

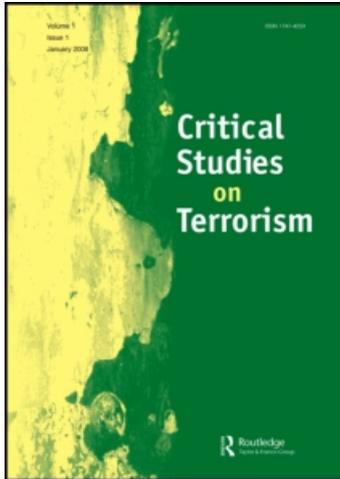
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Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 791468636]

Publisher Routledge

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Critical Studies on Terrorism

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t780786797>

Discourse and violence: the friend-enemy conjunction in contemporary Iranian-American relations

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Online publication date: 25 November 2009

To cite this Article Adib-Moghaddam, Arshin(2009) 'Discourse and violence: the friend-enemy conjunction in contemporary Iranian-American relations', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 2: 3, 512 – 526

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/17539150903306238

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17539150903306238>

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SPECIAL SECTION

Discourse and violence: the friend–enemy conjunction in contemporary Iranian–American relations

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Iranian–American relations have been beset by mistrust and occasional outbreaks of vitriol and violence for the past three decades. In this article I attempt to map, theoretically and empirically, the ‘discursive field’ in which relations between Iran and the United States reveal themselves. I am interested in representations of Iran and the United States, and how the fundamental friend–enemy distinction setting the two countries politically apart has come about. I take as a starting point the fact that discourse has a real and present impact on policy and that a lot of what is happening in world politics can be adequately contextualised with an appreciation of the linkages between ‘utterance’ and ‘action’.

Keywords: discourse; foreign policy; Iran; United States; trust

Introduction

The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting. (Sun Tzu 1963, p. vii)

Iranian–American relations have been beset by mistrust and occasional outbreaks of vitriol and violence for the past three decades now. In this article, I attempt to map, theoretically and empirically, the ‘discursive field’ in which relations between Iran and the United States reveal themselves. I am interested in representations of Iran and the United States, and how the fundamental friend–enemy distinction setting the two countries politically apart has come about. I take as a starting point, with critical theorists of international relations (see, amongst others, Campbell 1992, 1993, and Jackson 2005), that discourse has a real and present impact on policy and that a lot that is happening in world politics can be adequately contextualised with an appreciation of the linkages between ‘utterance’ and ‘action’.

What do I mean by the term ‘discursive field’? I have explained in detail elsewhere how politico-cultural inventions affect and condition the way we perceive our surrounding social worlds. Perceptions in world politics are particularly compromised and manipulated because the ontological fabric of the international system is professionally constructed. Discourse, and at a more basic level language, is central to this process of wilful interference. The articulation of words represents the most sophisticated form of self-externalisation in society; it is the first step to define ourselves and others and to understand our status within a world, that has been pre-created and whose historical fabric is beyond our

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control. This is what Karl Marx (1973, p. 146) meant when he observed that ‘Men [women] make their own history . . . not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted’. Structure, expressed and embedded in history, is everywhere for Marx and penetrates our consciousness. Discourse narrates history; it is a fundamental building block – always also political (and thus violent) – in our efforts to invent cultural realities. ‘The facts which our senses present to us are socially preformed in two ways’, writes the German critical theorist Max Horkheimer (1997, p. 200), ‘through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ’. Horkheimer (1997, pp. 200–201) adds the important caveat that ‘[b]oth are not simply natural; they are shaped by human activity. . . . The perceived fact is therefore co-determined by human ideas and concepts, even before its conscious theoretical elaboration by the knowing individual’. It should follow from this that any interaction in the social world, including Iranian–American relations, is not revealing itself within a detached or neutral habitat. Rather the contrary. International relations, including Iranian–American relations, are entirely constituted and conditioned by norms, institutions and other cultural artefacts which are socially engineered and thus subject to human manipulation.

We can derive an important methodological premise from the short discussion above. Whenever we encounter what Michel Foucault (2002, p. 41) terms a ‘discursive formation’; whenever ‘between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations)’, we are compelled to delve into the dynamics of this field, into the rapturous and tumultuous forces that are actively preoccupied with the production and transformation of reality and the subjectivication of knowledge. So, for instance, the ‘reality’ that Iran is a ‘terrorist’ state is one subject that has emerged out of the discursive field of Iranian–American relations. The ‘fact’ that the United States is a ‘neo-imperial’ force, indeed that its government represents the very re-incarnation of satanic evil, is yet another.

On the linkages between discourse and the construction of cultural realities, of which world politics in general and foreign policies in particular would be a part, there are more lessons to be learned from an essay by Walter Benjamin published originally in 1921 and titled ‘Critique of Violence’. In this essay, Benjamin (1986, p. 289) asks if the non-violent resolution of conflict is possible. His response is yes: ‘Nonviolent agreement is possible wherever a civilised outlook allows the use of unalloyed means of agreement. . . . Courtesy, sympathy, peacableness, trust . . . are their subjective preconditions.’ Benjamin puts primary importance on language as a mediating and ameliorating force, central to the build up of these subjective preconditions. According to him (p. 289), there exists ‘a sphere of human agreement that is nonviolent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of “understanding,” language’.

That language can be a source of mediation, empathy and inter-cultural dialogue has become central to communicative theories of politics, most famously expressed by Jürgen Habermas (1984). On the level of the functions of language for not only ‘achieving understanding’ (*Verständigung*) but also ‘empathetic understanding’ (*Verstehen*), Habermas recaptures Benjamin’s point that language is central to processes of reconciliation. In this regard Habermas remains within a tradition that takes understanding of the ‘other’ as one of its main goals. This ambition has been rightly termed the ‘rationalising’ core of Habermas’s communicative action theory which is said (Calhoun 1995, p. 51) to ‘inform a view in which establishing consensus is the program both for living within that social world and for building bridges to other social worlds’. Benhabib (1986, p. 241) adds that in Habermas’s conceptualisation of communicative action reaching out to such other social worlds

requires taking ‘a stance in relation to the reasons which agents in those cultures would consider “good” or “appropriate” to justify certain claims’. From this perspective, in language, instead of setting boundaries between ourselves and others, we are urged to engage in rational discourse, which by itself presupposes recognition of the other whilst leading to an unprincipled exchange, the aim of which would be to find a mutually acceptable, smallest denominator that would mitigate conflict. According to Thomas Risse (2000):

Arguing implies that actors try to challenge the validity claims inherent in any causal or normative statement and to seek a communicative consensus about their understanding of a situation as well as justifications for the principles and norms guiding their action. Argumentative rationality also implies that the participants in a discourse are open to being persuaded by the better argument and that relationships of power and social hierarchies recede in the background. *Argumentative and deliberative behaviour is as goal oriented as strategic interaction, but the goal is not to attain one’s fixed preferences, but to seek a reasoned consensus.* Actors’ interests, preferences, and the perceptions of the situation are no longer fixed, but subject to discursive challenges. Where argumentative rationality prevails, actors do not seek to maximise or to satisfy their given interests and preferences, but to challenge and to justify the validity claims inherent in them – and they are prepared to change their views of the world or even their interests in light of the better argument. (p. 7, emphases added)

But what about interfering factors that do not allow for an exchange that yields a ‘reasoned consensus’ as Risse foresees? What if discourse reveals itself within a field of violence and suspicion such as in international politics? What if language itself is inscribed with pain and terror? What if it prescribes murder? What if our words are untrustworthy?

Foucault points to such epistemic violence which he finds inscribed in language and expressed through the disciplinary powers of institutions and larger constellations he calls ‘regimes of truth’. According to Foucault (2002, p. 131) each society is endowed with such a regime which defines not only ‘the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true’, but also the very ‘mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements’. Foucault suggests that violence is inscribed in discourse and that it may not yield understanding of the other, but his or her condemnation. The discursive field enveloping Iranian–American relations serves as an example here. What US and Iranian political elites are reacting to is not the immediate reality of the other side, but representations of that reality which are filtered through thick layers of normative and institutional structures. What makes the relationship between Iranians and Americans conflict-ridden is not some innate antagonism between the two peoples, not even the hostage crisis in 1980 or the CIA (and MI6) engineered *coup d’état* which deposed Iran’s first democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953. What has hampered relations between the two countries, the true impediments of reconciliation, are invented myths about the other side which have not been entirely dispelled either politically or even intellectually.

Within such a discursive field which is pierced by violent narratives reified by those powerful stakeholders who have a particular interest in keeping the two countries apart, communicating rationally in a Habermasian sense has resembled a Sisyphus act. Former President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), who reached out to the United States via his ‘dialogue amongst civilisation’ initiative, and US President Barack Obama today had/have it so difficult not because they are not genuinely interested in facilitating trust-building measures between the two countries, but because they are operating within a discursive field that is permeated by memories of violence and populated by powerful social agents who are entirely antagonistic to the other side. Hence, repeatedly, the ‘rational majority’ have only managed to roll the rock up half way to the top of the mountain, only to see it

roll back down again, (in the case of Khatami, crushing him and his reformist movement along the way). Consequently, in order to address why there has not been a major rapprochement between the two states yet, some understanding about those sources of mistrust is necessary. Of course, the signposts presented cannot be fully explained within the confines of this article. I will not be able to dissect the institutional sites that give stakeholders in Iranian–American relations the status of ‘authorities.’ Neither do I claim to delve into the wider politico-cultural system that accommodates the politics of enmity between the two countries. All I can do is to point to a few narratives that are indicative of the signs and symbols that populate what I have called, rather sketchily, the *discursive field* enveloping Iranian–American relations; to give some understanding of the syntactical settings of that field. What I am bringing into focus, ultimately, is the movement ‘within’ the hyphen that seems to set Iranian–American relations politically apart.

Pahlavi Iran, Aryan myths and the Indo-European bond

It was Edward Said (1997, p. 6) who argued most forcefully that after the Islamic revolution in 1979 and the subsequent occupation of the US Embassy in Tehran on the 22 October, Iran and Iranians became a major source of anxiety and anger within the United States. ‘An important ally, it lost its imperial regime, its army, its value in American global calculations during a year of tumultuous revolutionary upheaval virtually unprecedented on so huge a scale since October 1917.’ The international focus on Iran intensified further after the end of the Cold War. From the perspective of Said (1997, p. 7) Iran ‘and along with it “Islam,” has come to represent America’s major foreign devil. It is considered to be a terrorist state because it backs groups like Hizbollah in South Lebanon’. Said (1995) may be too obsequious to his ‘Orientalist’ paradigm here, but he is right to point out that reactions to events such as the occupation of the US embassy cannot be divorced from a larger discursive constellation that represented post-revolutionary Iran as an entirely fanatical, irrational and evil entity.

This emerging narrative of the ‘mad Mullahs’ that Bill Beeman (2005) ponders, lodged its fulminate force into a discursive field, the ideational attributes of which were radically transformed after the revolution in 1979. Before the revolution political elites in the United States dealt with an image of Iran that was rather amenable to ‘Orientalist’ notions of the country as historically friendly and generally closer to the Western canon than the ‘Semitic Arabs.’ Iran was Persian, Aryan, whiter than the Arabs surrounding them and seemed to be, on the ideological surface, more like us. The shah himself was mystified as an occasionally autocratic but enlightened leader, who was on the path of transforming Iran into a modern (namely ‘Western’) country. A correspondence from the US Embassy in Tehran from 1951, that is two years before he was ousted by Mossadegh and subsequently reinstated by the CIA/MI6, is indicative of official attitudes towards the shah during that period. In this memo (CIA, Directorate of Intelligence 1972, p. 7) the shah is described as ‘confused, frustrated, suspicious, proud and stubborn, a young man who lives in the shadow of his father.’ At the same time he was deemed to have ‘great personal courage, many Western ideals, and a sincere, though often wavering, desire to raise and preserve the country’. Nine years before the revolution in 1979, the shah was described (CIA, Directorate of Intelligence 1972, p. 7) as ‘completely self-assured’ and ‘confident that he is leading the country in the right direction’. US officials also found him to be ‘well-informed’ and they were convinced by his ‘ability to keep abreast of developments around the world’ and by his ‘agile mind.’ Richard Nixon, in a private conversation with Alexander Haig and Douglas MacArthur II on 8 April 1971 (Conversation among

President Nixon, Ambassador Douglas MacArthur II, and General Alexander Haig 1971) was equally impressed. ‘Iran’s the only thing there’, he said. ‘By God, if we can go with them, if we can have them strong, and they’re in the centre of it, and a friend of the United States’. Nixon also seemed to be impressed by the ability of the shah ‘to run, basically, let’s face it, a virtual dictatorship in a benign way. . . . Because, look, when you talk about having a democracy of our type in that part of the world, good God, it wouldn’t work, would it?’ ‘No Sir’, MacArthur replied. ‘They don’t even know – they don’t know what it is. You know what happened in the Congo?’ MacArthur asked, ‘Belgium gave them a constitution, wonderful buildings, all the nice trappings, but these people had never practiced it at all.’ Those endorsements of the Iranian monarch were topped by the by now famous proclamation of former President Jimmy Carter on New Year’s Eve in 1977. Raising his champagne glass Carter toasted the shah at a lavish state dinner in Tehran calling him ‘an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world’. A year later the shah was in exile.

This representation of the shah as an enlightened and visionary, if periodically indecisive, yet pleasingly pro-Western leader was reified in the mainstream scholarly discourse about his rule. Roger M. Savory (1972, p. 286), for instance, writing in 1972 in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, the flagship journal of the field in North America, accentuated the ‘warmth and spontaneity of the Shah’s welcome by the people when he returned to Iran on 22 August 1953’. Whereas, the shah is complemented for his progressive social reforms, the nationalists, the Left and their intellectual avant-garde were considered naive, blind, unrealistic and utopian. Moreover, their opposition was inexcusable ‘since it should have been obvious to them that Muhammad Riza Shah was not, and could not become, the same type of despot as his father’ (Savory 1972, p. 293). ‘Much has been written recently about the politics of cynicism and pessimism in Iran’, Savory observes further, ‘and, in my opinion, much of the political unrealism of the Persian intellectual from 1907 onwards stems from a cynical and pessimistic outlook. . . . Is it too far-fetched to suggest’, he (p. 294) adds in typical Orientalist parlour, ‘that this attitude has its roots deep in two traditional channels of Persian thought: first, Persian mysticism, and, second, Shi’ite martyrology?’

Here we find why and to what purpose Said (1995, p. 3) defined Orientalism ‘as a discourse . . . by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient . . . politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period’. Although Orientalism asserts factual validity, even a scientific status, Said points out that it is the product of ideological fiction, with no real linkage to the cultures and peoples it claims to explain. It follows for Said that Orientalism has muted the Orient. The subject (the Orient) is not represented in the discourse of Orientalism, it does not speak; it is entirely *spoken for*, constituted all the way down to her personality by the ‘Orientalist brotherhood’ of scholars whose modern lineage Said (1995, p. 122) traces back to the writings of Silvestre de Sacy, Ernest Renan and Edward William Lane and the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt between 1798–1801 more generally.

Other than proving that the ideologues of the Pahlavi state in Iran and the Pahlavi monarchs themselves were somehow products of European Orientalism, Said’s argument that representations of the other can be entirely constituted by a discipline such as ‘Orientalism’ is difficult to hold. In other words, Orientalisms of any kind are dialectical formations (Adib-Moghaddam, 2008b). There is both an outflow of representations of self and other and an inflow; subject and object may be entirely reversible, they interpenetrate each other, they are hybrid. Let me give an example. When in 1971 Nixon (Conversation among President Nixon, Ambassador Douglas MacArthur II, and General Alexander Haig 1971) says that Iran ‘at least has got some degree of civilisation’ in contrast to ‘those

Africans' who according to him 'are only about 50 to 75 years from out of the trees'. When he considers Iran to be not 'of either world, really', i.e. neither Arab (Muslim) or 'Western' (Christian), when he considers Iran a bit whiter, a bit more civilised, he is not only articulating an Orientalist bias with particularly racist connotations; he is also reacting to the self-designation of the shah himself, who was adamant to legitimate his alliance with the 'West' via processes of discursive engineering. To be more precise, it was a particular function and goal of the discourse of the Pahlavi monarchs to represent themselves as 'Aryan', different to the Arab–Semitic other and thus closer to the 'Indo-European' family of Western nations. This strategy was deemed to be functional in order to solidify Iran's relation with the 'West' ideationally. At the same time, it served to legitimate this alliance to suspicious domestic constituencies who protested against Iran's dependence on foreign countries, and here especially on successive US governments.

The Aryan and Indo-European narrative was institutionalised by Reza Shah, the founder of the short-lived Pahlavi dynasty who was ousted by the British in 1941 in favour of his son Mohammed Reza who was only 21 years old when he ascended to the throne in the same year. Ervand Abrahamian (2008, p. 86) notes how during the reign of the first Pahlavi monarch organisations such as *Farhangestan* (Cultural Academy), the Department of Public Guidance, the National Heritage Society, the Geography Commission, the journal *Iran-e Bastan* (Ancient Iran) and the government media via newspapers such as *Ettela'at* (Information) and *Journal de Teheran* 'all waged a concerted campaign both to glorify ancient Iran and to purify the language of foreign words . . . especially Arab ones, [which] were replaced with either brand new or old Persian vocabulary'. The most consequential step towards institutionalising the Aryan myth came in 1934 when Reza Shah decreed that the country's name should be changed from Persia to Iran in all international correspondence and cartographic designations. Abrahamian (2008, p. 87) notes that in order to 'invoke the glories and birthplace of the ancient Aryans', the National Heritage Society went even as far as to build a rival 'Aryan' mausoleum next to the religious pilgrimage site in Mashhad which is dedicated to Imam Reza, the seventh descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and the eighth Imam of the Ithna Asharia (12er Shia) branch of Shi'ism which is followed by the vast majority of Iranians. Adopting methods developed in the science of phrenology, members of the Society dug up 'bodies to inter in these mausoleums [and] meticulously measured skulls to "prove" to the whole world that these national figures had been "true Aryans"'.

When during the Pahlavi dynasty Iranian scholars and the state itself adopted a scientific discourse that was meant to 'prove' the purity of the Aryan race, they were not only reacting to the Orientalist theses expressed, amongst others, by Count de Gobineau and Ernest Renan, who argued that Persians are racially superior to the Arabs and other 'Semitic races' because of their 'Indo-European' heritage. True, forerunners of the Aryan myth in Iran, cultural luminaries such as Mirza Fath Ali Akhuzadeh and Mirza Agha Khan Kermani, did internalise Orientalist notions of racial purity and introduced these ideas to the intellectual life of late 19th-century Persia (Adib-Moghaddam 2006, p. 16, Kashani-Sabet 2002, pp. 166–177). But there was also 'Occidental' breeding ground for such narratives to gain currency amongst the intelligentsia of the country, a whole range of nationalist myths which have survived throughout the centuries and which have been repeatedly tapped into in order to define, somewhat metaphysically, the national narrative in Iran. The Pahlavi monarchs were fascinated by the imperial history of pre-Islamic Persia, and found its historical vigour conducive to legitimate their rule. To that end, they invoked the myth that their dynasty was somehow related to Xerxes, Cyrus and Darius, the legendary Kings of the Achaemenid Empire. Thus, Mohammed Reza Shah adopted

the official title ‘Aryamehr’ or light of the Aryans, celebrated 2500 years of Iranian monarchy in a lavish festival in Persepolis in 1971 and subsequently abandoned the Islamic solar *hegra* calendar in favour of an imperial one, suddenly catapulting Iran into the year 2535 (based on the presumed date of the foundation of the Achaemenid dynasty) traversing both the confines of Muslim history and Western modernity. In the imagination of the shah this was the beginning of a new era for Iran, an era that was meant to set the country apart from its Islamic heritage fast forwarding it to the gates of a ‘great civilisation’ (*tamadon-e bozorg*).

The subject that emerges out of the shah’s official discourse in Iran is the Aryan Persian, Indo-European, heir to a lost civilisation but willing to catch up under Western tutelage. This subject has a tolerated presence in mainstream Western high culture via the discourse of Orientalism. It reminds us of Zarathustra, Scheherazade, Sindbad, Ali Baba, the tales of One Thousand and One nights: The shah ↔ the West ↔ Aryanism ↔ Indo-European-ness ↔ Orientalist blowback. A new subject now emerges out of the turmoil of the Islamic revolution in 1979. Now we are confronted with the revolutionary Iranian, somewhat Arab, certainly more Muslim and third worldly, darker and more radical in the unsettling sense of the term. Suddenly, the discursive field signifying Iranian–American relations is populated by different representations of the ‘other:’ Ayatollah Khomeini ↔ the Orient ↔ Islam ↔ the third world ↔ revolution ↔ terrorism. The reading of Iran changes. Consider Henry Kissinger (1982, p. 671) in this regard: ‘The rootless, the newly powerful, the orthodox, and the spiritually dispossessed came together with disparate, often conflicting motives and swept away the Shah’s rule in an orgy of retribution and vengefulness’, he writes in his memoirs. ‘But retribution for what?’ he asks incredulously. ‘[N]othing that happened can compare with the witch trials, executions, terrorism, and lunacy that followed, reminiscent in bloodiness and judicial hypocrisy of the worst excesses of Robespierre.’ For bestselling author Mark Bowden (2006, pp. 4–5) what was happening in Iran during those days of ‘rage and trepidation’ was even more momentous. ‘The capture of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran’, he writes, ‘was a glimpse of something new and bewildering. It was the first battle in America’s war against militant Islam, a conflict that would eventually engage much of the world.’ These lines were published in 2006, i.e. in the middle of the ‘war on terror’ which was adopted as the main strategic plank of the George W. Bush Administration after the terrorist attacks on the country in September 2001. Bowden is clearly echoing the pronounced view of US neoconservatives that Iran, Iraq, al-Qaeda, Hesbollah, Hamas, etc. are all part of the same problem: the global Islamic threat. ‘Iran’s revolution wasn’t just a localised power struggle; it had tapped a subterranean ocean of Islamist outrage’ (Bowden 2006, p. 5). How archaic and alien does it seem to us today that Pahlavi Iran was considered to be of ‘either world’ and a courted member of the international, namely ‘Western’, community of nations, despite the dictatorship of the shah, despite his human rights abominations, despite his nuclear energy programme, despite his support to bombing/insurgent/guerrilla campaigns conducted by Kurdish factions in Iraq in the 1970s.

Revolutionary Iran and the terrorist subject

I have argued that in 1979 a massive rupture occurred within the discursive field enveloping Iranian–American relations. This space, where representations of Iran and the United States reveal themselves and interact with each other in an ungracious simulation of reality, is created dialectically. In other words, there is both an inflow and outflow of signs and symbols, defined in terms of social constructions of self and other, subject and object,

which are entirely interpenetrated and thus interdependent phenomena, but claim, nonetheless, 'factual' validity as something distinct. The authorship of the signs and symbols that penetrated this field so vigorously, the idea of Iran as revolutionary, anti-imperial, Islamic, the vanguard in the fight of the 'oppressed' multitudes against the 'arrogant' forces, lay with Iranians themselves. My point is that the revolution equipped Iranians with the irresistible power to express their own narrative which was enunciated, nonetheless, primarily in relation to and in vigorous cross-fertilisation with the concept of the 'West'.

The social engineering of Iran's post-revolutionary identity discourse was precipitated and seriously affected by the writings of activist intellectuals whose ideas were widely disseminated amongst the anti-shah intelligentsia, especially in the late 1960s and 1970s. Two narratives, *gharbzadegi* (or westoxification) and *bazgasht be khishtan* (return to the self), were particularly hegemonic. The former was the title of a highly influential book authored by Jalal al-e Ahmad. In this book al-e Ahmad likens the increasing dependence of Iran on Western notions of modernity to a disease he terms *gharbzadegi*. If left untreated *gharbzadegi* would lead to the demise of Iran's cultural, political and economic independence, because society was made susceptible to penetration by the 'West'. 'Today', writes al-e Ahmad (1982, p. 19), 'the fate of those two old rivals is, as you see, this: one has become a lowly groundskeeper and the other the owner of the ballpark.' In order to escape this fate, al-e Ahmad argued, Iran had to be turned into the vanguard in the fight of the oppressed 'east' against the imperialist 'West', if necessary through revolutionary action.

Ali Shariati was equally adamant to challenge the policies of the shah and his real and perceived dependence on the politics of the United States. The narrative of *bazgasht be khishtan* picked up al-e Ahmad's theme accentuating cultural authenticity, and the wider anti-colonial struggle at the head of which Iran should position itself, not least in order to find a way back to the country's 'true' self which Shariati defined in socialist and Islamic terms. In an intellectual tour de force, Shariati turned Jesus, Abraham, Mohammad and above all Imam Hussein (grandson of the Prophet Muhammad) and his mother Fatimah into revolutionary heroes who were positioned at the helm of a new movement for global justice and equality. In his many speeches and written tracts, Shariati emphasised that Islam in general and Shia Islam in particular, demands revolting against unjust rulers. At the centre of Shariati's oeuvre we find Imam Hussein who is represented as the ultimate *homo Islamicus*, a martyr in the cause of justice who fought the 'tyranny' of the Umayyad caliph Yazid and who sacrificed his life and that of his family at the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD. 'Look at Husayn!' Shariati (cited in Donohue and Esposito 2007, p. 364) demands in 1970.

He is an unarmed, powerless and lonely man. But he is still responsible for the *jihād*. . . . He who has no arms and no means has come with all of his existence, his family, his dearest companions so that his *shahadat* [bearing witness to God, martyrdom] and that of his whole family will bear witness to the fact that he carried out his responsibility at a time when truth was defenceless and unarmed. . . . It is in this way that the dying of a human being guarantees the life of a nation. His *shahadat* is a means whereby faith can remain. It bears witness to the fact that great crimes, deception, oppression and tyranny rule. It proves that truth is being denied. It reveals the existence of values which are destroyed and forgotten. It is a red protest against a black sovereignty. It is a shout of anger in the silence which has cut off tongues.

The narratives of *gharbzadegi* and *bazgasht be khishtan* simulate a bifurcated syntactical order: justice ↔ oppressed (*mostazafan*) ↔ Muslim ↔ Islam ↔ revolution *versus*

imperialism ↔ oppressors (*mostakbaran*) ↔ superpowers ↔ the West ↔ the United States. In the writings and speeches of Ayatollah Khomeini, the dichotomies prescribed by this syntactical order find their explicit political articulation. The great utopia of universal justice, central to the former side of the dichotomy, could be turned into ‘reality’ by the *vali-e faqih*, the supreme jurispudent who would position himself at the helm of a global movement carried by the ‘oppressed’ masses of the world. With Ayatollah Khomeini, Islam not only becomes a desirable object of history, it is turned into a revolutionary, anti-imperial ideology with a universal claim.

During the same period that the shah proclaimed Iran’s new civilisation based on the country’s pre-Islamic heritage, and at the same time as mainstream scholars in the United States were explaining to us the benevolence of his rule, a different meaning of Iran was being formulated; a discourse that produced ‘revolutionary Islam’ and its ‘Muslim’ subject. On the necessity to establish the ideal Islamic polity in order to ward off imperial intrusions, Ayatollah Khomeini (1981, pp. 48–49) was explicit: ‘[T]he imperialists and the tyrannical self-seeking rulers have divided the Islamic homeland’, he lectured in exile in Najaf (Iraq) in 1970.

They have separated the various segments of the Islamic *umma* from each other and artificially created separate nations. There once existed the great Ottoman State, and that, too, the imperialists divided. . . . In order to assure the unity of the Islamic *umma*, in order to liberate the Islamic homeland from occupation and penetration by the imperialists and their puppet governments, it is imperative that we establish a government. In order to attain the unity and freedom of the Muslim peoples, we must overthrow the oppressive governments installed by the imperialists and bring into existence an Islamic government of justice that will be in the service of the people. The formation of such a government will serve to preserve the disciplined unity of the Muslims; just as Fatima az-Zahra (upon whom be peace) said in her address: ‘The Imamate exists for the sake of preserving order among the Muslims and replacing their disunity with unity.’

I have provided a mere microcosm of what was happening below the surface of the official discourse sponsored by the shah’s state apparatus in the 1960s and 1970s. The identity discourse of Iran was being populated by new symbols and signs. Suddenly, the same people who were represented as heirs to the pre-Islamic Persian empires, as Aryan, Indo-European and largely non-Muslim by the Pahlavis, appeared as primarily Islamic, anti-imperialistic, revolutionary and supportive of the struggles of the ‘third worlds’. The occupation of the US embassy in 1979 was the practical epitome of this discourse. It was not merely planned in response to the admittance of the shah to the United States for medical treatment which was interpreted as the beginning of yet another plot to reinstate his rule in Iran. The self-proclaimed ‘students following the line of Imam Khomeini’ were driven by ideas; coded by the powerful revolutionary narratives, some of which I have sketched above. As Massoumeh Ebtekar (2000, p. 80), one of the female students who was involved in the occupation of the US Embassy writes in her account of the events: ‘My sense of women’s rights and responsibilities derived much from the Iranian context, from Dr. Shariati’s book *Fatima is Fatima*, in which he describes the Muslim woman and her role in the world of today with a mixture of eloquence and penetrating insight.’ Note that Fatima, conceptualised as the ultimate female vanguard of the new order, reappears here. She travelled from seventh-century Arabia to claim a presence in the writings of Shariati and Khomeini (see above) and in the very consciousness of the revolution. More strategically, the students deemed the occupation of the US embassy a necessary step towards achieving Iran’s full independence from the international system, even if that

meant that Iran would be labelled a pariah or rogue state by its most potent guardians. In other words, the choice to detach Iran from that system which was deemed corrupt and geared towards the imperial interests of the superpowers, was self-consciously made by the more radical forces that gathered around Ayatollah Khomeini. As Ebtekar (2000, p. 241) writes: '[T]he Islamic Revolution in Iran transformed a once devoted ally of the West into a "rogue state" that insisted on taking orders from none other than God.'

The message of an author and the reception of her oeuvre are different matters. The subject that emerged out of the revolutionary narratives weaved into Iran before and after the revolution was not welcomed as the new vanguard who would rescue humanity from its fallen present of course. The 'revolutionary Muslim' subject that confronts us now, came to us full of residues of the past, carrying the heavy baggage of Orientalism with all its historical suspicion towards that Muslim other. The occupation of the US Embassy and other signposts of escalation such as Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie in 1989, in effect reified that pre-existing image of Muslims as violent, archaic and fanatical in the imagination of many stakeholders dealing with the region. A revolution (during the Cold War), a concept associated with communism, Fidel Castro, un-American 'leftists' and the Soviet other – in the name of Islam, a concept associated with the Arabs and Turks, the fiercest competitors with the idea of the 'West' and its Christian residue, has made it very difficult indeed to move beyond the canonised archives of Western Orientalism, even after the Iranian revolutionaries re-evaluated the project to export their Islamic republican model after the end of the Iran–Iraq war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. So the 'terror' label stuck, not because its point of origin lay in the abominations of Iran's radical politics, not because of the violence unleashed by the revolution per se, but because it confronted US foreign policies and their beneficiaries, primarily the Israeli state, through a radically alternative discourse that threatened to alter the political composition of a region that has been considered vital to US national interests because of its oil resources. In other words, Iran and its allies were not a military threat to the status quo, they did not purport to change the political composition of the region through military conquest. But they were a discursive one which made it necessary to fight them with a potent counter-discourse: hence the terror narrative emerges.

To those who would immediately interject by saying that Iran was associated with terror because the country supported a range of movements, Palestinians, Lebanese, Iraqi, Afghan, etc., organisations such as Fatah, HAMAS and Hezbollah that use political violence in order to further their political aims, allow me to respond that 'terrorism' as a noun and 'terroristic' as an adjective, are the terminological surface effect of discursive representations: they are concepts that emerge out of a particular politico-cultural configuration which commands its own signifying powers out of which the terror label and its derivatives are distilled. I am not saying that killing civilians is not immoral and taboo of course; it is and it should be. I am saying that in the reality invented for us, it is not that moral taboo that represents a country or movement as terroristic, but the discourse which signifies the fundamental categories of friend and foe, terrorists and freedom fighter. The normative difference between these categories cannot be measured and defined in terms of the type of political violence unleashed, but by its representation in the political and media discourse of a particular period.

Let me give you a few empirical examples with regard to the discursive field under scrutiny here. In the early 1970s the shah, via his intelligence organisation SAVAK, the CIA and the Israeli MOSSAD, sponsored a sustained 'covert war' of Iraqi-Kurdish factions under the leadership of Mustafa Barzani against the Ba'hist leadership in Iraq which led to bombings of oil installations in Kirkuk and other infrastructural facilities with

civilian use and subsequently to a full-fledged insurgency. Amongst us, we may deem the methods employed by the Kurdish movement ‘terroristic’. But this was certainly not the official view in Washington (or Britain, Iran and Israel). A White House Memorandum authored by Henry Kissinger and dated 5 October 1972 (White House Memorandum 1972, p. 1) refers to ‘Mustafa Barzani’s Kurdish resistance movement’. In the same memo (p. 1) it is indicated, that CIA Director Richard Helms reports the delivery of ‘money and arms . . . to Barzani via the Iranians without a hitch. More money and arms are in the pipeline’, it stated. ‘Barzani received the first two monthly cash payments of each for July and August. . . . By the end of October, the Iranians will have received for onward shipment to the Kurds 222,000 pounds of arms and ammunitions from Agency stocks and 142,000 pound from [Retracted].’ Note also that since its inception in 1979, the Iraqi government was put on the US State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism. The country was taken off that list in 1982 in the middle of the Iran–Iraq war and at a time when the Reagan Administration was aware of Saddam Hussein’s directives to use chemical weapons against advancing Iranian army units and Iraqi civilians who resisted his regime (Adib-Moghaddam, 2006, 2008). Iraq was put on that list again after its invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Ultimately then, the allocation of the terror label shifted with the particular political context in which it was employed.

Moreover, other declassified documents from the 1970s show that the label ‘terrorist’ was readily applied to student activists protesting the dictatorship of the shah. A US State Department Telegram of August 1972 (US Department of State 1972, p. 1), for instance, observes that ‘Terrorist activities in Iran seem to be increasing instead of usual summer subsidence due to vacation for students, perhaps indicating better organisation and broadening of appeal to non-student groups.’ In the same memo (p. 1) it is indicated that there ‘have been 28 confirmed explosions (11 of which directed against US presence), ten shootouts and several other incidents including unsuccessful attempt to kidnap daughter of Court Minister Alam, and plot to sabotage Isfahan steel mill.’ The fact that these ‘terrorists’ seemed to use similar measures as the Kurdish movement that the Nixon Administration supported during the very same period was not the measure according to which the terror label was allocated here. Rather, it was the fact that the students were acting against a leader who was considered to be an ally of the United States that turned them into ‘terrorists’. So in the discursive field I am dissecting here, the term terror and all its derivatives do not have any normative or analytical value beyond their signification within a particular politico-cultural constellation. Not because it is me who is blurring their meaning for the sake of my argument, but because politicians have twisted and turned them for their own purposes since the ‘birth’ of the term during the ‘reign of terror’ in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

Dialectical conjunctions and the Iranian–American syntax

Let me return to the beginning of this essay and recapture the issue of trust now within such an untrustworthy discursive field. The subject that emerges out of the turmoil of the revolution and the subsequent devastating war between Iran and Iraq (1980–88), does not speak to the American side in order to mitigate conflict, but to accentuate difference. Revolutionary Iran was adamant to define the Islamic Republic in strict juxtaposition to the West in general and the United States in particular. This discourse has suggested, as I mentioned, a bifurcated syntactical order within which the fundamental boundary between subject and object, self and other has been cemented with layers and layers of narrated inventions, all of which were meant to solidify the fundamental difference between the

two states. In other words, the political independence of Iran has been achieved via a discursive dependency. By defining Iran's new 'self' in relation to the American 'other', the discourse of the Islamic Republic has become entirely dependent on invented images of the United States in particular and the concept of the 'West' more generally. Thus, an oppressive syntactical dependency has been created which demands that Iran takes the US and the West permanently into account at each and every twist and turn of the country's official political discourse: *Marg bar Amrika* (death to America), *marg bar engelis* (death to England), *marg bar Israel* (death to Israel); calling for the 'death' of America, Israel and Britain guarantees their syntactical existence in the here and now. So the 'West' has a rather pronounced presence in Islamic Iran indeed, particularly amongst the rightwing, the supporters of Ahmadinejad who utter those slogans and whose iron fist is crushing Iranian pro-democracy activists at the very moment I am writing these lines. It should not come as a surprise that these young people are accused of colluding with the 'West': within contemporary Iran it is inevitable that 'you' reappear as a major focal point of the political discourse.

I am emphasising that a discursive field is always social, but that sociality could be violent, neutral, intimate, or friendly; it could be charged with negative or positive energy, but it always remains the loci within which shifts from enemy to friend or ally to foe can be signified. Note that I am accentuating the effects of discourse, our language towards the other, as the main source of trust building measures. I am re-emphasising this because Iran and the United States did occasionally reach out to each other out of expediency without changing their language towards the other side. When the 'Great Satan' and the 'mad mullahs' colluded via Israel in what became to be known as the Iran–Contra Affair in 1986, they remained just that: staunch antagonists who made a deal not in order to engender trust, but as a means to achieve divergent strategic interests. In the case of the Iranian leadership, the deal was necessary in order to secure the supply of arms and weaponry during a period when the chemical weapons attacks by Saddam Hussein's troops were beginning to demoralise the Iranian army. The Israeli government of Shimon Peres, on the other side, acted on the premise 'that moderate elements in Iran can come to power if these factions demonstrate their credibility in defending Iran against Iraq and in deterring Soviet intervention. To achieve the strategic goal of a more moderate Iranian government', it is stated in a White House Memorandum (1986, p. 1) authored by then US National Security Advisor John Poindexter, 'the Israelis are prepared to unilaterally commence selling military material to Western-oriented Iranian factions. . . . It is their belief that by so doing they can achieve a heretofore unobtainable penetration of the Iranian governing hierarchy'. In response to this memo, President Reagan (White House Memorandum 1986, p. 4) authorised assisting individuals and groups 'sympathetic to U.S. Governments interests . . . for the purpose of: 1) establishing a more moderate government in Iran, 2) obtaining from them significant intelligence . . . and 3) furthering the release of the American hostages held in Beirut'. It should become clear that in this clandestine transaction none of the stakeholders were interested in pursuing strategic trust-building measures, which would have involved, at minimum, the acknowledgement of the 'trustworthiness' of the other side (Booth and Wheeler 2008, pp. 229ff.).

The first major step towards that direction after the revolution in Iran was made by former President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) via the 'dialogue amongst civilisation' initiative which did not yield, however, the results he and his supporters envisaged. Rather the contrary, Iran was named a part of the 'axis of evil' and a major target in the global 'war on terror' pronounced by the administration of George W. Bush in the aftermath of the terror attacks on the country in September 2001 (Adib-Moghaddam 2008a, part 3). Thus

far, this narrative-counternarrative dialectic has not delivered a pacified discursive field in which a strategic leap towards trust could be signified.

Discursive fields are never immutable or unchangeable; they are impure, creolised phenomena, porous and polluted spaces that are open for interpretive penetration. Their relative ontological salience does not emanate from the a-historical codification of the objects that engage each other therein, but from the fact that none of them can be explained solely by their own properties. In this sense discursive fields are violently social phenomena; representations of self and other are entirely interdependent. Iranians and Americans may have parodied seemingly divergent identities aimed at setting each other apart, but their performative acts achieved the opposite. By allocating to the other side a prominent discursive presence, the interdependence between the two countries increased. Before the revolution, Iran and the United States were entangled in a social relationship that was beset by trust, after the revolution they were immersed in a social relationship beset by active distrust.¹ The latter constellation required by far more laborious political construction efforts, because a) the intentions of the other side were largely obscured, not immediately visible (there was no easily accessible 'intelligence' in CIA parlour) and b) the enemy image (mad mullah, Great Satan) had to be constructed within a discursive field that was suddenly ruptured by the Islamic revolution.

Premise (a) can be immediately linked to Sun Tzu's (1963, p. 84) ancient note of caution: 'Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril', or to the popular pro-verb that you should 'keep your friends close, but your enemies closer' which re-appears in Francis Ford Coppola's movie adaptation of Mario Puzo's novel *The Godfather*. In other words, after the revolution, Iran and the United States had to take each other permanently into account; they had to open up spaces for the other side in their official discourse because in the absence of diplomatic relations, both sides suffered from a pronounced sense of insecurity about each other's intentions. Indeed, a quick perusal of the main strategic speeches of successive US presidents indicates that the presence of Iran in the syntax of US foreign policy proclamations has progressively increased to the extent that today, President Obama mentions the country whenever he addresses three central international issues (the first and third of which are global): the topic of nuclear disarmament and the NPT, international relations in western Asia, and US relations with the 'Muslim world'.

Premise (b) refers to the process via which the unknown enemy has to become the socially engineered invention par excellence because he has to be made visible. Turning him into a 'real and tangible enemy' requires ongoing performative processes, the ultimate aim of which would be to reveal his hidden face. An incredible amount of Kantian *Einbildungskraft* (power of imagination) is needed here in order to turn him into something easily recognisable. If the enemy image is conducive to the politics of the day, the expressions of his face have to be drawn threateningly enough to mobilise the libidinous anger of the nation that would, ideally, stare at him with outrage. Of course, once this image is created it is difficult to be re-manipulated; indeed it threatens to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Political elites deceive themselves whenever they believe that they can monopolise the signification of a particular discursive field without taking the other side into account. No hegemony is all encompassing, no discourse can be co-opted fully by a particular agent, no discursive field is indifferent to temporal change. In a situation that is intensely social, where the bonds between country A and country B are not easily dissoluble, violence towards the other will always involve some blowback. The psychological (i.e. strategic) impact of violence between family members is more intimate than a pub brawl, the

violence between Iran and the United States causes more strategic and cognitive scars (on both sides) than the violence between say the United States and Brazil or Iran and Austria. It is in this sense that the United States and Iran share a 'common fate' in western Asia; not because their strategic goals are compatible, not because of expedient foreign policy reasons, not because Iran could act, once again, as a junior partner to the United States, not because the country is needed in order to pacify Afghanistan and Iraq, but because Iran and the United States inhabit the same discursive universe; their grammatical existence is inextricably linked.

At the beginning of this article we presumed that the hyphen setting the two terms 'Iranian-American' apart is a sign of unbridgeable difference. Certainly, after the Iranian revolution in 1979 there have been immense efforts on both sides to convince us that Iran and the United States are essentially different entities, that there is an inherent epistemological difference between these two ideas. But upon closer inspection the hyphen reveals itself as a conjunction, a grammatical particle, a *via media* that indicates that in the word formation 'Iranian-American' nothing is detachable, autonomous, at liberty. We are confronted with a particular form of what Gilles Deleuze (2004, p. 55) termed 'disjunctive synthesis', the interdependence of radically exclusive concepts, Iran (Iranian, mad mullahs etc.) on the one side, America (American, Great Satan etc.) on the other. Ultimately, within the discursive field we are looking at, each of these terms is intensely interdependent; they do not only signify a common discursive field, but also a conjoined cognitive region. It is time that we catch up with this political paradox – with the violently interdependent, latently empathetic potentialities of word formations. Uttering trust towards the other, after all, calls for the triumph of the conjunction 'and' over the predicate 'is'.

Note

1. I would like to thank Nicholas Wheeler for suggesting this term.

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