

Nov 04, 2016 by [Mark Dillen](#)

## Death to the Axis <sup>[1]</sup>

It doesn't count as public diplomacy — not yet. But the way in which the Iranian authorities have permitted foreign media visits, especially coverage by major American media (e.g., [NPR](#) and the [NYT](#)), not to mention official Iranian comments on bilateral relations, suggests a whiff of change toward caring what the Western world thinks. And this could hold some slight promise for progress in diplomacy of all sorts, public and otherwise.

In his recent [book](#), the Times' David Sanger makes much of opportunities lost for American diplomacy in the early post-9/11 period, prior to Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech. Now, as he suggested [yesterday](#), a "process" has started that finds Obama and Ahmadinejad making comments in public that provide an opening for dialogue. For now, it's just that — an opening.

Rhetoric, hot and heavy, has played an outsized role in US-Iranian relations. And that, in turn, influenced campaign rhetoric in last year's U.S. presidential elections. It was candidate Hillary Clinton who threatened to "obliterate" Iran should Iran attack Israel. Now Secretary of State Clinton prefers to talk about "a clear opportunity for the Iranians...to demonstrate some willingness to engage meaningfully with the international community."

Marking the 30th anniversary of the Islamic revolution last week, Ahmadinejad let it be known that "the Iranian nation is ready to hold talks, but talks in a climate of fairness with mutual respect." The first step forward, as was the case in US-Soviet and US-PRC talks, is a change in public rhetoric, away from "Death to America," and "Axis of Evil." If the rhetorical thermostat is closely controlled, you can surmise there's a chance for public and private diplomacy to make further progress.

*Published in Foreign Policy Association's Blog: "[Public Diplomacy and the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election](#)", co-hosted by the USC Center on Public Diplomacy.*

---