

The “Axis of Evil” Metaphor and the Restructuring of Iranian Views toward the US¹

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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.”

The phrase itself was constructed by David Frum, a White House speech writer, who came up with “axis of hatred” to describe the linkage between Iraq and terrorism. Frum’s boss, Michael Gerson, a self-described evangelical Christian, changed the phrase to “axis of evil” to make it sound “more sinister, even wicked.”² Later Condoleezza Rice, President Bush’s National Security Advisor, and Stephen Hadley, Deputy National Security Advisor, suggested adding North Korea and Iran as part of the axis. Hadley had second thoughts about adding Iran, because it had a democratically elected president, but Bush liked the idea of including Iran. “No, the president said, “I want it in.” In an interview with Bob Woodward, Bush later elaborated his reasoning behind including Iran: “And the fact that the president of the United States would stand up and say Iran is

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² Woodward, Bob (2004), *Plan of Attack*, New York: Simon and Schuster, p. 87.

just like Iraq and North Korea—in other words you’ve got a problem—and the president is willing to call it, is part of how you deal with Iran. And that will inspire those who love freedom inside the country.”³

In the end, President Bush’s senior advisors thought that the “axis of evil” was a signature phrase, “a declaration...that the country now would have a great mission. It was big, new, and different.”⁴ Although some doubted whether it would make sense to link the three countries, the metaphor was regarded by the President’s advisors as a “watershed” that would define the problem in “graphic, biblical terms without publicly committing to a particular solution.”⁵

The use of the phrase “Axis of Evil” was a restructuring of the American understanding of the “War on Terror,” in which the focus shifted from bin Laden and al-Qaida, 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 restructuring 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 United States concentrated on the Iranian development, with Russian assistance, of a nuclear power station in Bushehr. The United States believed that this can be used to produce

³ Woodward, Bob (2004), *Plan of Attack*, New York: Simon and Schuster, p. 88.

⁴ Woodward, Bob (2004), *Plan of Attack*, New York: Simon and Schuster, p. 90.

⁵ Woodward, Bob (2004), *Plan of Attack*, New York: Simon and Schuster, pp. 93-94.

nuclear weapons. Subsequently, the United States learned, to its own surprise, that Iran had a nuclear weapons development program 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 program and cannot prove that it will not so bestow these weapons, since no one can prove the opposite. The American government’s approach to the burden of proof was amply demonstrated in the case of Iraq, where it asserted that neither the United States nor the UN needed to prove that Iraq had WMDs, but that the Iraqis had to prove that they did not, 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 United States (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.

The “Axis of Evil” Metaphor

Many observers in the United States and Europe were both amused and puzzled by President Bush’s use of the phrase, “Axis of Evil.” Some regarded the phrase as just empty rhetoric that was designed to appeal to domestic audiences in the United States, such as evangelical Christians. For example, the phrase spawned the “Axis of Evil Cookbook,” which was published by the NthPosition, an on-line magazine.⁶ Although this phrase may have been an invention of the

⁶ http://www.nthposition.com/axis_booklet.pdf.

President's speech writers, it contains metonymic concepts that are grounded in experience and, like metaphors, "structure not just our language but also our thoughts, attitudes, and actions."⁷

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 9/11, 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 demonization, 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.⁸

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, which 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

⁷ Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson (1980), p. 39.

⁸ On 16 September 2001, President Bush stated, in response to a question about homeland security and civil rights, "This is a new kind of – a new kind of evil. And we understand. And the American people are beginning to understand. This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while." Remarks by the President upon Arrival, 16 September 2001. [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>].

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 important thing in the "evil" component of the metaphor is that evil has no specific goal--except to produce evil. As an ontological force "evil" has no interests of its own except the interests related to its destination--that is why all negotiations with evil are fruitless. There is no way to make a deal with the forces of "evil," except to include in this deal even a greater evil, not for you but for others. Therefore, the forces of evil had to be destroyed totally by the forces of good. Moreover, the absurd unity of such different political forces as Iran and North Korea seem not to be so absurd if you agree the Principle of Unity of Evil. If there is only one evil, all its incarnations are simply the different forms of one force--an argument which is very easy to understand, when you accept the dualistic ontology. Here the ontological changes produced by metaphor are obvious.⁹

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 Italy thus became "the Axis Powers." On 1 November 1936 Mussolini reported on the historic agreement between Germany and Italy, and he said, "This Berlin-Rome vertical line is not an obstacle but rather an axis around which can revolve all those European states with a will to collaboration and peace." After the signature of the tripartite Anti-Comintern Pact later in the year,

⁹ The authors would like to thank Victor Sergeev for these insights about the "evil" component of the "Axis of Evil" metaphor.

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.

“Axis” evokes “our” enemies of the Second World War, and it is a metonymy for Nazism and fascism.¹⁰ 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 conveyed 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, this is not merely Evil but a

¹⁰ Lakoff and Johnson (1980) point out that “metaphor and metonymy are different *kinds* of processes. Metaphor is principally a way of conceiving of one thing in terms of another....Metonymy, on the other hand, has primarily a referential function, that is, it allows us to use one entity to *stand for* another” (p. 36).

conspiracy of Evil. Now, demonization 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 Wyoming, 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 9/11. The attempt to acquire weapons of mass destruction, the promotion of radical-Islamic terrorism and acts of general dictatorial unpleasantness are all mixed up together, with the implication that responsibility for any one of them is responsibility for all of them. This we might call the principle of "the indivisibility of evil."

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. In any case a sovereign state's procurement of the only means of deterring attack from the United States (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.

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.

The Contextual Background¹¹

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 United States 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 American support of the Shah’s brutal repression and for its short-sightedness in supporting Iraq’s war against Iran from 1980 to 1988. Elite interviews conducted in both 2000¹² and 2002 showed that Albright’s apology made a strong impression on the Iranian oppositional elite.

A third factor was the Iranian collaboration with the West over Afghanistan. The United States gradually grew disenchanted with its former clients the Taliban. At the end of the 1990s Madeleine Albright stated that the United States 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 9/11. For

¹¹ For a summary of recent U.S. relations with Iran and description of the internal political situation in Iran, see Ervand Abrahamian (2004), “Empire Strikes Back: Iran in U.S. Sights,” in B. Cummings, Ervand Abrahamian, and Moshe Ma’Oz, *Inventing the Axis of Evil. The Truth about North Korea, Iran, and Syria*, New York: The New Press. Abrahamian argues, among other things, that the “Axis of Evil” speech threatens to reverse the process of reform in Iran (p. 94).

¹² Daniel Heradstveit, “Elite Perceptions of Ethical Problems Facing the Western Oil Industry in Iran,” *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2001.

their part, the Iranians were supporting the Northern Alliance, whose ethnic backbone was the Taziks of the Panshir Valley under the legendary guerrilla leader Ahmed Shah Masoud. In other words, Iran and the United States 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 United States. 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, as a 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 American behavior. The possibility that the other side has innocent intentions is discounted. We can probably say that if the enemy image of the United States 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.¹³ Under such conditions it is hard to achieve *détente*.

¹³ For example, 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.

Despite the measure of friction in the new partnership over Afghanistan and the “Karine A” arms-smuggling incident,¹⁴ 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 against the Shah, and even the embassy hostage-taking¹⁵ 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.

¹⁴ 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 United States kept a low profile, in part to discourage Israeli reprisals.

¹⁵ 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.

>>*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.

How the metaphor restructured the way Iranians viewed the United States

American motives

Painful historical experiences

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.¹⁶*

>>*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.*

Pathological needs of the superpower

¹⁶ In July 1988 an American naval vessel shot down an Iranian airliner carrying 290 people to Mecca.

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

Irrational Forces at Work

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:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Two respondents unpack “irrationality” and cite emotions:

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

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

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 American 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 United States 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.¹⁷ In five or ten years we will be friends with the USA. Iran has no other choice than to collaborate with the USA.

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

¹⁷ Iranians feel much more modernised and far superior to the Arabs.

Some thought that the Americans might decide to demonstrate their power, but that they were waiting for the right moment; others that the United States 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 behavior 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 United States 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 Tajikistan 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 favorably.

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 United States, 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 United States versus the Soviet Union, but the United States 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 United States 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, while 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 program. 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.

Conclusion

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 “demonized” enemies.

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

the uniformed armed forces of sovereign states. In other words, “terrorist” has now been mapped onto “opponent.”

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

We can say that the yield on the affective capital generated by 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.”

It seemed 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 program 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 demonization 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 program 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 United States 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.

The main mistake of this metaphor is that it targets entire countries, not their leaders. It does not differentiate between the evil leaders and the others who live in the country. The reformers, for example, did not want to be viewed as evil, but the metaphor painted them with the same brush of

evil. This must be resisted by joining with the conservatives and rallying around the government.

In other words, the metaphor mobilized the entire country.

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 political leaders know that their own citizens forget their differences and rally to the flag when attacked, they often seem to have difficulty understanding why this might also be the case for their enemies.