

Deciphering Iran: The Political Evolution of the Islamic Republic and U.S. Foreign Policy After September 11

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In the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush administration has pursued a robust and aggressive foreign policy. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have not only placed the Bush administration in conflict with longstanding U. S. allies and the majority of global public opinion, but it has also found itself in an awkward position vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic of Iran, the dominant regional power in Southwest Asia and nemesis of the United States following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Since the Revolution, U. S.-Iranian relations have been suspicious, hostile, and at times violent. From a historical perspective, it is increasingly evident that the unseating of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the U. S.'s close ally of more than three decades, was a watershed event with ramifications that continue to affect Iran, Southwest Asia, and the United States. Today, the pursuit of U. S. interests and the quest for regional stability—in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia—leads in numerous and overlapping paths squarely back to Iran.

The Bush Doctrine is defined by an emphasis on the right of the United States to use preemptive force against terrorists and their state sponsors; it has at its core a moral worldview that starkly contrasts good versus evil, and it makes no distinction between those who carry out acts of terrorism and those who harbor terrorists.¹ The consequences in U. S. foreign policy have included an aversion to nuance in favor of “moral clarity,” and President Bush’s message to the rest of the world that “either you are either with us, or you are with the terrorists.”² In this context, it is no surprise that the Bush administration’s approach to Iran has shown little appreciation for the impact of its actions upon the competition for political power in Iran today between radical and modernist Islamists—two prominent factions within the ruling clergy that disagree profoundly on the role of Islam in society.

The significance of the differences between radical and modernist Islamists is crucial due to the *de facto*

compression of all political interaction in Iran after 1979 into the only remaining framework and discourse: Islamism, or the use of the religion of Islam as a basis for political mobilization. Political agendas and policy-making among the clerical elite in contemporary Iran are therefore shaped by factional differences rooted in Islamist ideology, which are of great relevance to U. S.-Iranian relations. The radical Islamists are widely referred to in the West as “conservatives” because of their adherence to dogmatic Islamic extremism, and they maintain a hold on the Islamic Republic’s unelected but dominant centers of power. They also generally oppose normalized relations with the U. S. The modernist Islamists are widely referred to in the West as “reformists” due to their opposition to the monopoly on religious interpretation and political power claimed by the radicals. They favor greater democratization and the restoration of normal ties with the United States as part of a broader reversal of Iran’s post-1979 isolation. However, the factionalization of Islamists in Iran transcends this simplified explanation. A more comprehensive understanding of the evolution of Islamism in Iran—one that accounts for the roots of the radicals and modernists as well as subgroups within those factions—is warranted and will be offered in the following analysis.

Despite clear indications that the continued political viability of the modernists benefits U. S. interests directly, the Bush administration’s hardline posture toward Iran since 2002 has helped to erode the ability of the modernists to argue for transparency and moderation in Iran’s foreign and domestic policies. Inflammatory U. S. actions in recent years, such as the notorious “axis of evil” accusation during Bush’s 2003 State of the Union address, have provided the radical Islamists with a powerful political weapon to use against their modernist rivals. By increasing its pressure on Iran to the point where all factions of the Iranian regime perceive an immediate national security threat, the Bush administration has facilitated the reversal of the fortunes of the mod-

ernists and the seizing of the political initiative—and Iran's foreign policy—by the very radical Islamists it seeks to sideline.

U. S.-Iranian relations today are not unlike the proverbial elephant in the room. Most aspects of U. S. interests in Southwest Asia are affected by it, but the question has been effectively ignored by the Bush administration. Addressing the U. S.-Iranian relationship to more effectively achieve post-9/11 U. S. foreign policy goals is a process that transcends the trite framework of containing Iranian radicals or engaging Iranian reformers. Rather, it requires the development of a coherent conceptual and strategic framework by U. S. policymakers upon which to base any future interaction with Iran. For policymakers and interested observers, this implies a sustained effort to appreciate the historical importance of Iran's ongoing political evolution and its consequences for Iranian foreign policy and U. S. interests in Southwest Asia. This article will seek to shed light upon the connections between these dimensions by tracing the foundations and evolution of Iran's internal political dynamics along with the impact and outcomes of the Bush administration's policy regarding Iran since 9/11.

Islamism and the Iranian Context

Since the late 1960s, Islamism has presented a growing challenge to the legitimacy of Western models of modernization and secularization. The intellectual foundations of the most extreme aspects of the Islamist movement are based on the work of prominent Islamic scholars such as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989), Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), and Mawlana Mawdudi (1903-1979), among others, who concluded that an Islamic social order needs to stand in direct opposition to modern secularism in order to grow and flourish. The ideological and intellectual foundation for modern radical Islamism is therefore an uncompromisingly suspicious and hostile perspective regarding the nature of the relationship between an Islamic society and the West. This common thread binds all radical Islamist groups today, including the radicals within the ruling Iranian clergy.

Islamism and the Iranian Clergy

A first step toward transcending the simplistic "conservative-reformer" explanation of Iranian politics and developing a more comprehensive understanding of Islamism in Iran is understanding the phenomenon of Islamism and different types of Islamists. Using the scholarship of William Shepard, we can distinguish between three types of Islamists, or groups that view Islam as an ideology that puts forth a political agenda and act to implement that agenda. These include traditionalist Islamists, modernist Islamists, and radical Islamists.³

Each type of Islamist also contains a range of subgroups and tendencies as well. In Iran, the radical Islamists that took power after 1979 included three such subgroups (leftists, pragmatists, and conservatives). Thus, post-revolutionary Iranian politics have been dominated by the interaction of these three subgroups of radical Islamists—one of which (the leftists) ultimately evolved to the point of abandoning radical Islamist ideology in the 1990s and adopting a modernist Islamist ideological perspective instead. This shift may appear to be a minor point, but in fact has had important implications for Iranian politics and foreign policy, and is a salient element in the regional interests of the U. S.

Unlike secular ideologies, which avoid the mixing of politics and religion, radical, modernist, and traditionalist Islamists view Islam as a guide to public life; yet they differ in the manner in which Islamist political ideology should be implemented in society. Islamists are thus deeply divided along two cleavages. These include conflicting orientations regarding modernity and "Islamic totalism." Shepard defines the former as placing a high value upon modern material technology, using modern methods of social organization and mobilization, accepting modern political institutions such as parliaments and parties, and a having positive orientation toward change and the notion of progress. He defines the latter as the tendency to view Islam as an inherently all-encompassing, total way of life with specific guidance for the political, economic and social realms.⁴

The upshot is that not all Islamists reject modernity or view Islam as a comprehensive ideology that must dominate all aspects of society. Of the three Islamist types, the radical Islamists are the most committed to the notion of Islamic totalism while simultaneously (and perhaps surprisingly) being more open to modernism and mass-based political action to achieve their goals. Radical Islamists seek to apply their interpretation of *Shari'a* law and Islamic principles to all aspects of social life as extensively as possible, and by all means possible—including employing violence and terrorism. Traditionalist Islamists, by contrast, are inclined to avoid modern forms and modes of political engagement and prefer to emphasize the historical role of Islam in society: mosque-based, scholarly, private and somewhat aloof from the ebb and flow of daily politics. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Iraq is a prominent example of this school of thought today. Modernist Islamists advocate the flexible interpretation of Islamic principles in order to accommodate changes wrought by modern forms of social interaction and technology. They reject the traditionalists' avoidance of overt political involvement and as well as the radicals' goal of imposing a strict Islamist order by all means necessary. Modernists

view Islam as possessing a natural flexibility in the public sphere that can be used "...to interpret Islam in terms congruent with, or at least in very positive dialogue with, one or more Western ideologies."⁵

These different approaches to the role of Islam in politics and society are based on enduring distinctions, yet are often ignored or glossed over by Western analysts and observers. Nevertheless, these ideological differences largely dictate the political agendas advocated by various Islamist groups—including the modernists and radicals in Iran today. Despite the fact that the political factions within the Iranian regime have common roots in the radical Islamist movement that led the 1979 revolution, crucial ideological differences have emerged over time. The Iranian politicians viewed as "reformists" today are themselves former radical Islamists who have changed to be broadly reflective of the modernist Islamist impulse. The politicians who are viewed as "conservatives" remain unreconstructed radical Islamists. The traditionalists never adhered to radical Islamism and represent the vast majority of the Iranian clergy that have largely remained outside government since 1979; they are concerned with the loss of status for the clergy in Iran due to the politicization of a small number of their peers.

The modernist Islamist vision for the future of Iran and Islam stands as a stark alternative to radical Islamism. Modernist Islamist philosophers such as Abdolkarim Soroush in Iran pose two central points that represent breakthroughs in the world of Shi'a Islamic thought and also converge directly with U. S. interests and policies.⁶ The first point is that while Islamic principles are immutable, the human interpretation of them can and should change through time. There can therefore be no monopolistic interpretation of Islam—a claim that strikes at the very core of radical Islamism. The second point is that a truly religious state is one that must be democratic, and "to be a religious man necessitates being a democratic man as well."⁷ The importance of this assertion should not be underestimated, for it represents the indigenous Islamic articulation of a political doctrine that requires democracy as a necessary feature of modern society.

It is important to note that Iran's ongoing experiment in combining theocracy and democracy since 1979 is one that is not easily replicated outside Iran. Iran is a non-Arab, Shi'a country; in a region that is otherwise overwhelmingly Sunni, more than ninety per cent of its population of sixty-eight million subscribe to this minority branch of Islam.⁸ In addition, unlike the experience of most Sunni-dominated polities, Iran's political history has been shaped by the Shi'a belief that legitimate political and religious authority can only be interpreted by qualified *mujtaheds* (Shi'a scholars) who are

located outside the state. Shi'a believers are thus guided by a small number of Grand Ayatollahs who sit at the apex of the clerical hierarchy, the most prominent of whom is the *marja-e taqlid-e motlaq* (Ultimate Source of Emulation).⁹ Sunni Islam has no such hierarchy or tradition. As a result, in Iranian history the *ulama* (clergy) have been exceptionally active in the political arena, but, with the notable exception of the revolution, the clergy has never directly assumed power.¹⁰ Following the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979, the most politicized elements of the clergy emerged at the pinnacle of power in the new Islamic Republic of Iran. The unprecedented capturing of the state was spearheaded by a very small number of clerics who believed in the radical Islamist vision of Ayatollah Khomeini—even today, it is estimated that no more than three per cent of the estimated 200,000 *ulama* in Iran are such "regime clerics."

Islamism and Politics in Iran After 1979

From its inception, public participation and popular will have been important sources of legitimacy for the Islamic Republic. Iran's post-1979 political system features the full range of modern political institutions, including a regularly elected President and *Majles* (Parliament).¹¹ However, based upon Khomeini's doctrine of radical Islamism, the Islamic Republic system has enshrined the notion of the *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the Islamic jurist) where a single cleric serves as the religious and political leader. The system features a powerful set of Islamic oversight mechanisms as well; institutions such as the Assembly of Experts, Council of Guardians and the Supreme Leadership (*Rahbar-e Enqelab*) were created with veto power over the representative institutions. Ayatollah Khomeini served as the *Rahbar*—a position combining ultimate religious and political leadership—until his death in 1989.

The Islamic Republic has faced significant internal tensions in its short history due to this hybrid religious-democratic arrangement. In spite of external threats such as the hostile relationship with the U. S., Iraq's invasion of Iran in September 1980, and the war in neighboring Afghanistan, the most dangerous long-term challenge to the system's legitimacy and survival has come from within the clerical establishment itself—primarily from the internal fracturing of the ruling radical Islamists into competing factions, but from the opposition of traditionalist clerics outside government as well.

Factionalism in the Post-Khomeini Era

According to one contemporary observer of Iranian affairs,

The unchallenged authority and charisma of Ayatol-

lah Ruhollah Khomeini obscured the regime's underlying contradictions.... The divisions within the clerical community, where many traditionalist clerics had long viewed actual assumption of temporal power as inconsistent with Shi'ite theology, went unaided. ... The death of the founder of the Islamic Republic eroded the fragile political consensus and deprived the clerical establishment of its charismatic leader and its institutional coherence.¹²

Even prior to Khomeini's death, intense factionalism was evident among Iran's radical Islamist elite and had driven two notable events. The first was the dissolution of the Islamic Republican Party (IRP) in 1987—formed in 1979 to serve as a unifying political organization for the radical Islamist revolutionary cadres and leadership. The second event was the extra-constitutional creation of the Expediency Council in 1988 to break the legislative gridlock that had emerged between the Majles and the Council of Guardians, which were dominated by opposing factions.¹³ The Expediency Council has since become one of the most powerful political institutions in Iran.

In the 1980s the radical Islamist elite began to fracture into pronounced leftist, pragmatist, and conservative factions as subgroups began to speak to competing constituencies, differ on policy issues, and develop conflicting perspectives on religion's role in society.¹⁴ The leftists dominated the *Majles* in the 1980s. They advocated statist economic policies broadly informed by a blend of Marxism and notions of social justice, fiercely opposed the restoration of ties with the U. S., and were staunch disciples of Ayatollah Khomeini's radical ideology as well as his concept of the *velayat-e faqih*. The conservatives favored *laissez-faire* economic policies and a less dogmatic and revolutionary foreign policy, but were more extreme in terms of their adherence to the application of Islam to the social and cultural realms. Their loyalty to Khomeini's system of the *velayat-e faqih* was less pronounced than that of the leftists, and they were more closely aligned with the traditionalist clergy that opposed the *faqih* system. The pragmatists formed the buffer faction; they emphasized a pro-business approach to economic reconstruction after the devastating 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War and the easing of social and cultural restrictions mandated by radical Islamism.

The core post-Khomeini crisis of legitimacy of the Islamic Republic is born of the fundamental contradictions between unelected theocratic rule, the historical tradition of the Iranian Shi'a clergy's opposition to the state, and constitutionally-based republicanism. The concept of the *velayat-e faqih* is derided and unpopular among the traditionalist clergy in Iran. Virtually all other Grand Ayatollahs—most of whom possessed religious credentials superior to those of Khomeini—publicly

opposed Khomeini's doctrine after the 1979 revolution. Most were treated harshly.¹⁵

Given such opposition, Khomeini's supporters engineered a series of constitutional amendments in the months before his death. One outcome was the separation of the religious and political leadership functions so that the *Rahbar* no longer had to be a religious scholar of unquestionable qualifications. This change allowed for the selection of then-President Ali Khamenei as Khomeini's successor while sidestepping the vociferous protests of the traditionalist clergy. The succession was a rapid process that surprised outside observers, who largely expected a drawn-out crisis to take place. However, the pre-eminent position of religious authority in the Shi'a world, the *marja-e taqlid-e motlaq*, remains unoccupied. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the traditionalist Iranian-born cleric who resides in Najaf, Iraq, is the closest candidate today.¹⁶

The process of replacing Khomeini reflected a grand bargain struck between two factions of the radical Islamists—the conservatives and pragmatists—at the expense of the third faction, the leftists. While the conservatives consolidated their control over key unelected political institutions, the pragmatists (led by *Majles* Speaker Hojjatolislam Ali Akbar Rafsanjani) emerged as a popular political force. The conservative-pragmatist alliance subsequently ended the control of the leftists over the *Majles* by using the Council of Guardians to prevent leftist candidates from running in the 1992 parliamentary elections. The 1989-1992 period therefore marked the definitive fracturing of the radical Islamist elite in Iran. Khamenei became the new *Rahbar*; Rafsanjani was subsequently elected as president for two terms ending in 1997; the conservatives and pragmatists took control of the *Majles*; and the leftists were relegated to the political wilderness. However, according to Anoushiravan Ehteshami, the price of this bargain was high:

The process of succession ... has caused a serious rupture in the religious and political authority (and symbolism) of the spiritual leader of the Islamic state. Ultimately, as we have seen with Khomeini's successor, emphasizing the political at the expense of the religious has necessarily "de-Islamicized" the most religiously authoritative of offices in Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine.¹⁷

The resulting loss of the system's religious legitimacy was exacerbated by poor management of the economy and short-sighted social policies. The 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War resulted in an estimated one million casualties and economic costs of five hundred billion to one trillion dollars. At its peak, the conflict consumed roughly two-thirds of the government's expenditures, resulting in high inflation and massive underinvestment in the

economy throughout the 1980s. Industries and services operated at extremely low levels of output and capacity and suffered from the lack of investment, technology, and skilled labor, as well as a bloated state bureaucracy and ineffective management.¹⁸ By 1989, Iran's economy had been stagnant for fifteen years and the cumulative effects of the war, revolution, and international isolation had dramatically eroded Iran's status as one of the world's best performing developing economies from the 1950s to 1970s. When combined with the challenges posed by Iran's growing population, these developments were immediate sources of political pressure on the radical Islamists—widely perceived to be incapable of addressing their consequences.

Modernist Islamism Emerges in Iran

Following their ejection from politics in the early 1990s, many members of the leftist faction took up positions outside government and suspended their political activities.¹⁹ As observed by Ray Takeyh,

By the early 1990s, an eclectic group of politicians, seminary leaders, religious thinkers, and intellectuals undertook an imaginative reexamination of the role of public participation in an Islamic government. An impressive array of the regime's own loyal soldiers—men who had fought for the clerical state and served in some of its highest posts—found themselves increasingly marginalized by the defenders of strict Islamic orthodoxy, and began subtly defecting from the official line.²⁰

By the mid-1990s, the left wing of the radical Islamist elite in Iran completed a remarkable metamorphosis that transformed them from radical Islamists to modernist Islamists. Influenced by the philosophy of Abdolkarim Soroush, they adopted the perspective that the influence of popular will in the governance structures of the Islamic Republic had to be strengthened to preserve the system. The leftist/modernists thus tapped into deepening public dissatisfaction by stressing the indispensability of the rights and will of the people as well as the rule of law, civil society, and pluralism.²¹

In the meantime, the conservative-pragmatist coalition was unraveling over differences on economic and cultural policy. In early 1996, supporters of President Rafsanjani formed a new political party, the *Kargozaran-e Saẓandegi* (Executives of Construction), and continued to emphasize economic issues at the expense of radical Islamist ideology.²² In the 1996 parliamentary elections, the conservatives unexpectedly lost their majority, and fifty-three per cent of the new MPs declared their support for Rafsanjani and the pragmatists.²³ An even greater surprise occurred during the 1997 presidential elections. In February 1997 the *Kargozaran* threw their support behind Mohammad Khatami, a former cabinet

minister in the 1980s and member of the nascent modernist faction. Khatami's platform reflected a modernist Islamist agenda, which appealed to a wide range of electoral constituencies whose political clout and dissatisfaction was growing—especially among the youth and women.²⁴

Iran's population had exploded in the 1980s due to a 3.8 per cent annual growth rate—increasing from 33.7 million in 1976 to 49.4 million in 1986—further exacerbating economic difficulties. While the growth rate has been reduced to 1.6 per cent today, by the mid-1990s the government could not create enough jobs to absorb the 700,000-800,000 young Iranians entering the job market each year.²⁵ As a result, large numbers of young Iranians were emigrating to the West annually, reaching 200,000 in the late 1990s.²⁶ The sheer size of the baby boom generation, the simultaneous emergence of a robust women's rights movement, and the political demands of both groups are now enduring political realities in Iran. Recent polls show that eighty-four per cent of university students disagree with the direction of the clerical state and only five to six per cent of students watch or read religious materials.²⁷ Women currently comprise over half of all college students (as compared with twelve per cent in 1978), are involved at the highest levels of government, and have successfully pushed for the restoration of their civil rights in key areas in the 1990s.²⁸ The 1997 elections allowed women and youth to express their political preferences in a manner unprecedented in the Islamic Republic's short history, propelling the modernists and Khatami to an unanticipated landslide victory.

The election results marked the beginning of a new phase in post-Khomeini Iranian politics. Khatami received twenty million votes—or sixty-nine per cent—in a race with eighty-eight per cent voter turnout. The new Khatami administration quickly encouraged an expansion of media outlets, civic organizations, and political parties, and the modernists themselves formed a new political party, the *Jebhey-e Mosharekat-e Iran-e Eslami* (Islamic Iran Participation Front, or IIPF).²⁹ The IIPF then entered into a broader alliance with the *Kargozaran*, student, and labor groups to create the “Second of Khoradad Front.” However, compromises were also made between the Front and the radical Islamists—resulting in Khamenei's acceptance of Khatami's election and the modernists' decision to accept the continuing domination of the Council of Guardians and the Assembly of Experts by the radicals.³⁰ In 1999, the Khatami administration implemented a dormant clause of the constitution establishing elected municipal government; the IIPF swept those elections as well, receiving eighty per cent of the vote. Overnight, the number of elected officials in Iran increased from 400 to 200,000 and the

modernists eclipsed the *Kargozaran* as the most popular political party in Iran.

Election results aside, the radical Islamists still held sway over powerful bodies such as the Council of Guardians, Assembly of Experts, and the judiciary—including in little-known courts such as the Press Court and the Special Court for the Clergy. Through the *Rabbar*, they controlled an interlocking network of wealthy quasi-governmental foundations, patronage ties, and shadowy links to the security services and thuggish pressure groups such as the *Ansar-e Hezbollah* and *Basij* that were used to intimidate and physically harass political opponents. All of these tools were employed in a concerted campaign to reassert their control, beginning with the imprisonment of two key allies of President Khatami on trumped-up charges in June and July 1998.³¹ That winter several dissident writers and secular politicians were brutally murdered, and the crimes were traced by the Iranian media to the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) and radical Islamist politicians.³²

Popular sentiment against radical Islamism continued to grow in Iran during the late 1990s, and the modernists gathered greater momentum in the next two major political contests. The elections for the Sixth *Majles* (2000-2004) were held in February 2000, and of the 6,800 candidates only eleven per cent were disqualified by the Council of Guardians. This compared with a thirty-five per cent disqualification rate in the previous *Majles* elections, and indicates the extent to which the radicals were unaware of their own unpopularity or the changes within their former leftist colleagues.³³ The IIPF and its allies won a dominant majority of 220 out of 290 seats, with record voter turnout of eighty-three per cent.³⁴ In 2001, President Khatami easily won reelection against weak opposition from the radical Islamists, and received seventy-seven per cent of the vote.³⁵

These additional, humiliating defeats sparked a strong response from the embattled radicals through the judiciary. Since April 2000, dozens of journalists have been imprisoned and more than one hundred pro-modernist newspapers and magazines have been closed down by the Press Court.³⁶ IIPF MPs have been personally targeted as well, despite the parliamentary immunity provided them in the constitution. During the winter of 2001, three MPs were imprisoned or convicted on charges of criticizing or defaming the courts and in February 2002 sixty others were summoned to answer charges of “corruption.” In addition to this campaign of harassment and intimidation, the radicals have effectively employed their domination of the Council of Guardians and the Expediency Council to thwart pending modernist legislation on reforms to the Press Law,

fiscal policy, the constitution, gender and civil rights, and the penal code.

By 2004, the inability of the modernists to act on their electoral mandates in the face of resolute opposition by the radicals had a pronounced political effect, with public support for the modernists declining noticeably from its peak.³⁷ Sensing this trend, and feeling increasingly insecure due to a combination of their own domestic unpopularity and the Bush administration’s growing belligerence, the radicals escalated their efforts to further roll back the modernist gains. During the February 2004 elections for the Seventh *Majles* (2004-2008) over 2,500 out of 7,700 candidates (mostly from the IIPF) were deemed unfit to stand as candidates by the Council of Guardians. This was four times the number disqualified in the 2000 elections, and remarkably included eighty sitting modernist MPs. The IIPF reacted vehemently but ultimately ineffectively, and the Khatami administration had little choice but to carry out the elections. Not having done so would likely have spurred the radicals to declare a state of emergency, under the guise of national security imperatives, and use the armed forces to seize control of the government—precipitating an unprecedented constitutional and political crisis.

Given the Bush administration’s escalation of pressure on Iran in 2002-2003, such a scenario was viewed by the radicals and members of all factions (including the modernists) who wanted the post-1979 regime to continue, as a direct threat to the regime’s survival. As a result, despite vociferous domestic and international criticism, the radicals’ determination to see the flawed election through remained firm. The final election results confirmed expectations: the radicals controlled 190 seats in the new *Majles* and the modernists fifty seats, with the remainder forming a swing bloc of unaffiliated MPs.³⁸ Voter turnout was a record low fifty-one per cent, down from eighty-three per cent four years earlier.³⁹

It is likely that the radicals will seek to determine the outcome of the 2005 presidential election in the same manner. However, fundamental social changes in Iran—rooted in the continuing demographic boom (the population is expected to surpass eighty million by 2015) and the public’s demands for greater democratization and less radical Islamism in government—are gradually but inexorably shifting the political ground. These changes have affected the frame of reference employed by the radicals themselves, elements of which have responded to their string of resounding electoral defeats in the 1990s by advocating the revamping of their rigid Islamist ideology in order to avoid eventual political oblivion.⁴⁰ For example, the Speaker of the new Seventh *Majles* will be a non-cleric—a first since

1979—and was nominated by the radicals. In this sense, the demands of the public and emergence of the modernist movement have forced a paradigm shift in Iranian politics.

The Foreign Policy Impact of the Modernists

From 1997—2004 the modernists were the dominant political faction in Iran due to their willingness to voice the demands of Iranian voters for a less restrictive social and political environment, improved economic opportunity, greater integration with the outside world, and the normalization of Iran's international relations. The realm of foreign policy is one where the contrast between the two factions—i.e., the “Dialogue Among Civilizations” as advanced by President Khatami versus the fierce opposition of the radical Islamists to improved relations with the U. S., or “Great Satan”—could not be starker. In a recent review of Iranian factional politics, Hossein Seifzadeh characterizes the modernist approach to foreign policy in this manner:

Reformists also view foreign policy as a means of reducing pressures on Iran and the Islamic regime within.... It is hoped that through détente, reducing tensions and conflicts, dialogue among civilizations, coalitions for peace, and political deterrence, it is possible for Iran to increase access to international resources, investments, and markets... [the] reformist doctrine of foreign policy emphasizes the enhancement of human dignity, welfare, and global interdependence.⁴¹

President Khatami's foreign policy thus rejects the notion of the clash of civilizations, believes in the interdependence of societies, advocates a proactive approach, and has yielded significant successes.⁴² Relations have improved with all major European states since 1997, and Iran has helped to create a more harmonious regional environment by significantly improving its ties with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and other Arab states.

Notable progress was made in U. S.-Iranian relations as well. In January 1998 President Khatami gave an unprecedented interview on CNN in which he expressed regret for the 1979 U. S. embassy seizure and hostage crisis and called for a “crack in the wall of mistrust” between the two governments.⁴³ Secretary of State Albright reciprocated in a June 1998 speech, stating a U. S. willingness to seek a genuine reconciliation with Iran and remove the mutual hostility that the Clinton administration viewed as “not insurmountable.”⁴⁴ These comments initiated the increased exchange of athletes and academics, a marked lowering of hostile rhetoric, and the eventual lifting of some trade sanctions on Iran by the United States in 2000. The radical Islamists and Khamenei have continually vetoed the normalization of

relations with the U. S. since 1997, but in doing so were once again out of step with most Iranians. A 2002 poll of Tehran residents showed that seventy-four per cent favored talks with the United States, and seventy-nine per cent supported a dialogue even in the absence of formal relations.⁴⁵ However, the Bush administration has evinced little interest in continuing a comprehensive dialogue with Iran and has instead exerted strong unilateral pressure after 9/11—thus directly undermining the modernist's argument that normal relations with the U. S. would not harm Iran's interests.

Teetering on the Brink: U. S.-Iranian Relations after 9/11

The months immediately following 9/11 seemed to herald a period of improved U. S.-Iranian relations. Spontaneous public demonstrations of support and candlelight vigils for the United States took place in Tehran. Tehran's modernist mayor sent an official message of condolence to New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, and President Khatami unequivocally condemned the 9/11 attacks as “anti-human and anti-Islamic acts” during the global outpouring of sympathy for the U. S.⁴⁶ Iran strongly favored a U. N.-sanctioned, rather than unilateral U. S. response to the attack. Still, U. S. efforts to pursue al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and dislodge the Taliban regime led to an expanding sphere of U. S.-Iranian dialogue and cooperation as both parties sought to maximize the benefits that limited collaboration could offer—the U. S. to uproot al-Qaeda as quickly as possible, and Iran to solidify its influence in post-Taliban Afghanistan. A shakier tactical alliance has taken shape with regard to Iraq, with the notable exception that both sides have grown increasingly suspicious of the motives of the other.

Iran's Stake in Afghanistan and Iraq

Iran has significant interests in Afghanistan, its eastern neighbor with whom it shares a 560-mile border. In addition to historical cultural, linguistic and ethnic ties, twenty per cent of all Afghans are Shi'a. Iran has long pursued the establishment of a stable political atmosphere in Afghanistan that would permit the repatriation of two million Afghan refugees residing in Iran since the 1990s and prevent the influx of new refugees. Staunching the massive flow of narcotics from Afghanistan is another Iranian priority. According to the U. S. Department of State, Afghanistan is the source of two-thirds of the world's illicit opium, and in 2003 Iran ranked first in the world in opiate drug seizures due to its robust interdiction efforts along the Afghan border.⁴⁷

Finally, Iran has a vested interest in seeing the Northern Alliance triumph definitively in Afghanistan. Iran actively supported the Afghan resistance against the So-

viet occupation throughout the 1980s—in particular, a group of half a dozen Afghan warlords (mainly Shi'a Hazara and ethnic Tajik and Uzbeks) that formed the core of the Northern Alliance. Following the Soviet withdrawal, Iran continued its support for the Alliance, which then became embroiled in a civil war in the 1990s against the Pakistan-backed Taliban, a radical Islamist movement comprised primarily of Sunni ethnic Pashtuns that view Shi'as as heretics. By 2001 the Northern Alliance had suffered numerous defeats, but doggedly retained control over ten per cent of Afghanistan's territory. Nevertheless, its continuing survival and subsequent ability to assist the U. S. in ejecting the Taliban from power was largely due to support from Iran and Russia.

After 9/11, Iran took a number of steps that directly benefited the U. S. It used its longstanding influence to persuade the leaders of the Northern Alliance to sign the Bonn Accords in December 2001, in which the main Afghan political factions agreed on the formation and makeup of an interim post-Taliban government under Hamid Karzai. This agreement was essential to the U. S.-led effort to overthrow the Taliban. Other similar actions included Iran's offer to conduct search-and-rescue missions for U. S. pilots and the provision of a port for the shipment of U. S. wheat into Afghanistan.⁴⁸ The U. S. further benefited from Iran's participation in the January 2002 Tokyo conference that brought together representatives from over fifty countries and eighteen international organizations to arrange crucial international financial support for the Karzai government. Iran was one of the largest donors at the conference and pledged to provide \$560 million in aid to Afghanistan over five years—starting with \$120 million in grants and loans in 2002.⁴⁹

With the Taliban's defeat in late 2001, the impetus for U. S.-Iranian collaboration in Afghanistan began to wane, spurred by increasing mutual suspicion and rivalry on the ground. Iran's growing sense of strategic encirclement and U. S.-orchestrated limits on its regional influence led it to gradually adopt a siege mentality.⁵⁰ The United States accused Iran of destabilizing Afghanistan's central government by supporting regional warlords, as well as providing safe haven and transit to prominent members of al-Qaeda in the aftermath of the U. S. invasion.⁵¹ Moreover, the Bush administration became preoccupied with Iraq as 2002 progressed.⁵²

The U. S. shift to the Iraqi front provided Iran with additional opportunities that could be leveraged to improve its regional geopolitical influence and resolve longstanding security concerns, but raised other concerns about spreading instability and U. S. power in Southwest Asia. Iran and Iraq share a 660-mile border and strong historical linkages; Najaf in Iraq and Qom in

Iran are the two main centers of Shi'a learning and scholarship in the world and are connected by centuries of personal and communal interaction among the Shi'a clergy. Iran also has a direct interest in preventing the emergence of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq due to a fear of the spillover effect. Iran's Kurds, who comprise roughly ten per cent of the overall population, reside mainly along the western border with Iraq. Stability in Iraq would allow for the repatriation of roughly 500,000 Iraqi refugees that have been residing in Iran and prevent the inflow of others.

Lastly, Iran considers Iraq to be its primary security threat. A main goal of Iranian foreign policy since the early 1980s has been the removal of Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq—an objective that extended the Iran-Iraq War until 1988 and ensured Iran's neutrality during the 1990-1991 Gulf War. The Iran-Iraq War, regional rivalry, and ideological antipathy have led each country to host the exiled opposition groups of the other. Iran has supported, trained, and equipped the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), a prominent Shi'a resistance group, since its formation in Tehran in the 1980s. For its part, Iraq has provided the *Mojahedin-e Khalq* (MEK), an Iranian opposition organization that has Marxist-Islamist roots, with sanctuary and equipment since 1986.

Operation Iraqi Freedom has provided Iran with the opportunity to achieve elusive strategic victories on three fronts: the end of Saddam Hussein's regime, assisting SCIRI with its entry into post-Saddam Iraq as a viable political force, and eliminating the MEK as a direct security threat. To achieve these goals, Iran acquiesced to the U. S. invasion of Iraq despite its suspicions of long-term U. S. intentions and concerns over the conflict's consequences.

The toppling of Saddam Hussein achieved the first of these goals. Elements of SCIRI's Badr Brigade—a force of 10,000-15,000 fighters trained by Iran's Revolutionary Guards—publicly entered Iraq early in the U. S.-led invasion.⁵³ In a manner reminiscent of Hezbollah in Lebanon, with Iranian support SCIRI has become an active force on the ground in Iraq and provides the Shi'a population with badly needed food, medical care, schools, and security.⁵⁴ Despite U. S. suspicions that Iran intends to destabilize post-Saddam Iraq, Iran has refrained from supporting radical Islamists (such as Moqtada Sadr) in favor of using its connections with the Iraqi Shi'a hierarchy to pave the way for a successful transfer of power to a democratic Iraqi government where the Shi'a can exert their influence.⁵⁵

Lastly, the MEK remains a security concern for Iran, but one that has been eroded now that its sponsor and protector—Saddam Hussein—is no longer in power. MEK camps in Iraq were bombed by U. S. forces in

April 2003 during Operation Iraqi Freedom, and eventually surrounded by U. S. forces—according to U. S. National Security advisor Condoleezza Rice, to prevent the group from “engaging in terrorist activities, including activities against Iran.”⁵⁶ According to media reports and Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez (the senior U. S. military commander in Iraq), under the terms of a cease-fire negotiated between the U. S. and MEK the approximately 3,700 MEK fighters in Iraq have been “separated from their combat equipment” but remain in their camps under the protection of U. S. forces.⁵⁷ The Bush administration admits it is preventing the MEK’s return to Iran in order to protect its members from likely persecution; at the same time, other reports indicate that the MEK’s fate has become subject to a fierce struggle in the administration between those who view them as a terrorist organization and those who want to use them as leverage or bargaining chip to convince Iran not to meddle in Iraqi affairs.⁵⁸

The Bush Administration and Iran

Despite its episodic cooperation with Iran in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration claims to view the Iranian regime as inimical to U. S. security and interests. The extent to which Iran is considered a threat was revealed during the 2002 State of the Union address, when President Bush stated that

Iran aggressively pursues [weapons of mass destruction] and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people’s hope for freedom... States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.⁵⁹

Yet, the assertions of the Bush administration regarding the level of threat posed by Iran to U. S. interests appear to be just as problematic for lack of conclusive and supporting intelligence as the exaggerated and highly selective presentation of facts during the build up to war with Iraq.⁶⁰ The axis of evil concept has been strongly criticized on the grounds that it wrongly implies an alliance of sorts between Iran, Iraq, and North Korea and reinforces the image of the U. S. after 9/11 as an aggressive hegemonic power. This perception of the United States has had a pronounced effect in Iran and has led to a strong nationalist reaction from all factions. For example, the response of the Iranian leadership to the statement, provided by a furious President Khatami, was that Bush’s axis of evil accusation was “bellicose and insulting,” and that as long as the U. S. was “threatening, insulting, and humiliating us, neither myself nor the nation is ready to accept any relations.”⁶¹

It is evident that the Bush administration is dissatisfied with the inability of President Khatami and the modernists to alter the aspects of Iranian foreign policy that the U. S. finds most disturbing—mainly, the “Three

Sins”: Iran’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, support for terrorism (primarily Hezbollah, HAMAS, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad), and opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process.⁶² However, Iran retains a great capacity to help ease or complicate the evolving situation in Southwest Asia. Given this reality and the Bush Doctrine, the U. S. finds itself in an undefined and complicated relationship with Iran today: it regularly condemns a range of Iranian activities, but also relies on at least tacit collaboration with Iran to contain instability in Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran’s generally cautious policies and unwillingness to extend direct support to the Shi’a insurgents in southern Iraq reflect the emphasis on stability that Iran seeks and which in turn benefits the U. S. as well. Nevertheless, since 2002 the Bush administration has chosen to effectively terminate serious dialogue and collaboration with Iran. The main exception to this decision has been the provision of humanitarian assistance to Iran following the devastating Bam earthquake in December 2003, as well as some limited, low-level interactions. The Bush administration’s overall shift to a more confrontational posture has been driven by two related sets of factors: the ascendancy of the influence of hawks within the administration’s policy-making bodies, and the misplaced nature of U. S. pressure on Iran.

There is a well-documented internal rivalry for control over the crafting of foreign policy within the Bush administration.⁶³ Administration hawks, including Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and their staffs, urge the projection of U. S. power—unilateral and military if necessary—against states that are suspected of supporting terrorist organizations. The doves in the administration, including Secretary of State Colin Powell, urge a more pragmatic approach. They were instrumental in supporting U. S.-Iranian dialogue in 2001 and 2002 and felt that the U. S. and Iran viewed the immediate post-9/11 security situation in the same manner.⁶⁴ After 9/11 the ascendancy of the perspective of the hawks was reflected by the tougher U. S. posture vis-à-vis Iraq, the United Nations, France, and Germany (“Old Europe”)—as well as Iran.

Continued collaboration with Iran in Afghanistan was no longer seen by the Bush administration as constructive in light of the larger goal of pursuing regime change in Iraq as well as Iran’s own suspicious activities and support for terrorist organizations. This conclusion was seemingly justified in the wake of the January 2002 Karine-A affair, when a ship carrying a large covert cargo of weapons destined for the Occupied Territories allegedly originating in Iran was intercepted by Israel with great fanfare. According to Daniel Brumberg in 2002,

[H]opes for engagement [between the U. S. and Iran] were all but dashed by Israel's seizure in early January of the Karine-A—a ship filled with 50 tons of armaments that, according to credible intelligence sources, had been loaded by Iranians. This event confirmed the worst fears of U. S. administration hawks. They had long argued that Iran's reformists have no real power—or worse yet, that some of their leading lights, such as President Khatami himself, are using the appearance of reform to legitimize a regime sinking in economic and political quicksand. Rather than throw it a rope, the hawks held that Washington should pursue a policy of confrontation with Tehran.⁶⁵

While the subsequent “axis of evil” accusation was an initial warning to Iran, additional indications of the Bush administration's changing policy emerged in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. In the spring of 2002, Iran was directly warned by President Bush not to destabilize Afghanistan, while the *2002 Nuclear Posture Review*, a report prepared by the Pentagon for Congress every six years regarding the status of U. S. nuclear forces, included Iran as a target for a pre-emptive U. S. nuclear strike.⁶⁶ Media reports of the classified document listed seven countries (Libya, Syria, China, Russia, Iran, Iraq, and North Korea) against which nuclear strikes would be employed under certain conditions—such as against installations able to withstand non-nuclear attack, in retaliation for attacks by WMD, or due to “surprising military developments.”⁶⁷ In July 2002, administration officials claimed that Khatami and his supporters were “too weak, ineffective, and not serious” and that the administration would henceforth “seek to support the Iranian people ‘directly.’”⁶⁸ In December 2002, the U. S. unveiled a new effort at reaching the Iranian public through Radio Farda, a government-funded radio station that would target young Iranians. In the same month, new evidence of Iranian nuclear facilities led the U. S. to claim that “[T]hey [the nuclear facilities] were not justified by the needs of Iran's civilian nuclear program...[and that the U. S.] had reached the conclusion that Iran is actively working to develop nuclear weapons.”⁶⁹

By May 2003 and the end of combat operations in Iraq, the Bush administration's focus returned to Iran. Spurred by suspicions that al-Qaeda operatives hiding in Iran had been involved with suicide bombings in Saudi Arabia, it unilaterally ended informal talks that had been proceeding between Iran and the U. S. in Geneva on counter-terrorism issues.⁷⁰ These had been the first direct, high-level discussions that had taken place between the U. S. and Iran since 1979 and were an outgrowth of the collaboration in Afghanistan against al-Qaeda. The U. S. also ratcheted up its rhetorical pressure regarding

the treatment of student protesters in June 2003, warned against Iranian “meddling” in Iraq, and began to strongly criticize Iran's lack of compliance with the IAEA nuclear inspection regime.⁷¹ Hawks within the Bush administration have consistently and publicly advocated a policy of regime change in Iran as well. The Pentagon went as far as to propose a massive covert program to destabilize the regime via aggressive support for the MEK in late May 2003.⁷² The cumulative effect of these actions was to spur a strong nationalist backlash in Iran while simultaneously rendering the modernists vulnerable to the radicals' accusations of treason and creating “social tension” for their support of dialogue with the U. S.⁷³

The second set of factors affecting the Bush administration's approach to Iran stem from the self-fulfilling manner in which the administration's actions regarding Iran have exacerbated the most objectionable aspects of Iranian behavior (the so-called “Three Sins”). Recent U. S. pressure on Iran has come at an extremely delicate stage in the political evolution of the Islamic Republic. The reassertion of control by the radicals, in part due to U. S. rhetoric, has increased the real and potential dangers to the United States, creating a more complex security environment in Southwest Asia.

Instead of the Iranian regime giving ground on its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, for example, in the face of U. S. insistence—as in the case of Libya—Iran has by all accounts accelerated its nuclear program in recent years. The Bush administration's own actions have raised fears about U. S. military action against Iran and encouraged the Iranian leadership to acquire the capability to produce a nuclear weapon.⁷⁴ According to recent analyses, the desire to deter the U. S. now appears to be “the main driver of Iran's nuclear ambitions,” regardless of whether or not Iran can actually overcome the vast conventional and unconventional advantage of the U. S.⁷⁵

Even as Iran accepted the intrusive Additional Protocols to its Safeguard Agreement with the IAEA in December 2003, it stated its intent to fulfill its legal right to develop and control the full nuclear fuel cycle for peaceful purposes.⁷⁶ Iran has also affirmed that it would continue to enrich uranium and make the end product available for sale on world markets through the IAEA.⁷⁷ The U. S. response has been blunt: it will not tolerate the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran, and if Iran were found to be in violation of its IAEA obligations, it would consider strong measures. According to President Bush, “For regimes that choose defiance, there are serious consequences.”⁷⁸ The prospect of a future showdown over Iran's nuclear program is therefore a distinct possibility that could significantly erode regional and global security.

The Bush administration has also not been able to prevent Iranian involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, nor has it been able to enlist significant Iranian help in the campaign against al-Qaeda. Continuing instability in the aftermath of the U. S. military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, coupled with the goal of preventing regional destabilization, have led Iran to maintain and strengthen its relations with its allies on the ground in both countries. In Afghanistan, Iran maintains close ties with Ismail Khan, the warlord governor of Herat province (adjacent to the Iranian border) and has been active in promoting Iranian aid to sympathetic local leaders and populations.⁷⁹ In Iraq, the Iranian-inspired and equipped SCIRI organization continues to expand its presence throughout the southern part of the country despite U. S. warnings regarding the “unhelpful” nature of that presence.⁸⁰ Moreover, while Iran has deported over 500 al-Qaeda operatives caught transiting Iran in 2001 and 2002 to their home countries, a large number remain in Iranian custody. These include Saad bin Laden (Osama bin Laden’s son), Ayman al-Zawahiri (al-Qaeda’s second in-command), and Saif al-Adel (al-Qaeda’s third-in command); Iran has rejected repeated U. S. requests for their extradition, and has indicated that they will be put on trial in Iran.⁸¹

Lastly, the Bush administration has provided the radical Islamists in Iran a trump card vis-à-vis their modernist rivals. Since 2002 the radicals have been able to plausibly claim that Iranians must unify against growing U. S. bellicosity, which poses a direct threat to Iran’s stability and hard-won independence. Despite deep internal political divisions, this argument resonates with Iranians of all political stripes. Most Iranians reject the prospect of a U. S. intervention in Iran on nationalist grounds as well as the sordid nature of previous U. S. interference in Iran—such the central U. S. role during the Mossadeq coup in 1953 and strong U. S. support for the autocratic Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The overarching logic of national security has also provided the radicals with the rationale to squash internal political dissent for the time being. While this crackdown and the attendant reversal of democratization began in 1999, it has been emboldened since 2002 (as demonstrated by the heavily circumscribed 2004 parliamentary elections).

The resurgence of the radical Islamists in Iran has also allowed them to stave off the unveiling and extirpation of their murky ties with other radical Islamist groups throughout the region—including in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, the Occupied Territories, and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. These ties are the basis of longstanding U. S. accusations that Iran is the world’s premiere state sponsor of terrorism and have accounted for the most adventurous aspects of Iran’s post-1979 foreign policy. Notable instances have included Iran’s

fomenting of radical Islamism throughout the Persian Gulf in the 1980s and its ongoing financial and political support for radical Islamists in Lebanon (Hezbollah) and the Occupied Territories (HAMAS, Islamic Jihad). The support itself is made possible by the continuing access of the radical Islamists to vast resources within the Iranian state—access that is sheltered by their control over the unelected institutions of power within the Islamic Republic. It is important to note that in addition to its role in supporting terrorism outside Iran, this radical Islamist network is also responsible for terrorism against the Iranian population through the assassination, intimidation, and harassment of political dissidents at home and abroad. Ironically, it was the modernist Islamist movement in Iran that had been gradually but successfully uncovering this hidden nexus of power and holding it accountable to public scrutiny since 1997. That progress, along with the broader modernist movement, has clearly stalled since 2002 along with the deterioration in U. S.-Iranian relations.

Taking Stock of the Last Three Years

The rise of modernist Islamism in Iran represents a political breakthrough of great historical significance for Iran and the broader Islamic world. The modernists’ emergence is a process rooted in the ideological factionalization that has occurred within Islamists in Iran and in the demands of Iranian youth and women for democracy, social liberalization, and economic opportunity. However, the Bush administration’s pressure has affected Iran’s internal politics by drawing attention the potential threat posed by the United States to Iran. Prior to President Bush’s January 2002 State of the Union address, radical Islamists in Iran were under tremendous political pressure and unable to deflect an increasing public focus on their ties to radical Islamist organizations and continuing, unaccountable behavior. In the wake of their stunning electoral defeats in 1997—2001, the radicals had made significant political concessions—including the relaxation of efforts to impose radical Islamist social and cultural mores on the population, the toleration of unprecedented levels of civil society activism, public political debate and criticism, and the opening up of the previously taboo topics such as gender rights, corruption, and political intimidation and repression. Regardless of the ability of the theocratic regime to manipulate election outcomes as in 1992 or 2004, radical Islamism has unmistakably become a highly unpopular ideology in Iran today.

The United States could be taking advantage of the internal political trends in Iran to help achieve its regional foreign policy goals and set the stage for a long-term rapprochement with Iran. Such an approach would be based on the long-term interest in stability shared by

Iran and the U. S. in Southwest Asia, as well as Iran's shift from its radical Islamist ideology of the 1980s to the modernist agenda of cooperation and moderation. Instead, the Bush administration's policies are widening the gulf between the two countries, becoming increasingly ineffective due to consequences of its own making, and have strengthened the hand of radical Islamists in Iran's internal power struggle—a struggle they had been emphatically losing before 9/11.

A salient calculation in U. S. efforts to pressure the clerical regime is that Iran's large youth population is more inclined than the modernists to press for greater democracy and openness. Mindful of the unpopularity of radical Islamism in Iran, the Bush administration has publicly supported the Iranian people's desire for democratization while distancing itself from dialogue with the Iranian regime on the premise that none of its political factions are representative of the public's aspirations. At the same time, the Bush administration has demonstrated a reckless disregard for the long-term implications of its role in eroding the democratic institutions of governance in Iran—the creation and nurturing of which is ostensibly the core objective of its foreign policy. Moreover, the Bush administration's Iran policy has degenerated into a simplified “people vs. regime” dichotomy based on the exaggerated view that the Islamic Republic lacks popular legitimacy. While Iran's modernists have clearly lost popular support in recent years, this has not been due to a rejection of their ideology or political agenda, but rather to the unwillingness of radical Islamists to allow democratic governance to progress in a manner congruent with the will of the public. Nevertheless, the emergence of modernist Islamism continues to reverberate in the political system and has transformed and moderated the fundamental context within which politics occur in Iran. The ongoing social changes in Iran will only magnify this transformation over time, and do not at all imply—as the Bush administration seems to believe—that modernist Islamism is a spent force.

As Joseph Nye has recently noted, the struggle against radical Islamism is not a clash of civilizations, but rather “a contest closely tied to the civil war raging within Islamic civilization between moderates and extremists. The United States and its allies will win only if they adopt policies that appeal to those moderates.”⁸² By dismissing the significance of the profound distinctions between Iran's modernist and radical Islamists, the Bush administration has perpetuated the inability of the United States to influence or comprehend Iran's internal politics while undermining its own efforts to combat terrorism after 9/11.

NOTES

¹Peter Dombrowski and Rodger Payne, “Global Debate and the Limits of the Bush Doctrine,” *International Studies Perspectives* 4:4 (2003): 397.

²Remarks by President George W. Bush on 20 September 2001 to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, available online at the White House, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>> (25 March 2004).

³These typologies were drawn from a more in-depth and refined analysis conducted by William Shepard. For more on this excellent analytical framework, see William Shepard, “Islam and Ideology: Towards a Typology,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19:3 (August 1987): 307-335.

⁴Shepard, “Islam and Ideology,” 308.

⁵Shepard, “Islam and Ideology,” 311.

⁶Mohsen Milani, “Islam and Iran,” in *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform?* ed. John Esposito (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1997), 90.

⁷Abdolkarim Soroush, as quoted in Robin Wright, *The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran* (New York, NY: Knopf, 2000), 40.

⁸Iran's official state religion is Twelver Shi'ism. Other Shi'a majority countries in the Muslim world include Iraq and Azerbaijan, both Iran's neighbors.

⁹The *marja-e-taqlid-e motlaq* is the highest position and is normally occupied by the most respected theological scholar and conferred through the consensus of the other Grand Ayatollahs. Grand Ayatollahs achieve their status only after decades of teaching and research and the completion of a religious treatise that demonstrates an exceptional grasp of religious law and principles. In addition to the Grand Ayatollahs, the other main levels of Shi'a hierarchy (in descending order) include Ayatollahs and Hojjatolislams.

¹⁰Nikkie Keddie, “Origins of the Religious-Radical Alliance in Iran,” *Past and Present* 34 (July 1966): 70.

¹¹Mohsen Milani, “Islam and Iran,” 82-83. Since the 1979 referendum, there have been eight presidential elections, six parliamentary elections, four Assembly of Experts elections (including the first for drafting the constitution), one constitutional amendment referendum, and most recently in 1999 and 2003, the first local and municipal elections.

¹²Ray Takeyh, “Iran's Emerging National Compact,” *World Policy Journal*, 19:3 (Fall 2002): 43-44.

¹³Mohsen Milani, “Islam in Iran,” 87.

¹⁴Ali Banuazizi, “Iran's Revolutionary Impasse: Political Factionalism and Societal Resistance,” *Middle East Report* 191 (November-December 1994): 2.

¹⁵These included Ayatollahs Shariatmadari, Golpayegani, Araki, Tabatabai-Qomi, Shirazi, Rohani, Najafi, and Sistani and Kho'ei (the latter two resided in Najaf, Iraq). Shariatmadari was accused of involvement in a plot to kill Khomeini and excommunicated in an unprecedented fashion.

¹⁶Dilip Hiro, *Neighbors Not Friends: Iran and Iraq after the Gulf War* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), 207. The last undisputed *marja-e taqlid motlaq* for all Shi'as, including those outside Iran, was Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi in the 1960s.

¹⁷Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Islamic Governance in Post-Khomeini Iran," in *Islamic Fundamentalism*, eds. Abdel Salam Sidahmed and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 146.

¹⁸Hooshang Amirahmadi, *Revolution and Economic Transition in Iran* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 145-146.

¹⁹"The Left Wing: Formation and Tendencies," *Tavana* (Iranian weekly magazine) 1:22 (2 August 1998): 8-9.

²⁰Ray Takeyh, "Iran at a Crossroads," *Middle East Journal* 57:1 (Winter 2003): 44.

²¹Hossein Seifzadeh, "The Landscape of Factional Politics and Its Future in Iran," *Middle East Journal*, 57:1 (Winter 2003): 66.

²²"The Executives of Construction Group," *Salaam* (Iranian daily newspaper) (18 May 1997), 9; and "Iran: The Struggle for the Revolution's Soul," *ICG Middle East Report No.5* (Brussels, Belgium: International Crisis Group, 5 August 2002), 12, available online at: <http://www.crisisweb.org/projects/middleeast/iraq_iran_gulf/reports/A400729_05082002.pdf> (12 May 2004).

²³Matthew Wells, "Thermidor in the Islamic Republic of Iran: The Rise of Muhammad Khatami," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 26:1 (May 1999): 36.

²⁴Dilip Hiro, *Neighbors Not Friends*, 226.

²⁵"Minister Says 70 Per cent of Iran's Jobless Unskilled," *IRNA*, (23 July 2002).

²⁶"Khatami Hopes for More Tolerance, Rule of Law in New Iranian Year," *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)* (20 March 2002).

²⁷*Iran Times* (2 August 2002). Dilip Hiro, *Neighbors Not Friends*, 247.

²⁸These include recent revisions to divorce and custody laws, the restoration of women as judges, the appointment of a female Vice President, and the election of women to parliament since the early 1980s.

²⁹Prior to 1997, thirty-nine parties were officially licensed by the so-called Article 10 Commission (which has constitutional oversight authority); this number rose to 103 by January 2000. By 1998, there were also 890 newspapers and magazines—almost four times the number that existed in 1979; fifty daily newspapers accounted for a circulation of 3.5 million, with ten of them being pro-Khatami.

³⁰Stephen Fairbanks, "A New Era for Iran?" *Middle East Policy* 5:3 (October 1997), available online at <www.mepc.org/public.asp/journal/vol5/9710_fairbanks.as.p.> (10 June 2003). The Assembly of Experts retains nominal oversight over the Supreme Leader.

³¹Geneive Abdo, "Electoral Politics in Iran." These were Abdollah Nouri and Gholamhossein Karbaschi (the mayor of Tehran). Nouri later became the top vote-getter during the 1999 municipal elections for Tehran's fifteen council seats, winning 589,000 votes out of 1.4 million cast.

³²The public outcry over these murders sparked an intense media investigation led by journalist Akbar Ganji—who was then himself sentenced to prison in 2000.

³³Dilip Hiro, *Neighbors Not Friends*, 254.

³⁴"Political Factions in the Sixth Iranian Majlis," *Hamsabari* (Iranian daily newspaper) (9 September 2000) 8: 2213, 5.

³⁵"Iran: The Struggle for the Revolution's Soul," 22.

³⁶"The Iranian Media in 2003," *RFE/RL Iran Report* 6:50 (29 December 2003), available online at <<http://www.rferl.org/reports/iran-report/2003/12/50-291203.asp>> (19 May 2004).

³⁷"Iran Students See More Radicalism After Crackdown," *Reuters* (22 June 2003).

³⁸Golnaz Esfandiari, "Conservatives Dominate New Iranian Parliament," *RFE/RL* (27 May 2004).

³⁹"Tehran Announces Final Election Results," *RFE/RL Iran Report* 7:9 (March 2004), available online at <<http://www.rferl.org/reports/iran-report/>> (8 March 2004).

⁴⁰Ray Takeyh, "Iran at a Crossroads," 51-52. Takeyh asserts that "conservative pragmatism" is tacitly supported by the *Rahbar* and is rooted in the realization that coercion is ultimately unsustainable and cannot suppress a defiant reform movement over a prolonged period of time. See also Golnaz Esfandiari, "Conservatives Dominate New Iranian Parliament."

⁴¹Hossein Seifzadeh, "The Landscape of Factional Politics and Its Future in Iran," 71.

⁴²R.K. Ramazani, "The Shifting Premise of Iran's Foreign Policy: Towards a Democratic Peace?" *Middle East Journal* 52:2 (Spring 1998): 181.

⁴³"Khatami Suggests Warmer Relations With U. S.," CNN.com (7 January 1998), available online at <<http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9801/07/iran/>> (19 August 2004)

⁴⁴R.K. Ramazani, "The Shifting Premise of Iran's Foreign Policy," 186.

⁴⁵"Poll on U. S. Relations Causes Controversy," *RFE/RL Iran Report*, 5:36 (7 October 2002), available online at <<http://www.rferl.org/reports/iran-report/>> (17 June 2003).

⁴⁶Gawdat Bahgat, "Iran, the United States, and the War on Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 26:2 (March 2003): 95.

⁴⁷*2003 International Narcotics Strategy Report* (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Department of State, released March 2004); available online at <<http://www.state.gov/g/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2003/index.htm>> (12 May 2004).

⁴⁸Gawdat Bahgat, "Iran, the United States, and the War on Terrorism," 95.

⁴⁹"Iran to Extend Dlr 10 Million of Emergency Aid to Afghanistan," *IRNA* (21 January 2002).

⁵⁰Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Iran's International Posture After the Fall of Baghdad," *Middle East Journal* 58:2 (Spring 2004): 187.

⁵¹Gawdat Bahgat, "Iran, the United States, and the War on Terrorism," 96.

⁵²For more details, see Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack: The Road to War* (New York, NY: Simon & Shuster, 2004).

⁵³"Badr Brigade Can Complicate U.S. Invasion Plans," *Gulf News Online Edition* (4 March 2003), available online at

<<http://www.gulf-news.com/Articles/news.asp?ArticleID=79372>> (18 May 2004).

⁵⁴"Iran Sways Iraqis with Food, Aid," *Christian Science Monitor* (9 June 2003).

⁵⁵"Iranian Officials Discuss Iraq, Nuclear Activities," (22 April 2004), available online at <<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2004/4/05180F0A-2394-4167-8892-CB4BF8483F76.html>> (10 May 2004).

⁵⁶Glenn Kessler, "Rice Clarifies Stand on Iranian Group," *Washington Post* (13 November 2003), A22.

⁵⁷Peter Goodspeed, "Iranian Guerilla Army Complicates U. S. Plans," *National Post* (15 September 2003); David Holley, "U. S. Holds Former Iranian Fighters in Iraq," *Los Angeles Times* (11 September 2003).

⁵⁸Kessler, "Rice Clarifies Stand on Iranian Group."

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