

VIEW: An American in Iran —Michael Shank

Is 'evil' reserved for countries unwilling to cosy up to US interests? If Iran denationalised its oil supply (something Chavez receives flak for not doing), would 'evil' be supplanted by 'ally'? A country refusing to be cosy, attempting to build a healthy domestic infrastructure, and benefiting from its own natural resources, commits itself to castigation by the superpowers

Iran by any other name smells not sweet but suspicious. A renaming of Iran is occurring and permanently embedding ideologically-driven monikers into the hearts and minds of Americans. (Remember 'axis of evil' and comparison to Hitler's Germany.) The impact is potent and devastating, resulting in dehumanisation of a country and its people.

Recently embarking on a diplomatic peace-building mission, my trip to Iran from December 1-12, tells a different story.

But first, an examination of the word evil is necessary to surmise whether or not Iran has been appropriately renamed. Evil, according to Webster's Dictionary is something morally reprehensible, sinful, wicked, and arising from actual or imputed bad character or conduct. Does Iran fit the bill? While I realise that any counterargument to these dehumanising declarations will be equally subjective, I feel obligated to elucidate discrepancies.

In meetings with Muslim clerics in Qom, Jewish Rabbis representing Tehran's 20 synagogues, the Armenian Christian Archbishop in Esfahan, Zoroastrian priests, parliamentarians, non-governmental organisations, and news reporters, an alternative narrative arose — one of mutual tolerance and respect, albeit imperfect, that contradicts the speculations of the existence of evil, Hitler-type behaviour.

Our delegation found that Iran is not an extremist Islamic state trying to establish an order reminiscent of a 7th century caliphate, as Cheney has implied, but rather a state characterised by a healthy and diverse religious community. (Certain rights for the Bahai community are arguably still in question and in need of attention.) And with estimates of 15,000 non-governmental organisations active in Iran, it is clear that civil society has established a substantial foothold.

So what was Bush talking about? Was Bush referencing an 'evil' that pervaded internal or external affairs? Internally speaking, although critics of the government risk fines or imprisonment, Iran's domestic policies pale in comparison to the records of China and Saudi Arabia, two countries maintaining trade relations with the US government while intimidating dissidents.

Externally speaking, as Iran's current president faces castigation by his parliament, past presidents, and the Supreme Leader for his anti-Israel statements, Iran has not invaded any neighbouring country in the last century and remains compliant with the Non-Proliferation Treaty, two things that cannot be said for US allies India or Israel.

Is 'evil' then reserved for countries unwilling to cosy up to US interests? If Iran denationalised its oil supply (something US nemesis Chavez receives flak for not doing), would 'evil' be supplanted by 'ally'? A country refusing to be cosy, attempting to build a healthy domestic infrastructure, and benefiting from its own natural resources, commits itself to castigation by the superpowers.

Perhaps 'evil' addresses Iran's nuclear ambitions? Since the nuclear issue is a sticking point in US-Iran relations, let us explore this further. According to the UN website, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (of which Iran is a member) "promotes cooperation in the field of peaceful nuclear technology and equal access to this technology for all State parties, while safeguards prevent the diversion of fissile material for weapons use."

Iran is a member of this treaty, which nuke owners India and Israel refuse to ratify. Iran states that all nuclear initiatives within Iran are for peaceful purposes and gives us no pretext for believing otherwise.

Stop by the nuclear facility in Natanz, as we did, or analyse Iran's energy infrastructure and one understands that nuclear energy remains one of Iran's only available sources for generation. (Credit must be given to Iran for recently constructing a wind turbine farm in neighbouring Azerbaijan.) And while guarantees posited by Russia to assist Iran in nuclear development are laudable, these offers essentially fetter Iran's potential for competitiveness in the international marketplace.

If the name-calling stems from America's democratisation agenda in the Middle East, then Iran still does not fit the bill since the US overthrew Iran's democratically-elected leader, Dr Mohammed Mossadegh, in the 1950s. (Mossadegh nationalised Iran's oil, displeasing British and American oil interests.)

After dethroning Mossadegh, America's influence in Iran's political affairs through the 1970s precipitated the revolution of 1979. As a result, what prevails is a clarion call for justice and fairness — two tenets of Shia Islam that arguably spurred the development, post-revolution, of health clinics and schools in every town. (In fact, Shia Islam's belief in and pursuit of fairness and justice may well explain why there are rarely any incidents of Shia-coordinated terrorism.)

Consequently, Iranians feel that US enforcement of international treaties is far from just and fair. From their perspective, how can the US speak of human rights abuses in Iran when Guantanamo, CIA prisons in Europe, and Abu Ghraib all breach international conventions? How can the US promote democracy in Iran when Iran's democratically-elected leader was overthrown by the CIA?

How can the US discourage Iran's treaty-protected rights to legally develop nuclear technology, when allies like India and Israel proceed to abrogate the Non-Proliferation Treaty's governing authority?

Despite glaring incongruities in US policy, Iranians distinguish between a government and its populace and are overwhelmingly generous and gracious to US citizens. Whether street, synagogue or shrine, Iranian hospitality is all consuming. With a profound appreciation for Persian norms vis-à-vis respect and tolerance, I felt very much at home, welcomed not by a people and a government that was evil, but by an Iran that assumed a natural brotherhood and sisterhood between two nations' peoples.

The only regretful aspect, remarked Iranians, was that familial ties could not be nurtured more frequently. (It is difficult for Iranians to travel to the US and vice versa.) This separation process is a natural phase of a dehumanisation process and prevents US citizens from realising that Iran is not an evil country or remotely reminiscent of Hitlerism.

Opportunity for tangible improvement in US-Iran relations rests in increased dialogue — a no-brainer that each country has yet to realise. If the US and the United Nations consistently enforced international treaties and norms, the US would find a powerful ally in Tehran. Until then, however, Tehran will continue to stay vigilant, highlighting the unjust enforcement of treaties. Without US or UN consistency in enforcement, it comes off as another oil grab. (Iran maintains the second largest oil reserves in the world.)

Standing in the way of constructive dialogue are two presidents, one in Washington DC and one in Tehran. Both love to propagandise. Those worried about Iran's recently elected President Ahmadinejad need not worry about his diplomatic shortcomings. Demonstrating that Ahmadinejad is failing to adequately represent his people or government, Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei and former president Rafsanjani are already shifting power dynamics and establishing control mechanisms to fetter the polemical Ahmadinejad.

Former president Khatami is also busy touring the Middle East, building bridges between Iran and neighbouring countries. It is clear that Ahmadinejad will be isolated and marginalised by his own government.

Protecting Persia from propagandising politics is critical. Americans must not be complicit in the polemics and positioning practised by the Bush administration. Encouraging Capitol Hill to end the sanctions on Iran (that are ostensibly responsible for the recent plane crash in Iran due to 30 year-old plane parts) and engaging in more diplomatic gesturing will produce substantial results in the US government's capacity to negotiate with Iran. An impartial and just enforcement of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and its co-signers is also necessary if the US is serious about negotiating with

Iran.

Anything less, will be rightly perceived within Iran as unjust and unfair.

Anything less would be uncivilised.

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