

## CHAPTER 3

### IRAN'S INTERNAL STRUGGLES

Geneive Abdo

#### Overview.

This chapter argues that prospects for fundamental reform, much less outright revolutionary change, in the Islamic Republic of Iran are minimal in the short- to medium-term. In the complete absence today of any coherent, organized opposition and that of any competing ideology that could effectively challenge the continued clerical dominance, Iran's national struggle will remain for the foreseeable future a matter to be hashed out within the ruling coalition of "political mullahs" and lay revolutionary activists and other Islamic intellectuals. It is the members of this elite, known in contemporary Persian as "insiders," who together comprise the two primary political factions, labeled by the Western terms "reformers" and "hard-liners." The fate of the Iranian nation has remained exclusively within this carefully controlled circle since the consolidation of the Islamic Revolution, and there are no signs that either wing is prepared to open the door to meaningful participation by "outsiders" beyond the pale of the revolutionary discourse. As a result, any clues to the future of Iran must be found among the behavior, interests and ideology of the "insiders."

To show why this is the case, I will present a complex, interrelated set of religious, social and political factors shaping the nation's destiny. These include: the essence and dynamics of the ruling clerical caste, which is deeply divided among "hard-liners," "reformers," and quietist "traditionalists"; the structure of the Islamic state and the extraordinary concentration of executive and supervisory powers in the hands of the appointed supreme clerical leader; the failure of "internal reform" led by President Mohammad Khatami; and the complete lack of any legitimate or credible opposition political movement or cohesive ideological challenge to

the current Islamic political system.

I will analyze both the pillars of Iranian stability that keep the conservative establishment in power and the institutions and forces that may come one day to threaten the regime. Throughout, I will argue that neither revolution nor fundamental reform is likely anytime soon. The profound reason for this deadlock lies in the central theological, not political, debate dominating contemporary Iran: The dream among some to modernize Islam and the ambition of others to establish a “pure” Islamic state have clashed, destabilizing the country and undermining the democratic promise of the Islamic revolution.

The result is a nation frozen in place, one that will remain so until these deep-set contradictions underpinning the state and its relationship to society are resolved. Is Iran to be a Shi’ite Muslim state ruled by clerics with a monopoly on religious truth? Or is it to be a republic under the will of the people, while remaining consistent with religious and cultural traditions? While the focus of this paper is exclusively on Iran, it is worth noting that this broader struggle—a struggle not of Islam versus the West, but of Islam versus Islam—is actively at play in postwar Iraq and across the broader Muslim world.

After detailing the factors listed above and discussing their implications for regime stability, I will explore some of the potential turning points that could alter this roadmap and accelerate any emerging demands for fundamental change. I will also identify some key events and developments that could alert U.S. policymakers and other Iran-watchers to possible changes in the religious, social, and political landscape. These include the upcoming struggle over the succession to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, which could well mark the beginning of the end of the “Khomeini generation”; the selection and approval of the presidential candidates for the 2005 elections; continued attempts by reformists, so far futile, to modify the legislative process at the expense of the clerical establishment and in favor of popular will; and the ability of the political elite to forestall the demands of the educated and growing numbers of post-revolutionary Iranians. Of course, exogenous events also shape any nation’s destiny, particularly those of the magnitude of the U.S.-led

military campaign to topple Saddam Hussein and his Baathist regime in neighboring Iraq. Although events on the ground are moving quickly, I will briefly outline the immediate impact and likely future effects of the Iraq war and its aftermath on Iran's domestic political scene.

Finally, I will discuss the implications of the expected course of Iranian affairs—most charitably seen as “muddling through” and deferring the most difficult political, social, and religious questions as long as possible—on one of the pressing issues facing Washington decisionmakers: Iran's relationship to the United States. It is worth noting that whenever its own core values are involved, Iran remains for the most part highly immunized against outside interference in both its domestic affairs and its foreign policy.

### **Domestic Politics: Islam versus Islam.**

Amid the chaos of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and its dizzying aftermath, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that Ayatollah Khomeini was a radical—not just politically, but in *religious* terms. In the face of almost universal opposition among the handful of recognized senior Shi'ite theologians in Iran and Iraq, he single-handedly revolutionized the role of the clergy and stood the entire notion of relations between traditionally quietist Shi'ism and the state, corrupt by religious definition and prone to error and sin, on its head. Begun in the 1940s and refined in 1970 during his exile to the Iraqi holy city of Najaf, Khomeini's vision extended the clergy's traditional authority over orphans, the insane or anyone else unable to fend for himself—an established principle known as *velayat*, or guardianship—to society as a whole.

Against the traditional role for the clerics as moral guides and intercessors on behalf of the people with an inherently corrupt political authority, Khomeini proposed that the clergy should assume direct political power, in what would become the first theocracy of the modern age. In other words, the clergy and the state would become one and the same. To the majority of Shi'ite thinkers this was blasphemy; the sacred texts make it clear that with the final disappearance of the last of the community's rightful leaders, the

sainted 12 Imams, in 941 AD, no mere mortal could unite temporal and religious authority in one office. Nonetheless, Khomeini pressed ahead, skillfully exploiting the weakness and divisions among both his clerical and secular opponents, with a speed and finality that surprised even his most ardent supporters; few if any had expected to live to see this blueprint for religious government enacted. With the ratification of Iran's new Islamic constitution in 1979, the principle of supreme clerical rule—the *velayat-e faqih*, or the guardianship of the jurisconsult—was established in law. It provides for an appointed senior Shi'ite cleric and expert in Islamic law to have final say over almost all state affairs, including control over the security forces and the right to declare war. These powers were further buttressed by constitutional revision in 1988-1989, in preparation for the succession after Khomeini's death.

The *velayat-e faqih* remains the most prominent feature of Iran's political system, providing the state with what its supporters say is an Islamic essence. Hard-line theoreticians refer to this system as a "guided" republic, to distinguish it from the liberal, democratic republics of the West, with the supreme leader and the many state organs he controls responsible for guiding the nation along the righteous path. This attempt to co-opt the established role of Shi'ite clerics as moral guides, however, has failed to win over traditional theologians, who abhor their fellow clerics wielding political authority. Practical-minded critics among them also point to the very real risk to the standing of the clerical caste once it assumes responsibility for the state; the inevitable failures and set-backs of statesmanship cannot but tarnish the clergy's standing in the eyes of the people. Finally, the traditionalists and many of their allies fear that Shi'ism is in danger of being reduced to a state ideology, a grave threat to a faith that has long prided itself on its independence, its intellectual rigor and its ability to adapt to the changing circumstances of life.

Together, these "traditionalists" make up by far the single biggest of the three clerical factions; the others are the "hard-liners" now in charge of the state, and the "reformists" seeking to liberalize and modernize—but not supplant—the existing Islamic order. True to their quietest credo, the traditionalists refrain from

outward expression of their opposition to the *velayat*. What's more, these traditionalists—comprising a large body of senior clerics, their seminary students, and followers—could not be expected to ally themselves with any political reform that failed to respect Shi'ite religious and cultural values. Thus, they represent an unlikely source of anti-regime mobilization, although the steady accumulation of religious opposition to direct clerical rule may one day pose a serious threat to the legitimacy of the current order.

While the religious critique of supreme clerical rule dates back decades, more recently, the *velayat* has also become a target on political grounds among pro-reform clerics and many lay intellectuals, who see its present incarnation as a recipe for despotism and a violation of the democratic promise of the revolution. A number of former seminary students of Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, a revolutionary-turned-dissident recently freed from house arrest for challenging the religious credentials of the present supreme leader, have developed a damaging critique of absolute clerical rule in an attempt to reform and modernize the Islamic political system. Most prominent among these are the mid-ranking clerics Abdollah Nouri and Mohsen Kadivar, the latter of whom was recently a visiting scholar at Harvard University.

Lay political activists, taking advantage of a brief period of press freedom during President Khatami's early years in office, brought the critiques of Kadivar, Nouri, and their allies from out behind the walls of the seminary and exposed them to the Iranian public for the first time. They also added their own opposition, drawn from their political commitment to expanded personal and social freedom, the rule of law and the need for a civil society within an Islamic order. Many are well-versed in the political philosophy of the West, which they have sought to harness for their own needs. At the same time, they are critical of what they see as the excessive freedom of the West and of its threat to traditional cultural and religious values.

These critics of the present clerical system advocate a greater degree of public participation in political life through a number of reforms that include: popular election of the supreme leader and the imposition of term limits on the office; watering down or removing the power to veto parliamentary legislation by the

clerics of the Guardian Council controlled by the Leader; an end to the “vetting” of candidates for parliament and the presidency by this same council; the removal of direct clerical control over the judiciary; and the strengthening of the powers of the elected president, as a counter-weight to the appointed Supreme Leader. The result, say proponents, would be a fundamental rebalancing of the relationship between the people and the clergy and more representative of a true “Islamic republic,” as envisioned by the broad coalition that overthrew the U.S.-backed Shah. Interestingly enough, many of these proposals were reflected in the first drafts of the post-revolutionary constitution (and some were drawn from the experience of the 1906-11 Constitutional Revolution), only to be lost in Khomeini’s unexpected push for his maximalist demands of the *velayat-e faqih*.

After a period of disarray following the 1997 presidential landslide by the reformist cleric Mohammad Khatami, the hard-line establishment soon regained its footing. Relying on the organs of executive power under their control, chiefly the judiciary, the Guardian Council, and the security apparatus, they nullified the president’s popular mandate for change and thwarted pro-reform legislation passed by parliament. Special clerical courts answering to the Leader, once dubbed the “Islamic Inquisition” by the pro-reform press, began the steady prosecution of religious dissent within the clerical ranks. Political opposition was quashed, with reformist leaders hauled before courts, thrown into prison or even murdered by death squads tied to the intelligence service. The leader and his circle also deployed gangs of religious zealots to break up political or religious protests, as well as the more formal Islamic militia, the *basij*. Both were used to great effect to ruthlessly suppress the July 1999 student protests that rocked Tehran and other major cities. By April 2000, the hard-liners felt sufficiently strong to undo the most noteworthy achievement of the Khatami era, forcing the mass closure of dozens of independent newspapers and prosecuting leading editors, publishers, and commentators. Not long after, the president publicly confessed he had no real power. The political critique of absolute clerical rule was forced back into the shadows, and the dream of reform among ordinary Iranians was in tatters.

Disillusioned with this failure, very few of Khatami's constituents bothered to vote in the latest municipal elections, which were held in March 2003, leaving the field to big conservative gains.

Nor is the regime likely to face any danger from the frequent but scattered economic and social protests that erupt regularly among ordinary people, often in the less developed towns, villages, and urban neighborhoods. These are generally provoked by a breakdown in municipal services, by corruption, or heavy-handed police tactics, fed by underlying frustration at persistently low living standards, high unemployment, and a widening disparity in income and opportunity. To date, such protests have been completely devoid of any political demands and there have been no attempts by the elites of any stripe to try to tap into this autarkic dissatisfaction.

In sharp contrast to the run-up to the Islamic Revolution, the fruit of a "theology of discontent" decades in the making among many classes and factions, domestic politics in Iran today remains very much restricted to the narrow circle of "insiders." I will discuss the failure of the reform movement in detail in Part IV below, but it is worth noting here that the unwillingness, or inability, of the so-called reformers to acknowledge or give voice to this popular discontent has doomed them to impotence. With the primary forms of potential opposition—theological, political and socio-economic—all muffled, Iran's national struggle has come down to an elite affair, best described as the struggle of Islam versus Islam.

### **The Structure of the State.**

Iran's Islamic constitution provides an extraordinary concentration of executive power not in the hands of the elected president but in those of the Supreme Leader, or *vali-ye faqih*, appointed by a council of clerics dominated by hard-liners. In fact, the Iranian president wields less real power than perhaps any other elected chief executive in the world. This new constitution defines the Islamic Republic as a new kind of state, one ruled by qualified Islamic jurists until the missing Twelfth Imam, the last rightful ruler who disappeared in 941, makes his anticipated return to earth to usher in the age of perfect justice. The *vali-ye faqih* was given authority over the three branches of government, with specific

rights and duties detailed in Article 110. These include the right to appoint a Guardian Council, a body dominated by clerics to ensure parliament passes no laws or regulations in violation of the sharia, the Muslim holy law; supreme command over the military and the security forces, with the power to declare war and make peace; and the authority to confirm or reject the election of the president.

The Islamic constitution also creates a series of interlocking clerical bodies, ultimately controlled by the *vali-ye faqih*, at the expense of popular sovereignty as envisioned by many of Khomeini's lay revolutionary allies. In addition to the Guardian Council, which sits above the elected parliament and which has ultimate authority over both interpretation of the constitution and national elections, the law calls for a clerical Assembly of Leadership Experts, designed to select the leader and then supervise his work. Finally, the document mandates that all five seats on the Supreme Court and the office of prosecutor general be filled by Islamic jurists, with the head of the court and the prosecutor both direct appointees of the leader.

The completion of the final draft constitution by the Assembly of Experts, under the energetic leadership of Khomeini's star pupil, Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, bequeathed the world the first theocracy of the modern age. But the haste with which it was thrown together, with some delegates virtually tripping over one another to add more and more power to a supreme office earmarked for Khomeini, left the constitution a deeply flawed document, rife with legal shortcomings and outright contradictions. The most serious problems revolve around the remnants of a more liberal, democratic version, which can be found in the final document, only to be undermined elsewhere by the qualification that they be "consistent with Islamic standards." Specifically, these sections had to do with the rights and sovereignty of the people. Article 56, for example, notes that God alone exercises absolute power to rule over men, power that he has delegated to the people at large, not to the Islamic jurists. Other key articles also invoke the will of the Iranian people as the source of the state's legitimacy, as expressed in popular elections for president and the parliament. Finally, the text devotes considerable attention to the fundamental rights of the people, including freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and



freedom to form political parties. None of these rights has ever been fully respected, but their very presence and the presence of other expressions of popular sovereignty have left Iran's political system unstable and subject to future challenges on both religious and political grounds.

With the end of his life drawing near, Khomeini came to realize that there were no prominent religious figures who could fulfill the political requirements of his office; after all, most of the senior clergy remained cool, to say the least, to the idea of religious government. So in a stunning about-face, Khomeini severed the connection between the most senior clergy—the sources of religious emulation—and the office of supreme ruler, a link that had always been presented as central to his conception of Islamic government. Khomeini ordered a revision of the constitution, creating by decree a special assembly to do the job. The mission was clear: rework the law of the land to pave the way for his designated successor, the mid-ranking cleric, Ali Khamenei. Article 109, requiring the leader to be selected from among the senior-most clerics, the *marjas*, was scrapped. Other articles that would have allowed for a collective clerical leadership, a return to idea of the clergy as a whole as the “general representative” of the Imams, were also jettisoned. The powers of the leader were strengthened further at the expense of the elected president, while the office of prime minister was eliminated altogether. The revisions also abolished the judicial council that oversaw the work of the courts and the prosecutors, replacing it with a single judiciary chief answering only to the leader. Further changes gave the *vali-ye faqih* explicit authority to delineate the general policies of the Islamic Republic and to supervise implementation of those policies, as well as the right to appoint the head of the state broadcasting monopoly.

This further centralization of power has left the institution of the *velayat-e faqih* virtually impregnable to any foreseeable political challenge. The pro-democracy student riots of July 1999, the worst social unrest since the aftermath of the revolution, provide an excellent case in point. Despite the fury of the street protests, which caught many at home and abroad by surprise, the regime had no real difficulty in suppressing the outbreaks and in ensuring that nothing on such a scale would be repeated anytime soon.

Nor did the students' demands for greater freedom of expression and less clerical interference in their daily lives resonate among the population at large or among the pro-reform "insiders," who immediately distanced themselves from the protesters. Relying on its total domination of the police and the security apparatus, as well as the volunteer Islamic *basij* militia and the less formal vigilante forces based in neighborhood mosques, the regime crushed the student protests in a matter of days. Brutal tactics, including beatings, torture, lengthy imprisonment, and the threat of death sentences, halted any incipient opposition movement in its tracks. Many Western observers took the student protests, however truncated, as a sign of a growing demand on the part of Iran's huge youth cohort for a secular society. In fact, my extensive interviews with campus activists and ordinary students during and after the July unrest made it clear the vast majority of educated youth were demanding greater social and political freedom *within* an Islamic context; they want an Islamic system, just not *this* Islamic system.

Khomeini's reworking of the constitution also reflects the often-overlooked flexibility of the ruling circles, another factor in their longevity. To justify the radical changes needed for a smooth handover of power after his death, the ailing leader cited the overriding need to ensure the survival of the Islamic political system. In doing so, he invoked the religious principle of expediency, or *maslahat*. Clearly, it was in the best interests of the Islamic Republic to have an orderly transition, even at the risk of undermining religious practice. Likewise, *maslahat* was at work when, in a direct slight to the established clerical system, Khomeini was given the title of ayatollah despite his lack of religious and scholarly credentials. To the chagrin of the clerical critics of the Islamic Republic, Khomeini and his allies had long resorted to *maslahat* whenever the practical needs or interests of the Iranian state clashed with the traditional teachings of Shi'ite Islam. This was as true for such fundamental issues as taxation and banking, on which religious law places explicit if inconvenient restrictions, as it was for the prohibitions against music and chess, both of which were later waived in the face of social reality. In one notable ruling, it was decreed that soccer players and wrestlers, who enjoy enormous popular followings in

Iran, were not in violation of religious law when they wore shorts or other immodest clothing required for their sport. Nor was watching such events on television or in person a violation of the *sharia*.

As tensions began to mount between the traditional reading of Islamic law, as championed by the Guardian Council, and the demands of modern legislation approved by the elected parliament, Khomeini was forced increasingly to step in to bridge the gap. In January 1988, he implemented a startling and far-reaching measure to protect his young republic, declaring that a genuine Islamic state had the right to disregard religious law when passing legislation. Whatever was in the interest—or *maslahat*—of maintaining the ruling Islamic order, he argued, represented the “most important of God’s ordinances” and took precedence over all others “derived or directly commanded by Allah.” One month later, he institutionalized this principle by creating an Expediency Council to determine the interests of state and break deadlocks between parliament and the Guardians. The Expediency Council, whose members are chosen directly by the leader, was also accorded legislative powers of its own. This new body, with the reliable Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani at its head, was then given legal sanction in the revised constitution.

The enormous concentration of power in the hands of the establishment clerics, led by Khamenei and his allies, has provided the regime with more than enough tools to head off any challenge to its authority. It has also successfully thwarted the reform movement and its attempts to introduce greater popular participation and greater pluralism. After the unexpected setback of the 1997 Khatami landslide, the hard-liners soon realized they retained all the legal authority they needed to regain the upper hand, and they did so decisively. Their efforts were assisted by the mainstream reform movement, which, true to its “insider” roots and tone deaf to popular demands, declared at the outset its opposition to any attempt to revise the constitution. As a result, any significant reform will remain more a matter of negotiation within the narrow circle of competing elites than an endeavor fuelled by public demand, popular vote or protest.

## **The Failure of Internal Reform.**

With deep structural change in the form of constitutional revision off the table from the start, the pro-reform movement with Khatami at its symbolic head nonetheless squandered perhaps the best chance in a generation for internal reform. With almost 70% of the popular vote in May 1997 for his reformist platform, Khatami failed to take advantage of the opening and the disarray among his hard-line rivals. Instead of pressing quickly to implement campaign pledges to introduce the rule of law and to begin building a civil society before the conservatives could regroup, the new administration and its allies settled for half-measures. A letter from a prominent member of the radical wing of the Khatami coalition argued the president-elect faced serious obstacles that could be addressed only by swift and resolute action. These recommendations included a major foreign policy address denouncing terrorism and proclaiming Iran's readiness for relations with all nations on the basis of mutual respect; creating true political parties; promoting freedom in the universities; introducing independent newspapers and radio and television stations; and banning the Islamic vigilante groups that oppressed society at every turn. With the exception of a policy of press freedom, all of the other measures were stalled or ignored completely; even the opening of independent newspapers—arguably the one short-lived success of the Khatami era—was seriously delayed by bickering within the reformist camp.

The March local elections in Iran marked the formal low point for the reform movement led by Khatami and his allies. During my almost 3 years in Iran, from 1998 to early 2001, the capital, Tehran, was a hotbed of pro-reform political activism. But this time, just 12 percent of eligible voters bothered to cast ballots, a far cry from the heavy turnout that characterized the president's first election, or later polls for local councils and parliament. Across Iran, candidates associated with Khatami fared poorly, while those aligned with the conservative faction gained strength, even capturing the high-profile office of Tehran mayor.

Such dismal results on the part of the reformist project should have come as no surprise. Their seeds, in fact, were sown as far back as the summer of 1999, when Khatami virtually turned

his back on his most ardent supporters, the nation's university students who had taken to the streets to press the president's own demands for freedom and tolerance, and cast his lot with the ruling establishment. In a fateful address in the city of Hamadan on July 27, 1999, Khatami marked both the defining moment in his tenure and a turning point for the mainstream reform movement. A huge crowd of mostly male students crammed the local soccer stadium to await the president. Many chanted, "Khatami, we love you," under the baking sun; they were certain the president would endorse their aspirations and commiserate in their losses at the hands of the police and the vigilantes. But when he took the podium, Khatami stunned his audience with a strong endorsement of the *status quo*. Instead of instilling confidence in his foot soldiers, who had just risked their lives fighting in the streets for change, the president chose to rewrite the history of the pro-democracy protests, denying what many—including this author—had seen with their own eyes. "My dear ones, today in order to put down the riots and to put out the flames of violence for the nation, others use tanks, armored cars and heavy weapons. Our forces did not use firearms to tackle the rioting. The disturbance was put down calmly."

Khatami went on to dismiss the pro-democracy protests in Tehran as the work of thugs. "It was an ugly and offensive incident, which marred the image of our dear, patient, rational people . . . It was to express vengeance toward the system. It had nothing to do with the honorable nation or the university students." Many of the president's more militant supporters were stunned. Had not the students risked all to take their grievances beyond the walls of the universities and go directly to the people? Had they not protested to secure the very rights the president had affirmed was their legal due within the Islamic political system?

Over time, I watched as Khatami steadily abandoned his core supporters who had first put him in office—the religious intellectuals, including many prominent newspaper editors, publishers and commentators, as well as reform-minded clerics, feminists, and lay political activists. In one particularly poignant moment, two leading newspapermen, Mashallah Shamsolvaezin and Hamid Reza Jalaiepour sent a plaintive letter to the president, whose agenda they

had pushed relentlessly, asking for his protection from the hard-liners in the police and the courts.

These were brave men, ready to risk prosecution for their pro-reform convictions. Jalaiepour, a big, gregarious man, kept a kit bag with a razor and toothbrush by his desk in case he was hauled off by the police. And both did time in jail. Yet, they could not disguise their hurt and anger that they had been abandoned by the symbolic head of the reform movement. "Either tell us that our press activities are illegal . . . or tell us clearly from which government body we are to get a minimum of political and professional security to continue our work." They had taken Khatami at his word and pursued his promise of reform to its logical conclusions. With the police virtually knocking on their door, they asked, where was the president now? Khatami never responded.

When Election Day rolled around this March, millions of ordinary Iranians, who often took their cues from the political and cultural elite, voted with their feet and stayed away from the polls. How had it all gone so wrong?

At least four factors contributed to this failure. First, Khatami was a loyal product of the system he sought to reform. Second, his commitment to—and understanding of—the broader reform project and its theological, social, and political implications was always in doubt. Third, the obstacles to profound structural change, in particular those posed by the country's constitution that all but guaranteed the hold of the hard-line clerics, were enormous. And finally, the president and his allies failed to build a firm foundation for their proposed Islamic civil society, eschewing the time-consuming work of creating genuine political parties and grassroots organizations and instead relying on a sort of media campaign—in this case, the formation of an independent press—to carry the day.

On a cold winter day in 1997, Mohammad Khatami presented himself to Iran's supreme clerical leader at the latter's residence in Jamaran, once a village but now part of the sprawling capital, Tehran. He was considering a run for the presidency but had told his backers he was determined to give the leader, who has the final word in all matters of state, the chance to veto his candidacy from the start. He told Ayatollah Khamenei that his message of tolerance,

pluralism, and openness could draw Iranians, who had grown increasingly apathetic and cynical, back into the political system. He would also reach out to women and ethnic minorities, broadening popular support for the Islamic system and, by extension, for the leader himself. The leader, like everyone else in Iran, assumed Khatami could never win, and he gave the candidate his blessing to run while making no comment on his election platform. The result was the landslide victory of May 1997.

It is important to recognize that the reforms that came to be associated with the campaign of 1997 and the person of Mohammad Khatami represent only one of several key strands that made up the coalition of clerics, workers, leftist militias, secular and religious intellectuals, Iranian nationalists and university students who carried out the Islamic Revolution almost 2 decades earlier. For years, any push toward greater democracy, pluralism, and the rule of law were subordinated first to the demands of consolidating the revolution and purifying society of Western influence, as well as to the struggle with the Great Satan in the aftermath of the U.S. Embassy takeover. The bloody Iran-Iraq war, which dragged on for 8 years, further retarded the nascent reform movement. It was only with the end of the war in 1988 and the death in 1989 of Khomeini—a man, his son records, who was broken by the failure to bring down Saddam Hussein—that the reformers began to find their voice.

However, the tensions within the Khatami coalition began to show within days of its stunning electoral victory. Activists like Shamasolvaezin and Jalaiepour were impatient to push the reformist agenda. They argued for the immediate creation of a political party and the formation of grassroots organizations. But they were vetoed by powerful rivals inside the Khatami camp, who feared alarming the clerical establishment and diluting their own political power. Instead, the two men, joined by the U.S.-educated engineer Mohsen Sazegara, poured their enormous energies into creating the first truly modern newspapers of the post-revolutionary era.

This was, it turned out, a fateful decision, for it represented the path of least resistance and distracted the reform movement from the more basic building blocks of their proposed civil society, such as true political parties and nongovernment organizations (NGOs).

For Khatami, himself a former newspaper publisher, and the other intellectuals and activists who supported him, the written word was a seductive device. A free press, they argued, would mobilize public opinion, act as a check on arbitrary state power, and energize a society beaten down by revolution, war, death, and suffering. Sports, Western movie stars, pro-reform clerics, and biting political commentary all competed for readers' attention. "We were thinking about happiness and life, instead of sadness and death—to publicize life," Sazegara told us. "We were thinking of a kind of renaissance by happiness." The result, the color daily newspaper *Jameah*, was a spectacular success. Daily circulation quickly hit 100,000, the paper's break-even point, on its way to 300,000 and beyond. Plans for an independent publishing house, a political club, and a lecture series, all affiliated with *Jameah*, began to take shape.

The hard-line authorities soon recognized the danger. The election of Khatami was bad enough, they reasoned, but the unbridled voice of a truly independent press was another matter all together. Backed by the supreme leader, the Tehran prosecutor closed the newspaper and its successor and jailed its founders. So began a game of cat and mouse between the pro-reform press and the hard-liners in control of the courts. Religious imperative was also invoked to silence dissent, and many editors and publishers were jailed on charges of violating Islamic values.

The early Khatami years saw an explosion of independent newspapers and journals. These publications introduced educated Iranians to the reformist ideas and modernist theological debate that had once been restricted to private reading circles or hidden behind the walls of the religious seminaries. Corruption at the highest levels was exposed, and the powerful chief of the feared secret service was brought down in a murder scandal uncovered by the press. But one by one, these newspapers and magazines fell to the entrenched power of the clerical establishment, which exercised power through the un-elected institutions under its control, chiefly through the judiciary. In April 2000, these "press wars" closed dozens of publications. Prominent editors, publishers and commentators were hauled before the courts. The crowning achievement of the Khatami years was over.



Seven months later, I sat in the audience as the president confessed before a conference of lawyers and religious jurists that he had failed. His campaign promises to introduce the rule of law and create a civil society had proven empty. "After three and a half years," a grim-faced Khatami said, "I must be clear that the president does not have enough rights to carry out the heavy task on my shoulders."

### **Markers and Roadmaps.**

A number of factors and events bear watching by U.S. policymakers as they study the roadmap ahead. These include:

- The selection of presidential candidates for the election of Spring 2005. The Guardian Council of conservative clerics has established its right to vet all candidates for parliament and the presidency, and it has acted aggressively to defend the interests of the establishment. In 1997, it barred all but four of 238 hopefuls. A Council member told me the inclusion of Mohammad Khatami—whom virtually everyone, including the candidate and his inner circle, assumed would lose—among the finalists was the single biggest mistake in the panel's history. How will the hard-line clerics handle pro-reform candidates this time? Will they risk further alienating an already apathetic and dispirited electorate? Can they prevent a qualified lay candidate, or will they retain the clerical monopoly on the post?
- The eventual secession to the Supreme Leader. Born in 1939, Khamenei remains relatively young. He appears to have recovered from unknown health problems—rumors in Tehran included cancer but these could not be confirmed—that plagued him in the late 1990s and looks more vigorous than he was at that time. However, a smooth transition is vital to political stability. The steady loss of religious authority by the Leader's office suggests any successor would come from among the "political mullahs." Any deviation from this

toward a figure more acceptable in religious terms, or a return to the earlier notion of a ruling clerical council in place of a single Leader, would be highly significant.

- The reform movement has mounted a series of so far unsuccessful challenges to the supervisory and veto powers of the hard-line clerics on the Guardian Council. A frustrated Khatami has repeatedly threatened to put the matter to public referendum, or even to resign, to break the deadlock between popular and clerical power. It is unclear whether such a referendum could be held at all, or what its impact might be. The resignation ploy appears a doomed gambit; the president has already lost so much credibility with ordinary Iranians, and he has issued similar threats before without following through. Any steps, however unlikely, to rebalance the relationship between the Islamic *state* and the Islamic *republic* are worth noting.
- More than half of the Iranian population is under 25, with no memory of the Islamic Revolution and little real recall, if any, of Khomeini. This second generation of the Revolution has little or no commitment to the values and ideals of the ruling elites. Many are well educated, thanks to an extensive university system, and the system must find a way to meet their economic, social, and political aspirations. However, it is vital to stress again that the common Western argument, that this generation has rejected Islam and yearns for a secular Iran, is completely without foundation. Rather, today's youth want greater freedom of expression, cultural and political pluralism, and more economic opportunity—attributes they believe are compatible with their religious and cultural values. How effectively will the regime absorb this new generation, or will it continue to sit back as the best and the brightest pursue opportunity overseas in a debilitating “brain drain”? Will this new generation make common cause with other disaffected elements of society? Or will its most ambitious members simply seek their place among the “insiders,” a trend already visible among a number of campus leaders today?

## Domestic Politics and U.S.-Iran Relations.

Despite more than 2 decades of hostility and the lack of diplomatic ties, the U.S.-Iranian relationship is a defining force in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic. It also represents a huge, if often unstated, presence in the domestic affairs of the nation. Here in Washington, that primacy has long fostered the mistaken notion that the United States can exert considerable influence over the terms of any bilateral relationship and over Iran's internal affairs as part of any future rapprochement. In fact, the Islamic Republic is almost impervious to conventional outside pressure, particularly from the "Great Satan." Armed with its revolutionary and anti-colonial ideology and insulated against the general desire among ordinary Iranians for a resumption of ties, the ruling elite must sort out this matter within its own ranks.

Each faction is continually weighing the costs and benefits for itself—not for the nation—and calculating the risks and uncertainties involved. For example, the influential *bazari* merchants, who dominate much of the domestic economy and enjoy close ties to the clerical establishment, are clearly tempted by the potential rewards of expanded foreign trade; but they also realize their dominant positions in commerce and capital formation could easily be overshadowed by a complete opening to the outside and the arrival of American banking giants. While most reformist politicians generally favor an end to Iran's isolation and xenophobic foreign policies, they remain deeply anti-American (many were former hostage-takers, and they have replaced the anti-British views of their forefathers with intense distrust of the United States). The Supreme Leader, often among the most shrill of anti-American voices, remains fearful that restored ties would undermine Iran's religious and cultural values. At the same time, each faction wants to be sure that it controls the relationship, in order to channel the benefits toward its supporters and to accrue the political gains for ending the deadlock. Only when a broad consensus is reached among these "insiders," will there be movement on the American front, and it will certainly not come at a cost of major concessions on the part of Iran.

This phenomenon underscores the futility of periodic U.S. overtures, often to the more pragmatic conservatives like former

president Rafanjeni (“a man we can do business with”), or to his successor Khatami, whose reformist platform has led many in Washington to see him as a “democrat” and thus a natural ally. It also invalidates the conventional wisdom among Western diplomats in Tehran that appeals to Iran’s national interests will inevitably draw the country closer to the United States. A botched attempt by the Clinton White House to establish a secret channel to Khatami soon leaked to the conservatives, prompting the Supreme Leader to issue a blistering public attack on America and to launch a damaging witch hunt against Western “bases” among the reformist faction.

In February 2000, a U.S. message of congratulations to the reform movement for its relatively strong showing in parliamentary elections completely overshadowed the event itself. As a result, the reformers were forced to use their victory press conference, called to lay out an ambitious legislative agenda before the people and a huge international press corps, to assert their anti-American credentials and deny they were Western lackeys. Similarly, any goodwill from Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s attempt in March of that year to voice regret for the U.S. role in the 1953 coup that restored the Shah was completely squandered by references in that same speech to undemocratic elements among Iran’s ruling circles, remarks that outraged the entire Iranian elite. The most recent attempt by Washington to shape the Iranian political landscape came last summer, with a declaration by President Bush that America was effectively abandoning any support for Khatami and the reform movement and calling on the Iranian people to overthrow their government. For the reasons outlined earlier in this chapter, this bid will likewise fail.

If the troubled bilateral relationship and the Islamic Republic’s domestic policies remain largely immune to overt U.S. suasion, then what of Iran’s foreign policy? U.S. interests and concerns lie in several specific areas: the possible export of the Islamic Revolution, with its model of authoritarian clerical rule; and Tehran’s response to events in postwar Iraq.

The overthrow of the Shah and the rise of clerical power that followed deeply alarmed Muslim rulers across the Middle East, as well as their Western backers. Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Bahrain—all with sizeable and restive Shi’ite populations—were

terrified that Khomeini's call for worldwide Islamic revolution threatened their grip on power. The authoritarian leaders of Sunni states like Egypt and Jordan, long denounced by Islamist activists as corrupt and religiously illegitimate, were also badly shaken. After all, the leader of the Islamic Revolution saw himself as the leading voice for the global *ummah*, or Muslim community of believers, rather than just a the new head of state. Millions of Muslims, both Shi'ite and Sunni, were inspired by the Iranian experience. Over time, however, this vision began to crumble under the weight of the Iranian model's declining religious authority, its practical setbacks in running a state, and the need to focus increasingly on domestic problems and issues. In the early 1990s, Supreme Leader Khamenei formally renounced the export of the revolution, and today Iran's relations with its neighbors are defined less by ideology than by traditional geopolitics.

While events in predominantly Shi'ite southern Iraq have reignited fears in some quarters of a resurgence of revolutionary fervor on the part of Iran, recent history suggests the Islamic Republic would be more than content to see a stable, non-hostile Iraq on its border, regardless of the structure or form of government there. And, in fact, Khatami said as much on his just-completed visit to Lebanon, where he held talks with state officials as well as with the leaders of the Shi'ite movement Hezbollah. The president called for a democratic Iraq, based on the principle of "one man, one vote." This mirrors the latest public comments by Ayatollah Mohammad Bakr al-Hakim, a Shi'ite cleric and the leader of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI).

Hakim fled to Iran after the failed Shi'ite rebellion, encouraged by Washington in 1991, against Saddam Hussein, and he directs a formidable political and militia organization. His status as an exile opposition figure in Tehran for more than a decade, before his return to postwar Iraq, often obscures the fact that Hakim and SCIRI are not simply puppets of their former hosts in Tehran. As the scion of a leading clerical family in the Iraqi holy city of Najaf, Hakim commands both religious and popular support, while SCIRI'S role in armed resistance to the Baathist regime has conferred considerable political legitimacy on the group. Hakim should not be viewed as a mere stalking horse for Iranian-style clerical rule in Iraq. Nor is he

likely to seek any veto over a pluralistic postwar government.

On a more fundamental level, the fall of Saddam Hussein, who brutally suppressed the Shi'ite leadership, could open the way to a return of Najaf as a leading Shi'ite religious and intellectual center. The Iraqi city, site of the shrine to the Shi'ite saint, Imam Ali, had lost its standing in 1922 when its most active members were effectively forced out by the British. Many, including the young Ruhollah Khomeini, relocated to the sleepy Iranian town of Qom, which soon became a vital center of religious learning and later an important hub of revolutionary activity.

If Najaf once again regains its seat at the center of the Shiite world, a Qom-Najaf corridor would influence the role of Shiite Islam in the region and solidify the Shi'ite influence over a postwar Iraqi government.

## **Conclusion.**

In conclusion, religion will continue to play an important role in the domestic affairs inside Iran and the region. The strength of the clerical establishment should not be underestimated. Thus, any notions that Iran is on the verge of a second revolution which would prompt the fall of the clerics is unrealistic. Such a proposition is put forth by Iranian ex-patriots whose secular orientation has blinded them to the realities of Iran over the last 2 decades. Similarly, the proposition that Iran's younger generation is awaiting the chance to overthrow the regime and could do so with a little push from the United States, is also a false assumption. For all the reasons stated in this chapter, Iran's youth are not seeking a secular state but rather a reformed Islamic system which takes into account their religious and cultural values while also meeting their needs in the modern world. Furthermore, history in Iran and the history of revolutions have shown that it takes far more than unhappy people to foment revolutions. A broad-based social movement, comprised of workers, secularists, students, and modernist clerics, would be necessary to carry out a revolution. Such a coalition is absent in Iran and there is no indication that one is on the horizon.