

The United States and Iran: From Past Complicity to the Fight against the “Satans”

Dr Bichara Khader

Professor Emeritus

Université Catholique de Louvain

Centre d'Études et de Recherches sur le Monde

Arabe Contemporain

Washington is exactly 10,181 km from Tehran, the capital of Iran, and yet Iran continues to be an American obsession and is catalogued among the “evil axis” countries. For Iran, the US represents the “Great Satan,” and the American flag has been trampled by frenzied crowds for over 40 years, that is, since the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Why such hostility when the two countries are not close enemies (close enemies are neighbours), nor intimate enemies (those are the enemies from within), nor hidden enemies (the so-called domestic conspirators), nor conceptual enemies (as in the global war against terrorism), nor systemic enemies (in the case of a cold war between two major powers), nor planetary rivals (as is the case today between the US and China)?

None of the elements of this typology quite corresponds to the conflict opposing the United States (US) and Iran. So, is the Iranian or the American enemy a concoction? If so, we could, like Pierre Conesa,¹ speak of “the fabrication of the enemy.” This would mean that the enemy has a social function, that it is a political object and therefore “a choice, not a given”:² there is no structural enemy, but one of opportunity.

In the case in point, Iran hasn't always been the US's enemy: one could even say that the Shah's Iran, up until 1979, was a pillar of American strategy in the

Middle East. It was thus the Iranian Revolution of 1979 that shifted Iran to the US's “enemy” camp. Why? Because the Islamic Revolution took Iran out of the American sphere of influence, foiled the US's plans for the region, is perceived as a threat by its regional allies – particularly Israel and the Gulf states – but above all because the Islamic Revolution could produce “a demonstration effect” on other Muslim countries.

Europe does not have the same perception, considering the Islamic Revolution to have emerged from an authoritarian, police state, that it is a legitimate reaction of a suffering people, and, above all, that it does not directly threaten the interests of European countries in the region and does not hamper their plans at all. If it so happens that the Islamic Republic does not meet the aspirations of Iranians, says European discourse, it is up to them to get rid of it, and not to external actors.

For Iran, the US is a dangerous but necessary enemy. Dangerous of course, because American military bases are scattered everywhere in the Gulf region and in Afghanistan, encircling Iran and increasing its sensation of being surrounded. Dangerous, because the US supports the State of Israel, which has made the Islamic Republic a bogeyman, a sort of existential threat that it regularly brandishes to conceal its own occupation of Palestinian and Syrian territories.

A necessary enemy also because the American enemy has an identity function. Isn't it generally said that we arise by opposing? The enemy thus allows group unity and national identity to be rebuilt. The enemy binds a nation together, cementing its collective sense: the Turks need the Greek enemy, the

¹ CONESA, Pierre. *La fabrication de l'ennemi*. Paris: Robert Laffont, 2011.

² *Ibid.*, p. 31

Pakistanis join together against the Indian enemy. Someone once said that the Other is hell. But it is a hell that stirs up nationalist fervour. I am convinced that this perception of a constant threat, whether real or deliberately constructed, freezes the internal dynamics in Iran and, ultimately, allows the Islamic Republic to maintain its stranglehold on Iranian society.

The fabrication of the enemy thus has an instrumental function. Iran is not a direct security threat to the US (I cannot imagine Iran bombing the US, even if it had the means), but the fact that the United States catalogues Iran as part of the “evil axis” allows it to keep its military bases in the region, claiming to be the guarantor of its allies’ security, and sell billions of dollars’ worth of arms.

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For Iran, the foreign enemy allows it to be the “scapegoat” or eternal victim, which contributes to silencing opponents and uniting the nation behind its leaders. So here we are, in front of a rhetorical arm-wrestling match that could go wrong. From the moment Iran was qualified as forming part of the “axis of evil” and Iran qualified the US as the “Great Satan,” the adversary was in fact disqualified and turned into “a whole.” The Europeans have the wisdom to refrain from using or abusing certain explosive terms such as “evil axis.” And the Iranians have never called Europeans neither “little” nor “great Satans.”

This paper postulates that the policy of intimidation, sanctions and threats as practiced by the US has serious consequences and resolves nothing. Whereas the “open door” policy practiced by the EU and its Member States brings hope and, thanks to the election of Joe Biden, will permit diplomacy to be activated in order to defuse the current tension, end the fabrication of “Satans,” and reintegrate Iran into its natural region and into the concert of nations.

The Iranian Nuclear Question: Threat or Alibi?

The Iranian nuclear programme resumed in the early 1990s. But the country’s Atomic Energy Organization was weak, poorly funded and poorly supported, and Western countries were little inclined to help the Islamic Republic. This was when Iran turned to China, which was beginning to have a great need for Iranian oil and gas, and above all Russia, happy to take over from the Western countries in a country whose strategic centrality is unquestionable. Cooperation with Russia led to the completion of the first unit of the Bushehr Power Plant. The contract was signed in 1999. The co-operation agreement with China, for its part, was signed earlier, in 1990, for the “transfer of nuclear fuel cycle technology.” This strategic shift by Iran aroused the wrath of the US, which imposed a battery of sanctions between 1995 and 1996 on companies investing in Iranian oil and gas.

The sanctions irritated the Iranians and triggered a nationwide, nearly visceral anti-Americanism among them. But they also hit European interests in Iran hard. Indeed, Iran was beginning to be a lucrative market for European oil companies and for the business community. Important investments had already been undertaken. European countries were thus being directly targeted by the extraterritoriality of American law, a discretionary power that allows the US to unilaterally decide to prohibit other countries from trading with a third country, as was the case with Iran. European countries thus saw their “sovereignty” affected, but were obliged to abide by sanctions they hadn’t chosen and that went against their interests.

The European states, like their companies, felt cornered: submit or rebel at great risk. They chose to deal with the problem at its source. In 2003, Germany, France and the United Kingdom (UK) proposed a negotiation on the Iranian nuclear issue, which was the real stumbling block. According to the proposal, Iran would agree to apply the Additional Protocol to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which allows unannounced inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna. But this did not seem to satisfy the US. And yet, in 2006, the United States, Russia and China joined the negotiations initiated by the EU-3 group (France, Germany and the UK).

Israel, on the other hand, began threatening, launching a campaign to denounce Iranian nuclear activi-

ties and shouting from the rooftops that it was ready to destroy all Iranian nuclear facilities, claiming that Iran constituted an “existential” threat to the Jewish State. However, while it is true that Iran may have sponsored some terrorist attacks against Israeli or Jewish targets around the world, at no time has Iran risked a direct confrontation with the State of Israel. For the time being, Israel limits itself, according to many informed Israeli analysts, to liquidating Iranian nuclear scientists or those in charge of the ballistic programme, the latest being Mohsen Fakhrizade,³ assassinated on 27 November 2020. Commenting on this assassination, President Trump simply tweeted that it was “a blow for Iran.”⁴

In response to the accusations made by the US and Israel, Iran retorts that it co-operates with the IAEA, submits to its control of its nuclear activities and recalls that, unlike Israel, it is a member of the NPT. Iran reiterates its commitment not to produce nuclear weapons, but also recalls that the Treaty allows it to master civilian nuclear technology, which is, moreover, a “legitimate claim” and even a “national cause.” Some observers doubt Iran’s sincerity, but the majority of analysts find the American and Israeli arguments not only alarmist, but also false. And this for several reasons:

1. Nuclear weapons are not made to hurt but to scare;
2. To think that Iran could launch bombs on Tel Aviv and other Israeli cities is to forget that Israel is the only nuclear power in the region today and that any Iranian nuclear aggression would lead to the destruction of Iran by Israel and the United States;
3. In a nuclear confrontation between two nuclear powers, there are no winners, only losers.

Therefore, the reason why Israel and the US are so relentless in raising the spectre of Iran’s nuclear power is that military nuclear power is first and foremost a “power equaliser” and a means of “sanctuar-

izing a country.” It creates a balance. In this respect, the case of India and Pakistan is emblematic.

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However, the US, like Israel, wants Israel to maintain military supremacy over all the states in the region at all costs.

From the above, it is clear that the Iranian nuclear issue is an obsession for both the US and Israel, to which we can now add the Gulf states, primarily the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. For the latter, a nuclear Iran would be more threatening and destabilizing, and would lead to nuclear proliferation in the region. This would explain, in large part, the recent normalization agreements between Israel, the Emirates and Bahrain, thanks to the good offices of President Trump and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner.

Towards the 2015 Nuclear Agreement: The EU’s Key Role

Between 2003 and 2013, negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue stalled and international sanctions were maintained and reinforced.

It was only after the replacement of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad by Hassan Rouhani as President of Iran on 14 June 2013 that the situation was unblocked. Rouhani has a good image as a member of the “moderate” camp in Iran and was also Iran’s former nuclear negotiator from 2003 to 2005. As soon as he took office, negotiations resumed between Iran

³ This Iranian scientist was assassinated on 27 November 2020 in a sophisticated operation executed professionally. To Raz Simmt, researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies (Tel Aviv), only two countries have the capacity and interest in carrying out such an undertaking: Israel and the United States. But when asked by the New York Times, an American official attributed sole responsibility for the attack to the Hebrew State. Armin Arefi: “Israeli experts explain why the Hebrew State is likely to be linked to the elimination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the father of Iran’s nuclear programme,” *Le Point International*, 29/11/2020.

⁴ Cited by Mark FITZPATRICK in “Assassinating a scientist to kill the Iran deal,” *The Survival Editors’ Blog*, 30 November 2020 (www.iiss.org/blogs/survival-blog/2020/11/assassinating-a-scientist-to-kill-the-iran-deal).

and the Group of Seven (the five members of the Security Council, the European Union (EU) and Germany), first in Geneva, then in Lausanne (on 2 April 2015), and finally in Vienna, where a framework agreement, called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was formalised on 14 July 2015 and approved by Security Council Resolution 2231. The agreement included three important points:

1. Limitation of the Iranian nuclear programme for at least a decade;
2. Lifting of international sanctions against Iran;
3. Strengthening of controls.

On 16 January 2016, the IAEA, in charge of controls, certified that Iran had complied with the agreement by ceasing uranium enrichment. In exchange, the economic sanctions against Iran were gradually lifted, including part of the frozen financial assets estimated at nearly €135 billion (\$150 billion).

There was general satisfaction: European diplomacy had achieved a resounding success, Obama ended his term in office with the feeling that he had made a significant breakthrough on a complicated foreign policy issue, and China and Russia were happy to have been associated with the agreement. Western media hailed the deal as “historic.” However, two countries remained fiercely opposed to the deal: Israel and Saudi Arabia. They would do everything they could to derail it, counting on a key ally: President Trump himself.

Indeed, as soon as he was elected in 2017, Trump announced his intention to withdraw from the Agreement. On 8 May 2018, he announced that “the United States will withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal. [...] we will not allow a regime that chants ‘Death to America’ to gain access to the most deadly [sic] weapons on Earth.” He also announced the signing of a memorandum to reinstate economic sanctions on the Tehran regime, notably on the energy, petrochemical and financial sectors, and even “the highest level of economic sanction.” Trump was thus opting for “maximum pressure,” leading Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran’s Foreign Minister, to make this bitter observation: “The United States has become the first state in the world to not only violate a binding resolu-

tion that it itself sponsored, but also sanction governments and companies that support international law by implementing the provisions of this agreement.”⁵

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To justify this about-face, the US Secretary of State hammered home the point that he had proof that Iran’s commitments were a lie and that Iran had not stopped developing nuclear weapons,⁶ exactly the same misleading speech made by the ex US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, on 5 February 2003 before the US invasion of Iraq.

The European states, signatories of the Agreement, did everything to avoid the worst, but Trump’s decision left them stunned and dumbfounded. Not only was the US withdrawing from the Agreement, but it decided to reimpose heavier sanctions, provoking a crisis in transatlantic relations.

To circumvent US sanctions, the EU announced the creation of an alternative payment mechanism within a so-called Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV), isolating any link with the US monetary system so as not to expose any transactions to US sanctions. As envisaged by the EU, the new mechanism would accept payments from companies wishing to trade with Iran, either through waivers for oil imports or by allowing trade in goods such as food and medicine. But Trump threatened in a Tweet that if Europeans try to evade US sanctions on Iran, they would be subject to stiff fines and penalties.

The new president-elect, Joe Biden, thus inherits an explosive portfolio. In September 2019, he already took a stand on the Iranian issue, saying that the policy of “maximum pressure” has been a failure because it has inflicted unnecessary suffering on the Iranian people without making the regime bend.

⁵ ZARIF, Mohammad Javad: “Détruire l’Accord sur le nucléaire iranien serait un retour à la loi de la jungle,” *Le Monde*, 14 August 2020, p.28

⁶ Cited by Isabelle HANNA, correspondent in New York, *Libération*, 8 May 2018.

Realizing that the negotiators' consensus is broken and that the American withdrawal from the Agreement (in 2018) gave Iran a free hand to increase its nuclear capabilities and perhaps even get closer to a nuclear weapon, Joe Biden has promised to resume negotiations, but adding new demands: release of American detainees in Iran, respect for human rights, limitation of its ballistic programme and cessation of Iran's external interference and "destabilizing activities," particularly in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. To bring the Iranians to the negotiating table, he proposes "targeted sanctions."

The Iranians have made it clear that there is no question of renegotiating the 2015 agreement, and they demand the US ratify the agreement and the Security Council give it "binding force." As for the other US demands, notably human rights, the Iranians claim that they are not directly related to the purpose of the agreement, namely the nuclear issue. Regarding the limitation of the ballistic programme, Iran recalls that this is a demand made by Israel and Saudi Arabia. According to the Iranians, it is an issue that must be negotiated "regionally" and "collectively": they say it is not normal that so much noise be made about Iranian missiles with a range of 2,000 km, while Israel has hundreds of Jericho II missiles with a range of 3,500 km and Saudi Arabia has Chinese missiles with a range of over 2,000 km in its arsenal. As for "external interference," Iran recalls the Israeli policy of occupation and rampant annexation of Palestinian and Syrian territories and military incursions into neighbouring countries as well as Saudi Arabia's direct involvement in the inter-Yemeni conflict and its indirect involvement through the export of Wahabi ideology to various Muslim and non-Muslim countries. This means that resumption of dialogue will be fraught with difficulties. Not only could the Iranian conservatives win the next Iranian elections in June 2021, but the new American President's room for manoeuvre will be limited because of Congress's opposition to the lifting of sanctions and the pressure of powerful pro-Israeli lobbies (notably the Evangelicals and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee – AIPAC) and pro-Saudi lobbies (primarily oil companies and the arms industry), not to mention possible obstruc-

tion by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), which is populated by anti-Iranian hardliners.⁷

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If negotiations resume, it is unlikely that Iran will want to participate in a negotiation with Israel, but it is not unthinkable that the group of negotiators will expand to include Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, or even the League of Arab States. Should this occur, Joe Biden will have to face backlash from Israel and its allies in the United States, who will do everything they can to scupper the negotiations. The assassination of the Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrazadeh on 27 November 2020, attributed to the Israeli Mossad, aimed precisely at putting obstacles in the way of the future Biden Administration, which is preparing to resume the negotiations despite Israeli opposition.

It is taking an important risk because Israel is not a foreign policy issue for the United States, but rather a "domestic policy issue," as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt have masterfully demonstrated in the book entitled *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*.⁸

By Way of Conclusion

In a remarkable article,⁹ Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon pose the following question: Since the end of the Second World War, which countries have obsessed America? The authors list three countries: First of all, the Soviet Union. Throughout the Cold War, it was enemy number one. But, as General Éric de la Maisonrouge observed, this Soviet enemy had all the qualities of a "good enemy: sturdy, constant, coherent... Militarily it was similar to us... Troubling, certainly, but known and predictable... Its disappearance undermines our cohesion and makes our

⁷ NICOLAUD, François: "Nucléaire iranien: les délicats défis de Joe Biden," *Orient XXI*, 18 September 2020.

⁸ MEARSHEIMER, John and WALT, Stephen. *Le lobby pro-israélien et la politique étrangère américaine*. Paris: La Découverte, 2010

⁹ BENJAMIN, Daniel and SIMON, Steven: "America's Great Satan: The 40-Year Obsession with Iran." *Foreign Affairs*, No. 6 (98), p.56-66, 2019.

power futile" and plunged the West into anxiety.¹⁰ Hence the famous phrase by Georgi Arbatov, Mikhail Gorbachev's advisor, "We are going to do you the worst service, we are going to deprive you of an enemy," highlighting the technical unemployment of the Western strategic sector.¹¹

Since 1989, the Soviet enemy has become a friend under Gorbachev, then "a mere nuisance" with Putin's Russia, a challenging nuisance, in the words of Benjamin and Simon. I would say more like a "systemic adversary."

Secondly, China. China was an ideological adversary, then an economic partner and, finally, it has become a geostrategic global rival that is sanctioned, but with whom we discuss matters and do business. But if there is one enemy that has obsessed America for more than 40 years, it is Iran, to the extent that Henry Kissinger wondered whether Iran was "a country or a cause."

How to explain this American obsession when Washington is 10,181 km from Tehran, Iran's gross domestic product is not even 2% of the American GDP, its military expenditure hardly exceeds 1% of that of the United States, and it is far from having the strike force of the American army?

This article has answered this question in summary fashion. First of all, Iran's geography gives it considerable geostrategic importance. Secondly, Iran has important connections in the region which it can use to intimidate its neighbours and threaten America's allies, namely Israel and the Gulf states. Moreover, it can count on its new alliances with Russia and China and the other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. And finally, Iran "holds its own," shows remarkable resilience and does not submit willingly to anyone's "diktat."

This appeals to the disillusioned and disorientated youth of the Middle East more than "the Islamic revolution as such." And it is precisely this Iranian appeal that frightens the Sunni Gulf states, Israel and their American sponsor. The nuclear issue is therefore only an alibi: it can be resolved through diplomacy, as the EU-3 clearly demonstrated. In reality, the true objective of the US and its allies is to undermine Iran's regional influence, prevent it from upsetting

their plans for the region and, above all, preserve the military supremacy of Israel – the only nuclear power in the Middle East – over all the states in the region. In other words, the Iranian question cannot be disconnected from all the problems that plague the region, hinder its development and prevent it from living in peace and security. There is, in fact, a direct link between the Iranian issue and the other theatres of conflict in the region, notably Palestine, Yemen, Syria and Lebanon. Making Iran a bogeyman while pampering the State of Israel, which has been occupying the Palestinian territories and Syria's Golan since 1967 and violating international law with impunity, is absurd and unfair. Moreover, it gives credence to those who criticise the West's double standards. And above all, it shocks the peoples of the region. Indeed, according to the latest opinion poll conducted by the renowned Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha and involving 28,288 people, 89% of respondents believe that Israel is the primary threat to the region, followed by the US, with 81%. Iran only comes in third place with 67%.¹²

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This shows how important it is to have a holistic approach to the region in its entirety. The EU, which was the catalyst and facilitator of the 2015 Iran Nuclear Agreement, could take the initiative for an international conference for comprehensive peace in the Middle East. It is true that the pandemic is mobilizing people, finances and energy. But Joe Biden's election offers an excellent opportunity, not only to restore transatlantic ties, but above all to act together and rid the Middle East of all the stumbling blocks hindering its development and stability, and by extension, threatening European security.

¹⁰ CONESA, Pierre, op. cit., p.14

¹¹ Ibid., p.14

¹² "The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index: Main Results in Brief", Arab Center Washington DC, (www.arabcenterdc.org).