
***Casting for 'Pariahs':
United States, Iran, and the Quest for Enmity***

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ABSTRACT

The absence of official diplomatic relations between any two states is often a sure sign of estrangement beyond remedy. In such cases, estranged governments are prompt to recite a litany of misgivings, alleged violations, and grievances as reasons for their antagonism towards, and negative representations of, one another. In fact, the more protracted the rift between states, the more debased and fantastical the depictions of the 'Other'. What is more, prolonged estrangement strangely metamorphoses into a sort of quest for enmity, whereby every movement, every gesture, and every declaration on the part of the alleged protagonist is viewed with conspiratorial suspicion and virulent contempt. Enmity among estranged states, therefore, comes to be viewed as a powerful resource for, and much less a hindrance to, advancing the national interest. Identity and difference at the level of political elites operate on an entirely different set of subversive presumptions than at the individual or group level. Contemporary accounts of U.S.-Iran relations tend to ignore this rather benign, yet insidious, dimension of estrangement. This paper examines the implications of this symptom (i.e. enmity as a result of prolonged alienation) for international relations theory using the Iran-U.S. relations as a case study.

All over the world, at any hour, on a million screens an infinite number of people are saying something to us, trying to convince us of something, gesturing, making faces, getting excited, smiling, nodding their heads, pointing their fingers, and we don't know what it's about, what they want from us, what they are summoning us to.... Several languages are fighting for recognition and promotion; the language barriers are rising. Deafness and incomprehension are multiplying.

Ryszard Kapuściński, *Shah of Shahs*¹

As the decades-long estrangement between Iran and the United States inches ever-more urgently toward the dreaded possibility of violent conflict, there has been a gathering awareness nearly everywhere (as evidenced by the recent explosion in the number of memoirs, histories, travelogues, novels, studies, reports, films, etc.) of the somewhat paradoxical nature of the enmity separating the two countries. While there exist real political divisions and differences in perspective that have enabled the disputants to discriminate against and denigrate each other since at least the advent of the Islamic Revolution in February 1979, such differences are less substantive and concrete than they are symbolic. Each side has labored assiduously to distinguish itself from the 'other' in relation to its own founding myths and with the objective of furthering its interests at home and abroad. At the core of the U.S.-Iran estrangement is the contest over political discourse and historical narrative at an abstract, governmental level. Over the course of almost three decades, each side has justified its hostility toward the other through a carefully-constructed, yet rarely substantiated, series of slogans and narratives concerning the bad behavior of the other: the U.S. as the imperialist 'Great Satan', supporter of Zionism, and 'bully', Iran as a 'state sponsor of terror', member of an 'axis of evil', and an overall 'rogue nation'. Yet, unlike, for instance, the mutual hostility between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Iran and the U.S. have not, and do not, pose any immediate dangers or existential threats to each other. They are, as I mean to suggest throughout

¹ Kapuscinski, R. 1985. *Shah of Shahs*. London: Penguin Books. pp. 10-11.

this paper, in conflict over discourse: a discourse of estrangement ultimately born out of 'deafness and incomprehension' first foreshadowed by Ryszard Kapuściński in *Shah of Shahs*, his celebrated book on Iran in the immediate aftermath of the Islamic Revolution.

By now the drama of U.S.-Iran estrangement seems like a well-rehearsed play, so full of political theatrics and rhetorical flourishes it has been that the lay observer can hardly be faulted for only recalling its touchstone moments and repeated choruses. Yet, for all the drama which this relationship has produced, it is in fact the longest standoff the United States has ever had with any other nation in its history, with the possible exceptions of Cuba and North Korea.² Moreover, over the course of three decades, the relationship has gradually changed over time, from confusion to misperception to benign contempt to what it has become today, overt defiance. At each stage, to be sure, enmity has played a decidedly negative role in further distancing the two parties from each other, but in the latest phase of U.S.-Iran relations, it has taken the form of an objective strategy – however elusive and counterproductive – in shaping and countering the narratives each side has constructed about the 'Other'. Regardless of the range of substantive issues involved – e.g. support for terrorism, frozen Iranian assets, meddling in Iran, politics of oil and gas, nuclear energy, one can go on – the longevity of U.S.-Iran estrangement is at bottom a product of what William Beeman has termed 'postmodern culture conflict': a conflict about identity, representation, and interpretation – in short, about discourse.³ To this observation we may only add that the conflict over discourse has

² In contrast to the case of Iran, both Cuba and North Korea have at sporadically engaged in diplomatic relations with the U.S. even though they still remain estranged from each other. Given this reality, Iran may belong more appropriately belong to an 'axis of estrangement' alongside Cuba and North Korea, with all three nations led by revolutionary elites.

³ Beeman, W. 2005. *The 'Great Satan' vs. the 'Mad Mullahs: How the United States and Iran Demonize Each Other*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

been willful and deliberate with each side constructing the other to suit its own political imperatives; for as the English writer, William Hazlitt, so perceptibly recognized as regards dogmatic discourses long ago, 'What have [they] been but so many pretexts set up for men to wrangle, to quarrel, to tear one another in pieces about, like a target as a mark to shoot at'?⁴

In what follows, I should like to consider the implications of enmity both as a *constitutive force* and a *strategic resource* in international society for the study of international politics. It must be noted from the outset, however, that this paper is neither a general meditation on the phenomenon of enmity in the abstract sense of the term, nor does it amount to a comprehensive survey of the existing literature as regards the case of U.S.-Iran estrangement; rather, it is a look at the multiple locations, contours, and strategies of hostility and antagonism in relations between post-revolutionary Iran and the United States. As such, it is organized into two broad sections. The first section examines the different conceptions and figurations of enmity as a complex system of differentiation and representation in international society through a normative and distinctly post-positivist prism. The second section considers the nature and different manifestations of enmity in U.S.-Iran relations since the Islamic Revolution and elaborates on the strategic uses of enmity by looking at the discursive practices of estrangement deliberately employed by both sides in the supposed interest of their national stewardships. It is a peculiar characteristic of nationalism, I believe, that at the very moment it purports to celebrate the democratic spirit it vies for differentiation through what the renowned anthropologist, the late Mary Douglas, called 'defilement'.⁵ To be sure, in their unbending hostility toward one another since the first days of the revolution, neither the U.S. nor Iran have

⁴ Hazlitt, W. 1826. *On the Pleasure of Hating*. London: Penguin Books. pp. 108-9.

⁵ Douglas, M. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge. p. 198. As Douglas notes, 'Where there is no differentiation there is no defilement'.

managed to rise above defilement; alas, as I will demonstrate below, they have in fact actively pursued it.

Enmity: A Normative Consideration

Enmity occupies a central place in social relations among individuals and groups in international society. Whether it is born out of ideological competition, economic disparities, social injustices, religious orthodoxies, claims to supremacy, or whether it springs forth from more mundane circumstances such as familial disputes or personal jealousies, enmity is, almost at once, both a symptom and a cause of a kind of disconnect from the object of its unrelenting passions. As such, enmity is but a logical implication of an identity variously formed and reformulated in response to an entirely foreign set of characteristics perceived as being hostile and threatening. Indeed, as Carl Schmitt long ago observed, this rupture is the very condition necessary for the realization of 'the political' – i.e. the social space of varied encounters – in society.⁶ In Schmitt's formulation, moreover, enmity is especially worthy of attention for it represents the immanent possibility of death and carnage ('War follows from enmity. War is the existential negation of the enemy. It is the most extreme consequence of enmity').⁷ To be sure, the study of war – as a social phenomenon – has been a central preoccupation of International Relations (IR) scholars and practitioners for centuries. Yet, it is especially striking, given the complex substratum of differentiation atop which violent conflict rests, how little direct attention has been paid to the origins, evolution, and maintenance of enmity in international society.

⁶ Schmitt, Carl. 1996. *The Concept of the Political*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 26. As Schmitt notes from the outset, 'The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy'.

⁷ Ibid. p. 33. Schmitt adds, 'It [war] does not have to be common, normal, something ideal, or desirable. But it must nevertheless remain a real possibility for as long as the concept of the enemy remains valid'.

To be sure, enmity is not an abstract social condition devoid of context and independent of interpretation; it is, as I mean to suggest throughout this inquiry, highly *situational* and realized upon a spectrum of identity and difference. Enmity is a product of differentiation and therefore exists in degrees, ranging from indifferent estrangement to benign contempt (rivalry) to utter hatred (violence/war). It is first and foremost an existential phenomenon and as such it exists as a set of deeply-held ideas in the minds of statesmen as well as ordinary citizens. In examining the normative foundations of enmity, therefore, we must begin with a consideration not merely of the ideas and norms which influence the behavior of states in international society, but also of the multiplicity of constituencies and communities which take a special interest in cultivating and maintaining particular sets of identities. 'Thus', Alexander Wendt observes,

'unlike most roles in social life, which are constituted by functionally differentiated "counter"-roles (teacher-student, master-slave, patron-client), the role of the enemy is symmetric, constituted by actors being in the same position simultaneously. Self mirrors Other, becomes *its* enemy, in order to survive. This of course will confirm whatever hostile intentions the *Other* had attributed to the Self, forcing it to engage in Realpolitik of its own, which will in turn reinforce the Self's perception of the Other, and so on. Realpolitik, in short is a self-fulfilling prophecy: its beliefs generate actions that confirm those beliefs.... The point is that whether or not states really are existential threats to each other is in one sense not relevant, since once a logic of enmity gets started states will behave in ways that *make* them existential threats, and thus the behavior itself becomes part of the problem. This gives enemy-images a homeostatic quality that sustains the logic of Hobbesian anarchies'.⁸

But surely we must travel further and deeper still, beyond the mutual interaction of social agents and societal structures to the ever-elusive domain of power relations where Weberian 'webs of significance' and representational bonds are first formed,

⁸ Wendt, A. 2000. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 263.

and where understandings about Self and Other continually evolve and are perpetually fought over. It is in this contingent domain where enmity – as the sovereign and actionable expression of identity and difference – gains its normative force. As such, enmity is not simply, as Wendt contends, a consequence of a ‘Hobbesian culture of anarchy’⁹ – it is the normative by-product of the political condition that is perpetually present in social relations among individuals and groups in international society. Nothing exemplifies this better than the case of US-Iran estrangement where, as mentioned in the introduction, the conflict mainly revolves around discourses of victimization and of betrayal. The problem, therefore, is less about the *structural* effects of international dynamics that purportedly reinforce the opposing identities of the parties involved, and rather about the normative foundations of processes of differentiation which have their roots in the founding accounts (myths) of estrangement on each side.

What this illustrates is the impossibility of treating any given culture as a settled and static web of relationships and institutions: no culture (of anarchy) can be reduced simply to a particular shade of identity – e.g. hostile (‘Hobbesian’), competitive (‘Lockian’), friendly (‘Kantian’). It is not the case, as Wendt contends, that ‘the culture of an international system is based on a structure of roles’;¹⁰ rather, it is the result of a productive process of identification and differentiation which can never truly be settled or conceived of as whole. Relationships between states in international society and between individuals and groups in transnational and world societies are ‘contextual’ precisely because they are constituted by the sort of Schmittian political schemes which I alluded to above. The political is made actionable through the exercise of power, and power appropriated through the

⁹ Wendt, A. 1999. *Social Theory of International Politics*. pp. 259-60.

¹⁰ Wendt, A. 1999. p. 251.

identification/differentiation implications of the political. Therefore, the 'enemy', 'rival', and 'friend' categories are normative constructs, not structural molds conditioning behavior in uniform fashion; they are inspired by an envisioned view of both a self and an other which is realized upon a spectrum of differentiation.

This is not to say that constructivism's insights about the social construction of enemy images and processes of differentiation are not relevant. To the contrary, constructivism's explication of the relative importance of ideas over material conditions, its insights about the constitution and structure of 'roles' and of 'degrees of internalization' with respect to norms, and of 'identity formation' and 'structural change' are simply indispensable in considering the impact of polarized identities on the behavior of states and transnational groups.¹¹ The main problem with constructivist readings of international politics arises, however, when roles, norms, and values are conflated together so as to uniformly constitute a particular 'culture of anarchy'. I merely insist on the normative/structural distinction as regards the constitution of roles and identities because the constructivist emphasis on structure tends to privilege the *social* bases of interaction between individuals and groups in international society at the expense of oft-contingent and consequential *political* factors.

In the era of ever-increasing interaction and interdependence between peoples across the globe, of seemingly unmitigated violence, of the rise and proliferation of private authority and nuclear technology – one can go on – having the analytical and interpretive tools to map out and mine multiple zones of differentiation (i.e. of enmity) is of immense importance. To do so would require a closer examination of

¹¹ For a comprehensive collection of liberal constructivist account of norms and identity, see Katzenstein, P., ed. 1996. *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press. Also, see Wendt, A. 1999. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Chapters 3-7.

the way in which existing and emerging vocabularies of antagonism are cultivated and maintained through the power political discourses of differentiation and identification which form the basis of the relationship between danger, security, and identity in the three domains of international society alluded to above. It is to a consideration of such vocabularies, discourses, and modes of representation which I shall turn now.

As sovereign and actionable expressions of identity and difference, enmity and amity constitute, as I have hinted at throughout, the discursive framework of 'the political' in international society. Sovereignty entails drawing a border between a 'self' and an 'other', and, depending on the level of perceived threat posed by those outsiders, demarcating oneself alongside 'friends' and in opposition to 'enemies' in society. Formulated in this way, the necessity for proper vocabularies and appropriate modes of discourse becomes rather apparent. Enmity and friendship are virtually indiscernible in the absence of words and expressions, of borders and walls of separation, of representations and contact. Moreover, given how interactions between states in international society ultimately rest on a spectrum of difference, its many borders and far-reaching boundaries are meant to represent and emphasize the possibility of real danger and of enemies ever more urgently and virtually than those of safety and friendships. This has been an important feature of U.S.-Iran enmity since the onset of the Islamic revolution, as I will further elaborate below. Both sides have mastered the insidious art of imagery through media propaganda and emotion-rousing narratives of victimization and betrayal. What is more, each side has developed its own vocabulary of exclusion about the other for the twin purposes of vilifying the enemy at home and justifying governmental action abroad. Over time, such vocabularies come to serve as serious communications hurdles precisely at the moment when 'cooler heads' ought to prevail.

There is, however, a discernible and recurrent pattern to the movement of identities and ideas which a normative approach can make explicit. First, there is a point of origin, a series of inaugural encounters and circumstances in which ideas came to birth and identities entered discourse (e.g. the seizure of the U.S. Embassy compound and the subsequent hostage crisis). Second, there is a distance traversed, a passage through the boundaries of either national, transnational, or global societies where identities and ideas move from an earlier point to another time and place where they will come into new prominence (e.g. the period of consolidation in Iran during the war with Iraq, and the Iran-Contra affair). Third, there are zones of acceptance and of resistance which then confront the transplanted identities and ideas, making possible their introduction or toleration, however alien or familiar they might appear to be (e.g. Iran's support of Hezbollah, U.S. support of Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Gulf countries). Lastly, the now settled or incorporated identities and ideas are to some extent transformed by their new representations and uses in different domains of international society, their new positions, postures, and encounters in a new time and place (e.g. U.S.-Iran relations post-September 11, 2001). It is through these complex movements and affiliations that identities and ideas come to distinguish enemies from friends and foes from mere rivals: the more concentrated and controlled the movements (as in the case of authoritarian social structures) the more monolithic and solid the identities and the ideas.

Furthermore, a closer scrutiny of different methods and modes of representation necessitates a more interdisciplinary, focused, and concerted approach toward words, images, and sounds which often combine to bring about conflicting narratives of differentiation in different domains of international society (which, as alluded to in the previous section so worries Buzan and other English School

theorists). For instance, in between interstate, transnational, and interhuman domains are troubling cases of monolithic identities and ideas that move from one community or constituency to another, as when extremist notions about the role of Islam in social life are imported into highly secular Western societies, or when certain Western ideas about the management of local economies are credulously adopted by those developing nations otherwise ill-equipped to deal with their social and political ramifications. Such movements into new environments (i.e. domains or sectors) are never unimpeded, obviously. They necessarily involve processes of representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origin. Needless to say, this complicates any account of the transplantation, transference, circulation, and commerce of identities and ideas. It is little wonder, then, that such identities and ideas, regardless of their substantive content, function, or normative force, are readily interpreted through the prism of 'the political' and represented as either friendly or hostile to the interests of those encountering them. As Schmitt aptly puts it,

Every religious, moral, economic, ethical, or other antithesis transforms into a political one if it is sufficiently strong to group human beings effectively according to friend and enemy. The political does not reside in the battle itself, which possesses its own technical, psychological, and military laws, but in the mode of behavior which is determined by this possibility, by clearly evaluating the concrete situation and thereby being able to distinguish correctly the real friend and the real enemy'.¹²

In all these domains the specific situation or locality of a particular identity or idea seems uneasily distant from, and only rhetorically assisted by, the legendary wholeness, coherence, and integrity of the general field of activity to which it belongs. In other words, enmity, as a complex amalgam of ideas and identities, cannot easily be rendered discernible as a particular type of culture (i.e. 'culture of enmity'), but

¹² Schmitt, Carl. 1996. *The Concept of the Political*. p. 37.

must rather be treated as a kind of disciplinary discourse full of movement, subject to rendition, and devoid of a unified logic. The reality of this condition may not interest us much in its non-violent variety, but once the possibility of it engendering a violent figuration becomes apparent, its genesis, evolution, and maintenance form the basis of a response – of our reaction to it. And so continues the cycle of enmity, and ushers in, as David Campbell puts it, an ‘economy of violence’.¹³ Indeed, among contemporary international relations scholars no one has reflected more on the implications of differentiation for world politics than Campbell. In true interdisciplinary fashion, Campbell draws on classic works in anthropology, philosophy, linguistics, sociology, and history to show the dynamic relationship between the ‘logic of differentiation’, ‘logic of defilement’, and the production of danger in international society:

‘Were there no borders, there would be no danger, but such a condition is at odds with the logic of identity, for the condition of possibility for experience entails (at least to some extent) the disciplining of ambiguity, the containment of contingency, and the delineation of borders. In other words, given that difference is a requisite for identity, danger is inherent to that relationship: “Where there is no differentiation there is no defilement.”¹⁴ As such, danger is not an external condition that can be either tempered or transcended; danger is part of all our relationships with the world.... our current situation leaves us with one certainty: because we cannot escape the logic of differentiation, we are often tempted by the logic of defilement’.¹⁵

In the end, the politics of enmity, it would seem, are the politics of differentiation; but what is more, such politics, however perverted or efficacious, must rely on new forms of power, new identities, and new movements to disseminate. As regards identity and difference, such dissemination is age-old; it has been tested, tried, reproduced, even reconfigured, yet it has never ceased to exist at any point in time. If transgressions, as Foucault believed, made visible the boundaries of the acceptable, then, we must ask,

¹³ Campbell, D. 1998. *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p. 81.

¹⁴ Douglas, M. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. p. 198.

¹⁵ Campbell, D. 1998. *Writing Security*. p. 81.

how it is that such acts of subversion come to conquer new moral terrains and set in motion new processes of differentiation. How it is, for instance, that in spite of innumerable struggles against colonialism, apartheid, racism, inequality, terrorism, extremism – one can go on – dominant stereotypical, often chauvinistic, depictions of self and other, as evidenced in the perplexing cohabitation of old- and new-style differentiations, still abound? The answer, as I have asserted above, lies in the unreflective perpetuation of identity roles manufactured and reinforced by the political dictates of national leaders and of those members of the elite sector who stand to benefit from the status-quo regime.

Furthermore, these traditional discursive practices (and representations) have been further compounded by modern technology; there is increasingly greater immediacy of physical and verbal contact everyday through electronic communication and media services. That the drama of U.S.-Iran estrangement looms so large in the minds of millions of Americans is, for instance, due to the latter's daily exposure to the imagery of villainous-seeming (bearded young men) hostage-takers and the sights and sounds of angry mobs burning effigies of President Jimmy Carter and Uncle Sam in the streets of Tehran during the saga that became internationally known as the 'hostage crisis' and which took 444 days to resolve. Such imagery and representation is of course almost ubiquitous in the western media whenever Middle Eastern 'problems' are the subject. Iran continues to arouse seething passions in American, not only because of the deeply insulting and unlawful seizure of the Tehran embassy, which was occupied by Iranian students on November 4, 1979, but also as a result of the incredibly detailed, highly focused attention of the media to the event and Iran's ritual annual commemoration of it year after year. I merely cite this example in order to demonstrate the broader contours of identity and representation in relation to the

much wider cultural framework in which they are received. It is within the permissible premises of representation (of vilification and victimhood), therefore, that we must seek out the contest over and about identity and difference in the case of U.S.-Iran estrangement.

Pariah Politics: The Discursive Pursuit of Enmity

As mentioned previously in the introduction, the U.S.-Iran estrangement has been rendered through many reincarnations; at its core it is about a relationship and its transformation. It cannot be understood outside of the shared experiences that have characterized, shaped, and determined it. Although these experiences have been narrated and understood in different ways, they defined a continuing relationship that persists despite the absence of formal diplomatic or political relations since 1979. To understand the current predicament, therefore, one must understand the evolution of the relationship and unearth the myriad processes of differentiation and representation which, according to Ali Ansari, have brought us to 'the threshold of a conflict that many accept but few understand'.¹⁶ The enmity that exists between the two nations today cannot be understood outside the intimacy that preceded it – friendship precedes betrayal in the case of U.S.-Iran relations. Yet, to the contemporary observer, it must seem remarkable that the now great enemies were friends and stood should-to-shoulder as staunch allies. As with any betrayal, however, the disputants lay claim to different interpretations of what led to their estrangement, resort to selective memory and opt to omit such facts that are inconvenient those elements in power, and generally do not show any hint of trepidation in demonizing one another's intentions and motives. And so it remains in the mainstream American discourse that

¹⁶ Ansari, A. 2006. *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Next Great Conflict in the Middle East*. New York: Basic Books.

contemporary Iran, in the words of the U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, constitutes 'an outpost of tyranny'¹⁷ while in the lyrical chants of the faithful at virtually every Friday prayers sessions America seems perennially destined to symbolize the 'Great Satan'¹⁸ itself.

It is generally accepted that all nation-states are rooted in a series of foundation myths that underpin their historical identity. The nation-state, in the words of Benedict Anderson, is foremost 'an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'.¹⁹ These foundation myths are often contested and challenged by professional academics and marginalized groups in society, but they remain robust in the popular imagination and are frequently reinforced through mass media and the periodic reissue of patriotic encounters. As a result, and through the processes of internalization and differentiation explained above, foundation myths become compounded and extended rather than explained and scrutinized. A consensus emerges that few choose to challenge, and opinion repeated often enough becomes fact. Consensus on the defilement of the Other become common sense, and conventional wisdom in turn structures thought and shapes aspirations. It soon becomes difficult to break free of the paradigm of vilification. In the context of U.S.-Iran estrangement, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 is a watershed moment in relation to which the enduring myths of origin in both Iran and the U.S. would be revived. Therefore, the differing constructions of that cataclysmic historical moment become central in developing an understanding about the nature of enmity in relations between the two countries.

¹⁷ 22 January 2005. BBC World Service. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4198133.stm>. [last accessed 30 August 2007]

¹⁸ Black, Ian. 16 February 2005. *Guardian Unlimited*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/elsewhere/journalist/story/0,,1415966,00.html>. [last accessed 30 August 2007]

¹⁹ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983, p. 6.

The events of 1953 – in which a CIA-sponsored coup overthrew Iran's first democratically-elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadeq, and replaced him with Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi – were a foundational moment in the construction of U.S.-Iranian relations in that they transferred Iranian suspicions from the historic Anglo-Russian meddlers towards the Americans. The events of 1979 crystallized, and in effect, confirmed these feelings. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 bound Iran and the United States in an intimate ideological relationship, defined by a collective and shared traumatic experience, namely, the hostage crisis. Both the revolution and the ensuing hostage crisis were televised events reaching a vast audience; as such, in contrast to 1953, the American public, and the international community, were not shielded from these events by diplomats and elites. Iran was no longer a local difficulty in a distant land that could be contained or wished away like so many catastrophic coup operations in the Third World. As a result, neither side was willing to be influenced by the restraints of the international community. For a rejuvenated Iran, this was the time to reorganize the unjust international order in its own image, liberating the oppressed through an export of its revolutionary ideals. The United States, startled by its characterization as the villain, struggled to contain the consequences of revolution, but its failure to constructively engage with revolutionary Iran resulted in its appropriation of the means and methods of its antagonist.

This transformation – a paradoxical process of political divergence and cultural convergence – is fundamental to an understanding of U.S.-Iran relations since 1979. Interestingly (and crucially), it handed Iran the initiative by allowing Iranian politicians to define the methodology of engagement. If U.S. policymakers have subsequently found Iran incomprehensible, it is largely because they have had to operate in an environment defined by their opponents. The popular nature of

America's encounter with Iran's revolution and the amplification provided by the presence of the mass media ensured the mutual entrenchment of the mythology of the revolution. For adherents to Iran's revolutionary ideology, the Islamic Revolution indicates a definitive break with the past, defined by the termination of relations with the United States. This termination is defined by the seizure of the U.S. embassy in November 1979. And the seizure is interpreted in a context of more than one hundred fifty years of foreign interference in the country, particularly the involvement of the U.S. in 1953. Although the seizure of the embassy was a defining moment, it remains part of a wider process and is not regarded as an important event in itself. Thus in the popular revolutionary conception, the break in diplomatic relations between Iran and the U.S. is divorced from the reality of the hostage taking, and instead interpreted as a natural consequence of the fact that the U.S. could not relate to Iran's Islamic Revolution. There is, therefore, as Ansari notes, 'a structurally determined revolutionary logic within which the embassy seizure is situated but for which it bears no responsibility'.²⁰

For the Americans, on the other hand, the embassy seizure was the defining moment and the cause of the collapse in relations. Such was the sense of humiliation of the 444-day hostage crisis, broadcast nightly on U.S. television, that in the popular conception the hostage crisis marked a definitive break with the past, much as it did for the Iranian revolutionaries. What distinguished the two interpretations was that the Iranians regarded it as an act of closure, while the Americans marked it as the beginning of an era. The crisis was also seen as a persona betrayal mirroring what Iranian political activists felt in 1953. Furthermore, the immediate shock of the revolution and the need to absolve anyone of responsibility were such that, much like

²⁰ Ansari, A. 2006. p. 72.

the revolutionaries in Tehran, the events of 1979 were seen as extraordinary and unpredictable – characteristics soon to be applied to Iranians as a whole. In this way, both the revolutionaries and their victims became wedded to the idea that the revolution was unique and unforeseen, a product of forces that could not be analyzed.²¹ It was also at this moment that the two sides came to officially regard the other as 'pariahs', international outcasts in contravention of basic standards of morality and of international law. As such, after the events of 1979, official leaders on both sides began talking 'as much *to* their own populations as *for* them, in international dealings'.²²

Thus, both the United States and Iran have addressed each other for years with the specific intention of addressing someone else. The results have been disastrous. After nearly three decades following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the two nations had not established diplomatic ties, and continued to refuse to address each other in bilateral talks. Most often, difficulties in communication arose when there was a disparity between the actual and intended addressee. The most common dysfunctional communication occurred when both sides were ostensibly addressing each other, but were in fact addressing their own constituencies. Yet, what these peculiarities in modes of communication also reveal are the ulterior motives which often lie behind the usage of particular vocabularies, slogans, and depictions. In the case of the United States, Iran's unlawful seizure of its embassy in 1979 exemplifies precisely the type of enemy which justifies its myriad interests in the Middle East. Whether it be the defense of its only democratic ally in the region, Israel, or the support and protection of its Sunni Arab allies (and their oil emporiums) in Saudi Arabia and the Persian

²¹ See the classic statement in this regard by Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Vol. I, F. Furet and F. Melonio (eds.), A. S. Kahan (trans.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 95.

²² Beeman, W. 2005. *The 'Great Satan' vs. the 'Mad Mullahs'*. p. 38.

Gulf region, using Iran as a constant threat to such interests has served to justify the prolonged presence of U.S. troops and American companies in the region. In the case of Iranian ulterior motives, the onset of the Iranian Revolution, of eight-year-long war with Iraq have served to solidify the country's self-image as one finally clear of any 'foreign elements' and of 'foreign interference' in its domestic affairs. The vilification of America as 'global bully' and the 'Great Satan' are carefully designed to appeal to both the progressive and religious identities in contemporary Iranian society respectively – to simultaneously remind the public of the political sins of the U.S. in 1953 and its moral sins as a secular, materialist imperial power bent on world domination. Moreover, given the hierarchical structure of the theocratic regime in Iran, many a reputations and personal fortunes have come to depend on the revolutionary rhetoric of defiance and vilification as a means of preserving their own ends. Obviously, no comparable situation exists in the American elite circles, for the differences in America's global power (and hence the expansive range of U.S. foreign interests) far outweigh that of Iran's.

Given the disparities in 'hard' power projection and unequal distribution of capabilities which exists between the U.S. and Iran, moreover, it is important not to treat them as equals when it comes to their representational capabilities. In fact, U.S. attitudes toward Iran must be viewed within a much larger framework of American policy toward the Middle East as a whole, which, as Douglas Little makes clear, has always contained 'two contradictory ingredients: an irresistible impulse to remake the world in America's image and a profound ambivalence about the people to be remade'.²³ In other words, in addition to the discursive conflict between Iran and the U.S. over narrative one must also be mindful of the meta-narratives of superiority

²³ Little, D. 2002. *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. p. 3.

which have their origins in Orientalist discourses about the relative inferiority of the East. In such discourses, the enemy is often portrayed as weak, irrational, childlike, and cowardly. The Americans, and by extension the British, are seen as strong, rational, mature, and brave. The characterization of Iranians constitutes an almost perfect paraphrase of Edward Said's description of Orientalist attitudes toward Middle Easterners in this celebrated study, *Orientalism*.²⁴ In this way, the United States is only the latest representative of the foreign forces that destroyed the Ottoman Sultanate, divided up the area between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf into 'illegitimate states', and installed puppet rulers to do their bidding. Thus, all of the great external usurpers of history are linked, and opposed in a single process to the representatives of inner truth. The story of the U.S.-Iran estrangement in the aftermath of the revolution, however, continues to be a sad chronicle of misunderstanding and cultural misperception; only this time, enmity, for both sides, turns into a pursuit, a way of gaining the upper hand with the audience at home and public opinion abroad. The United States became the 'Great Satan', not in a sudden stroke at the taking of the hostages, but through a slow and steady process of differentiation. In a myopic, almost dogged manner, the United States persisted in digging itself into a ready-made villain's role within the symbolic structure of Iranian society. The great external occupier of culture and morality, supporter of illegitimate power, and destroyer of the

²⁴ Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage. As a decidedly humanistic endeavor, however, Said's analysis centers on a particular aspect of unequal object-subject power relations (i.e. between 'the occident' and 'the orient'), that of *representation*. For representations of the other point directly to the disparities in material and cultural power that very much condition and constrict relations between two seemingly unique, yet in fact similar and interlinked, civilizations. For Said, then, orientalism as a field of knowledge is primarily about the representations of the orient by the occident which in turn validate and ensure the subordinate position of the former relative to that of the latter' commanding, indeed superior, position. As Said himself notes, 'Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West'. Once the foundations of orientalism as the field of representations about the orient, rather than objective truths about it, become clear, it is not that difficult to discern the impact of such a field on mainstream cultural discourses in both Iran and the United States. p. 21.

natural bonds that bind men to each other in relationships of mutual benefit; such is the nature of the beast – and such, it seems, remains of the beast, only this time a new list of grievances and characters may be admitted to the record.

One of the persistent and enduring strategies of enmity employed by the United States against Iran has been the charge of terrorism. The United States first began to identify Iran as a supporter of terrorist activities in 1984 under the Reagan administration. The accusations have grown more strident from year to year, and indeed, have reached their zenith in the ongoing war in Iraq, where Bush administration officials have repeatedly accused Iran's Revolutionary Guards of supplying radical Shiite elements with weapons and training. As recently as 2006, the U.S. State Department has described Iran as 'the most active state sponsor of terrorism', claiming that '[Iran] provided Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian rejectionist groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad with funding, safe haven, training, and weapons'.²⁵ Of all these claims, the assertion of Iranian support for Hezbollah is verifiable, and indeed, proudly proclaimed by Iranian leaders. Nevertheless, the constant barrage of accusations about Iran's support for international terrorism is clearly meant as a strategy of enmity whereby the pariah status of Iran as an outlaw state in international society is highlighted time and again. Added to this long list of 'terror-related' accusations are concerns about Iran's abysmal record as regards human rights and its mistreatment of domestic dissidents and activists inside the country.

But perhaps the most important area of concern is that of the current standoff over Iran's alleged ambitions to become a nuclear power. Crucial to the understanding of the nature of the nuclear power struggle between Iran and United States is the

²⁵ United States. Department of State. Office of the Coordinator for Counter-terrorism. 2003.

realization that Iran's possible development of nuclear weaponry is not the principal issue. The United States has a long, unsuccessful record of trying to prevent nuclear weapons proliferation, but this effort has always been undertaken with the equally important goal of preserving the United States' own nuclear weapons superiority. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to which Iran is a signatory was supposed to preserve rights to peaceful development of nuclear technology while preventing new weapons development. The crux of the standoff over nuclear power with Iran boil down to Washington's unwillingness to afford its longstanding enemy in Tehran the opportunity to hurl invectives at it from an even more prominent (nuclear) platform. And so, the decades-long conflict over discourse has come to a material impasse: allowing Iran the possibility of acquiring nuclear weapons would dramatically transform the nature of Iran-U.S. estrangement to something more reminiscent of the Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union. Of course, Iranian officials are more than aware of the momentousness of such a prospect; in fact, President Mahmood Ahmadinejad's repeated posturing is precisely meant to once again remind both the domestic and international audiences of the past crimes committed by the United States against Iran – in short, to resurrect the image of the United States as a pariah state in world politics, especially in lieu of the multiple unilateral entanglements in Afghanistan and Iraq. Many in the West are too easily impressed by the Islamic rhetoric used by Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei to recognize that in the end what matters is Iran. Islam may be the means for some, but for the vast majority Iran is the end. That such ideas are even being discussed should remind us that the nuclear impasse is a consequence of a far wider problem between Iran and the United States, not its cause. The much urgent problem today is the latest incarnation of enmity as an object of desire between the two sides. A solution to the

nuclear issue will only come about if the mutual 'deafness and incomprehension' which first formed the basis for estrangement are diagnosed and illuminated.

Conclusion: The Politics of Enmity

Students of international relations have a tendency to look at states as actor – rational or otherwise – with an occasional foray into the domestic political context of their foreign policy making. Rarely do we look at the ways in which these actors relate and communicate with each other or the ways in which they have influenced the behavior and perceptions of the other. This glaring oversight may partly be attributed to the way in which most mainstream IR scholars conceive of the international realm as an anarchical arrangement of 'like units' (states) different only either in 'material capabilities'²⁶ or 'perceptions'²⁷ in relation to each another. Yet, and more importantly, it points to the complexities involved in dealing with the normative and often contingent foundations of such notions as identity and difference, of interpretation and representation, and of discourse and practice. The absence of official diplomatic relations between any two states is often a sure sign of estrangement beyond remedy. In such cases, estranged governments are prompt to recite a litany of misgivings, alleged violations, and grievances as reasons for their antagonism towards, and negative representations of, one another. In fact, the more protracted the rift between states, the more debased and fantastical the depictions of the 'Other'.

What is more, prolonged estrangement strangely metamorphoses into a sort of quest for enmity, whereby every movement, every gesture, and every declaration on the part of the alleged protagonist is viewed with conspiratorial suspicion and virulent

²⁶ Waltz, K. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

²⁷ Wendt, A. 2000. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

contempt. Enmity among estranged states, therefore, comes to be viewed as a powerful resource for, and much less a hindrance to, advancing the national interest. Identity and difference at the level of political elites operate on an entirely different set of subversive presumptions than at the individual or group level. Contemporary accounts of U.S.-Iran relations tend to ignore this rather benign, yet insidious, dimension of estrangement. In the preceding arguments and accounts, I have sought to make explicit the implications of this symptom for the almost three-decades-long estranged relationship between Iran and the United States. It is this condition of *normativity*, of conflict over discourse and narrative, and of the aspirational as well as the inspirational bases for differentiation, we may conclude, which has made pariahs out of both sides in the imaginations of each.