



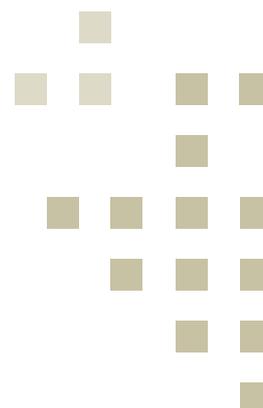
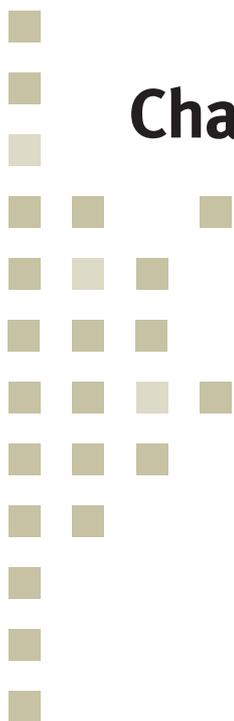
# [655] Paper

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# How the Axis of Evil Metaphor Changes Iranian Images of the USA

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**[Summary]** 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 stone dead and coming as a godsend to the conservatives and the ultras.



## Background to the research

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 *madrasahs* 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, military leaders 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 stu-

dent), 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 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 planners’ 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 “the Axis of Evil”

In his State of the Union Speech of 29 January 2002, Bush singled out Iraq, Iran and North Korea<sup>1</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 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

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<sup>1</sup> A secret Pentagon report later added Syria, Libya and China.

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 unpleasant-

ness 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>2</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. 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.

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

Before we begin 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.

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<sup>2</sup> USA Today poll August 2002, see <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines02/0823-02.htm>.

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>3</sup>; the latter take a more violent line, and are inclined to support a coup d’etat 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 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 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.

### **A purposive sample**

We have made a purposive 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 popula-

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3 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.

tion 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>4</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 interview instrument 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>5</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.

### **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)

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

5 “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.

at the expense of the agitation and demagoguery (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.

### The “Axis of evil” speech

In his State of the Union message to Congress on 29 January 2002, President Bush used 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 use 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 learned, 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 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 shortsightedness in supporting Iraq's war against Iran from 1980 to 1988. Elite interviews in both 2000<sup>6</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 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 Sep-

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<sup>6</sup> *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis*, Vol. 17, No. 2 2001.

tember. For their part, the Iranians were supporting the Northern Alliance, whose ethnic backbone was the Taziks<sup>7</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.

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.<sup>8</sup> 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>9</sup> the inclusion of Iran in “the Axis of Evil” came as a bolt from the blue. Here are five respondents:

- 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

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

8 The October 1973 War in the Middle East did not have a major impact on the cognitive framework of officials in the U.S. Department of State. Instead, they just became more negative about the role of the Soviet Union. See G. Matthew Bonham, Michael J. Shapiro, and Thomas Trumble 1979, “The October War. Changes in Cognitive Orientation Toward the Middle East Conflict”, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 43.

9 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 PLO 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.

against the Shah, and even the embassy hostage-taking<sup>10</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 below.

## 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>10</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 1 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

*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 jihad 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>11</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.

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<sup>11</sup> This negative statement has not been coded as an explanation, but the preceding sentence belongs under Irrationality.

- 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 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>12</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>13</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 ultraconservative 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

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<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

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 justified 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>14</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

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<sup>14</sup> In July 1988 an American naval vessel shot down an Iranian airliner carrying 290 people to Mecca.

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, downright irrationality. Here we count both the respondents who use that term and 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:

1. Despite the fact that Iranian representatives threw verbal stones at the USA, we note that the country supported the USA at the Bonn meeting.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. 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:

1. 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.
2. The phrase was not founded on strategic rationality and seems very poorly thought through. The countries in the “Axis of Evil” are very different.
  3. The phrase is quite irrational. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and President Khatami both adopted sensible positions.
  4. 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.

### Discussion

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>15</sup> In five or ten years we will be

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<sup>15</sup> Iranians feel much more modernised and far superior to the Arabs.

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:

- 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.

## **9/11 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>16</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.

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<sup>16</sup> The Revolutionary Guard.

- 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>17</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 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?

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<sup>17</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.

- 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.

### **Discussion**

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 9/11 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 (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>18</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 impact of "The Axis of Evil" on Iranian politics

### The respondents

<b>Table 2: What effect has "the Axis of Evil" rhetoric had on Iranian politics and the Iranian factions?</b> (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

#### *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

<sup>18</sup> *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis, op. cit.*

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, opposition newspapers operate more freely than the case was two years ago.<sup>19</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.

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<sup>19</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.

- ... 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.
- 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>20</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

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<sup>20</sup> 29 January, 11 February 2002.

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 supporters 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.

### **Discussion**

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>21</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 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

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.

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

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 9/11 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.

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.

The “Axis of Evil” rhetoric reflects 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 summarized 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 section we turn to domestic Iranian politics and the impact thereon of 9/11 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 series of questions devoted to miscellaneous comments on the status of democracy, we asked which faction was strengthened or weakened by 9/11. 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.