

# US–Iran “Special” Relations Between 2001 and 2003: Friends or Foes?

Written by Wael Zammit

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WAELE ZAMMIT, AUG 30 2015

### Introduction

#### *Rationale*

This analysis will bring to the forefront the “special” relationship between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran. It explores the mechanisms of the American and Iranian foreign policies toward each other. Such a topic cannot be discussed without tracing back its historical background. Marked by decades of antagonism and distrust, the two countries’ tumultuous legacy cast its shadow on the bilateral relations of the arch-rivals.

Being descendants of a seven-thousand-year old magnificent civilization, the Persian civilization, the Iranians have always held a perception of self-superiority over their neighboring countries.[1] Kenneth Pollack asserts that not only does the Persian history present a source of national pride, but also legitimizes the Iranians’ quest to attain a natural leadership role and aspire to regional primacy.[2] Yet, along with the seven-millennial prestigious Empire, Iranians experienced decades of less glorious memories being dominated by powerful hegemony and manipulated by Britain, Soviet Russia, and later by the United States.

The Iranians’ nationalistic pride was injured by the external meddling in their domestic affairs. The last transgression was the American-British 1953 coup that toppled their first democratically-elected Prime Minister, Mohamed Mosaddegh, and re-established the pro-western Monarch the ultimate ruler and autocrat Mohamed Reza Shah Pahlavi, whose regime was buttressed for years by the U.S.[3] This experience further nurtured the resentment and hostility toward America as many Iranians kept perceiving the United States through the 1953 prism. On the other hand, the Americans chose the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Hostage Crisis and their repercussion as their lens.[4] Equally important, despite the apparent friction and enmity, the two countries witnessed short periods of collaboration, hence the ambivalent character of their “special” relations which oscillated between rapprochement and estrangement especially in the post-9/11 era.

In this context, one question would rise to prominence: what exact timescale is investigated? It should be clear that this study explores the 2001-2003 period. Not only did the 9/11 terrorist attacks shake the foundations of the Twin Towers in New York, they also shook the ground of the already unstable Middle East and introduced new strategies of intervention mainly the “Bush Doctrine,” notably emphasized by the National Security Strategy of 2002.[5] It was marked by a shift from the “Clintonian” idealism to strategies of pre-emption and prevention. The United States moved from policies of isolation and containment into more confrontational and coercive diplomacy that entailed the unilateral use of military action to attack any countries or non-state actors that may be considered to be a threat for American interests.[6]

In this vein, the Bush administration launched the “Global War on Terror” (GWOT), such a concept and its repercussions on the American-Iranian relations would be studied thoroughly. Indeed, one of the main reasons for choosing the 2001-2003 timeframe is that this period witnessed an unprecedented cooperation between Washington and Tehran. Having a common enemy and short-time mutual interests, fighting al-Qaeda and toppling the Taliban in

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Afghanistan, the “war on terror” provided the United States and the Islamic Republic with a rare opportunity to come together and collaborate. Yet, such a honeymoon and rapprochement would soon end as Iran would be “rewarded” and thrown in George Bush’s “Axis of Evil.”

This examination will explore the unabated war of words between the two countries and the ambivalent nature of the U.S.-Iran relations especially with the constant accusations of sponsoring terrorism and developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Equally significant, delving into the complexity of the Washington-Tehran bilateral relations would naturally involve dealing with various states like Baghdad, Kabul and Tel Aviv to name but a few, in addition to various groups and state actors such as Hezbollah, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad. All these parties would be dealt with in relation to the main topic especially that the Iranian-American relations cannot be studied with disregard to the historic weight, the geopolitical calculations, the strategic and national interests of all the factions involved in an era that witnessed two major wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq, which reshaped the map of the Middle East and changed the regional balance of power for decades to come.

## *Aims, Objectives and Research Questions*

The main objective behind this examination is to show and account for the ambivalent and multilayered relationship between the United States and Iran which wavered between partnership and animosity, cooperation and friction, collaboration and antagonism. This love-hate relationship is to be studied in reference to the “war on terror,” the *détente* over Kabul and Baghdad, but also the rift when it came to accusations of promoting terrorism and pursuing nuclear weapons. Additionally, this exploration will juxtapose the attempts to reconciliation, the secret talks and meetings on the one hand, the sanctions and the threats of regime change on the other.

Still dealing with the “special” U.S.-Iranian relations, light would be shed on the non-ending war of words, not only during their worst days but even when the two foes are on the same boat and collaborating. The ambivalence between the shared undiplomatic discourse and the behind-closed-doors dealings is to be emphasized especially that the antagonizing rhetoric was seldom followed up with actions on the ground, if any. For instance, Ray Takeyh describes the antagonistic rhetoric as “merely incendiary and symbolic without practical relevance.”<sup>[7]</sup> These ironic situations are to be explored when discussing a central theme: the geopolitical realities versus the ideological fantasies.

The idea to be further discussed here is the clash between the strategic interests in opposition to the ideological imperatives and ideals. The shared pragmatism is to be highlighted, as when having a mutual enemy and overlapping interests, the “Great Satan” and the “Mad Mullah” tended to bury their hatchets and reach out to each other. Ironically, such openings would soon evaporate and the two rivals would lock horns again, hence the complex and “special” character of the American-Iranian bilateral relations. Yet, the role of ideology and religion would not be overshadowed. Such factors in addition to other states, issues and lobbies, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the domestic affairs will be studied via the realism-ideology-balance.

In this regard, the different overtures, setbacks and missed opportunities between 2001 and 2003 would be tackled and explained. The emphasis would be put on the two warring countries’ attempts to thaw the icy relations, collaborate and opt for a strategic partnership and the hard-liners’ continuous efforts to undermine any rapprochement, here again the ever-present strategic calculus, hegemonic aspiration along with external factors would have a say, further complicate the already complex relationship and re-establish the wall of mistrust between the two rivals.

Pertinent to this topic, many questions rise to the surface: How did the “war on terror” and the targeting of al-Qaeda affect the U.S.-Iranian relations? What kind of assistance did the Iranian provide for their rival? The crux of the “Bush Doctrine” and the pre-emptive thinking was the “either with us or with the terrorists” approach, in this regard, does it apply to the Iranian case? How can we account for the ambivalent role Iran played during the war on Afghanistan? To what extent did the war of words match the war on the ground? Why have the Iranians always referred to the rhetorical weapon? Did Iran support America in toppling Saddam Hussein? How and why? What were the reasons behind the missed opportunities for rapprochement between the Islamic Republic and the United States? Is the

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Islamic Republic of Iran an ideologically driven, irrational state? If not, can it be argued that Tehran is, in fact, the model of a pragmatic country? To what extent do the principles and ideologies draw the two countries' plans and foreign policies? In politics and international affairs, can we really talk about friendship and enmity, friends and foes?

## *Methodology and Sources*

The empirical approach will be the methodological tool opted for in the examination of the U.S.-Iranian ever-changing relations. A chronological order will be followed, sometimes going back and forth in time and calling for past and historic events to compare and juxtapose similar or opposing experiences in order to critically draw a full picture and highlight the ambivalent and “special” bilateral relationship.

Following the 1979 Islamic revolution and the Hostage Crisis, a plethora of books and articles dealing with the two countries' stormy relationship has been published. Yet, and despite the all-important post 9/11-era, the 2001-2003 period more precisely, little has been written in exploration of the controversial chapter of the American-Iranian relations. Indeed, not a single book has been written solely to explore the just mentioned timeframe. For instance, though Barbra Slavin's *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies Iran, the U.S., and the Twisted Path to Confrontation* and Kenneth Pollack's *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* give good insight into the Washington-Tehran ties, the two writers devoted just few chapters of their works to examine the various events, their collaboration, friction, its sources and repercussions on the two rivals.[8] In this vein, this study offers an examination which aims at filling a gap at the existing historiography and shortage of the controversial rapprochement and estrangement of the old-time foes between 2001 and 2003 while dealing critically with the wars on Kabul and Baghdad, terrorism, the nuclear dossier and the missed opportunities. This dissertation offers a more detailed chronology and a more critical analysis of the controversial and multilayered bilateral relations, different from the already published works about the topic, if any.

More importantly, it is essential to make it clear that this study will be based on primary sources which will be the backbone of this thesis. That will include official and governmental reports issued by various U.S. Departments, in addition to the White House briefings. Moreover, many speeches by Iranian and American presidents especially those by George Bush are studied and will be referred to. When dealing with the nuclear dossier, reports by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will be used. As for the terrorism, some declassified documents and other official reports mainly by the Department of State and the Pentagon will be used. Moreover, many interviews, declarations and congressional testimonies on various issues are to be quoted.

In order to produce a well-evidenced and well-documented work, different secondary sources will be employed throughout this empirical investigation. Added to Slavin and Pollack's works, Trita Parsi's book *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.* will be often referred to when discussing the dialectics of ideology and pragmatism and since it contains dozens of interviews with various policy makers in the two countries.[9] Related to that, *PBS Frontline*[10] and the three-part BBC documentary *Iran and the West*[11] will be another source as they provide multiple interviews and insights into the U.S.-Iranian relations. Equally important, many scholarly and newspaper articles will be used especially those written by experts and officials who were directly involved with the Iranians. To give few examples, when dealing about the Geneva talks and the collaboration over the post-Taliban Afghanistan, an article by James Dobbins who was Bush's special envoy for Kabul, will be quoted.[12] In line with this, the Leveretts, Flynt and Hilary Mann, who served in the Bush administration, will be referred to when talking about the rapprochement and the estrangement

## *Outline*

This investigation will follow a logical three-chapter flow along with an introduction and a conclusion, in addition to a comprehensive bibliography. The introductory part lays the framework of the forthcoming examination.

Chapter one offers a historical overview of the U.S.-Iranian relations in the second half of the twentieth century, focusing on the post-1979 era when their relationship took a 180-degree turn shifting from amity to animosity. It covers almost two decades of antagonism and documents the major events that took place during this period and

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affected the two regimes’ bilateral ties.

The second chapter is entitled “The Rapprochement: Sleeping with the Devil” and is divided into four parts. The first part opens with the election of the moderate Khatami president, and the mutual efforts to “break down the wall of mistrust” in order to reach reconciliation. Then, the American and Iranian reactions to the 9/11 attacks and Bush’s approach to the “war on terror” are to be explored. The third and fourth parts will discuss the marriage of convenience and examine the cooperation between the old rivals over Afghanistan. Such a rapprochement will be studied critically in an attempt to highlight the “special” character of this unholy communion.

Chapter three will mark the end of the short-lived collaboration and highlight the friction and estrangement between Washington and Tehran following the 2002 State of the union address and putting Iran in the “Axis of Evil.” This shift toward hostility is further examined through the analysis of the accusations of sponsoring terrorism and pursuing nuclear capability. As usual, the ambivalent nature of the Iranian-American relations will be examined through the invasion of Iraq and the 2003 proposal for a “grand bargain,” an offer of reconciliation and a comprehensive resolution of differences between the two bosom rivals.

The concluding part will be an assessment of the controversial U.S.-Iranian relations between 2001 and 2003 with reference to the tumultuous past and to the missed opportunities during such an important period, with an emphasis on the ideological and pragmatic effects on this “special” relationship. The continuous attempts to befriend an old foe will be recalled when discussing the future bilateral relations with all the changes that have taken place in the Middle East. This final part will be based on two personally conducted interviews with two experts on U.S.-Iranian relations: Trita Parsi the founder and president of the National Iranian American Council (NIAC), and James Dobbins, who served as the Bush administration’s special envoy for Afghanistan and who led the American team of Negotiators in Bonn back in 2001.[13]

## CHAPTER ONE: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE CLASH OF THE RIVALS

“The past is never dead. It is not even past.” William Faulkner

This chapter covers the analysis of the “special” relationship between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran in the second half of the twentieth century. It explores major events that have influenced the bilateral relations between the two countries, from the 1953 *coup d’état* to the 1979 Islamic revolution and Hostage Crisis. Then, the Washington-Tehran ties are explored through the prism of the Iran-Iraq war. It ends with a discussion of the Iranian-American relationship during Rafsanjani’s presidency. This chapter highlights the major watershed events that took place during the four decades since the 1950s and have shaped the U.S. foreign policy toward Iran ever since.

### The 1953 Coup

For most Americans, the story begins in 1979 with the Iranian Revolution and the Hostage Crisis. But to get a whole picture of what happened, we need to go back to 1953 which is where the story begins for most Iranians. For more than one hundred years, relations between the United States and Iran were cordial. In 1951, Mohammed Mosaddegh was democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran. Once in power, the Iranian nationalist introduced a number of social and political reforms.[14] Arguing that Iranians must win their independence, have a foreign policy of their own, and enjoy the right to control their oil revenues, Mosaddegh nationalized the Iranian oil industry which had, for five decades, been under British control at the hands of the Anglo Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), later to become British Petroleum (BP).[15] Hugely popular at home, the *Time* magazine man of the year was quite unpopular with the British government. Britain took Iran to the International Court of Justice over the matter and lost. They tried to hit its economy, and did, by enacting sanctions and instigating a worldwide boycott of Iranian oil.

Unable to tame him, London convinced Washington that the Iranian Premier was relying on the communist Tudeh

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Party and driving Iran toward the Soviet sphere.[16] In August 1953, a coup, code-named “Operation Ajax,” was orchestrated by the Central intelligence Agency (CIA) and the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6). Mosaddegh was toppled and the Shah, Mohamed Reza Pahlavi, was reinstated in the throne, “[putting] an end to a vibrant chapter in the history of the country’s nationalist and democratic movements.”[17] Back then, the covert operation was perceived to be “a success,” but given its “blowback,” U.S. Secretary of State, Albright, expressed, in 2000, her regret, for the coup which was a watershed event that crushed the nascent Iranian democratic experience ushering in more than twenty years of dictatorship under the Shah.[18]

### The 1979 Islamic Revolution

After the 1953 *coup d’état*, hundreds of millions of dollars were given to Iran as emergency funds, economic and military aid.[19] With American assistance, the king of kings formed SAVAK,[20] a vicious secret police force that repressed political dissent enabling the Monarch to rule Iran with an iron fist. To express his gratitude to Uncle Sam, Pahlavi allowed five U.S. oil companies to have a 40% share. Throughout the following years the successive American governments sought to stay the course buttressing the Shah’s regime seeing him as a stalwart ally in the region.[21] In short, Iran became one of the client states of the United States acting as the guardian of the American interests in the Gulf region.

Many groups resented the Shah. Iranians were fed up with the regime’s autocracy, brutality, corruption, westernization, added to the extreme inflation and poor socio-economic conditions.[22] In late 1977, anti-Shah demonstrations commenced and intensified the following months as leftists, liberals, nationalists and Islamists came together under Khomeini’s banner. From his exile, the seventy six-year-old religious leader was causing havoc in Iran. Officials in Tehran and Washington were taken off guard.[23] The nation was rapidly destabilizing as the number of demonstrators mushroomed to hundreds of thousands and reached millions by December 11.[24] While the U.S. National Security Advisor Brzezinski was assuring their “most reliable partner in the Gulf region” that they will “back him to the hilt,” U.S. State Department agents believed the revolution was “unstoppable” and Mohamed Reza Pahlavi was leaving the country. On February 1979, millions of Iranians welcomed Khomeini and the revolution was declared victorious.

Iran voted by referendum to make Iran an Islamic Republic and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini became its supreme leader. He accused America, the “Great Satan,” of “[being] behind all that’s gone wrong” and redefined the goal of the revolution from the removal of the shah to a complete removal of American influence in internal Iranian affairs, hence opening a new chapter in the U.S-Iran relations.[25]

### The Hostage Crisis

Iran’s post-revolution government called for the Shah to be sent back for trial. The latter was admitted into the United States for cancer treatment.[26] Iranians feared that the Americans were plotting against the revolution to stage a coup, as they did in 1953. Fueled by anti U.S. rhetoric and sentiments a group of revolutionary students stormed the American Embassy in Tehran, took control of the facility and held fifty two hostages in November 4, 1979.[27] At first, the students’ plan was just to make a symbolic occupation. What happened next has poisoned the bilateral relations between the two countries to this day. Khomeini considered the seizure of the “American spy den in Tehran” a “second revolution.”[28]

He rebuffed all American efforts to free the hostages. Sanctions were imposed on Iran freezing its U.S. assets, banning its oil imports and all diplomatic ties were cut. As Iran broke all the rules of diplomacy, the Carter administration sought to attempt a risky military rescue mission, Operation Eagle Claw. It failed and eight U.S. servicemen lost their lives. In Tehran, the accident was widely credited to divine intervention.[29] As Khomeini’s prestige skyrocketed in Iran, Jimmy Carter’s popularity hit the ground and so did his chances for re-election.

In this vein, Former Iranian president Abol Hassan Bani Sadr and Gary Sick[30] talk about the “October Surprise.” They argue that representatives of the 1980 Reagan-Bush campaign cut a secret deal with the Mullahs to delay the hostages release until after the November election “in return for some arms immediately plus the promise of future

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arms and political benefits once the Reagan administration came to office.”[31] No definitive conclusions have been reached concerning the allegations, yet the “separate peace” remains plausible especially in the light of later events. After the death of the Shah and Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Iran, negotiations with Washington were resumed and an accord was reached one day before Carter left office. The latter hoped to get the hostages home while he was still president. The Iranians deliberately delayed their release few seconds after Regan swore in.[32] After 444 days, the Hostage Crisis had come to an end, yet it changed the diplomatic and political landscape between the Islamic Republic of Iran and United States of America for decades to come, as hostility and antagonism characterized the new relationship between the old partners.

### The Iran-Iraq War

#### *The U.S. Support for Iraq*

After various provocations, Iraq launched a war on Iran on September 22, 1980. The Iranians suspected Washington was backing Saddam Hussein, they were not totally wrong. Indeed, unlike the international community reaction when Saddam would invade Kuwait ten years later, there were no indignant speeches, no calls for a U.S.-led intervention or any economic embargo against the Baathist regime in Baghdad.[33] The Iran-Iraq War cemented resentment of Americans. Though the United States officially remained neutral throughout the war, the American government supplied Iraq with military equipment, billions of dollars’ worth of economic aid, technological and operational intelligence.[34] The U.S. support of Iraq can be further emphasized through the testimony of Howard Teicher, former director of Political-Military affairs of the National Security Council:

The United States actively supported the Iraqi war effort by supplying the Iraqis with billions of dollars of credits, by providing U.S. military intelligence and advice to the Iraqis, and by closely monitoring third country arms sales to Iraq to make sure that Iraq had the military weaponry required. The United States also provided strategic operational advice to the Iraqis to better use their assets in combat ... The CIA, including both CIA Director Casey and Deputy Director Gates, knew of, approved of, and assisted in the sale of non-U.S. origin military weapons, ammunition and vehicles to Iraq.[35]

The American support for the Arab nationalist took other forms; after removing Iraq from the U.S. state sponsors of terrorism list and restoring diplomatic relations with Baghdad, not only did the Regan administration export materials for Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program, it also turned a blind eye as Saddam used chemical weapons against Iranians and against his own Kurdish population.[36] Interestingly, in ten years, the United States would move to unseat Saddam Hussein and overthrow his regime under the pretext of developing weapons of mass destruction. The irony is that in 2003 he did not really have such weapons and no WMD were found.[37] Talking about the U.S.-Iraq relations, it is worth mentioning that the fall of the Iraqi regime and the death of Saddam’s Iraq were not in 2003 with the U.S.-led military attack, in fact, Saddam Hussein signed his death warrant the moment he entered Kuwait. After 1991, American-Iraqi relations changed dramatically, a decade of political isolation and economic sanctions was inaugurated which led to the death of a million Iraqi civilians. Moreover, Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, Colin Powell’s chief of staff, argues that the U.S. chose to keep a-strong-enough Saddam to balance Iran, as with his overthrow the clerical regime in Tehran would find itself unchecked.[38] Ironically, that is more or less what happened after the 2003 U.S.-led military invasion of Baghdad.

#### *Hezbollah Bombings*

With the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and while Washington was supplying Iraq with arms, Iran was funding Hezbollah, a militant Shiite group and an offshoot of Khomeini’s revolutionary Islamic state. Iranian-backed operatives of Hezbollah are believed to be responsible for the 1983 bombings of the U.S. Marine barracks and the attacks on the American Embassy in Beirut, in which more than 250 Americans were killed.[39] The U.S. saw the act as a “terrorist attack,” the largest in its history. The Regan administration alleged Iranian involvement and added Iran to the list of state sponsors of terrorism in 1984 banning direct financial assistance with the Islamic Republic, and the relations between Washington and Tehran further deteriorated.

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### *The Iran-Contra Affair*

During the war, many countries, like Britain and China were supplying arms to both Iraq and Iran at the same time. The French, one of Saddam’s closest allies, also sold weapons to Iran in exchange for the French citizens who were kidnapped in Lebanon. As for the United States, despite its direct and indirect support for Iraq since the beginning, the policy makers in Washington also supported and armed the Islamic Republic of Iran as they sought to maintain regional balance of power, hence assuring U.S. hegemony in the Gulf region. In this case the assistance came in the form of the Iran-Contra Affair.[40] In an attempt to put an end to the Lebanese hostage crisis, and free the thirty seven Americans captured by pro-Iranian Hezbollah, top U.S. officials secretly agreed to make a three-way deal to sell anti-aircraft missiles and anti-tank weapons to Iran, a sworn U.S. enemy, via Israel.[41] The plan also included funneling the millions of dollars raised from the arms sales to anti-communist Contra guerillas fighting the Sandinista revolutionary government in Nicaragua. The two parts of the deal were illegal and prohibited by Congress.

The scandal broke in 1986 and marked the lowest point of Ronald Reagan’s presidency.[42] Although the facts prove the exact opposite, President Reagan claimed “[they] were not trading arms for hostages, nor were [they] negotiating with terrorists.”[43] He asserted that the weapons were sent to “moderate” Iranians who were opposed to Khomeini and with whom he wanted to establish a relationship.[44] In reality, the “moderate” Iranians were none but Khomeini’s men. The Iran Contra-Scandal shows Washington and Tehran’s realist and pragmatic tendencies. Despite the apparent friction and animosity, clandestine meetings were held and secret deals were made between the “Great Satan” and the “Mad Mullahs.” Such deals even involved Israel, the “Zionist entity,” the illegal imposition on the region, as it was described by the Islamic Republic.[45] In his *Treacherous Alliance*, Trita Parsi discusses lengthily the secret dealings between the United States, Israel and Iran.[46]

Despite the antagonistic rhetoric, and though the Islamic Republic did not recognize the Jewish state, the Iranians felt the whole world was against them and could not find any supplier of weapons or spare parts but Israel. Even the hard-liners of the clerical regime believed it was acceptable to acquire arms from a staunch enemy.[47] On the other hand, Israel which had adopted the “Periphery Doctrine” sought to support Iran in order to balance Iraq as they perceived Saddam Hussein as their main enemy. Ironically, not only did Israel provide the Islamic Republic with weapons, it also pressured Washington to talk and deal with the Iranian regime. Such a stance would change dramatically after the 1991 Gulf War and the decimation of Saddam’s military capability, Iran would be seen as the ultimate enemy. Such secret dealings highlight the pragmatic tendencies of those countries including Iran whose ideology loses its weight and the slogans lose their meanings when it comes to geopolitical realities and strategic interests.

### *The 1988 U.S. Attacks*

After the Iran gate, the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran locked horns again. Two operations, Operation Nimble Archer in October 1987 and Operation Praying Mantis in April 1988, were launched by the U.S. in retaliation for an Iranian attack on the U.S.-flagged Kuwaiti tanker and for the Iranian mining of areas in the Gulf. It was the biggest combat operation for the U.S. Navy since the Second World War and it brought the two enemies into a direct confrontation.[48]

The July 3, 1988 witnessed another tragic event that further fanned the flames of enmity and antipathy between the two countries. An Iranian commercial jetliner, Air Flight 655, was “mistaken” for an attacking F-14 fighter plane and was shot down by the cruiser USS *Vincennes*. 290 civilian passengers, including sixty-six children, were killed. The U.S. government claimed that the *Vincennes* was in international waters, its crew feared they were under attack and the Iranian plane did not identify itself. None of these claims were true.[49] In Tehran, this “mistake” was seen as a “massacre,” an “atrocious” and a deliberate “criminal act.” The Iranians argued that American recklessness and negligence amounted to international crime. Years later, the U.S. government expressed its regret for the innocent lives that were lost, yet an apology never came.[50] As a matter of fact, to date, the United States has never admitted any wrongdoing or responsibility in the tragedy. Ironically, they did not forget to award and honor all the men of the *Vincennes*. [51] Few days after the attack, both Iran and Iraq accepted UN Resolution 598 putting an end to the protracted war which cost them billions of dollars, around a million casualties and just as Henry Kissinger had wished

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both countries lost.[52]

## Rafsanjani’s Presidency

The post Iran-Iraq war period witnessed considerable changes. In addition to the end of the Cold War, the Gulf War, the death of Khomeini in 1989 and the election of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani president, Tehran tried to have more realistic and pragmatic internal and foreign policies. America also had a new president. In his inaugural address George H. W. Bush signaled to the Iranians that “goodwill begets goodwill.”[53]

Wishing to thaw the U.S.-Iran chill, Rafsanjani pressured Hezbollah to release the hostages. He condemned terrorism and anti-Western rhetoric at a Friday prayer sermon, and Iranian officials helped bring the hostages dilemma to an end. More importantly, Iran even allowed America to use its air space in the Gulf war which targeted their foe, Saddam Hussein.[54] Such an act highlights the Iranian pragmatism as they offered secret assistance to another enemy to hit a neighboring rival. This attitude would be explored in the next chapters as we delve into the controversial American-Iranian cooperation on Afghanistan and Iraq.[55]

Moreover, Rafsanjani announced that Iran will support everything the Palestinians agree to, concerning the Israeli-Palestine peace talks implying his desire to attend the Madrid Peace talks.[56] Unlike almost all the Middle East countries, the Islamic Republic was not invited.[57] The U.S. government did not include Iran in the formation of the new order and the security structure of the region, did not lift sanctions on Iran and did not agree to release the Iranian assets frozen for more than a decade. The Bush Administration claimed that the Iranians were still engaged in other acts of terrorism, as many critics of the clerical regime, such as *Shapour Bakhtiar*, Iran’s former Prime Minister, and members of the Iranian opposition group Mujahedin-e-Khaq (MEK), were assassinated in Europe.[58].

Ali Ansari argues that Bush was simply “unwilling to risk valuable political capital in an election year by appearing to be soft on Iran.”[59] Rafsanjani declared later America broke its promises though his government showed “goodwill,” and for his remaining five years in office, no further attempts for political reconciliation were made. It is worth noting that the exclusion of Iran from the Madrid conference transformed the Iranian attitude. They thought unless they put pressure on Washington by sabotaging its policies and efforts, the Americans will keep neglecting them. The Iranians reached their hands to the rejectionist Palestinian groups fighting the Israeli settlement and to the Lebanese Hezbollah once again.[60]

With a new president in the White House and under the pressure of the Israeli lobby, the United States adopted “Dual Containment” as a new policy in an attempt to contain Iran and Iraq rather than balancing one another.[61] Bill Clinton’s administration considered the Islamic Republic a “rogue state” and sought to further isolate it through economic and political sanctions. In fact, the United States imposed a total embargo on dealings with Iran by American companies through the Executive Order 12959 which prohibited all trade, financial, and commercial transactions with Tehran in April 1995.[62] A year later the Iran-Libya Sanctions act was passed by Congress banning foreign companies from investing more than \$20 million annually in Iran’s energy industry.[63]

The U.S.-Iran relation further deteriorated after the 1996 Khobar Towers attack in Saudi Arabia as a truck bomb exploded killing nineteen Americans. Although the United States accused members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard corps (IRGC), Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Saudi-Hezbollah of the attack, the Iranians still argue they had nothing to do with the terrorist act.[64]

During Clinton’s first term, the U.S.-Iran relations did not differ much from that of his predecessors. In fact since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which brought Khomeini’s men to power, rivalry, mistrust and hostility highlighted the Washington-Tehran relationship. Yet, in the midst of the rhetorical warfare, the two countries witnessed very brief periods of positive contact, secret meetings and dealings when their interests overlapped. Such deals and attempts of political reconciliation never succeeded because of the two sides’ lack of understanding, and continuous mistrust, let alone the two adversaries tragic past experiences.

In 1997, Bill Clinton’s second term coincided with the election of reformist Mohamed Khatami president of Iran who



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suggested a “dialogue between civilizations and nations” which will soon turn into a clash of civilizations and nations following the 9/11 events and the launching of the “war on terror.”

## CHAPTER TWO: THE RAPPROCHEMENT SLEEPING WITH THE DEVIL

“By and large, the Iranian role diplomatically has been quite constructive ... I’m not saying we see everything eye to eye here.” Richard N. Haass[65]

This chapter examines the “special” relations between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran as the two countries welcomed the new millennium. It opens with the mutual efforts to better relations and the rapprochement between the two long-time adversaries under the leadership of Clinton and Khatami. As for the second part of the chapter, basing my analysis on some books and conferences by the leading American intellect and political dissident Noam Chomsky, I will tackle various controversial notions such as terrorism and the “war on terror.”[66] This chapter critically explores the Washington-Tehran marriage of convenience as the two nations collaborated to fight a mutual enemy. Then, I will tackle their cooperation to form a post-Taliban government in Afghanistan with special reference to *Negotiating with Iran: Reflections from Personal Experience*, an article by James Dobbins, Bush’s envoy to Kabul and the diplomat who led the American team throughout the talks in Bonn.[67] Using various primary and secondary sources, the U.S.-Iranian rapprochement and its limits will be studied in a critical fashion in an attempt to highlight the special character of this marriage of interests in the light of ideological imperatives and pragmatic exigencies.

### Khatami and Clinton: Hand in Hand

#### *Breaking Down the Wall of Mistrust*

In 1997, Rafsanjani came to the end of his two terms as president. He left office with no particular achievements concerning improving the U.S.-Iran relations. As a candidate, Seyed Mohammed Khatami, a reformist, promised change. The moderate cleric argued that Islam can coexist with freedom, democracy and the modern world. Backed by the younger generation and intellectuals, the former minister of culture and Islamic guidance won by a landslide, large enough to make him feel he could challenge the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy.[68]

President Khatami spelled out his intentions for more positive relations with the United States as he asserted his “respect to the great people and nation of America.”[69] He launched his new policy toward the U.S. via a televised interview on *CNN*. He expressed his desire to “break down the wall of mistrust” between the two countries suggesting a “dialogue of civilizations” recommending the exchange of scholars, professors, journalists, artists and tourists as one means to overcome the American-Iranian cultural divide.[70] The dialogue of civilizations began with wrestling and other organized athletic competitions. Actually, both governments sought to establish the necessary groundwork for gaining each other’s confidence and overcome the former icy relations between them through sports, tourism and advocating educational, cultural, and other private exchanges promoting what became known as “citizen diplomacy.”[71] Kenneth Pollack, the former Director for Gulf affairs in the National Security Council from 1999 to 2001 recalls:

I personally met with more than a dozen of Khatami’s unofficial diplomats in various informal settings. They all came armed with a message and a mission. The message was that real change was taking place in Iran and Khatami and those around him wanted to explore the possibility of beginning a process of rapprochement. Their mission was to find out whether the Clinton administration was interested, and whether the United States would be willing and able to help Khatami to move down this path. Khatami was fighting a fierce internal battle for greater control over Iranian policy. If Khatami was going to make any progress, he needed the United States to demonstrate its goodwill in ways that the hardliners would find it impossible to dismiss.[72]

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Mohammed Khatami was elected with the promise of change, and since the first days his administration sought to open new horizons for their strained relations with the West and America. Yet, those efforts of bettering relations were not always welcomed in Tehran. Indeed, there was a staunch opposition by the less moderate forces, the hardliners, to any attempts of rapprochement with the U.S. In this vein, in a personally conducted interview with Fahmi Huwaidi, the Egyptian writer asserts that Iran should not be thought of as a monolithic country, rather there are various and sometimes clashing forces within the Iranian regime which is comprised of moderates, conservatives, liberals, nationalists and other schools of thought.[73] Interestingly, the Americans have often failed to make such a distinction and kept coloring the different Iranian factions with the same brush. Back to the domestic opposition, while Khatami was trying to reach out to the United States, hardliners questioned the legitimacy of his reconciliatory attempts as they believed he was making a strategic mistake and challenging one of the founding principles of the Iranian regime: Anti-Americanism.

Across the Atlantic, Bill Clinton responded to his Iranian counterpart Mohamed Khatami's move positively. He considered the latter's election "a hopeful sign," he expressed his regret of the estrangement between the two nations and affirmed that their different policies are "not insurmountable." [74] In addition, recent documents from the National Security Archive show that later in 1999, Clinton sent a letter to the Iranian President in which he ensured him that America harbors no hostile intentions toward the Islamic Republic, rather they seeks good relations with the Iranian government.[75]

The two governments lowered their rhetoric. While Iranian officials and Khatami continued their conciliatory constructive tone, the U.S. also stopped using the label "rogue state," which had been used for years, and reclassified the Islamic Republic as a mere "state of concern." [76] Then in June 1998, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright offered to "develop, with the Islamic Republic, when it is ready, a roadmap leading to normal relations." [77] Indeed the thawing of relations between Tehran and Washington went beyond softening the rhetoric to making tangible gestures and policy concessions. The Islamic Republic was cut from the list of major drug-producing countries, and Iran's leftist opposition group Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) was designated by the U.S. State Department a foreign terrorist organization.[78]

The United States relieved the pressure on Iran by easing the restrictions imposed on the sale of medical and agricultural goods and lessening sanctions on Iran oil industry and on foreign companies such as Total.[79] Months later, in March 17, 2000, Washington lifted sanctions on Iranian luxury products like carpets, caviar and pistachios.[80] On the same day, Madeleine Albright gave another signal of good U.S. intentions. As she stood before the American-Iranian Council (AIC), she acknowledged the U.S. "significant role" in the 1953 coup that overthrew the democratically-elected government of Mosaddegh, the "sustained backing" to the Shah's oppressive regime and the U.S. support for Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war.[81]

On the Iranian side, the reform-minded President Mohamed Khatami kept advocating the civilizational dialogue. He expressed his "regret" concerning the taking of the American hostages, the event that shattered the U.S.-Iran relations.[82] He asserted that "terrorism should be condemned in all its forms and manifestations," and that his government would no longer support the death warrant, issued by Ayatollah Khomeini, on author Salman Rushdie. Khatami described the affair as "completely finished.[83]" Such a stance, like Khomeini's decision to resume the nuclear program after judging it forbidden in Islam, further illustrate the pragmatic tendencies of the Iranian regime. Faced with realistic imperatives, the Iranians often reconsidered their ideological and religious ideals.

Still dealing with the controversial issues that had nurtured friction and feelings of mistrust between the two countries, the Iranian president claimed they were not trying to build nuclear weapons. As for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he expressed their will to contribute to an international effort to bring about a just and lasting peace in the Middle East. The Iranian efforts for reconciliation to overcome their differences with the U.S. can be summarized in the following lines:

President Khatami publicly criticized and condemned terrorism as inhumane and crystallized in his rhetoric that Iran would not interfere in the conflict between Israel and Palestine if a diplomatic, peaceful solution could be achieved. Khatami officially announced his regret, on behalf of Iran, for the 1979-1981 hostage crisis. When addressing the

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ever-present question of Iran and the nuclear question, he again publicly declared that Iran's ambitions did not include transformation into a regional or global nuclear power, nor was it seen as a future of the nation's long-term objectives.[84]

Khatami's intentions to engage with America and befriend an arch-enemy were clear. In order to do so, his administration adjusted its tone and rhetoric. The Iranians attempted to send positive signals in an attempt to prove their true will to reach out to America and engage with the International community. By clarifying their position on hot issues such as terrorism, the nuclear dossier and regional peace, the shift in Iranian policy under the moderate president is evident. Such attempts were also reciprocated by the Clinton government, mainly through lifting some sanctions and other cordial diplomatic gestures. Yet it is noteworthy that the bilateral attempts to bring down the “wall of mistrust” between the two sides and improve the complex and “special” relations were but one side of the story.

### *The Road was not All Roses*

Since his first days in office, Mohamed Khatami sought to narrow the differences between the United States and the Islamic Republic. The Clinton administration approached his olive branch with openness. But the road to reconciliation was not all roses. The attempts to normalize relations between the two countries were undermined by domestic opposition of the Republican-controlled Congress and the conservative religious clerics in Iran.[85] Indeed, dreams of *détente*, or at least a thaw in relations, with the “Great Satan” were perceived by hard-liners as an attempt to topple a pillar of the 1979 Islamic revolution.

On the other hand, influenced by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the Republicans on Capitol Hill remained suspicious of Iran. They claimed that Khatami's overture was nothing but a tactic in his pursuit for acquiring weapons of mass destruction and considered Clinton's *détente* moves “wrong-headed.” Iran's testing of a medium-range Shahab 3 missile in July 1998 further solidified their stance.[86] U.S. Congressmen also tried to review the MEK's terrorist status while the Islamic Republic was still ranked first in the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism. In this vein, after a five-year investigation, an indictment implicated unidentified Iranians in the Khobar Towers bombing and the U.S. Senate extended sanctions on Iran for five years. In Tehran, Khatami protested the economic embargo and the U.S. opposition to pipelines carrying Caspian Sea oil through Iran. He also complained about the failure of the U.S. to return the Iranian assets it had frozen and the \$20 million earmarked to Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty to “promote democracy” in the Islamic Republic. In Tehran this move was seen as a cold-war tactic that intended to “hurt” and destabilize the government in Tehran.[87] Interestingly, like in Iran, there was not a total agreement on how to deal with the Islamic Republic. While some in the Clinton administration sought to engage with the reform-minded president, others factions, mainly influenced by the Israeli lobby, rejected such a policy and rather pushed for more sanctions and containment.

After two decades of hostility, it can be said that the dynamics of the relationship between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran shifted in 1997. Although the road to reconciliation developed a few potholes, serious efforts for rapprochement were made as the two administrations sought to narrow their differences and open to each other. As the domestic conservative forces hindered such attempts, Khatami and his American counterpart tried to plant the seeds for a new and better future hence highlighting the “special” relationship between the two countries that were “still not friends,” yet “not enemies.” In this regard, the Clinton-Khatami era could have represented a breakthrough in the bilateral relations between the two countries. In 2002, the Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi stated: “I regret that Clinton failed to do better to finish the job. They had some efforts and took some positive positions but mixed those positions with some negative elements.”[88]

Despite the two presidents' efforts of reconciliation and the apparent improvement in the U.S.-Iran relations, which could have developed even further, mistrust still existed and various issues remained unsolved. Interestingly, though the executive branch, notably the president and Secretary of State, showed better understanding vis-à-vis the Iranians, Republican Congressmen had a second opinion. In this regard, it is very important to highlight the unabated Israeli role and efforts, via AIPAC, to undermine and kill any negotiations with Iran. They have always been suspicious that any rapprochement or a deal with the Iranians would be made at their expense and would leave them in the shadow, hence their continuous efforts to isolate Iran and calls for regime change as the only solution left to

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deal with the “Mad Mullahs” in Tehran. Such an approach is still adopted by the current government of Netanyahu and his efforts to block the undergoing negotiations between the two countries are not secret.

As the world welcomed the new millennium, Tehran and Washington welcomed the newly-elected presidents Seyed Mohamed Khatami and George W. Bush whose era would witness the biggest terrorist attack against America, leading to a new foreign policy and a new chapter in the U.S.-Iran relations.

### The 9/11 Terrorist Attacks

On September 11, 2001, for the first time since the War of 1812, the American territory was under attack.[89] Around 3000 people lost their lives as two hijacked commercial airplanes crashed into the World Trade Center in New York, a third airliner hit the Pentagon while the fourth crashed near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. It was the largest foreign attack on American soil, and not only did it shake the foundations of the twin towers, but also drew the lines of a new American foreign policy for what many commentators called a “post-9/11 world.”[90]

*Either you are with us, or you are with the Terrorists*

From his oval office, in the evening of September 11, President Bush addressed the nation and promised a strong response in their “war against terrorism” asserting that “[they] will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.”[91] This principle was further developed in his September 20, 2001 address to a Joint Session of Congress. George W. Bush considered the attacks more than just “acts of terror” but “acts of war.” He condemned al-Qaeda and its leader Osama Ben Laden and issued a six-point ultimatum to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan demanding them to:

- Deliver to the United States all the leaders of al Qaeda who hide in Afghanistan.
- Hand over every terrorist, and anyone who supports them, to appropriate authorities.
- Release all unjustly-imprisoned foreign nationals.
- Protect foreign journalists, diplomats and aid workers.
- Close immediately and permanently every terrorist training camp.
- Give the United States full access to terrorist training camps for inspection.[92]

Bush said that such demands were not open to negotiation or discussion. He added that the Taliban must “hand over the terrorists, or ... share in their fate.” More importantly, he declared that they will not differentiate between radical network of terrorists and governments supporting them. In this respect he asserted that “every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.”[93]

Such statements introduce what became known as the “Bush Doctrine.”[94] This interventionist policy consisted in strategies of pre-emption and prevention. The United States had the right of anticipatory self-defense and was free to take pre-emptive action against any country that might present a threat directly or indirectly. In this sense, it did not differentiate between terrorists and nations harboring them. More importantly, the “Bush Doctrine” championed unilateralism, the U.S. gave itself the right to act as it chooses with no necessary approval of the international institutions. In one sentence, the self-appointed policeman of the world, the United States, further asserted its position as the sole superpower in a unipolar world.

As days passed, the Taliban announced they were ready to cooperate and extradite Osama Ben Laden if they were given “solid evidence” of his guilt. They also made many offers to try Ben Laden in an Islamic court, hand him over to a third country, or take him to Pakistan to be tried by an international tribunal.[95] All the propositions were rejected by the Bush administration and all hopes to prevent military action went up in smoke. In Washington, the decision was made to launch a “war on terror.”[96]

*The “War on Terror” and Terrorism*

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Since his first speech following the 9/11 attacks, George Bush declared explicitly that it is a “war against terrorism.” In order to destroy the terrorists’ training camps and infrastructure within Afghanistan, capture al-Qaeda leaders, and eliminate all sources of international terrorism, the U.S. officials made it clear that the war will “take a while” as they didn’t expect just one battle, but “a lengthy campaign, unlike any other [they] have ever seen.”[97] Interestingly, Bush also said that their “war on terror” begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not necessarily end there, while his Defense secretary suggested in a 9/30 memo that they ought to “significantly change the world political map” and achieve regime change in “Afghanistan and another key State (or two) that supports terrorism.”[98]

In the midst of the conformist intellectual culture of the media biased coverage and while most journalists and academics hailed the president’s march to Kabul, one political dissident had another opinion. Noam Chomsky said that this war was but a second round of the so-called “war on terror” which was inaugurated in the 1980s.[99] Back then, the Reagan administration proclaimed that the Soviet Union sponsored international terrorism and it is their responsibility to eradicate the “evil,” the “plague” that is destroying civilization. Ironically, Bush’s rhetoric did not differ much as the latter continuously talked about his will to “rid the world of evil” in this “civilization’s fight.” Yet few things had changed between the 1980s and 2001, as those “terrorists” were once called “Mujahedeen” and the “enemies of freedom” were referred to as “freedom fighters.”[100]

On October 7, 2001, while the Afghanis raised their hands to the sky praying God to protect them from the upcoming “crusade,” they saw American planes launching their aerial bombing campaign. Chomsky also argues that the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, which was not authorized by the United Nations Security Council, was itself an act of terrorism.[101] But what is terrorism?

[An] act of terrorism, means any activity that (A) involves a violent act or an act dangerous to human life that is a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or any State, or that would be a criminal violation if committed within the jurisdiction of the United States or of any State; and (B) appears to be intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by assassination or kidnapping.[102]

This definition confirms Chomsky’s view who also asserted that it is “incomprehensible” that the “leading terrorist state in the world” and the country which was condemned by the highest international authorities for international terrorism, the United States of America, was leading a “war on terror.” As the military campaign began, the U.S. State Department threatened the Taliban to hand over all al-Qaeda leaders or “every pillar of [their] regime will be destroyed.” Across the ocean, George Bush’s “true friend” Tony Blair demanded them to “surrender the terrorists or surrender power,” and asserted that they will continue their attack against them until they get the leadership changed. According to the official definition of terrorism, such statements are textbook illustration of international terrorism.[103]

Following September 11, terrorism became the major theme around which talks and policies orbited. Its effect went beyond the domestic scene to influence and redefine American foreign policy toward many countries and especially Iran. In this regard, it is important to highlight the turn that the U.S.-Iranian relations took with the launching of the “war on terror,” as the two countries found themselves in an unannounced alliance fighting terrorism.

### The Marriage of Convenience

After the Soviet withdrawal and years of civil war, the Taliban took Kabul.[104] In addition to persecuting Afghan Shiites, they captured the Northern town of Mazar-e-Sharif and killed ten Iranian diplomats in August 1998. Iran sought international support as it prepared to revenge its officials.[105] In the United Nations, President Khatami addressed the world stating that they unequivocally “oppose all forms and manifestations of terrorism” and he advocated “[engaging] in a serious and transparent international cooperation to combat [it].”[106] By 2001, Khatami’s offer of cooperation against terrorism was to be put to the test.

### *The Rapprochement*

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For twenty years since the Islamic revolution, Iranians chanted “Death to America.” On the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, 2001, the authorities ordered that stop. President Mohamed Khatami was one of the first heads of state who came out to express his condolences to the United States of America. On behalf of the Iranian people and the Islamic Republic, he “[denounced] the terrorist measures, which led to the killing of defenseless people.” In a letter to the UN Secretary-General, Khatami described the attacks as “horrific,” “anti-human” and “anti-Islamic.” Similarly, *Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme jurist-ruler of Iran, condemned the tragic act* and the terrorists who carried out the attacks.[107] Various condolence messages were sent by the Mayor and City Council members of Tehran and by many NGO’s. *Iranian citizens mourned American victims. Hundreds held candlelight vigils and 60.000 spectators observed a minute of silence at a football match.*[108]

*Such gestures quickly* developed from humanitarian into diplomatic. Few hours after the terrorist attack, a State Department official Hillary Mann was contacted by an Iranian diplomat. He believed that al-Qaeda was responsible and expressed his hope that “[they] can still work together.”[109] Indeed, the two diplomats had maintained secretive backchannel contact for months and the terrorist act simply opened the doors for more talks.[110] In Washington, U.S. Secretary of state Collin Powell instructed his staff to develop a comprehensive diplomatic strategy to support the “war on terror” and asked Iran, via the Swiss ambassador, for information about Ben Laden, al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In Tehran, Khamenei authorized Khatami’s request for direct negotiations with the Americans.[111] In one of their meetings, the member of the Iranian delegation had a message for the American government: “Iran was prepared to work unconditionally with the United States in the “war on terror” and if they could work with [the Americans] on this issue, it had the potential to fundamentally transform U.S.-Iranian relations.”[112] Commenting on this, reporter John Richardson said that such a statement had “seismic diplomatic implications” as the U.S. has always demanded unconditional talks as a pre-condition to any official contact. Hilary Mann was even more optimistic: “It was revolutionary. It could have changed the world. They specifically told me time and again that they were doing this because they understood the impact of this attack on the U.S., and they thought that if they helped us unconditionally, that would be the way to change the dynamic for the first time in twenty five years.”[113]

This offer of support for the “Great Satan” and the hope for more open diplomatic contacts and more full-fledged relations with the United States were kept secret.[114] In Tehran, the Iranians opted for rapprochement as they wanted to ensure that the U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan could succeed, and they had their own reasons. In fact, the American decision to destroy the infrastructure of al-Qaeda and topple the Taliban served major political, economic and strategic goals for Tehran.[115] First and foremost, Iran would get rid of the hostile regime with which they share a five-hundred-mile border, and instead have a new friendly government. Second, the elimination of their radical Sunni enemy could bring political stability in Afghanistan, and would permit the return of around one and a half million Afghan refugees who resided in Iran, hence easing the burden on the Iranian economy.[116] Moreover, a strong central government in Kabul would, if not stop, limit the opium production and combat the Afghan drug trade. In this vein, Mohamed Khatami declared: “We have suffered a lot of pain because of the situation in Afghanistan in terms of drug trafficking and in terms of security so I am looking forward to that peace and security.”[117] To eliminate the Taliban regime would also mean to put an end to the support the Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) received from Iran’s enemies and neighbors: Afghanistan and Saddam’s Iraq. Last but not least, Iran wanted to play an active role in the “war on terror;” reduce tension and improve relations with Western countries including the United States and assure Tehran’s full integration in the international community.

### *The Successful Cooperation*

The 9/11 terrorist attacks introduced new parameters and represented a significant development in the relations between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran. President Khatami confessed years later: “The Taliban was our enemy. America thought the Taliban was their enemy too. If they toppled the Taliban, it would serve the interests of Iran.”[118] The Iranians decided to talk and open their arms to the Americans.

Since 1999, the Iranian and U.S. diplomats met in a body called the Six plus Two Group on Afghanistan (Six plus Two), which included the six countries bordering with Afghanistan (Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and China) plus Russia and the United States. While the Taliban were represented by Pakistan, Iran and Russia represented the views of the Northern Alliance.[119] In his book *The Persian Puzzle*, Pollack argues that Iran

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pressured the U.S. to take a more active role in the fighting in Afghanistan. The American reluctance to do so changed after 9/11. In fact, whereas most members of the Six plus Two talks were against the American-led war on the Taliban, the Iranians were not.[120] Moreover, a subgroup was created to discuss the planning of war. It included the U.S., Iran, Germany and Italy.

Paul Hastert claims that the two European countries were invited for political cover and “very quickly the multilateral talks became bilateral as the European and UN Diplomats excused themselves, or did not come to the meetings at all.”[121] The bilateral talks, which became known as the Geneva Contact Group, gathered the highest-level contacts between officials of the two countries since the Iran-Contra Affair.[122] Furthermore, when Pakistan and Indonesia asked the Americans to halt the military campaign during Ramadan, the holy fasting month in Islam, and that such actions might hurt its image in the Muslim world, the Iranians assured them that it would not and even if that happens, they can find ways to help.[123] Such an attitude is but one example of the degree of pragmatism that governs the Iranian policy-making. It did not really matter that Afghanistan was a Muslim country when compared to the profit and advantages Iran would get once their neighboring rival is destructed.

Despite the fact that Iranian top officials condemned and criticized the Operation Enduring Freedom in public, behind closed doors, they were enthusiastic supporters of the toppling of the regime of their Eastern neighbor Afghanistan.[124] The “war on terror” created a rare opportunity for Iran and U.S. to come together. Hilary Mann, who had just joined the National Security Council staff as its resident Iran expert and Ryan Crocker, a senior State Department official, sit with Iranian officials who expressed their will to cooperate with the Americans and re-establish diplomatic relations.

During those pre-attack discussions, the Iranian thrust was, you know, what do you need to know to knock their blocks off? You want their order of battle? Here’s the map. You want to know where we think their weak points are. Here, here, and here. You want to know how we think they’re going to react to an air campaign? Do you want to know how we think the Northern Alliance will behave? Ask us. We’ve got the answers; We’ve been working with those guys for years. This was an unprecedented period since the revolution of, again, a U.S.-Iranian dialogue on a particular issue where we very much had common interest and common cause.[125]

An agreement for Iran’s assistance in the war was reached. Indeed Tehran took many steps in support of ending the Taliban regime and eliminating al-Qaeda. The secret agreement for cooperation included offering to set search-and-rescue missions to help American downed pilots or soldiers who would escape into Iran. In return, the U.S. would respect the Islamic Republic airspace and territorial integrity.[126] Besides, the U.S. was given access to ports and airfields to be used as transit points to move humanitarian supplies, food and wheat into the war zone. Such steps were praised and welcomed by the United States and by senior U.S. officials. Thomas Pickering, an American diplomat, described the Iranian gestures as an “opportunity” and an “important step forward.”[127]

Following 9/11, Iran took a pragmatic approach. As the Iranians were shouting “Death to America” in the streets of Tehran, Iranian diplomats were collaborating with their American counterparts in New York and Geneva. While Ayatollah Khamenei was condemning the attack on the country and the people of Afghanistan, and Khatami was calling on ending the military campaign “as soon as possible,” Iranian officials were providing the Americans with intelligence information. They also collaborated with the Americans by capturing some “really bad Afghans” who were fleeing toward Iran.[128] Additionally, they neutralized anti-American notorious warlord, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, put him under house arrest in Tehran and prevented his return to Kabul to avoid any resistance to the U.S.-allied forces there. Facing a mutual enemy, Iran collaborated with America and played a major role in the war on the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The two countries had similar goals, after all it was in Iran’s interest to have a peaceful and stable eastern neighbor. In addition to pragmatism and realism, another Iranian feature can be highlighted, that is the ambivalence between their rhetoric on the one hand and the actions on the ground on the other.

For almost a month since October 7, the U.S. bombed the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Kabul. They targeted bunkers and caves, but it was clear that the war could not be won from the air alone. Through the Six plus Two group, Iran decided to share their deep knowledge of the Taliban’s strategic capabilities. Mohsen Aminzadeh, Iran’s Deputy foreign minister declared years later that an Iranian delegate, from the military, briefed the Americans on the situation

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inside Afghanistan.[129] In this regard, Hilary Mann described how the military man pounded on the table shouting “enough of that,” as he unfurled a map and pointed to exact targets that the U.S. needed to focus on and “that became the U.S. military strategy.”[130]

Iran’s support for the U.S. in their war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime harboring them took other forms. As soon as the war started, the Iranians urged their allies, the Northern Alliance, to participate fully and provided them with arms, supplies, tactical advice and humanitarian aid.[131] They even paid them. U.S. Secretary of State, Collin Powell declared: “We took a fourth world force, the Northern Alliance, riding horses, and married them up with a first world air force. It worked.”[132] Such a scene undermines the religious and ideological backgrounds and boundaries vis-à-vis the realist imperatives and the geostrategic calculations as the Iranians along with their Afghan partners collaborated successfully with the Americans to topple a common foe.

In an interview with Barbara Slavin in 2005, former Iran Revolutionary Guards Corps’ chief commander, Mohsen Rezaie, stated that the Islamic Republic played an “important role” in capturing Kabul as members of IRGC “fought alongside and advised the Afghan rebels who helped U.S. forces topple Afghanistan’s Taliban regime” in the months after the September 11 terrorist attacks.[133] Such a stance is further emphasized by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld who discussed the war on Afghanistan on *CBS* in November 11, 2001, two days before the fall of Kabul and asserted that “there [were] some Iranian liaison people, as well as some American liaison people working with the same Afghan forces.”[134] Besides, Slavin confirms the Iranian role and argues that members of the IRG Qods Brigade were on the field when the Alliance, with U.S. air support, took control of Kabul.

### *The Consensus: A Post-Taliban Government*

The American-Iranian cooperation did not end after the successful overthrow of the Taliban regime. The rapprochement between the two arch-foes was further illustrated in their collaboration to create an interim post-Taliban government in Afghanistan. Whereas, Iran’s role in the “war on terror” was largely secret, its role in forming a “broad-based, multiethnic, politically balanced, freely chosen” government was rather direct as the American and Iranian diplomats met and collaborated via the Six plus Two group.[135] The delegations of the eight countries joined by the major elements of the Afghan opposition met at a conference in Bonn, Germany in November 2001.[136]

James Dobbins, who was George Bush’s special envoy for Afghanistan, represented the United States. In his 2007 congressional testimony and in his article, *Negotiating with Iran: Reflections from Personal Experience*, Dobbins gives a detailed account of the negotiations that took place while forming the government with special emphasis on the “generally constructive” exchanges with his Iranian counterpart, Javad Zarif. The latter was the one who suggested the name of Hamid Karzai as a probable figure to lead the new Afghan government.

After agreeing on the interim constitution and on Karzai as the chairman of the administration, and when the negotiations reached an impasse, it was Zarif who made it possible and assured a consensus. Accordingly, Hossein Mousavian argues Iran wanted political stability in Afghanistan, “Iran was instrumental in establishing international legitimacy for the Kabul government by insisting the word “democracy” was introduced in the agreement.”[137] The U.S. and Iranian positions were aligned. Richard N. Haass, the director of policy planning in the State Department, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Iranian diplomats played a key role behind the scenes and “by and large, the Iranian role diplomatically has been quite constructive.”[138]

The harmony and the cordial relations between the two countries were further highlighted by a meeting at a ministerial level as U.S. Secretary of State Collin Powell shook hands with Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi at the United Nations. The act was described in a *New York Times* report as “a significant step forward in relations that have been officially frozen since the Iranian revolution of 1979.”[139] Secretary of State Powell summarized the post-9/11 American-Iranian cooperation and rapprochement in the following words:

We have been in discussions with the Iranians on a variety of levels and in some new ways since September 11th. Jim Dobbins spoke with Iranians in Bonn as we put together the new interim administration in Afghanistan, and I had



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a brief handshake and discussion with the Iranian prime minister in the UN. So there are a number of things going on and we recognize the nature of that regime and we recognize that the Iranian people are starting to try to find a new way forward and we are open to exploring new opportunities without having any vaseline in our eyes with respect to the nature of the government or the history of the past 22 years.[140]

Not only did the U.S.-led military campaign against al-Qaeda and the Taliban provide the United States and the Islamic Republic with a rare opportunity to come together, it also rebuffed the old beliefs that the two nations have diametrically opposed ideologies and that their clash is existential. Indeed, the various meetings and negotiations in Geneva and in Bonn coupled with the cooperation on the ground proved successful. The Afghanistan experience presented a good argument for Khatami's men, who lobbied for a strategic rapprochement with America, that a cordial relationship based on mutual respect and interests was possible. In the United States, Powell and his associates in the State Department did not oppose this approach as they believed they could engage with the Iranians on other issues. Interestingly, this view was not welcomed and well-received in the offices of Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld as the latter kept on promoting the containment and isolation of the clerical regime.[141] The two neoconservatives had their own reasons and after all the American-Iranian marriage of interests was not that perfect as each country had its own reservations.

### The Treacherous Alliance

The 9/11 terrorist attack was a watershed event that changed the course of U.S.-Iran relations. With the declaration of the “war on terror,” Tehran and Washington worked hand in hand. They put years of hostility and estrangement behind their back and focused on their mutual enemy as they cooperated to fight al-Qaeda and form a post-Taliban government for Afghanistan. Yet, their rocky relations since the Islamic revolution and various factors cast a shadow over the newly-reached rapprochement, hence highlighting the “special” relationship that had wavered between antagonism and harmony.

#### *Iranian Reservations about the United States*

For years, the ruling class in Tehran adopted pragmatism and *realpolitik* as the hallmarks of the Iranian foreign policy.[142] As it is mentioned above, Iran was one of the first countries to mourn the 9/11 victims and condemn the terrorist attacks. At the same time and while they were coordinating with the Americans, the Iranians did not forget to condemn the aerial bombardment of Afghanistan. In Tehran, the “either you are with us or with the terrorists” U.S. approach was perceived as “arrogant and imperialistic.” In this vein, Iran's supreme leader sharply criticized the military campaign. He stated that terrorism is only an excuse and the U.S. purports to combat terrorism, but its real intention is to grab more power, for imperialism.[143] Accordingly, President Khatami showed disagreement with the U.S.-led war on the Taliban as he preferred a UN-led action. He also called for an immediate halt to the U.S. bombing which was far from addressing the roots of terrorism, but would probably lead to more violence and he added that the terrorists may even take advantage of it.[144] Similarly, Iran's Foreign Minister, Kamal Kharrazi, questioned the real purpose behind the “unacceptable” U.S. actions. He also criticized the American approach to fight terrorism and asserted that such operations would not eliminate it, but on the contrary would lead to its expansion.[145]

The Iranian public criticism of its American partner should not be understood as a mere expression of its revolutionary anti-U.S. ideology. Despite the successful American-Iranian collaboration in defeating their mutual enemy, the Taliban, the two sides shared neither identical long-term goals nor similar strategies in Afghanistan and the broader central Asia.[146] As one State Department official put it “there are some things we're working in parallel with the Iranians, and some things they're going at in a different direction. We do not have identical goals in Afghanistan.” Iranian officials became alarmed by the American military presence in their “backyard” in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. Suspicious they were getting encircled by their “new friend” and “old foe,” the Iranians accused the United States of exploiting the “war on terror” to have a bigger military foothold in the region and to build and secure U.S. commercial and strategic interests.[147] On the other hand, the Islamic Republic wanted to pursue and protect its own national interests and assert its influence in Afghanistan and in the region.

Despite the secret meetings and sharing the same short-term goals, the U.S.-Iran cooperation witnessed few

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potholes and their *détente* was not perfect. In late December 2001, the Bush administration decided on the “Hadley Rules” policy, after Deputy National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley. Such a policy consisted in accepting help from Tehran, in their “war on terror,” but the U.S. would offer nothing in return because Iran was considered a state sponsor of terrorism.[148] In this regard the U.S. denied an Iranian request to interrogate four Guantanamo-prisoners who were suspects in the 1998 massacre of Mazar-e Sharif.[149]

Moreover, not only did high U.S. officials in the Vice president and Secretary of Defense offices try to sabotage the American-Iranian collaboration in Afghanistan, they also downplayed the role played by Iran in the “war on terror.” For instance, talking about taking over Kabul, Pentagon spokesman declared he had “no knowledge of [Iranian] assistance,” U.S. officials claimed that no meaningful contributions were made by the Iranians and asserted they did not have any interactions with them. On the other hand, Mohsen Rezaie, an ex IRGC’ chief commander confirmed the presence of very effective, active and experienced Iranian special forces on the ground, yet they were neglected by the Army propaganda which credited most of these achievements for the Americans.[150] Such facts confirm the complexity and the “special” character of the U.S.-Iran relations. At the height of their bilateral partnership, Iranians were condemning their secret allies and the Americans were denying them the credit as each nation tried to distance itself from the other.

### *American Accusations of Iran*

In the midst of the “war on terror,” the cooperation and rapprochement between Washington and Tehran was stained not just by Iran’s suspicions about their secret ally, the U.S. in return had its own reservations. By late 2001, signs of disagreement resurfaced.[151] The Islamic Republic was criticized and accused of permitting and facilitating the escape of al-Qaeda members from Afghanistan, and providing a safe haven for them.[152] The Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hamid Reza Asefi, denied the allegations and categorically rejected them as “baseless” and “dictated by the Zionist regime.”[153]

Furthermore, Pentagon and intelligence officials accused the Islamic Republic of exerting political and military influence in border regions in western Afghanistan in order to undermine the newly-formed government in Kabul by sending Iranian agents who infiltrated some regions, bribed tribal leaders and delivered weapons to cause havoc.[154] In January 10, 2002, George Bush warned Iran not to try to destabilize the interim government and Washington long-term goals in the country, and hoped Iran would continue to be “a positive force” in Afghanistan, otherwise the coalition will deal with them, “in diplomatic ways initially.” In Tehran, Bush’s words were denounced as “unfounded comments that rely on undocumented information,” while former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani considered them “rude and impudent.”[155]

Interestingly, after helping with the formation of Hamid Karzai’s government, the Islamic Republic’s assistance and cooperation with Kabul transcended the security level. Iran wanted to play a bigger role in Afghanistan. For instance, a UN-sponsored conference was held in Tehran in which experts, businessmen and entrepreneurs were invited to “discuss recovery efforts in health, education and community development.” Then, at an Afghan Reconstruction Conference in Tokyo in January 2002, Iran pledged \$560 million assistance to its neighboring country, which was one of the biggest contributions and almost the double of the \$260 million pledged by the United States.[156] In addition, according to the Iranian Foreign Ministry, Tehran’s annual trade with Kabul had increased manifold since 2001.[157]

Iran gained strategic depth in Afghanistan and wanted to have the upper hand there, yet they felt that Karzai’s administration was taking a pro-western tilt. Barnett R. Rubin, an Afghanistan specialist, argued that the Iranian “mischief,” which was condemned by Washington, should not be understood as an aggressive terrorist position, but simply a reasonable security concern and a response for a clash of interests. Such an attitude further confirms the ever-complex U.S.-Iran relations that wavered between cooperation and enmity and which depended primarily on the political calculations and the national interests of each country. It was realism and the shared political interests that put them in a secret alliance, and the moment their calculations diverged, each country turned to battle for its own interests. After all it was a marriage of convenience and each side had its own long-term goals in Afghanistan.

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Away from Kabul, the two nations' relations were further troubled by what became known as the Karine A Affair. In early January 2001, Israel seized a ship in the Red Sea that was carrying fifty tons of weapons including anti-tank missile, Katyusha rockets, explosives and ammunition.[158] Iranians were accused of supplying weapons to the Palestinian authority and threatening the stability of the Middle East. As usual, the Islamic Republic denied all the accusations and so did the chairman of the Palestinian Authority, Yasser Arafat, but weeks later he accepted some responsibility for the Affair. Years later, Javad Zarif described the Karine A Affair as a “mystery” that simply transformed the policy of engagement to confrontation. Kamal Kharrazi and other officials accused Israel of plotting the whole affair, yet it is more likely that hardline elements within the Iranian regime were behind the incident in order to undermine Khatami's efforts. The Karine A Affair served those who wanted to block the Geneva Channel and stop any U.S.-Iran rapprochement mainly Israel and the neoconservatives in Washington who used the act as a proof that the Iranians were still promoting terrorism and should be isolated.[159]

Since the Iranian revolution, the U.S.-Iran relationship was characterized by estrangement and hostility. After the efforts for reconciliation by the Clinton and Khatami administrations, the 9/11 attacks created a real opportunity for rapprochement. The relationship between the two long-time enemies was brought to a new level as the “Great Satan” and the “Mad Mullahs” found themselves in the same camp with convergent interests fighting a mutual enemy. Under the banner of the Six plus Two group, the new allies collaborated to form a post-Taliban government. Yet their short-lived cooperation witnessed few setbacks and their “special” relation oscillated between partnership and rivalry.

The American-Iranian secret alliance and partnership in the war on Afghanistan is a perfect illustration of the pragmatic approaches of the two governments. With different degrees, *realpolitik* has been central to their bilateral relations, as the two nations cooperated based on their mutual interests and practical exigencies rather than on the basis of ideological and religious doctrines. Though Iran was considered by the State Department a major supporter of terrorism, when needed the Americans sit and dealt with the “crazy clerics.” The Iranian realism is even clearer as they secretly conspired and aided the “Great Satan” against their Muslim Afghan neighbors. Such a position can be compared with the clash between Christian Armenia and Muslim Azerbaijan, and the Iranian flabbergasting siding with and supporting of the formers in the face of a Shiite country. Afghanistan was simply another illustration of how the balance is often tilted for pragmatism and geostrategic calculations over religious imperatives and ethics even for a country that is believed to be an ideologically-driven state.

In relation to U.S. but especially Iranian *realpolitik*, and in the post-9/11 context, we can also talk about 21<sup>st</sup> century American *weltpolitik* notably with the inauguration of the “war on terror” and in the realm of the “Bush Doctrine.” Indeed, weeks after September 11, the United States adopted a unilateralist aggressive foreign policy that was based on hard power and military action. With its “mega-imperialistic”[160] alienations and under the pretext of fighting international terrorism, the world's sole superpower asserted its hegemonic ambitions by embarking upon a policy of regime change as the Americans started with Afghanistan, would move to Iraq with their eyes on their rivals in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In Tehran, despite the mistrust and shared accusations with their bosom adversary, in January 2002, the Iranian government passed a message to the U.S. officials, they hoped for an “open dialogue with Washington covering all of the issues that divided the two countries.”[161] One week later, they received a very public answer by President Bush, an answer that would shake their rapprochement and bring their honeymoon to an end.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE ESTRANGEMENT WE DON'T SPEAK TO EVIL

“I am confident that Bush put the final nail in the coffin of Iran-U.S. relations ... I guess any improvement in relations must be ruled out, at least during my presidency.” Mohammed Khatami[162]

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Whereas the second chapter examines the rapprochement and the brief cooperation between Washington and Tehran following the 9/11 attacks, this chapter covers their estrangement. It opens up with George Bush's 2002 address to the nation as Iran was lumped along with Iraq and North Korea in Bush's "Axis of Evil." With reference to various articles and interviews, I will delve into the connotations of this metaphor and how it was received by the different political players.[163] Basing my empirical investigation on multiple primary sources such as reports by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), newspapers that covered the studied topic and other secondary sources, the shift toward hostility is to be examined through the analysis of two major themes: the accusations of sponsoring terrorism and pursuing nuclear capability.[164] In the midst of mistrust and undiplomatic rhetoric the "special" relationship between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran is to be discussed critically mainly through investigating their secret alliance in the War on Iraq in addition to the 2003 proposal for a "grand bargain," an offer of reconciliation and a comprehensive resolution of differences between the two bosom rivals.

### Iran in the “Axis of Evil”

Four months after the 9/11 attacks and the secret alliance and successful American-Iranian cooperation in Afghanistan, it was believed that the two old-rivals were marching toward reconciliation, but that was not totally correct. On January 29, 2002, President George Bush stood before a joint Session of Congress to deliver his first State of the Union address. The main theme of the speech was the "war on terror," it was centered on American foreign policy and even the domestic issues were interpreted within that realm and context. He gave a progress report of the U.S.-led military action in Afghanistan and asserted they were winning, yet he warned that "the war against terror is only beginning." [165]

Interestingly, Bush stated that terrorism is not solely related to Afghanistan. He warned of what he called "outlaw regimes" that "spread throughout the world like ticking time bombs." [166] In this regard, he accused Iran, Iraq and North Korea of supporting international terrorism and pursuing weapons of mass destruction and announced that these countries form an "Axis of Evil."

Our goal is to prevent regimes that sponsor terror from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction. Some of these regimes have been pretty quiet since September the 11<sup>th</sup>. But we know their true nature. 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 repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom. Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror ... This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world ... 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. [167]

Bush's words took the Iranians by surprise. For years the two nations' exchanged rhetoric was undiplomatic and antagonistic. Bush simply made it worse as he included Iran in his club of evil, and called it a threatening and dangerous state. In addition, the American president implicitly questioned the legitimacy of the ruling class in Tehran, as he criticized the "unelected few" in an attempt to reach out to the Iranians and increase the rift between them and their regime. More importantly, Tehran now faced explicit accusations and was directly linked to WMD and terrorism. About that, George Bush made it clear that not only will the U.S. shut down the terrorist camps and bring terrorists to justice but will also act preemptively and do what is necessary to ensure his nation's security. Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech set a new military strategy and drew a new foreign policy agenda for America. It is important to stop with the significance and meaning of such a phrase, how it was received throughout the world and its effects on the bilateral relations between Washington and Tehran.

### *Beyond Bush's "Axis of Evil"*

In his book, *The Right Man: The Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush*, David Frum, a White House speech writer, gives an insight into the State of the Union address. In an attempt to describe the linkage between Iraq and terrorism, Frum came up with the phrase "Axis of Hatred." [168] The word "hatred" was seen as mild and was later

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changed to “evil” which is more melodramatic hence the phrase “Axis of Evil” sounded “more sinister, even wicked.”[169] It is crucial to underline the importance of the choice of words and their impact, as one should always bear in mind that the main goal behind the use of such rhetoric is to indoctrinate and manipulate the already chocked American population and to deliver warning messages to the mentioned countries. The meanings and connotation of this controversial axis are to be discussed throughout the following paragraphs.

George Bush’s National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice, and her deputy, Stephen Hadley, suggested naming the Islamic Republic of Iran and North Korea along with Iraq in the axis. When the latter had second thoughts and expressed his uncertainty about including Iran arguing that their president was elected democratically, Bush said: “No, I want it in.” The president’s advisors believed the phrase was a “watershed” and a declaration of a new and a big mission that would define the problem in “graphic, biblical terms without publicly committing to a particular solution.”[170]

On January 29, 2002, Bush used the word “evil” five times and it was not his first. In his September 11<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> speeches he also used the term, and in an interview with *Newsweek* in November he said Saddam was evil.[171] It can be argued that Bush’s rhetoric echoed Ronald Reagan’s “Evil Empire” when talking about the Soviet Union. George Bush, a “born-again Christian” as he credited himself, referred to eschatological terms to draw a struggle between Good and Evil. He adopted a dualistic view of world politics between the Forces of Good presented by the United States and the “civilized world” against the Forces of Evil, the “Axis of Evil,” and highlighting the uncivilized barbaric enemy, suggesting a “moral struggle” as David Frum put it, a struggle of good against evil. This polarization and dichotomy further consolidates Bush’s division of world politics into “us” against “them,” either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.[172] Such a perception not only creates a political identity of the “Good” state, but also legitimizes the actions of the American government and justifies its future plans in its effort to stand up and oppose those “evil” countries. Furthermore, it is believed that this rhetoric also helped unify the domestic public opinion and mobilize the American people.

The “Axis of Evil” invoked other connotations. It exploited the history of the “Axis of Powers” in the Second World War: Germany, Italy and Japan.[173] The phrase was a metonym for Nazism and fascism, implied strategic collaboration between Tehran, Baghdad and Pyongyang and that the three countries were united and were working or conspiring collectively. Indeed, Frum considered their threat as terrible and profound as communism and Nazism in their days.[174]

On the other hand, the idea of an “Axis of Evil” was criticized and even ridiculed for various reasons. Unlike the Axis Powers, this troika did not sign any diplomatic treaties with one another and their relations were intense. While the term “axis” suggests cooperation and an alliance, there was no real connection between North Korea and Iraq or Iran. Actually, Pyongyang was culturally, ideologically and even geographically distant from the other two other states. In addition, Baghdad and Tehran were involved in an eight-year bloody war in the 1980s and had hostile relations ever since.[175]

Equally important, though usually described as “rogue states” by the U.S., none the three “evil” states openly opposed the “war on terror.” Hence, many believed the Americans were simply extending their scope of the war and garnering public support for probable future military action. What is certain is that the “Axis of Evil” caused controversy all over the world, enflamed anti-American sentiments and opened the door for the war of words especially in Tehran.

### *The Reception and the Reactions*

After months of cooperation over Afghanistan and though many analysts anticipated major improvements in the relations between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran, all hopes for further rapprochement were dashed when George Bush placed Iran in his club of evil. The international reaction to the announcement differed from Washington to Tehran to the European capitals and while many supported it in the U.S., it was harshly criticized elsewhere and it was not well received.

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In Tehran, the Iranian leaders reacted angrily to Bush’s accusations of exporting terror and pursuing weapons of mass destruction and dismissed them altogether. While the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, considered Bush a man who is “thirsty for human blood,” Mohamed Khatami accused his American counterpart of war-mongering and considered the latter’s words “bellicose and insulting.”[176] Khatami compared the U.S. attitude toward Iran to that of post-1979 revolution and asserted that the U.S. policy was doomed to fail and that it was even worse and more unrealistic. Hossein Mousavian, a top Iranian official, reports Khatami’s reaction to George Bush’s speech: “I am confident that Bush put the final nail in the coffin of Iran-U.S. relations ... I guess any improvement in relations must be ruled out, at least during my presidency.”[177] More importantly, the Iranians stopped showing up for the Geneva meetings, where they used to sit with the Americans mainly to discuss their cooperation in Afghanistan.[178]

As for the Iran’s foreign minister, Kamal Kharrazi, after cancelling a visit to New York and expressing grave disappointment and strong indignation at the “arrogant” remarks in the speech, he suggested that it would have been better if the Americans were more cooperative and helped them secure their five-hundred-mile Afghan border instead of hurling accusations.[179] The Iranian angry statements did not end there. Kharrazi’s deputy, Mohammad Adeli, expressed his chock and disappointment, while the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hamidreza Asefi believed the American accusations were not acceptable and based on mere hallucinations, not evidence.[180] Mohammed Ali Mousavi, then Iran’s ambassador to Canada, thought the “Axis of Evil” classification was a setback that brought back the wall of mistrust and claimed the American rhetoric was offensive and unprofessional. Massoumeh Ebtekar, then vice president for environment in the Khatami’s administration, believed that Bush made a strategic mistake, yet it was an occasion that brought Iranians together on a common stance.[181]

Indeed, Bush’s speech cast its shadow on the domestic political scene in Tehran. After various interviews with eighteen members of the Iranian oppositional elite, a study entitled *What the Axis of Evil Metaphor Did to Iran* argued that the “Axis of Evil” was a slap in the face of those who trusted the Americans and ended all prospects of future rapprochement with them. It was a huge blow to Khatami’s men who lost the argument to the hardliners.[182] It is essential here to ask, did it really kill all prospects of future rapprochement? The answer to this question will be unveiled in the upcoming lines of the dissertation.[183] Certainly, Bush’s antagonistic move toward Iran weakened the reformers’ position who felt betrayed, and plagued their strained relationship with the U.S. The mistake Iran made was that they helped the Americans without exacting a price for it wishing that their partners would reciprocate.[184] Tehran learned the lesson the hard way as some of the Iranian diplomats lost their careers as a price of this failure, and more importantly, the “wall of mistrust” the two sides once tried to break down, reappeared.

In Tehran, the speech coincided with the celebration of the 23<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the Islamic revolution, its slogans were revived, and as the Iranians expressed their hostility to the “Great Satan” and chanted “Death to America,” their president declared: “As long as [the Americans] are threatening, insulting and humiliating us, neither myself nor the nation is ready to accept any relations.”[185] After their rapprochement and their short-lived cooperation over Afghanistan, the U.S.-Iran relationship was deteriorating.

The negative reception of the 2002 State of the Union address was not just in Tehran. Whereas Pyongyang described Bush as a nuclear maniac and his remarks as reckless tantamount to a declaration of war, Baghdad called it stupid and inappropriate. Across the Atlantic, Paris criticized Bush’s “simplistic” approach and Berlin rejected the U.S. unilateralism. Moscow questioned the label-sticking cold war tactic and Beijing did not advocate that kind of language in international relations.[186] The European Union’s foreign policy chief, Chris Patten, deemed Bush’s rhetoric unhelpful and declared that the “Axis of Evil” was not a well thought-through policy. The European Union believed they could tackle the Iranians through engagement, not containment.[187]

On the other hand, other forces welcomed the administration’s foreign policy. James Woolsey, director of the C.I.A. from 1993 to 1995, was “quite positively impressed” and former U.S. ambassador to South Korea, James R. Lilley, supported the American president’s approach and thought the president spoke the truth. Similarly, Elaine Sciolino, a senior writer in the *New York Times* asserted that she was not surprised and the classification was clever and came as a natural evolution from the “war on terror.”[188]

George Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address was one of the most important speeches in the history of the

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complex U.S.-Iran relations. It marked the rift between the two states and highlighted the estrangement between a country that was accused of sponsoring terrorism and attempting to acquire nuclear power, and a second nation that believed in preemptive military action and adopted regime change as a policy.

### Terrorism and Nuclear Weapons

This part of the investigation examines what America considers the major pillars of Iranian threats: promotion of terrorism and development of weapons of mass destruction. Even in the midst of their collaboration, U.S. suspicions and accusations were often announced. This idea can be summed up in the words of National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice who declared in January 2002: “Iran’s direct support of regional and global terrorism and its aggressive efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction belie any good intentions it displayed in the days after the world’s worst terrorist attack in history.”[189]

#### *Sponsoring Terrorism*

After 9/11, Iran was not only one of the first states that condemned the attacks, but it also cooperated with the Americans in the U.S.-led “war on terror.”[190] This collaboration was not taken into consideration and not even mentioned in Bush’s speech in January 29, 2002 when the latter designated Iran as part of an “Axis of Evil.” Yet it was not too surprising that the Bush administration accused its long-time foe of terrorism. Since the creation of the U.S. State Department list of nations sponsoring terrorism, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been in that list.[191] In May 2002, the U.S. Department of State confirmed that Iran “remained the most active state sponsor of terrorism.”[192]

While writing these lines, March 2015, and while Washington and Tehran are negotiating a nuclear deal, the FBI has just removed Iran and Hezbollah from its own list of sponsoring terrorism, though they are still on the U.S. State Department list. In this regard, it is noteworthy to say that accusing regimes and groups of terrorism and placing them on such lists is not 100% related to terrorism. In their war against the Soviet Union, Ben Laden’s “Mujahedeen” were not designated terrorists. In the 1980s, Iraq was taken off that U.S. Department of State list simply to be able to assist Saddam Hussein against Khomeini’s Iran in the eight-year war. For years, Nelson Mandela, the South African hero, figured on that list as a terrorist.[193] Ironically at the same time Ernesto Pinochet, the Chilean butcher had cordial relations with the West and Ferdinand Marcos, the dictator of the Philippines and the second most corrupt head of state ever according to Transparency International, was hailed by the Americans for his “adherence to democratic principles and democratic processes.”[194] Furthermore, though fifteen out of the nineteen hijackers involved in the 9/11 attacks were Saudis, Saudi Arabia, one of the U.S.’ most strategic allies, was not designated a terrorist state. Last but not least, although Mujahedin-e-Khalq claimed responsibility for many terrorist acts inside Iran, and the United States accused them of killing American citizens in the 1970s, the organization had an office near the White House and some of its leaders still enjoy close relations with U.S. officials.[195]

Back to the “Axis of Evil,” the United States accused Iran of sponsoring terrorism and terrorist groups and denounced the Iran’s role in Afghanistan and its support for al-Qaeda members. But before that and more importantly, the two countries disagree on defining terrorism. While the Iranians do not hide their support, for the “resistance movements,” Hezbollah, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, all three organizations are on the U.S. State Department list and are considered terrorist Islamic groups because of their anti-Israel operations.[196] Whereas the Americans reject their terrorist activities and denounce their role in destabilizing the Middle East and threatening the security of the region, the Iranians believe that Hezbollah and the Palestinians are liberation movements fighting occupation forces. The divergent interests and different partners and perspectives may account for the failure to find a common understanding and definition of the word “terrorism.” Khatami asserted “this is our problem: who defines terrorism and who is a terrorist.”[197]

As Washington accused Tehran of backing groups that target civilians for political goals and try to recreate another Lebanon in the West Bank and in Gaza, the Iranians rejected such claims and asserted they are against terrorism but they acknowledge the legitimate rights of people who are under occupation and support their independence.[198] Despite their differences and their domestic clashes, both Iranian conservatives and reformists oppose Israel, at

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least rhetorically, and believe that the Palestinian resistance against occupation “is not a terrorist fight, it is a legitimate fight. It is not terrorism.”[199]

As always, the war of words and the accusations were not one-sided. While Bush named Iran in his “Axis of Evil” and declared that it was the most active state sponsor of terrorism in the world, Iranians claimed they had been victims of terrorism and denounced the double standards and the U.S. peculiar attitude toward the MEK. Former president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, declared that the term “terrorism” had become an instrument that the American administration was using to suit its own ends and he accused George Bush of supporting of terrorism.[200]

In addition to aiding, arming, training and sponsoring terrorist groups, Iran was accused of supporting terrorism in Afghanistan. Few days after naming Iran in the “Axis of Evil,” Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an Afghan warlord who had been under house arrest in Tehran since the 1990s, managed to return to his homeland to fight the Americans there and challenge the “puppet regime” in Kabul.[201] Some American Officials believed that releasing Hekmatyar was an Iranian pay back for Bush’s speech.[202] Such a claim is hard to rebuff especially with the timing of his comeback, it is probably more than just a coincidence. On the other hand, a *Washington Post* report stated, in February 2002, that Ismael Khan, another warlord who controlled Herat, was backed by the Iranians who provided him with weapons and trainings through al-Quds Brigade, an elite security unit directed by the IRGC and loyal to Iran’s clerical leaders.[203]

As mentioned in the second chapter, Washington accused Tehran of offering support and sanctuary to many al-Qaeda fighters. Despite the Iranian denial, facts show that the American suspicions were not baseless. Before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Iran had become the preferred route and bridge to Afghanistan.[204] As soon as the United States started bombing the Taliban, hundreds al-Qaeda operatives fled to Iran including Osama Ben Laden’s son, Saad, and many other leaders such as Abu Hafs the Mauritanian, Abu Musaab Zarqawi and the head of Al Qaeda’s military committee, Sayf al-Adl, who was in charge of securing the arrival of the fighters to Iran.[205] Though it was never confirmed, Richard Minitier, an investigative journalist argued that Ben Laden himself crossed the Afghan border to the Iranian city of Mashhad in July 2002.[206] American and Israeli officials accused Iranian security forces of harboring the escaped terrorists. U.S. Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, put it explicitly: “There’s no question that there is al-Qaeda and folks that are in there... Iran has been permissive and allowed transit through their country of Al Qaeda.”[207]

In an interview with *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, Hamid Zakiri, a senior IRGC who defected asserted that the relationship was not between al-Qaeda and the Iranian government, it was rather with the intelligence branch of the Revolutionary Guards.[208] The same idea was confirmed in Sayf al-Adl’s testimony who asserted that the cooperation was with “sincere individuals,” not with the official administration in Tehran.[209] Paul Hastert also argues that the evidence of operational collaboration between al-Qaeda and the Iranians was clear.[210] After the terrorist attacks in Riyadh in May 2003, in which eight Americans were killed, U.S. officials put the blame on the al-Qaeda members hiding in Iran.[211] As a result, the already ruined Tehran-Washington relationship further deteriorated. The planned meeting between the Iranian UN ambassador Javad Zarif and his American counterpart Zalmay Khalilzad was canceled, the secret Geneva Channel was closed for the second time and all direct talks were ended.[212] Barbara Slavin argues that the Geneva Channel of communication, which was revived in the spring of 2002, and the bilateral talks were too secret that many officials within the Bush administration did not know the meetings took place.

Back to terrorist attack in Saudi Arabia, Hastert believes that despite the religious differences and the divergent geopolitical aims, both al-Qaeda and certain factions of the Iranian regime had mutual interests and collaborated to limit the projection of U.S. interests in the region. Similarly, Iran or at least certain Iranian factions did cooperate and coordinate with the Taliban in 2007 in order to rein in the American forces in Afghanistan.[213] Likewise, eight years later, various newspapers including the *Guardian* reported in May 2015 that secret meetings are being held between Taliban representatives and Iranian officials to discuss future plans in reaction to the rise of ISIS or the so-called “Islamic State.”[214].

Such alliances show how pragmatism and *realpolitik* still dominate the Iranian foreign policy-making, and how an arch-enemy like al-Qaeda or the Taliban, the Sunni groups that Iran helped crushing can become partners,



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temporarily at least. One can compare such relations to the one that brought the USA and the USSR together in wartime. Away from the Sunni-Shiite controversial relations and back to the Riyadh bombings, the attack further damaged the Washington-Tehran relations and increased the friction and estrangement between the two nations. Yet, the Islamic Republic was not just accused of sponsoring international terrorism, the U.S. also questioned the Iranian quest for nuclear weapons.

### *The Nuclear Dossier*

When George Bush designated the Islamic Republic in the “Axis of Evil,” he did not just criticize the Iranians sponsorship of international terrorism, he also condemned their pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, and assured that his administration will not permit “rogue states” to threaten the security of the world with the most destructive weapons.[215] But, Iran’s aspirations for a nuclear project were not new. The Iranian nuclear program was launched in the mid-twentieth century under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Ironically it would not have seen the light of day without the U.S. cooperation and help till 1979.[216] After the revolution, their collaboration was ended. The nuclear program was deemed forbidden in Islam and was halted by Khomeini. Afterwards, favoring pragmatism over idealism, he decided to resume it with assistance from Argentina, and then in the 1990s, Russia became Iran’s main partner in the nuclear field.[217]

In January 30, 2002, a report released by the CIA confirmed that “Iran [remained] one of the most active countries seeking to acquire WMD and ACW (advanced conventional weapons) technology from abroad.”[218] Iran was also accused of seeking chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons and missile-related technologies. The report stated that along with Beijing and Pyongyang, Moscow was still Tehran’s main supplier especially in relation to the nuclear power station at Bushehr.[219] Coupled with Bush’s harsh comments and the classification of Iran in the “Axis of Evil,” National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice, and Vice President, Dick Cheney, condemned the Iranians “unstinting efforts” to develop WMD and stressed the danger they posed.[220]

The American accusations and allegations were solidified and the U.S.-Iran relations were further damaged in August 2002 when a spokesperson for the National Council of Resistance of Iran, the political wing of MEK, declared at a press conference that Tehran had a covert nuclear program and revealed two secretly-built nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak: The first is a gas centrifuge uranium enrichment plant whereas the second is a heavy-water plant. Then, inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed the existence of the facilities, and in February 2003, Mohamed ElBaradei, the IAEA director, declared that Iran had a more advanced uranium enrichment program than was expected in the Natanz site.[221]

Relations between Washington and Tehran further deteriorated as distrust and hostility characterized the rhetoric of both the Iranians and the Americans. The U.S. officials used the revelation of the two facilities to boost their stance and their allegation that Iran was determined to acquire WMD. The Bush administration questioned not only the secrecy of the Iranian nuclear program, but its existence altogether, arguing that there is no legitimate need for a major oil-producing country like Iran to have a nuclear power station unless it is for the production of bombs.[222] The Irony is that the United States of America is itself one of the main producers of oil in the world, yet it has nuclear power.

On the other hand, and in response to the American condemnation, the Iranians refuted the U.S. accusations and doubts. They claimed that their foreign policy does not include acquiring nuclear power as non-peaceful means. Such an idea is further highlighted in a letter by Iran’s Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in which he stated that they were not trying to develop nuclear weapons and that “unlike the United States, weapons of mass destruction have no place in Iran’s defense doctrine.”[223] In this vein, Khatami declared: “It is not our policy to have nuclear weapons. We don’t have a program to build bombs.”[224] His administration also assured that they are only interested in nuclear technology for their civilian energy program and claimed that their nuclear project was peaceful and had no military ambitions.[225] More importantly, as signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Iranian officials asserted that Iran vigorously pursues its “inalienable right” to enjoy all the technical and research privileges to develop its nuclear, chemical and biological industries for peaceful purposes.[226]

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Discussing the Iranian nuclear dossier, geo-strategically speaking and from the Iranian national security perspective, Tehran's aspiration for nuclear weapons can be understood for a country that is encircled and surrounded by various nuclear powers: Tel Aviv to the west, Islamabad and New Delhi to the east and the Americans in both Kabul and Baghdad. Needless to say that almost all the previously stated countries, in addition to most of the Gulf countries are U.S. partners and allies. Besides, it is worth noting that while sanctioning Iran and harshly criticizing their attempts to acquire WMD, the United States has been the main supporter of Israel, which has more than two hundred war heads and still refuses to sign the NPT.

In an interview with BBC, John Bolton, U.S. Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security asserted that Washington believed Iran was not a rational partner and thought that the ultimate way to stop them from acquiring nuclear weapons or supporting international terrorism was to change the regime in Tehran.[227] Bolton's words should not be taken for granted; despite being presented as fanatical and called “Mad Mullahs,” the Iranian ruling class is rather very rational. In fact, unlike the adventurous Saddam Hussein who committed strategic mistakes such as attacking Iran and invading Kuwait, Iranian policy makers are rather more calculating and did not indulge in similar acts. “Iran has acted with greater savvy and caution than have many of Israel's traditional foes ... Iran was never reckless or completely insensitive to its losses,” Ehud Yaari, an Israeli journalist explained.[228]

Rational or not, the neoconservatives in Washington did not recognize the legitimacy of the Iranian regime. Despite the fact that the Bush administration did not openly threaten to strike Iran, they had a phrase for it: “All options are on the table.”[229] Such a phrase was regularly used by top U.S. officials while refereeing to Iran. It means the option of military attack is open. Noam Chomsky argues that such a phrase is a direct threat to Iran and according to the UN Charter, the foundation of modern international law, the use of force or the threat of use of force is unlawful in international affairs. But such a principle is overlooked by rogue states like the United States or Israel.[230]

As the war of words escalated between the old foes, their relationship worsened as well. While the Americans kept accusing Iran of supporting terrorism and developing WMD, Iranians continued chanting their “Death to America” and “Nuclear power is our right” slogans. As hostility governed the U.S.-Iran relations, the Americans left the talking to the Europeans. In October 2003, the foreign ministers of Britain, France and Germany (the EU3) visited Tehran and started negotiating with the Iranians.[231] In November of the same year, though Mohammed ElBaradei stated in a report to the IAEA Board of Governors that there was “no evidence” indicating that Iran had been attempting to develop nuclear weapons, John Bolton considered the findings “impossible to believe” and the Bush administration continued its accusations and threats.[232] One month later and after rounds of talks with the EU3, the Iranians agreed to cooperate fully with the IAEA and stop enriching uranium. Iran signed the IAEA's “Additional Protocol” providing a high level of transparency to its nuclear program.[233]

Discussing the Iranian nuclear dossier, though this view is not widely-shared, I do believe that uranium enrichment is a deterrent and the Iranian nuclear project and threat of a bomb are just precious bargaining chips. Tehran does not seek a nuclear weapon, and it is against its strategic interest to do so. Bearing in mind its vast resources and size, the Islamic Republic enjoys a conventional superiority in comparison to its neighbors, and the day the Iranians obtain the nukes, all the regional rivals will go for their own. Such a scenario would leave Iran in parity with a country like Qatar which is 140 times smaller than the former.[234] This approach has been verified recently, in reaction to the preliminary Iran deal reached in March 2015, Saudi Arabia put it explicitly: If Iran possesses a nuclear bomb, they will do the same.[235]

Back to the central discussion, after signing the “Additional Protocol,” as months passed and as the talks continued, Iranians would break their promise, resume enriching, re-engage in multilateral negotiations with the international community, new sanctions would be imposed especially with hard-liners winning the presidential and parliamentary elections in the Islamic Republic. Yet, in the midst of apparent hatred and lack of trust, and despite the shared antagonistic threats and accusations between 2002 and 2003, few gestures and initiatives of cooperation took place between the two rivals.

### The Forbidden Reunion

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As soon as Bush nominated Iran in the “Axis of Evil,” friction and antipathy characterized the relationship between Washington and Tehran. But, as previously stated, the two countries had very complex and “special” relations. Despite the accusations, the rhetorical warfare and threats of war, reconciliation attempts and brief collaboration between the two states sometimes took place. The “war on terror,” the invasion of Iraq and the 2003 historic proposal can be cited as good examples.

### *Apart yet Together*

Notwithstanding its tragic repercussions, the 2002 State of the Union address should not be thought of as the station that broke all the ties and ended the newly-born rapprochement altogether between Washington and Tehran. The reality is much more complicated and so is the nature of the “special” relationship between the “Great Satan” and the “unelected sponsors of terrorism.”

In March 2002 few weeks after Bush’s speech, Senator Joseph Biden, now Vice President then chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, invited representatives of the Iranian Parliament to sit down with American Congressmen in an open dialogue.[236] Biden’s initiative was well received in the corridors of the White House, his speech was encouraged and he was asked to pursue it.[237] On the other hand, the *Financial Times* reported that Ayatollah Khamenei gave his authorization to the Supreme National Security Council to assess the merits of engaging in a bilateral dialogue with the Americans. One day later, the supreme leader denounced their bullying and asserted that negotiating with the U.S. will not solve any problems as it will be exclusively beneficial to them. More importantly and beyond the declarations, senior Iranian parliamentarians sit with their American counterparts to discuss their complex relations. In Washington, while Colin Powell denied any plans to start a conflict with Iran, Condoleezza Rice and Richard Boucher made it clear that the U.S. does not oppose talks with Tehran and is ready to sit to the Iranians. Yet, it must be stated that Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and other neoconservatives in the Bush administration never supported the idea of engaging the Iranians as they did not stop advocating military intervention and promoting regime change in Tehran.

Despite the already discussed differences concerning the definition of terrorism and the different approaches they had to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Iran approved an American suggestion to urge Hezbollah to exercise “self-restraint” in an attempt to avoid widening the crisis and restore peace in 2002.[238] Back to Afghanistan and terrorism-related issues, Stephen Hadley, who served as National Security Adviser for President George Bush, wrote about the “constructive cooperation” between the two countries.[239] The Islamic Republic’s ambassador to Kabul met routinely with his American counterpart.[240] Likewise, representatives of the two nations met again in March 2002 in Geneva to discuss rebuilding Afghanistan’s police force and national army. James Dobbins, the Bush administration’s special envoy for Kabul, recounts the exchanges he had with the Iranians who “persisted in [their] attempts to cooperate with the United States.”[241] They expressed their readiness to work under the leadership of the Americans and participate in the U.S.-led program, clothing, arming, paying, training and arming up to 20,000 Afghan troops. Concerning this offer, the Iranians received no response.[242]

This offer was another episode of the Iranian attempts to reach out to the Americans. Iran’s efforts for an extended cooperation with the U.S. that might lead to a strategic rapprochement were once again met with contempt as the “hawks” in the Bush administration turned a deaf ear to such requests. Backed by the Israeli lobby, neocons such as Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Feith adamantly refused reaching out to and dealing with the regime, and pushed for regime change instead.

Still dealing with the cooperation over Afghanistan, Iran’s pragmatic stance toward al-Qaeda changed after the 2003 terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia. Pressured by Washington and Riyadh, Tehran arrested and deported hundreds of al-Qaeda operatives who hid in Iran.[243] The comments of the key leader in al-Qaeda, Sayf Al-Adl, provide a better understanding of the situation: “The steps that the Iranians took against us confused us and aborted 75% of our plan. A large number of young men were arrested including up to 80% of Abu Musaab’s group.”[244]

Despite the estrangement and shared insults after relegating Iran to the “Axis of Evil,” the complex and “special” character that highlighted the bilateral relationship between Washington and Tehran was still there. Beyond the

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apparent friction and antipathy, the Iranian-American collaboration over Afghanistan continued in a limited manner. More importantly, it was not just in Kabul that the two rivals' interests crossed. Baghdad was another place where the two bosom enemies met.

### *The Iraqi Quagmire: My Enemy's Enemy is my Friend*

This part of the dissertation is not an account of the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, nor is it a description of the U.S. propaganda and media coverage during the war. It is an analysis of the Iranian role and the cooperation between Washington and Tehran in the U.S.-led assault on Iraq. The war has been known as the “War on Iraq,” “Invasion of Iraq,” “Bush’s War,” but probably the acronym of the initial codename that was chosen, then changed, is the best description and the most genuine one. At first it was called “Operation Iraqi Liberation” and its acronym “OIL” gives a full picture of the nature and the reasons for the invasion.

Unlike Ronald Reagan who aided Saddam Hussein while he gassed the Iranians in the eight-year war and gassed his own Kurdish population, and unlike his “daddy” who supported the Baathist Iraqi regime in brutally crushing a revolt in the beginning of the 1990s, George Bush made it clear he was going to Baghdad to “liberate Iraq and free its people.” In March 2003, the neoconservatives and their allies invaded Iraq to disarm Saddam of weapons of mass destruction, he did not have, and to put an end to his support to al-Qaeda and break their relationship, a relationship that did not exist in the first place.[245]

As opposed to the common belief, the Islamic Republic of Iran though an arch-enemy to the Iraqi regime and Saddam Hussein, was against the American invasion.[246] They declared that they would not stand still and simply watch the toppling of neighboring Iraq. Indeed the Iranians did not stand still; they assisted in the overthrow of the Baathist regime. Theoretically, the Islamic Republic adopted the policy of “effective neutrality.”[247] Practically, knowing that the American attack on Iraq was certain, the Iranians worked by the saying “if you can not beat them join them” and jumped on board the American boat.

Mohammed Khatami declared years after he left office: “Saddam was our enemy [and] we wanted him destroyed.”[248] The Iranians suggested repeating the Afghanistan experience in Iraq, replacing the Five plus One talks by Six plus Six, the six countries neighboring Iraq, the Security Council members plus Egypt. The United States rejected the offer as it would include France and Russia and the two states were against the war on Iraq. Instead, the Geneva Channel was resurrected, their partnership was revived as the Iranian UN ambassador Javad Zarif and his American counterpart Zalmay Khalilzad started sitting together in the spring of 2002.[249] Unlike the Americans, sharing a nine-hundred-mile border with Iraq and going through a bloody eight-year war against Saddam, the Iranians had clearer picture about the Baathist regime and had a better understanding of the Iraqi tribal networks. They provided the Americans with intelligence.[250]

In a series of interviews with *Russia Today*, Abdul Sattar al-Rawi, the former Iraqi ambassador in Tehran until 2003, recalls the Iranian role in the invasion and describes the political and military assistance to the United States.[251] He argues that the pre-war cooperation between Iran and the U.S. goes back to 2001 when Ahmad Chalabi, an Iraqi politician with American nationality, was well welcomed in Tehran and he was allowed to set an Iraqi National Congress (INC) office there.[252] According to *Radio Free Iraq*, Chalabi served as a mediator between Washington and Tehran as he visited the two capitals regularly and held meetings with senior officials and with various Iraqi opposition leaders in the months preceding the invasion.[253] In August 2002, he arranged for a transmitter that was financed by the Americans, broadcast for the Iraqis and installed in Iran. More importantly, al-Rawi argues that Chalabi transferred millions of dollars from the U.S. to Iran and was used to finance and equip the Badr Brigade.[254]

The former Iraqi ambassador also recalls the crucial role the Iranians played, as they mobilized the Badr Brigade near the Iraqi Southern border and they established thousands of tents, allegedly for times of crisis. Another part of the Badr Corps moved to the North and would later join the Kurds, led by Jalal Talabani, in fighting the Iraqi forces and supporting the Americans.[255] In this vein, a Jamestown Foundation report confirms al-Rawi’s testimony and highlights the Iranian role in the war. It discusses the mobilization of the Iranian forces on the border. The IRGC ordered the Badr Brigade to form two battalions: Mujahedi al-Hussein and Anasr al-Hussein to collect intelligence on

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Iraqi military units and the Air Defense Forces then assisted the Americans as soon as the war began. Abdul Sattar al-Rawi is confident that the Islamic Republic played a helpful role prior the U.S. invasion. The U.S.-Iranian partnership was illustrated in a very famous statement by Mohamed Ali Abtahi, Iran’s former vice president, “Were it not for Iran, Baghdad and Kabul would not have fallen.”[256]

The Islamic Republic’s efforts and assistance to the United States was not solely during the period prior to the invasion or during the war as the Iranian-backed forces fought alongside the Americans and did not oppose the U.S. occupation. Furthermore, Kenneth Pollack describes their “very helpful” role especially during the reconstruction phase after Saddam’s fall. Iran instructed the Shiite political parties and their affiliated militias to engage in the reconstruction efforts.[257] The cooperation between Washington and Tehran and Iran’s role in the war on Iraq can be summed up in the following lines by the Iraqi writer Aymen al-Hashemi:

The Iranian position on the American invasion of Iraq, before during and after the war, has been characterized by pragmatism and political hypocrisy. Iran, the Muslim neighbor which was concerned with the security and unity of Iraq, pressured elements of the Shiite political parties to participate in the London and Washington conferences which paved the way for the occupation of Iraq. Despite the apparent strained U.S.-Iranian relations, secret political flirtation between the two sides took place ... An Iranian-American deal should not be disregarded, with Iran putting pressure on Shiite clerics to adopt a choice of conciliating the occupier and not to be dragged into any acts of resisting the occupation.[258]

In spite of the secret and real collaboration between the United States and the Islamic Republic in the 2003 war on Iraq, the Iranians were not simply following an American agenda, they were rather pursuing their own interests which sometimes differed from those held by the invaders. Various articles and testimonies have described the destructive role played by Iran and/or its offshoots to hit American interests in Iraq. For instance, a report by the *Institute for the Study of War* explores Iran’s involvement through the IRGC and the Quds Brigade in training, funding and supporting various resistance groups, mainly Shiites but also Sunnis, in targeting the U.S. forces, the Iraqi Security forces and the government in Baghdad.[259] The ambivalent Iranian position highlights the multi-layered and “special” relationship between Tehran and Washington. Iran’s crucial role in toppling Sadam’s regime, the collaboration between the U.S. and the country that was just thrown in Bush’s “Axis of Evil” and the continuous threats of military action from the hawks in Washington, made the Iranians think about further expanding their partnership, bettering their relations with the Americans and solving all the standing issues for good.

### *The Grand Bargain: The Missed Opportunity*

Just few days after George Bush declared “Mission Accomplished” in toppling Baghdad, surrounded by thousands of U.S. troops near their borders and as the neoconservatives continued their hostile calls for regime change in Tehran, the Iranians decided to reach out to the Americans. In an unprecedented move and in an attempt to mend Iran’s shattered relations with the United States, a proposal was sent by the Islamic Republic, via the Swiss ambassador, to Washington.[260]

The Iranian offer was a comprehensive proposal which laid out the terms for a “grand bargain” that sought to address the various points of contention between the two rivals.[261] It was drafted by Sadagh Kharrazi, the Iranian ambassador in Paris, an in-law of Khamenei and the Foreign Minister’s nephew, and was reviewed and discussed by top Iranian statesmen: the supreme leader, the President, the Foreign Minister and the UN ambassador.[262] Not only was the roadmap authentic and approved by the highest levels of leadership, it also sought to resolve all issues of concern between the U.S. and Iran and put everything on the table, it included terrorism, the nuclear program, the sanctions, Iraq and even the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.[263]

In the pursuit of normalizing the relations between Iran and America, the roadmap suggested direct talks and “mutual respect” between the two states. The Islamic Republic demanded that the U.S. stop the hostile behavior and drop the policy of regime change in Tehran. In addition to abolishing U.S. sanctions, Iran defended its right for access to peaceful nuclear, biotechnology and chemical technology. In addition, the Iranians demanded the Americans to respect their interests in Iraq and in the region, and sought cooperation over anti-Iranian groups, mainly the MEK.

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On the other hand, the Islamic Republic made major concessions. Iran was ready to cooperate fully with the IAEA, open its nuclear program to inspections. Besides, they pledged to help stabilize Iraq and take decisive action against terrorists especially al-Qaeda. More importantly, Iran offered to halt its material support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and to transform Hezbollah into a peaceful political party. It also promised to accept the Palestinian-Israeli peace process and the two-states-approach.

In Washington, Flynt Leverett, who was serving in the U.S. National Security Council in the Bush administration, believed the proposal was “extraordinary” and his wife Hilary Mann, the head of the Department of State Iran Section, thought it was “significant and groundbreaking.”[264] Although the State Department, Collin Powell and his deputy, Richard Armitage, did not oppose the Iranian offer, neocons like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld had a different opinion: “We don’t speak to evil.”[265] Without even being negotiated or discussed, Iran’s proposal was neglected and the Iranians never received a response.[266]

One of the main reasons that led the Americans to reject the Iranian proposal was the balance of power between the two states at the time. “America was too strong and too awesome, Iran too weak and too fragile. It was hubris,” Parsi reasoned.[267] Indeed, very proud of the successful military campaign in Kabul and in Baghdad, the Bush administration did not see the need to talk to the vulnerable Iranians. The Americans thought that whatever the U.S. was going to achieve by negotiating with Iran, it can achieve even more by simply removing the government of the Ayatollahs. Did not they topple Saddam just in three weeks! The proposal was ignored and the Washington-Tehran relations remained hostile.

The rapprochement and the short-lived honeymoon between the United States and the Islamic Republic were halted by throwing Iran in the “Axis of Evil.” Accusing the Iranians of sponsoring international terrorism and developing nuclear weapons simply added fuel to the fire as the war of words escalated further inflaming the hostility and antagonism between the “Great Satan” and the “evil.” Notwithstanding the secret meetings in Geneva and the brief collaboration over Iraq, the neoconservatives in the Bush administration, mainly the Vice president and the Secretary of Defense and their associates, did their best to block all attempts of partnership with the Iranians. The continuous threats of regime change and the calls for military action against Tehran killed all seeds of reconciliation. Yet, in an unstable Middle East, with the eruption of the insurgencies in Iraq, the equation soon changed for the favor of the Islamic Republic which gained more control over Baghdad and the region, not to mention the election of conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president. Years after rejecting the Iranian roadmap, many top U.S. officials like Paul R. Pillar, James Dobbins, Lawrence Wilkerson, and Richard Haass, now perceive the 2003 Iranian proposal as a “missed opportunity.”[268]

### Conclusion

This thesis has examined the “special” relationship between the United States and Iran between 2001 and 2003. This research is the first attempt in the field to assess the ambivalent and multilayered American-Iranian relations during the just mentioned timeframe. Not only does this work complement the existing literature, it also contributes in specific areas to the historiography of post-9/11 American foreign policy toward the Islamic Republic and to the wider literature of the Washington-Tehran bilateral relations.

Past experiences and memories have deep impact on the collective identity of countries that they never lose their influence over time. Some memories are passed throughout the consecutive generations, they transcend the barrier of time and affect nations’ present realities and future behaviors.[269] This approach fits perfectly the U.S.-Iranian case. In fact, the two nations’ tumultuous past has greatly affected the nature of their relationship as each country insisted on viewing the other side from different and opposing perspectives. Tehran chose the infamous 1953*coup d’état* as the prism through which they viewed the U.S. whereas Washington viewed Iran through the 1979 Islamic revolution and the humiliating Hostage Crisis. The misrepresentation of such events has conspired to plague the

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U.S.-Iran relations for decades. Despite few attempts of reconciliation, the two states failed to end years of mutual hostility, diplomatic isolation, political pressure, economic sanctions, rhetorical threats and they came short of adjusting their lens and finding common ground to move forward.

Interestingly, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the U.S.-led “war on terror” created the common ground for a new and a very “special” relationship which oscillated between partnership and rivalry, cooperation and enmity. The second and third chapters have explored the unholy communion. The two long-time adversaries accomplished what was thought to be impossible: direct negotiations and collaboration, as they worked together to fight a mutual enemy, al-Qaeda, and form a post-Taliban government for Afghanistan. In line with this, the controversial U.S.-led “war on terror” was explored. The 2001-2003 period has been critically chronicled and the two countries’ ever-changing relationship was discussed through various themes and phases such as the secret talks and meetings, Bush’s “Axis of Evil,” the accusations of sponsoring terrorism and pursuing weapons of mass destruction, the Iraq war and the 2003 offer of a grand bargain. In this vein, light was shed on the ambivalent and the ebb tide-like American-Iranian relations which kept wavering between rapprochement and estrangement.

Equally important, the ambivalence of the studied relationship took another form which was highlighted throughout the dissertation. The ambivalence was laid through the antagonistic rhetoric and often undiplomatic exchanges between the two nations. It is worth noting that the multi-layered war of words between the “Great Satan” and the “Mad Mullahs” have not always reflected the real relationship between the two sides. The shared threats and incessant antagonistic accusations were rarely followed with actions, especially for the Iranians who differentiated between harsh rhetoric and their operational policy. “Though our rhetoric has been radical, in practice, our behavior has not,” Ali Reza Alavi Tabar asserted.[270]

In this regard, despite being described as irrational, fanatical and suicidal, the policy makers in Tehran are very rational and calculating players who have adopted pragmatism and *realpolitik* as the hallmarks of the Iranian foreign policy. In line with this, throughout the dissertation, the most salient feature of the U.S.-Iran bilateral relations has been the significant degree of pragmatism that has characterized their “special” relationship after 2001.

Indeed the triumph of national interests, geopolitical calculus and aspirations for regional hegemony over ideology could not be clearer during the studied period. This of course does not mean that religion and ideology are abandoned altogether, yet slogans, ideological imperatives and ideals tend to lose their weight and become secondary to mutual interests, geostrategic realities, seeking pre-eminence and playing a leadership role in the region. In a personally conducted interview with Trita Parsi, the founder and president of the National Iranian American Council further explains this idea in the following words: “Both sides are being pragmatic and pursuing their interest. The idea that there was an insurmountable ideological obstacle was always incorrect. There have been strong ideological problems between them, but none that superseded their strategic interest if it contracted those interests.”[271]

This leads us to answering a central question in this thesis: Are the United States and the Islamic Republic friends or foes? As a matter of fact, in politics and international relations, pragmatism and national interests leave little room for concepts such as friendship and hatred. In this sense, today’s friend might turn to be tomorrow’s foe and yesterday’s enemy might become the next partner. Indeed the geopolitical changes and strategic calculations determine the allies and rivals. Such an approach is well illustrated in this exploration of the post-9/11 “special” American-Iranian relationship.

When delving into the complex U.S.-Iranian relation between the 2001 and 2003, it is crucial to highlight the all-important role played by internal and external forces such as the conservative hard-liners in Tehran, the neoconservatives in Washington along with the Israeli lobby on Capitol Hill. Influenced by AIPAC, having their own geopolitical calculations and interests, all attempts of reconciliation, were undermined hence missing what was likely the greatest opportunity for a strategic rapprochement between the two bosom rivals. Indeed this thesis has highlighted the two rivals’ miscommunication, misrepresentation and missed signals as the two sides were often driven into friction at times when they could have reached reconciliation.

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Ironically, twelve years later, we are witnessing a similar scenario. While the Obama administration is trying to strike a historic nuclear deal with Hassan Rouhani's Iran, Republican Congressmen, the Israeli lobby and Benjamin Netanyahu are determined to block the talks and kill the agreement.[272] Another analogy can be drawn between the studied period and the present. While Washington and Tehran worked together to fight the Taliban and al-Qaeda in 2001, now they are facing another mutual enemy: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's so-called “Islamic State” (IS). Indeed, indirect American-Iranian collaboration against al-Baghdadi's men in Iraq has been reported.[273] More importantly, secret anti-IS cooperation is not unlikely to take place in the future especially in the light of the advances of the “Islamic State” and the just signed tentative nuclear deal.

James Dobbins, George Bush's Special envoy for Afghanistan and currently the RAND Corporation chair, argues that a final agreement will be reached this year as both the Iranians and Americans have invested a lot of political capital in the ongoing nuclear negotiations.[274] The same view is shared by Trita Parsi. Yet whereas Dobbins asserts that Congress will not be able to block the final deal, Parsi believes that its implementation can be complicated and even undermined by what he called the “anti-peace forces.”[275] More importantly, concerning the future American-Iranian relations, an open alliance seems unlikely, but the two sides can reduce using their energy against each other and still collaborate tactically and strategically. Besides, bearing in mind the economic interests, with the sanctions relief and if trade between the two countries increases unhindered with no sudden geopolitical earthquakes, it is conceivable that the two rivals will become de facto allies, even though on surface their rhetoric will deny that, here again the ambivalence and the “special” character of the multilayered U.S.-Iranian relationship are clear.[276]

Last but not least, as a consequence of the research undertaken for this thesis and in relation to the geopolitical changes taking place in the Gulf region, a number of general and specific lines of further research can be identified. Probably the most ambitious of these would be a tripartite investigation of the interrelated and complicated American-Iranian-Saudi relations, especially with the current proxy wars and sectarian conflicts throughout the Middle East and with each country having its own agenda, geostrategic calculations and hegemonic aspirations.

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[73] PERSONALLY CONDUCTED INTERVIEW: Huwaidi, Fahmi. Oral Interview, 8,9 May 2015.

Fahmi Huwaidi, with 55 years of experience, is one of the most prominent journalists and writers in Egypt and in the Arab world. He has written about Iran and has a deep knowledge of the Iranian regime as he met many of the ruling clerics. It is noteworthy that Fahmi Huwaidi was one of the first Arab journalists who entered Tehran few days after the 1979 Islamic revolution. I was very lucky and honored to interview him and benefit from his illuminating ideas and opinions concerning Iran and its relations with America and the Arab World.

[74] It is believed that this speech was one of the most positive public statements from the American side in years. William J. Clinton, “Videotaped Remarks on Id al-Fitr,” Public Papers of the Presidents: William Jefferson Clinton, pp. 136-37, Vol. 1, 29 January 1998. <<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/WCPD-1998-02-02/pdf/WCPD-1998-02-02-Pg155.pdf>>

[75] Clinton, William J., “Message to President Khatami from President Clinton,” National Security Archive, Electronic Briefing Book No. 318, 2010, <<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB318/doc02.pdf>>

[76] Katzman, et al, “The End of Dual Containment: Iraq, Iran and Smart Sanctions ,” *Middle East Policy*, pp. 71–88, Vol. 8, No. 3,, September 2001.

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[77] *U.S. Department of State. Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, “Remarks at 1998 Asia Society Dinner, Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York, New York,” 17 June 1998.*  
<<http://www.state.gov/1997-2001-NOPDFS/statements/1998/980617a.html>>.

[78] Though Iran was dropped from the Drug List, this act had no immediate effect, as Tehran was still listed as a major sponsor of international terrorism, so the United States continued voting against loans and grants to Iran from international lending institutions such as the World Bank. Fathi, Nazila, “Iran’s Leader Says UN Report Removes Suspicions of Weapons,” *New York Times*, 13 November 2003.

[79] Office of Public Affairs, Treasury Deputy Secretary Stuart E. Eizenstat Statement on Sanctions, “Text as Prepared for Delivery,” 26 July 1999.  
<[http://www.state.gov/1997-2001-NOPDFS/issues/economic/990726\\_eizenstat\\_sanctions.html](http://www.state.gov/1997-2001-NOPDFS/issues/economic/990726_eizenstat_sanctions.html)>

[80] Office of Foreign Assets Control, U.S. Department of the Treasury, “What You Need to Know About U.S. Economic Sanctions,” 12 March 2003. <<http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/programs/documents/iran.pdf>>

[81] *U.S. Department of State, “American-Iranian Relations,” Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright Remarks before the American-Iranian Council, Omni Shoreham Hotel, Washington DC, 17 March 2000.*  
<<http://secretary.state.gov/www/statements/2000/000317.html>>.

[82] When asked about the hostage crisis, Khatami expressed his regret, but he didn’t apologize. He chose the verb “regret” so that his words “could not be used against [him] as propaganda.”

[83] (n.a), “UK Rushdie’s relief over fatwa move,” *BBC News*, 23 September 1998.  
<[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/177987.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/177987.stm)>

[84] Ömür Öz, “*United States Foreign Policy Failures Toward Revolutionary Iran: Miscalculating Tehran’s Power Projection and Ignoring the National Character of the Iranian People*,” MA thesis, Naval Post Graduate School, Monterey, California, December 2010.

[85] Puneet Talwar, “Iran in the Balance,” *Foreign Affairs*, pp. 62–67, Vol.80, No. 4, July–August 2001.

[86] Robert O. Freedman, U.S. Policy Toward the Middle East in Clinton’s Second Term *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, p. 72, Vol. 3, No. 1, March 1999.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Kharrazi, Kamal, Interview by Barbara Slavin, *USA Today*, “Q&A with Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi,” 18 September 2002. <[http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2002-09-18-iran-full-interview\\_x.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2002-09-18-iran-full-interview_x.htm)>

[89] Many commentators made an analogy between 9/11 and the Pearl Harbor attacks. Chomsky argues that such an analogy is “misleading” because the U.S. national territory was never threatened back in 1941. “The U.S. preferred to call Hawaii a territory, but it was in effect a colony,” so we can not call it a national territory. Noam Chomsky, *9-11: Was There an Alternative?* (Seven Stories Press; UpdExp An edition, 2011), p. 43.

[90] In many of his interviews and works, Mahdi Elmandjra, the Moroccan scholar and futurist, often criticizes this “post-9/11” notion. He argues that 9/11 was a tragic terrorist attack that we all condemn, but one should not fall prey to American propaganda. He asserts that the event was well politicized and one should not forget that in the decade preceding 9/11, millions of Arab and/or Muslim civilians were killed in Iraq, Somalia, Chechnya, Serbia ... Elmandjra asserts that all such atrocities are even more catastrophic than 9/11, and he warns that though we woe and mourn all the victims, the Americans are using what he called “linguistic terrorism” aiming to indoctrinate not only the American public but also the international community telling us what is terrorism and what is not, and using the



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terrorist attacks to implement their hegemonic “mega- imperialist” plans. Mahdi Elmandjra, *Humiliation in the Era of Mega- Imperialism* (Arab Cultural Center, 2003), pp. 13, 73-74.

[91] George W. Bush, “Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks,” Washington, DC, 11 September 2001. <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=58057>>

[92] Ibid.

[93] George W. Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” Washington, DC, 20 September 2001.

[94] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, “Patterns of Global Terrorism – 2002,” April 2003. <<http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2002/pdf/index.htm>>

[95] Abdul Salam Zaeef, the Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, announced they were ready to cooperate with the Americans and deliver Ben Laden once they were given evidence of his involvement in the terrorist attack. He said: “In America, if I think you are a terrorist, is it properly justified that you should be punished without evidence? This is an international principle. If you use the principle, why do you not apply it to Afghanistan?” Similarly, President Khatami declared they were not been given “any clear or written evidence” except mere speculations. John F. Burns, A Nation Challenged: The Taliban; Clerics Answer ‘No, No, No!’ and Invoke Fates of Past Foes,” *New York Times*, 22 September 2001. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/22/world/nation-challenged-taliban-clerics-answer-no-no-no-invoke-fates-past-foes.html>>;

(n.a), “The Smoking Gun,” *Justice Not Vengeance*, 8 October 2001. <[http://www.j-n-v.org/AW\\_briefings/ARROW\\_briefing005.htm](http://www.j-n-v.org/AW_briefings/ARROW_briefing005.htm)>.

[96] In his book, counterterrorism tsar Richard Clarke argues that few hours after the terrorist attack, Senior U.S. officials were already going to war. For example, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage stated in the evening of September 11, 2001: “No difference between the Taliban and al-Qaeda now. They both go down ... We have to eliminate the sanctuary.” Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America’s War on Terror*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2004), pp. 22-23.

[97] George W. Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” Washington DC, 20 September 2001, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>>

[98] Office of the Secretary of Defense, Memorandum for the President, “Strategic Thoughts,” Top Secret/Close Hold, 30 September 2001. <<http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB358a/doc13.pdf>>

[99] Chomsky argues that the “war on terror” is neither new nor a war on terror. Noam Chomsky, *9-11: Was There an Alternative?* (Seven Stories Press; UpdExp An edition, 2011), p. 43.

[100] Back in the 1980’s, the CIA supported Ben Laden and the “Mujahedeen” in their “holy war” against the “Russian infidels.” In the words of Brzezinski, the Americans “drew the Russians into the Afghan trap.”

[101] Noam Chomsky, “The History and Hypocrisy of the War on Terror,” Town Hall Auditorium, New York, 22 January 2002.

[102] United States Code Congressional and Administrative News, 98th Congress, Second Session, 1984, Oct 19, volume 2; par 3077, 98 STAT. 2707, West Publishing Co., 1984.

[103] Noam Chomsky, “The History and Hypocrisy of the War on Terror,” Town Hall Auditorium, New York, 22 January 2002.

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[104] The Taliban are Sunni Muslims and violently opposed to the Shiites including the ruling group in Tehran as they rejected the latter's form of Islam and considered them an enemy.

[105] After the murder of ten Iranian diplomats and a journalist, the Islamic Republic mobilized thousands of troops to their border with Afghanistan. But, with the sad memory of the Iran-Iraq war in their minds, they did not invade their neighboring country. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle* (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 329.

[106] United Nations, “2001 should be a year of dialogue Among Civilizations; President of Iran Tells General Assembly,” Statements by Mohammad Khatami, before the 53<sup>rd</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly, New York, 21 September 1998. <<http://www.un.org/documents/ga9446.html>>

[107] B.A. Robinson, “Muslim Leaders’ Statements Condemning Terrorism, From 9/11 to ISIS/Islamic State Atrocities in 2014,” *Religioustolerance.org*, 27 August 2014. <<http://www.religioustolerance.org/muslim-leaders-condemn-acts-of-terrorism.htm>>

[108] Iran-US Complicated Relations, *Eghtesade Iran [Economy of Iran]; Economic & Financial*, pp. 22-26, No. 32, October 2001. <[http://www.parstimes.com/history/complicated\\_relations.html](http://www.parstimes.com/history/complicated_relations.html)>

[109] John H Richardson, “The Secret History of the Impending War with Iran That the White House Doesn’t Want You to Know,” *Esquire*, 18 October 2007. <<http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a3574/iranbriefing1107/>>

[110] John H Richardson, “The Secret History of the Impending War with Iran That the White House Doesn’t Want You to Know,” *Esquire*, 18 October 2007. <<http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a3574/iranbriefing1107/>>.

[111] Flynt Leverett, “Illusion and Reality,” *The American Prospect* (September 2006), <[http://newamerica.net/publications/articles/2006/illusion\\_and\\_reality](http://newamerica.net/publications/articles/2006/illusion_and_reality)>; *PBS Frontline*, “Terror and Tehran: Does America’s war on terror hold democracy hostage in Iran?” <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/>>

[112] *Iran and the West: Nuclear Confrontation*. BBC, 2009.

[113] John H Richardson, “The Secret History of the Impending War with Iran That the White House Doesn’t Want You to Know,” *Esquire*, 18 October 2007. <<http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a3574/iranbriefing1107/>>

[114] When she discusses the meetings with a reporter in 2007, Mann will say, “As far as they [the Iranians] are concerned, the whole idea that there were talks is something I shouldn’t even be talking about.”

[115] Gawdat Bahgat, “Iran, the United States, and the War on Terrorism” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* pp.93-104, Vol. 26, No. 2, March-April 2003.

[116] According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), before September 2001 Iran was host to as many as 1.5 million Afghan refugees. Ann Encontre, *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Global Report 2001*, (Brussels, Belgium: SOFADI, 2001), p. 284.

[117] Mohammed Khatami, Interview by *The New York Times*, “Interview with President Khatami,” 10 November 2001. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/10/international/10KTEX.html?pagewanted=1>>

[118] Mohammed Khatami’s testimony in *Iran and the West: Nuclear Confrontation*. BBC, 2009.

[119] The Afghan Northern Alliance was a military front that opposed and fought the Taliban. They were supported by Tehran and Moscow. Its commander Ahmed Shah Massoud was Iran’s main ally in Afghanistan. The latter was assassinated two days before 9/11 by al-Qaeda.

[120] Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle* (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 345.

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[121] Hastert Paul, “Al Qaeda and Iran: Friends or Foes, or Somewhere in Between?” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, pp. 327–336 Vol. 30, 2007.

[122] Trita Parsi *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the United States* (Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 227-228.

[123] Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle* (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 347.

[124] Mohammed Khatami’s testimony in *Iran and the West: Nuclear Confrontation*. BBC, 2009.

[125] An extract from Ryan Crocker’s speech at the Carnegie International Endowment for International Peace in 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2013 in Washington, D.C. Seyyed Hossein Mousavian, “US, Iran cannot afford another missed opportunity,” *Al-Monitor*, 26 May, 2014. <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fr/originals/2014/05/iran-us-missed-opportunity.html#ixzz3TKPCznDA>>

[126] Kenneth Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 346; Brian Whitaker, “Iran in secret pact to aid Americans Agreement to help soldiers or airmen,” *The Guardian*, 17 October 2001 <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/17/afghanistan.terrorism10>>

[127] Thomas Pickering, Interview by Linden MacIntyre, *PBS Frontline*, 21 February 2002. <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/interviews/pickering.html>>

[128] John H Richardson, “The Secret History of the Impending War with Iran That the White House Doesn’t Want You to Know,” *Esquire*, 18 October 2007. <<http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a3574/iranbriefing1107/>>

[129] *Iran and the West: The Man Who Changed the World*. BBC, 2009.

[130] John H Richardson, “The Secret History of the Impending War with Iran That the White House Doesn’t Want You to Know,” *Esquire*, 18 October 2007. <<http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a3574/iranbriefing1107/>>

[131] Barbara Slavin, “Strategically Lonely’ Iran Exploits Opportunities for Regional Influence,” *Atlantic Council of the United States*, March.2011; James Dobbins, “Negotiating with Iran: Reflections from Personal Experience,” *The Washington Quarterly*, pp. 149-162, Vol. 33, No.1, January 2010; Steve Kohl, *Ghost Wars* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), p. 345.

[132] *Iran and the West: Nuclear Confrontation*. BBC, 2009.

[133] Slavin, Barbara, “Iran Helped Overthrow Taliban, Candidate Says,” *USA Today*, 9 June 2005. <[http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-06-09-iran-taliban\\_x.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-06-09-iran-taliban_x.htm)>

[134] Donald H. Rumsfeld, Interview by Bob Schieffer and Gloria Borger, U.S. News and World Report Correspondent, *CBS Face the Nation*, 11 November 2001. <<http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2368>>

[135] James Dobbins, “Negotiating with Iran: Reflections from Personal Experience,” *The Washington Quarterly*, pp. 149-162, Vol. 33, No.1, January 2010; James Dobbins, “Negotiating with Iran,” Testimony presented before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs on November 7, 2007. <<http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT293.html>>

[136] Ibid.

[137] Seyed Hossein Mousavian “Engage with Iran in Afghanistan,” *The National Interest*, 30 May 2013. <<http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/engage-iran-afghanistan-8528>>; Speech by Ambassador James Dobbins to

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the New America Foundation, Washington, D.C., August 24, 2006.

[138] Eric Schmitt, “A Nation Challenged: Regional Politics; Iran Experts Sway in Afghanistan Region, Worrying the U.S.,” *New York Times*, 10 January 2002.

[139] Serge Schememann, “A Nation Challenged; A New Day; U.S. and Partners Quickly Set Sights on a Post-Taliban Kabul,” *New York Times*, 13 November 2001. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/13/world/nation-challenged-new-day-us-partners-quickly-set-sights-post-taliban-kabul.html>>; U.S. Congress. House Committee on Government Oversight and Reform. “U.S. Diplomacy with Iran: The Limits of Tactical Engagement.” Testimony of Hilary Mann before the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs. 110<sup>th</sup> Cong. 1<sup>st</sup> session, 7 November 2007 <[http://democrats.oversight.house.gov/images/stories/subcommittees/NS\\_Subcommittee/11.7.07\\_Iran\\_II/HillaryMannLeveretttestimony1107.pdf](http://democrats.oversight.house.gov/images/stories/subcommittees/NS_Subcommittee/11.7.07_Iran_II/HillaryMannLeveretttestimony1107.pdf)>

[140] U.S. Department of State Archive (2001-2009), “Press Briefing on Board Plane En Route Moscow,” December 9, 2001, <<http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2001/dec/6759.htm>>

[141] Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the United States* (Yale University Press, 2008), p. 128.

[142] Mark N. Katz, “Iran and the “War on Terror” War on Terror in Perspective,” *Middle East Policy Council*, 4 January 2011.

[143] Jonathan Steele, “American ‘Imperialism’ Condemned by Tehran,” *The Guardian*, 9 October 2001 <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/09/afghanistan.terrorism4>>

[144] Khatami, Mohammed, Interview by *The New York Times*, “Interview with President Khatami,” 10 November 2001. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/10/international/10KTEX.html?pagewanted=1>>

[145] Some writers and Middle East experts such as Noam Chomsky, Robert Fisk and Abdel Bari Atwan, expressed the same opinion and opposed the U.S. military action arguing it will lead to more terrorism. After thirteen years, with thousands of deaths and spending over one trillion dollars on the “war on terror” in Afghanistan, the U.S. is currently, February 2015, negotiating with Taliban representatives who will soon get back to govern Kabul. The irony is that another unwinnable “war on terror” is taking place, this time it is to eliminate the “Islamic State” (IS), also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Its outcome won’t differ much. Indeed the “war on terror” has been a terror-generating war. To sum it up in Chomsky’s words: “there was a small group up in the tribal areas of mostly Pakistan and Afghanistan, al-Qaeda, and we have succeeded in spreading it over the whole world. Now they’re all everywhere -you know, West Africa, Southeast Asia- simply generating more and more terror. And I think it’s – you know, it’s not that the U.S. is trying to generate terror. It’s simply that it doesn’t care.” Noam Chomsky, Interview by Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now*, 3 March 2015.

<[http://www.democracynow.org/2015/3/3/chomsky\\_on\\_snowden\\_why\\_nsa\\_surveillance](http://www.democracynow.org/2015/3/3/chomsky_on_snowden_why_nsa_surveillance)>

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[150] Barbara Slavin, “Iran Helped Overthrow Taliban, Candidate Says,” *USA Today*, 9 June 2005. <[http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-06-09-iran-taliban\\_x.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-06-09-iran-taliban_x.htm)>

[151] Such accusations will be dealt with in more details in the next chapter. See Chapter Three, pp. 71-77.

[152] A. William Samii, “Tehran, Washington, and Terror: No Agreement to Differ,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 3, September 2002.

[153] Alexandra Poolos, “Relations Become Tense After Washington Comments, Warnings,” *Pars Times*, 11 January 2002. <[http://www.parstimes.com/news/archive/2002/us\\_iran\\_relations\\_tense.html](http://www.parstimes.com/news/archive/2002/us_iran_relations_tense.html)>

[154] Eric Schmitt, “Iran Exerts Sway in Afghan Region, Worrying the US,” *New York Times*, 10 January 2002.

[155] Eric Schmitt, “Bush Tells Iran Not to Undercut Afghan Leaders,” *New York Times*, 11 January 2002. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/11/international/asia/11IRAN.html>>

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[159] Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the United States* (Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 233-234.

[160] This notion was coined by the Moroccan scholar and futurist Mahdi Elmandjra his book *Humiliation in the Era of Mega- Imperialism*. Mahdi Elmandjra, *Humiliation in the Era of Mega- Imperialism* (Arab Cultural Center, 2003).

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[163] See Chapter Three, pp. 63-70.

[164] See Chapter Three, pp. 71-83.

[165] George W. Bush, “State of the Union Address,” United States Capitol, Washington, DC, 29 January 2002. <<http://georgewbushwhitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>>

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[167] George W. Bush, “State of the Union Address,” United States Capitol, Washington, DC, 29 January 2002. <<http://georgewbushwhitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>>

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

[170] Ibid, pp. 93-94.

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[172] Liu Yongtao, “Discourse, Meanings and IR Studies: Taking the Rhetoric of “Axis of Evil” As a Case,” *Confines de Relaciones Internacionales y Ciencia Política*, 2010, pp. 85-107; Daniel Heradstveit and G. Matthew Bonham, “What the Axis of Evil Metaphor Did to Iran,” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 61, No. 3, pp. 421-440, Summer 2007.

[173] Hussein Ibish, “Axes of Fable: The Paling Mythologies of the “Axis of Evil” and “Axis of Resistance,” *The Majalla*, 17 October 2013. <<http://eng.majalla.com/2013/10/article55246063>>

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[176] (n.a), “Iran Accuses Bush of War-Mongering,” *BBC NEWS*, 30 January 2002. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1792767.stm>>

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[181] Mohammed Ali Mousavi and Massoumeh Ebtekar, Interview by Linden MacIntyre, *PBS Frontline*, February 2002. <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/interviews/mousavi.html>><<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/interviews/ebtekar.html>>

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[184] Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the United States* (Yale University Press, 2008), p. 235.

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[229] The Bush administration kept sending threatening messages to the Islamic Republic. For instance, in June 2003, the American president warned they “would not tolerate the construction of a nuclear weapon” by Iran, while the White House Press Secretary asserted that “military option was not ruled out. Yet, “All options are on the table” was the most recurrent phrase used by the American officials.

[230] Noam Chomsky, Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett, “Iran and American Foreign Policy: Where Did the U.S. Go Wrong,” Technology and Culture Forum at MIT, 14 May 2013.

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[242] Ibid; Barbara Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U.S., and the Twisted Path to Confrontation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007), p. 199.

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[244] Fu'ad Husayn, *Zarqawi: The Second Generation of Al-Qaeda*, (Dar al-Khayal, Beirut, Lebanon, 2005), p.57; Paul Hastert, “Al Qaeda and Iran: Friends or Foes, or Somewhere in Between?” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, pp. 327-336 Vol. 30, 2007.

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[246] At first, the Iranians opposed the invasion of Iraq. Though Saddam Hussein was their staunch enemy who dragged them into the eight-year war, they thought that he was no longer that strong. The Iranians believed that the 1991 Gulf War, a decade of UN sanctions and international isolation had weakened him and they preferred a hostile powerless Saddam to a new western anti-Iranian puppet regime in Baghdad. Interestingly, even the Israelis were not very excited about invading Baghdad. They reasoned that Iran was the real and principal danger that should be eliminated, and the Baathist regime should be kept to balance Iran. The Israelis wanted Tehran to be toppled “the day after” Iraq was crushed. Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the United States* (Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 239-240.

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[248] *Iran and the West: Nuclear Confrontation*. BBC, 2009.

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[251] “Iran and her Role in the American War on Iraq, Part One,” *A journey into memory*, Abdul Sattar al-Rawi, Russia Today, 19 October 2012.

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[255] “Iran and her Role in the American War on Iraq, Part Two,” *A journey into memory*, Abdul Sattar al-Rawi,

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[258] Aymen al-Hashemi, “Files and Facts of the Destructive Iranian Role in Iraq,” *Mokarabat*. <<http://www.mokarabat.com/s849.htm>>

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[260] Following the Islamic revolution, Iran closed the American embassy in Iran, and the Swiss embassy has been representing the American interests in Tehran.

[261] “Original U.S. Draft Negotiation Proposal” as reproduced in Parsi’s “Appendix A.” Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance : The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the United States* (Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 341-342.

[262] “Letter from Ambassador Guldemann to the U.S. State Department” as reproduced in Parsi’s “Appendix C.” Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the United States* (Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 345-346.

[263] Parsi wrote about the two-page proposal and gave a detailed description of the roadmap, its background and how it was received in Washington. Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance : The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the United States* (Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 243-257; Barbara Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U.S., and the Twisted Path to Confrontation* (St. Martin’s Press, 2007).

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[271] PERSONALLY CONDUCTED INTERVIEW: Parsi, Trita. Email Interview, 18 May 2015.

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