

Iranian Reactions to U.S. Foreign Human Rights Policy since 9-11  
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# Iranian Reactions to U.S. Foreign Human Rights Policy since 9-11

By Anisseh Van Engeland-Nourai\*

## Introduction

“From now on, we are encircled.”<sup>1</sup> This feeling is shared by many Iranians in spite of their different political backgrounds. The encirclement started with the Gulf, Pakistan, Central Asia and Afghanistan reached its culminating point with the invasion of Iraq. This sentiment has been accentuated by the “Axis of the Evil” label. In his 2002 State of the Union’s Speech, President G.W. Bush labelled Iran, Iraq and North Korea members of the “Axis of Evil”, implying that those three countries were dangerous because of their links to global terror.<sup>2</sup> In this speech, President Bush also spoke of the Human Rights situation in Iran:

Our second 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 11th. But we know their true nature [...] Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom.<sup>3</sup>

In a few lines, President Bush laid down the post-2001 US Human Rights foreign policy towards Iran: The Bush administration did not aim at one specific issue like his predecessors used to do.<sup>4</sup> The target would be the nature of the Iranian regime and the Iranian constitution that allows non-elected people to rule the country. The country was labeled “evil” not only because of its so-called participation to global terrorism but also because of its Human Rights record. Paradoxically, at the time of President Bush’s speech, the Human Rights situation in Iran had improved. After 2002, the situation changed for the worse. It is therefore legitimate to wonder if the label “Axis of Evil” and the US Human Rights foreign policy towards Iran had an impact on the degradation of the Human Rights situation.

When I address the issue of Human Rights in Iran, I refer to international Human Rights standards as laid down by the United Nations. I refer to the “universal” norms of Human Rights. There are several cultural relativist approaches, one being the Iranian and Islamic vision of Human Rights. This issue is not addressed in this paper but it is

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<sup>1</sup> De la Gorce Paul Marie, *La République Islamique d’Iran sous Pression*, le Monde Diplomatique (Paris), Juillet 2003, at Grandes Manoeuvres Américaines, 8.

<sup>2</sup> President Georges W. Bush, State of the Union Speech, Washington D.C, January 29 2002 (transcript available at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov))

<sup>3</sup> President Georges W. Bush, State of the Union Speech, Washington D.C, January 29 2002 (transcript available at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov))

<sup>4</sup> For example, the Reagan administration worked on the issue of Bahaism and freedom of religion.

important to clarify my stand.<sup>5</sup>

The first part of the paper will deal with the Iranian reactions to the US Human Rights foreign policy. I will analyze the Iranian leaders' reactions, then the ones of civil society and the Iranian people. In a second part, I will study the consequences of the US discourse on the Human Rights situation in Iran.

The paper tries to explain one reason that led to the degradation of the Human Rights situation in Iran. I do not say the Human Rights situation in Iran worsened solely because of the US Human Rights foreign policy. I only present and explain one of the multiple roots of the Human Rights crisis in Iran. This paper is provocative and raises issues on purpose.

### **Part I: The Consequences in Iran of the US Human Rights Discourse: Reactions and Actions**

The diplomatic improvements between Iran and the United States were interrupted with the 2002 President Bush's speech. "Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom."<sup>6</sup> In one sentence, the Bush administration changed the US Human Rights policy towards Iran. The basis of this assertion was that "freedom, democracy and human rights are universal values"<sup>7</sup> and "When given a choice, people will choose freedom, human rights and democracy."<sup>8</sup>

When President Bush delivered his speech to Congress a week after the State of the Union Speech, he elaborated the basis of the "Axis of Evil" theory:

America will always stand firm for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women, private property, free speech, equal justice and religious tolerance. America will take the side of brave men and women who advocate these values around the world- including the Islamic world- because we have a greater objective than eliminating threats and containing resentment. We seek a just and peaceful world beyond the war on terror. We're dealing with a struggle in which the United States is under attack from regimes and organizations that see, as a legitimate tool of politics, the deliberate targeting for death of thousands of innocent people as they go to work in a skyscraper. Those are

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<sup>5</sup> For more details about the Iranian version of Human Rights: Van Engeland-Nourai Anicée, *Universality of Human Rights and Iranian Law: Enforcement of Human Rights in a Muslim Country*, 2006, (unpublished PhD dissertation, Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, thesis under the direction of Olivier Roy), (on file with the author).

<sup>6</sup> President Georges W. Bush, State of the Union Speech, Washington D.C, January 29 2002 (transcript available at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov))

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Khalizad Zalmay, *Where is Iran --and the US Iran Policy--heading?*, Address to the Washington Institute for Near East policy, (August 2, 2002), (transcript available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org>)

<sup>8</sup> President Georges W. Bush, Statement Washington D.C, July 2002, (transcript available at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov))

the kinds of regimes the United States is struggling against, and that is a moral struggle, fundamentally.<sup>9</sup>

The conclusion of the inventor of the “Axis of Evil”, David Frum, is that:

He [President Bush] sent a message of hope to the people of Iran. He told them that he is serious in condemning their government, that he is not going to be one of those world leaders who try to do business with and prop up their oppressors, that in fact he sees their oppressors as oppressors. That is a hopeful message to a people who are overwhelmingly sick of being misruled by these clerical fascists.<sup>10</sup>

The two speeches were essential as they defined the Bush administration’s doctrine for his presidency. It seemed to have purposely a provocative nature. Indeed, Iranians were offended. Rarely has one phrase caused so much confusion and controversy.

## **Chapter 1- Reactions in Iran**

The reactions in Iran were at first unanimous: there was anger and puzzlement. A war of words took place, soon replaced by concrete consequences and actions on the field.

### **Section 1: The Ultimate Insult<sup>11</sup>**

President G.W. Bush opted for a very public opportunity to deliver his speech about the “Axis of Evil”. The State of the Union’s speech had indeed a particular importance after the 2001 terrorist attacks and the world expected the United States’ official reaction. The humiliation for Iran and Iranians was therefore largely public. As the Bush administration chose a speech with a wide audience to launch the “attack”, a war of words began. The Iranians decided to answer on the same tone and in the same way: in public and loudly

- **The Reformist Camp Taken by Surprise**

Reformists were advocating for a better relationship with the United States. It ended up being a political trap for them and the Bush policy on Human Rights discredited them. After 2002, they had no other choices than criticizing the United States. President Khatami, who had taken the first steps towards reconciliation, called his followers to demonstrate against the United States. The “Axis of Evil” was considered as a betrayal and a failure for the Reformists

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<sup>9</sup> President Georges W. Bush, Statement to the Congress, Washington DC, February 2002, (transcript available at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov))

<sup>10</sup> Interview with David Frum, Speechwriter for Bush, Interview by Linden Mac Intyre, Frontline magazine, (April 8, 2002), (available at [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org))

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Elaine Sciolino, senior writer in the Washington bureau of The New York Times, interview by Linden MacIntyre, Frontline magazine, (17 April 2002), (available at [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org))

President Khatami was the first one to respond to the “Axis of Evil” concept: “Bush’s remarks are intervening, warmongering, insulting, a repetition of his past propagation, and worse than all, truly insulting towards the Iranian nation.<sup>12</sup>” As President Bush had chosen to address his message not only to the leaders of Iran but also to the people, the President called for national unity. According to him, the unjustified attacks from the United States would lead to “more unity and solidarity among the Iranian nation”.

His speech was shortly followed by the Foreign Minister’s words, Kamal Kharrazi, who spoke of an intervention in internal affairs:<sup>13</sup> According to him, Human Rights are a national matter and the way people are elected in a country is a purely constitutional matter.

With these arrogant statements, the American government has further unveiled its true image as a hegemonic power that wants to dominate the whole world through force [...] we, besides rejecting American accusations, believe that the world will not tolerate U.S. hegemonic ambitions and believe Mr. Bush would do better by presenting proof of his accusation.<sup>14</sup>”

The Iranian Majles Speaker Mehdi Karroubi declared that the idea that “a minority rules over Iran” had no sense, since more than 20 elections have been held in Iran after the Islamic Revolution in 1979: “Bush’s speech is not only an insult to the Iranian nation but is also an affront to the American nation with a president talking in such a tone to the world.<sup>15</sup>”

The Majles reformist group, *Dovvom Khordad*, released a statement supported by all the parliamentary groups, declaring:

The expansionist stands taken by the U.S. president originate in the monopolistic view of Washington, which believes it deserves to dominate the world [...] The new stances of the U.S. president added another black page to the error-filled book of American foreign policies. [...] The nation will strengthen its iron barriers [against it] and will not allow [it] to destroy its independence and freedom. Being able to divide the dynamic and active Iranian nation is a mere dream for evil-seekers. The great Iranian nation, which has always been an advocate of peace, security and justice for all nations, especially its neighbors, will fire a bullet at foreign enemies, which will deal with it as if it were hundreds of thousands of bullets. We, members of the Parliament, unanimously stand by the freedom and independence of the Iran and hereby declare that the statement by the U.S. president [...] is a threat to world peace

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<sup>12</sup> S. Haeri, *Iran reacted with Indignation to Bush’s Warnings*, Iran Press Service, (January 30, 2002), (available at [www.iran-press-service.com](http://www.iran-press-service.com))

<sup>13</sup> IRNA, Archives, February 2002, (available at [www.irna.com](http://www.irna.com))

<sup>14</sup> *Reactions to U.S. President's Outrageous Remarks*, Tehran Times, Tehran, (January 31 2002), (available at [www.tehrantimes.com](http://www.tehrantimes.com))

<sup>15</sup> *Reactions to U.S. President's Outrageous Remarks*, Tehran Times, Tehran, (January 31, 2002), (available at [www.tehrantimes.com](http://www.tehrantimes.com))

and security. It is vital for all freedom- and right-seeking nations to stand against this hostile and unwise action.<sup>16</sup>

It is essential to understand that those harsh words were pronounced by people who worked for years for reconciliation with the United States and felt betrayed. It was impossible to imagine that they would make such statements, using the very same words Conservatives had been using for decades. The Bush administration alienated the only forces that could ever improve the relationships between the two countries.

- The Hardliners: A Godsend

The Bush administration's Human Rights foreign policy was the opportunity Conservatives had been waiting for. Not only does it look like they were right in their opposition to reconciliation with the United States, but they are now entitled to practice an open anti-Americanism, without anyone to contradict them. It reinforces their propaganda and the rhetorical basis of their claims to protect the country from Western interventions. As Reformists have no other choice but to join the "America bashing", Conservatives grew stronger than ever. They have now the opportunity they have been waiting for since the end of the eighties. This US Human Rights interventionist policy gives them material to re-launch their propaganda machine.

After the "Axis of Evil" Speech, the Guide A. Khomeini said Mr. Bush was "a man thirsty for human blood."<sup>17</sup> He also referred to the double standard of Human Rights: "The United States president is threatening and accusing other countries of evil involvement while America has opposed popular movements, supported undemocratic regimes, sold lethal weapons and looted the wealth of other nations more than any other country". He added that US officials were unaware of the reality of other countries. Following this political line, the editor of the newspaper *Keyhan*, H. Shariatmadari, said "Iran will have a harsh response for the United States."<sup>18</sup>

While covering for the Friday Tehran University Prayer, the ex-president A.A.Rafsanjani qualified the United States of "Axis of Evil".<sup>19</sup> His perception is that the imperialistic American nation tries to extend its hegemony to the Middle East where the oil lies and intimidates Muslim countries because they try to resist.

In March 2002, Iran filed an official complaint with the UN over the "Axis of Evil" speech. In the complaint, Iranian Foreign Minister Kharrazi said that describing his country as "evil" was an affront to Islam.<sup>20</sup> The Minister of Justice also opened an office where Iranian citizens could come and make claims against the United States, like the

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<sup>16</sup> *MPs' Unanimous Response to Bush: Iran Stands Firm*, Tehran Times, (February 3, 2002), (available at <http://www.tehrantimes.com>)

<sup>17</sup> Fathi Nazila, *A Nation Challenged- the Rogue list: Bush's Evil Label rejected by Angry Iranian Leaders*, New York Times, (February 1, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> *Keyhan*, Tehran, January 2002, (available only at [www.kayhannews.com](http://www.kayhannews.com))

<sup>19</sup> *Rafsanjani : White House, Main Axis of Evil Deeds Globally*, Payvand News, Tehran, 24 May 2002, (available at [www.payvand.com](http://www.payvand.com))

<sup>20</sup> News available at [www.payvand.com](http://www.payvand.com)

one that exists in Washington.<sup>21</sup>

Shortly after the “Axis of Evil” speech, President Bush went further and spoke to the people of Iran using *Radio Farda*: “We continue to stand with the people of Iran in your quest for freedom, prosperity, honest and effective government, judicial due process and the rule of law. And we continue to call on the government of Iran to respect the will of its people and be accountable to them.”<sup>22</sup> There was no official reply from the Iranian government. There was no winner in this exchange that decreased as the battlefield moved from words to actions.

## **Section 2: Civil Society: Behind the Leaders!**

Civil society was at first puzzled. It was torn apart between seizing the “Axis of Evil” opportunity to criticize the government on the one hand and shocked at being insulted as a nation on the other hand. They could have launched attacks against the regime and could have provoked a crisis. Eventually, some of the civil society leaders chose to show their discontentment with the regime. Others decided not to agree with the United States but to use the tensions as to make their ideas heard by the leaders of the Islamic Republic.

Hamid Reza Jalaipour, a former journalist and politician close to the reformist camp said: “Iran is after no adventure. The country's official strategy was against terrorism and violence; policies of the country must not be condemned if an independent hard-line group has engaged in a wrong act.”<sup>23</sup>

The Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi denounced a foreign interference in the country's affairs:

The fight for human rights is conducted in Iran by the Iranian people, and we are against any foreign intervention in Iran [...]The people of Iran have been battling against consecutive conflicts between tradition and modernity for over 100 years. By resorting to ancient traditions, some have tried and are trying to see the world through the eyes of their predecessors and to deal with the problems and difficulties of the existing world by virtue of the values of the ancients. But, many others, while respecting their historical and cultural past and their religion and faith, seek to go forth in step with world developments and not lag behind the caravan of civilization, development and progress. The people of Iran, particularly in the recent years, have shown that they deem participation in public affairs to be their right, and that they want to be masters of their own destiny.<sup>24</sup>

Civil society leaders denounced the attacks on Human Rights as incorrect: The Bush

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<sup>21</sup> Serge Michel, *Les Relations avec les Etats-Unis: Enjeu Principal de la Lutte entre Réformateurs et Conservateurs*, Le Monde, 5 Novembre 2001.

<sup>22</sup> R.W. Stevenson, *Bush's Appeal to Iran's Public in Radio Talk*, New York Times, (December 21, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Bonyan, Tehran, March 2002, (available at [www.worldpressreview.org](http://www.worldpressreview.org))

<sup>24</sup> Shirin Ebadi, Nobel lecture, Oslo City Hall, Norway, (10 December 2003), (available at <http://www.nobel.se/peace/laureates/2003/ebadi-lecture.html>)

administration statements are focused on Human Rights issues that are not primordial to Iran. The attacks from the Bush administration are useless as they do not target the real issues. Besides, it restrains the actions of civil society as Human Rights activists are accused of working for the United States.

## **Chapter 2- The Effects on Civil Society: Time for Actions?**

Did the US Human Rights foreign policy have the effect of “freeing” civil society as expected by the Bush administration? It rather gave it arguments. Iranian civil society uses the US Human Rights foreign policy not as a sign of external support but as a way to advance their ideas at the national level: It uses the Bush rhetoric to frighten and blackmail the regime in hope it will listen to the citizens’ requests.

### **Section 1: The Taheri crisis: a first attempt of manipulation**

The Taheri affair was the first opportunity for the Bush team to make use of an Iranian domestic crisis: it claimed the affair was the consequence of the US calls for freedom. The Bush administration also tried to manipulate the civil society against the regime.

On July 8, 2002, the Ispahan prayer leader, Ayatollah Jaluludin Taheri resigned. In his public resignation letter, he criticised the “*deception, unemployment, inflation...*” and many other issues in Iran. His declaration happened after clashes that occurred in several cities between demonstrators and Islamic militant groups described by Ayatollah Taheri as mad, ignorant fascists. The protests marked the anniversary of the 1999 crackdown by security forces in the campus dormitories. A group of 125 pro-reform members of parliament signed a letter of support of Taheri’s resignation. Ayatollah Taheri published his letter in the reformist newspaper *Nowrooz*.<sup>25</sup> The next day, Iran’s Supreme National Security Council banned all newspapers from writing against or in favor of Taheri’s comments. *Nowrooz* was published the next day, full of blanks with the mention: “The article was removed on the National Security Council’s order.”<sup>26</sup> The strategy used by *Nowrooz* editors was daring and challenging, a symbol of the civil society’s discontentment. Until then the crisis was internal. It was the Guide of the Republic who gave it an international feature.

In response to Taheri, the Guide Khomeini issued a statement that was read on radio several times. He agreed with Taheri on the general Iranian situation but criticised the Ayatollah for speaking publicly: “Ayatollah Taheri complained about several conditions of the country [...] These topics are true, and I have often publicly and privately warned ... about them [...] Each of us in our speeches must exercise more care and be more precise and not threaten the unity and inspiration of this big and brave nation

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<sup>25</sup> *Nowrooz*, Tehran, 8 July 2002, (available at [www.nowrooz.net](http://www.nowrooz.net))

<sup>26</sup> *Nowrooz*, Tehran, 10 July 2002, (available at [www.nowrooz.net](http://www.nowrooz.net))

[...] All that America lacks to carry out its threats against Iran is the existence of a secular popular base.<sup>27</sup>”

This speech shows how much Iranian rulers fear the impact the United States Human Rights foreign policy could have on Iranian people. According to the Guide, problems do exist but should not be exposed in a broad public light as dissent among the rulers might give rise to a secular popular movement. This movement motivated by acts and speeches like Taheri’s could then turn to the United States to seek support. That would undermine the Republic and the nation. It is the rare to hear a public address from an Iranian official that raises so directly the threat of secularism.

The Bush administration decided to use the crisis, hoping it could gather the Iranian civil society around their ideas and provoke a crack in the regime. Consequently, President Bush issued a statement on July 12, 2002, supporting democratic and reformist forces in Iran, with no mention of President Khatami:

Far too little has changed in the daily lives of the Iranian people [...] Meanwhile, members of the ruling regime and their families continue to obstruct reform while reaping unfair benefits [...] The people of Iran want the same freedoms, human rights, and opportunities as people around the world”<sup>28</sup>

The statement provided an opportunity for Conservatives who were quick to assert that “reformism is in fact an American project.<sup>29</sup>” Most Reformists chose to be silent. Alireza Alavitarbar, a reformist, declared: “The reformists obliviously stood by and watched.<sup>30</sup>” Some of them reacted and took an anti-American stance. They had no other choice as the Bush administration had taken a step further: it had definitively interfered in internal affairs: “The biggest help the American president can provide to Reformists is not to interfere in the internal affairs of the great nation of Iran,” said Mostafa Tajzadeh, a reformist leader<sup>31</sup>. Reformists felt they could not do much and that every crisis was consolidating the Conservatives’ power. Every time President Bush would speak, Conservatives would win a battle, score points in their struggle against the reformist movement.

The Taheri crisis was a purely internal matter at first. With President Bush’s intervention, it became an issue: the United States tried to gain control over the Iranian civil society while Conservative Iranian rulers denounced the dangerous influence the United States had on Iranians. The US government had been involved in the Taheri’s crisis before it had done or said anything, when the Guide read his speech on the radio. This is an example of the manipulation used by both sides of an internal crisis that was designed at first only to denounce internal legal failures. President Bush’s statement was

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<sup>27</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini, Answer to Ayatollah Taheri, Speech on the National Radio, July 2002, (transcript available at [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/middle\\_east](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/middle_east))

<sup>28</sup> President Georges W. Bush, Statement, July 12, 2002, (available at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov))

<sup>29</sup> Kayhan, Tehran, July 14 2002, (available at [www.kayhannews.com](http://www.kayhannews.com))

<sup>30</sup> Hayat-e now, Tehran, 15 July 2003, (available at [www.hayateno.org](http://www.hayateno.org)), reformist newspaper

<sup>31</sup> Nowrooz, Tehran, 14 July 2003, (available at [www.nowrooz.net](http://www.nowrooz.net))

published partially by some newspapers like *Nowrooz*.<sup>32</sup> The judiciary power reacted by closing down the newspapers that would publish President's Bush statements. There were some accusations of an American manipulation.<sup>33</sup> Such radical actions show that there is a fear and that the United States foreign policy has an impact on the Human Rights situation and on civil society: on the one hand, the US Human Rights policy gives arguments to the reformist's newspapers and personalities to speak up. On the other hand, it pushes the hardliners to be harsher and to repress freedom of speech for the sake of the nation and the system.

The fact that Bush statement occurred at the time of the anniversary of the 1999 student uprising was not candid. The Bush administration probably hoped at that time to use the civil society discontent to make the US speech sink into the Iranian minds. It only ended up worsening the national crisis and provoking more repression of freedoms.

## **Section 2: Tools for Civil society**

Civil society leaders understood they had become an issue in the struggle between the two parties, the US side trying to convince the civil society to listen to the call for freedom, the conservative side protecting the civil society from the outside evil by restraining freedoms. Consequently, Iranian personalities decided to use the crisis and the "Axis of Evil" speech as well in order to deliver a message to the conservative forces: They did not wish to side by the Bush administration but they hoped the leaders would listen to them if they made threats. On April 19, 2003, 252 personalities issued a first statement:

Believing in existence of a foreign serious threat to Iran, hoping, with due attention to the present sensitive conditions, that the authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran, would acknowledge the undeniable reality, that the acceptance and exercise of democratic rule is the most effective measure to confront the temptation of the violation of the Iranian security by foreign governments, and any act of aggression.<sup>34</sup>

It is clear that these eminent personalities are weighing the interests of Iran. They reach the conclusion that the only way to avoid an external act of aggression is to turn to democracy and Human Rights. They propose several reforms to enforce Human Rights.

On May 19, 2003, 196 clerics, intellectuals, women and journalists sent an open letter.<sup>35</sup> The terms used in this letter are clearly a reference to the "Axis of Evil" and subsequent statements. The letter opens on the threat the country faces: "Looking at the grave situation of our region and the delicate condition of our country, and in pursuit of

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<sup>32</sup> F. Arabsorkhi , *Bush's Remarks: A More Careful Look*, Nowrooz, Tehran, July 2002 (available at [www.nowrooz.net](http://www.nowrooz.net))

<sup>33</sup> President Georges W. Bush, Statement, July 2002, (available at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov))

<sup>34</sup> Iranian Political Activists, Statement Concerning Regional Developments, (April 19, 2003), (available at [www.kadivar.com](http://www.kadivar.com)),).

<sup>35</sup> Iranian Political Activists, Statement Regarding Ways to Assist National Resistance Against Foreign Threats, (May 19, 2003), (available [www.kadivar.com](http://www.kadivar.com))

giving support to the nation to stand against foreign threats and to break the internal political deadlock [...]”. The whole letter is therefore an “advice” given by prominent members of civil society to the government as to how it should address the external threat. The answer is the respect of Human Rights. To ensure the enforcement and the respect of Human Rights, the intellectuals list the measures that should be taken. In the second paragraph of the letter, it is written: “The unelected institutions [...] are united and are standing against the wishes of the nation”. In the third paragraph, “On the top of the demand for freedom and justice, a popularly elected government is at the top of the list”. The words used here remind strongly of President Bush’s statements.

On May 25 2003, 127 out of 290 Majles members signed a letter addressed to the Guide Khomeiny. There is no direct criticism but rather an acknowledgment of the general situation of the country: “Perhaps there has been no period in the recent history of Iran as sensitive as this one [due to] to political and social gaps coupled with a clear plan by the government of the United States of America to change the geopolitical map of the region.<sup>36</sup>” The letter also warns of the risk for Iran to lose its independence and territorial integrity.

In February 2004, the Majles stepped down in order to protest against the Council of Guardians’ barring of 2000 candidacies. The Parliamentarians issued a letter published in reformist newspapers. The letter was signed by 70 reformist legislators. The next day, the Tehran prosecutor’s office ordered the newspapers to be closed down. Here are some extracts of this letter:

Now, on the threshold of the seventh round of elections, [certain] institutions have negated the most obvious right of the people: the right to vote and be voted for. In the current circumstances [...] the higher the level of popular participation in the elections, the more auspicious it will be for the country and the regime [...] If the people are the basis of the country’s strength, then the maintenance of this strength depends on particular circumstances based on the wishes of the people. The people’s view of the government goes beyond the ballot boxes. The higher the number of votes, the more stable the regime will be [...] But the behavior that began with the elections for the seventh Majles, in our opinion, can neither be explained within the framework of the ideals of the Imam [Khomeini] and the revolution, nor based on the principles of conscientious leadership of the people, nor will it help the country down the path of expansion and development [...] A Majles about to be stripped of members courageous in speech and action, a Majles that is formed beginning with the ostracism of around 2,000 people, is a Majles that will not only be unable to defend the national interests, the institutions of the country, and the rights of the nation, but will in all probability be cowed by threats to national security and sovereignty. We are supremely anxious that our regime (with the regretful loss of the great protector of the people) will be brought low in the face of the seen and unseen attacks of foreigners.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> This letter was not made public as the Guide threatened anyone who would publish it.

<sup>37</sup> “*The Letter the Iranian Government Doesn’t Want You to Read*”, published in Shargh and Yas-e Now, Tehran, 18 February 2004, (available at [www.worldpressreview.org](http://www.worldpressreview.org))

There are direct references to the “Axis of Evil” speech and the idea of the “unelected ones”. The former Parliamentarians are sending a message to the leaders: the only way to ensure the security of the country and prevent any other US intrusion would be to respect the democratic process. Eventually, neither the conservative judiciary nor the conservative Council of Guardians listened to those warnings. The 2004 February elections were a parody of the Bush’s statements on the Iranian constitutional law and it is legitimate to wonder if the Iranian 2004 elections process is not a conservative challenge to the United States.

On April 24, 2004, the Iranian Association for the Defense of the Press led by Hojjatoleslam Mohsen Kadivar published an open letter to the Guide.<sup>38</sup> The Association asked the Guide “to start answering the people” about his actions as the highest authority of the country for the past 15 years, actions taken as “an un-elected one”.

The newspapers in Iran did not mention or publish those statements. When they did, the newspapers were closed down. Paradoxically, the ban was imposed by the Supreme National Security Council chaired by President Khatami. In general, President Khatami has to cope with two trends: the movement for liberties coming from the people, and the resistance coming from Conservatives. To keep up the balance, the President has to make some sacrifices. It is an endless search for balance in order to avoid either an outburst followed by a popular revolution or to avoid a conservative coup d’état that could end up in a bloodshed. President Khatami tries to protect the Human Rights safety valve that relies on equilibrium between conservatism and reformism.<sup>39</sup> The tactic Khatami is forced to adopt make him yield on precious liberties like the freedom of speech. It hurts his policy and his own camp. Every time the US government issues a statement to support Iranian people’s struggle for Human Rights, it puts Khatami in a difficult position and hurt his ideas as he has to compromise on the un-compromisable: Human Rights.

Do the statements and open letters show the impact the Bush administration discourse has on Iranian people? Several US specialists analyse the situation that way.<sup>40</sup> They think the Bush statements encourage Iranians to fight for Human Rights. However when one reads the civil society’s statements carefully, it appears clearly that the Human Rights approach is not Universalist but clearly Islamic. Besides, there are no invitations at the address of the US government or the US troops. Civil society is rather blackmailing the government. The members who signed the documents are not pro-American.<sup>41</sup> They

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<sup>38</sup> Haeri Safa, *Khamenei is Responsible of Un-Elected Exactions*, *Press Association Say*, Iranian Press Service, (April 24, 2004), (available at <http://www.iran-press-service.com/>).

<sup>39</sup> What I called the safety valve is the fragile balance that prevails when it comes to Human Rights in Iran: it is the Iranian Human Rights paradox that law allows women to study but does not give them the right to travel alone. It is the balance that exists between law and practice.

<sup>40</sup> Clawson Patrick, *Iran: Demonstrations, Despair and Danger*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policywatch, No 766, 11 June 2003.

<sup>41</sup> For example, Azam Taleghani, daughter of the deceased Ayatollah Taleghani, is the head of the Women’s Society of Islamic Revolution”. She is not a secular and considers the reform of Iran within the framework of Islam. On the other hand, Soroush is a secular but do not wish an American influence in Iran.

do not show any interest in the implementation of a US style democracy in Iran. They simply try to benefit from the opposition between Conservatives and United States.

### **Section 3: Students, Agitators of the Civil Society or Manipulated by the two parties?**

Students were restless in 2003. They demonstrated to celebrate the anniversary of the 1999 demonstrations. Soon they demonstrated against police decisions to close the campus early in June so that no celebrations could take place. Students requested the release of the Ayandeh pollsters and the abolition of Professor Aghajari's death sentence.<sup>42</sup>

The US vision of the 2003 events is quite different and reinforces the Bush administration beliefs of the positive impact of their statements: According to the Reuters agency, students gathered in the streets after hearing a US based Iranian television station exhorting them to go to campus to protest for freedom. President George Bush had no doubt that the unrest marked a turning point. He described it as "the beginnings of people expressing themselves towards a free Iran". The Bush administration endorsed the demonstrators, saying they "are asking to join the modern world". The Bush administration pretended it had control over those movements.<sup>43</sup> It is erroneous from the Bush administration to assert this, knowing that a professor had been arrested and sentenced to death, pollsters had been put in jails and it was the anniversary of the 1999 demonstrations. Students were acting on their own behalf.

The Iranian authorities accused the United States of supporting the student demonstrations. Iranian Conservatives were so certain of the role of the United States that they sent a formal protest to Washington via the Swiss embassy in Tehran. The Guide Khomeini declared that the United States was trying to destabilize the country by encouraging the people to seize power in the streets.<sup>44</sup> It is also erroneous: students are an autonomous force. In general, conservative politicians in Iran are under the impression that the mayhem in Iran is the consequence of the US interferences, idea that paradoxically consolidate the Bush administration beliefs they have an impact with their calls to freedom. Both Reformists and Conservatives feel that students and journalists are going too far, encouraged by the United States that will not care if there are victims and it threatens the social safety valve. The students' demonstrations and the idea of an US support also give to Conservatives the opportunity to accuse Reformists of being the cause of the instability.<sup>45</sup> According to the newspaper *Resalat*, Khatami created a

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<sup>42</sup> Professor H. Aghajari criticized Islam and the Shias leaders in a speech before a small group of students at the Bu Ali-Sina University in Hamadan. The transcript is available at [www.hrw.org/press/2002/11/iranacademic.htm](http://www.hrw.org/press/2002/11/iranacademic.htm). He was sentenced to death; it was commuted to 5 years of imprisonment. Students also took up the cause of three pollsters from the Ayandeh at the apparent request of the Majles. The poll results showed that 74% of Iranians were in favor of the resumption of the dialogue with the United States.

<sup>43</sup> Presses releases, White House, Washington DC, (available at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov))

<sup>44</sup> "Still on the Streets", The Economist, 16 June 2003.

<sup>45</sup> *The Student Movement's Rebirth*, Iran-e emrooz, Tehran, November 2002, (available at [www.worldpressreview.com](http://www.worldpressreview.com))

movement, has lost control over it and it is now manipulated from outside.<sup>46</sup> The police said that the students arrested during the demonstrations confessed the United States had encouraged them and that the Los Angeles television and radio broadcasted in Iran thanks to the satellite played a role. The Minister of information said it had monitored many phone calls to the United States during the demonstrations.<sup>47</sup> The target here is of course the communication tools: phone, satellite dishes and Internet are gates to the outside world and consequently endanger the conservative ruling.

It is hard to say to what extent the US Human Rights policy influence students in reality. It is however quite certain that students feel the regime is under threat and that leaders might be more receptive to their arguments.

#### **Section 4- The Streets of Iran**

The target of the Bush administration is not only the Iranian civil society but the entire society. If the US Human Rights foreign policy creates anger and discontentment among Iranians, people are nevertheless more vulnerable to President Bush's speech and the argument of freedom, democracy and Human Rights.

There is indeed discontentment, frustration, anger and despair but it has not been created by the Bush foreign policy: Khatami's failure to reform, the return of Conservatives to power, the renewal of Human Rights violations and the social crisis make the people of Iran unhappy. There is a wish for reform. The leaders are aware of it but do not want to modify the structures of the republic as the system is in their favour.

Beyond this anger, there is a hope: a hope that US pressures on Iran will force the government to change its Human Rights policy.<sup>48</sup> The frustration at the reforms' failure is widespread and any attempt to pressurize Iran is sometimes secretly welcomed. However, very few wished to "sell the country". It is quite paradoxical: Iranians hope the US pressures will not be fruitless but do not wish an Americanization of their country and values. The symbol of this paradoxical feeling towards the US policy is an article published in the *Tehran Times*. According to the article, the United States were planning to use the Bam disaster to set up a permanent delegation that could be the premises of an invasion.<sup>49</sup> As the newspaper underlined, the people of Iran are grateful to the people of the United States for their support in the Bam tragedy but do not wish to see the US government entering Iran in the name of humanitarian assistance.

### **Part II: Costs and Benefits of such a Policy: the Consequences of the Human Rights Foreign Policy**

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<sup>46</sup> Resalat, Tehran, July 2003, (available at [www.courrierinternational.com](http://www.courrierinternational.com))

<sup>47</sup> Hachemi Akbar, *The rebellion has been quite down... for now*, Hamshari, Tehran, July 2003, (available at [www. http://www.hamshahri.net](http://www.hamshahri.net))

<sup>48</sup> B. Daragahi, *Bush's words stir hope in Iran: Frustrated Citizens say US Pressure can Force Change*, Washington Times, (February 11 2002).

<sup>49</sup> Tehran Times, Tehran, December 2003, (available at [www.tehrantimes.com](http://www.tehrantimes.com))

As we have seen, the US Human Rights foreign policy has consequences on Human Rights: newspapers closed down, academics accused of being pro-American and imprisoned or students' demonstrations regarded as supported by the United States.

It also has effects on national issues such as the municipal and legislative elections, the political union and the general Human Rights condition. The impact is sometimes positive, sometimes negative

## **Chapter 1: Effect on Iranian Elections**

The results of the latest elections clearly demonstrate the impact of the US Human Rights foreign policy. In February 2003, Conservatives won the municipal elections. Then they won the February 2004 Parliamentary elections.

There are three main explanations for the failure of Reformists: The Council of Guardians rejected many reformist candidates. As a result, there were few reformist candidates. Secondly, people were disappointed with President Khatami's policy and the lack of reforms: consequently few citizens went to the polls. Though the President has committed himself to Human Rights and democratization, very few reforms had actually taken place. Eventually, people who would have voted for reformist candidates in another times felt it was important to vote for conservative candidates in times of external threat. When there is an external threat (such as an US invasion), people tend to rally under the umbrella of nationalism, and Conservatives were encouraging such a reaction. Consequently, the US policy is partly responsible for the victory of the Conservatives. The 2004 conservative political campaign was focused on the threat of an invasion: "If we yield a bit, you can be sure the enemy will seep in the Parliament to harm us" said a poster in Qom.<sup>50</sup> The leader of the Tehran prayer, Ayatollah Ahmad Janati declared that people should go and vote to "shot a bullet in Bush's heart".<sup>51</sup> He added that the ones who would not go to vote were traitors to the nation. The Guide declared when casting his vote in the ballots: "this is an important day for the country and the people, it is a big day, as usually when elections take place, but these elections are even more important because our enemies are trying to stop the people's movement to the ballots". It is quite ironic to hear him saying this while his camp barred Reformists from being candidates to the elections.

There was a national upsurge when the Council of Guardians barred from the electoral process candidacy to 2000 reformist candidates' applications in February 2004. It was the biggest crisis since the creation of the Republic and the role of the United States could not be ignored.<sup>52</sup> Most Reformists figures could not run and there was a constitutional violation as much as a violation of civil and political rights. It created a huge discontentment in Iran and a feeling that there was no point in voting as the basic

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<sup>50</sup> Le Monde, "A Qom, Capitale cléricale de l'Iran, on se réjouit d'un retour des Conservateurs", 20 février 2004.

<sup>51</sup> Le Monde, "Derniers efforts de mobilisation pour les législatives en Iran", 20 février 2004

<sup>52</sup> *The Dangers of Iran's electoral crisis*, Tose'eh, Tehran, 24 January 2004, (available at [www.worldpressreview.org](http://www.worldpressreview.org))

democratic principles and basic Human rights were not respected.<sup>53</sup> Comments and interviews flourished in the newspapers about the crisis and were considered by Conservatives as the results of confused thinking and foreign meddling.<sup>54</sup> Reformists felt they were denied the right to run for national and political reasons but also because of the US interference in Human Rights situation.

The Bush administration remained silent till after the elections when it adopted a paternalistic tone to criticize the elections results. President Bush declared: “I join many in Iran and around the world in condemning the Iranian regime's efforts to stifle freedom of speech, including the closing of two leading reformist newspapers in the run up to the election. Such measures undermine the rule of law and are clear attempts to deny the Iranian people's desire to freely choose their leaders. I am very disappointed.”<sup>55</sup>

The US Human Rights policy has an effect on the Iranian political life: people tend to vote for the Conservatives who, though they would violate Human Rights, would ensure the security of the country. Despite the fact that people are worried about their security and wish for more freedoms, they would eventually vote for the ones who will not make Human Rights their priority. This is another effect of the Bush’s policy: it affects Human Rights in Iran as people, though they want more freedoms, are aware that an invasion of Iran would be dramatic. At the same time, Iranians are aware that Conservatives are using and abusing the situation.

## **Chapter 2: National unity**

### **Section 1- A National Bloc...**

Another consequence of the US foreign policy is the restoration of Iran’s self-image and the national unity. The unfairness of the US statements pulled back together the various political trends. It forced Conservatives and Reformists to find a consensus on several issues. Conservatives had to acknowledge public issues such as unemployment, moral conservatism and Human Rights. Reformists had to yield on their discourses on friendship with the United States and accepted their diplomatic defeat. It had the effect of strengthening the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was not the aim of the Bush administration who wanted to undermine it: In his televised address, President Khatami said “all levels of the population will join hands, without partisan considerations, and will come to show their fidelity to the revolution”. Iranian politicians and religious leaders have been calling Iranians to show their support for the regime. The Bush administration policy created a national union block that extends from the leaders to the bottom of the society: “The Islamic Republic is proud to be the target of the hate and anger of the

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<sup>53</sup> A. Zeydabadi, *A Modest Proposal*, Yas-e now, Tehran, 16 February 2004, (available at [www.worldpressreview.org](http://www.worldpressreview.org))

<sup>54</sup> *Conservative contradictions*, Aftab-e Yaz, Tehran, 17 February 2004, (available at [www.worldpressreview.org](http://www.worldpressreview.org))

<sup>55</sup> [www.payvand.com](http://www.payvand.com)

world's greatest evil, we never seek to be praised by American officials.<sup>56</sup>

## **Section 2- ...With defects**

There are limits to the national unity bloc: Conservatives say that people have shown they have remained faithful to the objectives of the revolution. However beyond the objectives of the revolution is the unity of Iran. The dynamic that gathered people together against the United States foreign policy is not a sign of support of the Islamic Republic but clearly a sign of nationalism.

Besides, dissidents tend to use the hostility between Iran and the United States to push for more reforms in favor of Human Rights and democracy. Despite the ex-parliamentary Speaker Mehdi Karubi's call to the people of Iran to demonstrate against the United States even if they are political or ideological opponents of the regime, the temptation is too strong for internal opponents as proved by the three statements made in April and May 2003: there are dissenting voices in the civil society movement, indicating not a support for the Bush administration's theories, but a way to blackmail the government as to advance the Human Rights cause.

The tensions between the US and Iran are also used in the political arena: The presidents of the two main political parties, Mohammed-Reza Khatami (the brother of the President, leader of the Islamic Iran Participation Front) and Habibollah Asgarrowladi (leader of the hardline Islamic Moutalafeh Group) had an exchange of letters. H. Asgarrowladi said:

The stands that you and your party are so distant from the stands of the honourable president that for the public they show a kind of ambiguity of coordination with the US. Playing words such as "elected" and "appointed", faulting the constitution and undermining the political philosophy of Imam Khomeyni and the Islamic revolution in Bush's remarks and statements do not seem to have been an accident.<sup>57</sup>

It was a very serious accusation: the brother of the President was accused of making deals with the enemy. In his public reply, the leader of the reformist party avoided to answer on the accusation of collusion<sup>58</sup>. One of the consequences of the US Human Rights policy is the denunciation of a reformist conspiracy with the United States.

## **Chapter 3: Human Rights, a Heavy Cost.**

### **Section 1- Impact on the world of Human Rights**

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<sup>56</sup> Fathi Nazila, *A nation challenged: the Rogue list: Bush's evil label rejected by Angry Iranian leaders*, New York Times, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2002.

<sup>57</sup> www.iranianvoices.org, in the news archive section.

<sup>58</sup> www.iranianvoices.org, www.payvand.com, in the news archive section.

Since 1997, the reports of non governmental organizations were quite positive about the Human Rights development in Iran. The arrival of President Khatami was welcomed with relief.<sup>59</sup> Those non governmental organizations soon realized the challenges the Khatami's team was confronted to as Human Rights were taken hostages between the two camps.<sup>60</sup>

The US Human Rights foreign policy adopted after September 2001 seems to have puzzled these organizations: They were no official reactions or back up to Iran. Ultimately, these organizations changed the tone of the reports from a mitigated critic to a firm condemnation of Human Rights violations. The 2003 Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reports are appalling.<sup>61</sup> It shows how much the situation has deteriorated since 2002.<sup>62</sup> Those organizations reflect the surprising turn taken by Iran in 2002.

The United Nations saw the election of M. Khatami as a major impetus to the domestic reform process.<sup>63</sup> In April 2002, during the fifty-nine session of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, a draft resolution criticizing the situation in Iran was defeated by a vote of twenty to nineteen, with fourteen abstentions, marking the first time in more than fifteen years that a resolution criticizing Iran's Human Rights practices did not pass at the commission. It brought an end to the mandate of the U.N. special representative on Human Rights in Iran.<sup>64</sup> It cleared Iran from the globes' worst Human Rights offenders. It took two decades from Iran to remove itself from the list. However the UN changed its stance in 2003 and Iran was heavily condemned during the 60<sup>th</sup> United Nations Commission on Human Rights meeting. There is apparently no linkage between the United Nations condemnation and the US policy.

European and Iranian officials meet regularly as they are engaged in dialogues regarding Human Rights: The European Union launched a Human Rights Dialogue with Iran in 2002 and started the negotiations for an Agreement on Trade and Cooperation that contains a Human Rights clause. The different European reports show that the European Union did not change its policy towards Iran after 2001 and were still encouraging for a while. In 2003, the dialogues were suspended because of the deterioration of the Human Rights condition. The latest reports and moves from the European institutions are diplomatic retaliations to the Human Rights violations.<sup>65</sup> There seems to be no impact of the US foreign policy on the European policy as the European Union has its own Human

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<sup>59</sup> Human Rights Watch, Iran: 1997 Annual report, Washington DC, (1998), (available at [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org))

<sup>60</sup> Human Rights Watch, Iran: 1999 Annual Report, Washington DC, (2000), (available at [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org))

<sup>61</sup> Human Rights Watch, Iran: 2003 Annual report, Washington DC, (2004), (available at [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)) and Amnesty International, Iran: 2001-Annual Country report, (2002), (available at [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org))

<sup>62</sup> Human Rights Watch, Iran: Briefing to the 60<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN Commission of Human Rights, January 2004, (available [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org))

<sup>63</sup> United Nations, General Assembly, Fifty-third session, Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Note by the Secretary-General, A/53/423, (23 September 1998), (available at <http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf>)

<sup>64</sup> Human Rights Watch, Iran: Report for the Year 2003, Washington DC, (2004), (available at [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org))

<sup>65</sup> The European Union suspended all Human Rights talk with Iran, as well as other talks (political and economic). It waits for the Human Rights situation to improve. For details see [www.eu.org](http://www.eu.org)

Rights agenda and the European critics were made in the framework of the Human Rights dialogue and the Agreement on Trade and Cooperation.

The US State Department country's reports hardly acknowledged the efforts or improvements since 1997 and did not see the changes after the Axis of Evil speech.<sup>66</sup> The aim of the reports seems to denounce Iran as one of the world's worst human rights abusers, whether it is founded or not.<sup>67</sup> More recently, the United States launched a scathing attack on Iran's Human Rights record in a new pamphlet that details abuses against the press, reformist politicians and minority religions. The 16-page, full-color brochure entitled "Iran: Voices Struggling to be Heard" denounces actions by the country's conservative religious leadership. Conservatives are accused of trampling people's hope for democracy. Apparently, this is the official answer to the February 2004 elections. The brochure was released as Iran has come under heavy fire at the annual meeting of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva where a UN expert and the European Union have been highly critical of the Islamic Republic's record. The pamphlet also explained that all the moves taken by the Iranian civil society are the results of the US Human Rights policy and that it is a success for the Bush administration.<sup>68</sup> However, it is simplistic to believe that the Iranian civil society waited for the Bush administration to start protesting. Civil society was taking decisive steps far before the Bush administration's statements. It is nonetheless interesting to notice that the Bush administration is convinced its discourses have a solely positive impact on the Human Rights situation in Iran.

## **Section 2- Impact on Human Rights in Iran**

### **A- The US policy: A Hammer Against Reformists and Human Rights**

It is difficult to know to what extent the US policy regarding Human Rights has influenced political life, civil society actions and peoples' reactions in Iran. Some analysts are convinced that US support has hurt the reform process in Iran while other disagree and see only a positive impact.<sup>69</sup> According to Ray Takeyh, the "Axis of Evil" speech had several surprisingly positive ramifications in Iran.<sup>70</sup> He does not give any example or explanations for his assertions. In general, American scholars or Iranian scholars in exile are quite certain that the effects were positive. One of them declared that

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<sup>66</sup> Comparisons of all the reports: US State Department, Iran Country Report on Human Rights Practices, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, (available at [www.state.gov/www/global/human\\_rights/1998\\_hrp\\_report/iran.html](http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1998_hrp_report/iran.html))

<sup>67</sup> US Department of State, Iran: Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2002, released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, (available at [www.state.gov/www/global/human\\_rights/1998\\_hrp\\_report/iran.html](http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1998_hrp_report/iran.html))

<sup>68</sup> US State Department, Iran: Voices Struggling to be Heard, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor and Bureau of Public Affairs, Washington DC, (April 9, 2004), (available at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/31261.htm>)

<sup>69</sup> Clawson Patrick., *Iran's Reaction to New Bush Policy Shows America-Bashing is Out of Style*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policywatch, No 647, 7 August 2002, p.1.

<sup>70</sup> Takeyh Ray & Clawson Patrick, *Iran's Place in the Axis: Signs of Movement?*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policywatch, No 625, Special Policy Forum report, 17 May 2002.

Unlike what many say, Mr. Bush's statement did not harm the reformists, did not add to the number of people being harassed or going to jail. In fact, there were many outspoken statements after his speech, including a Feb. 4 talk by a leading reformist, Abbas Abdi, who claimed that the threat to Iran did not come from any outside force but that the main threat was the fact that almost all social and political institutions in Iran were crumbling, and that people had lost almost all confidence in the state. I can cite many more examples. I can send you the responses that came directly from Iran even after Mr. Bush's statement, via email and phone calls, as well as call-ins to Voice of America and the Iranian radio in L.A., to show how supportive Iranians were, only because of their disenchantment and frustration with the whole regime, hardliner or reformist ...The regime as a whole, especially the conservatives, despite their vitriolic rhetoric against the U.S., were genuinely scared, and they have been trying to save face and polish their act.<sup>71</sup>

According to R.Tanter using a confrontational language brings more benefits than costs. The problem is that in international politics and diplomacy, confrontational language leads the other party to move from a defensive stance to an aggressive reaction. Consequently it delays any dialogue. The terminology used by the Bush administration was not a wake-up call: it only angered Iranian officials and left the Iranians puzzled. The idea that “the principal advantage of categorizing countries as evil is political mobilization of domestic population, bureaucracies, and allies against such regimes” did not work in the Iranian case.<sup>72</sup>

Those analyses are often made by people who are cut off from the Iranian reality. They are not aware of the Human Rights realities on the field and do underestimate Conservatives' influence. There is no doubt Iranian Conservatives are afraid of the collapse of the system. However it is naïve to think that the Islamic Republic of Iran will be undermined from outside. The real threat to the system is secularism; that threat comes from inside, from members of the civil society who advocate such ideas and changes, if it must occur, will come from them.

I believe the Human Rights situation has worsened in Iran partly because of the US Human Rights foreign policy, though it would be mistaken to put all the Iranian Human Rights miseries on the United States' shoulders. Soon enough, the Conservatives understood that the “Axis of Evil” label was aimed at their policy and was not a critic of the Reformists. The United States was campaigning against them in a brutal and direct way Iranian Reformists never used. Iranian Reformists are far too aware of the fragile social balance and the need of the social safety valve to confront directly the Conservatives. The United States threatens this safety valve now. Conservatives feel hassled from outside and at the same time use the menace to their benefit: they present themselves as victims of the Bush policy and administration. They also portrayed themselves as the champion of the Iran's freedom, even if it entails some Human Rights

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<sup>71</sup> Interview with Azar Nafisi, by Wen Stephenson, for Frontline Magazine, (from 23 April 2002 to 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2002), (available at [www.pbs.com](http://www.pbs.com))

<sup>72</sup> Tanter Raymond., *How much of an axis and how evil?*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policywatch, No 602, 7 February 2002.

violations.

The Bush administration's policy on Human Rights had the effect of a hammer on Reformists. The policy weakened the possibilities for reforms, weakened Khatami's camp and the democratic and Human Rights movements. The "Axis of Evil" struggle is led in Iranians people's name, according to the Bush administration. However, the Iranian people are the first victim of the international struggle.

Unfortunately, the Bush administration's posture toward Iran has not been helpful. President Bush's harsh comment that Iran is part of the "axis of evil" has allowed Iran's conservatives to claim they are defenders of the republic while they tighten the reins on the reformist majority. Now with the threat of war against Iraq coming to our borders, the conservatives have been conveniently handed another excuse to crack down on dissent and democratization.<sup>73</sup>

Most of the times, when the Bush administration sides by the Iranians in the name of Human Rights, it hurts the reformist movement and civil society by giving arguments to the Conservatives: Fighting for democracy and Human Rights equals helping the United States to invade the country. Notions such as Human Rights are a threat to the national identity and the future of Iran. Anyone struggling for Human Rights is considered as a traitor to the Iranian nation. The "Axis of Evil" and other US statements are a godsend for Conservatives as it strengthens their positions. Reformists are helpless: they were the ones advocating reconciliation with the United States and the latter now appear as a threat to the country's integrity. Reformists seem to be the ones who betrayed the country and help set the fox to mind the geese. What hammers the reformist camp is a godsend to Conservatives and ultras: the "Axis of Evil" speech was perceived as an insult to Iranian values, domestic policy and Human Rights. It is propaganda material for Conservatives.<sup>74</sup>

It also became obvious to Iranians that the US policy has another aim than the promotion of democracy and Human Rights values. They know they are used for the US political purposes; it probably explains why the civil society dares to use a sort of blackmail and use the frictions at their advantage to advance the Human Rights cause. It refuses to accept that only the US leaders and the Conservatives would benefit from the crisis.

In the United States, dissenters from Washington's "Axis of Evil" say the concept can only radicalize Tehran further, make the effort of moderates and Reformists harder and in the long run destabilize the region.<sup>75</sup> Some say accusations and hostile words from the United States have encouraged hard-liners within Iranian society, making President Khatami's job more difficult. According to S. Hunter the American foreign policy

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<sup>73</sup> S. Razavi-Faqih and I. Urbina, *The Fight for Iran's democratic ideals*, New York Times, 10 December 2002.

<sup>74</sup> Heradstveit Daniel & Bonham Matthew, *How the Axis of Evil Metaphor changes Iranian images of the US*, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 5-6, (December 2003), NUPI & Maxwell School of Syracuse University, (available at <http://faculty.maxwell.syr.edu/gmbonham/Evil.doc>)

<sup>75</sup> BBC News, *Analysis: the axis of evil debate*, 6 February 2002; T. Yasin *Knocked off Axis? Iranian Reform Challenged?*, Harvard International Review, Volume: 24, Issue: 2, 2002.

empowers the Conservative side by weakening Khatami.<sup>76</sup> For example, Iran took a quite and neutral stand in the war against Afghanistan and was rewarded with the label of “Axis of Evil” or accusation of hiding Al Qaeda members.

What do Iranians from Iran think about the consequences of the US foreign policy on Human Rights? According to Maasoumeh Ebtekar,

The response is an overwhelming response: All different factions [are] united. ... I think that that's natural, because it's a response to preserve the independence and the integrity of Iran [...] but as I mentioned, foreign intervention, foreign pressures could also injure the reform process, the democratic processes in the country. I think that they are making a mistake, a strategic mistake, which they have been making the past years and they made initially in terms of not understanding [the] Islamic Revolution in Iran. The strategic mistake [is] that [the] time for unilateralism has passed away. The global community is not going to bow and submit to the messages of unilateralism that the Americans are sending. The global community is looking for an international arena where democracy is cherished, like it's cherished within the American state. It should be cherished at the international level as well, if we're not dealing with double standards, if we're dealing with a set of values and standards, universal values that we have in the Charter of Human Rights. If we're dealing with universal values, these values should apply to every society. They should apply for the Palestinian people. They should apply for the Afghan people. They should apply for the Iranian people, and they should apply for the American people. And that's the problem. The problem lies in these double standards and the fact that an arrogant government is trying to impose its will upon the global community.<sup>77</sup>”

Hamidreza Jalaipour added that such rhetoric against Iran would only make hard-liners bolder in their opposition to the United States and the reform movement in Iran.<sup>78</sup>

Shirin Ebadi, the Nobel Prize winner hopes the prize will bring attention to Iran as a country fighting for its Muslim-democrat credentials. She criticized the US position during her Nobel lecture.<sup>79</sup>

The reformist Karim Argandepour said that: “The possibility of a state of emergency exists, and that would be a form of coup d'état against the reformist camp, as some extremists in the conservative camp are seeking to create such an exceptional situation.<sup>80</sup>” There is a feeling in Iran that Conservatives have now a free hand to repress Human Rights. “It is like they have offer to stealers to gift to commit any exactions in the name

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<sup>76</sup> Shireen Hunter, the director of the Islam Program at the Center for Strategy and International Studies in Washington DC,

<sup>77</sup> Interview of Maasoumeh Ebtekar, Professor at Modarres University and used to be vice president for the environment, Interview by Linden MacIntyre, Frontline Magazine, February 2002, (Available at [www.pbs.com](http://www.pbs.com))

<sup>78</sup> A former journalist and politician close to the reform camp, in N.Fathi, *A nation challenged: the Rogue list: Bush's evil label rejected by Angry Iranian leaders*, New York Times, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2002.

<sup>79</sup> Shirin Ebadi, Nobel lecture, Oslo City Hall, Norway, (10 December 2003), (available at <http://www.nobel.se/peace/laureates/2003/ebadi-lecture.html>)

<sup>80</sup> Interview of Karim Argandepour, with the Khorassan daily, *Iran: State of emergency of state against US possible*, 20 August 2002.

of state emergency.<sup>81</sup>

For others the US foreign policy is a wake up call for Human Rights in Iran. From the national union may result a long-term compromise not only regarding internal politics or foreign policy but also Human Rights. If the Conservative movement decides to follow that path, it would be a great victory and it would ensure a better future for Iran. This new flexibility of the Conservatives would be the results of the signals sent by the United States. It would also be the successes of years of Khatami's policy to gather everyone around Human Rights and Democracy. *Aftab-e Yazd*, supporting that argument, even announced the victory of Reformists "the people has won and the reforms succeeded. The Conservatives have integrated the notion of people."<sup>82</sup> Unfortunately victory was pronounced too early as this newspaper is now closed and their journalists are in prison. It is also very optimistic to believe that Conservatives will accept such a compromise.

#### B- The End of the US-Iran attempts of debates regarding Human Rights

A part of the Dialogue among the Civilizations initiated by M. Khatami was devoted to Human Rights. The "Axis of Evil" labelling was felt as a betrayal for the moderates who wasted a lot of efforts in setting up a dialogue with the United States. President Khatami's efforts to open up to the United States were ruined and he became the target of Conservatives critics. Conservatives presented Khatami's policy as given birth to negative results and the "Axis of Evil" humiliation. It was also a public humiliation for the president's camp.<sup>83</sup> As Friedman put it

Iran quietly aided the U.S. in forming the interim government in Kabul. Not a single Iranian was involved in Sept. 11, not a single Iranian has been found in Al Qaeda, and Iran's nuclear reactor is under international inspection. Iran has the most democracy and freest press of any Muslim country in the Middle East. And as a thank you, President Bush labeled Iran part of the "Axis of Evil".<sup>84</sup>

It is now very difficult to speak about a possible dialogue between Iran and the United States. However there are rumors of secrets talks between the two countries, Human Rights put aside.<sup>85</sup> The secret talks would help to a resumption of the relationships and Conservatives could say it is their success.

## Conclusion

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<sup>81</sup> *The American Threat? A godsend for the Conservatives*, Asr-e now, Tehran, March 2001, (available at [www.courrierinternational.com](http://www.courrierinternational.com))

<sup>82</sup> *The victory of the Reformists*, Aftab-e Yazd, March 2002, (available at [www.worldpressreview.org](http://www.worldpressreview.org))

<sup>83</sup> Friedman T, "Axis of Evil Comments Anger in Iran", BCSNews.com, 11 February 2002.

<sup>84</sup> Friedman Thomas, *The View from Tehran*, New York Times, June 26 2002,

<sup>85</sup> M. E.Amini, *Resume Talks with the United States? Hum!*, Gozarech, Tehran, June 2002, (available at [ww.courrierinternational.com](http://ww.courrierinternational.com))

The main consequence of the post September 11, 2001 foreign policy regarding Human Rights in Iran was the renewal of the anti-US rhetoric, as it existed under Khomeyni, while it was out of style in the Khatami's era.<sup>86</sup>

The two biggest obstacles for Iran now appear to be the fundamentalist clerics and American imperialism, the latter having already proven to have the adverse effect of reinforcing the former. In this context, one can wonder why the Bush administration goes on thinking the people of Iran would respond to its call while even the Reformists are criticizing this policy: the Bush administration is apparently counseled by experts who believed the United States could use the popular mood in Iran to overthrow the Iranian government. What the US administration does not seem to understand is how fragile the balance established by Khatami is. Human Rights are the last barrier to Iran's normalisation. Part of the future of Iran will depend on the way the country solves the Human Rights situation. In that sense, the Bush administration targeted the Achilles' heel of Iran, but did it in a clumsy way. The world is not divided in a Manichean way, between the good countries respecting Human Rights and the bad ones violating them.

Iran faces several potential situations where Human Rights play a key role: The worst scenario possible would be a military-humanitarian intervention in Iran. Iranians are very much aware of the risk.<sup>87</sup> For the Bush administration, this invasion would be justified by Conservative attitudes towards Human Rights. This would mean the US has a specific strategy: forcing Conservative to be more extreme, Reformists to be clueless, the whole situation requiring an US intervention for "freedom". However it does not seem that the United States wishes to invade Iran. It would rather welcome a more friendly government.

Another scenario would be the signature of an agreement between the Conservatives and US leaders. It would be at the Conservatives' interests to demonstrate their abilities to find an agreement with the enemy, when Khatami failed to do so. It will also be the opportunity for the Conservatives to demonstrate that reforms can only come from them. It would be both parties' interests to compromise. For instance, while the European Union shares similar concerns with the United States over the possibility of Iran acquiring weapons of mass destruction, its conciliatory approach based on increased trade and diplomatic relations seems to have had a greater effect on Iranian politics. If such an attitude could prevail in the future between the United States and Iran, accusations and hostilities could be avoided and reform could stay on track. However some believe that there is no room for reconciliation.<sup>88</sup>

A third scenario would be a social outburst ending in a revolution. There is no sign of violence for the moment but it should be mentioned.

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<sup>86</sup> *Iran lashes out at Bush*, BBC News, Middle East, 31 January 2002.

<sup>87</sup> Bernard Hourcade, *The Islamic Republic 25 years on: Iran-A spring of change*, Le Monde Diplomatique, February 2004.

<sup>88</sup> A. Zeydabadi, *What will they do with their "electoral success"*, Shargh, Tehran, February 2004, (available at [www.courrierinternational.com](http://www.courrierinternational.com))

The likely event to happen would be a return of the Reformists. Though they suffered a heavy blow, the Iranian reform movement will continue to struggle. President Khatami's term is close to an end and there is very few chances the Council of Guardians will let a prominent reformist be a candidate for the next elections. If Iranians do not get the reforms through the ballots, they will change their countries in the everyday life and with the help of the civil society. Human Rights reforms already take place from the bottom to the top of the society.<sup>89</sup> In that respect, the Bush foreign policy regarding Human Rights is only a temporary external annoying factor. It did hammer the Reformists for now but they will gather their strengths. Even the moderate conservative AA.Rafsandjani, who was very critic of the United States after 2002, seems to be more flexible now: he says that Iran is in a storm provoked by the United States, and that Iranians need to be more flexible and smart to be survive the storm. It could be understood that the inflexibility of Conservatives would not survive the storm while Reformists though they have to bend now, could make it through the crisis.<sup>90</sup> It is a very hopeful message that relies on the dynamism of the Iranian society. Besides, an American invasion is almost impossible. Invading the country to rebuild it from zero would not be a clever move and the Bush administration is aware of it. The aim of the administration's Human Rights policy is to make sure Iran is on the "good side" of the world's nations, which would secure the US interest in the region.<sup>91</sup> The United States are also very careful with Iran because of their history with the country:

I like to call Iran the "Bermuda Triangle" of American foreign policy, because Iran helped get Jimmy Carter defeated; Ronald Reagan had to deal with American hostages held in Lebanon by Iranian-supported groups; and then Iran-Contra, which ... was the illegal sales of arms ... to Iran and the use of the profits to pay for the rebel movement in Nicaragua. Actually the one who did the best on Iran was Reagan's successor, George Bush the father, because he came into office and in his first inaugural speech announced that goodwill begets goodwill when it came to Iran. He really was searching for an opening to find some sort of areas of cooperation and maybe rapprochement.<sup>92</sup>

So what could the United States do now to turn this negative impact into a positive one? Most reformers said it would help if the U.S. resume diplomatic ties and ease economic sanctions. However "the general feeling in Washington these days is that the reform movement in Iran is not living up to expectations. Whereas the United States one had great confidence that the only remaining question was when –not whether- such

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<sup>89</sup> Anisesh Van Engeland-Nourai, *The Struggle for Human Rights in Iran: Civil Society v. the Judiciary*, Cornell LL.M Conference, April 2004, Cornell Law School, (available at <http://lsr.nellco.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=cornell/lps>)

<sup>90</sup> Ali Keshtgar, *Tehran Modifies its Policy Towards the United States*, Mihan, Tehran, May 2003 (available at [www.courrierinternational.com](http://www.courrierinternational.com))

<sup>91</sup> Mohammad Firouzan, *After the Earthquake, a honeymoon with the United States ?*, Shargh, Tehran, December 2004, (available at [www.courrierinternational.com](http://www.courrierinternational.com))

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Elaine Sciolino, Senior Writer New York Times, Interview by Linden MacIntyre, Frontline magazine, (17 April 2002), (available at [www.pbn.com](http://www.pbn.com))

reforms would take hold, this confidence has now evaporated.<sup>93</sup>” The United States feel they have been blinded by the Khatami’s myth.<sup>94</sup>

On the other hand, perspectives of dialogue about Human Rights between Iran and the United States will not evolve until the US policymakers

gain the right perspective on Iran. This lack of perspective has been mainly the result of a lack of access to Iran since 1979, as well as the paradoxical and complicated nature of the Iranian society. What was needed was a framework for understanding Iran that did not change with every turn of events or depend on the often arbitrary statements and proclamations of Iranian politicians. Such a framework would help explain the wayward moves of the Islamic government within the larger setting of Iranian society, its various forces, and their complex web of relationships. The main tendency in the U.S. academic and policymaking circles has been to reduce various tensions and contradictions in Iranian society to the conflict between the "good guys" led by President Khatami and the "bad guys" guided by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Takeyh R. & Clawson P., *Iran's place in the axis: Signs of movement?*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policywatch, No 625, Special Policy Forum report, 17 May 2002.

<sup>94</sup> Rubin Michael., *Khatami and the myth of Reform*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, The Politic, Spring 2002

<sup>95</sup> “*Dealing with Iran*”, The Economist, 12 June 2003