

National Security and the Alternative Voice

Identity, Nation Building and the Case of the Iranian Bloggers.

Bachelor's Thesis

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Hushang observed it keenly and steadily, then took up a stone, which he gripped firmly and, with the strength granted to heroes, let it fly against the world-devouring monster, which leapt aside from the world-conquering Shah.

The small stone dashed against a greater one, both shattered by the impact, and from between the two there flashed out a spark whose brightness set the heart of the stone aglow. The monster was not slain, but, out of the realm of the hidden, fire was discovered from that stone.

So whenever iron is struck against stone, a spark appears.

On the discovery of fire, from the epos Shahnameh by Ferdowsi.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	5
1.1. Background	5
1.2. Research Questions	6
1.3. Method & Material.....	6
1.4. Limits & Delimitations	7
1.5. Disposition	7
2. Theoretical Rationale.....	9
2.1. National Identity & Personal Identity.....	9
2.1.1. Identification Theory	9
2.1.2. National Identity Dynamic	10
2.1.3. Identification & Foreign Policy.....	11
2.2. Discourse Analysis.....	11
3. Background	13
3.1. About Blogs & Blogging.....	13
3.2. Iran.....	14
3.2.1. A Brief History.....	14
3.2.2. Media and Internet in Iran	16
4. Constructing Identities	20
4.1. The Capture of the Sailors	20
4.1.1. First Article: “The 15 British soldiers”	21
4.1.2. Second Article: “British Soldiers Were 500 m Inside Iran”	22
4.1.3. Third Article: “Perplexed”	24
4.1.4. Forth Article: “Stupidly and Childish”	25
4.1.5. Fifth Article: “Our silly president and the British Sailors”	27
4.1.6. A Summary of Results.....	30
4.2. The Movie ‘300’	31
4.2.1. First article: “The Iranian Dilemma: 300, The Angry People”	31
4.2.2. Second Article: “Even when they lose the war...”	34
4.2.3. Third Article: “300”.....	37

4.2.4.	Forth Article: “300 the Truth?”	39
4.2.5.	Fifth Article: “300”	41
4.2.6.	A Summary of Results	42
5.	Conclusions	43
5.1.	Discussion	44
6.	Bibliography	46
7.	Acknowledgements	48

1. Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to try to gain a better understanding on how people relate to their national identity and how they reason around the concept of nationality in a time of conflict. This is done by comparing the textual output of some Iranian bloggers with theories of identification.

Though the study of two events, occurring at roughly the same time and affecting roughly the same people, I will investigate both the concept of national identity itself, and also compare if there are differences in reactions between different kinds of events. The first was the Iranian arrest of 15 British soldiers in the Persian Gulf, and the second the release of the American movie *300*. Both events got a lot of attention by Iranian bloggers since they both were high-profile political issues, although different from an actor-perspective.

1.1. Background

When building a nation-state, or retaining *status quo* in an existing country, one of the building-blocks is fostering solidarity between its citizens. One way of achieving solidarity is through shared identification, so that people feel that they are a part of the same nation, and work together to strengthen the country and defend it against external threats.

The outset of creating shared identities has changed in the last years, however. One of the most common ways to do it used to be by creating shared experiences – something done very efficiently by a government controlled mass media where there was a clear top-to-bottom and asymmetric model of communication from the ruling elite to its subjects.

The rapid spread and adaption of the Internet, in even the world's most remote places, have marked the turn of a new order where national borders are of less concern than they used to be. Ideas – and identities – now travel globally and with much less opportunities of being controlled, moderated and shaped by a government. It also gives the opportunity to “ordinary” people, in other words; the non-elite, to have access to a global audience for their political views and ideas. This was, prior to the advent of digital global communications, a possibility reserved only for a few.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How, and to what extent, can the studied events be considered to threaten the identity of the Iranian nation-state, its history and people?
2. How do the bloggers respond to government manipulation of their collective identity?
3. What are the argumentative tactics amongst the bloggers to convey their point-of-view?

1.3. Method & Material

The main material for analysis in this thesis is ten blog posts, written by Iranians, and published to the general public on the Internet. The posts were collected strategically, from a list of English-language Iranian blogs. There were some specific criteria for sampling: the posts had to be of a certain length; the post had to be written by someone who lives in, or at the very least, have strong ties to Iran. Expats and emigrants were thus excluded since they may not share the same identity as people who still feel that Iran is their homeland. Also, the post could not be a translated post originally posted by someone else in Persian – because this made it impossible for me to verify that a translation was precise enough to be analyzed using these precise methods where words are measured and weighed.

Perhaps most importantly, to be included in the sample the post also had to deal with one of two subjects: the Iranian capture of 15 British sailors or the Iranian response to the release of the movie *300*. These specific issues were selected because they both stirred up considerable emotions amongst the bloggers; they are both threats to an Iranian identity, however in different ways. The British sailors intruded on Iranian sovereignty and *300* on Persian culture. Because they share similarities while also being different in several aspects, they complement each other well and help contrast one against the other. Even the bloggers themselves made comparisons of the two events (see especially Fifth Article: “Our silly president and the British Sailors”, on page 27), and that gave me the idea to incorporate a similar comparison into the analysis to reach further into the different kinds of threats and responses to external stimuli.

One issue that should be noted is the complete lack of women bloggers participating in this sample. This is not a conscious choice, but one that was forced upon me. There simply were none who wrote about either of these two cases.

The material was analyzed using discourse analysis. Being both a theory and a method, the underlying theory is explained at greater length in the section *Discourse Analysis* on page 11. Discourse analysis is difficult in the sense that it is an interpretative process, where the researcher is taking an active part in relation to his or her material. I’ve attempted to remedy this somewhat by being as transparent as possible in

my analysis and provide quotes of everything I use to draw conclusions. This hopefully makes it possible for a reader to determine if he or she shares my interpretation and if my reading is reasonable.

Worth noting is that I've tried to take into consideration that the articles are written by someone to whom English is not a native tongue. Writing in a second language impairs your ability to be selective and nuanced in your descriptions – simply because you might lack the extended vocabulary. On the other hand, some of the analyzed bloggers *do* have a very good command of English and are very to-the-point. Thus, in practice, has meant that I've tried to be dynamic and judge each article separately: the better command of English displayed by the author, the smaller units of language was analyzed. For some authors, this means that only the general idea of an expression is taken into consideration. For others, I've allowed myself to twist and turn every word and compare them to synonyms and antonyms.

1.4. Limits & Delimitations

First and foremost, this thesis does only analyze the domestic aspects of two foreign policy conflicts. It does not go into the motivations and rationale for any of the actions taken, for example *why* Iran chose to arrest the British sailors, or why the American movie company chose to fund, make and release a movie that could be offensive to millions of people. Neither does it claim to offer any judgment on rationality of said actions. Further, it does not study any *actions* taken by the regime to take the opportunity to put fuel on the fire and rally support because of any of these incidents.

Second, as to the generalizability, it is important to understand that I do not claim that this can be seen as anything more than an example of how it can be in a specific case. The sample is too small to provide any opportunity to be true for any general population.

Also, as to the material: blogs are in their nature dialectical. Most of the posts included in this thesis had comments to them – comments written by the readers of the blogs. These comments are often answered by the original author and what started out as a free standing article ends up being a debate. Though interesting in its own right, I have chosen not to take this debate into account and focus entirely on the original article.

1.5. Disposition

This thesis is structured in a fairly straight-forward way. The first chapter sets a backdrop for the issue at hand: providing a background and formulate research questions. It discusses the material and the methods and how the methodological tools are applied to said material.

The second chapter discuss the theoretical rationale, explain – in brief – the theories that are applied in doing the actual research. This chapter also sets some important terms that will be used throughout the analysis.

The third chapter is a necessary background to the different things that can influence the result or the analysis, or that can be important for the understanding of the problem. Here I include a brief history of Iran and its attitude towards media in general, and internet and blogs in particular.

The fourth chapter is the analysis of the empirical material itself. It is divided into two sections, one for each event, and both sections holds the analysis of five articles. Both sections end with a short summary of results to make skimming and fast reading of the thesis easier.

The fifth chapter is where the results of the empirical analysis are properly compared to the theory and some results are synthesized and answer the research questions. There is also a subsection here called *discussion* that contains a more argumentative line; where I allow myself to draw somewhat wider conclusions from the material and relate it to other events. This chapter ends with a short section covering ideas for further research that could be attempted to verify or falsify the conclusions in this thesis.

2. Theoretical Rationale

This chapter describes the theoretical backdrop for the analysis that is later to follow: First there is a discussion on theories of personal identification versus the identity of the nation-state and whatever loyalties may lay there. Second, there's a brief discussion of the use of discourse analysis as a tool to analyze the contents of the texts. (Discourse analysis, being both a theory and a method, is also discussed – especially my use of it – in the section *1.3 Method & Material* on page 6.)

2.1. National Identity & Personal Identity

Traditionally, when discussing international relations and matters of security, transnational relationships between nations have been formulated with the nations themselves as actors; the nation of Japan have a relationship with the nation of France, for example.

Bloom (1990) attempts, with his theories on national and personal identity, to widen and nuance that description by adding the actions of individuals into the equation. The problem historically, he says (1990:1), has been that there was a lack of theories that coherently explains the relationship between a mass national population and its state.

The problem consists of two parts, according to Bloom (1990:2). First, you need to learn the attitudes of the individuals, and this problem was addressed with the advent of public opinion research. This made it possible to investigate the attitudes of a mass public, as opposed to the actions of a ruling class or of an elite, that had earlier been the focal point. Second, Bloom advocates using identification theory, drawn from Freud, Mead, Erikson and Habermas, to create a link between identification and the actions of a nation-state.

2.1.1. Identification Theory

Identification theory, as used by Bloom (1990:25), is important in sociology because it is what makes up part of the “glue” of any social system: solidarity. The prospect is that a shared identification links individuals in the same psychological syndrome, and thus act together to defend, enhance and develop a shared and common identity. The group sharing a common identity will thus act as one unit in mobilizing coherent mass movements.

In psychological terms, the identification process is something individuals go through from the earliest infancy until, and all the way through, adulthood. Individuals actively seek identification with externalities: in the early years, it's mostly the parents and immediate family – people who provide the infant with emotional security and tend to its needs. Later in life such stability is provided by other factors, such as a group of individuals and a society. This identification is shared between individuals, and do thus tend to work in concert with the group to enhance and develop the shared identity (Bloom 1990:50).

An important ingredient in building a nation-state is to secure such a shared identity between the citizens. This, the *national identity*, is created when a mass of people have internalized the same identity and national symbols, and make the participants act as one psychological group when there's a threat or danger to that same identity or its externalities (Bloom 1990:53).

Nation-building is not a finite affair, but is something that needs to be present throughout a nation's lifespan. Most of this work is done by the families; the children are socialized into the same patterns and behave somewhat like their parents, their siblings and immediate family. Not only are there identities connected to the nation-state, but they might also be socio-economic for example. These have to be considered by the state, in order to avoid, for example, a class-based revolution because of spur in that part of the civil identities. (Bloom 1990:71)

2.1.2. National Identity Dynamic

An identity can, of course, be politically manipulated in order to make political gains from a situation, by triggering certain feelings within the identification:

If there's a general identification made with the nation, then there's a behavioral tendency among the individuals who made this identification and who make up the mass national public to defend and to enhance the shared national identity. (Bloom 1999:79)

Bloom (1990:79) calls this the process of national *identity dynamics*; when images of an international event is shown to the mass public in such a way that 1) national identity is perceived to be threatened, or 2) there's an opportunity to enhance the national identity. Such events can be triggered either by a government or an external political factor, and in the latter case the reaction may influence the policy-making process of the government. This mass public influence on policies would, according to Bloom (1990:77), happen even if the state were not democratic; since all states have to be sensitive to the general will of the people, at least on an unconscious level and much more so in the longer term.

As important as the identification dynamic is to create and unite a nation of people, Bloom (1990:81) says that there is usually fierce competition among politicians to be

the one who is most thought to represent the national identity and its symbols. The candidate or leader who best align himself with a national identity – or manage to modify it to suit his or her own need – is likely to be very successful in gaining support from the people. However, policy decisions are not only domestic in nature and in fact; foreign policy is an excellent opportunity to build also domestic credibility for a candidate or party.

2.1.3. Identification & Foreign Policy

Foreign policy events are excellent to use as a tool for nation-building because it allows for the play on national identity dynamics. A shared identity to a part is made up of shared experiences, and as such the shared experience of a foreign policy matter can gather the whole of society around a single issue, because there is a strong and clear shared experience. The national government can then put itself in a position of uniting the nation, and as being ideologically and historically intertwined with the national identity and thus its rightful protector. (Bloom 1990:81)

Doing this can be very beneficial for a nation, particularly in times when there's a domestic dispute or when there's need of mobilizing sentiment away from internal dissention or conflict. There is always a danger, however, if a government uses national identity dynamics to manipulate a sentiment, that it might trigger a response that drags in an unanticipated direction or with much louder amplitude than expected. (Bloom 1990:82)

This play on identity is, in the modern society, done very efficiently and rapidly by the use of mass media where images can be instantly broadcasted to a whole population very quickly. This fact also makes it possible for a nation to continuously manipulate the national identity in a way that was not possible before the spread of national broadcasters such as radio and television. This is even more the case if the nationally spanning media are structurally non-free because it cannot be counter-balanced with a second opinion, but the messages are allowed to play uncommented and without another view. Worth noting is, however, that also free media tend to play on national identities and exaggerate and dramatize international events – even in peacetime. (Bloom 1990:84)

2.2. Discourse Analysis

Texts, articles, pictures and images are all part of a larger social system; a system intertwined in an elaborate labyrinth of meaning, intent and decoding. Journalists, for example, use his or her experiences and social reference points in an attempt to convey a specific message to the recipient of such a message. The reader or viewer, on the other hand, uses his or her experience to and social reference points in trying to make sense of the message. The message thus exists not only in relation to itself, but also to other texts and symbols that surrounds us in the veritable web of messages.

All social interaction, and particularly our use of language, is controlled by cause and effect that are not always conscious. For example, in a situation where a reporter interviews a politician there's always going to be established ideological agreements of relation, knowledge and identities.

Fairclough considers language as both socially constructed and socially constructing, and its use is always dependent on social identities, relationships and systems of knowledge and values. Language is considered to be a system, rather than an individual, random and unpredictable activity.

A method of making sense of such a complicated system is the use of critical discourse analysis – a both theoretical and methodological means that attempts to reveal structures that we often take for granted due to the transparency and close integration in our daily life (Schröder 2002). When using discourse analysis, not only the text is studied but also the discursive and socio-cultural practices that are associated with the production and decoding. (van Dijk 1998).

Macro & Micro Levels of Analysis

A text can be studied both on a structural *macro* and *micro levels*. The macro level means that the *schematic* and *thematic structures* of the text are focused on. The thematic structure reveals a hierarchical tree containing the issues or events that are described in the text. The schematic structure describes what “rules” the author is adapting to, that is if there are any conventions that influence the text. For example, in a news text, there should be a heading and an introduction.

The micro structural level focus on details, such as *coherence, lexical style, connotations and implications*. Coherence is how the different parts in a text are combined to form one unit and provide meaning to a reader. Meaning and coherence cannot be seen manifested in the text, but is created between sender and receiver; author and reader. Thus, when this is revealed, ideology can be seen in the text. A lexical level is to focus on specific words and why these words were chosen – especially in contrast to other words that were avoided. (Ekström & Larsson 2000:206)

3. Background

The chapter offer a brief discussion on *blogging* in an effort to introduce new readers to the new phenomena and shed some light on the specific Iranian situation – needed go grasp the subtleties of the issue at hand. There's also a section briefly covering an Iranian political history and an introduction to the country's laws that govern media use. This is crucial because it very much affects what bloggers can write about without putting themselves in harm's way. Lastly there are short descriptions of the commented events for orientation.

3.1. About Blogs & Blogging

This text deals extensively with the phenomenon of *blogging*, and the term might need explanation for an uninitiated reader. The term *blog* is derived from *Web log*. (*Blog* can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog.) A blog signifies a user-generated website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order. Blogs often provide commentary or news on a particular subject, such as food, politics, or local news; others function more as personal online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic. The ability for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of many blogs. Most blogs are primarily textual although some focus on photographs (*photoblog*), videos (*vlog*), or audio (*podcasting*). (Gillmor 2004)

As of December 2006, blog search engine *Technorati* (2006) was tracking more than 60 million blogs. This figure cannot be seen as a grand total of the number of blogs in of the world, since not all of them are tracked by the search engine – especially not the ones in other languages than English. *Technorati* is, for example, notoriously bad at tracking content in Persian, due to poor support for other character encodings than the needed for the western alphabet (Derakhshan 2006). This skews the measurement and other ways to count the Iranian blogs are needed.

Other research shows that there was, in October 2005, around 100 million blogs in the world, with around 700,000 in Iran. It should be noted that the numbers from Iran does not necessarily denote active blogs but are a sum of the number of created

blogs at the various Iranian blog-hosts¹. It is estimated that the number of active blogs at the time, in Iran, was between 40,000 to 70,000 (Riley 2005).

For the sake of explaining some basic terms that will be mentioned occasionally in this thesis, it can be noted that the *blogosphere* is a word that is used quite often to connote the existence of a virtual community of blogs where the bloggers meet and discuss. A similar term for the Iranian diaspora of blogs is *blogestan*, playing on the Persian *-stan* suffix often used in regions, such as Kurdistan and Balochistan.

3.2. Iran

3.2.1. A Brief History

Iran is, even though it was briefly occupied by the allied-axis during World War II, one of the few countries in the region that never was colonized by the western powers. The country has, however, always been of uttermost geopolitical importance due to its oil-rich soils and long coastlines.

The Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi wanted to tightly ally Iran with the western powers, and sought close ties to the United States. During the late nineteen-forties an ever-growing nationalist movement pressured him to appoint Mohammed Mosaddiq as the country's prime minister (CIA 2006). Mr. Mosaddiq sought to consolidate his powers and, when in 1941, as he nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, he sidelined the Shah and feared the Western power into imposing an embargo on Iranian oil exports. The failing oil economy made the state weak and in 1953 Mr. Mosaddiq was overthrown in a CIA sponsored *coup d'état* that led to re-instigated authority for Reza Shah. (EIU 2005)

The aggressive economic modernization resumed – a reform that got called the “white revolution”. The executive power also got more and more centralized, as the Shah became paranoid, and there was also an increased use of repression of political dissent. Ayatollah Khomeini was expelled 1964 after being accused of creating unrest within the religious groupings. (EIU 2005)

During the nineteen-seventies the Iranian economy suffered a record inflation; the imposed western culture was offensive to many Iranians; the repressive security situation made the people feel unsafe. All this brought opposition groups together against the Shah in an anti-monarchist coalition using the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini as their leader. (EIU 2005)

¹ The figures are split between hosts in this way: *Persian Blog*: 520,000 blogs, *Blogfa*: 55,000 blogs, *Blogsky*: 20,000 blogs, *Mihanblog*: 25,000 blogs, *Parsiblog*: 7,000 blogs and *Perianlog*: 9,500 blogs. (One can only assume that the 63,500 blogs that are unaccounted for in relation to the total of 700,000 are hosted on private servers or on sites outside Iran.)

The events culminated in the February 1979 Islamic Revolution, overthrowing the Shah. Since then, even though Khomeini died in June 1989, Iran has been a theocratic republic. At first, the western powers did not know what to make from the new regime, but the Ayatollahs uncompromising “neither West nor East” policy and the fundamentalist interpretation of Islam made the suspicions grow. After the occupation of the US embassy in Tehran and the following year-long hostage situation, most of the west – following the United States – turned their backs on Iran. (EIU 2005, CIA 2006)

Political structure of today

Post-revolution Iran has a dual power structure, where a supreme religious leader (the *valiat-e faqih*) shares power with the president. At the present time, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei holds the highest religious office. (EIU 2005) The religious leader is far from being just a spiritual guide, but has enormous power through his direct influence over governmental departments and agencies. He also appoints people to key-roles in the society – among them, positions within in the media sphere, such as editors and reporters. (CIA 2006)

The power for the popularly elected congress, the *Majlis*, is limited by the *Guardian Council*, a group of clerics, who have influence and can influence the legislative process. The council is similar to an upper house of parliament and can veto any legislation it deems to be “un-islamic” (EIU 2005).

This means that the religious Supreme Leader, together with the Guardian Council is a very powerful moderating force on the *Majlis*. This made it extremely difficult for the Khatami led reformist government to make any major changes. But, it also means that the President Ahmadinejad’s current hard line politics are also controlled by a moderating power, and some analyst’s means that his radical populist comments on Israel, for example, is nothing more than an attempt to consolidate his domestic power in relation to the Guardian Council and the Supreme Leader. The political life in Iran is oriented around conservative and reformist views. None of the groups wish to demolish the theocratic, cleric-controlled government, so reform is a relative term compared to western politics. (EIU 2005).

After a few years of progression for the reformists, through former President Khatami, the reformists lost the presidential post and a big part of parliament in the election of 2004, and the conservatives took an upper hand. The conservatives have quickly consolidated their power over the government and some of the members of the reformist movement have been jailed for political reasons. The press freedom has also lessened (CIA 2006). One explanation of the conservative defeat of the reformists is that the people were disappointed in the changes that President Khatami was able to make during his presidency. (Secor 2004, Economist 2004)

3.2.2. Media and Internet in Iran

Press Freedom in Iran

Formally, the Iranian Press Law of 1986 states that “publication[s] and news media shall enjoy freedom of expression provided what they publish does not violate Islamic principles or the civil code”. It states that the mission of the press is to “enlighten public opinion, advance the objectives of Iran, counteract internal division among citizens, propagate Islamic culture and principles and reject manifestations of imperialistic culture, as well as foreign politics and economic policies”. (ONI 2005)

In order to operate a newspaper – even an internal or in-house journal – the publication must be licensed by the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance and such a license requires the publisher to submit a variety of personal documents and photographs. The applications are reviewed by the Press Supervisory Board, consisting of “devoted Muslims who possess the required scientific and moral competence”. The applicant are subject to a number of formal requirements, for example the person holding a license must be over the age of 25, be free of a criminal record and be proven to be without “moral corruption”. Some people are also banned from consideration altogether, such as those who have publicly supported Iran’s former regime, the Shah, and are as such forbidden to acquire a license. (ONI 2005)

The license specifies a number of variables that the journal must submit to, the names of the publication as publishing timetables are regulated. It is unlawful to publish material that goes beyond the scope and limits of the license. The law also specifies that a journal must put forward any criticism while observing reason and logic, and that it may quote anti-Islamic materials or parties for purposes of research, criticism, or rejection of their viewpoints, so long as it would not create publicity for these materials. (ONI 2005)

Also, the law states that state officials should not use coercive measures to control the press. In theory, that sounds reasonable. In practice however, the Iranian press are imposed with harsh censorship and the state impose limits on free speech within the broad and largely indefinable areas of religion, morals, libel, national security and what is called anti-revolutionary activities. Every week, the Supreme National Security Council submits a list to the editors of newspapers, with specific subject and general areas that cannot be written about. Failure to comply with the limits of this list of “red-lined issues” will lead to suspension or threats thereof. The charges against individual journalists and newspapers are handled by a dedicated press court, and even conservative or “hard-line” papers have been sanctioned in the past. (ONI 2005)

The arbitrary nature of this system seems often to crackdown on issues that officials claim to be “anti-revolutionary” propaganda. In short, this can be any material even remotely considered to criticize the government or the system of government. News-

papers are charged with spreading “lies” to undermine the Islamic revolution, undermining national security or insulting the Supreme Leader. Publications that are considered to break any of these rules are subject to a ban and the journalist and editor can be punished. (ONI 2005)

There still are a few national independent newspapers left in Iran. They are, however, prone to harsh self-censorship to avoid prosecution (ONI 2005). This makes them less likely to investigative journalism in any field that could put them in trouble with authorities.

Satellite television is illegal and owning a parabolic dish is prohibited. Still, possession of such dishes is very common in Iran, and most have no problems to access western television (Sreberny 2000). Several million satellite dishes are in operation in Iran (ONI 2005). The police do periodic raids and seize equipment, and the owner is harshly fined. Under previous governments, however, such raids have been pretty uncommon (Fathi 2006). There have also been attempts to jam satellite signals closer to the source and prevent them from ever reaching Iranian territory.

In general, press freedom has decreased steadily since the year 2000 as a consequence of more repressive governmental forces. ONI (2005) speaks of more than 110 daily newspapers and journals that have been closed since then. More than 40 journalists have been detained for criticizing the state in the same time period.

On the surface, the Iranian media system seems to follow a concise rule-of-law: even though arrests can be politically motivated and trials may be conducted in secret, the juridical processes are generally followed. But there is also a more undocumented, darker side of extra-judicial assassinations and accusations of torture. Journalists have been threatened and beaten by the intelligence services. RSF (2006) calls Iran the “biggest prison for journalists and bloggers in the Middle East” and claim that 13 people were jailed during 2005 for their activities.

The system is also arbitrary in the sense that it is not totally clear what is prohibited or not, and the regime works by setting examples by arresting people seemingly at random, in order to serve some specific political interest (ONI 2005). This also applies to people who are not journalists in the strictest sense of the word, such as bloggers, activists and protesters for human rights.

Internet in Iran

Internet growth has been phenomenal in Iran during the first years of this century. Common figures of usage from the year 2001 were around 1 million users, compared to 5 million users in 2005 (CIA 2006, ONI 2005, EIU 2005) and 7 million in 2006 (Freedom House 2006). TCI estimated in 2005 (ONI 2005) that the number of Internet users would reach 25 million in 2009. The growth in Iranian Internet users

between the year 2000 and 2007 is estimated to 2,900%, which is the highest in the Middle East region, except for Syria (3,566%) (Miniwatts Marketing Group 2007²).

One difficulty here is measuring in a consistent manner. Some measure the number of computers with Internet access, others the family members in with access to a computer, and yet others people with even an e-mail account. Also, Internet cafés are still a very common method for Iranians to get access. In 2005 there were around 1,500 such cafés in metropolitan Teheran (ONI 2005).

Broadband access has been expensive to a point where prices, rather than political or technical controls, have been the biggest hurdle to widespread broadband penetration. This is changing though as competition on the market grows stronger. Not only is the number of providers rising far beyond the traditional monopolist Telecommunications Company of Iran (TCI) but there are also competing technologies. In parts of the population dense city of Tehran customers can choose between ADSL, WiFi and even Wimax access. In rural Iran though, Internet access is available exclusively by means of modem – whenever the old and rusty phone system works good enough to allow a connection.

Internet has, in a very short period of time, become a very important media channel for Iranians. Due to the lack of trust in anything that is perceived as official and “washed” news from the state-sponsored media outlets, polls show that Iranians trust Internet sources more than domestic television or radio (ONI 2005). This lacks comparison in any western country.

Blogs, written both from within and outside Iran, have grown at an extreme rate and Iranian servers host literary tens-of-thousands of blogs. Although this has created a sort of a backlash, with the traditional hardline press claiming that blogs are a western, CIA operated conspiracy to poison the Iranian youth with counter-revolutionary ideas (Derakhshan 2004), it is important to note that the new technologies are by no means limited to an opposing group. The use of modern information technology has of course spawned interest from the regime too as a way of talking to their subjects, and today both the prime minister and the president operate blogs of their own. (ONI 2005). What is revolutionary with the digital technology is the feedback channel and added interactivity, and it goes without saying that it can also be utilized in religious practice and the spreading of “accepted” truths. (Eickelman *et al.* 1999)

The regime is very aware of the power of the Internet, and Iran upholds one of the tightest and most repressive schemas for content control in the world – only beaten

² The statistics from *Megawatts Marketing Group* is a composite of figures from *Nielsen/Netratings* and from *International Telecommunications Union (ITU)*.

by China. Sites written in Persian are particularly exposed to censorship and control, and blogs are especially vulnerable. (ONI 2005)

Formally, Internet sites fall under the same press laws that apply to printed media, with all the control that comes with it. Lately measures to control what is spread on the internet have increased, primarily through use of filtering software (ONI 2005). However, the regime does still try to use deterrent actions to and do periodically crack down on oppositional usage, jailing bloggers and online journalists. One such occurrence was during a few months in the fall of 2004, when around 20 people with ties to Internet-based newswires and blogs were incarcerated – charged with undermining the Islamic state. (Reporters Sans Frontières 2004)

4. Constructing Identities

This chapter will look at the output of bloggers and analyze their texts in pursuit to find identity-bearing units that correspond to the theory of national identity dynamics. Following the traditions on discourse analysis, the aim is to shed light on the connotative levels of expression. There analyzed texts deal with two different issues that occurred more or less simultaneously in time: 1) the capture and detention of 15 British sailors around disputed waters off the coast of Iraq and, 2) the premiere of the American-made movie *300* and the Iranian buzz surrounding its release.

The quotations have been slightly touched up to increase readability. That means that some spelling errors have been corrected and some words italicized.

4.1. The Capture of the Sailors

On March 23rd 2007 fifteen Royal Navy personnel from HMS Cornwall, were surrounded, their boat rammed (BBC 2007a) and subsequently detained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards off the Iraq-Iran coast.

The British Government stated that the team had been conducting a compliance inspection of a merchant ship under the mandate of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1723. HMS Cornwall was part of the British contribution to multinational forces engaged in maritime security operations following the War in Iraq. (BBC 2007b)

Intense diplomatic efforts were made to secure the release of the detainees. On 28th of March 2007 television channels around the world showed footage released by the Iranian government of some of the 15 British sailors. Over the next two days a further video was shown on Iranian television displaying three of the detained Britons and some letters, allegedly written by one of the captured sailors, were released, claiming the British ships were in Iranian waters. (BBC 2007c) Iran stated that an apology from British officials would "facilitate" the release of the personnel. (IRNA 2007)

On 4th April, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad held a news conference to announce the release of the personnel as a "gift" to Britain, stating: "On the occasion of the birthday of the great prophet, and for the occasion of the passing of Christ, I say the Islamic Republic government and the Iranian people – with all powers and legal right to put the soldiers on trial – forgave those 15. This pardon is a gift to the British people." (Karim 2007)

4.1.1. First Article: “The 15 British soldiers”

The author of the article is an Iranian national who currently spends much of his time on assignment in Tripoli, Libya as part of his work. He has written regularly in his blog since January 2005. The full text of this post is attached as Appendix A.

He describes that he first heard of the capture from a friend working with the BBC, and that he was surprised to hear of it. The post is made about a week after the capture happened and he expresses surprise that they have not yet been released after such a long time.

First he launches an attack on the Iranian administration, especially for releasing videos of the detainees and showing letters to their families where they admit to guilt and say that they’re sorry for invading Iranian territory.

I cannot believe these guys in Iranian administration! What are they trying to achieve keeping these guys? And these video and letter releases! They always do this in case of political activists but how they thought it may work for the British?... I don’t know and probably will never know.

First, he is careful to be specific; a non-Iranian commenter would probably not have written “Iranian administration”, but rather go for the shorter “Iranians”. Mr. Behi does this because he himself is part of the group and he wish to nuance the categorization and exclude himself from the group he’s criticizing.

It’s interesting how he polarize the international dispute with how arrested Iranians are treated in domestic disputes. Here it is clear that he does not like the treatment of Iranians who are forced by the government to admit to whatever crimes they are charged with, and think it’s even more pointless in a dispute like this since it is only for show – considering no one believes in such confessions anyway. Note how he distances himself from the actions by reminding the readers that he cannot explain why the Iranian regime acts in this manner. He, as an Iranian, don’t understand this either and express that clearly.

He also expresses fear that Iran’s actions will have consequences, and offer his assessment that it is a “panic reaction” because the country has run out of options.

I just hope that this does not result any more stupid military chain reaction. Iran is afraid... it is cornered politically and militarily... I think this is a panic reaction.

His choice of words here clearly gives the impression that he think not only the conflict itself is petty in nature, but also dangerous in the sense that it can start a “stupid” chain reaction leading to serious consequences. Interestingly enough he does not say that the Iranian *government* is afraid, a distinction he’s been very keen on making in previous sentences. Instead, he seems to imply that the Iranian people are also afraid of where this development will take them.

He also enters into discussion on the rationality of the political choices, and he identifies both his own Iran and the British/Collision Forces to not acting rationally in their decisions, and that the inherent danger of the situation is because of that:

This Iranian administration is not very rational. Don't poke it like this... I should say this to the Iranian government too. These guys who are surrounding us are not that rational either... Do not poke them like this.

The use of the word *poke* here seems to signify the pettiness of the conflict. Nations, in normal language use, do not poke each other and the word is more commonly used in child play or when describing a sight nuisance. This word is probably chosen just because it is provoking and unusual to think of international affairs with terms associated with much more mundane and everyday things. Such play on words is common for making rhetorical points. Behi does, however, also point out that the country is *surrounded* by somebody who is not rational *either*. *Surrounded* is almost apologetic in the sense that the mere implication of being surrounded by an adversary is very dangerous from a military perspective, and could justify a strong reaction of force – not least in light of the Bush doctrine of preemptive strikes when feeling that the nation is threatened.

Comments

Mr. Behi does, in this post, take a negative stance to every action taken by the Iranian government: he goes against the capture, the release of videos and letters and calls his government cornered and desperate. He goes to great length in distancing himself from all actions and any anti-British sentiments in Iran. He also, somewhat explicitly, conveys to the reader that the Iranian government and the Iranian people are not the same and that the Iranian people have just as much difficulty in understanding its government's actions as foreigners have.

National identity in this post is thus separated from the government's actions as they do not represent the will of the people. Contrary to Bloom's theories, the author seem not to embrace this opportunity to strengthen his collective identity when his country is in the midst of a conflict. Quite the opposite; he is implying that the actions of the governments are childish in nature and wants to distance himself and his own identity from any associations with it.

4.1.2. Second Article: “British Soldiers Were 500 m Inside Iran”

The article is written by Arash Kamangir (2007a), a pen name for an Iranian student who is spending a year in Canada studying completing his degree in math. He has been blogging since October 2004 – ever since before he went abroad. Recently, following a quarrel between himself and another Iranian expat blogger, his true identity was discovered and outed to the world, why he might face problems when returning

to Iran after his studies. (He's presented here with his pseudonym not to make matters worse than they already are.) The full text of this post is attached as Appendix B.

In his first paragraph, he establishes the background to this stand-off in light of other recent conflicts and asks rhetorically and with hindsight if it was worth the effort:

When Israel and Lebanon got engaged in a full-scale war over the fate of two Israeli soldiers many asked the obvious question that was it worth of it? Now, apparently, the Islamic Republic is willing to destroy half the country for 500 meter of Iran being "invaded".

Israel, the arch-enemy of the Islamic Republic, is used by Kamangir as a deterring example. The answer to the rhetorical question is obviously supposed to be that it was not worth it in terms of resources and human life. Now, he points out that the *Islamic Republic* is making the same mistake. They are *willing to destroy* Iran, because of an *invasion* that he puts in quotes to connote that he does not think that there's been a real invasion at all, but really rather something of a trespassing of only a few meters. Note how he use the three terms *Islamic republic*, *the country* and *Iran* as opposing actors in his text, where it is the *Islamic republic* rather than the British that are dangerous to *the country*.

According to IRNA, the Iranian embassy in London announced that the arrested British soldiers were into Iran by 500 meters.

Kamangir then refer to a press announcement by the *Islamic Republic News Agency* (IRNA) where they state – and he's very clear that it is their figure and not his own – that the British were 500 meters into *Iran*. He use the word *arrested* and not *captured* or *kidnapped*, words common in other media – especially western.

In the end of his post Kamangir offers a humorous and pragmatic solution to the conflict by offering what part of the country to the British:

p.s. I just did a simple math. From the 1,648,195 square kilometers of Iran's territory, about 13,000 meter squares are mine. That means a pathway of width 50 meters and length 500 meters. Can I ask for my portion of Iran and let the soldiers get back to their ship and not have a hundred Iranians be killed over this?

Comments

Most apparent in this post is the use of three different names for signifying basically the same thing: *Islamic republic*, *the country* and *Iran*. The words are not used interchangeably and there seem to be specific usage of all of them. *Islamic Republic* is used to refer to the country's government in a way that makes it clear that the citizens themselves are not represented. It is the political and religious elite that are in executive control over the region since the revolution. The term *country* seem to be used when talking about the nation-state, while *Iran* is reserved for a more cartographic unit.

4.1.3. Third Article: “Perplexed”

The author of this post, Nema Milaninia (2007), is the executive director of the International Studies Journal, a peer-reviewed publication based in Tehran, Iran. The blog from which the post is taken, *Inside Iran*, is a group effort – so there are several authors contributing with material, but this article is written by himself alone. The full text of this post is attached as Appendix C.

His introductory paragraph he sounds dejected as he admits to be bewildered at the actions of the Iranian government:

To be honest with you, I have absolutely no idea what to say about this episode expect that it reinforces everything I’ve thought about foreign policy with Iran.

Even though he says that he have nothing to say, there is of course more to come in this post – in spite of this claim. It is just his way of protesting against yet another issue on Iranian foreign policy that puzzles him. His use of *to be honest with you* is also a way of leveling with the readers; that he is as clueless as they are to what is going on and to its solution. To him, this event is typical for the Iranian regime and its policies to the outside world and he sounds tired of having to deal with such conflicts constantly. With a humorous touch he continues:

When dealing with Iran, you’re playing chess with a monkey. Not because the monkey is stupid or anything, just that you really have no idea what it’s going to do. In this case, serving *Chelo-Kabab* and polo to detained marines.

This metaphor is interesting because it reveals a lot of what he’s feeling. What Milaninia seems to be saying is that the regime is very unpredictable in its foreign policy and that unpredictability is sometimes worse than stupidity. The point is that in international relations it is (sometimes) important to be predictable because it helps when nations try to relate to one another. Predictability is stabilizing. In this case, however, Milaninia does not think that it is rational to first capture soldiers only to serve them luxurious food, and letting them go.

He then expands the discussion on what possible motives there might be for the Iranian government to resort to this action:

[...] For all we know, this can equally be a maritime dispute and Iran’s attempt to display its dominance in the Persian Gulf. This could also be an attempt to obtain access and freedom for Iranians who are currently detained in Iraq. Basically, no one has yet defined clearly what’s going on.

One possible theory is, according to Milaninia, that this is *Iran’s* way of maintain control over the *Persian* Gulf – and old conflict between the surrounding nations – where Iran have fiercely defended their right. It is also possible that the prisoners are to be used in an exchange with the Americans to get back some of the Iranians held

by coalition forces. Either way, he suggests other reasons than what is usually heard; that the conflict is attempted to throw of domestic criticism.

Comments

In this article, the idea of any clearly associated national identity is harder to make out. Milaninia talks quite objectively about the events, from the perspective of someone who is used to analyze foreign policy.

The term *Iran* is used throughout the text – also when referring to the actions and policies of the government. He is critical to how the government has handled this, and thinks that it is an un-rational reaction – though he also says that no one knows why the government did what it did and that an ulterior motive might surface later as things clear up. Thus, the action may not be stupid – he explicitly say that it's not – as it can lead to something, but irrational and random nevertheless.

His personal point-of-view seems distant and academic as he displays neither identification nor association with the events. Is it clear, however, that he feels that the Iranian leadership is not someone who he would recommend doing business with considering its weak history with handling them in a proper manner. This, we can suspect, is something a researcher in international relations would look down on – even if it's his own country that's at fault.

4.1.4. Forth Article: “Stupidly and Childish”

Yasser, 23-year-old student of microbiology at Azad University, Iran. He says that one of his goals with writing a blog is to improve his English. He's quite political throughout his blog, and it is clear that he do not shun sensitive subjects, even though he resides within the Islamic Republic of Iran and its tough press-laws. The full text of this post is attached as Appendix E.

His opening paragraph explains the history of using public confessions on political prisoners, and how the Iranian community reacts to such broadcasts:

In Iran it is a tradition political prisoners confess in front of camera and broadcast the confession on TV. Also Iranian people remember many apology letters from prisoners who were regretted. Most of these persons when get out from Iran told that they forced to the confession and writing apology letters. It is an old trick that no more anybody in Iran fooled by it. [...] I really cannot figure out who ordered to do this stupid response by Iran against pressure of west.

The use of the word *tradition* in this sense is probably sarcastic; that such a thing, parading of political prisoners, have become a common event is, by its own right, terrible. The people, who then *get out of Iran*, are *forced* to submit to confessing to crimes they did not commit. The practice have been used so much that people have learnt not to trust it, in effect setting the behavior that the Iranian government, by default, cannot be trusted by its own people. Given this, he calls the handling of this

crisis *stupid* because it is seen only as an empty gesture. He concludes that this response by *Iran* must have been *ordered* by someone and with that sentence also use the unit of the country, but also point out that the decision is in an individual's hands.

The next paragraph goes into the details of how he perceived the confessions:

They show UK sailors confession. The captive says words which are like translation of Iranian officials. Woman captive everyday wrote a letter^[3] which are more similar to letters of Mr. President [Ahmadinejad] to Mr. Bush^[4] or the letter who he wrote to people of America^[5]!

He use the word *captive*, which is a way of making the British soldiers more passive and victimized than if an alternative word, such as *solders* or *spies*. He points out that the words they're using are clearly not their own, but such things that is usually said by *Iranian officials*, the bureaucratic elite. The *woman captive* Faye Turney, mentioned especially because of her gender, sent an apologetic letter where she, like Ahmadinejad, said that the west should withdraw from Iraq and ends its occupation of the middle-east and the aggression of towards its peoples. He continues:

Sincerely I never imagine that Iran acts such stupidly and childish. Iranian persons who run and moderate this crisis are really similar to attitude of followers of Mr. Ahmadinejad and his theories.

His use of *sincerely* in this way seem to be a way of saying that not even him expected Iran to act like this: so *stupidly* and so *childish*. He then points out that there are *Iranian persons*, in other word not the people of Iran, who are doing this. They, he says, display traits similar to the Ahmadinejad and *his theories* – certainly a way of saying that the ideas of the president is not shared by of the poster himself, or even of the majority of Iranians who are regarding them as extreme.

Comments

The blog post is explicitly discussing the Iranian government's habit of treating prisoners a certain way, and the author very clearly express that both the practice and its outcome is contra productive. As such, there's a difference between the government and the people, who long stopped believing in their leaders. The soldiers are described as victims of circumstance rather than perpetrators of espionage against his country - especially the female sailor is given extra attention. Nowhere in the text

³ A full text version of the letter from Faye Turney to the British people” can be found here: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/iran/story/0,,2046745,00.html> (2007-05-23)

⁴ The letter to George W. Bush can be found here: <http://www.president.ir/eng/ahmadinejad/cronicnews/1385/02/19/letter.pdf> (2007-05-23)

⁵ The letter to American people can be found here: <http://www.president.ir/eng/ahmadinejad/cronicnews/1385/09/08/letter-e.htm> (2007-05-23)

does the author assert anything but contempt for the actions of his government, and he use derogatory epithets such as *childish* to describe them. The President and his followers are described as radical and strange to most people.

4.1.5. Fifth Article: “Our silly president and the British Sailors”

Jadi, 27-year-old blogger from Tehran who have been blogging for years, but since his blog got filtered in Iran he is now residing on an American webhost and blogs exclusively in English and hopes to avoid being filtered again by doing so. Jadi starts off by telling how little he knows and how much the information differs from one source to another:

[...] I do not know if [the sailors] were in Iran’s territory or not. My TV and radio are controlled fully by the government and say “They were in Iran’s waters” all the time. CNN and BBC says “They were not” and both of them show “proofs”!

His limited knowledge of the situation is, by his account, due to *governmental control* over his media channels and that these TV and radio stations are repeating the accusation constantly. It’s not explicitly clear how he gets access to CNN and BBC, but like many Iranians he probably have access to satellite television in his home. Problem is that it is providing him with conflicting stories. He says that both present “*proofs*” that their version of the story is correct, but the quotation marks suggests that he refutes the evidence of both parties as being tampered with – or at least that they both have their reasons for lying or bend the truth to suit their needs.

He then compares the situation to another issue that have bothered the Iranian mass public in parallel to the event with the sailors; the release of the movie *300* (which is, not quite by accident, also discussed at great lengths further into this thesis):

[...] I want and I have to tell my opinion on this issue. I think all of this problem was degrading for me as an Iranian. Many Iranians were concerned about “300” movie and says “It was defacing Iranian people”. I think it did not. It was a movie and it did not claimed to be accurate. I think this Ahmadinejad is defacing us. In his silly gestures. When he orders some detainees to CONFESS on the TV. It is a routine. When they arrest you in Iran you have to confess on the TV and say “I hate what I did” and “Yes! I was wrong” and... He did the same thing with the soldiers. I think there is no need for this.

He then describes these events in the light of his own person, and concludes that they *degrade* him as an *Iranian*. President Ahmadinejad is the one who is *defacing* them as a country, using *silly gestures*. He says that the practice to *confess*, a word he capitalizes, is something you do because you’re *ordered* to do so not because you are particularly guilty of what crimes they charge you with, and that this process has become routine in Iran. Jadi believes this is wrong and should not have been forced upon the British soldiers. He compares the attention to another incident, the release of the movie *300* a film that many thought *defaced* Iranians, and Jadi does not agree – he

thinks that Ahmadinejad have done a much better job at destroying the international image of the country and its people.

In the next paragraph he elaborate on the Iranian media's views of the truth and what people in the country believe to be true.

My TV also lied a lot. My controlled media did it too. They told me “All the Britons confessed and thanked Iran for its hospitality” and “England sent us a letter and apologized for entering our territories”. I did not check this news yet but it is unlikely to be true.

Jodi talks about his TV lying because of the government controlling the flow of information. His way of saying *they told me* is done with a significant amount of cynicism. And, before he's even heard what the news had to say today, he's already thinking that it will be all lies. This approach is typical and say a lot about the Iranian attitude towards its terrestrial, government controlled media outlets; a default view that everything is lies and propaganda to suit the governments interest. Everything has to be double-checked with another source, and also knowing how information from western sources can be biased against Iran, there is a natural skepticism towards both.

In his next paragraph he analyzes the treatment of political prisoners in general and of the British soldiers in particular. Iran prided itself with being hospitable – a very, very important thing in Iranian culture is endless hospitality – to the British and treating them well:

Ah... and fuck us because of our hospitality! We arrest people. Do not allow them access phone lines or lawyers. Make them be a part of a show on TV and make them wear those silly suits and scarves. Then we announce “They apologized” and “we forgave them” and give them some gifts and Chelo-Kabab and then release them. Is this Hospitality? Not in my opinion. I think this treatment is defacing.

Jodi questions how it is possible to *arrest people*, strip them of their rights and still be hospitable. The prisoners were made to take part on a show where they *apologized* and were *forgiven* as a grand gesture from the Iranian government. To be forgiven is a fantastic gesture, but Jodi seems to be saying that it cannot be, if the whole apology is merely staged.

He also attacks the clothes the prisoners are made to wear on taped interviews, calls them *silly suites* – including the mandatory *scarf* which Faye Turner had on for several interviews, a significant marker and symbol for the deeply religious Islamic republic. The issue of the meal; the exclusive serving of *Chelo-Kabab* – the finest meat, represents the duality Jodi sees in this: Iran serves exclusive food to political prisoners, and think that this alone makes the country hospitable. He calls the practice *de-*

facing and seems to think that it is degrading, not only for the soldiers, but also for the nation.

He asks himself what impression the world will have of such a nation. What people will remember in a few months time, when all this urgency cools off:

I am sure in the next months whoever hears the name of “Iran” is not going to say: “- Iran? Yes! I know them from the ‘300’ movie. That ugly faced, poorly organized army.” But they probably will say: “- Oh! I remember them. The issue of Britons! The silly nation who thinks being polite is a good meal and some souvenirs.”

Here he tries to see his own nation through the eyes of someone else, from the perspective of a foreigner. It’s clear that Jodi wants his country to be seen in the best possible way, and that he thinks that the way that the British soldiers were treated makes that very difficult. He compares the crisis with the ‘300’ debacle, and comes to the conclusion that viewers can see through the fantasy world of a movie – that Persians are not *ugly* nor *poorly organized* just because they saw it in a Hollywood-film. Instead, he fears, that the treatment of the soldiers will make deeper scars into people’s minds because Iran thinks that *politeness* can be bought with *food* and *gifts*.

Comments

Iran in Jodi’s post seems to be in a strong conflict between the actions of a few and reaction of the masses. A ruling elite that impose decisions that have consequences far beyond the governments grasp, and that the actions of these few will eventually come back to haunt the mass citizenry in one form or another. This can, for example, be seen in how he reason about what the aftermath of the conflict will be. The government makes decisions that stain the image of Iran in the international community’s minds.

He seems confident that the identity of Persia can survive the release of a controversial movie, but apparently one trait of that identity: the importance of hospitality cannot survive the actions of a desperate and irrational government. Such things makes it clear that Jodi is indeed very critical to the current regime and though he clearly prides himself on being Iranian, he despise how *they* make *him* look in the eyes of the world.

Clearly, he does not line up beside his government to protect the autonomy of Iran in any geographic sense, but rather he reacts to the same government breach of the cultural ideals Jodi feels is a big part of the Iran that he wants to protect. President Ahmadinejad gets to represent the elite and he’s made out to use silly gestures in order to rally support around a thing that most Iranians know, due to their callus for government propaganda and exaggeration, know to be lies and staged confessions and apologies.

4.1.6. A Summary of Results

One thematic narrative that very clearly goes through a lot of the texts is the separation between *the government* and *the people*. Many writers are very clear on using terms like *the Islamic Republic* when commenting something that they do not agree with and wish to dissociate from. One went even further and actively used three different words for signifying three different aspects of the situation: *Iran, the Country and the Islamic Republic*. The reasons for doing this, even if it's unconscious behavior, might be explained with a need to criticize different aspects of the events without, because of that, criticizing something by proximity. For example, if the only unit used would be *Iran*, without distinctions or other levels of significance, then the people would be responsible for the actions of its (undemocratically elected [sic]) government.

None of the authors, to any of the articles, expressed anything but sympathy for the British soldiers. On the contrary, all of the authors strongly criticized the government of Iran for being irrational and making this into a public relations event where they tried to rally support for its cause – but failed miserably, because no one believed them. Several of the authors point out that the imposed confessions are contra productive considering how common they are when someone is arrested for political reasons. People listen to them but know that they are only the confessions of lips.

A sensitive part of the Persian identity, for some of the authors, is the culture of hospitality. A discussion around this term is hard to imagine in another cultural setting (for example, the closing of the extra-judicial prison on *Guantánamo Bay* has many reasons, but no one in the west argues for its abolishment on grounds that they are not hospitable enough to its prisoners). The loss of this part of the identity, and the thought of the world perceiving the Iranians to have a funny view of what it means to be hospitable, seems to be a much bigger loss to certain bloggers, than some 500 meters of invaded water. President Ahmadinejad personally gets blamed for this attack on culture and it's almost as if some of the bloggers perceive Ahmadinejad of being a bigger threat to the Iranian culture than any outside invasion.

It is also very clear that all the authors do not identify with the Iran that is perpetrating these acts towards the British. All of them are very explicit in their distance to the government – who they blame for this. They chose their words carefully so as not to say *we* or *us* when discussing the crisis and the agents involved in it. Clearly, this means that the Iranian government failed to rally support, at least among these layers of society. The Iranian identity or nation was not strengthened due to hardships through international conflict.

4.2. The Movie ‘300’

Based on a graphic novel by American artist Frank Miller, Warner Brothers premiered the high-budget movie *300* in March 2007. The film is (loosely) based on the historical battle of Thermopylae between Sparta and Persian Empire in the year 480 BC. The plot follows King Leonidas and his personal guard who go to war to fight the hundreds-of-thousand man army of King Xerxes. As in the original graphic novel, the Persians are depicted as a monstrous, barbaric and demonic horde.

The release of *300* made studio officials, representing Warner Brothers, address the political interpretation of the film's theme. There were some media reports of parallels between the portrayed conflict in the film, and the current events in the world. The film's director thus went public and denied all such parallels, even though he acknowledged how the film could be seen in that way.

The controversy after the film's opening has been massive due to its unfavorable portrayal of the people from the Persian Empire. Critics, journalists, historians and of the Iranian government officials, including President Ahmadinejad, have officially denounced the film.

The Iranian Academy of the Arts submitted a formal complaint against the movie to UNESCO, saying it was an attack on the historical identity of Iran and the Iranian mission to the UN protested the film in a press release.

The major controversy surrounding the film has been its portrayal of ancient Persians. Most debate came from Iran. There were several reasons to this anger: its release on the eve of *Norouz*, the Persian New Year; and the Iranian view of the Achaemenid Empire as a very dignified page in the country's history, to name but a few. There was also a fear of a coming war over Iran's nuclear program, and some meant that this film was a propaganda exercise to turn the world against Iran.

4.2.1. First article: “The Iranian Dilemma: 300, The Angry People”

The article is written by Arash Kamangir (2007b), a pen name for an Iranian student who is spending a year in Canada studying completing his degree in math. He has been blogging for since October 2004 – since before he went abroad. Recently, following a quarrel between himself and another Iranian expat blogger, his true identity was discovered and outed to the world, why he might face problems when returning to Iran after his studies. (He's presented here with his pseudonym not to make matters worse than they already are.) The full text of this post is attached as Appendix F.

Kamangir starts his post by explaining how he thinks that the world is viewing Iran and the Iranians in order to present the reader with the problem he's discussing in the post; how the protests over the release of *300* is damaging the international image of Iranians:

It is a repeatedly asked question that if the average Iranian is not a little Ahmadinejad, who are those who pour into the streets yelling death verdicts and punching the air.

His use of the descriptive term *a little Ahmadinejad* is typical of a critical commenter and plays on the president's small stature – a common joke in Iran – as well as on a nickname for someone who is following a radical leader. In this usage it is apparent that he chose the word to belittle both the president and his supporters; such people who *pour* out when protesting. This is a way of labeling them as a group of people with a mob-mentality without any reasoning and intellect; such people *punch in the air*, a habit which makes their way of protesting and their political argument sound very silly indeed. This, he is saying, is the image of the Iranian population in the eyes of many foreigners – westerners in particular. Many moderate Iranians themselves do not like this image of their country – a common defense is that the regime bus radical professional protesters to gatherings and that it has nothing to do with a general sentiment amongst the country's population.

He then goes into the problem with the movie *300* and how it has provoked the Iranian people and spurred protests, not least in the online communities and the blogs:

The release of the movie *300*, and how the Iranian blogosphere reacted to it, was an informative window to the Iranian mindset. Aside from a few bloggers, the general mood in the blogestan is anger and demand for revenge. [...] It is becoming common to see links in *Balatarin*^[6], the Iranian *Digg*^[7], in which the author has nothing to say more than "I am offended and I need to avenge".

People, Kamangir says, are after *revenge*, a word that draws apparent associations to physical force and violence. He speaks of a *mood* in a virtual community where people discuss matters that are important to them. Clearly, the reader gets the impression of heated feelings and a great number of angry people, even though the medium does not allow for a worldly mob to assemble. He summarizes the postings he has seen on a popular link-aggregator, saying that people feel *offended* and *vengeful* because of what they've seen in the movie.

Kamangir then compares this angry group of people with the common international image of Iranians that he presented earlier. The problem is, he says, that indulging in these activities only adds to the image of the irrational Iranian:

⁶ *Balatarin* (<http://balatarin.com>) is a site where users can suggest new links to websites and vote on the popularity of links already suggested. Once a link collects enough positive votes, they are moved to the front page, which increases their chance of being viewed. There's a strong Iranian focus and the language of most content is Persian.

⁷ *Digg* (<http://digg.com>) is similar to *Balatarin* but with English language content.

To my experience, and also according to the results of a recent research, most Iranian bloggers are middle-class university students. When this body of rather intellectual people is so welcoming to anger, who can expect anything from us, the Iranians, other than hundred-thousand-people rallies in which people shout for something they have no clear understanding of. After all, it is no mystery that the Islamic Republic is very good in busing people from suburbs to the heart of the capital city.

In order to strengthen his argument on who populate the Iranian blogosphere, he use existence of *research* – although without proper information how to find it – that the demography is made up in a certain way. This group of bloggers is *reasonably intellectual*, in stark contrast with the angry mob he’s polarizing against. These other protesters are bused in from suburbs, where the poor people live, by the *Islamic Republic*. Note how he avoids using *Iran* or *the government* but go for the more specific term *Islamic Republic* in order to make it perfectly clear that the instigators of these protests are not representative of the mass people of Iran, but the ruling religious elite. At the same time Kamangir distances the mode of government from the entity of geographic area or cultural identity.

Comments

Kamangir seem to think that the reactions of the blogosphere, or *blogestan* as it’s called in Persian, are good indicators of the sentiments of “real” Iranians. He is very clear on the separation of actions taken by the true intent of the people and actions initiated by an entity that he seems to think have very little to do with the real people. He is explicitly criticizing how the regime usually “stage” protests in order to claim support for policies, and that in the case of the movie *300*, a lot of people seem to gladly play along – even those who normally wouldn’t stand behind the government, but who in this conflict did very much playing the governments hand. He does not give a definitive answer to why this may be.

In this post, there are also mentioning’s of more than just a *national* identity, but also of a socio-economic group made up of middle-class university students, and how this group is over-represented among bloggers. Protesting, in the way often associated with the Iranians, is usually done by the poor people where there’s also a strong correlation of religiosity and support for President Ahmadinejad and his hard-line policies against reforms.

So, here there’s a tension between defending the national identity and doing so in a way that is supporting the current Islamic government – a government that he considers not to be necessarily Iranian *per se*.

4.2.2. Second Article: “Even when they lose the war...”

This article is written by Paymane who’s been blogging since 2004. The name is, most likely a pseudonym, although it could also be his real first name. Not much is known about the author, and he himself say that there’s no need for a presentation – his words and opinions can be found in the blog, and “that should be enough”. The blog itself is hosted on an American server. The full text of this post is attached as Appendix G.

The full title of the analyzed post is: *Even when they lose the war they still claim victory and (make a bad movie about it too!)* and just by the title it is clear that this is a critical post of an illogical film. He says:

They never give it up, do they? First it was *Alexander*, then *300*. They never show Persians in a good light.

First, he creates a category of *them*; the other. These others, he says, are constantly on the Persians’ backs, making numerous movies where they, as a people, are not well represented. The others in this case, are probably first and foremost Americans, since they are the ones making these films. But, there’s also reason to suspect that the whole western hegemony is included into this group. He then makes a list over historical achievements made by the Persians in ancient times, and asks rhetorically why there have been no films about these events:

They never make a movie about Cyrus's triumphant entry to Babylon. They never create a movie about How Persians dominated most of Greek islands without war, and just with Diplomacy. They never make a movie about How Darius build the Suez Canal, 2000 years before there ever was such canal.

Quite obviously, Paymane is proud over these achievements. It’s also interesting to note how he repeatedly capitalizes the ‘h’ in *how*, as if to emphasize the importance of *how* these things came about. He especially mentions – and again uses capitals to emphasize the word – *diplomacy* as the method of Persian dominance. Worth noting is that he only mentions *triumphs* and peaceful ruling, while purposely excluding any bloody battles or conflicts that were ever-present during the age of the Empire. All-in-all he seems proud of Iran’s historical connection to the old Achaemenid Empire and identify with these historical roots. He continues to elaborate on what is wrong with the movie *300* and how the movie was received in Iran:

[T]heir triumphalism and our modesty and humility in the face of a propaganda campaign that makes me angry.

Again, and even more clearly here, he shows the divide between the categories of *us* and *them*. *They* are *triumphant*, though it’s not exactly clear over what, and the *we* are *modest* and *humble*. Paymane speaks of a *propaganda campaign*, something that connote that there is an active part that have a strategy to bad-mouth Iran and its culture. He does not elaborate further on who is behind this propaganda.

He continues:

That's the real reason why Persians are understandably angry. They're about 100 years late, in that anger, or perhaps 400 years, depending how you determine the exact time, that our falling behind, started. [...]

Paymane means that there are up to 400 years of anger locked up in the Persian culture, and that that anger is now rising to the surface. The point is that the Persians, he says, started to *fall behind*. He uses the word *our* to – again – signify which one of the groups he belongs to. In the next paragraph he turns things around a bit, and starts criticizing Xerxes:

The Battle of Thermopolayee was a stupid act by Spartans. [...] That being said, Xerxes, (خ شایدار) was an incompetent idiot, Persia lost Egypt too under his reign.

He marks his alignment to the Persian group even further by criticizing Xerxes for *incompetence*, since he – as a group member – is allowed to be critical of his own people; much more so than an outsider ever could be. He also makes the effort of including Xerxes' name in Persian, perhaps in an effort to further mark his territory: most people who read his English blog is unlikely to know Persian, but by including the name he again emphasize the *us* and *them* perspective.

In the next paragraph he returns to the subject of how great the old Persian Empire was and how much good things have come out from the culture; things that the author believes have been hi-jacked by other cultures. He writes⁸:

[...] Iran, that oldest of multi-national empires and world powers, what does she get? At one time, the biggest Philosophers and scientists were Razi, Aveecina and Farabi. All three were PERSIAN. Not arab, not Muslim Persian. [...] Razi was born in Ray a small city near where Tehran is now, Farabi was born in Farab, solidly in Iranian territory, and Aveecina was born in North East of Iran and is buried in Hamadan. [...]

Paymane refer to the county as *she*, bringing on an association to something of a motherland. This, the *oldest* of *empires*, has lost hold of what is duly *hers*. He brings up an example of three prominent *philosophers*, spelt with a capital 'p', who he emphasize should be identified as Persian. He especially point out that they are not *Muslim Persians*, but only *Persians*. If there's still doubt, the origin is made clear beyond all doubt by his capitalization of *Persian*. If the reader doesn't believe him, he gives numerous examples to where they were born, to once and for all prove that they are part of the Persian culture, and not to something else.

⁸ The background to what he's writing is that the after the Arabian invasion of 634 AD, when Islam conquered the older Zoroastrian religion of ancient Persia, the language and names were replaced with Arabic. Thus, the western historians (and surely also the Arabic?) got it wrong and attributed much to the Arabs.

He concludes:

When we Iranians are going to wake up? When are we going to realize, they are taking everything away from us?

He reaches out to everyone in the *us*-category and urge for everyone in that group, *we Iranians*, to act and realize that something is about to *taken away*. Not only is this just about western intrusion, but what started as a critique to an American movie does not stop there, but he also sees problems with Iran's Arab neighbors⁹:

What Occupied Islands? Iran withdrew from the Islands to leave the matter as a "status quo" It was a "time out" declared, no one was supposed to flag the islands. [...] Since the Sheikh of Sharjah, violated the status quo, he and his companions were forced out. I am certainly not going to lose sleep over that. I'd say Iran Liberated the Islands from Occupation of Arabs. So they are "Liberated Islands". Persian Gulf, was called Persian Gulf, before Arabs could have any appreciable presence. [...]

The conflict of the islands serves as an example of the tensions that Iran feels against the other Arab countries in the region. The fact that the Arabs were *forced* out is rationalized because they are said to have broken agreement, upon when Iran *liberated* the islands. The name *Persian Gulf* vs. *Arab Gulf* is another example of how Iran is trying to defend their cultural hegemony in a region of the world where the Arabs are expanding their claims and sidelining Iran. This hurts the Iranian self-image and sets off intense protests from the Iranian community and Diaspora.

Comments

Paymane is very clear on where his loyalties are in these matters, and he aligns strongly with Iran against the west – and the latest expression of anti-Iranian propaganda: the movie *300*. What is interesting though is that it is not primarily Iran as a *nation state* that he defends, but its older culture: The Persian identity, the older empires and the historical events that shaped that same identity more than two-thousand years ago. These roots are very much in focus throughout the duration of the entire post, especially in the selective representation of the achievements of the Achaemenid Empire.

The invocation of the motherland, the *she*, is also interesting because it is meant to make people feel bonded by birth to a geographic area – something that is far from norm in some nomadic societies, for example – and to a cultural identity shared among the people.

⁹ The background to this is the disputed islands of *Abu Musa* that both the United Arab Emirates and Iran claim ownership of. More information here: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/iran/abu-musa.htm>

Even the introduction of Islam is seen as somewhat negative considering it made the indigenous philosophers become Arabs – in the world’s view. Normally, and especially for someone who identify with the religious regime, this occasion would be cause for celebration rather than sorrow and he would probably argue that it was beneficial for the country. This Persian identity is further developed though introducing a strong criticism of Arabism and how the Iranians are constantly sidelined in relation to them.

4.2.3. Third Article: “300”

“Iranian Teacher XP” has been blogging since September 2005 and reading his other posts, it becomes clear that he is a teacher to boys somewhere in their teens. The full text of this post is attached as Appendix H. He has borrowed a copy of 300 from one of his students, and this is his review:

Right from the beginning the word Persian used by King Leonidas made me not have any sympathy with the Spartans at all! Even in some parts I wished to be part of the Xerxes’s army to kill the Spartans to their last ones! [...]

Apparently, *Iranian Teacher* sides right away with the Persian fighters – the exact opposite than what was indented from the movie’s creator. What bothers him is how the Spartan king uses the word *Persian*, and this made him lose all sympathy for the Spartan warriors. This changes who he is “cheering” for throughout the conflict of the movie, and he wishes the Persians would defeat the Spartans *down to the last man*. He continues and makes an interesting parallel to another, much more recent war:

The “bravery” of the Spartan really impressed me and reminded me of those Irani/Iraqi based movies in which an Iranian (Persian) was like Achilles and almost immortal as the Spartan soldiers were. Very funny indeed!

Iran is no different than any other nation on earth in the sense that it deals with hardship through manifestation of culture and expression of the art. The Iranian nation have produced (and still do) quite a lot of movies dealing with the 1980-88 war between Iran and Iraq. A common theme in these films is heroism and sacrifice in the face of death, where heroes perform super-human achievements for the benefit of the country.

It’s almost like he corrects himself when calling his countrymen *Iranian* instead of *Persian*, signifying the enormous prestige that is in that label: the *Persians* – not *Iranians* – were almost immortal. They were strong like *Achilles*. This parallel he finds *funny* because the board is turned around (although I suspect he might really be looking for another word).

If this movie had been made five years ago, the Persians could have been replaced by Iraqis on the spot!

Like many other Iranians, our author makes the connection to American propaganda in light of real-world conflicts. (Note: here the word *Persian* is used, but when referring to cinematic entities, where using *Iranians* would indeed be incorrect.)

Persians could have been pictured more cute and human than what Zack Snyder presented in the movie because you look “MORE” victorious when your rival is made of flesh and is someone like you are!

He still doesn’t sound too upset when making his summary on the looks and representation of the Persian people in the movie. Whatever changes that could have been called for would have been to enhance the story rather because they were especially tasteless to an Iranian audience, according to his suggestions.

In his next paragraph he makes the connection between the western religious symbols and the movie:

King Leonidas had been pictured as Jesus in his last close ups with lots of arrows in his body to show how innocent he was while he was killed by “barbarian” Persians. Shit out of ten is my score to the movie except the graphics which was out of this world!

The connection between the deaths of Leonidas and Jesus is interesting since it connotes and transfer *innocence* from one to the other. *Killing* an innocent man makes anyone look like barbaric – in this case the *Persians*.

Comments

Iranian Teacher express clear solidarity and identity with the Persian soldiers as they are featured and shown in the movie, and does so even before the storyline really takes hold of the movie; by the simple uttering of the word *Persian* in a tone that he does not like. It is reasonable to believe that had the movie been about a conflict where *Persians* were not involved, he would not have made this oppositional reading of the material. Thus, it has to do with self-identification and transfer of values from the fictional characters to his own *persona*.

Like many others, he also makes the connection to a propaganda machinery, designed to make Iranians, and their ancestors, look bad. A few years ago, he says, this could have been a movie about Iraqis to whip the international sentiments against them and their culture in as a precursor to war.

He also sees a connection to the identity of the Iranian soldiers as they are portrayed in other contemporary, domestic productions, about the Iran/Iraq war. The identity is that of a strong and heroic people, willing to make huge sacrifices for the good of their country.

4.2.4. Forth Article: “300 the Truth?”

Kourosh Ziabari, a Persian journalist born in 1991. The owner of "world's youngest journalist" record; writing for more than 10 newspapers and magazines around the world. Living in Rasht, Iran. Been blogging, on his blog *Faith Today*, since on July 2006. The full text of this post is attached as Appendix J.

After first briefly reviewing two other films he saw that night, he remembers *300* that he saw a while ago:

[...] I remembered the bitter memory of “300 the movie“, a newly Warner Bros released production with the first ranking place in the best-seller trailers table. Not just insulting to the personality of Persian people and mocking them in a baffled way, *300* the movie is redrawing a comic picture of reality into the canvas of historic lesson.

His memories of the film are *bitter*, and there's some frustration that his feelings are not shared with other people, considering it is *ranked first* on a best-sellers list. What angers him is how reality and history is distorted and represented in an inaccurate way. His grudge seems to be that the makers of the film claims the film to be accurate, as he does not seem to object to the inherent unrealisticness of other movies. The *personality*, which is most likely a reference to the identity, of the *Persian people* is *insulted* and *mocked*. Note here that he uses the word *Persian* for the group of people not residing the geographic area of old Iran – he does not say the *Iranian people*.

He continues in the next paragraph to describe why movie is so offensive to Iranians and it's relation to current events in foreign policy:

Unfortunately, this co-Iraq war propaganda film that leads the viewer into an imaginary way about the history of Persia, insults and offends the great, dignified and delightful civilization of Ancient Persia as the world's oldest urban place.

Again, he emphasize that the story told in *300* is *imaginary* and thus not correct from an historical point-of-view. He is very precise when specifying who it is the film is attacking and his description of the old civilization is filled with positive adjectives: *great*, *dignified* and *delightful*. He also claims that it was the world's *oldest urban place*, which sounds like a way of claiming authenticity through age. *Urban* in this use imply some degree of civilization and existence of a higher culture with experts in science and the arts – something Zabari associates himself with as an Iranian and an heir to the Persian Empire. Most of the world's astronomy, at this point, did as an example originate from Persia. He also makes the connection to the Iraq-war and calls *300* a *propaganda film*. The implication is that *300* an American effort to discredit the Iranians to create anti-Iranian sentiments in the west, and that it might be a precursor to an attack.

The next paragraph is a few rhetorical questions aimed for people in the movie industry who creates these films:

I just want to ask that what happened if all the filmmakers, producers, writers and artists didn't attempt to omit the historical realities and choose what they want among the pages of history? I want to ask that what happened if *300* the movie would sketch the real and trustworthy picture of Thermopylae war between Persia and Greece? I cannot find any answer to these questions until the anti-human and anti-morality sentiments are died in the mind of all artistic creators.

Zabari, in light of the fictitious events and modifications of historical facts to serve dramatic effects, wants to know why film-makers think they can *omit historical realities*. This is a reasonable demand, but hardly a new problem nor unique to this specific film. He asks for a *real* and *trustworthy* version of what happened at the battle of Thermopylae. These artists who do this are *anti-human* and *anti-moral*, he says, and it is clear that he has taken deep personal offence to how this movie presented its version of reality. He ends with a closing paragraph where he transfers the old empire to the present:

We are getting closer to Persian New (Norouz as an ancient global cultural heritage) Year that you can find its particular logo on Google's official holiday page. [...]

Norouz is the old Zoroastrian New Year, and means literally *new day*. Its celebration stems back to the Achaemenid Empire and coincides with spring equinox – another example of the Persian's excellent knowledge of astronomy. Choosing this sentence as a closing paragraph to the post is not an accident, but a manifestation of how the legacies of these glorious times live on even today. The fact that Google marks this day furthers the authenticity of this claim as Google is, if anything, a global phenomena in a new kind of empire.

Comments

Zabari have clearly taken offence by how the Persians and the Persian Empire was shown in *300*. He describes the Achaemenid Empire as a particularly glorious period in the history of Iran and he seems to identify strongly with the ancient culture.

He is so protective of its special status that he questions any artistic license as to changing historical events, and he would like to see a better representation of, what he believes, really happened. He points the civilizations achievements in science, and particularly astronomy, by a series of implications, as to make the reader observant of the fact the Persians should be treated with greater respect. He also points out that the Achaemenid legacy lives on even today – 2500 years after its prime.

4.2.5. Fifth Article: “300”

“Rodman” describes himself as living in the “Ancient Persian Empire” and has been blogging since 2006. The full text of this post is attached as Appendix I.

1- 300 is a comic-book style (think Sin City) film with heavily computerized special effects about 300 Spartans that defeat a Persian army of one million or so. It's fun to watch but ridiculously doesn't make sense because those who like these kinds of movies don't care if it makes sense or not.

Rodman makes a short summary of the film and seems to be taking a fairly distant approach to its story-line. He acknowledges its roots as a comic book, and its aesthetic proximity to other American action flicks. He agrees that the story is *unrealistic*, but says at the same time that is of less concern since the audience does not care about *sense*. He is careful to say *those* who watch these movies, thereby excluding himself from that group.

Rodman's own stoic and distant description of the film, as nothing more than mindless entertainment is then set contrast, in his second paragraph, where he describes the Iranian sentiment and commentary to the movie's release in Iranian national media:

2- It's all over the Iranian media. Big bad dirty America has made a movie called 300 in which Iranians are shown as brutal motherless dogs. Once again imperialism wants to poison the world's mind against our brave nation and its ancient ambition to use nuclear energy since Darius the great.

It's not without apparent satire and irony that he summarizes the current Iranian sentiments about the release of the movie. America, according to the author, is made out in the national media to be *big, bad* and *dirty* and out to *poison* the world's *imperialist* minds against *brave nation*. He also makes a pass at the Iranian ambition to acquire nuclear energy, and ironically says that the pursuit to get nuclear power is as ancient as Darius the Great (Darius was father to Xerxes I – the Persian king portrayed in *300*). This satirical account of how the issue is treated in Iranian media might be an indicator of what he thinks that they overreact.

He then discusses an alternative interpretation to the story of *300*:

3- Elsewhere in the world the rumors are that the movie's underlying message is about the American army in Iraq (ironically shown as Persians) and the small Iraqi insurgents (the Spartans) who will eventually do to George Bush what the Spartans did to Xerxes!

This *rumored* interpretation is radically different as it depicts the Americans as the unorganized and vicious soldiers, and the *insurgents* as heroes. His use of *elsewhere* signifies at least some degrees of distance – geographic and ideologically – between the two different interpretations.

Rodman only has this comment to such an interpretation:

4- What? Bush? Xerxes? Now that's an insult to my Persian ancestors!

This is clearly meant to be read with a significant amount of humor and wit, as he refuses the interpretation that there could ever be a parallel between the American President Bush and Xerxes I of Persia. Rodman says that such a comparison is *insulting* to his *ancestors*, clearly saying that Bush isn't worth much in his eyes. Thus, this interpretation, coming from *elsewhere* in the world, is considered by him to be wrong because there can't be a similarity between his ancestors and the current president of the United States.

Comments

Rodman takes a relaxed attitude to this whole episode and use humor to defuse the sensitive subject. Still, even though he does not advocate the use of strong words, and seem to think that most critics are taking this movie too seriously; it is clear that he define himself as a member of the Persian community and the Iranian people. Still, he does relay a telling account of how the Iranian propaganda works.

4.2.6.A Summary of Results

According to these results, there is a very strong tendency to align and identify with the idea of an old and ancient Persian culture from the time of the Achaemenid era. Interestingly, Iran as a nation-state is hardly mentioned in these posts at all. Thus, it would seem that whatever traits are identified with Iran – as it is organized now – is not under direct attack from the movie *300*. Instead, the reason so many get upset is the portrayal of Persians in an unfavorable way.

The old Persian empire is described in very favorable terms as being a pinnacle of civilization at the time and the authors takes great pride in its achievements and characteristics.

A common theme among the authors of these posts is the perceived attack on the ancient Persian culture from an entity, in this case the US, that they feel are trying to stage a propaganda campaign against the people of Iran. The purpose of this would allegedly be to shape the international community against Iran in order to prepare for a military invasion of the country.

5. Conclusions

According to Bloom's theories (1990:53) an attack on the common identity of a mass public should bring the group together to collectively protect the group, and thus the results of this study suggests that the identity with contemporary Iran is subordinate the identity of ancient Persia. The bloggers reactions to a foreign policy event involving a territorial dispute – even one that could suggest possible foreign aggression on its waters – yielded virtually no protest in the sampled articles. The conflict itself was considered to be petty, and the actions of the Iranian government were seen as particularly embarrassing to the nation. The way it was resolved only added to the criticism and doubt that there ever was a real issue.

Yet, another conflict almost parallel in time, gave rise to a massive popular protest, even among people who normally were more moderate; the release of the movie *300*, and its dubious portrayal of the ancient Persian Empire, were widely contested and spurred loud protests from Iranian bloggers. It was considered to hit straight to the heart of the Iranian minds and deeply offend both nation and people.

Bloom's (1990:79) use of the national identity dynamic, where a government uses foreign policy events to influence national sentiments and bring the nation together, can be seen in both cases, through the actions of the Iranian regime. The results of this research would however suggest that the bloggers see through such actions and react to their heart's content.

The Iranian government has, according to the authors, indeed attempted to use situations to their advantage. The bloggers reaction to it however, seem to have backfired. In the case of the arrested British sailor, the consensus is clearly that it was staged from the beginning to end. The released videos of the detainees and the published letters admitting guilt were received with considerable skepticism, because it is considered routine for political prisoners to admit to whatever they are charged with – without it meaning anything. Even in the case of *300* one blogger noted that the national (governmentally controlled) media were going on full speed trying to make political gains of the situation.

Here it can still be argued that such manipulation was more effective – considering the massive protests that took place. An important difference was, however, that the Iranian government did not take initiative to release *300*, but merely react to facts.

This was of course different in the case with the sailors, and that fact might have contributed to the reaction from the bloggers that it was a staged event.

Considering the massive control over the information-flow and the inherent danger of being dissentingly politically active in the Iranian blogosphere, the protests against the Iranian government's actions were surprisingly loud and explicit. The criticism of President Ahmadinejad, for example, was at times very harsh and personal. Considering the social context this kind of textual production is both daring and impressive. In the case of the British soldiers, most often it was a structural critique aiming at the actions of the government and their foreign policy decisions.

One thematic narrative in this case is the separation between *the government* and *the people*. Many writers are consistently using terms like *the Islamic Republic* when commenting something that they do not agree with and wish to dissociate from. One went even further and actively used three different words for signifying three different aspects of the situation: *Iran, the Country and the Islamic Republic*. In the case of 300 much of the focus was on the word *Persian* that got to signify all that was good, not only historically, but also in a transferred meaning to the people whom inhabit the land in contemporary times, as well as the ancient culture that preceded the nation-state of the Islamic Republic of Iran by two-thousand years.

5.1. Discussion

An important finding in this thesis is how different the mass public reacts to different kinds of threats depending on the sensitivity of issue at hand. Apparently – and interestingly – in this case, the threat of foreign military ships operating in Iranian waters, wasn't perceived to be as much of a threat than an American blockbuster was. Not even considering there's a risk for a full-scale invasion and war sometime in the near future. This must be considered to be quite unique, and it deserves some elaboration.

It is clear that the Persian identity is very strong with the Iranians – maybe more so than with any other country who have ancient civilization in their history. And, considering how weak the Iranian identity seems to be – in this case referring to Iran after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 – it is tempting to suggest that the latter was never really established with the people. This might have to do with the difficulty of harmonizing the “new” Iranian identity with the older and more established Persian identity.

This massive support of the idea of a glorious Persian Empire, might be the consequences of relentless ill-treatment from the western powers during modern times, were Iran have been held back from its own success; been degraded to being an oil field that must be dominated and controlled by any means necessary in order to secure the supply of energy. All these parameters might mean that a major part of the

national identity have been created around an almost mythological ancient civilization where the Persians – their ancestors – were the pinnacle of societal and cultural evolution.

This fact might prove interesting from a security perspective. Unlike many other countries, born from the end of colonialization, Iran has a real history, and a real common shared identity – not just a recent nationalization project. This would make it stronger and more resilient to foreign pressure.

Another interesting question that came from doing this research was what difference have come from the advent of digital and decentralized communications, for example through the introduction of the Internet.

Bloom talks about creating national identities very efficiently through the use of nationally spanning media channels such as terrestrial television and radio. With the introduction of the digital media, however, the rules of the games have changed. Suddenly people, who just ten years ago were passive receivers of information, have the opportunity to talk back and have access to instant communications channels to millions of people. At first, where we still are – especially in a global perspective, this creates a digital divide of people who can or cannot participate due to economic or social reasons, but it will no doubt have an impact on people's organization and thus; the shared identities they create for themselves. For regimes like Iran, or any nation-state for that matter, this is a huge challenge since it might get harder to influence and create national identities.

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