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‘Ingilis’, ‘Cherchil’ and Conspiracy Theories Galore: The Iranian Perception of the British

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MAYSAM BEHRAVESH, OCT 24 2010

‘Wherever there is a trace of “politics”, there is a trace of the British’ is a phrase that continues to hold a strong popular conviction in Iran, with the term ‘politics’ carrying powerful connotations of political sleaze and scam in the popular mentality. The Iranian historical experience of Imperial Britain as a dishonest and detrimental interference in Iran’s domestic politics and economy has fostered a lingering sense of suspicion in the collective memory of Iranians, affecting educated elites and the grass roots alike. The Iranian popular and political culture is rife with terms and expressions that associate an essentialist xenophobic belief in the purportedly inherent subtlety, duplicity and opportunism of the British. ‘*Cherchil*’, the transliterated form of ‘Churchill’, for example, signifies a person of great cunning and machination powers. The transliterated word ‘*Ingilis*’, which refers to England, resonates in the Iranian popular culture with all sorts of political trickery, unreliability, unpredictability and deception. Similarly, in Iran’s post-revolutionary official political culture, it should be noted, ‘*Ingilis*’ has often been used and is still frequently employed instead of ‘*Britania*’, the Persian transliterated equivalent for ‘Britain’, both to imply its allegedly deceitful nature and keep alive the sense of the potential threat it poses in the public unconscious as well as in the securitized consciousness of those in power. Notably, what makes it all the more problematic is the accompaniment of this cognitive and discursive process by a high degree of subjective homogenization that causes Britain to be perceived as a uniform evil totality in the popular and elite eye, rendering the solidified identity-image further difficult to fracture.

One of the constant characteristics featuring Iran-Britain relations in the post-revolutionary era has been a strong sense of distrust and a demonizing discourse they have employed mostly as an ideological-moral framework to interpret and represent each other’s actions and policies. A great majority of the Islamic Republic officials view the UK and its policies, however favourable or friendly they might prove to be at times, from a ‘threat-based’ perspective. As Fakhreddin Azimi contends, ‘[t]he long nourishment of Pahlavi authoritarianism by foreign imperial interests deeply affected the Iranian culture of politics’ reinvigorating public reservations about ‘foreign interventions and intentions, real or perceived meddling, and sententious pronouncements about the virtues of democracy’.[1] A byproduct of this sedimentary perception is the development of conspiracy theories about British ubiquity in Iranian affairs, exemplified by the pre-revolutionary book and television serial *My Uncle Napoleon*[2] and its overriding motif that the British have a hidden hand in anything ominous and undesirable that happens to its protagonist and, by extension, to Iran. Strikingly, there is a good number of Iranians among the general public who believe that the Islamic Revolution was primarily masterminded by *Ingilis*. Others take a further cynical stride and, in spite of the strained relations and almost constant tension between the Islamic Republic and Great Britain since, maintain that the ayatollahs are originally a British product and bilateral co-operation on how best to take advantage of Iran’s national wealth goes on behind the scenes.

Drawing a crude comparison between the Iranian and Indian experiences of British presence in the respective countries might enable one to set out two primary reasons for the abundance of conspiracy theories among the Iranian public. Firstly, unlike the UK’s evident and apparent colonization of the Indian Subcontinent and its colonialist practices there – that lasted for over two centuries – the British presence in Iran mostly took the form of hidden intervention and surreptitious exercise of influence; a practice that can work to raise unresolved questions in the public opinion and is more likely to leave a lasting imprint upon the collective memory of a nation than obvious control

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would be. Secondly, whereas India is an established parliamentary democracy, where power is exerted through transparent democratic mechanisms and processes, Iranian system of governance is too complex at the highest levels of national decision-making to deliver such a transparency, which in turn gives rise to speculations as to who really orders the things and pulls the strings, inclining the public to jump to the most oversimplified and at-hand conclusions on the basis of their historical memory and life-experience.

Even before the 1979 revolution, the pro-Western Iranian Monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah, frequently suspected the British (and others) for various reasons that often went beyond his own unique and characteristic blend of paranoia. Much like his father before him, he had been restored to power by a coup d'état in 1953 which was co-staged by intelligence operatives from Britain and the United States. Similarly, as his father was forced to abdicate at the height of World War Two in 1941 by the same foreign powers, the Shah saw his position as potentially susceptible to a similar fate. Such a deep suspicion appears to have been fuelled by the BBC radio's Persian-language service that extensively covered revolutionary discontent in Iran along with Ayatollah Khomeini's statements from France where he lived in exile at the time. This continued to take place in spite of the British government's formal support for his regime – which it saw as a strategic ally in the Middle East and a defensive shield against the spread of Communism – as well as Tehran's 'endless' objections to the Foreign Office, then run by Lord Owen, through Iranian Ambassador to the UK, Parviz Radji, only to be met by the assertion that BBC is 'independent' and 'we [do] not control their policy'.^[3]

Post-revolutionary Anglophobia is different in nature in a few aspects. Firstly, it was altogether a component of an overarching revolutionary discourse of xenophobia, or more pertinently, Westophobia which was rooted in the suppressed revolutionaries' collective memory of historical victimization and according to Majid Adibzadeh had 'de-terrorizing' and 'security-providing' functions.^[4] Opposition to the West, with the UK and US at its epicentre, also had roots in the Iranian national culture of enshrining an eternal struggle between 'good' and 'evil', that allowed the revolutionaries to represent themselves as 'good' and the Western 'other' as 'evil'^[5], and thus naturalize and therefore eternalize their fight against Western enemies. This leads us to the second primary function of the post-revolutionary Westophobic/anti-Western discourse, namely, its centrality to the Iranian national-state 'identity construction'. In fact, by confronting the West represented as Satanic, unreliable, crafty, suppressive and terrorizing, the revolutionaries became able to (re)define their own identity as divine, reliable, honest, emancipatory and reassuring. As the 'Little Satan' that is often said to be following the path of the 'Great Satan', or, as an Iranian observer has contentiously argued, is indirectly and psychologically 'manipulating' it^[6], 'Ingilis' has an indispensable and central place in this Manichean discursive construction. Whether this image is gradually fading away and giving way to equally negative images of other foreign powers – such as Russia and China – in the mentality of new Iranian generations remains to be seen. In any event, one may make a good case for the fact that bad collective memories of the past hardly fade away.

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Notes

[1]. Fakhreddin Azimi, *The Quest for Democracy in Iran: A Century of Struggle against Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 13.

[2]. The mentioned serial is based on a popular Persian novel of the same title – *Dayi Jan Napelon* – by Iraj Pezeshkzad, a former Iranian diplomat, that was first published in 1973 and later translated into English by Dick Davis. For further details, refer to the 2009 BBC Four

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television programme 'Iran and Britain', produced by Emily Cloke and directed by Neil Cameron.

[3]. For further evidence, see the 2009 BBC Four television documentary 'Iran and Britain', produced by Emily Cloke and directed by Neil Cameron; See especially recollections and explanations of Lord Owen, British Foreign Secretary from 1977 to 1979, Parviz Radji, Iranian Ambassador to the UK from 1976 to 1979, and Gerard Mansell, BBC External Services Director from 1972 to 1980.

See also David Farber, *Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter with Radical Islam* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 98

[4]. Majid Adibzadeh, *Zaban, Gofte-man va Siasat-e Khareji: Dialectic-e Baznemayi az Gharb dar Jahan-e Nemadin-e Irani* [*Language, Discourse and Foreign Policy: The Dialectic of representation of the West in the Iranian Symbolic World*] (Tehran: Akhtaran Publishing, 1378/2008), p. 154.

[5]. Ahmad Naghibzadeh, *Tasir-e Farhang-e Melli bar Siasat-e Khareji-e Jomhuri-e Eslami-e Iran* [*The Impact of National Culture upon the Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy*] (Tehran: Institute of Political and International Studies, 1381/2002), p. 222; Also Ahmad Naghibzadeh, 'Naghsh-e Avamel-e Zehni dar Jahatgiriha-ye Siasat-e Khareji-e Jomhuri-e Eslami-e Iran' [*The Role of Subjective Factors in the Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy Orientations*], in Nasrin Mosaffa and Hossein Nozari, eds., *Negahi be Siasat-e Khareji-e Jomhuri-e Eslami-e Iran* [*A Look at the Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy*] (Tehran: Iranian Foreign Ministry Publications, 1385/2006), p. 56.

[6]. Seyyed Vahid Karimi, an Iranian Foreign Ministry analyst of international affairs, put forward in 2007 what he dubbed 'manipulation theory' in a Persian article titled 'England and American Presidents'. There he challenges the notion that the United States was the 'origin of all developments and global crises particularly those in the Middle East' in the post-World War Two era, and contends by providing historical examples that the American presidents in the past half century have been subject to indirect British 'manipulation through interdependency and engagement', which was particularly the case with George W. Bush who 'was influenced by Tony Blair. [In fact] Blair took advantage of the American power to overthrow Saddam [Hussein] in Iraq' (p. 327). The thrust of his so-called theory is that 'in the author's opinion, from 1945 onwards, due to the [US] inexperience in international relations, American "power and resources" were "abused" through "interdependency" and "engagement" by a number of prime ministers of England (*Ingilis*), the country's closest ally, and [in fact] they have managed to lead American foreign policy in a manner that has established a particular political pattern in international relations' (p. 328). However, he fails to make any reference to the Suez Crisis of 1956 that caused an almost irreparable damage to Britain's international standing and the consequent unrivalled American ascendancy in the Persian Gulf, or to the powerful arguments and repeated calls by a good number of British politicians for the abandonment of a subservient relationship with the US and adoption of a 'solid but not slavish' special relationship. The so-called 'manipulation theory' clearly shows how deep conspiracy theories against the British have

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penetrated into the Iranian political culture. For further details, see Seyyed Vahid Karimi, 'Ingilis va Roasa-ye Jomhour-e Amrika [England and the American Presidents]', *Faslname-ye Siasat-e Khareji* [*Foreign Policy Quarterly*], vol. 21, No. 2, 1386/2007, pp. 325-355.

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Maysam Behravesht is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at Lund University, Sweden. His doctoral thesis investigates the impact of identity motives and emotive drives on the nuclear behavior of states with revisionist tendencies, deploying ontological security theory and narrative methodology for the purpose. He served as the Editorial Assistant of the quarterly *Cooperation and Conflict* for three years from 2013 to 2016 and is currently a Research Fellow at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University.