

## What the Axis of Evil Metaphor Did to Iran

Daniel Heradstveit and G. Matthew Bonham

*This article focuses on the Axis of Evil metaphor that was used by President George W. Bush in his State of the Union Address in 2002 to represent Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. After describing “axis” as a metonym for fascism and Nazism, and “evil” as a metonym for Satanic forces that implies an alliance of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea that is collectively responsible for evil deeds, the authors analyze the impact of this metaphor on Iranian self-image and politics. The data for this analysis are drawn from in-depth interviews conducted with 18 members of the Iranian oppositional elite. The interview results suggest that the Axis of Evil metaphor had an impact on political discourse in Iran and strengthened the rhetorical position of conservatives vis-à-vis reformers by reviving militant revolutionary language with the Great Satan (the United States) as the main target of the theocratic and conservative forces. The article concludes with some observations about the implications of using cultural and historical experiences for explaining differences between the ways in which Americans (and other people in the West) and Iranians have understood the metaphor.*

**I**n this article, we focus on the Axis of Evil as a creative metaphor; that is, a metaphor that is capable of giving us a new view of the world.<sup>1</sup> Metaphor is the first step in the construction of such novel understandings, especially those that change the way we see our world.<sup>2</sup> The restructuring often begins with a vague idea that has long been

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1. “In the metaphorical statement ... the contextual action creates a new meaning, which truly has the status of event since it exists only in the present context ... In this way, the innovation of an emergent meaning can be taken as a linguistic creation. And if it is adopted by a significant part of the linguistic community, it in turn can become a common meaning and add to the polysemy of lexical entities.” Paul Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 99.

2. Ricoeur refers to the “symbol that gives rise to thought.” “It is this articulation of thought posit-

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neglected, such as an “Axis.” In this respect the Axis of Evil metaphor is a kind of cognitive breakthrough, an effort to restructure the international system as it was in the 1930s — an attempt to see the world through the eyes of that period. Recalling the Second World War, the Axis Powers are evil, and the implication is that something must be done about them. If you find the metaphor to be compelling, then you must act. In fact, metaphor sanctions actions and helps to build goals.<sup>3</sup> Metaphor puts an end to debate once you follow it to its conclusion, and then the implications for action are obvious. A senior advisor to President Bush has acknowledged the implications of this view in an interview with a journalist. He said, “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality — judiciously, as you will — we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things sort out. We’re history’s actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”<sup>4</sup>

The contribution of this article is its focus on both the target of a metaphor, and its source.<sup>5</sup> While the metaphor may re-structure the way the West views Iran, it also re-structures the way the Iranians view the world, and, more importantly, themselves. The Axis of Evil metaphor divides the world into two parts: those who believe in the metaphor and those who do not. However, whether you believe in the metaphor or not, it changes the way you view your world. For example, the targets of the Axis of Evil may not take the metaphor seriously, but they don’t want to be part of “Evil.” For them the source of the metaphor may also become the source of evil.

### THE AXIS OF EVIL SPEECH<sup>6</sup>

In his State of the Union Address to Congress on January 29, 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.”<sup>7</sup>

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ing and thinking that constitutes the critical point of our whole enterprise.” Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, tr. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 348-349. Ricoeur also discusses the power of metaphor to “re-describe reality.” Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p. 6.

3. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 142. The authors would like to thank Victor M. Sergeev for describing how new metaphors can change one’s ontology of the world.

4. Ron Suskind, “Without a Doubt,” *The New York Times*, October 17, 2004.

5. The nature of metaphorical mappings is described by Lakoff: “A metaphoric mapping involves a source domain and a target domain. The source domain is assumed to be structured by a propositional or image-schematic model. The mapping is typically partial; it maps the structure of the ICM [idealized cognitive model] in the source domain onto a corresponding structure in the target domain.” See George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 288.

6. An earlier version of this analysis of the Axis of Evil speech and metaphor was published by the authors in G. Matthew Bonham and Daniel Heradstveit, “The ‘Axis of Evil’ Metaphor and the Restructuring of Iranian Views Toward the US,” *VaseteH — Journal of the European Society for Iranian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2005), pp. 89-105.

7. “North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens. Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few

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The phrase itself was constructed by David Frum, a White House speechwriter, who came up with “Axis of Hatred” to describe the linkage between Iraq and terrorism. Frum’s boss, Michael Gerson, changed the phrase to Axis of Evil to make it sound “more sinister, even wicked.”<sup>8</sup> 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.’”<sup>9</sup> 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 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.”<sup>10</sup>

In the end, President Bush’s senior advisors, such as Karl Rove, 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup>

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 Usama bin Ladin and al-Qa’ida, 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 Usama bin Ladin, in that the Administration had a need to show that it was still “doing something,” even if that something was unconnected with bringing the World Trade Center attackers to justice. The key concepts in this restructuring have been firstly “terrorist states,” which implies the “indivisibility of terrorism”<sup>13</sup> and therefore that the collective responsibility for 9/11 is on 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.

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

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repress the Iranian people’s hope for freedom. Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror.” President George W. Bush, State of the Union Address, January 29, 2002.

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

9. Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, p. 88.

10. Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, p. 88.

11. Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, p. 90.

12. Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, pp. 93-94.

13. The phrase, “indivisibility of terrorism,” was used by Rupert Cornwell, “How War in the Middle East Roils Transatlantic Relations,” *European Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2002).

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.<sup>14</sup> 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 first, the theocracy's general hostility to the United States (opposition to Good must necessarily be Evil) and second, its attitude towards terrorism; generally, that Iran does not consider the Palestinians' struggle against the Israelis to constitute terrorism, and specifically, the country's support for Hizbullah 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. For example, the phrase spawned the "Axis of Evil Cookbook," which was published by the *NthPosition*, an on-line magazine.<sup>15</sup> Although this phrase may have been an invention of the 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."<sup>16</sup>

Bush used the word "evil" five times in this speech, three times referring to enemies. He also used it in his speech to the nation on September 11, 2001, and a week later he described terrorists to Congress 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 label of "Evil Empire" for the Soviet Union, which was equally criticized 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.

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14. At first the United States concentrated on the Iranian nuclear development, with Russian assistance, of a nuclear power station in Bushehr. The United States believed that this facility could be used to produce 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 country, determined to develop nuclear weapons, could keep the process hidden from inspectors and other outsiders. "Powell Says Iran Is Pursuing Bomb," *The Washington Post*, November 18, 2004, p. A01.

15. See Val Stevenson, "The Axis of Evil Cookbook," [http://www.nthposition.com/axis\\_booklet.pdf](http://www.nthposition.com/axis_booklet.pdf).

16. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, p. 39.

Certainly Bush and some of his advisors, as evangelical Christians, may have a tendency towards a 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 a situation’s complexities.<sup>17</sup> 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 picture of the world, 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 important thing about 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 evil, except to include in this deal even a greater evil, not for you but for others. Therefore, the Forces of Evil have 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 with the principle of the Unity of Evil. If there is only one evil, all of 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.<sup>18</sup>

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 usage 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 remilitarization 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 November 1, 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.”<sup>19</sup> After the signature of the tripartite Anti-

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17. On September 16, 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,” September 16, 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>.

18. The authors would like to thank Victor M. Sergeev for these insights about the Axis of Evil metaphor.

19. Benito Mussolini, Edoardo and Duilio Susmel, eds., *Opera Omnia* (Florence, 1951-1960, Rome, 1978-1980), Volume 28, pp. 67-72.

Comintern Pact later in the 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. “Axis” evokes “our” enemies of the Second World War, and it is a metonym for Nazism and fascism.<sup>20</sup> This historical resonance is the second level. Nobody today in polite society can say anything good about the Axis Powers, and anyone compared with them is stigmatized.

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 pre-2003 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 mobilizing 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 *conspiracy* of Evil. 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 20<sup>th</sup> century, when all one’s enemies were fronts for International Jewry, International Capitalism, or International Communism, according to various narratives. 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 serves 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.”

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20. Lakoff and Johnson 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.” *Metaphors We Live By*, p. 36.

*THE CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND*<sup>21</sup>

Prior to the Axis of Evil speech, Iranian-American relations had been undergoing a thaw. One factor was President Khatami's idea of a "dialogue of civilizations,"<sup>22</sup> presented as a response to Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations theory. 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 Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq and thereby put an end to Iranian democratization for the sake of its own oil interests. She also apologized for America's support of the Shah's brutal repression and for its short-sightedness in supporting Iraq's war against Iran from 1980 to 1988. Elite interviews conducted in both 2000<sup>23</sup> 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 the Taliban, which it had originally hoped might stabilize the country. At the end of the 1990s Madeleine Albright stated that the United States was now an opponent of the Taliban because of their "despicable" treatment of women and their general disrespect for human rights. Similarly, on September 25, 2001 Foreign Secretary Jack Straw visited Tehran, 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 with regard to Afghanistan. For their part, the Iranians were supporting the Northern Alliance, whose ethnic backbone was the Taziks<sup>24</sup> of the Panshir Valley and which had been under the leadership of the legendary guerrilla leader Ahmed Shah Masoud until his assassination on September 9, 2001 by al-Qa'ida agents. Following the attacks of 9/11, 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 November 27, 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 December 5 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, yet everything would change following the Axis speech.

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

22. See **Muhammad Khatami**, *Hope and Challenge* (Binghamton, NY: Institute of Global Cultural Studies Binghamton University, 1997).

23. **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), pp. 22-40.

24. Taziks are the Iranians' ethnic cousins in Central Asia, as they are surrounded by mostly Turkic peoples.

*9/11 AND THE AXIS OF EVIL IN IRANIAN POLITICS**THE RESPONDENTS*

The data for this research were collected during fieldwork in Iran in March and 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.<sup>25</sup> 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*. 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 responses shown below are direct quotations from individuals that were taken from detailed interview notes.

*SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY*

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 also have included representatives of Iran’s cultural and artistic elite, a segment of the population that has been an important catalyst in the reform process that the country has been undergoing for the last decade. It should be emphasized 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 universes of “elite members” can possibly be identified. 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-ended questions provide interesting information, and our surveys have shown that for political elites this procedure is stimulating — the interviewees give more of themselves than is the case with closed questions. The problems arise subsequently, when we try to review and organize the data. Categorizing 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 standardized, so that all the respondents 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. 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

25. For the respondents’ individual biographical information, please see the Appendix at the end of the article.



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 forward.

We are also fully aware of the limitations of the data. We have limited our survey to the political opposition in Iran 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 Khamene'i and the revolutionary doctrine of the Islamic Republic. The fact that we were foreigners helped to soften this aspect, because conversations with foreigners emphasize the informative (perception-reflexive) 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 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 World Trade Center attacks.

### *RESPONSES*

#### **Iran's National Unity Has Been Strengthened**

September 11 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.

September 11 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 September 11, 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 September 11, 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.

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 [the Revolutionary Guard] was doing in Afghanistan.

### **Iran Has Become More Integrated into the World Community**

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

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

September 11 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.

The catastrophe [of September 11] 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 democratizing Afghanistan, Iran cooperated with the USA. Khatami's approach reflected Iranian attitudes.

### **Iran is Perceived as Less Extreme**

On September 11 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 in

Sunni Islam.

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

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

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

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

### **Iran Is the Lighthouse of Islam**

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

In general, Arab 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 United States had been weakened by 9/11, but others believed that Iran had been strengthened by the attack. 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, and indeed was the first Muslim country to do so, was favorably 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 as a consequence of 9/11, Iran has become more important in international politics. After 9/11, a number of delegations came to Tehran. Iran looked as if it was about to be welcomed into the Western club. The respondents emphasized the constructive role they thought Iran played, and there was a general consensus that its work to create a democratic Afghan government was 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 may suspect that the respondents 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, but 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, much of the Western world just tars the Shi'i Islamists with the brush of Wahhabi puritanism and obscurantism.

The key concept in the mobilizing rhetoric was "the Great Satan" (the United States). Today it is mostly the conservatives and ultra-conservatives who cling to this enemy image, but it appears from the interviews in both 2000 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 United States.<sup>26</sup> The hope is that the United States will conduct some self-examination and confess its offenses 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*

##### *Responses*

<b>What effect has the Axis of Evil rhetoric had on Iranian politics and the Iranian factions? (n is the number of statements)</b>	
No effect on 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 ultra-conservatives	16
	n = 36

26. 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).

## **No Effect in Iran; Strengthened the Overseas Exiles**

No Iranian group has exploited this to its own advantage.

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

## **Strengthened the Reformers**

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

## **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 factional 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, *inter 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 civilizations' has been shelved in favour of the USA's unilateral policy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The phrase came straight after the collaboration between the 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 normalized relationship between Iran and the USA.

### **A Godsend to the Conservatives and Ultra-conservatives**

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, factional 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 around the religious values. This reaction strengthened the conservative groups. The mobilization of religious and conservative ideas was strengthened by the fact that Bush's speech

came right before our celebration of the 23<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the Islamic Revolution.<sup>27</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.

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 blood-thirsty. 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 position of power, insults a nation, security questions acquire a place in national politics at the expense of topics such as freedom for the citizens. The groups that supported openness in domestic policy ... therefore lost ground. The ultra-conservative faction is 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 realized 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 from reaping the benefits 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' favor. **If the verbal hostilities between the USA and Iran continue, they will strengthen the conservative forces at the next election.**

The conservatives and the ultra-conservatives, who — in contradistinction to the reformers who want dialogue — base their policy on hostile relations with the USA and 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.'

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27. January 29 and February 11, 2002, respectively.

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 destructive factional fighting 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 exiled opposition, the Pahlavists, giving them hope for 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 the last thing that they want. In this perspective the policy of the United States 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 also will 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, not only among the reformers but also among the conservatives. Two respondents considered that the speech had strengthened reformist forces by badly scaring the conservatives. According to these two respondents, conservatives were convinced that the United States would sooner or later attack Iran. They realized 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. Thus, conservatives, according to these two respondents, 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. However, this “Tehran Spring” was very brief: As soon as the conservatives felt they heard the danger-over siren, they exploited Bush’s speech for all it was worth.

Our interviews thus suggest that the American warning to Iran embedded in the Axis of Evil speech gave conservatives pause and resulted in greater national unity. Another consequence of the speech was the alienation of reformers. They met the conservatives half-way, with a suddenly decreased enthusiasm for normalization of relations with a country that had betrayed, threatened, and insulted them in this manner.

According to the respondents, 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 normalization of relations with the United States. 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 stigmatize 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 United States was nevertheless not the highest-scoring effect of the Axis of Evil. That was reserved for the baleful effect on Iran’s domestic factional fighting. There is a massive consensus that the speech was a godsend to the conservatives, revitalizing 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 United States had been right 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, as 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 ultra-conservatives who profited most of all from Bush’s choice of words.

## *CONCLUSION*

In this article we focused on domestic Iranian politics and the impact there of 9/11 and the Axis of Evil. The respondents were quite upbeat in regards to the first, seeing it as strengthening Iranian national unity and bringing coherence to the country’s 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. Regarding 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 emphasized 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 United States and come as a godsend to the conservatives and the ultra-conservatives.

The metaphor 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 ex-

ample, did not want to be viewed as evil, but the metaphor painted them with the same brush of evil; they resisted by joining with the conservatives and rallying around the government. In other words, the metaphor mobilized the entire country — including “friends” of the US. We also would remark that, while Great 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.

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. This is exactly what we have witnessed with dramatic changes in the political context after the metaphor was originally articulated. Since then there has been one dramatic intervening event, the War in Iraq. The impact of this event is too well known, discussed, and analyzed to dwell further upon it here. Suffice to say that the War in Iraq has been a reality check on what a superpower can and cannot achieve in the region. The War in Iraq has been a learning experience for a whole global audience having to change many of its pre-war perceptions of a superpower being gradually weakened in its self-image as well as weakened in the eyes of the world.

With this dramatically changing situation, President Bush has stopped using the metaphor. With the changing context, the metaphor has been emptied of its original meaning; its original source has lost its rhetorical force. But the changing context has given the metaphor new meaning to those people and countries it was originally intended to discredit. Now it goes to demonstrate how the “evil US” could label a whole country like Iran as evil. It is not at all surprising that the right wing of the Revolutionary Guard affiliated with Mahmud Ahmadinejad likes to repeat this metaphor as an example of what satanic forces the US represents. This also is an example of how a sender of any given message can lose control over its further use. New senders can resend it in a form that is quite contrary to what the original sender intended. It is not even necessary for the new senders to try to create new meanings, because the changing political context has already given it new meaning.

Our respondents made some appropriate predictions about the short-term effects of the metaphor in Iran. What they did not foresee, however, was its long-term effect. It is still with us in political speeches everywhere. It has been seized as a rhetorical tool by many in our global village. The effect of the metaphor for the domestic development in Iran has, for all those working for democracy and the rule of law inside the country, been a disaster reinforced by the turn of events.

George W. Bush, if not remembered for anything else, will certainly be remembered for giving the world the skillful but misguided construction of the metaphor, the Axis of Evil. It has become a powerful rhetorical tool for mobilizing the ultra-conservative and anti-democratic forces in Iran. The metaphor also has become a stumbling block for Bush, as well as for the effort of the United States to create a better world.

## APPENDIX

## LIST OF RESPONDENTS

1. Bahman Farmanara: b. 1942. Studied acting in England at the age of 16 and then studied filmmaking in the US at the University of Southern California. He returned to Iran to work in Iranian TV. Returned to the US and Canada between 1980–1990, where he ran several film companies. He has made five feature films, the most recent of which are *Smell of Camphor*, *Scent of Jasmine* and *House Built on Water*.
2. Sadegh Ziba Kalam: b. 1948. Studied engineering in London and received his Ph.D. at Bradford, UK, on the Iranian Revolution. He is a professor of Political Science in the Faculty of Law and Political Science at Tehran University.
3. Farhad Ataie: b. 1953. Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies from the University of California, Berkeley. Professor of Economics at Imam Sadegh University.
4. Anonymous playwright.
5. Abadollah Molaei: Director of Euro-American Studies at the Institute for Political and International Studies, Tehran.
6. Seyed Kazem Sajjadpour: Ph.D. from the US. Director General of the Institute for Political and International Studies, Tehran.
7. Mahmud Sariogham: Educated in the United States, he is a professor on the Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Shahid Beheshti University in Iran and the head of the Center for Scientific Research and Strategic Studies of the Middle East.
8. Hamid Reza Jalaiepour: One of the most active reformist journalists, he was involved with most of the now-closed newspapers, including *Jame'eh* and most recently *Bonyan*.
9. Farshid Farzin: b. 1967. He is an M.A. candidate in the Faculty of Law and Political Science of Tehran University, working on his thesis on International Law and Satellite Legislation. He is also a consultant to Atieh Bahar consultancy firm.
10. Amir Mohebian: He is a columnist for the conservative newspaper *Resalat* and is considered to be the most vocal spokesperson for the conservative side.
11. Mohammad Ali Najafi: b. 1945. He has an M.A. in architecture. He also has directed several films and television series. His architectural firm is responsible for designing a mosque and a cultural center in Tehran.
12. Siamak Namazi: b. 1971. He received his M.A. in Urban Planning from Rutgers University and has lived in Iran since 1999. He is the Risk and Strategic Management

Director at Atieh Bahar Consulting in Tehran.

13. Hadi Semati: b. 1960. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. Spent 1978–1980 in the United States, then returned to Iran, where he did his military service and worked for the Foreign Ministry. He spent 1985–1993 in the US and currently teaches at the University of Tehran, Faculty of Law and Political Science.

14. Hatam Ghaderi: Professor of Political Philosophy at Tehran's Teacher Training University.

15. Ahmad Zeydabadi: b. 1965. Ph.D. candidate in Tehran University's Faculty of Law and Political Science. His dissertation is on religion and the state in Israel. He works as a journalist in the Foreign Desk of *Hamshahri* and various other newspapers. He was in prison for seven months in 2001 and was recently sentenced to 23 months plus five years prohibition from journalistic activity.

16. Farhad Firouzi: Previous editor of the weekly journal *Karnami*. Independent writer and author.

17. Ibrahim Asgharzadeh: b. 1955. Studied electrical engineering at Sharif University and became part of the student movement before the Revolution. He was one of the main US hostage-takers and was an MP in the third parliament. He is currently an elected member of the Tehran City Council and an outspoken reformer.

18. Seyyed Ibrahim Nabavi: b. 1958. He is Iran's most popular satirist whose newspaper columns appear regularly in the mainstream and reformist press. He was imprisoned for his writings and currently runs his popular website, <http://www.nabavionline.com>.