

# The Sources of Anti-Americanism in Iran: A Historical and Psychological Analysis

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## Introduction

The year is 2005; the event is the Islamic Republic of Iran's Revolution Day (February 11), which marks the fall of the U.S. backed Shah's government in 1979. Barbara Slavin, a senior diplomatic reporter for *USA Today*, enters Tehran's Freedom Square where she observes thousands of people gathered to hear Iran's new president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, speak to his country. All around her, Slavin witnesses government organizers passing out anti-American posters, which contain phrases such as "Hey Bush, Shut up" and "The Holocaust is a Big Lie." Ahmadinejad speaks and refers to the United States as "the Great Satan," while "the crowd...dutifully sings patriotic songs and chants 'Death to America' and 'Death to Israel' on cue."<sup>1</sup> Near Slavin stand a few schoolgirls, who notice she is American. Paradoxically, the schoolgirls become excited and shout out in English, "What's your name?" and "We love you!", and even proclaim "We love Americans."<sup>2</sup>

Stepping back and analyzing this very interesting interaction between Slavin and several young Iranian schoolgirls, it becomes apparent that the situation was quite odd. In this greater sea of anti-American condemnation existed a few teenagers who "loved" Americans. This inconsistency sparks many questions. Clearly, anti-Americanism was prevalent; however, how was it that these girls were able to have seemingly positive feelings toward Americans when it seemed as though the majority of the population was calling for the annihilation of the United States?

This research seeks to analyze modern Iranian anti-Americanism and to determine its origins, as well as to understand its perplexing complexities. This essay

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

contributes to the existing political science scholarship by combining historical and psychological explanations. Psychology is especially important because in order to completely understand a specific event, one must enter into the mind of those actors involved, which is what this research seeks to do. In doing so, one is presented with a more complete picture. Thus, while many historians have focused specifically on the historical background of contemporary anti-Americanism, and some political scientists sparingly on the psychology involved, few scholars of either discipline consider both equally, especially in the case of Iran. This absence is critical, as history and psychology are important components of political science research.

The first section of this research analyzes Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) and its mortality salience (MS) hypothesis. This holds that when faced with opposing worldviews or any other signal that triggers anxiety about death, humans will “conform more closely to the norms of their culture, punish violators of those norms more severely, and react more negatively toward those whose worldviews conflict with one’s own.”<sup>3</sup> The second section discusses the significant role state elites played throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in developing and fostering Iranian anti-Americanism by applying TMT to modern Iranian politics. The third segment focuses on Iran’s experience with foreign powers throughout history and how these experiences reinforced Iranian fears of those with conflicting worldviews. Though the recent past is of great importance, in the case of Iran the distant past is also of equal significance. Iran’s history reveals a culture that is well defined, thinks quite highly of itself, and views outsiders negatively. Within this section, particular attention is paid to U.S. intervention in Iran, namely the 1953 CIA led coup d’etat and the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis. This analysis concludes with a brief analysis of these events through the lens of TMT. The fourth and final section discusses important

<sup>3</sup> Tom Pyszczynski, Abdolhossein Abdollahi, Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, Florette Cohen, and David Weise, “Mortality Saliency, Martyrdom, and Military Might: The Great Satan Versus the Axis of Evil,” *Personality and Social Psychology* 32 (2006): 526.

implications and conclusions concerning modern relations between the United States and Iran. The central argument of this paper is that in order to completely comprehend modern Iranian anti-Americanism, one must understand how state elites capitalize on Iranian fear and anxiety, which resulted due to Iran's negative history with foreign powers.

### **Terror Management Theory**

For the purposes of clarification and understanding, this section will first begin by explaining the psychological theory that much of this research is supported by, Terror Management Theory. This theory, a collaborative effort put forth by Tom Pyszczynski and his colleagues, is based upon the idea that only humans experience anxiety and fear of death. In order to manage this anxiety and fear, humans create cultural worldviews, providing humans with self-esteem, which limits fear of death. Self-esteem is defined as the sense of being valuable and a significant contributor to reality. By promoting these cultural worldviews, part of us or our values will live on, even though we as humans will eventually die. This creates a sense of immortality that combats the anxiety created by the fear of death. Pyszczynski and his colleagues note: "Cultural worldviews are individualized conceptions of reality, derived from the external culture, that provide meaning, purpose, value, and the hope of either literal or symbolic immortality, through an afterlife of a connection to something greater than oneself that transcends one's mortal existence."<sup>4</sup> Thus, culture is an extremely important component of Terror Management Theory.

Perhaps a more important aspect of Terror Management Theory for this research is the idea that when one's cultural worldview is threatened, humans will react negatively against those who have different worldviews. This is the mortality salience hypothesis. The idea here is that contact with those with different worldviews than one's

<sup>4</sup> Tom Pyszczynski, Zachary Rothschild, and Abdolhossein Abdollahi, "Terrorism, Violence, and Hope for Peace: A Terror Management Perspective," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 17:5 (2008): 318.

own will increase anxiety and fear of death in oneself. This is attributable to the fact that the promotion of a different cultural worldview will come at the expense of one's own, thus bringing an end to the individual's symbolic immortality. Zachary Rothschild et al. effectively expresses this idea when he states, "empirical studies have found that when reminded of mortality people typically reaffirm or defend faith in their protective ideologies by derogating and sometimes supporting violent action against those who do not share their beliefs and values."<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, then, when people feel that their protection from existential fear and their cultural worldview is being challenged, people will be more likely to condone violence against others and even act out against this "challenger" themselves.

The implications of these findings are extensive. According to Pyszczynski, "one of our earliest and most widely replicated findings is that reminders of death increase nationalism and other forms of group identification."<sup>6</sup> The fact that TMT increases nationalism makes sense, since people will flock to their culture and will want to promote it over other cultures. The idea of group identification is extremely important to consider for the purposes of this research and is a bit more complex. There has been a plethora of studies conducted on this concept in various fields, but most notably psychology. Many scholars have found that group identification is a social construct. David Berreby, author of *Us and Them: Understanding Your Tribal Mind*, states: "Our sense of reality is *created by the mind* . . . Our sense of human kind contributes to the creation, marking some people as teammates and others as enemies, making those labels feel as real as sunshine and as accurate as two plus two equals four."<sup>7</sup> In other words, even though our notions of "us" and "them" seem concrete, they are created, and thus

<sup>5</sup> Zachary Rothschild, Abdolhossein Abdollahi, and Tom Pyszczynski, "Does Peace Have a Prayer? The Effect of Mortality Salience, Compassionate Values, and Religious Fundamentalism on Hostility Toward Out-groups," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 45 (2009): 817.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Pyszczynski, "What Are We So Afraid Of? A Terror Management Theory Perspective on the Politics of Fear," *Social Research* 71:4 (2004): 837.

<sup>7</sup> David Berreby, *Us and Them: Understanding Your Tribal Mind* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2005), 181. [emphasis added]

are flexible and can be changed easily by a number of factors. In the context of Terror Management Theory, then, those designated as out-groups or “enemies” to one’s own cultural worldview can be manipulated, depending on the context.

Terror Management Theory has implications for our studies on leadership. According to Pyszczynski et al., “death reminders have been shown to increase . . . liking for *charismatic leaders* who proclaim the superiority of one’s own culture.”<sup>8</sup> This makes sense, since such a leader embodies one’s culture and stands as a symbol of it. These leaders often have a clear vision and a patriotic message, which is very appealing to the greater population, especially if their cultural worldview is being challenged. In essence, a strong leader helps citizens and subjects to transcend death.

This paper argues that TMT can help us to better grasp the complexities of modern anti-Americanism in Iran. In the following section, I will analyze how state elites and other various leaders capitalize on Iranian fear and anxiety and exploit these feelings for their own personal advantage.

### **State Elites and the Promotion of Anti-Americanism**

Taking a look back at the vivid example presented in the introduction, one finds a contradictory situation. On one hand, there is a congregation of Iranians whose rally cry is “Death to America.” On the other hand, there are a few young, Iranian schoolgirls who whisper to an American journalist, “We love Americans!” Such contradictions hint at a theme visible throughout Iran. Studies have shown that more than two-thirds of the Iranian population want good relations with the United States.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, popular efforts, though unsuccessful, have been made to “liberalize Iran’s society and check the power of unelected officials and paramilitary groups.”<sup>10</sup> Iranians are attracted to the personal freedoms and liberties that all Americans have. Iranians also enjoy various aspects of American culture, such as American films and music. And yet, anti-

<sup>8</sup> Pyszczynski et al., “Terrorism, Violence, and Hope for Peace,” 319. [emphasis added]

<sup>9</sup> Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bitter Enemies*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

Americanism dominates Iranian political culture. Here, it is argued that one of the main reasons for this is the ability of states elites and leaders to capitalize on and exploit Iranian fears and anxieties addressed by Terror Management Theory.

In Iran, the population is constantly being reminded of supposed threats to its existence by the Iranian leadership. The question arises, why do this? During an anti-Western religious rally, supreme religious leader Ayatollah Khamenei explained to the crowd why it is important to chant "Death to America." According to Khamenei,

Our people say, 'Death to America,' and this is like saying 'I seek God's refuge from the accursed Satan,' Why is this? So the believer will never forget, even for a moment, the presence of Satan; so he will never forget, even for a moment, that Satan is ready to attack him and to destroy his spiritual shield and his faith. The saying 'Death to America' is for this purpose.<sup>11</sup>

From this explanation by an Iranian leader, it becomes clear that Khamenei is using fear and anxiety in order to promote anti-Americanism.

In this passage, one witnesses a state leader exploiting the idea of an in-group and an out-group, with the in-group being the Iranian population and the out-group being the United States. Furthermore, Khamenei equivocates the U.S. with Satan. In this sense then, Islam and the West are said to be "totally antithetical civilizations" engaged in the ultimate battle of good versus evil.<sup>12</sup> In his speech, Khamenei says the purpose of this chant is to remind Iranians that Satan is present and ready to attack. By stating that the enemy is near, this promotes fear and anxiety about death. With the presence of fear and anxiety, according to TMT, members of a culture will view out-groups negatively and even promote violence towards that out-group, as they feel that their own cultural worldview is being threatened by an opposing one. This ultimately gives way to anti-Americanism.

<sup>11</sup> Youtube, LLC, "Iranian Former Leader Explains Why Say 'Death to America,'" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OIUieD2KN4>, (accessed December 1, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Ussama Makdisi, "Anti-Americanism in the Arab World: An Interpretation of a Brief History," *The Journal of American History* 89:2 (2002): 551.

Khamenei successfully exploits Islam to promote anti-Americanism as well. Religion is particularly interesting under the scrutiny of Terror Management Theory. According to Rothschild and his colleagues, “a growing body of literature supports the idea that fundamentalists rely on their textually centered belief systems to alleviate death concerns.”<sup>13</sup> Religion and culture are intertwined and create a dynamic worldview. For many Iranians, this is the case. Thus, by framing the enemy, the United States, in a religious context, Khamenei’s words are even more powerful and fear-provoking than they would be without the religious context. According to Pyszczynski et al., “threats to religious beliefs and values are especially fear-provoking because they question the validity of the route to literal immortality one’s religious worldview provides.”<sup>14</sup> Because Iranians are relatively religious, it becomes quite clear why Khamenei’s words are so persuading to so many Iranians.

Some Iranian leaders take this idea to the extreme and advocate martyrdom among religious fundamentalists. According to Rothschild et al., “religious fundamentalism is the belief that there is a single set of religious teachings that provide absolute truth that, if followed, lead to a special relationship with the deity, and that must be vigorously defended against evil oppositional forces.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, when presented with a group with different beliefs or a different cultural worldview, such groups are immediately regarded as “evil” due to fundamentalists’ religious inflexibility. This heightened sense of anxiety and fear leads many fundamentalists to advocate violence against out-groups or what they see as distinct and evil enemies. According to Pyszczynski et al., “some Islamic sects preach that martyrdom attacks are the duty of all good Muslims and that those who do so will be rewarded by a blissful afterlife, the

<sup>13</sup> Rothschild et al., “Does Peace Have a Prayer?” 817.

<sup>14</sup> Pyszczynski et al., “Terrorism, Violence, and Hope for Peace,” 320.

<sup>15</sup> Rothschild et al., “Does Peace Have a Prayer?” 816.

ultimate victory over death.”<sup>16</sup> Here again one witnesses how state leaders are able to use fear and anxiety about death in order to promote anti-Americanism.

Not only do state elites exploit group identification and religion in order to promote anti-Americanism, some leaders, such as President Ahmadinejad in particular, use “Third Worldism.” According to Patrick Clawson:

Third Worldism is that mix of socialism and anti-imperialism which blames the West, especially America, and the local elites which work with it for the shortcomings in developing countries, offering a vision of a more equitable and prosperous society once the evil West is forced to give up its death grip on the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, the United States is labeled as evil (and an out-group) and is blamed for all of Iran’s internal problems. In doing this, the United States is viewed as leading a conspiracy against Islam and all developing nations in general, thereby allowing Iranian elites to develop nationalist sentiments. The clerical establishment in Iran has developed Third Worldism to form a Third Worldist-religious alliance which has made a powerful anti-American mix. These leaders create fears of being “Westernized” and of losing traditional Iranian cultural and religious identities. Looking through the lens of Terror Management Theory, these leaders create fear, which in turn creates a backlash against the West, namely the United States, thereby promoting anti-Americanism.

The question then arises, why would state elites manipulate the public in order to promote anti-Americanism? Political science research has concluded that Iranian state elites use anti-Americanism as a way to cover up their own failings as leaders, to stay in power, and to bolster their own position within Iran by mobilizing support. An interesting quote by Barbara Slavin sums up this idea quite well: “When you create an external enemy, you can use it as a weapon inside the country.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, by creating an outside enemy, the concerns within the country are also directed outward and less attention is spent on internal problems. This concept is synonymous with how

<sup>16</sup> Pyszczynski et al., “Mortality Salience, Martyrdom, and Military Might,” 535.

<sup>17</sup> Patrick Clawson, “The Paradox of Anti-Americanism in Iran,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 8:1 (2004): 5.

<sup>18</sup> Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies*, 53.

citizens react during a state of war. For example, during wartime, citizens are more willing to give up their personal freedoms and liberties and even more likely to pay higher taxes. The reasoning behind this is that the population is more worried about survival, so personal freedoms and liberties seem trivial when examining the big picture. In times of peace, however, people are less willing to give up their freedoms and liberties, as fear of death is absent. By creating an environment that is synonymous with a constant state of war, Iranian state elites benefit and are able to stay in power.

According to Barry Rubin:

By assigning responsibility for their own shortcomings to Washington, Arab leaders distract their subjects' attention from the internal weaknesses that are their real problems. And thus rather than pushing for greater privatization, equality for women, democracy, civil society, freedom of speech, due process of law, or other similar developments sorely needed in the Arab world, the public focuses instead on hating the United States.<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, Iranian state elites successfully use anti-Americanism as a tool to mobilize support, capitalizing on the results of group identification and the fear and anxiety explored by Terror Management Theory. Anti-Americanism allows these leaders to pursue regional goals with no considerable costs, as well as to deter responsibility for their country's major handicaps. Furthermore, "regimes can demand national unity and shut up reformers in the face of the supposed American 'threat.' And by seizing the anti-Americanism card, Arab governments make sure their opponents will not use it against them."<sup>20</sup> Thus, it becomes quite clear that these state elites and their exploitation of fear and anxiety about death significantly contribute to the development of anti-Americanism in Iran.

### **Historical Explanations of Anti-Americanism**

Focusing on modern Iran is a useful method that helps explain the complexities of anti-Americanism. However, this presents a partial picture and thus several

<sup>19</sup> Barry Rubin, "The Real Roots of Arab Anti-Americanism," *Foreign Affairs* 81:6 (2002): 74.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-81.

important questions remain unanswered. For instance, why promote anti-American views and not anti-Germanism or anti-Japanese ones? Why are relations so strained between Iran and the United States? Surely these strained relations developed first and anti-Americanism followed suit. Were there specific events that sparked Iranian anti-American sentiments? These questions must be answered in order to understand Iran's modern anti-American politics. Following is a brief account of Iran's history with foreign powers. Here again, Terror Management Theory is enlightening and helps explain Iran's psyche.

By examining Iranian history, it becomes evident that Iranians did not have very positive interactions or experiences with foreign powers. Iran, which used to be Persia, was invaded by the Arabs and converted to the faith of Islam during the 600s AD. While the Persians saw the Arabs as barbarians and themselves as quite superior, "they had no choice but to accept Mohammad as God's prophet and the Koran as God's word."<sup>21</sup> However, the Arabs slowly lost power in Iran. After a brief Mongol invasion, power passed to the Safavid dynasty, which was inspired by Shiism. After several rulers helped unite Iran for a time and established Shiism as the official religion, the country fell into disorder. Again, Iran succumbed to foreigners, and, in the late eighteenth century, was conquered by the Turkic tribe, the Qajars.

According to Stephen Kinzer, the Qajars "bear heavy responsibility for the country's poverty and backwardness."<sup>22</sup> Rather than ruling in the interest of the greater population, the Qajar rulers ruled for themselves and were quite tyrannical throughout the nineteenth century. However, these rulers succumbed to foreign pressures from Britain and Russia, selling their nation's resources (specifically their natural petroleum resources) to these foreigners for their own personal profits. As a result of such actions, the Iranian population rebelled and in 1905 the Constitutional Revolution erupted. The

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 22.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

general population wanted democracy to bring it out of poverty, as well as expel the Qajar court and the foreign powers that were beginning to increasingly influence internal politics. While the Revolution resulted in the creation of a parliament, the Majlis, and the Qajar dynasty was abolished in the 1920s, democracy had yet to come to the people. Iran remained under repressive rule, and foreign interference in Iranian affairs, namely by the British, increased even further.

While this is an extremely brief account of Iran's long and tumultuous history, one important theme emerges: Iranians had extremely negative experiences with outsiders. Not only were rulers oppressive, they sold their resources to foreigners and the masses received little compensation. The once great, superior, and well-defined Persian culture was falling apart, while much of the world was on the path to modernity. These experiences created an environment that was particularly suitable for anti-foreign sentiment. As Kenneth Pollack writes, "It was humiliating; it was frustrating, and it was frightening for Iranians to be so vulnerable and so constantly manipulated by these foreign powers."<sup>23</sup> Through the lens of Terror Management Theory, it becomes clear why Iranians felt this way; the ultimate fear of the eradication of their cultural and religious worldview seemed inevitable. As one would imagine, then, foreign interference had a significant effect on the Iranian state of mind. More specifically, according to Pollack, "The 'Great Game' that Russia and Britain played for control over Central Asia in the nineteenth century left scars on generations for Iranian leaders and deeply instilled a determination to insulate Iran against foreign influence."<sup>24</sup> This environment of distrust would play a significant role in the years to come.

During the middle of the twentieth century, hope for a new Iran began to spread. Though the British and its oil company, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), dominated the country as never before, a national movement called the National Front

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle* (New York: Random House, 2004), 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

developed under the leadership of Mohammad Mossadegh. Mossadegh, a highly educated man and defender of Iranian interests, held two central beliefs that he invested into the National Front. The first was a passionate faith in rule of law, and the second, not surprisingly, was a strong desire for Iran to be free from foreign intervention.<sup>25</sup> Proposing a passionately nationalist and democratic platform and being a very charismatic leader, Mossadegh became Prime Minister of Iran in 1951. Quite controversially, Mossadegh nationalized Iran's oil industry and eventually expelled all British from within Iran's borders. As one can imagine, the British erupted in protest. They argued that Iran had no legal right to perform these actions, even though they themselves had recently been going through the process of nationalizing their own resources. Britain and Iran soon entered into a heated stalemate; neither side would make any sort of compromise. Both the Iranians and the British wanted full control of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. While the British were mainly concerned about their loss in revenue, for most Iranians, the issue was much greater than oil; the issue was about their autonomy and freedom from foreign intervention, which they had been denied for so long. It was a struggle for life or death. Both sides refused to make any effort to understand the opposing perspective. The British soon appealed to the United States for help.

Taking a step back, it should be noted that up until this point in history, most Iranians viewed the United States quite positively. While Iranians were very distrustful of foreigners as a result of their turbulent past, they viewed the United States as a non-colonial power and a symbol of justice, equality, and democracy vested in elected officials. Elaborating on the subject, Kinzer writes, "In 1953 . . . many Iranians thought of Americans as friends, supports of the fragile democracy they had spent half a century trying to build. It was Britain, not the United States, that they demonized as the

<sup>25</sup> Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men*, 53.

colonialist oppressor that exploited them."<sup>26</sup> Soon, however, these views would change for the worse.

When Britain pleaded for the United States to intervene, the U.S. approached cautiously. During the early 1950s, the U.S. was led by the Harry Truman administration, which was then dealing with a multitude of complex problems, of which the most significant was the Cold War. Nearly every action taken by the U.S. was viewed in the greater context of the Cold War and the ongoing ideological battle between communism and democracy; the case of Iran was no different. Under the Truman administration, America's greatest concern was that the British and the Iranians solve their dispute through some sort of compromise. Truman and his administrators had no desire to interfere with Iran. They were concerned that Iran might fall to communism if this dispute was not solved, but they were not willing to interfere directly. Despite tremendous pressure from the British, Truman refused to give in and continued to demand that Mossadegh and Prime Minister Clement Attlee (and later Winston Churchill) reach some sort of agreement.

A defining moment came with the American presidential election of 1952; Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected president under a strong anti-communist campaign. For the British, appealing to Eisenhower was their last hope. Fortunately for them, Eisenhower saw the Iranian predicament differently than Truman. According to Kinzer, "Eisenhower had come to the conclusion that Iran was collapsing, and that the collapse could not be prevented as long as Mossadegh was in power."<sup>27</sup> To this day, it is still debated among historians if Iran was actually about to collapse under Mossadegh; however, most sources agree that he was losing support and that the Communist party (Tudeh) was growing. The fear was that if Iran fell into disorder, Iran would become

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 160.

another victim to communism, along with 60 percent of the world's oil reserves.<sup>28</sup> For Eisenhower, this would be a devastating blow to democracy. Despite warnings of the potentially catastrophic outcomes from numerous Middle East relations specialists and even by Truman, Eisenhower authorized the CIA to lead a coup d'état to overthrow Mossadegh in 1953. The nationalist leader was to be replaced with a stronger leader who would be able to hold up against the communist threat. From this point forward, the positive views of the United States that Iranians once held would forever disappear; a new enemy would thus be created.

Mossadegh, the National Front, and other liberal leaders were crushed and power fell into the hands of the unpopular Mohammad Reza Shah, who would become increasingly repressive and remained distant from the people of Iran in the next 25 years. As one can imagine, Iranians were enraged. For many, Mossadegh was the closest they had come to democracy; not only was Mossadegh gone, power transferred to an extremely unpopular dictator. Dissent, fear, and anxiety caused by this dictatorship and U.S. interference culminated in the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, where Iranians not only rebelled against the rule of Reza Shah, but also against the United States. Such rebellion is most notable through the Iranian seizure of the American embassy in Tehran in 1979, where Iranians held approximately fifty Americans hostage for over a year. In turn, the hostage crisis sparked the United States to support Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, which also further promoted anti-Americanism in Iran. Kinzer notes that the "fundamentalists clerics who consolidated power in Iran during the early 1980s not only imposed a form of religious fascism at home but turned their country into a center for the propagation of terror abroad."<sup>29</sup> This idea is best illustrated through the manipulation of the population by state elites, as discussed in the first half of this research. Additionally, it should be noted that "this anti-Americanism was not

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 203.

characterized by hatred of America of things American as much as by a relatively new identification of American power as a force for repression rather than liberation in the Arab world.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, while American intervention in Iran perhaps prevented a communist takeover and bought twenty-five years of good relations with Iran, the long-term costs would outweigh most benefits reaped from this interference.

Iran’s prospects of democracy, the closest they had ever been, came to an abrupt halt in 1953 as a result of U.S. intervention. Mark Gasiorowski writes, “The 1953 coup ended the slow, halting progress that Iran had been making since the early 1900s toward a more representative form of government and toward freedom from foreign interference.”<sup>31</sup> Many American historians have researched the dramatic effects this act of intervention had on the state of Iran and U.S.-Iranian relations. Most historians agree that the 1953 coup was the foundation of anti-Americanism in Iran. Rubin makes this argument when he states, “in the long run the CIA’s support for the shah’s return would breed Iranian anti-Americanism and play a central role in shaping the attitudes of the post-shah regime.”<sup>32</sup> According to James A. Bill, these actions “paved the way for incubation of extremism, both of the left and of the right. This extremism became unalterably anti-American...The fall of Mossadegh marked the end of a century of friendship between the two countries, and began a new era of U.S. intervention and growing hostility against the United States.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, there is consensus among scholars that 1953 was a defining moment in history for the future of U.S.-Iranian relations.

Since this research seeks to combine both historical and psychological explanations for the sources of anti-American politics in modern Iran, a brief psychological examination of these events is warranted. As discussed earlier, Terror Management Theory posits that those whose cultural worldview is being challenged by

<sup>30</sup> Makdisi, “Anti-Americanism in the Arab World,” 549

<sup>31</sup> Mark Gasiorowski, “The 1953 Coupe D’etat in Iran,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19:3 (1987): 278.

<sup>32</sup> Rubin, “The Real Roots,” 87.

<sup>33</sup> James A. Bill, quoted in Kinzer, *All the Shah’s Men*, 212.

an opposing worldview will regard them negatively and even act out aggressively toward this “enemy” or out-group. In the case of Iran, this is exactly what occurred. U.S. intervention in Iran most certainly caused fear and anxiety among Iranians that their cultural and religious worldview would be eradicated. Iranians were especially prone to such feelings as a result of their negative experiences with foreigners throughout history. According to Rubin, “the United States ultimately became identified by many Iranians as the new imperial force in the country.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, fear of being “westernized” became common throughout Iran. These thoughts ultimately transformed into anti-Americanism and violent attacks against the United States, most notably the embassy hostage crisis in 1979. The actions taken by the United States in 1953 still remain a major source of grievance for many Iranians. Additionally, it gave state elites the groundwork they needed to promote anti-Americanism even further. Without these actions taken by the United States, Iranian elites would have little to work with and anti-Americanism would have less legitimacy in Iran today.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Ultimately, it is clear how both psychology and history are needed to fully comprehend modern Iranian anti-American politics. Terror Management Theory elucidates why the actions taken by the United States were so damaging to the Iranian perception of Americans. Furthermore, this theory also reveals why the tactics used by Iranian state elites are effective. Although the United States interfered in Iran in order to stop the Cold War from escalating, by intervening in Iran they ended up starting another war with Islam. While it is impossible to go back in time and change the actions taken by the United States, efforts have been made by the United States under the Bill Clinton administration to at least recognize and apologize for American intervention in Iran in 1953. However, most of these efforts by the Clinton administration proved

<sup>34</sup> Barry Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 57.

ineffective, especially as the George W. Bush administration went on to declare Iran as part of the infamous “axis of evil.”

Today, U.S. relations with Iran revolve around several important matters. These include Iran’s pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (namely nuclear weapons), its support of international terrorism, its opposition to the Middle East peace process, and its many violations of human rights.<sup>35</sup> The most important of these issues is the threat of nuclear weapons building in Iran. Pollack notes that this issue is the most important “because of the concern that Iran may acquire these weapons fairly soon and because of the impact it could have on the other three issues.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, it becomes apparent that it is imperative to address Iranian anti-Americanism and U.S.-Iranian relations in general.

In addressing these issues, especially the matter of nuclear weapons, it is important to keep in mind Iran’s experiences with foreign powers as discussed throughout this paper, as well as the ability of state elites to capitalize on the fears and anxieties addressed by Terror Management Theory. By understanding Iran’s complex history with foreign powers, especially its relations with the United States, one can better develop a foreign policy towards Iran that will not only address the nuclear issue, but also the three other concerns expressed above by Pollack.

Even once Iran’s history with the United States is examined, along with how state elites influence Iranian politics, it becomes apparent that there is no cure-all solution to fostering better US-Iranian relations. There are ultimately costs to every solution; the primary task is to pick the “least bad option.” Given Iran’s history with foreign powers, especially the United States, directly interfering with Iranian politics would be extremely detrimental. Thus, this option is completely out of the question. Though a regime change in Tehran would most likely help foster relations, U.S. involvement is not an option. The problem with a possible regime change in Iran is that

<sup>35</sup> Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle*, 375.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

it is unlikely to happen any time soon, mainly because Iranian state elites criticize anyone who backs the United States. Pollack notes that, “because the United States remains such a hot button for so many Iranians, it is too easy for Tehran’s hard-liners to scuttle negotiations with the United States by claiming that those doing so are betraying the country or allowing the Americans to get the best of them.”<sup>37</sup> This is just another example of how state elites capitalize on the fears and anxieties addressed by Terror Management Theory. Thus, as witnessed throughout this research, a severe psychological problem impedes any progression of U.S.-Iranian relations.

Most decisions involving foreign policy are never clear-cut; the case of U.S.-Iranian relations is no different. The question arises, then, what should the United States do in order to address this complex problem? Ultimately, the United States must implement a policy that is flexible and is backed by the international community. This policy must be multifaceted, as there is no single solution. The U.S. must try to open a diplomatic dialogue with Iran. They must make an effort to satisfy Iran’s desires, within reason, and Iran must make an effort to satisfy America’s demands as well. If this does not work, a conventional carrot-and-stick approach could be beneficial.<sup>38</sup> This involves specifically laying out two options for Iran: incentives for meeting our demands, as well as sanctions for violating them. A containment policy might also be advantageous. In the end, while none of these solutions are guaranteed to be successful, it is necessary for the United States to be proactive and persistent in its policies toward Iran.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 398.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 405.