The coup of 1953 made the Islamic Revolution of 1979 possible, even predictable. The Shah proceeded to create a rigid authoritarian state, relying on an extensive secret police apparatus to maintain order. The coup essentially destroyed the delicate internal balance of power, with the monarchy coexisting with assertive parliaments and prime ministers. The National Front that was the main engine of the modern middle class’s aspirations was effectively crushed when the monarchy proved relentlessly hostile to leftist and moderate political parties. As the secular opposition was repressed and its leaders and politicians imprisoned, the clerical establishment emerged as the main venue of opposition politics. The clerical community largely stayed out of the 1953 nationalization crisis, while at critical junctures it even assisted the restoration of the monarchy. However, by the 1960s more militant clerics such as Ayatollah Khomeini were coming to the forefront and mobilizing the impressive clerical network against the regime. Given the fact that the secular forces were largely decimated, the clerics with their privileged mosque sanctuaries managed to appropriate the leadership of the evolving anti-Shah opposition.

Toward the end of his life, Ayatollah Khomeini reemerged as the leader of a populist revolution and an Islamic Republic that pledged to remake the entire region into its image. Beyond doubt, the forbidding Iranian cleric remains one of the most significant figures in the contemporary Middle East. Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolution would thus be a curious mixture of ideological flexibility,
relentless determination and tactical retreats. A coalition that featured clerics, westernized intellectuals, defiant students, middle-class professionals, and traditional merchants would be held together by a cleric who came to personify Iran’s struggles and tribulations. Ayatollah Khomeini offered something to everyone: he was a religious leader who would redeem the prophetic quest for construction of a pious order; a Third worldlist with a determination to emancipate his state from America’s encroaching capitalist empire; a modernist with an appreciation of democratic ideals, a defender of women and the oppressed; and always, a Persian nationalist seeking to restore Iran to its rightful place. Far from being a monolithic platform, Ayatollah Khomeini’s message was an opportunistic one that concealed his essential objectives in order to broaden his coalition.

Despite the clerical determination to assume power, a look back at Iran in 1979 actually reveals the influence of the secular forces. The first post-revolution prime minister of Iran was Mehdi Bazargan, who despite his revolutionary disposition was a true democrat. The liberal movement led by the venerable National Front with its strong nationalist credentials commanded substantial support among the middle class and was strongly represented in the new provisional government. Even the radical Left still had a growing audience, particularly among the youth and industrial workers. The discursive message of the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK), with its mixture of Marxism and Islam, still lured many university students. The Fadayan-e Khalq could still mobilize hundreds of thousands for their demonstrations, and their newspaper enjoyed widespread circulation. Even the Communist Party, the Tudeh, with its long history of struggle against the monarchy and claims of economic justice, proved tantalizing to an intelligentsia attuned to the cause of Third World liberation.

The original draft of the Islamic Republic’s constitution was a further rebuke to Ayatollah Khomeini’s vision of theocratic absolutism. Modeled along
the lines of the French constitution, the Iranian document encompassed provisions for a strong presidency, an elected assembly, and individual rights. The notion of clerical monopoly of power and the subordination of the popular will to the dictates of a Supreme Leader was markedly absent. Despite vague assertions of Islam’s importance to the nation, the document was not just progressive but reflected the influence of the secular parties and leftist forces. The critical question remains: How did Ayatollah Khomeini and his disciples manage to silence such an impressive array of actors?

Unlike the divided secular opposition and the quietist ayatollahs, Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters had long honed their organizational skills through decades of exile and oppositional activities. Through the effective use of mosques (Iran’s only nationwide network), the creation of shadowy organizations with their own militias and effective manipulation of external crises, Ayatollah Khomeini gradually managed to displace his challengers. At every step of the way, he and his supporters proved more ardent in their faith, manipulative in their conduct, and merciless in their retaliations. Soon after returning to Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini implored his allies to be vigilant and aggressive in their efforts to establish the theocratic order. Through domination of the revolutionary committees overseeing local affairs, appropriation of the defunct regime’s wealth, and mobilization of their zealous supporters, Ayatollah Khomeini and his allies fashioned a parallel regime with more authority than the tentative and moderate provisional government. While the government continued to issue orders, the secretive Council of the Revolution, manned by Ayatollah Khomeini loyalists such as Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Ali Khamenei, and Muhammad Beheshti, was busy countermanding its decisions. However, to truly consolidate their power, the revolutionaries still needed a crisis that would effectively radicalize the population and discredit their foes. In addition, the American embassy proved a tantalizing target. On Sunday, November 4, 1979, a group of Iranian students took over the
U.S. embassy in Tehran, beginning a crisis that would last 444 days. The ostensible purpose of the hostage taking was the students’ alarm that the admission of the ailing Shah to the United States for medical treatment was an attempt by Washington to orchestrate a coup against Iran’s nascent revolution like coup of 1953. In the midst of the enveloping turmoil, Iran held elections for parliament and for the Assembly of Experts, which was to evaluate the draft constitution. In the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, the clerical hard-liners and their political party, the Islamic Republican Party (IRP), came to dominate the new parliament, further buttressing their encroaching institutional dominance. In a similar vein, the Islamist forces captured the majority of seats in the Assembly of Experts, ensuring them a commanding voice in the revision of the constitution. Ayatollah Khomeini blessed the new assembly, insisting that the “constitution must be 100 percent Islamic.”

The new constitution created the unprecedented theory of velayat-e faqih whereby a religious leader would oversee all national affairs. This office, had virtually unlimited responsibilities and was empowered to command the armed forces and the newly created Revolutionary Guards, dismiss any elected official, countermand parliamentary legislation, and declare war and peace. The new office was subject neither to elections nor to the scrutiny of the elected institutions and the larger public. Islamic law was to displace the existing legal codes, circumscribing individual rights and prerogatives. A Guardian Council, composed mainly of clerics, was to vet all legislation, ensuring their conformity with Islamic strictures. The constitutional arrangement guaranteed that Ayatollah Khomeini’s reinterpretation of Shiism would remain the ideology of the state and that only those devoted to his vision would command critical institutions. On December 3, 1979, a frenzied public in a national referendum duly ratified the new constitution, with its antidemocratic provisions. The foundations of the theocratic regime were thus born on the heels of anti-Americanism and the notion of resisting foreign
intervention. At every step of the way, the clerical militants had exploited external crises to accelerate the pace of the revolution and purge the regime of undesirable elements. On September 22, 1980, yet another international conflict convulsed the republic and paved the way for the complete control of the state by Ayatollah Khomeini and his narrow collection of disciples – Iraq’s invasion of Iran. The Iraqi invasion was intended to destroy the theocratic regime, but it ended up buttressing the revolution and subverting the remaining moderates within the republic. Saddam had miscalculated, not for the last time.

Having dismissed the elected president and silenced their clerical detractors, hard-liners unleashed a reign of terror that was to disenfranchise the remaining secular opposition forces – the old elite had to be forcefully removed before the new one could ensure its political hegemony. Mass arrests, brutal suppression of demonstrations, and summary executions were the order of the day. The liberal National Front politicians, the radical MEK supporters, landlords, writers, intellectuals, and journalists were dismissed, imprisoned, and on occasion executed. The violence of this period gave rise to the so-called Second Republic, a regime that consolidated its power through terror. This was essentially the end of the revolutionary promise of a progressive, inclusive society that embraced pluralism while remaining loyal to its religious traditions. This process of consolidation of the revolution soon moved beyond the political elites as Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed his own cultural revolution. The universities were closed for two years as their curriculum was altered, television and news media bombarded the populace with Islamic propaganda, and the women who had made up such a critical part of the revolutionary coalition were forced to wear strict religious dress. Every aspect of public life had to conform to Islamic strictures, with loyalty tests and ideological standards determining admission to universities, the civil service, and the armed forces. The new stalwarts of the revolution who had survived assassination campaigns, American coercion, and Saddam’s invasion
seemed confident that God was on their side and the perpetuation of their regime was a sign of divine approbation. Throughout the 1980s, war, martyrdom, sacrifice, and vengeance were the themes of Iranian politics and national discourse. (Chapter II)

During his first two years in power, Ayatollah Khomeini’s achievements were considerable. He implemented the Islamic ideology that he had spent decades developing and refining, and he created a new constitutional system with clear redlines and an elite loyal to his vision, which ensured that the Islamic Republic would survive his passing. Iran would now be guided by activist clerics and a strict interpretation of Shiite Islam. Alternative ideologies such as liberalism or secularism and politicians and clerics challenging of the velayat-e faqih were simply excluded from the councils of power. To be part of the ruling echelon one had to be committed to the Islamic Republic and its mission of salvation. On June 6, 1989, the founder of the Islamic Republic died. On that tumultuous day when the guardians of the revolution gathered to bid farewell to their departed leader an uneasy future lay ahead. The simmering conflicts that had been held in check by Ayatollah Khomeini’s authority now became all too evident, his disciples soon lapsed into an intense factional struggle as contending interpretations of Islam, differences over economic policy, and Iran’s role in the international community dissolved the unity of the clerical elite. In essence, the tensions between the regime’s revolutionary ideals and its practical requirements burst to the surface, bedeviling Iran’s new rulers. Without Ayatollah Khomeini available to resolve these disputes, stalemate and deadlock became the new currency of Iranian politics.

Three political tendencies now emerged in the struggle for the leadership of the Islamic Republic, all led by very different clerical politicians. The hard-liners, united by their contempt for democratic pluralism and their determination to
sustain Ayatollah Khomeini’s divisive legacy, would ultimately settle on Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as their standard -bearer. The more moderate and pragmatic elements within the clerical hierarchy would coalesce around Iran’s ultimate political insider, Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. These more tempered clerics believed that the perpetuation of Islamic rule mandated a greater attention to the economic deficiencies of the state and integration into the global economy. The pragmatists would press for a degree of cultural freedom and normalized relations with states that Ayatollah Khomeini had long castigated. Finally, the Islamic Republic featured a dynamic cadre of clerical and intellectual reformers who stressed that the legitimacy of the state was contingent on the vitality of its representative institutions. Also drawing on Ayatollah Khomeini’s legacy, they emphasized the elected branches of the state and the importance of popular will in charting the national course. Muhammad Khatami would emerge as the most important, but by no means the only, representative of this cohort. These factions would now battle one another for influence and power, as the Islamic Republic’s institutions were increasingly pitted against each other. The point remains that these three broad factions are likely to challenge one another for control of the Islamic Republic, and despite the ebbs and flows of their political fortunes, they will determine Iran’s future.

Over the past few decades, Ayatollah Khamenei and the militant conservatives essentially ensured their political hegemony by dominating Iran’s powerful non-elected institutions. Through their control of the Supreme Leader’s office, the Guardian Council, and the judiciary, they sought to ensure that the prerogatives of the elected institutions and the demands of the public could be effectively negated. The hard-liners took full advantage of Ayatollah Khomeini’s constitutional manipulations, which granted clerical watchdog organizations ample power to thwart popular aspirations. In the name of Islamic salvation, the reactionary elements of the state obstructed a range of initiatives that would have
made the Islamic Republic a more tolerant and inclusive polity. Beyond the formal institutions of the state, the hard-liners also came to dominate the coercive instruments of power, particularly the Revolutionary Guards. The Revolutionary Guard force is commanded by ideologues that are committed to the values and philosophical outlook of the clerical militants. Throughout the 1990s, they called for suppression of the reform movement and denounced its attempts to expand the political rights of the citizenry. The Guards were unleashed to deal with student protests and often pressed the leadership to violently dispense with pro-democratic forces. As they gained stature and wealth, the Guards have increasingly emerged as an independent pillar of the state whose predilections and demands cannot be ignored by the ruling authorities. Iran’s conservatives, both young and old, are imbued with an ideology that views the essential purpose of the state as the realization of God’s will on earth. Such an exalted task mandates the assumption of power by clerics or by laymen who are religiously devoted. They see themselves as a vanguard class that retains loyalty to Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolutionary vision and best understands the intricacies of religious jurisprudence and for that reason, they hold that their authority should neither be infringed upon by representative bodies nor challenged by popular will. Given such ideological inclinations, the hard-liners are utterly contemptuous of democratic accountability and pluralistic precepts. After all, as Hamid Reza Tariqi of the Islamic Coalition Society noted, “The legitimacy of our Islamic establishment is derived from God. This legitimacy will not wash away even if people stop supporting it.”(Chapter III)

The economic perspective of the Right is as flawed and retrogressive as its political platform. The conservatives’ economic policies stem from competing demands of their constituents in the bazaar and their revolutionary pledge to uplift the downtrodden. A modern economy with its rational bureaucracy, cohesive administrative institutions, and a viable banking system are dismissed in favor of the existing opaque arrangements with their traditional means of exchange. The
results have been predictably disastrous, and subsidies today consume approximately 20 percent of the country’s GDP. A viable structural reform package would entail dispensing with these onerous subsidies and reducing the size and scope of the bloated bureaucracy. However, such reforms may cause short-term disruptions that a regime with a limited popular base is unwilling to countenance. Given its ideological commitments and its fear of antagonizing its lower-class constituents, the Right has jealously guarded the existing stagnant state with all its pathologies and deficiencies.

In a sense, the hard-liners are offering the populace their own social compact, whereby in exchange for spiritual salvation, the public will relinquish the right to dissent. In such an order- where the task at hand is to construct a society seeking continuous conformity with God’s will as seen by an enlightened clerical corps- there is no room for disagreement. The populace should be grateful, the hard-liners assert, that it is provided with a leadership and a social arrangement leading to celestial rewards. To disagree with clerical fiats and the accumulation of power by a narrowly self-selected group of religious is to engage in a provocative act of defiance that must necessarily be suppressed. Iran’s Right seems to perceive that it has reached “the end of history,” where an exalted order has been constructed that requires no further reform or alteration. The inflexibility of the hard-liners’ outlook stands in stark contrast to a dynamic and changing Iranian society. By the time of Ayatollah Khomeini’s death, the prolonged war with Iraq and the struggles on behalf of the revolution had convinced many social sectors that citizens have rights and are not mere actors obeying clerical dictates. Iran is also a young country, with an estimated 70 percent of the population under the age of thirty. A new demographic cohort has been evolving under the structure of the Islamic Republic, with its own demands and imperatives.
For pragmatism, the legitimacy of the state and the prolongation of Islamic rule were contingent on its economic performance. As such, he would spend much of his presidency, indeed his entire career, seeking to build strong institutions, buttressed by a competent and expanding bureaucracy to realize his vision of change and reform. They hoped to conceive a new order that would be economically efficient, culturally tolerant, and politically autocratic. It is important to note that the aim of the pragmatists was never the creation of a democratic polity, but rather a stable society that would meet the economic needs of its constituent. The pragmatists would seek to transcend Ayatollah Khomeini’s populist policies by emphasizing private initiatives and attracting foreign investments. This would entail borrowing from the World Bank and agreeing to partial foreign ownership of domestic industries. The Islamic Republic would no longer seek to challenge the prevailing international norms but would participate in the global economy. Once a modern industrial economy was created, then not only would the regime’s legitimacy be enhanced but also problems of economic inequality would be similarly alleviated.

It was important, they believed, to grant the public a stake in the political process and national planning through competitive politics with elections among diverse choices of candidates and platforms. In their conception, the Supreme Leader was not just the guardian of a restrictive view of Islam, but an important politician with the responsibility to tackle thorny issues such as population growth and institutional decay that had obstructed Iran’s development. All this is not to suggest an emerging appreciation for the collective will- Rafsanjani and his allies were not beyond manipulating the electoral process to achieve their desired results. Nonetheless, unlike the reactionary Right the pragmatists saw a rigid political order as detracting from the essential task of rehabilitating the economy.
On cultural issues, the pragmatists sought to avoid the coercive imposition of Islamic ordinances on the country’s restive youth. Given their devotion to the essential institutions of the Islamic Republic, such enterprising moves would have distinct limits, as notions of equality of the sexes and gender emancipation were still dismissed on religious grounds. Despite such inhibitions, the pragmatists acknowledged that the relaxation of cultural restrictions and a degree of social freedom could provide a useful safety valve for Iran’s youthful populace. In the end, Rafsanjani’s presidency failed to achieve its main objectives. Despite some success in denationalization measures, the so-called Era of Reconstruction did not liberalize the economy or resolve its inherent distortions. Borrowing from the international markets placed Iran in the unenviable position of having a huge debt burden. The resulting inflationary pressures eroded the standard of living of the poor and the middle class. The inability of the state to reduce its heavy subsidies, the periodic declines of the petroleum market, and an inability to attract foreign investment curbed the potential of Iran’s growth. On the cultural front, Iran remained a largely repressive society, struggling under the burdens of religious impositions that many found objectionable, given the rampant corruption of the clerical class.

The essential basis of the reformers’ ideology was that the interpretation of the scriptures cannot remain immutable and must adjust to the changing human condition. For religion to remain vital, they said it had to address the demands of modern society. Islam was not lacking in traditions that can address this challenge, as the well-established practice of *ijtihad* (interpretation) offered the reformers a path towards an evolved understanding of the sacred texts. In the hands of the reformers, Islam was not merely a system for connecting man to his divine creator, but a force for progressive change. The scriptures call for freedom from tyranny and for human quality, and Islamic civilization’s historical legacy of intellectual inquiry was seen as the basis for reconstructing the society along pluralistic lines.
Moreover, the Koran’s mandate that the community be consulted and rulers be accountable established the platform for collective action and democratic participation. Some reformists propounded the notion of collective rationality, which can only be ascertained through the democratic process as the best guide for the national government, and they came to differentiate between a “religious state” and a “religious jurisprudence state.”

It is important to note that along with the other factions in the Islamic Republic, the reformers were loyal to the regime and its defining institution, the *velayat-e faqih*. However, the difference between the reformers and the hard-liners was their interpretation of the prerogatives of the office and the extent to which it must accommodate popular imperatives. For the hard-liners the powers of the Supreme Leader were immune from electoral scrutiny. For the reformers the absolutism of the office contravened the democratic spirit of the constitution. Unlike the hard-liners, the reformers exhibited ample confidence in the ability of the populace to sustain a state that was religious in character and yet democratic in its practices. Tensions and contradictions that such an order inevitably provoked would be resolved through compromises that democracies are particularly capable of forging. Such a progressive interpretation of the Islamic Republic would prove fundamentally at odds with the despotic aspirations of the hard-liners.

During the heady days of the “Tehran Spring,” the reform movement proceeded from triumph to triumph, overwhelming bastions of reaction through electoral success. Such euphoric expressions engendered a sense of complacency, as the reformers never developed a grassroots organizational network to sustain their momentum and did not conceive a coherent strategy for actually dislodging their well-entrenched nemeses. The reform movement remained a closed circle of intellectuals without connection to other disaffected communities. Labor unions, trade organizations, and the modern business sector, which are the backbone of
change in most developing societies, were largely absent from Iran’s emerging political struggles. The debates were scintillating, and the innovative attempts to reconcile tradition with modernity were though provoking and imaginative. However, the movement did not undertake the organizational effort of institutionalizing its power.

The other party that must bear its own measure of blame for the failure of the reform movement is the United States. The Bush administration’s strategy of democratic transformation and its so-called moral clarity paradoxically contributed to the conservative consolidation of power. The contest between reform and reaction in Iran took a dramatic turn after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as external events suddenly intruded on Iran’s domestic struggles. The bitter lesson of the Islamic Republic remains that hard-liners have historically been the sole beneficiaries of American antagonism. Ayatollah Khomeini, as we have seen, provoked the hostage crises to inflame the public and displace the moderate provisional government. More than two decades later, his disciples sensed in Washington’s bellicosity another opportunity to fend off the reformers and change the nature of the debate. Beyond their rhetorical fulminations, the conservatives wrapped themselves in the mantle of national unity to justify their crackdown. They were not engaged in the suppression of democratic rights, they said, but were merely instituting judicious security measures designed to safeguard Iran from foreign intervention. The reality remains that the hard-liners required international crisis and conflict with America as a means of deflecting attention from their sagging political fortunes. Sadly, Washington’s approach played easily in the hands of the “unelected few” that President Bush and his advisers justifiably abhor.
In foreign policy as with most revolutionary states, Iran has journeyed from being a militant actor challenging regional norms to being a pragmatic state pursuing a policy based on national interest calculations. However, Iran’s journey has been halting, incomplete, and tentative. Through the 1980s, under the Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran thrashed about the Middle East, seeking to undermine established authority in the name of Islamic redemption. Ayatollah Khomeini’s successors would wrestle with the legacy, as they sought to integrate the theocracy into the global society. From Rafsanjani to Khatami to Ahmadinejad, Iran’s presidents would seek the impossible, balancing Ayatollah Khomeini’s vision with the mandates of the international community. The best manner of understanding Iran’s regional policy is to envision three circles: the Persian Gulf, the Arab East, and Eurasia. The Persian Gulf would by far be the most significant, while the Arab East and Central Asian lands would assume less importance.

Given the fact that Iran’s oil is largely exported through the Persian Gulf, the theocracy eventually appreciated the need for stability in this critical region. As such, ideological crusades and threat against the Gulf sheikdoms ended, and Iran accepted the prevailing status quo. In a similar vein, the theocratic regime recognized the futility of antagonizing its powerful Russian neighbor, and did not inflame the Islamic sentiments in the former Soviet bloc. As the two powers cultivated favorable economic and strategic relations, Iran was provided further incentives for a policy of moderation. However, in the more distant Arab East that neither bordered Iran nor offered it lucrative commercial opportunities, Tehran behaved in a zealous manner and allowed its animosity toward Israel to condition its strategy. The fact remains that Iran’s excessive ideological posture toward this region did not infringe on its tangible interests, limiting the need for caution and pragmatism. Such a bewildering array of policies and priorities has often confounded the international community, making Iran’s foreign policy difficult to comprehend. The Islamic revolution was a struggle between good and evil, a
battle waged for moral redemption and genuine emancipation from the cultural and political tentacles of the profane and iniquitous West. Iran is a country of contradictions and paradoxes. It is both grandiose in its self-perception yet intensely insecure. It seeks to lead the region while remaining largely suspicious and disdainful of its neighbors. A perennial struggle between aspirations and capabilities, hegemony and pragmatism has characterized Iran’s uneasy approach to the Middle East. (Chapter IV)

On September 22, 1980, Saddam took the catastrophic decision to invade Iran, beginning one of the longest and most destructive wars in the modern history of the Middle East. The Iran-Iraq war was unusual in many respects, this was a war waged for the triumph of ideas, with Ba’athist secular pan-Arabism contesting Iran’s Islamic fundamentalism. As such, for Tehran the war came to embody its revolutionary identity. The themes of solidarity and sacrifice, self-reliance and commitment not only allowed the regime to consolidate its power but make the defeat of Saddam the ultimate test of theocratic legitimacy. As an ideologically driven state, Iran never defined the war in terms of territory lost or gained but as a spiritual mission seeking moral redemption. For the clerical rulers, Iran had been attacked not because of its provocations or territorial disputes but because the Islamic Republic embodied a virtuous order. This was an infidel war against the Islamic revolution, the “Government of God,” and the sublime faith of Shiism.

By 1988, Iran’s population was exhausted and war-weary. Eight years of sacrifice and hardship had not produced the much-pledged victory. The steady stream of volunteers who sustained Iran’s war effort had been reduced to a trickle, compelling the regime to impose draconian conscription measures to meet its basic manpower needs. Today in Iran, one rarely finds a family that has not been affected by the war – the loss of a son, a disabled relative, the hardship that all had to suffer. In many ways, the war continues to define the parameters of Iran’s
By the time of Ayatollah Khomeini’s death in 1989, Iran’s revolutionary foreign policy had not achieved any of its objectives. Tehran’s attempt to export its revolution had not merely failed; it had led the Gulf States to solidify against Iran. Leading regional actors such as Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic ties with the Islamic Republic, while the sheikdoms put aside their historic enmities and came together in the Gulf Cooperation Council, an organization largely devoted to containing Iranian influence. Along these lines, the Arab princes and monarchs further solidified their security ties to the United States and generously subsidized Saddam Hussein’s military in his war with Iran. The revolution without borders seemed uneasily confined within Iran’s boundaries. The 1990s will stand as one of the most important periods of transition for the Islamic Republic. The basis of the regime’s legitimacy and authority would now have to change; the Islamic Republic had to offer a reason for its rule beyond the catastrophic invasion of its territory and the moral claims of its clerical founder.

Along these lines, Iran’s new pragmatic rulers, led by Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the Islamic Republic did dispense with much of its revolutionary radicalism and began to project the image of a judicious state, basing its policies on careful calculations of national interest. The most momentous change in Iran’s regional policy came with the election of the reformist president Muhammad Khatami in 1997 Khatami’s “Good Neighbor” diplomacy finally managed to rehabilitate Iran’s ties with the local regimes. An entire range of trade, diplomatic, and security agreements were signed between the Islamic Republic and the Gulf sheikdoms. In this way, Khatami managed finally to transcend Ayatollah Khomeini’s legacy and to displace his ideological antagonisms with policies
rooted in pragmatism and self-interest. Today, as a hard-line government consolidates its power and proclaims a desire to return to the roots of the revolution, dire warnings are on the horizon. Under Khatami’s auspices, Iran’s Gulf policy underwent a fundamental shift, with national interest objectives its defining factor. Irrespective of the balance of power between conservatives and reformers, Iran’s regional policy is driven by fixed principles that are shared by all of its political elites.

In contrast to its policy toward the Persian Gulf and the Arab East, Iran’s approach toward its northern and eastern neighbors has been one of sustained realism. The proximity to a strong Russian state and the prospect of commercial contracts and important arms deals has always injected a measure of pragmatism in Iran’s policy. In a curious manner, despite its declared mission of exporting the revolution, the Islamic Republic has seemed perennially indifferent to the plight of the struggling Muslims in Central Asia. A beleaguered Iranian state requiring arms and trade and an aggrieved former superpower seeking profit and relevance have forged an opportunistic relationship that eschews ideology for the sake of tangible interests. A final important factor that has intruded itself uneasily in Iran’s international orientation is pragmatism. Iran may perceive itself as uniquely aggrieved by the great powers’ machinations and it may nurse aspirations to emerge as the regional leader. However, the limitations of its resources and the reality of its actual power have sporadically led to reappraisal and retrenchment. The intriguing aspect of Iran’s policy is that it can be both dogmatic and flexible at the same time. The Islamic Republic may take an ideologically uncompromising position toward Israel, yet pragmatically deal with its historic Russian nemesis. The tensions between Iran’s ideals and interests, between its aspirations and limits, will continue to produce a foreign policy that is often inconsistent and contradictory.
In his 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush effectively closed off the possibility of a new chapter in U.S.-Iranian relations, denouncing the Islamic Republic as a member of an axis of evil, along with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and Kim Jong Il’s North Korea. Bush described Iran as a “major sponsor of terrorism,” and once more condemned the “unelected few” who suppress a restive populace. In the meantime, important changes were taking place within the theocratic state that further diminished prospects of a rapprochement. The reformers and pragmatic conservatives who had called for cooperation with the United States in Afghanistan seemed increasingly under pressure within the corridors of power. The United States had not only failed to reward Iran’s constructive behavior but was once more beating the drums of regime change and pressing the international community to embrace its sanctions policy. Washington’s new reliance on democratization as a means of dealing with security challenges like proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism did not bode well for an Iranian regime whose politics were distinctly reactionary. The hard-liners, who had always claimed that America’s hostility toward Iran was immutable and that the core American objective remained the overthrow of the theocracy, seemed validated by the course of events. For the hard-liners, the United States was the source of all of Iran’s problems, and for the pragmatists it was the solution to the theocracy’s mounting dilemmas.

As Iran’s nuclear program matures and becomes the subject of international scrutiny, another dynamic is entering the debate: public opinion. Far from being a source of restraint, the emerging public sentiment is that Iran, as a great civilization with a long history, has a right to acquire a nuclear capability. The recent disclosures of the sophisticated nature of Iran’s nuclear program have been a source of pride for a citizenry accustomed to the revolution’s failures and setbacks. Iran’s experience during the past quarter-century with war, sanctions,
and estrangement from the international community has fostered a population that is somewhat unresponsive to external pressures.

Today the Islamic Republic stands at a crossroads. For nearly five years, Iran was involved in delicate negotiations with Britain, France and Germany regarding the direction of its nuclear program. Subsequently, it began contemplating a plan for outsourcing its nuclear enrichment activities to Russia. As Iran’s nuclear program becomes the subject of deliberations at the UN Security Council, it is time for a more imaginative approach. The nature of Iran’s relations with the United States and what type of security architecture emerges in the Persian Gulf are likely to determine Iran’s decisions. It is neither inevitable nor absolute that Iran will become the next member of the nuclear club; its internal debates are real and its course of action still unsettled. The international community and the United States will have an immeasurable impact on Iran’s nuclear future. As Washington seeks to grapple with Iran’s nuclear challenge, it must accept that its threats and its hostile rhetoric have limited effect in altering Iran’s path. Indeed, a belligerent U.S. posture only assists those within the theocracy who argue that the American danger can only be negated through the possession of the “strategic weapon.” Given the disutility of force and threats, a realistic engagement strategy may still alter Iran’s nuclear course.

The reality remains that the Islamic Republic never evolved into a pure totalitarian state such as Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. As the revolution settled into a more predictable pattern of governance and as the regime’s detractors were eliminated from the scene, the differences and divisions among Ayatollah Khomeini’s disciples began to surface. Pragmatists stressing the need for a greater focus on the economy, hard-liners insisting that their mandate from God empowered them to disregard popular aspirations, and reformers stressing the
need for a more tolerant theocracy began to battle one another for influence and power. After all, not all revolutionaries are alike. President Ahmadinejad and his immediate predecessor, Muhammad Khatami, are both part of the same elite, yet on critical issues such as the importance of civil society and individual sovereignty they differ radically. To be sure, Iran’s factions may submerge their differences and defend the regime when it is challenged by student protests or American threats, but the core disagreements within the elite remain unabridged. The Islamic Republic may not be a big tent, but it is still a tent with diversity of views and opinions. The simmering tensions between clerical leaders and the popular base of the regime and its constitutional pledges and republican mandates ensured divisions and rivalries. Even within its restrictive confines, the Islamic Republic would always feature robust and lively debate.

Iran today is a nation in search of an identity, a state that oscillates between promises of democratic modernity and retrogressive traditions. The call for representation and the rule of law, for accountability and equality, have transformed the average Iranian from a passive observer of clerical politics into an active agent of change. The resilience of the forces of progress stems from their diversity. Clerical reformers, disillusioned youth, a burden middle class, women seeking emancipation, and intellectuals yearning for freedom of thought have come together in their demand for a government responsive to its citizenry. In essence, the struggle in Iran is not a simple conflict between the people and the clerics. Iran’s factional politics, ideological divisions, and political rivalries are much more complex and nuanced. In the long run, Iran’s sophisticated and youthful populace can be neither appeased by cosmetic concessions nor silenced by threats of coercion.
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