

Policy Brief

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Dangerous liaisons

The US and Iran: the complex game of lobbying and information in an open society

Abstract

David Samuel's political biography of a key Obama adviser on Iran's policy in the New York Times magazine can be compared to the historical Watergate's journalism research. This policy brief analyses its impact on five crucial issues: (1) US domestic rivalries impact on the external relations with Iran; (2) contemporary tools of government manipulation of media through the creation of an "Echo chamber"; (3) the making of financial lobbying; (4) the appeasement reasoning construct and (5) the confront of political strategy with human reality through the Syrian drama.

Many thanks to Professor Raymond Tanter. He provided considerable feedback; in particular, he assisted in fact-checking. The professor also provided his take on negative effects those who use the infamous "echo chamber" have on American foreign policy.

Introduction¹

Watergate is the symbol of a time marked by the transformation of what was first perceived as a mere “conspiracy theory” into the actual conspiracy. The judicial system identified and condemned it and its tremendous impact is still felt in both the US political scene and across the world.

Bob Woodward – an acclaimed journalist committed to limit the political power – would also become a symbol of a distinctive form of research at the crossroads of journalism and analysis. His four volumes² on George W. Bush’s presidency are a prime example of this approach, they are a crucial read for whoever wants to understand the US Middle-East policy at the time.³

Two works on Obama were produced in 2016, Jeffrey Goldberg’s in the Atlantic and David Samuels’s in the New York Times (NYT) magazine.⁴ While in a lighter format than Woodward’s, David Samuel’s piece certainly reached deeper than most articles and vividly illustrated the complex game of lobbying and information in an open society.

The Echo Chamber

In declarations to NYT magazine, Mr Ben Rhodes, Obama’s strategic communications security advisor, acknowledged the existence of secret direct negotiations between the US and Iran predating the November 2012 elections.

Mr Rhodes’ most shocking revelation was that the White House transformed a large spectrum of media into an “echo chamber” in order to sell the Iran deal. The manipulation of the broadcast industry had been so crude that it even enabled the creation of an implausible myth: that the election of a “moderate” Iranian President in 2013 created a favourable political climate to negotiate the deal. This is plainly absurd, considering the fact that secret negotiations predated Rouhani’s election and were masterminded by the Supreme leader of Iran, not by the Iranian president.

¹ Note: all the cited online references in this document were consulted between 15 June 2016 and 12 July

² Woodward, *Bush At War*, London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 7 July 2003; Woodward, *Plan of Attack, Bush At War Part II*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 11 October 2004; Woodward, *State of Denial, Bush at War, Part III*, London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2 July 2007; Woodward, *The War Within: A Secret White House History, 2006-08, Bush at War Part IV*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 12 September 2008.

³ By contrast, Bob Woodward’s work on President Obama is a deception, either from the literary or the political analysis point of view. Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 3 May 2011.

⁴ Respectively, Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine” <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> and “The Aspiring Novelist who became Obama Foreign-Policy Guru” David Samuels, May, 5, 2016 in http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/the-aspiring-novelist-who-became-obamas-foreign-policy-guru.html?_r=0

The financial aspect

Behind this “communication strategy”, Mr Rhodes reveals an authentic financial emporium supported by the Ploughshares Fund, the Iran project and “whomever else”.

How does this financial mechanism work? How come the White House adviser speaks of these supposedly independent civil society foundations as if they were a secret operations slush fund for Iranian propagandist missions? What is the relation between the Iranian authorities, the White House, the National Iranian American Council (NIAC), the Gulf 2000 network and these funds?

The appeasing logic

The Atlantic piece by Mr Jeffrey Goldberg is – to our knowledge – the first contemporary Western main stream literature attempting openly to defend the logic of appeasement: “Obama believes that the Manichaeism, and eloquently rendered bellicosity, commonly associated with Churchill were justified by Hitler’s rise, and were at times defensible in the struggle against the Soviet Union. But he also thinks rhetoric should be weaponized sparingly, if at all, in today’s more ambiguous and complicated international arena. The president believes that Churchillian rhetoric and, more to the point, Churchillian habits of thought, helped bring his predecessor, George W. Bush, to ruinous war in Iraq.”

Otherwise, we put forward a working assumption on the basis of the biography of Mr Rhodes in the NYT. Could this biography be the archetype of the appeasement mind-set? Should we analyse the appeasement psychological moulding here presented, from 9/11 to the Syrian massacres, on the same lines psychology has seen common appeasement reactions to aggression in the personal, private sphere?

Syria

Both the Atlantic and the NYT articles predate the declaration of dissent signed by 51 American diplomats. However this initiative was most likely expected and both Mr Obama and Mr Rhodes are implicitly trying to address the problems set forth in the declaration. Neither of them is able to answer the issues raised by the diplomat’s declaration, and Syria is the clearly the point where the Obama pro-Iranian strategy reveals its total absence of logic. Can we see the US diplomat’s declaration as the fundamental antidote to the Iran deal lobbying in an open society?

1. October surprise revisited?

According to the lead article of the NYT⁵, the bilateral secret negotiations between the Iranian and the US authorities started in July 2012 in Muscat and were led on the US side by Jake Sullivan, an aide of Hilary Clinton, and were developed afterwards under the leadership of the deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns.

In October 2012, the NYT and other US major news outlets⁶ had already published the story of the bilateral negotiations. Here, the source was a self-proclaimed “former CIA agent who infiltrated the Iranian Revolutionary Guards”, Reza Khalili, whose story had been posted previously on the web⁷.

In this original 2012 story, the negotiations were held in Doha, Qatar, on October 1st 2012, and were led on the US side by Valerie Jarret and on the Iranian side by Ali Akbar Velayati.

Ali Akbar Velayati, one of the prime suspects of an Iranian terrorist attack targeting a Jewish centre in Buenos Aires, was the longest serving Foreign Affairs Minister of Iran and is currently the closest representative of the Iranian Supreme Leader on foreign affairs. Valerie Jarret is presented as “the working wife” of President Obama by the above mentioned NYT magazine article but has also been described elsewhere as the “political godmother” of the Obama couple as she has had a permanent presence in their political life.⁸

It is fascinating to see after so many years a sort of re-enactment of the “Reagan – Carter” competition to gain the favour of the theocracy during the 1980s. Gary Sick – a Carter administration official concerned with Iran during the Islamic revolution and the hostage crisis – joined his testimony to a growing number of press and book reports of an “October surprise”, where the Reagan camp competed with the Carter administration in negotiations with the Iranian authorities to procure the release of US hostages in return for the supply of weapons.⁹

⁵ Op. cit.

⁶ See the NYT http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/world/iran-said-ready-to-talk-to-us-about-nuclear-program.html?hp&_r=1& and the Atlantic Magazine of the same day <http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/149265/october-surprise-direct-talks-iran-joseph-klein> According to the original story, not followed here by the NYT, Ali Velayati and Valerie Jarret families have close links that come back to the time Valerie Jarret was born and leaned Farsi in Iran.

⁷ Namely here <http://www.wnd.com/2012/10/october-surprise-obama-secret-iran-deal-cut/> as well as here http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=6fd_1350767994&comments=1

⁸ For instance, here http://cj.myfreeforum.org/archive/valerie-mussolini-jarrett-obama-senior-advisor_o_t_t_3662.html

⁹ “October Surprise: America's Hostages in Iran and the Election of Ronald Reagan”, Gary Sick, 1992. Apparently, Gary Sick version is only a part of the story, the other part speaks of the Carter administration

Gary Sick started his professional career as a US Navy intelligence officer in Iran. With decades of experience in Navy intelligence, he held several top administration positions prior to involvement with the Carter administration on formulating a US policy toward Iran.¹⁰ He was a key figure in Middle-East Watch (one of the founding components of Human Rights Watch) where he still has a leading role. He is also a prominent member of the unofficial representation of Tehran in the US, NIAC. Most importantly, he is the founder of the think tank “Gulf/2000” and he is cited often in Tehran official press where he gives an American face to Iran’s perspectives on international policy.¹¹

2. The Echo Chamber in action

The most shocking bit among the NYT magazine’s revelations may well be the existence of the “echo chamber”, created by Mr Ben Rhodes.¹² Most of us were shocked to find out how far the present administration was willing to go to sell to the American people a fake image of the Iranian regime’s “moderation”. According to Mr Samuels’ article, “The narratives he frames, the voices of senior officials, the columnists and reporters whose work he skilfully shapes and ventriloquizes, and even the President’s own speeches and talking points, are the only dots of colour in a much wider vision.”

In the picture painted by both Mr Samuels and Mr Rhodes, on the political battles of the Obama Administration; we found something we would rather expect from “The Ministry of Truth” in Orwell’s 1984 than in the democratic proceedings governing our institutions.

Mr Samuels appears to share this impression, invoking the name of Orwell twice, the first to point out that Mr Rhodes’ bookshelves contained the author’s book “All art is Propaganda” and the second while describing Mr Rhodes’ information machine: “I brought up the soft Orwellian vibe of an information space where old media structures and hierarchies have been erased by Silicon Valley billionaires who convinced the suckers that information was ‘free’ and everyone with access to Google was now a reporter.”

original negotiations with Tehran. See for instance <http://aradicalblackfoot.blogspot.be/2007/01/1980-october-surprise.html>

¹⁰ See for instance <http://www.adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Hunter,%20Robert%20E.toc.pdf>.

¹¹ See for instance, <http://www.tehrantimes.com/news/403166/BBC-report-contains-factual-errors-Gary-Sick>

¹² NYT, op.cit.

The examples given by Mr Samuels on the function of the “echo chamber” are frightful reminders of Orwell’s best known novel:

“He [Rhodes] turns to Price [his deputy]. ‘We’re resolving this, because we have relationships,’ he says. Price turns to his computer and begins tapping away at the administration’s well-cultivated network of officials, talking heads, columnists and newspaper reporters, web jockeys and outside advocates who can tweet at critics and tweak their stories backed up by quotations from ‘senior White House officials’ and ‘spokespeople.’ I watch the message bounce from Rhodes’s brain to Price’s keyboard to the three briefing podiums – the White House, the State Department and the Pentagon – and across the Twitterverse, where it springs to life in dozens of insta-stories, which over the next five hours don formal dress for mainstream outlets. It’s a tutorial in the making of a digital news microclimate – a storm that is easy to mistake these days for a fact of nature, but whose author is sitting next to me right now”.

Mr Samuels further explains how this “Brave New World” came to us:

“All these newspapers used to have foreign bureaus”, he [Rhodes] said. “Now they don’t. They call us to explain to them what’s happening in Moscow and Cairo. Most of the outlets are reporting on World events from Washington. The average reporter we talk to is 27 years old, and their only reporting experience consists of being around political campaigns. That’s a sea of change. They literally know nothing.”

Mr Samuels continues, “In this environment, Rhodes has become adept at ventriloquizing many people at once. Ned Price, Rhode’s assistant, gave me a primer on how it’s done. The easiest way for the White House to shape the news, he explained, is from the briefing podiums, each of which has its own dedicated press corps. ‘But then there are sort of these force multipliers,’ he said, adding, ‘We have our compadres, I will reach out to a couple of people and you know I wouldn’t want to name them –’ (...) ‘I’ll say, Hey, look, some people are spinning this narrative that this is a sign of American weakness’, he continued ‘but –’

‘In fact it’s a sign of strength!’ I said, chuckling.

‘And I’ll give them some color,’ Price continued, ‘and the next thing I know, lots of these guys are in the dot-com publishing space, and have huge Twitter followings, and they’ll be putting this message out on their own.’”

And, naturally, the crux of this fiction selling exercise is the “Iran deal”, and once again, Mr Samuels explains it better than anyone else:

“Rhodes’s innovative campaign to sell the Iran deal is likely to be a model for how future administrations explain foreign policy to Congress and the public. The way in which most Americans have heard the story of the Iran deal presented – that the Obama administration began seriously engaging with Iranian officials in 2013 in order to take advantage of a new political reality in Iran, which came about because of elections that brought moderates to power in that country – was largely manufactured for the purpose for selling the deal. Even when the particulars of that story are true, the implications that readers and viewers are encouraged to take away from those particulars are often misleading or false.”

(...)

“The nerve centre for the selling of the Iran deal to Congress, which took place in a concentrated three-month period between July and September of last year, was located inside the White House, and is referred to by its former denizens as ‘the war room’.”

(...)

“Rhodes ‘was kind of like the quarterback,’ running the daily video conferences and coming up with lines of attack and parry. ‘He was extremely good about immediately getting to a phrase or a way of getting the message out that just made more sense,’ Kreikemeier [a staffer who helped running the team] remembers. Framing the deal as a choice between peace and war was Rhode’s go to move – and proved to be a winning argument.

The person whom Kreikemeier credits with running the digital side of the campaign was Tanya Somanader, 31, the director of digital response for the White House Office of Digital Strategy, who became known in the war room and on Twitter as @TheIranDeal.”

(...)

And in Ms Somanader’s own words: “So, we developed a plan that was like: The Iran deal is literally going to be the tip of everything that we stand up online...And we’re going to map it onto what we know about the different audiences we’re dealing with: the public, pundits, experts, the right wing, Congress.”¹³

¹³ Ibid.

Samuels then argues: “By applying 21st-century data and networking tools to the white glove world of foreign affairs, the White House was able to track what United States senators and the people who worked for them, and influenced them, were seeing online – and make sure that no potential negative comment passed without a tweet.”

(...)

“We created an echo chamber,” he [Rhodes] admitted, (...)

We tested these revelations by collecting data from The Iran Deal Twitter account (@TheIranDeal). Considering the fact that Ben Rhodes himself is very active on Twitter, tweeted and retweeted a large number of news items and op-eds regarding the Iran deal, we also used his official Twitter account (@rhodes44), when collecting our data.

As expected, the news items and articles that were tweeted or retweeted by Tanya Somanader and Ben Rhodes on Iran and the nuclear deal between July and September 2015, promote Iran’s image and the imperative of dealing with the regime. They also reveal the news outlets and the journalists that are part of the White House’s “echo chamber”.

The composed list provides the names of these media outlets, including journalists or opinion contributors, dates of publication and website links to articles. Subsequent to the final vote on the Iran deal in the U.S. Congress in September 2015, Ben Rhodes virtually stopped tweeting and retweeting anything about the issue.

However, Tanya Somanader continued to run The Iran Deal twitter handle until February 2016, tweeting and retweeting news items and op-eds mentioning the deal and interacting with the public by responding to their inquiries. In order to guarantee the inclusivity of as many actors as possible, we collected data between July 2015 and February 2016 from The Iran Deal Twitter account.

Going through the tweets of Ms Somanader and Mr Rhodes, following this methodology, we were able to generate the following results on the “echo chamber.”

Our analysis detected the following number of tweeted pro-Iran deal stories in the mainstream media (ordered by the number of tweets):

- The Washington Post, 11; New York Times, 10; Politico, 8; The Huffington Post, 7; Vox, 5; USA Today, 4

With three tweets:

- The Atlantic; Boston Globe; CNN; Forward; Haaretz; Al Monitor; Los Angeles Times

With two tweets:

- BBC News (US); Charleston Gazette-Mail; The National Interest; Observer; NBC news; NPR; NYMag; PhillyDotCom; Punditfact; Reuters; Slate; Star Tribune; Sun Sentinel; The Times of Israel;

With one tweet:

- Albuquerque Journal; The Anniston Star; Associated Press; The Baltimore Sun; Bozeman Daily Chronicle; Brookings; Chicago Tribune; The CTMirror; Defense One; Delaware online; The Denver Post; The Economist; The Hill; The Hollywood Reporter; Inforum; The Kansas City Star; Miami Herald; Mic; MIT News; MSNBC; Pittsburgh Post-Gazette; The News and Observer; Roll Call; San Francisco Chronicle; The Salt Lake Tribune; The Star-Ledger; Syracuse.com; Tampa Bay Times; Think Progress; Vatican Radio.

There were also Ben Rhodes' retweets of journalists or individuals such as *James Fallows*; *Joe Cirincione*; *Sabrina Siddiqui*; *Barak Ravid*; and a CNN video footage of *Zbigniew Brzezinski*. Ben Rhodes also tweeted the general line in support of the Iran deal.

As expected, this impressive “echo chamber” reproduces similar story-lines that fully operate as Mr Rhodes “ventriloquizing” (using Mr Samuels’s expression). In the run-up to the 2016 elections, The US establishment will have to take a closer look at who is really behind these supposedly ‘independent’ analysts in the press, think tanks and elsewhere, if it wants to protect itself from the kind of infiltration and manipulation revealed by Mr Rhodes.

3. The financial angle

It is difficult to imagine such a massive “echo chamber” operation without significant financial support. Mr Rhodes identifies three fundamental financial sources for the spin operation; (1) Ploughshares Fund; (2) Iran project and (3) non-identified (“whomever else” in his words).

Mr Rhodes’ revelations sparked some interest in the media, mostly with regard to the accounts of this Ploughshares Fund, which show ostensive objectives of promoting the image of Iran and to finance US based media and organisations known by their favourable opinion of the Iranian

authorities, such as National Public Radio (NPR), J Street, Arms Control Association, the Brookings Institution, the Atlantic Council and Princeton University.¹⁴

Ploughshares stated in its 2015 report that its public relations efforts resulted in 811 op-eds, 352 letters to editors-in-chief and 227 editorials promoting the nuclear agreement with the Iranian regime. According to Ploughshares annual reports, as wired by the Associated Press on May 21st, this entity has systematically provided financial aid to and cooperated with the following press outlets: Nation, Huffington Post, Salon, Pro Publica and Mother Jones.

A very interesting and vivid fact is that these five outlets were amongst the main sources that posted articles against the Iranian opposition, People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (PMOI/MEK), starting from 2011 when the debate over the Iran nuclear agreement was launched coinciding with the topic of the PMOI delisting. They continue to run such articles to this day and the allegations raised in them are strikingly similar.¹⁵

¹⁴ Among the articles in the press that have been referring to the sponsoring in the US of media and nuclear experts in favour of the Iranian authorities profile we can quote Bradley Klapper in the Associated Press, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/7044e805a95a4b7da5533b1b9ab75cd2/group-helped-sell-iran-nuke-deal-also-funded-media>; Alana Goodman in the Washington Free Bacon, <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/inside-iran-echo-chamber/> ; Eric Cortellessa in the Times of Israel <http://www.timesofisrael.com/where-did-ploughshares-get-its-money-to-sell-the-iran-deal/> Regarding NGOs, see <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/printgroupProfile.asp?grpId=7156>

¹⁵ The following are links to a number of these articles:

- <http://www.thenation.com/article/cult-leader-will-tell-congress-fight-isis-regime-change-iran/>
- <http://www.thenation.com/article/controversial-iranian-exile-shakes-canadian-parliaments-human-rights-program/>
- http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/08/08/mek-lobbying_n_913233.html (08/08/2011)
- http://www.huffingtonpost.com/reza-marashi/mek-terrorist-organization_b_1350676.html
- http://www.huffingtonpost.com/massoud-khodabandeh/post-delisting-what-are-t_b_2094297.html
- http://www.salon.com/2012/03/12/washingtons_high_powered_terrorist_supporters/
- http://www.salon.com/2012/05/15/likely_victory_for_mek_skills/
- <https://www.propublica.org/blog/item/rep-king-hardly-the-first-u.s.-official-to-publicly-support-terrorist-grou>
- <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/09/mujahedin-iran-mek-lobby-brown-lloyd-james>
- http://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2012/03/when-terrorist-group-not-terrorist-group?utm_medium=twitter&utm_source=twitterfeed&fb_ref=Default%252C%2540Total

Leaked emails of Secretary Hillary Clinton's office also confirm that Ploughshares Fund acts as a 'slush fund' to finance pro-Iranian policy from the US Administration. In an internal email from a close political associate of the State Secretary to her assistant, Huma Abedin, he explains:

"Ploughshares provided a significant amount of funding to us and others... and carried out a lot of organizing on their own for passage of New START... We would not have had the resources to build the Generals/Admirals/Clergy voices including op-eds, fly-ins for Hill visits, letters, calls, etc without Ploughshares... They're in a decision mode now on how much to resource for supporting ATT... My request, if possible/appropriate, is a Thank You letter to them... Here (below) are names and address if possible... As always, thank you so much for considering..."

This request was henceforth approved by the secretary.

Ploughshares Fund is the biggest grant provider for the US in matters of "peace" and "security".

The former Soviet Union had successfully pursued a strategy of sponsoring a complex network of so-called "peace initiatives" or infiltrating others to debilitating the Western resolve to confront its own armed built up.¹⁶

This strategy was symbolically set in motion when the Soviet Union presented a bronze statue to the United Nations in 1959 called "Swords Into Plowshares".¹⁷ After this historical event, whoever started a peace movement using the expression (even when written like ploughshares) could not possibly ignore the obvious symbolic weight. As such, the "Ploughshares Fund" most likely referred to this strategy; it was created by Sally Lilienthal in 1981 and directed by her up to her death in 2006. After her death in 2006, substantial changes occurred in the management of this "Peace Fund". Mr Reza Aslan becomes a member of the board of directors of "Ploughshares" in 2006 and Mr Joe Cirincione becomes the head of the Foundation; after this, the Ploughshares' agenda is mostly dominated by Mr Reza Aslan.

In the wake of the 1979 revolution in Iran, the seven-year-old Reza Aslan and his family moved to the US and settled in the San Francisco Bay Area.¹⁸ According to his own account, the young Aslan

¹⁶ See for instance, "West European Pacifism and the Strategy for Peace" edited by Peter Van Den Dungen, Springer, 1985 or still Staar, Richard Felix, "Foreign policies of the Soviet Union", Hoover Press, 1991, ISBN 0-8179-9102-6.

¹⁷ Photo 21 in the UN gift series can be seen at the site <http://www.unmultimedia.org/photo/detail.jsp?id=314/314774&key=20&query=statue&sf=>

¹⁸ Consulted the 2016-07-01 <http://www.onbeing.org/program/transcript/7047>

converts to evangelical Christianity at the age of fifteen;¹⁹ he went to a Jesuit Catholic College where he studied the Bible, focussing on the New Testament. Aslan soon came to realise that everything he was told about the Bible and the New Testament, including the Gospel story, were false.²⁰ Subsequent to Aslan's graduation, he decides to head to Harvard in order pursue a Master's degree in Biblical Studies, but he was encouraged by Katherine Bell, his undergraduate professor, to study Islam instead, because, by the time he would get his PhD in Biblical Studies "no one is going to care about Biblical Studies anymore, everyone is going to want to have scholars and experts on Islam".²¹

Thus, in 1995, Mr Reza Aslan studies the Islamic faith and converts before heading off to Harvard, arguing that he "had an emotional conversion to Christianity but a rational conversion to Islam".²² According to Mr Reza Aslan's official website, he ultimately obtained a Master of theological studies from Harvard University and a PhD in the sociology of religions from the University of California, Santa Barbara.²³ Aslan authored several books, including "No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam" and "Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth". Furthermore, he is a member of the Advisory Board of NIAC, widely considered as the Iranian regime's lobby in the U.S. chaired by Trita Parsi.

Whereas Mr Reza Aslan became a Muslim by "reason", as he claims, he unmistakably shows his credentials as an indefectible supporter of the Iranian regime and a ferocious detractor of the Iranian opposition.

On 13 January 2011, merely one and a half years after the brutal post-election crackdown of June 2009 by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government, Aslan wrote an article for *The Atlantic*²⁴ in which he deliberately tried to whitewash the crimes that have been committed by the Iranian regime against the people of Iran. Mr Reza Aslan argues "Is it possible that Iran's blustering president Mahmoud

¹⁹ Consulted the 2016-07-01 in the Economist online edition the author's book review *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. By Reza Aslan. *Random House*; 296 pages; *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. By Reza Aslan. *Random House*; 296 pages; <http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21582239-perhaps-jesus-was-no-pacifist-no-angel>

²⁰ Consulted the 2016-07-01 An interview of the author on the magazine loonwatch, <http://www.loonwatch.com/2011/11/exclusive-loonwatch-interview-with-reza-aslan>

²¹ Ibidem

²² Ibidem

²³ According to his own website: <http://rezaaslan.com/about>

²⁴ Consulted the 2016-07-04, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/01/do-we-have-ahmadinejad-all-wrong/69434/>

Ahmadinejad, long thought to be a leading force behind some of Iran's most hard-line and repressive policies, is actually a reformer whose attempts to liberalize, secularize, and even 'Persianize' Iran have been repeatedly stymied by the country's more conservative factions? That is the surprising impression one gets reading the latest WikiLeaks revelations, which portray Ahmadinejad as open to making concessions on Iran's nuclear program and far more accommodating to Iranians' demands for greater freedoms than anyone would have thought."

He further concludes that: "It's not obvious whether Ahmadinejad is driven by a legitimate desire for reform or just tactical political interests. But if you oppose the Mullahs' rule, yearn for greater social and political freedoms for the Iranian people, and envision an Iran that draws inspiration from the glories of its Persian past, then, believe it or not, you have more in common with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad than you might have thought."

But his devotion to Mahmmoud Ahmadinejad is matched by his disdain for the PMOI/MEK, which, according to one of the Iranian regime's propaganda websites, he accuses of being a "fanatical religious cult".²⁵ Together with other pro-Iranian personalities such as Trita Parsi and Gary Sick, he signs on August 2nd 2011 in the Financial Times²⁶ a "Joint experts' statement on the PMOI" which campaigned against the delisting of the MEK from the U.S. Foreign Terrorist Organisation list and claimed that the Iranian resistance does not have a base of popular support in Iran. The statement further stipulates that organisations such as Human Rights Watch "have determined the MEK to be a cult-like organisation with a structure and modus operandi that belies its claim to be a vehicle for democratic change."

His strenuous defence of the Iranian regime and furious attacks against its opposition have been widely recognised by the Iranian authorities' official press and his writings have been published and praised on many occasions. For example, on 14 January 2015, "Rahyaftegan", an organisation affiliated with the Iranian regime which promotes the activities of its "missionaries" worldwide and

²⁵ Consulted the 2016-07-03, available at <http://www.payvand.com/news/05/oct/1016.html> He is the author of several other hate scripts of the same kind either at Iranian pro-regime websites or in US ones, some of them part of the Echo Chamber. See for instance <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/dec/10/opinion/oe-aslan10> ; http://usepublicdiplomacy.org/blog/060519_aslan_mek_mujahedin_e_kalq_iran_diplomacy_quagmire ; <http://www.nejatngo.org/en/Mission.aspx> ; <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2009/07/28/the-raid-that-could-leave-iran-cheering.html> ; <http://www.nejatngo.org/en/post.aspx?id=2660> ; All consulted on 2016-07-03

²⁶ Consulted the 2016-07-03, available at <https://next.ft.com/content/563a29aa-c378-11e0-b163-00144feabdc0>

documents new Muslim converts, published an interview of Reza Aslan with BBC Farsi on its official website titled “Interview with Reza Aslan regarding Islam and Christianity.” On 13 December 2011, a news story titled “Reza Aslan: fear and misunderstanding are the basis of Islamophobia” appeared on the website of “Jamaran”, a media outlet that “aims to promote the ideas of the great leader [Ruhollah Khomeini] of the Islamic Revolution.” Moreover, on 19 November 2015, the “Young Journalists Club”, which was founded by the state-owned Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), published a news story of Reza Aslan in the Washington Post titled “Washington Post: foolish to blame Islam for the actions of ISIS”. News stories regarding Reza Aslan also appeared on “Mizan”, an online state-owned news agency, “Tabnak”, a news website which was founded by former officials of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, “Al-Manar”, a Lebanese based television station which broadcasts from Beirut and is affiliated with Hezbollah and “Al-Alam”, which is an Arabic news channel broadcasting from Iran and is property of the state-owned IRIB.

Subsequent to Mr Reza Aslan’s accession to the board of directors of Ploughshares Fund in 2006, NIAC reportedly started to receive grants from the foundation in 2007, indicating that Aslan’s accession to the board had a significant impact on the grant applications of the Iran lobby. According to the Ploughshares Fund Annual Reports, in 2007, a conflict of interest arose regarding Mr Reza Aslan. The conflict of interest related to a grant of \$30,000 provided by Ploughshares Fund to Abraham’s Vision, as Aslan is also a member of its board of directors.

In a reaction to this conflict, and instead of bringing his conflicting involvements to an end, Mr Reza Aslan erased parts of the foundation’s conflict of interest policy clause, which would have otherwise highlighted his conflicts of interest.

The following paragraph is the conflict of interest policy clause of Ploughshares Fund as stated in its Annual Report of 2008²⁷. In bold, we can read the part that was cut out in the subsequent year:

“As a public foundation, dependent upon the contributions and involvement of members of the public, Ploughshares Fund has a special commitment to ethical behaviour and transparency in our work. The board and staff of the Ploughshares Fund are encouraged to play active roles in their communities, which may lead, from time to time, to potential conflicts of interest or the appearance of such. It is our policy to acknowledge such conflicts openly and appropriately. *Conflicting*

²⁷ Consulted 2016-06-29 in http://www.ploughshares.org/sites/default/files/pf_AR_2008.pdf and in http://www.ploughshares.org/sites/default/files/pf_AR_2009.pdf

involvements include but are not limited to: Ploughshares Fund board, staff or immediate family members of board or staff members serving on the boards of applicant organisations, or doing business with or being employed by applicant organisations. In cases of such conflicts or the appearance thereof, Ploughshares Fund board members and staff are expected to disclose the conflict prior to making any grant-related decisions and to abstain from voting or participating in the discussion of the applicant organisation other than to answer specific questions that may be raised by other board members. In cases where a grant is awarded to an organisation and one or more Ploughshares Fund’s board members has abstained from voting as the result of a conflict or the appearance thereof or a staff member has a conflict or the appearance thereof, such circumstances shall be identified in the Annual Report.”

The official website of NIAC does not indicate when Mr Reza Aslan joined its advisory board and Mr Aslan does not clarify this on his personal website either. In fact, he does not even confess to his affiliation with NIAC there. Google search results show that his profile page was made by NIAC on 1 September 2008. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that this is the date when he was appointed a member of NIAC’s advisory board.

Based on the pre-2009 conflict of interest policy clause of Ploughshares Fund, Mr Reza Aslan would have been identified as an individual with conflicting involvements relating to the grant applications of NIAC and therefore required to abstain from voting on the grant requests of the latter. This never happened due to the timely erasing of the troubling provisions. Thus, NIAC reportedly received over \$800,000 in grants from the foundation between 2007 and 2015, and the matter was never considered as conflictual or problematic.

Mr Reza Aslan’s actions are very important for the public to understand his ethical standards. However, the procedures used in the lobbying industry to hide conflicts of interest on which it operates are usually much more sophisticated. Some NGOs explained how complex the operations of some major US foundations are and how they use “money-laundering” techniques which most of us would deem impossible in a world in which philanthropy is the supposed goal.

Discover the Networks²⁸ refers to one of the earliest forms of these money-laundering setups, The Tides Foundation, and emphasises that “By letting the Tides Foundation, in effect, ‘launder’ the money for them and pass it along to the intended beneficiaries, donors can avoid leaving a ‘paper

²⁸ <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/funderProfile.asp?fndid=5184>

trail.’ Such contributions are called ‘donor-advised,’ or donor-directed, funds.” The Tides Foundation appears indeed as one of the financial pillars of the Ploughshares Fund, but Tides is neither the most important pillar nor the most significant technique in the financial scheme.

The “Search for Common Ground” (SFCG), an NGO operating in Washington DC and Brussels, acts as a transit mechanism of the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation (RBF) to finance the “Iran Project” in 2012, in a way which is apparently intended to underreport links between these two entities.²⁹ RBF, other than indirectly financing pro-Iranian organisations such as NIAC through Ploughshares Fund, also directly funds such organisations.³⁰

However, we think that the crux of the matter lies elsewhere. Most of the foundations involved in supporting the Iran deal or other Iranian interests tend to work together with business foundations such as the Boeing Company. As such, it seems rather plausible that those foundations which have a direct interest in supporting the Iranian authorities, may ask their partners to act on their behalf.

So, for instance, the Boeing Company – which made a very lucrative deal with Tehran³¹ – does not need to show up directly through its foundation as a donor to the Iranian lobby; it can entrust this task to one of its partners with which it shares the sponsorship of hundreds of millions of dollars of grants in a vast array of projects. This partner – which might be any of the Rockefeller foundations or others within the major league of foundations – might still use, at least partially, one of the money laundering available procedures, such as the Tides Foundation.

The result of this operation is that the Iranian authorities can manage a huge number of undercover lobbying activities, penetrating the United States decision-making process at the highest levels.

Furthermore, it is important to stress another aspect that has not yet been highlighted by the preceding press reports: this financial machine professes to act in the name of “peace” and “nuclear disarmament” (as in the case of the Soviet Union, a doctrine for exclusive export use) but it actually sponsors other objectives of the Iranian regime, such as suppressing its opposition.

Among the organisations funded by this system, we can see both the main allegedly traditional lobbies of Iran in the US, the so-called “Gulf/2000” – receiving a total of \$375,000 between 2011

²⁹ See SFCG Financial Statement 2012. The grant amounts to 80.768 dollars. Incidentally, the same document shows Swiss Foreign Affairs contributions for work “with Iran and Syria”.

³⁰ See http://www.ngo-monitor.org/funder/rockefeller_brothers_fund/

³¹ See for instance <http://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2016-06-23/oh-so-that-s-why-boeing-wanted-the-iran-deal>

and 2015 – and NIAC – receiving over \$800,000 between 2007 and 2015 –, and a plethora of think tanks and organisations known for their silence on the Iranian regime’s nefarious actions and record or for the active promotion of the Iranian authorities and denigration of its opponents.

The so-called Gulf/2000 project was perhaps the most efficient think-tank in promoting the idea of the need to go ahead with the “unfinished business”, implicitly pointing to the invasion of Iraq.³² It was also very active in defaming the Iranian opposition, particularly with regard to the members of the PMOI, who are refugees residing in Iraq.³³

Some of the Ploughshare Fund subventions to NIAC explicitly demand the targeting of the Iranian opposition. In its 2012 annual report, Ploughshares Fund reveals that one of the objectives of the subvention given to NIAC was “To shape public discourse about the pending removal (delisting) of the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK/PMOI) organisation from the State Department’s list of terrorist organisations, an important issue in the U.S.-Iran debate”.

In May 2005, Human Rights Watch issued a widely discredited report against the PMOI/MEK, under the direction and authorship of Hadi Ghaemi. At the time, he sat on the advisory board of NIAC, which campaigned hard to prevent the PMOI’s delisting. NIAC’s disclosed internal documents show that Ghaemi held several meetings with Iran’s UN ambassador Javad Zarif in 2003. Another record has in one instance registered 4 hours of telephone conversations between Ghaemi and Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Similarly, the person who oversaw the drafting of the 2009 RAND report on the MEK and Camp Ashraf, entitled, “[The Mujahedin-e Khalq, A Policy Conundrum](#),” James Dobbins, is also a vocal advocate of rapprochement with Iran and has been active in the “Campaign for a New Policy on Iran” which lobbied the US to lift sanctions on Iran and has extensive links to NIAC’s Trita Parsi.

Interestingly, both appear as signatories in the August 2011 statement of 37 so-called experts in the Financial Times, arguing against the delisting of the MEK in the United States, because such a move would have undermined rapprochement with Tehran.

³² Sick, Gary, “The Persian Gulf: The Gulf/2000 Collection” Palgrave Macmillan, April 2015.

³³ In this regard, see Bric, Casaca and Zabeti, “People’s Mojahedin of Iran”, Mission Report, L ‘Harmattan, 2005.

Other than promoting the Iranian authorities and demonising the Iranian opposition, we notice that many of the financial mechanisms engaged in these operations are often engaged in anti-Semitism or anti-Israel propaganda.³⁴

Overall, the Iranian lobby Emporium in the US predates the Obama administration and its agenda goes much further than the so-called ‘Iran deal’. Whereas we can only guess the dimension and real identity of “whomever else” – as mentioned by Mr Rhodes in Mr Samuel’s NYT analysis – the reach of the organisations that are involved in fuelling the echo chamber, such as the Ploughshares Fund, Iran Project, Gulf/2000 and NIAC has been relentlessly expanding in recent years.

4. The appeasing logic

Mr Goldberg’s piece is basically an apology of President Obama’s foreign policy, erecting it to the statute of “doctrine”. As we observed in a previous policy brief,³⁵ this is the first time since the Second World War, the appeasement doctrine is rehabilitated and Churchill’s action vilified as ‘warmongering’, despite the exceptional circumstances of Hitler’s threat.³⁶

We think this sort of reasoning is an instinctive trait of the appeasing logic in the West, referred to in the specialised literature.³⁷ It compares to the psychological phenomenon, which has been widely studied in connection with common aggression, but has not been sufficiently studied as a phenomenon resulting from terror aggression.³⁸

The first characteristic is denial, as the victim refuses to face what happens. The victim refuses to refer to the aggression itself for emotional self-protection. In a second step, we have the dissociation process, where the victim describes the events as if they did not happen to him and as if he was

³⁴ See for instance: <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/244604-group-slams-npr-host-for-anti-semitic-canard-about-bernie> ; <http://iraniansforum.com/Document/BlameIsrael.pdf> and <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/inside-iran-echo-chamber/>

³⁵ “The Pink Threat” ARCHumankind, Policy Brief, ISSN 2506-7524.

³⁶ Goldberg, op. cit. This sort of accusations to Churchill are to be found normally in Neo-Nazi literature such as <http://www.theoccidentalobserver.net/2010/04/kevin-macdonald-the-monstrous-winston-churchill/>. What is interesting here is to see this logic followed within the Western establishment.

³⁷ See for instance <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12142-009-0118-2> However, we think this issue deserves to be seen with a different focus, from the psychopathy angle rather than from the civilizational one. Most of the existing literature on religious traumatic syndrome relates to Christian fundamentalism bluntly ignoring the fact this is a relatively benign relative of the much more serious Islamic fundamentalism.

³⁸ See for instance, as applied to children abuse: <http://www.johnbriere.com/stm.pdf> For a general characterization of the phenomenon we can see <https://victimsofpsychopaths.wordpress.com/traumatic-bonding/>

watching a movie. When reading his 9/11 experiences, one gets the impression that Mr Rhodes went through these two stages of denial and dissociation. It could be perceived as strange that someone who witnessed the tragedy up-close is not providing a different testimony, other than the fact that he saw the first tower collapsing, which most of us did as well as we were watching it unfold on television.

The third step is cognitive dissonance, which also appears as a self-preserving mechanism. Here, the truth is distorted and the aggressor's action normalised in order to diminish the pain of reality. Whereas the NYT article does not cover Mr Rhodes' thoughts on the perpetrators of the 9/11 massacre in general, or on Iran in particular, we can detect him trying to normalise the aggressor's actions during his subsequent professional life. This normalization process can be observed in particular as Mr Rhodes cuts the drama out of the capture of US Navy personnel by Iran in early 2016, an incident, which is described with detail by Mr Samuels's piece.

Stockholm syndrome is the most developed stage of the ailment, in which stage the victim takes positive action on behalf of the aggressor. It appears that the staunch defence of the Iranian authorities' actions and image by the "echo chamber" campaign led by Mr Rhodes could be due to a form of Stockholm syndrome.

5. Syria

Both interviews of President Obama and his advisor are designed to explain the administration's policy (or absence of policy) on Syria, and are better understood if we take into consideration the manifest of the 51 dissident US diplomats. These documents were recently leaked to the press along with the emails of Hillary Clinton; what can be distilled from her correspondence seems to indicate that she broadly agreed with these dissidents and even voiced their point of view.³⁹

They also reveal that the White House knew that this manifest was coming, even if it did not necessarily know the precise bearings of the text. President Obama's attempt to explain his zigzags on Syria and make them appear as part of a coherent strategy is not successful. Overall the Atlantic feature makes use of basic descriptors popularised in foreign affairs talks and hereby fails to convince most experts.

³⁹ See <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/2866467/State-Dept-Dissent-Memo.pdf> and <https://wikileaks.org/clinton-emails/emailid/18328>

President Obama tries to implicitly make the case that the “Iran deal” is of such importance that it justifies sacrificing fundamental principles, such as the right to live of Syrians. Since the enactment of the Iran deal a year ago, the silence and inaction of the Obama administration has only grown more apparent. Syria shows that what President Obama had in mind was not specific to the Iran deal, but a permanent policy of appeasement of Tehran’s international expansionism and internal abuse in the name of peace.

The Rhodes interview was apparently seen as an opportunity to look at ways to mend what the President’s own interview was unable to fix: the US inaction in face of the Syrian drama. Instead, it turns out to be a tremendous indictment of the President’s policy. Mr Samuels’ words provide an outstanding treatment of the issue:

“What has interested me most about watching him and his cohort in the White House over the past seven years, I tell him, is the evolution of their ability to get comfortable with tragedy. I am thinking specifically about Syria, I add, where more than 450,000 people have been slaughtered.

‘Yeah, I admit very much to that reality,’ he [Mr Rhodes] says. ‘There’s a numbing element to Syria in particular. But I will tell you this,’ he continues. ‘I profoundly do not believe that the United States could make things better in Syria by being there. And we have an evidentiary record of what happens when we’re there – nearly a decade in Iraq.’

Iraq is his one-word answer to any and all criticism. I was against the Iraq war from the beginning, I tell Rhodes, so I understand why he perpetually returns to it. I also understand why Obama pulled the plug on America’s engagement with the Middle East, I say, but it was also true as a result that more people are dying there on his watch than died during the Bush presidency, even if very few of them are Americans. What I don’t understand is why, if America is getting out of the Middle East, we are apparently spending so much time and energy trying to strong-arm Syrian rebels into surrendering to the dictator who murdered their families, or why is it so important for Iran to maintain its supply lines to Hezbollah. He mutters something about John Kerry, and then goes off the record, to suggest, in effect, that the world of the Sunni Arabs that the American establishment built has collapsed. The buck stops with the establishment, not with Obama, who was left to clean up their mess.”

As Mr Samuels highlights elsewhere in his piece:

“When I asked whether he [a White House official whose name was kept anonymous] believed that the Oval Office debate over Syria policy in 2012 – resulting in a decision not to support the uprising against Assad in any meaningful way – had been an honest and open one, he said that he had believed that it was, but has since changed his mind. ‘Instead of adjusting his policies to the reality, and adjusting his perception of the reality to the changing realities on the ground, the conclusions he draws are exactly the same, no matter what the costs have been to our strategic interests,’ he says.

Other than this, the White House has tried as much as possible to use the Caliphate’s atrocities as an excuse for its inaction in Syria, the underlying explanation being that Assad and his Iran-Russian sponsors would act on behalf of the United States.

On this point, the dissident diplomats⁴⁰ correctly argue:

“A de facto alliance with the regime against Da’esh would not guarantee success: Assad’s military is undermanned and exhausted. Kurdish YPG fighters cannot -- and should not -- be expected to project power and hold terrain deep into non-Kurdish areas. And, crucially, Syria’s Sunni population continues to view the Assad regime as the primary enemy in the conflict. If we are to remain committed to countering Da’esh in the Levant without committing ground forces, the best option is to protect and empower the moderate Syrian opposition. Tolerating the Assad regime’s continued gross human rights violations against the Syrian people undermines, both morally and materially, the unity of the anti-Da’esh coalition, particularly among Sunni Arab partners. Failure to stem Assad’s flagrant abuses will only bolster the ideological appeal of groups such as Da’esh, even as they endure tactical setbacks on the battlefield. As brutal as Da’esh is, it is the Assad regime that is responsible for the vast majority of the hundreds of thousands of victims in this conflict.”

The appeasement catalogue of justifications is virtually endless; for each barbarity there will be the claim that an even bigger one has been avoided. Mr Samuel’s outstanding journalism – which is comparable to Bob Woodward’s original work on Watergate – most shocking revelation may be the part that informs us that the White House thinks the “World of Sunni Arabs” has collapsed.

He is not referring specifically to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain or Syria: he is actually making a statement on the entire Sunni Arab population, a population that is the majority of a considerable number of countries, some of them as big as Egypt. This statement means the Obama administration sees as

⁴⁰ Op. cit.

natural an unimaginable human catastrophe un-paralleled in recent human history. This should raise alarm bells, not only within the US diplomatic establishment but also within the rest of the civilised World.

Conclusions

The United States of America has one of the freest economic, social and political systems in the world, which is certainly one of the main reasons that it is recognised as the current hegemon and the most important symbol of - what has been conventionally called - the ‘Western’ or the ‘free’ world.

Notwithstanding, the protection of this highly liberal system has shown time and again the need actively to prevent those who want to misuse freedom to the detriment of society, or even to destroy freedom itself to achieve their aims.

The United States deals with the presence of foreign interest opinion in a much freer way than most other countries, which is an integral part of its fundamentally free system.

It does have some transparency rules on the use by foreign powers of their institutions, but as Mr Samuel’s analysis and observations showed, these rules *in se* are insufficient to prevent foreign powers – particularly those obsessed by their objective of “death to America” – from infiltrating at the highest levels of power.

It is difficult to imagine stricter rules that would not jeopardise the essence of the freedom of information, it was not difficult to circumvent them in the past and most likely it will not be difficult to circumvent them in the future.

However, one of the most significant strengths of the US political system is the existence of powerful, independent, morally solid sources of alternative power – such as the 51 dissenting diplomats – a power that is the centre of the checks and balances system and which enables the system to correct itself.

The existence of highly professional and systematic analysis - independent from the political power - of the influence of hostile powers within the US, could therefore be considered as a potential counter-measure to face these acute challenges.

Other than this, we believe a citizens' watch is crucial in to reveal the shady dealings behind a supposed peace initiative, as their influence and funds are being guided by a totalitarian and expansionist agenda.

Washington DC, 2016-07-07