy and conflict resolution, which one respondent attributed to experiences in the two world wars. This same respondent was not afraid to spell out the implication that, in contrast, the USA was devoted to “militarism”.

Another main reason for the European difference is, according to the respondents, that Europeans simply have a greater understanding of the Muslim world. Geographical proximity, greater vulnerability, trading interests and cultural openness all contribute to this superior knowledge of the Middle East.

This applied in particular to Iran. The fact that the USA has isolated itself from Iran, has no presence there and no dealings with Iranians, has left its mark. The Europeans are active in Iran, and so they naturally understand the country better. One respondent claims that his German contacts greatly disapproved of American policy but were afraid to speak out.

## Recipes and warnings

Our question about possible positive consequences of 9/11 was complemented by another, asking what might lead to a worsening and what to an improvement of relations between the US and the Muslim world.

### *Improvement*

There was a wide variety in the respondents’ suggestions for improvement of relations. We received five suggestions from nine respondents that may be categorised as belonging to the realm of geopolitics: dismantling Iraqi sanctions, reduction of military presence, a different attitude to authoritarian Arab regimes, more humane treatment of Muslim prisoners (one each) and, of course, Palestine (five respondents). The last was expressed in terms of a more neutral involvement, of regarding the conflict from a humanitarian perspective instead of a conflict between Christianity and Islam and following ethical norms. One respondent said, “The USA is the only actor that can prevent the Palestine issue leading to catastrophe”.

However, sixteen respondents made replies touching on nine factors that we may classify in terms not of geopolitics but of psychology. These ranged from the very general (“better intentions”, “flexible thinking”) and so forth to the highly specific, such as the respondent who thought that the Iranian cinema had a positive role to play. Another thought that, “Formerly it was the prophets, now I think it is the artists who can create a better world”. One interviewee suggested that the Muslim world should meet American threats with “a disarming smile”, thus eroding any support the USA might receive from the rest of the world.

The single word that recurred most often (eight responses) was “dialogue”. One respondent emphasised that this should be between the NGOs, between academics, between elites, between states and between diplomats:

I myself was invited to a conference in the USA, but was afraid to go. I was afraid of accusations of espionage for the USA and of going to jail. We had greater freedom before, the conservatives have become more powerful.

A couple specifically mentioned the Huntington thesis on the “clash of civilisations”, but one of them emphasised that President Khatami had suggested a model solution:

Dialogue is more difficult for Muslims than for people in the West because the Muslims are the weaker party. It should nevertheless be added that the Muslim countries contain people working for mutual understanding between Islam and the West. If the stronger party is welcoming and magnanimous, the weaker party will be conciliated. The West must be willing to understand the traumas that the Muslim world has experienced down the ages.

#### *Aggravation*

The other half of the question produced something like a mirror-image, in that the “spiritual” factors mentioned were outnumbered by specific geopolitical dangers. For instance, one respondent cited the USA’s continuing to ignore international Muslim organisations, one mentioned Muslim civilisation’s sense of encirclement, and three emphasised the baleful effect of Western propaganda, oversimplification and stereotyping. One respondent pointed out that more than a hundred of those arrested in the wake of 911 were professors at American universities; Bush was treating all Muslims as terrorists. Language is a factor, and one respondent complained about Bush’s use of the term “crusade”. Another pointed out that the Palestinian casualties were dehumanised by being presented in American media solely as statistics, whereas Israeli victims had names.

As against these half-dozen statements seeing the continued failure to understand and appreciate the Muslim world as factors likely to lead to a worsening of relations, however, we received nineteen that concerned specific policies – plus some rather uncategorisable reflections. One respondent summarised the aggravating factors in two words – “Bush’s policies!” Another mentioned the strengthening of extremists in the USA, in the Muslim world and elsewhere, while two emphasised the dangers posed by collapse of client Arab governments. One respondent mentioned new American military operations, while another four were more specific and referred to an invasion of Iraq.

Not surprisingly, nine interviewees had something to say about Israel and Palestine, emphasising how USA’s “myopic” support for Ariel Sharon will continue to lead to escalating terrorism. Never has Israel behaved as violently as now, said one. Another was deeply pessimistic:

The core of the Palestinian problem is on the psychological plane, but what is expressed on the surface is territorial and political demands. Accumulated and repressed aggression is released through violence. The conflict over Palestine, in which the whole world is involved, is insoluble, because everything today revolves around Jerusalem.



# Chapter 5

## The world after 911: “The War on Terror”

After our survey of the elite respondents’ opinions of the post-911 world in general, and the well-springs of American and European attitudes and actions, we turn to the more specific topic of what the Bush Administration calls the “war on terror”. The fact that it is not called “the war on al-Qaida” suggests that this is, and is intended to be, a very open-ended concept, and perhaps even an “endless war” against ever-new enemies. While a covert police and intelligence war on the terrorist networks in both East and West is no doubt in progress, as we saw in Chapter 1, the rhetoric of the “war on terror” is highly geared to military operations against states that are considered, with varying degrees of evidence and improbability, to have been “responsible” for 911. So far there appear to be three candidates for this “war on terror” – Afghanistan (ongoing during the interviews), Iraq (at that point in the future, but regarded as largely inevitable) and Iran itself.

### **The war in Afghanistan**

We also asked our respondent sample about the actions the USA and its allies had taken after 11 September, also asking if they could have acted differently. We focused on the war in Afghanistan and the question what would have happened if the USA had not gone to war. The hypothetical form of these questions was to stimulate the respondents to think alternatively and spontaneously, to produce subtle and unexpected answers. Contrariwise, we wanted to avoid the conventional group thinking that tends to attach to official positions. Previous experience with elite interviews shows that this approach gets the most out of the respondents intellectually speaking.

### **Respondent sympathy and hostility**

#### *Sympathetic responses*

Many of the interviewees, like the following eight, claimed that the war in Afghanistan was inevitable. The “logic of the situation” dictated that it had to happen.

With bin Laden, al-Qaida and the Taliban in mind, I don’t think so [that the USA could have acted differently].

The USA is always trying to create stable conditions for itself.

Here it was a question both of the legitimacy of the government and survival as a superpower. For the first time since the American Civil War, there

was a military attack on American territory to which anyone would have made a military response.

Theoretically the USA could have reacted differently, but the country had been deeply wounded, the politicians were under heavy pressure.

This had to do with the USA's self-image. The domestic atmosphere forced Bush to act, anything else would have been perceived as weakness. The attack on the USA gained the country sympathy internationally as well. If the USA had not reacted, governments that supported terrorist groups would have been encouraged. With their actions, these governments forced the USA to take responsibility.

Bush had to act to get society back on its feet and to safeguard the country's international prestige. Lost legitimacy would have damaged the Republican Party and made it easy for the Democrats to undermine their position.

It would have been a defeat for the USA's reputation as a hegemonic power. If, in the situation, the superpower had not found a target to strike at, questions would have been asked about the American intelligence apparatus.

There was no other alternative. Without a military attack it would have been impossible to break the Taliban. Because Afghanistan is a country with little contact with the outside world, political and economic sanctions alone would have been useless.

Several respondents emphasised the brutal nature of the Taliban regime and the necessity of getting rid of it. However, many interviewees, while understanding how and why the USA was compelled to act and thus supporting the war in principle, were unhappy with the means and other aspects.

#### *Ambiguous sympathy*

The USA is a big country. It's like with the elephant – when it moves, it is bound to crush things.

Sanctions were not an adequate solution. If Bush did not act, he would have domestic problems. Deciding on a military solution was not a bad solution, but the USA should have listened more to others, coordinated everything better.

After the WTC, military action in Afghanistan was the only way the USA could react.

But it is important to emphasise that Afghanistan was in a special situation as regards a response to the challenges the USA was facing. Nor must we forget that ten years ago the USA was supporting the fundamentalists as a bulwark against Soviet influence. The American attitude to Iran was also a contributory cause to the USA's supporting the Taliban. The USA had previously supported the Taliban and they supported Iraq when we fought them. The most violent period Kabul has experienced was when the USA gave its approval to Taliban policy.

We understand that the USA had to strike back, but what is more difficult to understand is that the country exploited the events to settle old scores that were not related to the WTC.

It was difficult for the USA not to go to war, but in a broader perspective it was not rational. If the USA had first and foremost emphasised the problems of injustice and national rights, the country would have approached the

original ideals on which the country was founded. But American politicians act like politicians everywhere. To safeguard their existence they had to make an immediate response. It would have been much harder work to use the events to create a different way of thinking.

The UN is based on universal values, but the USA ignored the organisation. No one likes the Taliban, but if Iran had not helped to weaken them, the USA would not have triumphed so quickly.

If we ignore the USA's excessive violence, this was a natural reaction to such a serious attack. But the unnecessary suffering made me unhappy.

Instead of aerial bombing the USA could have used special forces and thereby avoided killing innocent civilians.

More limited operations would have been more likely to lead to the arrest of bin Laden.

### *Hostility*

Some respondents declined even to say "Yes, but" and condemned the whole Afghan operation outright. They think that the USA ought to have done something different, and predict that it will end in tears. Here are three such respondents:

Even before the WTC, the USA wanted to attack Afghanistan. The plans were in a desk drawer, but bin Laden gave them a good excuse.

National pride also made them act. There were groups in the USA that thought rationally and wanted to proceed in a milder manner, but they lost out. Strong feelings in American public opinion gave the government a free hand.

If Clinton had been in power, the reaction would have been milder. Bush the Cowboy played tough guy. But it is very naïve to think that one man controls everything – there is a power behind him, one that is hard to discern.

The USA could perhaps have reacted differently. They chose the line of least resistance. There might have been other feasible courses that would have served the USA better:

Anger and revenge motivated the Americans to the air war. The USA wanted to show who was boss. Instead of taking a day at a time and thinking carefully through the problem, the USA was the victim of the "quick success syndrome".

The USA could have acted differently by concentrating on exterminating the dangerous terrorist nests around the world and at the same time trying to do something about the causes of the hatred of the country. Here are eight respondents:

If the USA had not gone to war, movements all over the world would have understood that the USA was also vulnerable and thus open to negotiations. A negotiation line would have given the USA a moral edge vis-à-vis the Muslim world. Opinion tends to sympathise with the victim. Instead of taking up arms, they should have created a USA with a human face, now *that* would have strengthened the nation and created a positive image. The situation now is that a pre-existing negative picture of the USA has been created.

First the USA ought to have made a serious attempt to find out why it happened, and then acted in concert with the world community to stop anything similar happening again. Globalisation is the keyword. The events should have been taken up at a global level as a global problem.

If the USA had proceeded more cautiously, the country would have achieved wide support in the Muslim world.

In the war on terror the USA should have made greater use of international channels, the UN, the EU and even NATO.

The USA chose military solutions. It should have proceeded more wisely and above all acted through the UN, not unilaterally.

The USA could have made more active use of diplomatic channels. For a more coordinated approach to the terrorism question, NATO should have had a stronger role.

Air war was not required to overthrow the Taliban. A collaboration with Pakistan and Iran would have yielded the same results.

This is not a conflict about military power, but about injustice.

Many respondents saw the terrorists bouncing back, perhaps in even greater strength. Here are six in this camp:

Instead of invading Afghanistan, the USA should have thought it over and sought long-term solutions. One thing is certain, Afghanistan will not solve the terrorist problem. The people who do these things, will come back in greater force.

The USA is not going to win the war in Afghanistan. The effect of the war is a reinforcement of a negative image that the third world already has of the USA. The perception of the USA as a country with the will to act multilaterally is gone. Hatred of the USA will grow in strength.

Another consequence of the USA's policy is that it gives Ariel Sharon a free hand to commit his crimes.

In the short term the war, which President Bush exploited to his own advantage, made him popular. But the popularity will not last, before too long the war will make him less respected.

If bin Laden and his groups are arrested, they will be replaced by new bin Ladens and new groups.

September 11 will happen again, and with broader support from the man in the street. The conviction that it serves America right will be greater.

The great degree of understanding expressed by the majority of the respondents regarding the USA's decision to go to war in Afghanistan came as a surprise to us. Astonishingly many find good arguments for how the USA could not have done anything different, passivity would have had catastrophic consequences, such as a strengthening of al-Qaida's role in international politics and a global militarisation of political Islam.

Here the almost ritual condemnation of the superpower that dominates the answers to other questions, and caused us to classify them as "dispositional attributions", is largely absent. It is reasonable to believe that the cause of this is that the respondents are moving from symbolic politics to pragmatism. Where political situations are conducive, conservative forces in Iran seize any chance they get to wave the banner of the Satanic enemy image of the USA, so as in this way to breathe new life into the fading revolutionary dogmas of Khomeini's day. It is quite another matter when Iran's national

interests in its own back yard are concerned – symbolism must take a back seat to national interest.

Iran is most definitely interested in seeing the Taliban overthrown, and this was to be the introduction to what we might call a pragmatic collaboration between Iran and the superpower. A honeymoon began, which soon gave way to bickering – over for example safe conduct for al-Qaida soldiers through Iranian territory, and shiploads of weapons to the Palestinians. This suggests that ultraconservatives were circumventing official policy and operating on their own, which is by no means unusual and weakens Iran as a nation-state, showing that the country is at war with itself and unable to coordinate its foreign policy.

Despite this strife and confusion, the collaboration over Afghanistan was the beginnings of something new, even if the high hopes of a *détente* with the USA were dashed (see next chapter). Political developments in Afghanistan are of great interest precisely because they so clearly show how the politics of symbolism recedes into the background in Iran's own vicinity. Pragmatism and symbolism co-exist – together with unofficial collaboration with the USA, the anti-American rhetoric lives its own life in the public space.

At the same time, our sample condemns various aspects of the American military operations, and on a general level there is no one expressing support of "the war on terror" as such.

### Respondent causal attributions

If the respondent statements on Afghanistan are analysed for causal explanations within the framework of cognitive attribution theory, we find a quite different pattern to that generated by very general questions about the causes of American behaviour (see above).

Table 6 Causal explanations of the American war in Afghanistan		
N = number of causal statements*		
Situational	Expressive	Dispositional
18	1	19
		N=38
*Since we have a non-random sample and a relatively low N, no significance tests are reported, nor are percentages given.		

Respondents who say that the USA ought to have done something different have been coded as making dispositional attributions, since this implies that the USA had freedom of choice and therefore acted not under constraint but in accordance with its "nature". Even with the addition of these contra-factuals, however, we see that number of situational attributions has increased drastically in relation to Table 5.

Moreover, those who support the USA role in Afghanistan are explaining this solely in situational terms. This represents a resolution of a cognitive dissonance problem. Just as we explain the bad behaviour of our enemies in terms of their evil dispositions, so that we can avoid the insight that, in their shoes, we would have done exactly the same, so too we explain the good

behaviour of our enemies in terms of their constraints, so that we can avoid saying anything favourable about them. It is thus possible for a respondent to make a scathing condemnation of the USA, with hostile dispositional attributions, in the general questions, and then producing a situational explanation of something that, as a patriotic Iranian, the respondent regards as a good deed, namely the destruction of the Taliban. At the same time the “hawks” are playing safe by saying that the USA could have achieved the same result by better means, with less suffering and so forth.

### The war on Iraq

The rhetoric of the “war on terror”, “terrorist states” and “the Axis of Evil” suggests that the USA has a “shopping list” of countries that it intends to deal with, by means that are not specified in advance in all cases, but that may easily include invasion and occupation. When we were in Teheran interviewing the elite respondents (March–April 2002), the conquest of Iraq still lay in the future, although it was not difficult to see it coming. We did not ask the interviewees *whether* there would be a war, only *why* the USA wished to go to war, and what the *consequences* would be.

### The reasons for the war

**Table 7 Perception of the USA’s motives for going to war against Iraq**

N = number of statements\*

The USA is seeking geopolitical hegemony	6
Regime change	4
Iraq is threatening Israel	2
Need for an enemy image	2
Reaction to 11 September	1
Weapons of mass destruction	1
Democratisation of Iraq	1
	N = 17

\*Since we have a non-random sample and a relatively low N, no significance tests are reported, nor are percentages given.

The responses to this question confirm not only the results from other questions in this study but also the results obtained in other studies that we have carried out in Morocco and Tunisia.<sup>36</sup> The Muslims have formed an image of a superpower that wants hegemony both locally and globally. Iraq is an

<sup>36</sup> See Daniel Heradstveit and G. Matthew Bonham, “The fundamental attribution error and Arab images of the Gulf war”, *Political Psychology*, No. 2 1996.

obstacle to the superpower's ambitions in this respect. Alexander George operates with the terms "Master Belief" and "Core Belief" to denote perceptions that are never questioned and that form the bedrock for a series of other perceptions regarding a problem complex.<sup>37</sup> Any change in the perception that the USA wants hegemony will lead to other changes in the view of the USA, because so many perceptions rest on this core or master belief. As the table shows, this core belief of the Muslim belief system dominates the interview responses.

Our Iranian elite respondents therefore operated within familiar cognitive frameworks. The revolutionary rhetoric in Iran has filled the public space with an especially rigid enemy image of the USA, so that the respondents can easily fall back on pre-established beliefs. For this reason the results were fairly predictable. Our question provoked merely an extrapolation from pre-existing cognitive structures, and we could have made an educated guess that "hegemony" would be the dominant explanation for the American war on Iraq.

However, there is also some emphasis on the USA's wanting a regime change, due largely, in the respondents' opinion, to Bush personally; his desire either for revenge for the assassination plot against his father or else to continue his father's work or correct his father's mistake in stopping the last Gulf War short of Saddam's overthrow. In equal third place come the removal of the threat Saddam Hussein was considered to pose to Israel, and the American psychological need for an enemy.

It is interesting that the main reason the USA had been giving for the war on Iraq,<sup>38</sup> the removal of Saddam's "weapons of mass destruction", is quite peripheral to the respondents' argumentation. The notion that Iraq can threaten the USA appeared far-fetched to the sample. Similarly, another of the proclaimed American goals, to introduce democracy to Iraq, hardly featured in the responses, and the same is true of the shock of 11 September.

In other words, the respondents did not entirely ignore the USA's "official" motivations for the war on Iraq, but assigned them very little weight. Far more central to their perceptions are other and ulterior motives. The USA has a hidden agenda; the official reasons are, they think, a smoke-screen for control of the Persian Gulf so that the states of the region have to submit to American power. Several give the impression that the USA's rapid victory in Afghanistan has made the Americans arrogant, inspiring them to start new wars to secure power and control not only over the Persian Gulf but globally.

We illustrate this section with some of the respondent statements, one from each category:

If the USA attacks Iraq, it will be to achieve what they consider a better strategic position. By taking Iraq, they reckon on crushing most of the power the region will have in the future.

Bush wants to complete what his father should have done – remove Saddam Hussein. The USA's relationship to Saddam Hussein is based on

37 George, Alexander L., "The Operational Code: A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-making", *International Studies Quarterly*, XIII, p. 190–122, 1969. Daryl Bem uses the term "primitive belief", see *Beliefs, Attitudes and Human Affairs*, Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, Belmont, California, 1970.

38 "Regime change" was not then as prominent in American arguments as it later became.

bitterness. The rapid victory in Afghanistan has reinforced these negative aspects of American policy.

It is because the USA wants to replace dark patches [on the map?] with its own light. By dark patches I mean weapons of mass destruction. Iran is the darkest patch, Iraq less so. The USA wants to test Iraq to make the country show its cards.

When all Americans, including the President, now take all kinds of security more seriously, this is connected with the fact that it was New York and Washington that were hit. The President looks ahead and the question he asks is: What can happen if the USA does not act now? That is why the USA is talking about Iraq.

Iraq mobilises the American people because the focus on Iraq reminds them about and reinforces the image of the enemies of the USA.

Iraq will become an important part of the new Middle East that they aim to create after peace has been made with Israel. A precondition for the new Middle East becoming a reality is economically and politically liberal states. It is therefore important that the political conditions in Iraq be changed.

### **The consequences of the war**

We took the opportunity to pose the hypothetical question of the consequences of such a war, because it was one that greatly concerned and excited the respondents. At the time of writing the war has already taken place, but we shall let the answers stand, partly because many consequences are long-range and remain to be seen, partly to see whether their predictions as to short-range consequences have been fulfilled.<sup>39</sup> The responses do not greatly lend themselves to quantification, as interviewees tend to cover several bases and free-associate rather too widely. Instead, the consequences will be grouped together.

In contrast to the question of why the USA was going to attack Iraq, the question of the consequences did not suggest any pre-digested answers stemming from the Iranian revolutionary rhetoric and the “party line”. The fact that the question was hypothetical (when it was asked, not now) made for a greater chance of getting answers based on affective rather than cognitive structures.

### *Destabilisation*

All war is unpredictable, and the sample was afraid that anything might happen. A couple of respondents mentioned interruption in the oil supply, and one even feared the use of nuclear weapons. This at least we now know has not happened. Similarly, some interviewees emphasised the loss of human life, which unfortunately we cannot say is an unfulfilled prediction. As we saw in the previous section, there is no confidence in the USA’s expressed war aims.

Many interviewees warned of destabilisation, and that on several levels. First is the danger that an attack on Iraq will drag other states into the conflict. The possibility of Turkish intervention against the Kurds was men-

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<sup>39</sup> The respondent who predicted that France would be the only European country to oppose the war wins no prizes.

tioned, and indeed, at one point of the war, when the Peshmerga took Kirkuk and Mosul, this looked imminent. A couple thought that, if the war grew protracted, other Arab states would be forced by the pressure of their populations' outrage to come in on the Iraqi side. Another thought the protests would only be verbal. One respondent thought that Iran might enter the war, despite the fact that the grass-roots did not share the anti-Americanism of the elite, in order to prevent encirclement; another that Iran might intervene if the war resulted in a pro-Western government in Iraq.

No Iranians have any reason to love Saddam Hussein. Even so, one respondent stated that getting rid of Saddam would solve nothing. Another even thought that since there was no alternative, the USA does not want to change the Iraqi regime right now. A third emphasised that there are no quick fixes in Iraq. Several emphasised that their success in Afghanistan was leading the Americans into false confidence; Iraq is not Afghanistan and the same methods cannot be applied. The USA can install a new Hamid Karzai in Iraq, said one, but that will not ameliorate the frustration of the Iraqi people; others claimed that there was no possible Iraqi equivalent of Karzai.

Other respondents remarked that it all depended on the USA's tactics: it would be positive if the USA could get rid of Saddam cleanly, but devastating the country was another matter. Refugee flows into Iran were also a concern.

Another factor in destabilisation was the perception of a new age of colonialism and the effect this will have on the Muslim street. Two respondents thought that other Gulf states would be very pleased to see the back of Saddam Hussein, and that anger in the streets is of no practical significance for policy. Even though the regimes collaborate with the USA, they serve the people up with anti-American rhetoric. Others, however, claimed that an American war against Iraq without a regional consensus would have serious repercussions for Saudi Arabia and Egypt, where bin Laden is a popular hero. The war can thus further encourage his brand of fundamentalism and militancy, and --- provided that the war lasts long enough -- fundamentalists from the entire Muslim world may go to Iraq to fight.

The question of the legitimacy and acceptance of American actions was linked to the issue of Palestine. Both the Iraqi and Iranian regimes derive(d) legitimacy from their progressive positions on this, and should there be peace in Palestine, both would become very isolated and the US very powerful. On the other hand, the USA's double standards in the Persian Gulf and in Palestine were offensive, and the respondents have no confidence in the declared American goals of introducing greater democracy into the entire Gulf. Actual American behaviour in the region completely undermines all such ethical posturing.

### *Fragmentation*

Several respondents discussed the fragmentation of Iraq, with secession by the Shi'i population in the south. However, they dissented from the usual Western image of the Shi'a as unconditionally wanting to break away: the Shi'i Muslims in Iraq are nationalists, they are supporters of the state of Iraq, said one. Others asserted that the Shi'a sympathised with Iran, regarded it as a bastion of their religion, desired an alliance with it, but would probably not

want to be actually incorporated into Iran; they would rather have a better position within Iraq, with an end to discrimination, or a federal solution with Baghdad, or form their own state. Moreover, not all the Shi'a are in fact so subordinate, for it is Iraq, and not Iran, that has the two vital Shi'i pilgrimage cities of Najaf (the burial-place of 'Ali) and Karbala (the site of the martyrdom of Hussein). At the time of the 1979 Iranian revolution, Westerners had the impression, abetted by Khomeini himself, that the centre of Shi'i theological gravity was Qom, but in fact this seminary town is outranked by the Iraqi centres.

We felt a strong sense of expectation on the part of the respondents that a war would put an end to the oppression of the Shi'a of the Gulf, that after the war they would play a stronger role in regional politics. This they expected to strengthen Iran's position, at the same time as frightening the Sunni-ruled states. If the Shi'a did not get that stronger and regionally destabilising position, however, they would be no better off than under Saddam. As for Kurdish independence, this would affect both Iran and Turkey.

#### *Consequences for Iran*

Despite this, to our surprise some of our elite Iranians had hopes that the removal of Saddam Hussein would lead to a democratisation of Iraq that could in turn "infect" Iran itself. One claimed that if conditions in Afghanistan and Iraq improved, Iranian people might say they preferred to live in these countries, which would accelerate liberalisation. A democratic Iraqi government might be able to pressure Iran to normalise its relations with the West and strengthen the existing political trends towards market liberalism and political pluralism. If this seems to be a contradiction of their acute scepticism that democracy is in fact on the American agenda, it is a contradiction in their own attitudes. The reverse of this coin is that an American failure in Iraq would affect the Iranian situation in the opposite direction; this would put wind in the sails of revolutionary dogmatic forces, which would intensify their anti-American discourse. The politics of symbolism would defeat the politics of feasibility.

On the other hand, a Western government in Iraq will weaken Iran's position in the oil market. Iran will have to compete with Iraq and follow the latter's rules, which are more in accord with global norms. That is, Iranians will have less free hands in negotiating with Western oil companies than they are today. Competition with Iraq for Western investment may mean the end of the current practice of offset purchase agreements. No foreign company now has any right to own interests in Iranian oil and gas fields; they are awarded a right to develop a field at a given price and receive an agreed return on their investment. When the plant has been amortised and the developer has received his share, the plant passes to Iranian authorities or companies. Western oil companies will prefer to invest in Iraq, but because Iran needs Western capital, it may have to abandon such special contracts – which will be a traumatic step, as these offset agreements are enshrined in the Constitution. Another economic consequence of the conjunction of a Western-oriented Iraq and a conservative Iran was capital flight.

Respondents felt that Iran had been "encircled", as 911 led to the stationing of American and NATO forces in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Foreign troops have been stationed in Afghanistan. The new situation has had a negative impact on economic activity.

It has strengthened our feeling of being encircled by the USA, and very much increased the feeling that the USA is our powerful neighbour. This has led to an extensive debate in Iran on whether the way to go is to fight this mighty neighbour or adapt to it.

The USA is advancing ever closer to our frontiers. With its offensive interference in the region it had previously secured a foothold in the Gulf, Central Asia and Northern Iraq, and has now also become our big neighbour in Afghanistan.

Finally, several respondents feared that the USA would now go to war against Iran itself. We shall look at this perception at the end of the next chapter, in the context of an analysis of "the Axis of Evil".



# PART III IRAN

## Chapter 6 Iran and “the Axis of Evil”

### Introduction

In his State of the Union message to Congress on 29 January 2002, President Bush launched the expression, “the Axis of Evil”, to include Iraq, Iran and North Korea: “States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger.”

We have already reflected on the rhetoric of this slogan, in the Introduction, noting how it deployed the two components, “Axis” with its memories of the Second World War, and “Evil” with its eschatological religious thinking. In particular we noted how it implied not only that certain geographical regions were the source of the Evil in the world, but also that they were all in alliance with one another in order to promote that Evil.

In terms of American intentions, the launching of the phrase “Axis of Evil” to supplement the “War on Terror” marks a new phase, in which the focus shifted from bin Laden and al-Qaida – almost certainly the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks – with their allies and bases in Afghanistan, to a series of other states, whose involvement in that operation ranged from minimal to non-existent. The uncharitable might link this shift to the failure to catch Osama bin Laden, in that the Administration had a need to show that it was still “doing something”, even if that something was unconnected with bringing the WTC attackers to justice.

The key concepts in this shift have been firstly “terrorist states”, which implies the “indivisibility of terrorism” and therefore the collective responsibility for 9/11 of any state so designated; and secondly, “weapons of mass destruction”, because anyone who possesses them may be tempted to sell or give them to “terrorists”, thus evoking fears of chemical, biological or even nuclear attacks on American cities. However, anyone who *already possesses* nuclear weapons is immune from attack, as for instance Pakistan, whose military intelligence service was the chief sponsor of the Taliban, and possibly North Korea. That none of this applies to American allies goes without saying.

At first the USA concentrated on the Iranian development, with Russian assistance, of a nuclear power station in Bushehr. The Americans consider that this can be used to produce nuclear weapons. Subsequently, the USA learnt, to its own surprise, that Iran had a nuclear weapons development programme near the city of Natanz. Secretary of State Colin Powell used this as

an example of how a nation determined to develop nuclear weapons can keep the process hidden from inspectors and other outsiders.

The *topos* of “terrorist states with weapons of mass destruction” is therefore confined to hostile states that may, at some time in the future, acquire nuclear weapons which they may, at some time in the future, possibly be tempted to bestow on terrorists. Iran most definitely qualifies under these criteria, in that it is considered a hostile state, has a nuclear programme and cannot prove that it will not so bestow these weapons, since no one can prove a negative. The American government’s approach to the burden of proof was amply demonstrated in the case of Iraq, where it asserted that neither the USA nor the UN needed to prove that Iraq had WMDs, but that the Iraqis had to prove that they didn’t, and that any evidence presented was a fake.

Two other reasons for granting Iran membership in “the Axis of Evil” are probably the theocracy’s general hostility to the USA (opposition to Good must necessarily be Evil) and its attitude to terrorism; generally, that Iran does not consider the Palestinians’ struggle against the Israelis to constitute terrorism, and specifically, the country’s support for Hizbollah in Lebanon.

That Washington is not yet talking about the invasion and occupation of Iran should give no grounds for complacency, as the whole story of the “war on terror” has been one of vague sliding transitions. When the phrase was launched, Iraq was never mentioned. Then came increasing American pressure to let the UN inspectors do their jobs, then came the determination not to believe the inspectors, then came the express aim of regime change. At first regime change could mean Saddam cooperating, but later it meant removing him by force. Analogous to this, it is not difficult to imagine the Americans requiring the shutdown of Bushehr and Natanz, then demanding that Iran prove the non-existence of other programmes, then refusing to accept anything as evidence, then declaring that the only way to be sure is to remove the present government.

Against this background, we asked our Iranian elites why they thought they had been accorded membership in “the Axis of Evil”.

### **The stab in the back**

Prior to “the Axis of Evil” speech, Iranian-American relations had been undergoing a thaw. One factor was Khatami’s idea of a “dialogue of civilisations”. Another was the apology proffered in March 2000 by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright for the events of 1953. She admitted that the USA played a major role in the overthrow of Mossadeq and thereby put an end to Iranian democratisation for the sake of its own oil interests. She also apologised for the USA’s support of the Shah’s brutal repression and for its short-sightedness in supporting Iraq’s war against Iran from 1980 to 1988. Elite interviews in both 2000<sup>40</sup> and 2002 showed that Albright’s apology made a strong impression on the Iranians.

A third factor was the Iranian collaboration with the West over Afghanistan. The USA gradually grew disenchanted with its former clients the Taliban. At the end of the 1990s Madeleine Albright stated that the USA was

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40 *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis*, Vol. 17, No. 2 2001.

now an opponent of the Taliban because of their revolting treatment of women and their general disrespect for human rights. Similarly, on 25 September 2001 Foreign Secretary Jack Straw visited Teheran, the first official UK government visit since 1979, with a view to getting Iran to join the anti-Taliban coalition. He stated that Iran was a useful and important consultee as regards Afghanistan. It was clear that Iran had nothing to do with 11 September. For their part, the Iranians were supporting the Northern Alliance, whose ethnic backbone was the Taziks<sup>41</sup> of the Panshir Valley under the legendary guerrilla leader Ahmed Shah Masoud. In other words, Iran and the USA now had a common interest in crushing the Taliban. Iran envisaged a new geopolitical role for itself in Afghanistan and Central Asia, in alliance with the USA. On 27 November 2001 representatives of the Northern Alliance and various Afghan exile groups met in Bonn to construct a transitional administration. The Northern Alliance accepted an international peace-keeping force, and by 5 December the negotiators had agreed on a government of national unity under Hamid Karzai. Iran played a constructive role at this conference. Everything seemed to point towards collaboration.

(In passing, we would mention that conservatives in the Muslim world often speak with two tongues; time and time again we find that Muslims want the West to come and “help” them with conflict situations, at the same time as they strongly condemn Western interference. The war in Afghanistan was a perfect example of this – Iranian conservatives were happy to see the USA crush the Taliban, while at the same time profiling themselves in Iranian opinion as being against American intervention. Muslims who accuse the West of double standards are not themselves innocent of this.)

Some disputes nevertheless arose, in consequence of “incidents”. These were of such a character that they could have been resolved with greater goodwill. It appears, however, that bad historical memories resurfaced and undermined the basis for this détente that promised to return Iran to the mainstream of international politics. Historic experience has created negative psychological structures, and the Revolution maintained them; it is within these cognitive frameworks and their psychological baggage that the Iranians interpret the USA’s behaviour. The possibility that the other side has innocent intentions is discounted. We can probably say that if the enemy image of the USA were to be smashed, the entire ideological cognitive system, the political ideology we call Islamism, would fall apart. However, unless that happens, the negative cognitive framework will magnify all misunderstandings and disagreements. Under such conditions it is hard to achieve détente.

Despite the measure of friction in the new partnership over Afghanistan and the “Karine A” arms-smuggling incident,<sup>42</sup> the inclusion of Iran in “the Axis of Evil” came as a bolt from the blue. Here are five respondents:

41 Taziks are the Iranians’ ethnic cousins in Central Asia, surrounded by mostly Turkic peoples.

42 Thursday 3 January 2002 Israeli commandos boarded the “Karine A” in the Red Sea and seized 50 tonnes of arms meant for the Palestinian areas. At a press conference the following day the Israeli defence chief Shaul Mofaz said that the ship belonged to the PLA and the cargo was mostly from Iran. Sharon called Iran “the world’s terrorist centre” and claimed that the cargo was proof that Iran and the Palestinians were planning an attack on Israel together. Iran denied everything, and it later emerged that the ship was Iraqi-owned. Yasser Arafat denied knowledge of it, and a PLA commission of enquiry concluded that it was an independent operation on the part of some Palestinian security personnel. The USA kept a low profile, in part to discourage Israeli reprisals.

With his policy after 11 September, Bush has overshadowed the work of those who supported normalisation between Iran and the USA. Of all the countries in the region, Iran is the one that absolutely had nothing to do with 11 September. Nevertheless it was Iran, for reasons connected with domestic politics, that had to pay the highest price for what happened.

Before the launch of the concept “the Axis of Evil” and thereby the declaration of American enmity, the Iranian perception was that the antagonism between the two countries was not eternal, but something that could be changed. The slogans of the Islamic Revolution were directed against the Shah, and even the embassy hostage-taking<sup>43</sup> was a denunciation of American interference, not an expression of hatred of the USA as such. The hostility between the USA and Iran was either rooted in history (Mossadeq) or in political conditions. Both Khatami’s ruling idea of the dialogue of civilisations and Albright and Clinton’s admission that the USA had wronged Iran, were crucial to the way the Iranians perceived the USA. A process in the right direction – forwards – was in progress. But never before has the USA stabbed us in the back like after 11 September: Iran defended the progressive forces in Afghanistan, played a constructive role in the Bonn conference and defended the establishment of a democratic regime in the country.

When Bush used the term “the Axis of Evil”, it was as if he hit the moderate forces in Iran with a hammer.

The phrase came straight after the collaboration between USA and Iran in Afghanistan. The sense of betrayal was strong.

“The Axis of Evil” is a slap in the face of all those who trusted the USA.

We shall see more of the respondents’ sense of surprise, incomprehension and injustice in the following section.

## Why is Iran on this list?

### The respondents

We decided to operate here with a large number of possible motives so as to bring out some subtleties. As is only natural, some of the categories run into one another, but the general structure of the respondents’ cognitive universe is nevertheless plain. In the table and in the sample responses that follow, we have chosen to group the topics under three main heads: avowed American aims, geopolitics and psychology. There are unusually many statements because for obvious reasons this question excited the respondents greatly and many suggested several American motives, in some cases up to four at a time.

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<sup>43</sup> In 1979 Iranian students occupied the US Embassy in Teheran and took 53 hostages. Khomeini exploited the spectacular event strategically by letting it drag out, and as a mobilising factor for Islamism. What began as a not very well planned student demonstration ended up as a tool of the theocrats and spelt the end of Iran’s first post-revolutionary government, a secular one – as well as Jimmy Carter’s presidency. Not until January 1981 were the hostages released.

<b>Table 8 The USA’s motives for including Iran in the “the Axis of Evil”</b>	
(N is the number of statements)*	
<i>Avowed American aims</i>	
Al-Qaida	3
Removal of WMDs	6
Democratisation	5
<i>Geopolitics</i>	
Domestic motives	8
Hegemony	13
Israeli interests	13
<i>Psychology</i>	
Ingrained hatred	4
Need for an enemy image	5
Irrationality	11
	N = 68

\*Since we have a non-random sample and a relatively low N, no significance tests are reported, nor are percentages given.

#### *Avowed American aims*

Only three respondents mentioned al-Qaida or terrorism specifically. One thought Iran’s support for “terrorism” was a factor; it is not clear whether he meant bin Laden or Hizbollah or both. Two cited the free passage through Iran granted to members of al-Qaida. It is possible that talk of “pressure on Iran” is code for making Iran abandon its support for terrorism, or for that matter weapons of mass destruction, but here we have coded only explicit references, and assigned vague talk of “pressure” to Hegemony, see below.

The threat to the USA from Iran’s possession of weapons of mass destruction attracted rather more attention, being invoked by six respondents. One thought this was the prime reason for “the Axis of Evil”. Another took a “situational” approach to the position of both sides on this issue: the need to feel secure will lead the country inter alia to acquire weapons of mass destruction. As the West perceives things, states that cannot cooperate on the basis of mutual trust will eventually move in the direction of developing weapons of mass destruction. A third also indicated a certain sympathy, by mentioning long-distance missiles that can reach the United States. Yet another thought that the warning was actually meant for Russian ears, presumably because the Iranian nuclear programme would not be possible without Russia.

One third of what we might call the avowed American aims is democratisation. Five respondents touched on this theme. All are worth reproducing:

Iran violates human rights and this is hurting the pro-Western forces in the country.

Bush's speech was probably meant to frighten the Iranian hard-liners, and because politicians in Washington think the reform movement is in the process of giving up, the aim may have been to pressure Iran towards a democratic government.

It was an attempt to exploit those groups in Iranian society who feel themselves unjustly treated. After the war between Iran and Iraq, conditions became bad. We have religious groups who isolate themselves and have no understanding of what it means to create a modern society. These groups exercise power far beyond what the modern world can accept. The point is, however, that Iran can solve this problem best itself. The USA tried to exploit the events of 11 September to fish in troubled waters.

Since March 2001 the gap between the rulers and the ruled in Iran has only widened. The problem is that the Iranians cannot trust the clergy, they have no faith in them. In the meantime Khatami and Khamenei are playing "Good mullah, bad mullah". It is conceivable that Bush meant his speech to present the Iranian people with the choice between security for the land and people on the one side, and Islamic *ji*had on the other. The message can also be a clear signal to the reformers to do something, to get going.

After 11 September the USA began to pay attention for the first time to the abuses of human rights in Iran.

However, this respondent went on to undermine his own reference to democratisation as a possible motive: But otherwise it has been quiet. It is remarkable that we don't hear more positive things about the reform movement, which after all is the main force for democracy. Another explicitly repudiated the notion of American interest in democratisation<sup>44</sup>: Mr. Bush has exhibited a lack of interest in protecting civil society, civil rights and the development of political parties in Iran.

### *Geopolitics*

Several respondents mentioned domestic factors, either in so many words or by implication. For instance, we have coded as Domestic two mentions of "anti-Iranian" elements in Washington; one respondent linked these to Bush, another spoke of a lobby.

Several regarded "the Axis of Evil" concept as the result of a tug of war within Washington. We could have also coded these in terms of the results of such a process and the aims and desires of the winning side, but it is sometimes implied that the concept was a weapon in this struggle. For example:

The speech's primary aim was in domestic politics. It was a rhetorical phrase that probably plays well in domestic American politics.

Bush wants to show the American people that he is keeping an eye on Iran.

The code-words in the concept "the Axis of Evil" were intended for American public opinion. Bush was speaking to the American people and

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<sup>44</sup> This negative statement has not been coded as an explanation, but the preceding sentence belongs under Irrationality.

then the question is whether he really meant what he said. But public opinion is important, and it is up to the diplomats to tone down the impression.

It was a dramatic action, the expression was meant to serve as a propaganda tool to get attention.<sup>45</sup>

The phrase may be a product of the power struggle in Washington, in which the hawks have the upper hand.

There was a debate in the USA about whether to use diplomacy or threats and power vis-à-vis Iran. In the end the victory went to those who thought that Iran should be compelled to change its policy by force.

And what is the objective of these hawks? The respondents displayed a massive conviction that the name of the game was American hegemony. Here are four respondents:

They have seen that the time has come to put pressure on Iran. The hawks have lost faith in Khatami, who they no longer expect to achieve anything.<sup>46</sup>

I think the Bush administration has concluded that the pressure the USA has exercised on Iran has not given any results. Stronger medicine is necessary. “The Axis of Evil” was a power ploy that I think they have succeeded with.

They see the time as now ripe to pressurise Iran, not least because they are of the opinion that Khatami is finished and the reform process has run out of steam. We may speak about a marriage of convenience between the ultraconservatives in Teheran, Washington DC and Israel.

The USA does not trust Iran’s post-revolutionary governments because they have defined themselves ideologically in opposition to the West.

Many respondents hinted at a pre-existing agenda; they did not specially mention the “New American Century” project, but seem to have it in mind:

11 September was not the basis for “the Axis of Evil”. The idea has been ready for at least a couple of years, the WTC was a welcome opportunity to launch it.

Bush was taking the opportunity to promote unilateralism. The people Bush surrounds himself with are also an explanatory factor. They are ultra-conservative and militaristic. They are taking ideas from the Cold War when the USA played the role of world policeman.

It may be a warning that the neo-conservatives in Washington will employ military means in foreign policy. It is misleading of the USA to speak of “the Axis of Evil”. On the other hand, the USA’s containment policy in this area is expansionist. It deprives people of the right of self-determination.

The USA wants to play the role of saviour of the world. “In God we trust” is on the American dollar.

The usual thing is that we can define the borders of a state, but the USA is not like other states. The USA is a place, not a country – it is everywhere. The USA is power. The USA included Iran in “the Axis of Evil” in order to demonstrate power vis-à-vis Iran. This was a form of power that was justi-

45 It is possible that Iran’s attention is meant here, rather than that of other Washington actors, in which case this statement would belong to Hegemony.

46 Since the respondent does not state what it was the hawks wanted Khatami to do, this statement has been difficult to code. For example, it might mean that they have given up hope that he will stop Iran supporting terrorism.

fied on the basis of democratic and humanitarian ideas – good and evil. It was to frighten Iran, spread terror and fear.

This is primarily about the USA's security interests.

Iran's important strategic role makes the country of great interest to the USA... The USA desires agreement with Iran. If they are not reconciled, the USA will claim it has free hands to attack.

Two respondents took their arguments in a direction reminiscent of "the Great Game":

The phrase may, for example, be intended as deterrence in order to prevent Iran getting politically involved in Afghanistan.

The idea that Russia might once again sink its teeth into Central Asia, as in the days of the Soviet Union makes the USA uneasy. The USA is therefore interested in these countries developing relations, not only with Russia, but with other countries of the region. Neither Turkey, nor Afghanistan, nor China will in this context be the right partner. Iran, on the other hand, with its access to the sea, may become the transit country for goods from these states. Iran also has great national resources and a population with high education. What prevents Iran playing such a role for the USA is out Islamic government. This problem must therefore be solved. As the situation is today, the USA is facing an unsolved security problem in Central Asia.

The clear implication of this respondent's analysis is some kind of take-over so as to enable Iran once again to be a key piece on the American strategic chessboard.

We have counted no less than 13 of these statements hinting at or complaining of hegemonic intentions on the part of the USA, intentions for which "the Axis of Evil" concept is merely a cloak. This highest score, however, is shared by mentions of Israel.

Three respondents thought of the "Israeli angle" in connection with Iranian arms shipments to the Palestinians. Of these, one specifically cited a "50-tonne consignment", another a "boatload" as being the triggering factors. This is a reference to a real incident. Two others referred to Iran's "interference" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to Iran's creation of "difficulties" for an agreement between the parties.

One respondent concentrated on Hizbollah and Israeli revenge for its defeat in Lebanon: Iran and Israel have been in continuous war with one another for the last twenty years. The war has been fought in South Lebanon. The effective fighting of the Iranian-supported Hizbollah forced Israel out of Lebanon. This is something that Israel cannot forget, and the Israelis are therefore not interested in seeing a flourishing Iran.

Three respondents mentioned the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in very general terms, as for instance "Israeli's security interests", "the conflict between Israel and Palestine" or Bush's speech as being caused by "strong pressure from Israel".

Like many people in the Muslim world, four respondents saw the Israeli tail wagging the American dog:

In addition came the pressure from the Jewish lobby. Israel hates Iran.

I think that Israel has also helped to put Iran in "the Axis of Evil". They have exploited the situation in their own interest, manipulated recent events to convince the hawks that something must be done about Iran.

The USA’s policy is directly tied to Israeli interests, it is dictated by Israel’s national interests. The USA pumps huge amounts of money into Israel, but not into the oil states of the Gulf where their interest lies.

Israel needs crises in the Middle East that distract attention from Palestine. Iran has served this purpose for a long time.

### *Psychology*

We turn now to what we may call psychological factors. Four respondents interpreted “the Axis of Evil” rhetoric as a result of the “bad blood” between the two countries:

The USA has selected Iran as an enemy country because it has constantly expressed its hostility towards the USA.

History has laid the foundation for the hatred Iranians feel for the USA. The USA cannot forget the hostage crisis of 1979, and the Iranians think that it was no accident when the airliner carrying 250 passengers was shot down over the Gulf. It was without doubt the US Navy who were behind it.<sup>47</sup>

This goes back to the defeats the USA has experienced in relation to Iran in the course of the last 23 years, the feeling of humiliation that Iran has inflicted on the USA. Iran has out obstacles in the way of mutual understanding.

Because Iran has a government founded on Islam, the USA hates the Iranian Islamic Republic. The USA is religious and atheistic at one and the same time, more atheistic than any other country in the world.

This ideological hatred is related to another theme of the respondents, the American need to have enemies. Five interviewees mentioned this; one counted up four reasons for Iran’s membership of “the Axis of Evil”, then added that these all made it easy to create an enemy image of Iran. Another took the Axis as a characteristic of “American enemies”. A third quoted an Iranian ambassador as saying that propaganda is essential to the USA, and now this propaganda is focused on us.

Two more respondents were extremely explicit about the pathology of enemy images:

The USA has a need for an enemy image. They have always conjured up enemy images. There was a time when terrorism was linked to the drug barons they declared war on, without much success. Now they need a new enemy image.

The need for a new enemy image is a contributory factor. The USA is trying to find an identity that can unite the nation politically and culturally. The phrase is connected with this identity crisis. Bush is trying to divide up the world into good and evil people, heroes and villains, friends and enemies. He is trying to underpin his politics with a form of metaphysical language, good and evil. He is creating a divide between Us and Otherness. This is a dangerous political discourse, which has negative consequences for global politics. When the aim is a bipolar world, it is easy to conceptualise so-called “rogue states”.

This theme segues naturally into our last explanatory paradigm, down-right irrationality. Here we count both the respondents who use that term and

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47 In July 1988 an American naval vessel shot down an Iranian airliner carrying 290 people to Mecca.

those who so to speak shake their heads in puzzlement, or give reasons why “the Axis of Evil” makes no sense. Five examples of the second category are:

Despite the fact that Iranian representatives threw verbal stones at the USA, we note that the country supported the USA at the Bonn meeting.

Even if Iran is not quite in line with other states in the region, the Iranian government is not as dangerous as some people think.

The strange thing is that when Washington talks about “the Axis of Evil”, it does not mention the Wahhabis and Saudi Arabia, who are behind the terrorist schools in Pakistan and elsewhere.

In reality there are no fundamental conflicts between Iran and Israel, nor between Iran and the USA. I don’t think Israel wants the Iranian government overthrown.

President Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright were of a different metal than Bush. The way Bush is going, he is pouring oil on the flames of anti-Americanism, he is giving the fundamentalists a helping hand.

These respondents argue that Iran has done nothing to deserve “the Axis of Evil” label or that the USA is shooting itself in the foot. This implied irrationality can easily be the prelude to an explanation in terms of domestic American politics and so forth, and sometimes was. However, other respondents are much more emphatic that the labelling is inexplicable, and they go on to condemn it as irrational. Here are four examples:

That Iran was included in “the Axis of Evil” is a mystery. It was a very sudden change in American thinking. It came as a shock and is not rational. I cannot explain it. The remarkable thing is that the states in question are a heterogeneous group, they are very unlike. Tarring Iran with the same brush as North Korea is really surprising.

The phrase was not founded on strategic rationality and seems very poorly thought through. The countries in the “Axis of Evil” are very different.

The phrase is quite irrational. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and President Khatami both adopted sensible positions.

Bush is behaving like a Baptist preacher with a highly provincial outlook on the world.

Two respondents unpack “irrationality” and cite emotions:

More than a strategy, the phrase is an expression of anger.

It is a mystery to me. Relative to Clinton’s presidency it was a sharp change of course. The phrase is founded not on rational thinking, but on feelings.

### **Commentary**

Metaphors are tied to cultural contexts, what can be an effective rhetorical instrument in one culture may not convey meaning in another. Due to a quite different Iranian experience of the Second World War, none of our respondents reacted to the word “Axis” at all. The term “evil”, on the other hand, is not specifically Western and so functions as intended in both American and Iranian cultural contexts. We might even say that “evil” carries even stronger negative connotations in Iran than in the USA, even though the Americans

are a far more religious nation than most European countries. Some respondents seemed rather to accept the validity of a list of “evil” states, but thought that Iran should not be on it, c.f. the several who stressed the difference between Iran and for example North Korea. Their surprise was not at the verbal aspects of the slogan but at the strange company Iran was made to keep. Although the respondents emphasised the startling irrationality of tarring Teheran with the same brush as Pyongyang, they did not explicitly attribute this irrationality to American religiosity. The nearest we come to this is the respondent who thought Bush to be like a Baptist preacher from the boondocks.

It is, then, the *Realpolitik* aspects of the “Axis of Evil” that bothered our Iranian respondents the most. The irrationality of the “Axis of Evil” was seen to a greater degree in terms of the dynamics of internal American politics, both the usual Washington infighting and the wider constituency of the American public. Many respondents saw the slogan as a consequence of the dominance of extreme right-wingers, hawks and Cold Warriors, who are still living in a bipolar world – not the USA versus the Soviet Union, but the USA versus assorted Black Hats, who are all in cahoots with one another. In this way the rhetoric of “the Axis of Evil” is seen as illustrating a symbolic conflict between the USA and Iran that is not related to any real conflict of interests.

There lies an implication of irrationality also in the familiar *topos* of American foreign policy being run from Israel. Some of this thinking is conspiratorial, other lines of argument are firmly grounded in realities on the ground, such as the way Iran and its instrument Hizbollah succeeded in ejecting Israel from Lebanon, and in the alleged Iranian arms shipments to the Palestinians. The geopolitical explanation of “the Axis of Evil” is couched roughly half in terms of intrinsic American thirst for world domination, half in terms of Israel’s strategic interests. In both cases the Realpolitik enmity is aggravated by ancient hatreds.

So few respondents made specific mention of al-Qaida, or weapons of mass destruction, that we may speak of a consensus in the sample that these factors are nothing but stalking-horses for American global hegemony. However, it cannot be ruled out that when the respondents talk about “pressurising” Iran without specifying what Iran is being pressurised actually to *do*, they are actually thinking of pressure to abandon support for terrorism and/or the nuclear programme. Their reticence may be embarrassment, or self-justifying “spin”, but the material does not allow us to be sure of this. In the same way, our sample was vague as to whether American hegemony means pressurising the current Iranian government to do its will, or replacing that government. The respondents did not use the term “regime change” that subsequently became so relevant to Iraq, but some hinted that Bush may have been attempting to give the reformers a helping hand. Their references to democratisation and American intervention in the political process were, however, heavily outnumbered by their references to US/Israeli strategic interests and US hegemony; they do not give the impression that they consider the Bush Administration to be particularly *interested* in them either way.

## A war against Iran?

We did not ask the sample specifically to comment on the probability of an American war against Iran itself, but the subject was frequently touched on in the respondents' answers to the question of the consequences of a war on Iraq, and elsewhere.

We noted with interest that the respondents were particularly uncertain about the USA's attitude to Iran. Bush gave Iran a green light on participation in the overthrow of the Taliban, but then put Iran in "the Axis of Evil". Behind the sharp words the respondents used against the USA there lay a hope of reconciliation, grounded on objective features of the situation in the Gulf. We had the diffuse and subjective impression that our Iranians did not like being compared in any way with Iraq, at the same time as they were not sure that the Americans understood the essential differences.

Here are three respondents hoping for *détente*:

We should not ignore the possibility that Afghanistan will benefit the USA. But there are strong anti-American forces in the area who are more extreme than we have ever experienced in Iran. Iran is more cautious in its criticism of the USA – it is possible to conduct a dialogue with Iran.

It would be in accord with the USA's long-term interests to act in a more friendly way vis-à-vis Iran. For Iran is not at the same stage of development as the Arab countries.<sup>48</sup> In five or ten years we will be friends with the USA. Iran has no other choice than to collaborate with the USA.

The main problem for the USA is the Arabs, The elites of the Arab world like the USA while the grass-roots hate it – in Iran it is the other way round, the grass-roots love the USA but the elites have big problems.

Some thought that the Americans might decide to demonstrate their power, but that they were waiting for the right moment; others that the USA would not attack at all, while a third group thought a limited attack (for example a strike at nuclear facilities) not improbable. Here are five respondents who do not expect such an attack:

That Bush uses expressions such as "good" and "evil" suggests less serious intentions than for example a military action against Iran. This is an abstract way of speaking that it is difficult to relate to any specific plans for Iran.

The expressions he uses – good and evil – do not suggest that he is thinking of imminent military action.

The USA should reconcile with Iran because it will need Iran's help. My perception is that the USA will not launch an attack on Iran. Some time in the future, through secret channels the USA and Iran will reach an agreement.

I do not think there will be any military action against Iran, but the phrase strengthens Muslim hatred of the USA.

There is no consensus in the American Administration to attack Iran. That the USA has not yet attacked Iraq is not connected first and foremost with regional conflicts, it is a matter of domestic American politics. Bush wants to militarise society. For this he needs a big military budget that the American society must accept.

Here, on the other hand, are seven respondents who are more pessimistic:

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<sup>48</sup> Iranians feel much more modernised and far superior to the Arabs.

The USA has decided to solve the Iranian problem.

The USA desires agreement with Iran. If they are not reconciled, the USA will claim it has free hands to attack.

It may be a warning that the neo-conservatives in Washington will employ military means in foreign policy.

There was a debate in the USA about whether to use diplomacy or threats and power vis-à-vis Iran. In the end the victory went to those who thought that Iran should be compelled to change its policy by force.

11 September has created a general unease and fear in Iran. People are afraid of a new war, that the countries that fought Iraq will now start a war with us.

We should disguise the fact that certain groups of the population think that a new war in which blood is spilt can lead to something positive. What has happened may induce Iranians to leave the country. They are afraid of what can happen here.

They (the conservatives) fear that the USA will make bombing raids into Iran. There are two main targets: our nuclear facilities and Pasdaran (The Revolutionary Guard), or more precisely the fractions within it that have caused trouble for the USA.

During the interviews we had the impression that the respondents were even more worried than they were willing to admit. Given the ferocity of their condemnation of American behaviour in general, this reluctance to attribute to them the further evil of making war on Iran may seem surprising. The explanation may be that it is “too close to the bone” – it is getting too serious, they are frightened and do not want to think about it too much.

Should the USA adopt a harder line, two respondents thought that Iran would quickly give way:

I am not sure what will happen to Iran, but the country will probably buy itself some time. If Iraq gets a new government, this will weaken Iran’s position. And history shows that when a danger approaches, Iran yields – as for instance in the war against Iraq. The situation will make the Iranians flexible and eager to adapt to the new power constellation. If Iran faces a big enough threat, the government will change course. Iran will conform to the USA and orientate itself in a new direction politically.

Iran will be intimidated by the threat from the USA. Domestic conditions in Iran are bad enough as they are. The Caspian (oil), Central Asia (gas), Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are all in one way or another strategic allies of the USA. If the USA goes to war against Iraq, this will put Iran in an unpleasant situation. That NATO is now almost at the Iranian frontier means that Iran is surrounded by the USA on all sides. In a way we can say that Iran is encircled. As the Israelis put it: we are under diplomatic attack.

Others thought the consequences of a military confrontation would be more serious:

Were the USA to go to war against Iran, it will have the most serious consequences. Iran is not Afghanistan, nor yet Iraq. The country has much in common with the oriental civilisation stretching from Tazikistan to Pakistan, in addition to the Shi’i influence that stretches from Lebanon to Iraq. An attack on Iran may therefore cause great instability. It may be a benefit to the

arms manufacturers, while the oil industry needs peace and stability and can be badly damaged. Normally the currents of opinion change over time, so it would be wise of the USA to mount short military actions without too high a cost.

If an American operation against Iran is unsuccessful, it will take a long time to make any changes in the country. The Islamic Republic will once again be strong and the ideological discourse will have new vigour. In Iran the question of support for Hizbollah in Lebanon is controversial, but with the development sketched out above, “the politics of symbolism” in this category will be regarded favourably.

# Chapter 7

## 911 and “the Axis of Evil” in Iranian politics

### **The Iranian self-image**

Before we turn to the respondents’ views of the current state of play in Iranian politics and which factions have profited and which suffered from “the Axis of Evil” rhetoric, we shall look briefly at what they said or implied about Iran’s image of itself in the new world created by the WTC attacks.

### **The respondents**

*Iran’s national unity has been strengthened*

11 September strengthened Iranian self-confidence.

11 September led to the Iranian government feeling more responsibility for its people. In general people felt a certain satisfaction in noting that peripheral nations in the third world could play such an important role in the USA. It is a paradox that some of those who felt satisfaction also reacted against the blind and pointless violence.

11 September has made the rulers understand that they must do more to remove the gap between the rulers and the ruled. The reformists are now openly admitting that this gulf – which is getting wider – exists. That politicians take it seriously is shown by the greater freedom of speech: there are controversies and disagreements on the role that should be played in this by the courts, which are in the hands of the “Leader”.

Prior to 11 September, foreign policy was a subcategory of domestic policy. This created a situation in which national security policy acquired a separate dimension partly elevated over domestic policy. Foreign policy was subject to a tug of war between different factions in which each conducted its own foreign policy. After 11 September Iran saw itself obliged to change its foreign-policy priorities. Conservatives and reformers came together more often than before in order to search for consensus in foreign policy. Previously, relations with Arab neighbours had a higher priority. In this field there was general agreement. The same could not be said of relations with Europe and the USA. The events of 11 September imposed a consensus and de-ideologising also in relations with the USA and Europe.

Iranian foreign and security policy is more important than ever. Previously, each faction conducted its own foreign policy. Now there is no doubt that we need a single national foreign policy. We must think things through carefully before we act in the foreign-policy arena.

After the WTC, previous disagreements were laid aside. Before there were factions in the state conducting their own foreign policy. For example, Khatami wasn't aware of what *Pasdaran*<sup>49</sup> was doing in Afghanistan.

*Iran has become more integrated into the world community*

The events made Iranians realise that everything that happens in this world has come closer. Even what happens a long way away can have consequences for Iran. The notion that we can isolate ourselves from the rest of the world has become weaker.

Our geopolitical position meant that everyone had to talk to us after 11 September. This made us feel important.

11 September reduced the tension linked to Iran in the international community.

The events affected every country in the world, and it is therefore not advisable to consider Iran separately. It was a watershed that many people think should form the basis of a new international system based on multilateralism. European countries are concerned with this as well.

The need to strengthen the global community and democratic values has always existed. The WTC has strengthened the global community.

People are dependent on one another. This time it was the USA that was affected, next time it can equally well be us. The divide between different cultures is not so clear any longer, we can have the same feelings across cultural boundaries.

11 September is a unique occurrence that has not only changed the USA's perception of defence issues and international policy, the event has also changed the USA's view of the world. The catastrophe was an excellent opportunity for Iranians to express sympathy with the USA and demonstrate that the country distanced itself from that sort of act. Iran joined the mainstream of global politics. Khatami and most other Iranians expressed sympathy with the USA, and in the work of democratising Afghanistan, Iran cooperated with the USA. Khatami's approach reflected Iranian attitudes. The murder of Iranian diplomats at Mazar-i-Sharif<sup>50</sup> and the hatred of the Taliban meant that even before 11 September there were Iranians who wanted a war with Afghanistan. The reformers were against it, however, because they thought that such a war would put the brakes on the reform movement. Previous periods' mistakes in Iran and groups acting on their own in no way reflect on the reform movement's will to fight terrorism. Connecting weapons of mass destruction to terrorism thus represents a wholly new problem for Iran.

*Iran is perceived as less extreme*

On 11 September we were confronted with a modern form of extremism. This weakened the image of Iran as an extremist country.

Iranian extremism is viewed in a gentler light because the events so clearly showed that the extreme elements in Sunni Islam are willing to go

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<sup>49</sup> The Revolutionary Guard.

<sup>50</sup> In 1998 Teheran accused the Taliban of killing nine Iranian diplomats in an attack on the town of Mazar-i-Sharif. For its part, the Taliban claimed they were killed by a splinter group.

further than the extreme elements in Iranian Shi’i Islam. Extremism in Shi’i Islam is more modern than the Sunni.

Although bin Laden was no hero, there was sympathy for him over the whole world. Even in Europe there were groups who wore bin Laden T-shirts. Nothing like this happened in Iran, here there was no one who expressed sympathy for him.

It is important that Iran was not involved. The ideological vocabulary in Iran has changed. People no longer care about issues that are of only symbolic importance. For example the man in the street has no interest in fighting in Lebanon. How does this serve our interests?

It is important that not everybody in Iran accepted the logic behind the acts.

It is important that Khatami condemned the acts after only 11 hours.

### *Iran is the lighthouse of Islam*

We are unlike other countries in the region. Our political culture is in constant development. And the very fact that we have not stagnated has given us confidence. Everyone who comes from outside must pass through Iran; this gives us power at the same time as making us vulnerable to attack.

In general Arabic societies are stagnant. This is by no means the situation in Iran. We have a dynamic society with a political philosophy in constant development.

Of the three countries that Bush first included in “the Axis of Evil”, Iran is the only one where the population is well-educated. Moreover, Iran plays an important geopolitical role.

The Iranian reform movement, which claims that a modern political movement can grow up in an Islamic country, puts Iran in a special position. By focusing on elections and human rights, the reformists are sending a powerful message to Muslim countries and Farsi-speaking populations.

Most countries in the Muslim world are heading towards democracy. In this way Iran, compared with the rest of the Muslim world, has a lead of 20 years.

### **Commentary**

We saw in Chapter (Positive or negative consequences?) how some respondents thought that the USA had been weakened by 11 September. As we would expect from cognitive consistency theory the converse proposition, that Iran had been strengthened by it, was also well evidenced. The strengthening they describe takes the form of an increase in national unity and greater effort to conduct a coherent foreign policy and a greater integration into the international community. Our respondents are sure that the fact that Iran was quick to condemn the 911 terrorist attacks, the first Muslim country to do so, was favourably received by the rest of the world and would help to soften the West’s perception of Iran as a terrorist state. In the same way, the world community ought to be able to see that the Iranian ideological extremism (as exemplified by *Pasdaran*’s assassination of dissidents in exile) is in fact not so dangerous after all, in comparison with what happened in Manhattan.

It was also a common perception among our respondents that in consequence of the WTC, Iran has become more important in international politics. After 11 September a lot of delegations came to Teheran. Iran looked as if it was about to be welcomed into the Western club. The respondents emphasised the constructive role they thought Iran played, and there was a general consensus that its work to create a democratic Afghan government were of great assistance to the West. Behind this enthusiasm it was easy to see a hope that this would be the country's future. We have already noted the sense of betrayal they felt when the USA then turned round and demonised Iran (Chapter 6: The stab in the back).

We may suspect that the interviewees have an overly optimistic view of the international community's ability to distinguish between the "fundamentalism" of Iran and that of the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia. For the Iranians, these are not only two different political ideologies, they are two dramatically different ways of thinking. Iran, they think, stands for an Islamic road to modernity, with the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. The reform movement talks about Islamic democracy, the rule of law, freedom of speech, human rights and civil society. However, the Western world just tars the Shi'i Islamists with the brush of Wahhabi puritanism and obscurantism.

The key concept in the mobilising rhetoric was "the Great Satan" (the USA). Today it is mostly the conservatives and ultras who cling to this enemy image, but it appears from the interviews in both 2000<sup>51</sup> and in 2002 that Iranian elites, despite the Revolution's attempt to liberate the country from foreign interference, still feel that they are in the power of the USA. The hope is that the USA will conduct some self-examination and confess its offences against the Iranian nation, so that new and good relations can be established, in turn facilitating a modern Iran.

## The Iranian polity in 2002

### The status of democracy

A goal of our interview surveys in Azerbaijan (1999) and Iran (2000) was a comparative study of the status of democracy in the two countries. In 1999 we interviewed the democratic opposition in Azerbaijan, and this was the reason why for our Iran 2000 study we concentrated exclusively on leading persons in the Iranian reform movement. When we started new Iranian fieldwork in 2002, however, we wanted to supplement the sample by including some eminent representatives of the conservative camp.

We succeeded in obtaining only a single interview with a moderate conservative. The very enquiry was in itself an distasteful experience; we encountered downright hostile attitudes when we politely requested to talk to them. They gave us the feeling that we were doing something unethical and improper and that it was rank impudence to ask them. This illustrates the hostile attitude of the conservatives to the West. They appear to believe that even if their country is forced out of its self-imposed isolation by economic and technological developments they will be able to survive to cultivate their enmity.

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51 *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis, op. cit.*

We are also aware that several of the reformists we interviewed have subsequently been arrested, convicted and imprisoned. It was dramatic and unpleasant when one of our interviewees was served with his prison sentence actually during our conversation with him.

Since the election of President Khatami the tensions between ultras, conservatives and reformists have been aggravated. Iranologists and others are constantly discussing whether a civil war is in the offing, a new Algeria, but this scenario is generally rejected with reference to Iranian society’s revulsion against violence.<sup>52</sup> Our interview data tend to contradict this, in that respondents asserted that there are groups who can envisage the use of violence.

It should be noted that there is an economic background to all this. The clergy got rich on the Revolution by means of confiscating the property of the Shah and the Iranian diaspora, in addition to donations from believers to good causes. Today these properties, and the still arriving donations, have been converted into foundations that control large slices of the Iranian economy. There are signs that Khatami has succeeded in introducing legislation that will gradually reduce the economic power and influence of the theocrats.<sup>53</sup> This is a factor working for the reformists.

In Chapter 6 we mentioned the incident of the arms smuggling on the “Karine A”, which was surely done without Khatami’s knowledge. This kind of freelance activity has been typical of Iranian politics, witnessing to a fragmented society with an inability to achieve any consensus in foreign and security policy. However many elections there are, incidents of this type show a failure of nation-building – a multiplicity of centres of power. That Iran is unable to coordinate its foreign policy, which is instead the prisoner of factions, shows that it has a long way to go towards democracy and the rule of law.

Below follows a medley of respondent voices talking about the state of play at the time of the interviews, though with statements about whether the conservatives have been weakened or strengthened by 11 September and “the Axis of Evil” deferred to the next sections. See also the statements in Chapter 7 above about Iran being a model for Islam.

The policies Khatami has conducted up to now clearly show that he is a conservative. There is a difference between verbal and operational liberalism.

There are those in the American Administration who think the Iranian reform movement has lost its vitality. I agree with this opinion. It happened as long ago as 1999. The reason is that the reform movement has no strategy and those who join it are generally mediocrities. Khatami changes his mind five times a day.

The *Bassij* does not play any important role. The organisation can be compared with a Scout association. It is not dangerous. Moreover, it is subordinated to *Pasdaran*.

The mafia is active in maintaining the fixed exchange rate, which Iranian criminals profit from greatly. It is therefore necessary that the authorities

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52 Amuzegar, Jahangir: “Iran’s Crumbling Revolution”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 82, Jan.-Feb. 2003.

53 *Ibid.*

stand united to get rid of the mafia. I am not uncertain of Khamenei's attitude, but what counts is that he supports the struggle against the mafia.

If we are to have a hope of creating a good future for Iran, it is necessary that conservatives and reformers stand together. The ultraconservatives<sup>54</sup> on the extreme wing do not only threaten violence, they carry it out. My neighbour was killed. This violence is perpetrated by some small groups within *Pasdaran*. They want to get the country into a military conflict. I am fully aware that 70% of *Pasdaran* voted for Khatami, but it doesn't help much as long as the organisation has violent extremists in their midst. One of *Pasdaran's* missions is to protect Iran's boundaries. The big cross-border alcohol and drug traffic provides *Pasdaran* with enormous incomes. The conservatives are not a homogeneous group, they contain elements involved in shady dealings.

11 September has led Muslim intellectuals to revise their view of fundamentalism. There is a tendency to a more sceptical attitude than there used to be.

In the last analysis it is the social changes that will determine the result. For example, Iran's demographic development will be crucial.

There are many fractions in Iranian politics but the most important thing is to note the main currents in conservatism and reformism. The ultraconservatives are also an important part of the picture.

Ten years ago we needed an intelligent president to end the Cold War (Gorbachev). Now we need a crazy president in Iran to wake up public opinion.

When we consider states and governments, we must look in what direction they are moving. Instead of the previous militant line, Arafat now wants to take a political line. When we discuss change, it is not enough to look only at political changes, we must take the social too. There is much more personal freedom in Iran than earlier.

Whereas Rafsanjani emphasised economic policy and Khatami the political aspects, we are now giving priority to social values. Greater freedom as regards the chador is an example of this. Society must be built on democratic values and allow individual freedom. We should act rationally so that we do not create a "window of opportunity" for people of bin Laden's type to do harm. Now we can express such opinions in Iran. It wasn't like that before, Iran's position was much less clear.

The conservatives see that the goods given to the people have their own dynamic, which means that everything can spin out of control. This is a common phenomenon. For example, the various channels in the state-controlled Iranian TV have now begun to send pop music to curry favour with the viewers. The conservatives are not against reforms, but don't want Khatami to get the credit for them.

In Iran the mixture of politics and religion we have today will within ten years be reduced to a minimum. The religious discourse will be restricted to domestic policy.

The USA has decided to solve the Iranian problem, and wants to limit Iranian influence in this region. The two points above have made the ques-

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54 As mentioned before, the respondent actually said "radicals", an Iranian usage which is confusing for westerners.

tion of extending the democratic right to participate in the Iranian political and social space a pressing one.

One respondent said that Iran’s main problem is the Rentier State and an incompetent bureaucracy: getting a job is dependent on your contacts. What good does it do that 80% vote for Khatami?

### **The balance of power**

The policy of the conservatives after 11 September is unclear. After the massive conservative offensive in April 2000, we actually witnessed a calming-down. It became easier to publish and the imprisoned dissidents – such as for example the journalist Gandji<sup>55</sup> was given better conditions in prison. The reformers interpreted this as suggesting that the conservatives – having understood that they themselves were capable of neutralising the President and the new Majlis – were now willing to give the reformers greater freedom of action. The panic after the landslide elections for the Presidency and the Majlis subsided after the conservatives discovered that the elected officials and deputies had no chance of facing down the conservatives’ won apparatus of power – that is, the Council of Guardians, the Expediency Council, the Assembly of Experts, the courts, *Pasdaran*, the Army and economic foundations.

It is interesting to note that in both interview surveys (2000 and 2002) fears were expressed of a violent coup d’etat, the starting-gun for which would be given by groups on the right wing.<sup>56</sup> In April 2000 the rumour on the Teheran street was an imminent military coup, but it all settled down again after one of the *Pasdaran* generals publicly warned against any such ideas. That *Pasdaran*’s attitude was decisive for whether there would be a coup or not was confirmed by our 2002 fieldwork. However, the interviewees consider that the danger of a coup is by no means over, they do not think it improbable that the ultraconservatives take this step. The Western press confuses the conservatives with the ultras (“the radicals”), but Iranians know the latter as groups who feel excluded from the mainstream, but who are living on their privileges and thus having their cake and eating it too. In a situation of tension and chaos, the ultras are ready to seize power. The respondents were of the opinion that the conservatives are sectarian, blinkered and not averse to violence in the name of religion.

During our fieldwork there was a lively debate within the ranks of the clergy, about whether there was religious justification for violence against opponents of the Revolution. There is no doubt that the ultras would answer in the affirmative.

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55 Akbar Gandji, one of the most popular journalists in Iran, who had worked for a number of reformist newspapers, was arrested after participating in a conference arranged by the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Berlin in 2000. This conference was stigmatised by the conservatives who control the courts as anti-Islamic. According to the public prosecutor, Gandji’s books *The Grey Eminence* and *The Red Eminence* provide a distorted image of the Islamic Republic. Gandji claims that the murder of dissidents in the autumn and winter of 1998 was carried out on assignment for the State. In 2001 he was sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment and five years of internal exile. The sentence was appealed and reduced to six years of imprisonment.

56 See Heradstveit, “Iran – reformer eller kaos”, *Internasjonal Politikk*, No. 4, 2000.

Here are our respondents talking about whether the conservatives had been strengthened or weakened by 11 September:

*The conservatives have been weakened*

11 September weakened the conservative forces in Iran.

11 September toned down the use of anti-American slogans. They had been a rhetorical/ideological tool in the hands of the conservatives who had used them to resolve disagreements in domestic policy. The fact that they have to some degree changed their tune is connected with the fact that, for the first time since the Revolution, the threats from the USA are taken seriously. The conservatives are afraid to play with fire.

*No, the conservatives have been strengthened*

For Iran the effect of 11 September has been negative. The conservative forces have been strengthened. They have exploited the war in Afghanistan by pointing to the USA's brutal behaviour against the Afghans, at the same time as they were happy to see the Taliban put out of business. But it doesn't bother them to speak with two tongues.

The euphoria the reformers felt in 1999 was exaggerated. The conservatives have great power, as the journalist Gandji has stated in several articles. The fact is that he is safer in prison than he would be if released. Dubious personages in the ranks of the conservatives and ultraconservatives<sup>57</sup> would not hesitate to kill him. Among the ultraconservatives are those who would like to see a state of emergency, they want chaos.

There is an atmosphere of distrust between the conservatives and the reformers. It is true that there is less political violence. The reason for this is that Khatami is not nearly so dangerous as the conservatives feared a couple of years ago.

Unfortunately, we are now seeing that reformism has stagnated. Huntington's theories have set us back.

It is particularly difficult when over 50 American authors assert that the "American identity" has been attacked. When al-Qaida's terrorist acts are exalted into a war of identities (war between civilisations), the gulf between the USA and ourselves is widened and mistrust of the USA is created. Not infrequently, spokesmen for democratic reforms in Iran are tarred with the same brush as the USA, which makes it hard to work for reforms.

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<sup>57</sup> What the Iranians call "the radicals", a usage too confusing for Western readers.

## The impact of “The Axis of Evil” on Iranian politics

### The respondents

**Table 9: What effect has “the Axis of Evil” rhetoric had on Iranian politics and the Iranian factions?**

(N is the number of statements)\*

No effect in Iran	2
Strengthened the overseas exiles	1
Strengthened the reformers	2
National unity	4
Killed off dialogue with the USA	11
A godsend to the conservatives and ultras	16
	N = 36
*Since we have a non-random sample and a relatively low N, no significance tests are reported, nor are percentages given.	

#### *No effect in Iran, strengthened the overseas exiles*

No Iranian group has exploited this to its own advantage.

No single faction in Iran has benefited from the speech. On the other hand, the Iranian political opposition abroad (the Pahlavists) have benefited. The speech created an atmosphere that enabled the exile opposition to present itself as an alternative to the Islamic government.

#### *Strengthened the reformers*

The reformers have benefited from the phrase. The conservatives have been scared and now see the USA as a real threat. For this reason they are more cautious about using the USA in the ideological struggle against the reformers. They understand that this is not the time for ideological initiatives in domestic policy, Iran must act rationally. All rational foreign policy favours the reformers. The ideological element in politics harms the country and must be eliminated.

As long as they were confident that no foreign state would overthrow the government, the rulers of Iran felt strong enough to oppress the opposition in the country. But after Bush’s speech on “the Axis of Evil”, and bearing in mind the activity of the secular opposition abroad – including Shah Pahlavi’s son – the government concluded that the USA would support the secular and Western-oriented opposition in Iran. In order to deal with such a situation and the problems this would bring, they went in for national reconciliation. Even if it is rather unclear what that means, this way of thinking has led to the release of political prisoners, such as members of the National Front. In

addition, oppositional newspapers operate more freely than the case was two years ago.<sup>58</sup>

*National unity*

... the reformers are concerned not to give the USA the impression that Iran can be frightened into compliance. The threat has brought the conservatives and reformers together, compelled to solidarity against what is seen as an external danger.

... the interesting thing is that we in Iran – across faction boundaries – have reached a consensus on how to react to it. We shall not subject ourselves to the USA, but neither are we interested in giving the USA excuses for further confrontation. We are using the means we have at our disposal as regards reducing the effect the phrase can have internationally, in alia by cultivating contacts with the Europeans.

... the conservatives have been surprisingly cautious. We think it is because they are quite simply scared that the USA will carry out its threats. In other words, this is too serious to exploit for propaganda purposes.

If we are threatened from outside, we will stand together regardless of our views in domestic politics.

*Killed off the dialogue with the USA*

The last year has been disappointing for Iran. The USA has dictated developments. Khatami's concept of "the dialogue of civilisations" has been shelved in favour of the USA's unilateral policy.

The groups that supported dialogue with the USA therefore lost ground.

The speech changed the basis for joint action with the USA. In the new context, the idea of dialogue acquired a different meaning from before, which undermined the position of those who supported dialogue with the USA.

The phrase Bush used has meant that the moderates must to a much greater degree than previously defend all positive steps they support in the relationship with the USA and in international policy.

... in such a situation, the reformers will not advocate dialogue with the USA either. In the light of the collaboration with the USA, the reformers have taken over the conservatives' arguments that the USA cannot be trusted.

It has weakened the position of those who support a détente with the USA.

The Iranian politicians who want dialogue with the USA see their chance as gone. The idea is now dead.

The phrase came straight after the collaboration between USA and Iran in Afghanistan. The sense of betrayal was strong.

Iranians who were previously neutral to the USA have unfortunately changed their views and are now against the USA.

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<sup>58</sup> It was during this interview (28 April 2002) that our respondent received his shocking prison sentence. Less than two weeks afterwards, two of the most important oppositional newspapers were closed.

With great satisfaction, they note that “the Axis of Evil” is a slap in the face of all those who trusted the USA.

I think that “the Axis of Evil” has destroyed the foundation for a normalised relationship between Iran and the USA.

*A godsend to the conservatives and ultras*

But we should remember that the conservatives, by maintaining the enmity with the USA, are not exclusively concerned with scoring domestic points. The fact is that they, too, want to negotiate. The problem is, however, that in Iran, faction-fighting is still more important than national interests. By exploiting Bush’s statements in domestic politics, the conservatives elevated factional conflict over national interests.

Religious groups, those who exercise religious and political power, have had the greatest benefit from the speech. The speech was perceived as an insult to the values of the Iranian people and for that reason caused the Iranians to rally round the religious values. This reaction strengthened the conservative groups. The mobilisation of religious and conservative ideas was strengthened by the fact that Bush’s speech came right before our celebration of the 23rd anniversary of the Islamic Revolution.<sup>59</sup> This made it easier to get masses of people onto the streets and demonstrate against what Bush said – and this benefited the conservative forces in society. A bit later came the Palestinian issue in full force, and so we had a process where Bush’s phrase and Sharon’s policies reinforced one another. This was a marvellous opportunity for the conservative forces to mobilise society in the direction they wanted. In Iran, being for Palestine is the same thing as being anti-American; mobilising for Palestine is the same as mobilising against the USA.

The right-wing profited from “the Axis of Evil”. The language used in the conservative newspaper *Kayhan* is now the same as during the war with Iraq, violent and bloodthirsty. Reality is presented in a way that requires the country to be in continual preparedness, the citizens must be on guard and form a common front against the enemy at the gates. The conservatives are using the American initiative to eliminate or oppress the opposition.

When the USA, on the basis of its power position, insults a nation, security questions acquire a place in national politics at the expense of topic such as freedom for the citizens. The groups that supported openness in domestic policy ... therefore lost ground. The ultraconservative faction critical of the government and the state benefited from Bush’s speech.

President Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright were of a different metal than Bush. The way Bush is going, he is pouring oil on the flames of anti-Americanism, he is giving the fundamentalists a helping hand. Mr. Bush has exhibited a lack of interest in protecting civil society, civil rights and the development of political parties in Iran. On the basis of Bush’s statements, the conservatives want to introduce a state of emergency in Iran.

The fact that Bush made a distinction in his speech between the elected and the non-elected elements of the government could have been used by the reformers. They could have played on this distinction and so strengthened their position in Iranian politics. Instead, they collaborated with the forces of the dictatorship. The right-wingers immediately saw the danger that the sup-

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59 29 January, 11 February 2002.

porters of religious dictatorship in Iran and the Taliban might be portrayed as birds of a feather, and thus that they might suffer the same fate as the Taliban. To prevent this, they realised that in this situation they needed support from Khatami, and it turned out that Khatami was easy to play for a sucker. The reformers' strategic blunder was due to an unconscious xenophobia. It was this that prevented them reaping the benefit of a situation that could have strengthened the forces of democracy in Iran.

In the conservative camp there are those who have benefited from the phrase.

The phrase goes in the conservatives' favour. If the verbal hostilities between the USA and Iran continue, they will strengthen the conservative forces at the next election.

The conservatives and the ultraconservatives, who – in contradistinction to the reformers – want dialogue, base their policy on hostile relations with the USA, will clearly benefit from Bush's speech. After Afghanistan Iran expected that the dialogue with the USA would get wind in its sails, but then came the speech that gave the right-wingers the chance to say, "If they want to hurt us, then we'll hurt *them*".

The extreme right-wing forces have derived advantage from "the Axis of Evil".

The conservatives' assiduously used argument that the USA is hostile to Iran has been strengthened.

The speech has strengthened the right-wing forces in Iran. The effect of the statement was extensive because it wounded national feelings that everyone shares. Bush assaulted a people, their culture and their feelings.

The conservatives welcomed the speech with open arms.

Iranian conservatives have clutched the phrase to their breasts. Bush has given them the ideal ammunition.

For Iran, all interference by foreign powers is the worst thing imaginable. When Bush used the term "the Axis of Evil", it was as if he hit the moderate forces in Iran with a hammer.

### **Commentary**

The WTC attacks and subsequent American policy have had a decisive effect on Iranian domestic politics. Iranian hatred is not reserved for "the Great Satan", there are fierce conflicts among Iranians as well. Society is fragmented, with a destructive faction-fight between supporters of the revolutionary Khomeini dogmas and those who want a modern Iran with the rule of law and freedom of expression.

Only two of the respondents dismissed "the Axis of Evil" rhetoric as having few consequences for Iranian politics. One claimed that no Iranian faction had exploited the speech in its own interest, as everyone rallied round the flag, while another said that the only beneficiary was the exile opposition, the Pahlavists, giving them hope of imminent regime change. Everyone else considered that the phrase had had an enormous impact on the tug of war between the conservatives and reformers.

Some respondents hint that there are groups in Iranian society which hope for a bit of outside help in getting rid of the dictatorship. At the same

time, a bloodbath is that last thing they want. In this perspective the policy of the USA under Bill Clinton, which now appears to have been shelved, was promising; it was implicit in this policy that Iran could, by small steps and avoiding war, create the rule of law and an Islamic version of democracy. For a country like Iran, American sabre-rattling under Bush is particularly alarming, as the fragmentation of the Iranian nation will mean that the already irreconcilable factions will hate one another all the more and exploit the resulting chaos to make a grab for power. It will also harm economic development and compromise Iran’s ability to deter other attacks. The anxiety the liberal respondents feel leads several to contemplate exile.

“The Axis of Evil” led to real fear among not only the reformers but also among the conservatives. Two respondents considered that the speech had strengthened reformist forces by badly scaring the rightists. Having included Iran in “the Axis of Evil”, the USA will sooner or later attack. All-out war is not considered very likely, but both sides think that limited military strikes are a real possibility. The conservatives realised that, with the threat of an American military attack hanging over Iran, perhaps with a view to a Pahlavi restoration, this was no time for ideological adventures or the politics of symbolism. They thus toned down the anti-American rhetoric from the Revolution and, afraid that the reformers would get the upper hand, bit the bullet and offered them a measure of compromise and cooperation on the basis of “If you can’t beat them, join them”. One respondent thought, however, that “the Axis of Evil” represented a lost chance for the reformers, and that the conservatives had played Khatami for a sucker.

In retrospect we know that this “Teheran Spring” was very brief (see Postscript). As soon as they felt they heard the “Danger Over” siren, the conservatives exploited Bush’s speech for all it was worth.

Our material thus suggests that USA’s warning to Iran was effective. If the threat becomes serious enough, the Iranians will give way, and the sabre-rattling had a great, though transitory, effect on the domestic situation.

However, the scaring of the conservatives was not the only route to national unity. Another was that the reformers themselves were profoundly alienated. They thus met the conservatives half-way, with a suddenly decreased enthusiasm for normalisation of relations with a country that betrayed, threatened and insulted them in this manner.

Despite the pain caused by the historical experience of USA–Iranian relations, the man in the street has a positive attitude to the USA and to a better relationship with that country.<sup>60</sup> It is the dominant groups in the Iranian political classes that are hostile. This is the other way round from most Arab countries, where the regimes are pro-Western and the man in the street nurses a fierce hatred of the USA that can flare up at any time, for example during the 1991 Gulf War. According to the respondents, however, the Bush speech upset the positive trend that had begun in Iranian politics, such as a more open attitude to the international community and a normalisation of relations with the USA. There was much talk of the “objective” alliance between the two countries in overthrowing the Taliban and reconstructing the Afghan government. This, they think, demonstrated the usefulness to the superpower of having good relations with Iran. With the launching of “the

60 For the opinion polls, see Amuzegar 2003, *op.cit.*

Axis of Evil”, however, all this was put on ice, and will not be taken out again for a long time. To stigmatise a country in that way was seen as a deeply hostile act.

Strong and passionate as the respondents’ sense of betrayal was, the sudden death of the dialogue with the USA was nevertheless not the highest-scoring effect of “the Axis of Evil”. That was reserved for the baleful effect on Iran’s domestic faction-fight. There is a massive consensus that the speech was a godsend to the conservatives, revitalising the bloodthirsty anti-American rhetoric from the days of the Revolution. The conservatives took the speech as the final proof that their enemy image of the USA had been the right one all along, and that the reformers with their wish for dialogue were naïve. And it is very hard for the reformers to argue with this; most people will perceive the “Axis of Evil” to be insulting and degrading. Some of the respondents stated it was the violence-prone and coup-plotting ultras who profited most of all from Bush’s choice of words.

In conclusion, we would point out that the crafters of a rhetorical device intended to function in one cultural and political context have only imperfect control over how that device is received and exploited in an alien cultural and political context. We would also remark that, while Powers know that their own citizens forget their differences and rally to the flag when attacked, they always seem to have difficulty understanding why this might also be the case for their enemies.

# Summary

We began this study by pointing out the dubious rhetoric of the “war on terror”, and how the formal definitions of “terrorism” appear to have collapsed. The “war on terror” is a term that contains within itself the assumption that “terrorism” is everything that They do to Us and never anything that We do to Them. It is at one and the same time a police action against malefactors and a war against states, so that our side can do anything that is done in war, and yet all the actions of the other side are regarded as illegitimate, like resisting arrest.

Such a rhetorical device is a piece of political communication, designed as a response to the political communication of knocking down the premier visual symbol of American capitalism. The game is to take the affective capital generated by this outrage and see how far it can be extended to cover operations against different “demonised” enemies.

It is most unclear what would constitute “victory” in a global war against terrorism; presumably extirpation of the terrorists, but, allied to the American doctrine of preventive war against potential threats, this promises to turn into a war of extermination against whole cultures. The antithesis to the old diplomatic courtesies is the concept of the “terrorist state”, which is a different ontological entity from our own, “freedom-loving”, states, and which cannot therefore be considered to enjoy any rights under the law of nations. We are only one step away from applying the “terrorist” label to the uniformed armed forces of sovereign states. In other words, “terrorist” has now been mapped onto “opponent”.

As a rhetorical device, “the Axis of Evil” exploits both the history of the Second World War (as a metonym for fascism, involving memories of disastrous appeasement) and religious eschatology (with its implication that We are on the side of Good and so can do anything we like). The most dangerous aspect of the device is that it tells Western populations that all its enemies are not only evil but also united under a single umbrella. In this way it resembles the old theories of the International Jewish-Bolshevik Conspiracy. Evil is indivisible, and so responsibility is collective. This means that any state that seriously annoys the United States can be held co-responsible for the strikes on New York and Washington and treated accordingly.

We can say that the yield on the affective capital generated by 911 has been extremely high, creating public support for the war in Afghanistan, the invasion and conquest of Iraq and quite possibly similar enterprises in the future. If, therefore, a war is fought against Iran, it will be fought not against a member of the community of nations but against “the cowardly terrorists of the Axis of Evil”. We thought it would be interesting to see what the Iranians have to say about this, using the same sample of the “oppositional elite” as we interviewed on Iranian democracy and the oil companies in 2000.

Beginning with general questions about terrorism, we found that our Iranian sample was somewhat disinclined to construct definitions that were act-specific and actor-neutral. Some spoke of violence against the innocent, but the majority either considered that it was the political context that determined whether an act was terrorist (violent resistance to oppression is legitimate), or that it was merely a label for the acts of the other side. Of the latter, some considered that Iranians misused the label in this way too, but the dominant mode was indignation at the double standards of the USA, for whom terrorism is always what the Palestinians do but never what is done to them.

Asked to explain Islamic terrorism generally, the respondents focused on global structural factors, such as the alienation and frustration caused by the world's political, economic, social and cultural "class divide", and also on local structural factors, the failure to resolve regional crises and stop repression. We noted with interest the respondents' failure to cite structural relations within Muslim countries themselves, that is, the corruption and incompetence of Arab regimes. In the same way, they had little to say about Muslim attitudes and a great deal to say about Western attitudes, namely ignorance, discrimination and contempt.

Whereas practically everyone in the West assumes that Osama bin Laden organised the attacks of 911, in the Middle East there is less agreement about this. Iran has long been addicted to conspiracy theorising, and this is fully manifested in the respondents' attribution of the causes of the WTC strike. Only one third of the sample thought that al-Qaida carried out the attack all by itself, the majority thought either that they must have had help from within the USA itself, for example from the CIA, or that responsibility was a mystery that could not be penetrated.

However, our expectation that there would be a cognitive-dissonance nexus between attribution of responsibility and (dis)approval of the attack – if it was a bad thing to do, then the Muslims didn't do it – was disappointed. Although flirting with conspiracy theories that seem to exculpate al-Qaida, the respondents roundly condemned the attacks. Even those who "understood", agreed that this was not the way to proceed. This is a difference from opinion in Arab countries. It is possible that the official Iranian "line" influenced the sample here; many respondents were indignant to be asked the question at all.

We asked the respondents to explain bin Laden's actions and subjected the results to cognitive-attribution analysis. There is a tendency to situational and expressive attribution, which can be considered an attempt to exculpate his acts as rational and understandable, while at the same time subjecting them to moral condemnation. Much of the respondents' disapproval of 911 is due to its having no positive consequences.

In Chapter 4 we turned to the consequences of 911. Respondents agreed that it was a political earthquake that would enhance Muslim self-confidence. Optimists thought that American self-examination would lead to a better understanding with the Muslim world, while others claimed that American intellectual laziness and cultural chauvinism would strange such impulses at birth. Indeed, it would lead to a backlash and even greater ruthlessness in achieving and maintaining hegemony. Some respondents thought

that 9/11 was actually welcomed by certain American forces, allowing a return to Cold War modes of militarism.

Coded in the same way as their explanations of bin Laden's behaviour, respondent attributions for the behaviour of George Bush and the US came out massively dispositional. The respondents use hostile and emotional language about the US, such as "burning desire" and "thirst" for global domination; the superpower is regarded as a political pathogen. They consider Americans to be ignorant, blinkered and militaristic, in contrast to Europeans, who have greater insight into the Muslim world and who were cured of militarism by the Second World War. We were struck by the fact that the respondents accuse the Americans of an incapacity for self-criticism while exhibiting the same vice themselves.

Suggestions for improvement in US relations with the Muslim world focused on geopolitics (e.g., end to Iraqi sanctions and support to authoritarian governments) and of course the Palestine issue, but to an even greater extent psychological factors – ranging from the very general to the highly specific, and making great use of the word "dialogue". Contrariwise, the clash of civilisations would be further aggravated by myopia, stereotyping and propaganda.

We next asked our respondents about the (then ongoing) war in Afghanistan and were surprised to find a spectrum running from considerable sympathy and understanding for the American action, through sympathy tempered with unhappiness with the means, to hostility based on it being a bad and counter-productive idea. Here the ritual condemnation of the evil superpower is mostly absent. Explanations divide roughly half-and-half between situational and dispositional. We attribute this to the fact that overthrowing the Taliban was in Iran's own national interest, which means a sudden loss of interest in the politics of symbolism.

It was clear when we were in Teheran that the next item on the American "shopping list" would be Iraq, and so we asked our respondents not if, but why the US was going to war. There were very few mentions of the "official" reasons for the war, such as weapons of mass destruction and democratisation. The coming war was seen overwhelmingly in terms of American and Israeli strategic and hegemonic interests.

The consequences of the war were expected to be destabilisation, including the involvement of neighbouring states in the conflict, further antagonising of Muslim opinion and the fragmentation of Iraq. Opinions were divided as regards how close the Shi'i population of the South wanted to get to Iran. Some respondents hoped that the democratisation of Iraq would "infect" Iran itself. On the other hand, a Western-run Iraq would be a disaster for Iranian oil policy and competitiveness. And Iran was now "encircled" by American power.

Chapter 6 turns to Iran itself, outlining American concerns with its nuclear programme and showing how the US appears to be preparing the ground for an attack on Iran with the same methods as employed in Iraq. We then demonstrate the respondents' sense that "the Axis of Evil" represents a betrayal of Iran's constructive assistance to the West over Afghanistan, in fact a totally unforeseen "stab in the back".

This leads naturally to the question of why Bush chose to put Iran on such a list with such a label. We sorted the replies into three groups of three each. The avowed American aims and interests were not much in evidence: there was some attention to alleged assistance to al-Qaida and other terrorists, weapons of mass destruction and democratisation. Much more attention, however, was given to a triplet of “geopolitical” factors: domestic motives, hegemony and Israel. There was considerable belief that the demonisation of Iran was the result of Washington infighting, or Bush playing to a domestic audience. The dominant explanation, however, was in terms of American and/or Israeli strategic interests and the American desire for global hegemony, a programme for which the whole “Axis of Evil” concept is merely a disguise. A third group of explanations is psychological: some respondents attributed the “Axis” to the historical bad blood between the two countries, others thought in terms of the chronic American need to manufacture enemies, while the largest group in this category consider it as irrational, driven by emotions or ignorance or simply inexplicable and insane. The picture that emerges is thus of an expansionist superpower that is dangerously out of control.

The respondents were about evenly divided on the question whether the USA would actually attack Iran – that is, make a limited strike, no one expected all-out war. However, they gave us the impression of being more worried than they were prepared to admit.

In the last chapter we turn to domestic Iranian politics and the impact thereon of 911 and “the Axis of Evil”. The respondents were quite upbeat on the first, seeing it as causing a strengthening of Iranian national unity and a more coherent foreign policy. Further, the WTC attacks and Iran’s prompt condemnation meant that the Iranian “fundamentalists” were no longer seen as the worst that Islam had to offer. After a section devoted to miscellaneous comments on the status of democracy, we asked which faction was strengthened or weakened by 911. The majority view was that the conservatives had been strengthened. If this seems to contradict the optimistic noises mentioned above, that may be a contradiction in the minds of the respondents themselves.

Finally, we asked our sample to identify the impact on the Iranian factors of the “Axis” speech specifically. The results were quite unambiguous: a tiny minority saw it as helping the reformers or the Pahlavist exiles, a larger minority emphasised the way it scared or offended the conservatives and reformers into collaborating with the other camp, but there was an overwhelming consensus that it had both killed the nascent dialogue with the USA stone dead and come as a godsend to the conservatives and the ultras.

## Postscript

We began to interview our respondents in the “Teheran Spring” when the conservatives, scared by the Bush sabre-rattling, found it expedient to be more pleasant to the reformers. That one of our respondents received his prison sentence in the middle of our conversation, however, turned out to be prophetic. Shortly after we left the country the conservatives switched course. The American threat seemed less acute, and the collaboration with the reformers was seen as having outlived its usefulness.

Iran celebrated Press Freedom Day (3 May 2003) in its own inimitable fashion by closing two reformist newspapers for insulting Islam.<sup>61</sup> A number of prominent reformers in the ranks of the intellectuals, journalists and students have been arrested. In September 2002 President Khatami presented two bills intended to reduce the power of the clergy, which attracted solid support in the Majlis. At the beginning of November 2002, however, the historian Hashem Aghajari was condemned to death for blasphemy. He is refusing to appeal, and is thereby likely to become a martyr and a strong unifying symbol of democracy. Aghajari’s speech that attracted his sentence called on Muslims to think for themselves; he said that Islam needed its Reformation, as Christianity had before it. Muslims need an Islam that respects the rights of all, an Islamic humanism where state and religion are separated. This amounted to a frontal attack on the office of Iran’s Supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, an office that violates the spirit of the democratic Iranian constitution. His death sentence sparked strong reactions among the Iranian reformers, violent protests and huge student demonstrations, the biggest for three years. Four student leaders who had led peaceful demonstrations against the death sentence were arrested by plainclothesmen and charged with endangering national security and insulting Islamic values.

In the summer of 2002 the US changed its policy towards Iran. The Bush Administration, having given up hope of collaboration with Khatami and his supporters in the government, now turned to the extra-governmental elements of the opposition. Despite the election of Khatami partisans to the Majlis, in Bush’s eyes Iran is conducting an uncompromising hostile policy. His hard line is welcome to the Defense Department but represents a defeat for the State Department.

By the beginning of 2003, Iran regarded the obviously imminent American invasion of Iraq with mixed feelings. On the one hand Iranians longed to see the back of Saddam Hussein, on the other they feared a flow of refugees and fresh problems with “its own” restless Kurds. In addition came the encirclement effect of having American troops to both east and west, and the prospect of a pre-emptive strike against Iran’s intermediate-range ballistic missiles and active nuclear programme. During his visit to Oslo in January 2003, Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi stated that as a matter of principle Iran would not participate in an attack on Iraq or open its airspace.

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<sup>61</sup> One of these bans was rescinded immediately, the other not.

The subsequent American victory in Iraq led the Iranian government to reconsider its relations with its arch-enemy. Kharrazi has made statements suggesting a will to improvement. On the other hand, Khamenei is blocking all such efforts. According to Kharrazi, however, it is not quite so simple as the conservatives opposing détente with the US and the reformers advocating it, both sides are split.

We began writing this work during the invasion of Iraq. We conclude it a couple of days after a double restatement of the thinking behind Bush's "Axis of Evil" – his visit to Auschwitz in order to tar the US's current enemies with the brush of the Holocaust, and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's warnings to Iran. The "shopping list" is still in the basket.

Daniel Heradstveit, Oslo, June 2003

# Appendices

## Appendix I – List of Respondents in Teheran 2000

1. **Dr Shahriar Rohani** is a Political activist and adviser to President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami.  
He served as the spokesman for the committee that, after the Islamic Revolution, took over all Iran diplomatic and consular functions in the US, including at the UN. Rohani held this position for about 13 months, after which he moved back home to become the editor in chief of *Keyhan* (Universe). At the time of the Revolution, *Keyhan* was the most popular daily with a circulation of about 400,000, which is still a record. Just before the Islamic Revolution, the paper was bought by a revolutionary businessman, and it became a supporter of the Revolution and the Freedom Movement (*Nehzate Azadi*). The Freedom Movement was a party founded after Mohammad Mossadeq's fall in 1953 by Mehdi Bazargan and other veteran members of the National Front (*Jebheie Melli*), Mossadeq's party. After the Revolution, disagreements with the clergy pushed them into opposition, where they still are, 20 years later.
2. **Dr Hamid Zaheri** is an oil expert. General Manager for International Affairs of the National Petrochemical Company (*Sherkate Mellie Petroshimi*). OPEC spokesman from 1974 to 1983.
3. **Dr Alireza Tabibian** is Associate Professor at Teheran University and member of The Institute for Research in Development and Planning, a semi-governmental organisation. He is the architect of the second five-year economic plan under Ali Akbar Hashemi Bahremani (better known as Rafsanjani, which refers to the city he comes from, Rafsanjan).
4. **Dr Morteza Mardiha** is an intellectual and writer and political journalist on the daily *Asre Azadegan* (The Time of Liberals). This paper, which was shut down by the conservatives in April 2000, was the successor of two dailies shut down one after the other, *Jame-e* (Society) and *Neshat* (Happiness). All three dailies, with the same editorial board, advocated the establishment and development of public, non-governmental media as the forth pillar of democratic society. Dr Mardiha is known for a pragmatic rather than an idealistic approach.
5. **Dr Abdelkarim Soroush** was formerly Professor of Philosophy at Teheran University, and a member of the Iranian Philosophical Society (*Anjomane Hekmat va Falsafeie Iran*). He is regarded by many as the leading intellectual and theorist of the reformist movement. He is now suspended from his professorship. His doctrine of compatibility between democracy and Islam, and his intellectual struggle against vulgar/ritual-

istic interpretations of the Muslim religion, have made him the bugbear of the conservative clergy. *Time Magazine* has offered the following description of him: “Abdelkarim Soroush, the 52-year-old philosopher who has emerged, reluctantly, as the Islamic republic’s most dangerous dissident. Soroush poses such a challenge to Iran’s powerful religious establishment that his situation is unlikely to be eased by the recent election as President of Mohammed Khatami, who promised more openness and freedom. Soroush’s sin, in the eyes of the mullahs, is to question the central tenet of the late Ayatollah Khomeini’s notion of Islamic government: that Iran’s holy men have a God-given right to rule. That appears to go too far even for Khatami” (*Time*, 23 June, 1997, Vol. 149, No. 25.).

Though he is not himself a politician, his writings are inevitably interpreted in a highly political way in Iran.

6. **Dr Alireza Rajaiee** was newly elected member for the 6th parliament. In a very controversial decision the Council of Guardians (*Shoraie Negahban*) declared his election invalid. He is head of the political writers of the pro-democracy daily *Asre Azadegan* (The Time of Liberals). Although not officially a member of any party, his candidacy for parliament was supported by a wide range of pro-democracy groups including student organisations.
7. **Mr Mohammad Torkaman** is a political historian, writer and journalist interested particularly in oil-related events. He is pro democracy and human rights and close to the Freedom Movement (*Nehzate Azadi*).
8. **Mr Ali Akbar Moeenfar** was minister of oil during the Bazargan government. Now he is an oil consultant. He has been a political activist since Mossadeq’s time as a member of the National Front (Jebheie Melli). After the fall of Mossadeq he joined the Freedom Movement (*Nehzate Azadi*) of which he is currently one of the leaders. He also joined the Islamic Society of Engineers (*Anjomane Eslamie Mohandesin*). He was elected from Teheran to the first post-revolutionary parliament, where he became a member of the group opposing clerical rule.
9. **Dr Ghassem Salehkhoo** is an international financial consultant, pro democracy and human rights. He has been Iran’s ambassador to Japan, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Afghanistan and its representative to the IMF.
10. **Dr Morteza Nasiri** is a lawyer, expert on international contract law, now with an office in both Teheran and the USA, politically close to the Freedom Movement (*Nehzate Azadi*). He has represented some Iranian national companies such as IranKhodro (the biggest automobile factory in Iran) as well as private industries in international contexts. He acted as an adviser to the Bazargan government.

11. **Dr Mohsen Sazegara** is consultant to the President and a political activist and writer (journalist). He is one of the founders of the Revolutionary Guards (*Sepahe Pasdaran*), now a radical reformist, and a member of the committee established by Khomeini during his exile in France. It is interesting to note that almost all the members of that committee are now either executed, like Sadegh Ghotbzadeh (the former Minister of Foreign Affairs), or exiled, like Abolhassan Banisadr (the former President, now living in Paris), or belonging to the present opposition in Iran (Sazegara himself). The function of the Paris-based committee was to translate Khomeini's speeches and thoughts for Western media and more generally to the entire world. In addition the committee designed many revolutionary policies and approaches. Dr Sazegara was later one of the founders of the now closed daily *Jame-e* (Society) and is still very active in pro-democracy activities like managing meetings and writing critical articles in the daily press.
12. **Dr Parviz Varjavand** is leader of the National Front (*Jebheie Melli*) and was Minister of Culture in the Bazargan government. The party goes back to Dr Mossadeq, who was famous for his struggle with the oil companies, particularly BP. He is also a political writer and professor at universities such as Islamic Azad University.
13. **Dr Hossein Zaiem** is an oil industry management and marketing expert, and a member of the National Front (*Jebheie Melli*), the party established by Dr Mossadeq as an umbrella organisation for all modernisers. The main item on the agenda was to nationalise Iran's oil industry. The National Front's days of glory ended with the coup of 1953, and it now lives mostly on its history and its heroes.
14. **Dr Mohammad Hosein Bani-Asadi** is an engineer and consultant at Iran Industrial Foundation Co. He is member of the central committee of the Freedom Movement (*Nehzate Azadi*). The Freedom Movement is the only overt opposition group in Iran that dates back to Khomeini's day. The Movement was against the continuation of the war with Iraq and the totalitarianism of the clergy (*Rohaniiat*). (*Rohaniiat* is used as the proper name for the conservative body of clergy belonging to the establishment as opposed to *Rohaniioon* which has the same dictionary meaning as *Rohaniiat* but in political usage stands for the more reformist part of that establishment. Khatami, for example, belongs to the *Rohaniioon* but Rafsanjani to the *Rohaniiat*.) Dr Bani-Asadi is the son-in-law of ex-Prime Minister Bazargan and was his special adviser. He is also the founder of the *Bassij* militia, founded at the beginning of the Revolution. (*Bassij* is the name of the organisation and *Bassiji* refers to a member.)

## Appendix II – List of Respondents in Teheran 2002

1. Bahman Farmanara, b. 1942, went to England at the age of 16 and studied acting and then to the US where he studied filmmaking at USC. He returned to Iran to work in Iranian TV. Returned to the US and Canada 1980–90, where he ran several film companies. He has made 5 feature films, the most recent of which are *Smell of Camphor*, *Scent of Jasmine*, and *House Built on Water*.
2. Sadegh Ziba Kalam, b. 1948, studied engineering in London and took his Ph.D. at Bradford, UK, on the Iranian Revolution. He is a professor of Political Science at the Faculty of Law and Political Science at Teheran University.
3. Farhad Ataie, b. 1953, holds a Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies from U.C. Berkeley. He is Professor of Economics at Imam Sadegh University.
4. Anonymous playwright.
5. Abadollah Molaei is Director of Euro-American Studies at the Institute for Political and International Studies, Teheran.
6. Seyed Kazem Sajjadpour holds a Ph.D. from the US. He is Director General of the Institute for Political and International Studies, Teheran.
7. Mahmoud Sarioghlam was educated in the United States. He is a Professor at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Shahid Beheshti University and Head of the Centre for Scientific Research and Strategic Studies of the Middle East.
8. Hamid Reza Jalaiepour is one of the most active reformist journalists. He was involved with most of the now-closed newspapers, including *Jame'eh* and most recently *Bonyan*.
9. Farshid Farzin, b. 1967, an M.A. candidate at the Faculty of Law and Political Science of Teheran University, working on his thesis on International Law and Satellite Legislation. He is also a consultant to Atieh Bahar consultancy firm.
10. Amir Mohebian: No biography. He is a columnist for the conservative newspaper *Resalat* and is considered to be the most vocal spokesperson for the conservative side.
11. Mohammad Ali Najafi, b. 1945, holds an M.A. in Architecture. He has also directed several films and television series. His architectural firm is responsible for designing a mosque and a cultural centre in Teheran.
12. Siamak Namazi, b. 1971, received his M.A. in Urban Planning from Rutgers University and has lived in Iran since 1999. He is the Risk and Strategic Management Director at Atieh Bahar Consulting in Teheran.

13. Dr Hadi Semati, b. 1960, received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. From 1978 to 1980 he was in the United States, returned to Iran, did his military service and worked for the Foreign Ministry. He spent the years 1985–1993 in the US and currently teaches at the University of Teheran, Faculty of Law and Political Science.
14. Hatam Ghaderi is Professor of Political Philosophy at Teheran's Teacher Training University.
15. Ahmad Zeydabadi, b. 1965, is a Ph.D. candidate in Teheran University's Faculty of Law and Political Science. His dissertation is on Religion and State in Israel. He works as a journalist in the Foreign Desk of *Hamshahri* and various other newspapers. He was in prison for 7 months in 2001 and was recently sentenced to 23 months plus 5 years of prohibition from journalistic activity.
16. Farhad Firouzi is a previous editor of the weekly journal *Karnami*. Independent writer, author.
17. Ibrahim Asgharzadeh, b. 1955, studied electrical engineering at Sharif University and became part of the student movement before the Revolution. He was one of the main US hostage-takers and was an MP in the third parliament. He is currently an elected member of Teheran City Council and an outspoken reformer.
18. Seyyed Ibrahim Nabavi, b. 1958, is Iran's most popular satirist whose newspaper columns appear regularly in the mainstream and reformist press. He was imprisoned for his writings and currently runs his popular website [nabavionline.com](http://nabavionline.com).

# Iran and “the Axis of Evil”

The rhetorical device of the “war on terror” rests on the assumption that “terrorism” is everything that They do to Us and never anything that We do to Them. The linked device of “the Axis of Evil” exploits both recent history and religious eschatology to persuade Western populations that all their enemies are not only evil but also united under a single umbrella of collective responsibility for the attack on the WTC. If, therefore, a war is fought against Iran, it will be fought not against a member of the community of nations but against “the cowardly terrorists of the Axis of Evil”. We set out to discover what our sample of the Iranian oppositional elite has to say about this.

The majority either considered that it was the political context that determined whether an act was terrorist (violent resistance to oppression is legitimate), or that it was merely a label for the acts of the other side. Explanations of Islamic terrorism focused on local and global structural factors. Although flirting with conspiracy theories that seem to exculpate al-Qaida, however, the respondents roundly condemned the attacks, not least in terms of their having no positive consequences. Whereas al-Qaida was explained mostly situationally, American behaviour was explained dispositionally, as political pathology. Respondents wanted the US to make a greater effort to understand and talk to the Muslim world. Attitudes to the Afghan war were mixed, but the (then imminent) war on Iraq was seen overwhelmingly in terms of American hegemony and Israeli interests and was expected to be extremely destabilising.

The respondents feared an American attack, and regarded their membership in “the Axis of Evil” as a stab in the back after Iranian help in Afghanistan. This demonisation was seen overwhelmingly in terms of American geopolitical designs, ignorance and downright irrationality – an expansionist superpower that is dangerously out of control. The WTC attack initially caused a strengthening of Iranian national unity and a more coherent foreign policy, but most of the respondents regard “the Axis of Evil” as killing the nascent dialogue with the USA and coming as a godsend to the conservatives and the ultras.