
Iran's Long Reach

Introduction

At midday on Fridays in south-central Tehran, when the day of rest hushes even the city's normally deafening traffic, it is possible to walk along the streets lining Iran's largest university and hear the booming anthem of the revolution that shook this country, and the world, more than a generation ago. The refrain of "*Marg bar Amrika*" (Death to America) echoes from the congregation of Tehran's Friday prayers with sufficient regularity to remind Iranians and visitors alike of both the catalyzing impact and the unexpected endurance of Iran's Islamic Revolution.

Nearly thirty years have passed since Iranians gathered by the tens of millions in the streets of the capital and other major cities and drove their monarchy from power. Iran's revolution reshaped the country, the region, and Iran's interaction with the rest of the world, especially the United States. The majority of those living in Iran today are too young to remember this period, and yet as their 2005 election of an Islamic firebrand demonstrates all too clearly, the Islamic Revolution remains the defining narrative for Iran's political, social, and economic development. By virtue of its size, history, resources, and strategic location, Iran under any circumstances would hold particular relevance for U.S. policy, as it did throughout the 1960s and 1970s. But the 1979 revolution and the political system that it wrought have placed Iran squarely at the heart of U.S. security challenges for the past twenty-nine years and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

That revolution, and the chaos and internecine civil war that followed, established the Islamic Republic, arguably the world's first and only modern Muslim theocracy. It also established Iran as the epicenter of a wave of religiously inspired activism and virulent anti-Americanism that would eventually radiate through the region and among Islamic countries across the globe. "It moved us from the age of the Red Menace to the epoch of Holy War."¹ Since that time, Iran's society and its political dynamics have undergone an evolution nearly as dramatic and unpredictable as the events of its revolution, but its leadership remains committed to two singular dimensions of the state's legitimacy—its religious inspiration and orientation and its antagonism, even defiance, toward Washington's role as the sole remaining superpower.

1. Christopher Hitchens, "Iran's Waiting Game," *Vanity Fair*, July 2005.

Iran is inherently exceptional in both the Middle East and within the wider community of Muslim nations—its dominant Persian ethnicity and culture is not shared by most of its neighbors, nor (with a few notable exceptions) is its population's adherence to Shia Islam. Moreover, the amalgamation of sacral and secular authority in the Islamic Republic rests upon an unprecedented—and still unique—doctrinal gimmick that itself has inspired a relatively paltry number of advocates outside Iran's own leadership. And yet, in spite of the many anomalies that distinguish Iran from the Middle East and the wider Muslim world, its influence—political, economic, intellectual, and spiritual—within the region and the *umma* (the broader Islamic world) remains undeniable. Indeed, since his election to Iran's presidency in 2005, the fiery Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has won legions of admirers across the region, using a combination of provocation and populism to transcend the ethnic and religious antipathies that traditionally have divided Iran from its neighbors.

Iran's influence is as multifaceted as it is profound. Its strategic outlook and ideological posture dictate the security environment in the Persian Gulf; through its support for terrorism and pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, Tehran remains the foremost challenge to the regional status quo as well as to vital U.S. security interests there. Economically, too, Iran remains a powerhouse despite three decades of U.S. sanctions and its own leadership's disastrous economic management, thanks to its endowment of 11 percent of the world's petroleum and the world's second largest deposits of natural gas, and its location at the crossroads of Asia's historic trading routes. As the center of gravity for the worldwide community of Shia Muslims and the heir to the ancient Persian empire, Iran exerts unique sway over a diverse and dynamic cultural sphere.

As a result of these multiple layers of identity and influence, Iran offers a compelling case for examining its role as one of the pivotal states in the Islamic world. First outlined in a 1996 *Foreign Affairs* article by Robert Chase, Emily Hill, and Paul Kennedy, the "pivotal states" thesis was offered as a means of organizing America's national security strategy in the post-Cold War era.² In lieu of a compelling Soviet threat, the authors suggested that Washington might best address the diffuse challenges facing U.S. interests by focusing its energies on particular developing states that, by virtue of size, history, and other factors, pose the potential to wield disproportionate influence over their respective regions and the international system.

Chase, Hill, and Kennedy delineated several criteria in their definition of a pivotal state. Most importantly, it should bear geostrategic value with respect to U.S. interests. Secondly, a pivotal state is one that is "poised between potential success and possible failure"; this uncertainty positions a

2. Robert S. Chase, Emily B. Hill, and Paul Kennedy, "Pivotal States and U.S. Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 1 (January–February 1996): 33–51.

pivotal state as capable of helping and/or harming the region. Finally, the pivotal state should have carved out a significant role in global issues and negotiations. By investing U.S. attention and resources in such regional heavyweights, the authors argued, Washington could benefit from the multiplier effect of their leverage. Notably, the authors excluded Iran from their own short list of pivotal states, arguing that as a “rogue state,” it already receives considerable U.S. attention.

Today, the impetus to articulate an intellectual imperative around which to focus U.S. security strategy seems quaintly obsolete. Five years after the “pivotal states” theory made its debut, the September 11 attacks clarified U.S. security priorities in tragic fashion and shattered any prior assumptions about the relevance of the developing world. Since that time, the exigencies of the global war on terrorism have trumped all other strategic principles, with considerable, though not universal, consensus.

Nonetheless, one can argue that the pivotal states framework remains a useful model for approaching the particular challenges facing the United States even in the aftermath of 9/11, particularly as it is applied in this series to that subset of the developing world that is linked in ways both amorphous and inextricable by a shared religious heritage. The terrorist attacks on American soil made painfully clear the shortcomings of America’s existing strategic bargain. The illusion of stability had enabled Washington to disregard the means that its allies used to ensure it—the violent repression of opposition forces and the tacit export of militancy. And it shrouded a deeper danger, the failure of modernization in the Islamic world to generate greater public prosperity and a more liberal political order. Practicalities, politics, and principles resist any return to the old implicit strategic approach. In its place, a wide range of policymakers, pundits, and academics have argued for the promotion of meaningful political and economic reforms as the fundamental tenet for a new U.S. approach to the region. To implement that new approach, however, some mechanism for prioritizing the challenges and opportunities is essential. By focusing U.S. efforts on the pivotal states of the Muslim world—those countries whose futures are not yet certain but whose dynamics endow them with clout beyond their borders—we can hope to secure a better future for our vital interests in this domain.

Iran as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World

This monograph endeavors to outline the centrality of Iran and its ongoing political, economic, security, and theological dilemmas to the evolution of the broader Muslim world. This introductory chapter presents an overview of Iran’s current political dynamics. From 1997 to 2005, Iran’s politics were dominated by the promise of progressive change, although for at least half of that period it was evident to most Iranians that the promise had already

been broken. Still, as long as the avowedly reformist president Mohammad Khatami remained in office, the political formula that his proponents had devised—the gradual usurpation of government institutions by reform-oriented politicians—appeared to be the single mechanism for altering the domestic and international course of the Islamic Republic. With the 2005 election of hard-line president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, that blueprint for change has been made irrelevant, and a new era of contention between the orthodox defenders of Iran's Islamic Revolution and the forces of change has begun. The introduction examines this recent history as context for the later analysis.

Chapter 2 examines Iran's sources of influence on the broader Muslim world. Through its strategic ambitions and dynamism, political innovations, economic clout, religio-cultural institutions, and historical and cultural linkages, Iran is a driving force in the Islamic world—owing initially to its role as the progenitor of state-sponsored political Islam and more recently as the incubator of religiously oriented political reform. The Islamic Revolution bequeathed a multifaceted legacy that has made Iran a central player in the narrative of the region and the wider community of Muslim states.

Chapter 3 analyzes the social, economic, and regional forces that are driving Iran toward change. Although its leadership and rhetoric often appear stagnant, Iran is in reality one of the least static societies in the Muslim world. Thanks to a disproportionately young population and an economy subject to considerable external pressures and cyclical fluctuation—as well as the massive transformations occurring along its borders with Iraq and Afghanistan—Iran today is fraught with pressures and tensions. This section explores those frictions and examines the likely scenarios for change within Iran, and what a changing Iran might mean for the broader Islamic world.

Chapter 4 considers U.S. policy options toward Iran, recognizing the inherent limitations on our influence after a three-decade absence from Tehran but also the significance of Iran's role in the broader Muslim community of nations. If in the aftermath of 9/11 U.S. foreign policy was inextricably tied to the promotion of change in the Islamic world, then it is essential to understand how its critical actors, such as Iran, might be influenced in the foreseeable future. Ultimately, the United States is constrained by a variety of historical, legal, and practical factors. But if the project of democratization in the Middle East and liberalization in the broader Muslim world is to be successful, it will have to engage Iran and both sides of the energetic debate over religion, politics, and modernity in that country.

Iran Today

The Islamic Republic owes its longevity to an intricate balancing act between theocracy and democracy—between the power of the supreme

(religious) leader, who holds ultimate and ostensibly divine authority, and the legitimizing force of the popular vote, which has featured prominently in the present Iranian system of rule. This dual and dueling structure of government reflects the contradictory demands of the broad revolutionary coalition that coalesced to topple the Shah. The constituents of this coalition shared little beyond their intense frustration with the monarchy; their interests, motivations, and visions for the postrevolutionary state diverged substantially and, in some cases, placed them in direct confrontation with one another. The result was a unique framework of competing institutions that facilitated the regime's religiously ordained repression at the same time as it nurtured the democratic aspirations of its citizenry.

The contention among the revolutionary coalition also conditioned another key attribute of the Islamic Republic—the entrenched competition among the Islamic Republic's political elite. From the start, the regime has been riven by infighting that persisted and even intensified after each successful purge. Even at the peak of its powers, Iran's Islamic government never achieved the totalitarian domination of its adversary Saddam Hussein. While Iran's dissension was frequently discounted as mere intra-elite squabbling, the regime's fierce battles and profound philosophical differences on such key issues as economic policy helped to preserve political space for debate.

From these structural and philosophical tensions emerged Iran's recent experiment in democratic reform. To the surprise of many Iranians and observers, the regime's splintered authority and vicious power struggle generated what in retrospect must be acknowledged as a serious and authentic effort to reconcile democratic institutions and values with Iran's self-imposed Islamic constraints. In one of Iran's many ironies, this reform movement had its roots in the regime's attempt to impose greater control over its fractious institutions, with the 1992 orchestrated ouster of many left-leaning officials by then-president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Hoping to facilitate the smooth acceptance of his economic restructuring and reconstruction package, Rafsanjani deployed the vetting authority of one of the key clerical oversight bodies to rid the Majlis (parliament) of rivals who did not share his own enthusiasm for private enterprise.

This faction, then referred to as the "Islamic left," found itself suddenly sidelined on the margins of the state that its members had helped create. From their refuge in universities, think tanks, and semigovernmental institutions, the Islamic leftists began to reassess their handiwork, recognizing in their own political isolation the absolutism and capriciousness that represent the systemic flaws of the postrevolutionary state. In their writings and debates, Iran's Islamic leftists questioned the increasingly domineering tactics of the regime, and identified the reassertion of the revolution's republican ideals as the solution to the country's enduring political problems. In order

to advance their vision, the leftists also began plotting their way back into political power, reactivating old networks and developing strategies that reflected their emphasis on the state's elected institutions.

The left wing's reconsiderations coincided with the coming of age of a new generation of Iranians, whose expectations and sense of political entitlement had been framed by their rearing under the revolution. Changes in the social fabric of the country—in Iran's demography, its educational patterns, and its prevailing cultural constraints—made it inevitable that the latest round of the Islamic Republic's power struggle would transcend the limited parameters of elite politics. Youth participation combined with left-wing strategizing set the stage for the 1997 election of President Mohammad Khatami, a moderate cleric who had been forced out of Rafsanjani's cabinet into the relative obscurity of the National Library. With that election, the reform movement officially burst onto the national and international consciousness.

The Limited Legacy of the Reform Movement

Khatami's unexpected landslide heralded an explosion of political ferment and a modest relaxation in Iran's strict social and cultural taboos. His talk of civil society and rule of law triggered hopes that Iran's revolutionary juggernaut might finally yield to the aspirations of its citizenry. In diplomatic circles, the Khatami era augured the rehabilitation of the Islamic Republic and its commercial and political reengagement with the world. On the streets, Iranians invoked the date of Khatami's victory, the second day of the Persian month of Khordad, and the magnitude of his popular mandate, twenty million votes, as mantras for a better future.

It appeared briefly that this future might be within reach. In the first two years after Khatami's inauguration, changes in the permitting process facilitated the quadrupling of the country's press, helping to politicize a new generation of Iranians and challenge its prevailing orthodoxies and oligarchies. Social liberalization also accelerated, as evidenced by the increasing liberties taken in interpreting Islamic dress codes and by the raucous public celebrations that erupted in November 1997 when the national soccer team qualified for the World Cup.

Political changes proved to be a much tougher fight, but here too, the reformers made headway at the outset. Insistence on rule of law propelled the Khatami administration to investigate a series of dissident murders and, for the first time since the revolution, to force small but meaningful reforms on the Intelligence Ministry. By implementing long-disregarded constitutional provisions for local elections, Khatami expanded the country's democratic institutions and dispersed some authority to Iran's provinces. Internationally, reformers trumpeted the distinctly tolerant notion of "dialogue among civilizations"; initiated overtures to the United States, including the land-

mark 1998 CNN interview in which President Khatami called for “a crack in the wall of mistrust”; and intensified Iran’s rapprochement with Europe and its neighbors.

The reformists also set about to rapidly and dramatically expand Iran’s media, a deliberate strategy intended to generate broader public participation in the nation’s political debates. The newspapers served as proxies for other forms of political activism that remained proscribed under the Islamic Republic’s strictures. “The press was never intended to be the spearhead for Khatami’s political reforms,” former press deputy Bourghani acknowledged, “but it was soon apparent that it offered the fastest path to political liberalization.”³ One of the most prominent and determined reformist editors, Hamid Reza Jalaiepour, described frankly his decision to open a newspaper rather than establish a political party; having been denied a license for a political party, he acted strategically to exploit the opening granted to the press by Khatami and his liberal cultural minister. “Instead, I saw that press licenses were easier to get, so I opened a newspaper.”⁴

The systemic transformation that the reform movement appeared to herald was to prove illusory, however. Throughout his two terms in office, Khatami and the reformists found their vision of a kinder, gentler Islamic Republic thwarted at nearly every turn by conservatives, who mounted an ardent defense of the system. Conservatives considered this reform movement anathema; the central tenets of its agenda affronted their vision of an Islamic moral order and threatened to undermine the theological foundations of the state. Through their control of the judiciary, the security forces, and key legislative bodies, the conservatives struck back with a vengeance to parry the reformers’ public appeal. They shuttered reformist newspapers, obstructed Khatami’s legislative program in the parliament, and filled Iran’s prisons with a new generation of dissidents. Indeed, the reformists’ greatest triumph—an overwhelming victory in the February 2000 parliamentary elections—immediately brought about a crackdown that progressively stripped the reform movement of its strategists, its initiatives, and its popular mandate.

The ensuing four years were dominated by political paralysis and a bitter struggle for power. Conservatives consistently eroded the authority of Iran’s elected institutions, while the reformers’ victories at the ballot box were made almost meaningless because all their savvy strategizing was unable to trump their rivals’ monopolization of ultimate decision making. Meanwhile, reformers came under new pressure from students and liberal dissidents, who demanded more aggressive efforts to advance their cause.

3. Kaveh Ehsani, “‘The Conservatives Have Misjudged’: A Conversation with Ahmad Bourghani,” *Middle East Report* 212 (Fall 1999): 37.
4. Afshin Molavi, “Extra! Extra! Extra! Iran’s Newspapers at War,” *Washington Post*, August 30, 1999.

After the brief honeymoon period of the late 1990s, neither the president nor his reformist cohorts ever proved capable of outwitting their adversaries or willing to risk a confrontation that might threaten the system. These disappointments cost the reform movement dearly in terms of its single historic asset, its popular mandate. From Khatami's May 2001 reelection to the second round of local council balloting less than two years later, voter turnout dropped dramatically, and those who did cast ballots heavily favored conservatives. This trend held true for the parliamentary election, which took place in February 2004, which was framed by another intense battle between reformers and the conservative oversight body, the Guardians' Council, which disqualified more than three thousand candidates from competing, including eighty members of parliament (MPs). The latter indignity finally provoked the reformers to engage in a rare and overdue protest, but their sit-in at Iran's historic parliament building failed to mobilize significant public sympathy.

The End of Managed Change

In June 2005, Iran experienced "a new Islamic revolution"⁵ with the ascension of little-known hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency. Ahmadinejad's unexpected victory undermined much of the conventional wisdom about contemporary Iranian politics, demonstrating yet again that the Islamic Republic retains considerable capacity for political surprises. Chief among those surprises was the evidence that Iran's conservative faction could, in fact, attract respectable levels of support from a population that profoundly resents its ruling system, and that it could do so not by moderating its revolutionary rhetoric but by projecting integrity to a cynical and disaffected citizenry. Although it is reasonable to suspect that Ahmadinejad's dark-horse victory might have benefited from some direct assistance at the ballot box or, at the very least, some undue influence, it is also clear that his candidacy tapped into a previously unexploited imperative among the Iranian people—the basic human desire for a better life.

Ahmadinejad's victory was significant not simply because of who won, but also because of who lost. In both the first-round balloting and the run-off election one week later, Iranians explicitly voted against the candidate who promised them democracy. Naturally, voters had sufficient justification for doubts that any candidate could or would deliver on such promises; still, the notion that the electorate in an autocratic system would spurn the candidates who criticized that system confounds some very basic assumptions that inform current U.S. policy. Of course, Iranian voters' rejection of democratic

5. "Ahmadinejad Calls His Victory a 'New Islamic Revolution,'" *Associated Press*, June 30, 2005.

enticements was made in favor of an alternative, and evidently more compelling, offer—that of material improvements to their daily lives.

In the first round of the elections, this national compromise generated a surprisingly high turnout for Mehdi Karrubi, one of the stalwarts of the early revolutionary years who served several stints as parliamentary speaker. His presidential pitch centered around a pledge to distribute Iran's oil bounty in the form of a monthly stipend to each Iranian adult. This \$60-a-month promise netted Karrubi an unexpected third place in the official tally, and a credible complaint that an accurate count might have placed him higher. Finishing a distant fifth was Mostafa Moin, the earnest but unexciting former Khatami cabinet minister who had run as the official candidate of the reformist movement. Iranians were sympathetic but ultimately unconvinced by Moin's increasingly frantic effort during the campaign to outline an agenda that was ambitious but promised little prospect for implementation.

With only a week to refocus energies on the competition between the top two vote-getters, the second round of voting proved even more dramatic. It was a study in contrasts—Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran's savviest power broker, taking on the ruffled, unknown Ahmadinejad. To win back the position he had held for two terms in the 1990s, Rafsanjani launched a slick, cynical campaign that was buttressed by the last-minute backing of reformist politicians desperate to avoid what they advertised to the Iranian people as the onset of fascism. But voters scoffed at Rafsanjani's claims to have supported reforms, and opted overwhelmingly in favor of yet another electoral upset.

Ultimately, Ahmadinejad benefited from the well-organized political machine that is the Islamic regime's base, and many Iranians reasonably presume that he was assisted by considerable electoral manipulations as well. Indeed, with varying degrees of directness, at least three of the erstwhile contenders for the presidency alleged serious improprieties and demanded a government investigation. However, beyond whatever legal and extralegal electoral manipulations were deployed to boost him to power, Ahmadinejad managed to do what no preelection analysis suggested was possible—persuade a sizeable portion of Iran's electorate to endorse a candidate defending the status quo political system. What resonated most about Ahmadinejad's candidacy was his simple message, his upright reputation, and his focus on the hardships and inequities that afflict the average Iranian. In one of his final campaign appearances, Ahmadinejad spoke bitterly about the indignities of Iran's grinding poverty; upon his victory, he proclaimed himself honored to be "the nation's little servant and street sweeper."⁶ Like the watershed 1997 election of Khatami, Ahmadinejad's victory represented a protest vote,

6. Colin Freeman, "I Am Proud of Being the Nation's Little Servant and Street Sweeper," *Telegraph* (London), June 26, 2005.

a mutiny by an electorate more concerned with jobs and the cost of living than with lofty promises of democracy.

His victory also highlighted the paucity of alternative options available to Iranians. A push for a public boycott by Iran's inchoate opposition fell short of its goal of denying the regime the legitimacy of public participation. Here again, Iranians—particularly those outside of Tehran—demonstrated their unwillingness to break wholly with the system. The election, while not at all free and fair, at least offered an opportunity to make some sort of a choice. Iranians saw no strategic path for achieving a more attractive future that was sufficient to cede their limited role in charting their nation's course by boycotting in large numbers.

The balloting firmly closed the door on an era and a particular political strategy—one that posited a rehabilitation of the Islamic Republic through the restoration of the limited but potentially operational guarantees of representative government upon which it was established. The paradigm of change espoused by the reform movement—change from within the system itself—was not only discredited, but was deprived of any institutional vehicle to advance its aims. Today, across the board, the individuals who control all branches of government in Iran are committed to the preservation of the status quo.

Reform in Retrospect: Why a Mass Political Movement Did Not Succeed

Accepting the proposition that the reform movement's strategy no longer remains viable, it is fair to consider briefly what brought about its frustration. First, it is clear that the strategy itself was inherently limited by the moderate nature of its ambitions and the restraints that its leadership imposed on its quest to implement its agenda. Their cautious approach represented the authentic impulses of politicians who had spent two decades as part and parcel of the Islamic system and who were convinced that the changes they advocated represented an inevitable consequence of Iran's changing society.

Khatami and his allies were not naïve; rather, having battled back from political oblivion, many were profoundly cynical about the political system they were challenging and the prevailing political culture, which had condoned successive suppressions of popular rule. Iran's reform movement therefore explicitly set out to avoid any overt challenge to the boundaries of permissible political discourse ("redlines" in the Iranian vernacular) and to capitalize on the room for maneuver accorded the mainstream political elite. However, reform within the redlines failed to anticipate the intense reaction from the conservatives, who viewed these tactics as unambiguously threatening and responded in kind. The re-

formers' prudence may have temporarily preserved their place in Iranian politics, but it did not protect them or their agenda from vicious attacks. The conservative campaign ultimately made a mockery of the reformers' strategic self-restraint.

The second significant factor that contributed to the breakdown of the reformist strategy was the deeply held fear of instability and disorder that permeates Iran's political culture, a trait that may be the single most significant legacy of the Islamic Revolution. Khatami, for one, never demonstrated the stomach for high-risk gamesmanship, particularly after the shattering violence of July 1999, when security forces and hard-line thugs crushed student protests. Many influential reformers were convinced that their movement stood to lose more than it gained by casually wielding its most potent asset, its popular support. Rather than rally their supporters in the streets, MPs penned appeals to the supreme leader that were as eloquent in their appeal for democratic institutions as they were ineffective in achieving them. For his part, Khatami focused his energies within the bureaucracy—trying to advance legislation that would enhance the presidency's powers and check the authority of unelected institutions. "Mr. Khatami should have invited the people to, for example, Azadi Square to talk to them," Dr. Ibrahim Yazdi noted ruefully in 2003. "If he had invited them one year after his victory, nearly one million people would have gathered and it was enough to spark horror among the rulers. Khatami could not do so and it is a big fault."⁷ As a result, successive electoral mandates were squandered and Iranians became disenchanted with the glacial pace of change.

Finally, the reform movement never fully transcended its elite origins, as evidenced in the movement's organization as well as its ideology. The reformers remained a cliquish group of political insiders (*khodi*, in the Iranian vernacular) who never managed to mobilize society in support of their efforts. As a result, even the Islamic Iran Participation Front—the largest and most geographically dispersed reformist group—registered only ten thousand members from Iran's seventy million citizens. Elite bias was mirrored in the movement's rhetoric and policy objectives, which presumed freedom to be the most sought-after social good, despite evidence that Iranians craved economic security at least as much as they yearned for liberty. The reformers' failure to make a persuasive case to address Iran's economic dilemmas contributed to the perception that its leaders were out of touch, and sapped the movement of some of its populist appeal.

7. Mohammad-Mehdi Sofali, "The Threat Is Serious, Believe It!" *Nassim-e Saba* 99 (July 20, 2003): 6.

The Era of Ahmadinejad

If the 2005 presidential election marked the conclusion of the incrementalist, insider strategy of the reform movement, it also represented the opening salvo of a new era in Iranian politics. The current phase is marked by the reascendance of the conservatives, who are clearly in command of Iran's near-term course, and the surprising centrality of Ahmadinejad himself. After his unexpected electoral victory, the conventional wisdom presumed the previously unknown blacksmith's son to be a political naïf and a mere pawn of his hard-line backers. The office that he holds is a deliberately weak one, thanks to the enduring suspicion of Iran's revolutionaries toward central authority and elective office, and Ahmadinejad's predecessors routinely found their agendas constrained by the post's constitutional and bureaucratic limitations. Moreover, Ahmadinejad had no real prior exposure on the national or international stage. As a result, most pundits initially predicted that he would have only modest impact on decision making, and have continued to anticipate that the president's days are numbered or his influence waning.

As happens all too frequently with Iran, the experts have been proved resoundingly and repeatedly wrong. Much as he may be resented by other Iranian politicians and reviled by most of his counterparts around the world, Ahmadinejad matters. He placed himself at the center of Iran's most contentious debates and at the forefront of its long-running antagonism with Washington. At home, through an ambitious program of administrative overhauls and personnel changes, he reshaped Iran's bureaucracy and altered a number of key policies. In the foreign policy arena, Ahmadinejad deftly exploited international opposition to Iran's nuclear program as a domestic rallying point, and his odious statements on the Holocaust and Israel have made him something of a regional icon, willing to confront Western powers and orthodoxies.

At least in part, his relevance can be credited to fortuitous timing. Ahmadinejad benefited from the rising tide of anti-Americanism and regional anguish over violence in Iraq and Palestine. He was also boosted by the July 2006 conflict in Lebanon, which enabled Ahmadinejad to mug for the masses across the Arab world even as it heightened regional leaders' concerns about Iranian troublemaking. Ahmadinejad has trumpeted the electoral victories of Islamist groups in Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, and elsewhere in the region as evidence that his brand of politics is ascendant.

Equally important to his endurance, however, are Ahmadinejad's formidable political skills, which have too often been underestimated by his detractors at home and abroad. His limited experience in national and international politics notwithstanding, the Iranian president has demonstrated a real talent for populist theatrics and bureaucratic gamesmanship, both of

which have helped him outmaneuver his rivals. Chief among his political assets is audacity; his brash talk is mirrored by an unwillingness to be sidelined from key policy debates. Ahmadinejad's determination to play a central and public role in foreign policy has forced the departure of several key rivals, including Ali Larijani, who until October 2007 served as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator. This ambition and obstinacy has translated into greater practical influence than either his office or his stature would normally imply. Compared to his mild-mannered predecessor, Ahmadinejad has greater—albeit more negative—impact on the dynamics of Iran's politics, economy, and foreign policy by virtue of his unyielding ways.

Iran's controversial president has also profited from the quiet but apparently consistent support he has received from Iran's ultimate decision maker, supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Neither Ahmadinejad's domination of the public debate on key issues nor his persistence in the face of challenges from a variety of establishment elites would be possible without the approval, or at least acquiescence, of Khamenei. Their tacit alliance reflects both ideological and practical political considerations. First, there appears to be a convergence in their views on the centrality of Islamic values, which Khamenei has described as a sort of personal vindication after the reformist period.

Perhaps some individuals, even some sincere members of the revolution and not the outsiders and ill-wishers, had come to the conclusion over the past several years that the era of the revolution's original slogans was over. . . . We knew that they were making a mistake. But their presumptuousness was painful to [our] hearts. Thanks to the Iranian nation's endeavor and the nation's choice today, a government has been elected whose principled and fundamental slogans are the same as the original slogans of the revolution. That is, the basic watchwords of the Islamic Revolution are the dominant and popular ideas today. This is highly significant.⁸

Like Ahmadinejad, Khamenei is inherently distrustful of the West and is convinced of the permanence of U.S. antipathy, a legacy of the formative influence of the Iran-Iraq war, which Khamenei has described as "not a war between two countries, two armies; it was a war between an unwritten, global coalition against one nation."⁹ Like Ahmadinejad, Khamenei is prone to seeing a conspiracy around every corner, and he shares the president's

8. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, speech in Tehran on June 30, 2007, broadcast on Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 1 on July 1, 2007, World News Connection.
9. "Supreme Leader Khamene'i Emphasizes Spiritual Strength of Iranian Army," Tehran Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran Radio 1, April 16, 2003, World News Connection.

preference for offense as the best defense. "We need courageous actions," the supreme leader commented in July 2007. "And this is why I thank God for this government, that is, there is the courage for taking action."¹⁰ Moreover, Khamenei is presumably more comfortable with a chief executive whose public appeal bolsters rather than threatens the legitimacy of the revolutionary system and his own office. In practice, Khamenei has repeatedly commended Ahmadinejad's administration in public for revitalizing the spirit and mores of the revolution, while chastening its critics in a fashion rarely seen during the eight-year onslaught by conservatives against Khatami.

Thanks to his implicit backing from Khamenei, Ahmadinejad at least for the moment appears to have outflanked efforts by his rivals to contain him. He has purged detractors from his cabinet, forced the resignation of powerful rivals such as Larijani and rebounded apparently unscathed from setbacks such as his slate's loss in December 2006 elections. While his influence on specific decisions is impossible to ascertain from the outside, Ahmadinejad has indulged in relentless self-promotion both at home and abroad. His presidency is quite a contrast from his campaign for the office, when he cleverly showcased his modest lifestyle, particularly contrasting his apartment in a low-rent district of Tehran with the grand villas of Iran's power brokers in the capital's posh northern neighborhoods.

Initially upon assuming the presidency, Ahmadinejad continued to project an unpretentious persona, rejecting the tradition of hanging the president's portrait in all state offices and dispensing with the new presidential jet. However, the president's personal frugality belied his ambition and his predilection for instigating drama in which he would play a central role. At home, perhaps the best example of Ahmadinejad's imperious presidency has been his well-publicized program of visiting each of Iran's thirty provinces, with his entire cabinet in tow and an open pocketbook for both personal petitions and public works. The president's nationwide tour, which has now entered its second round, has elicited more than nine million letters penned directly to the president, who claims to have adjudicated thousands of cases and provided 2.4 million Iranians with at least a token financial response. The visits have had two primary political payoffs for Ahmadinejad. First, they have bolstered his support from the supreme leader, who has praised the effort as a "very good and necessary initiative" while castigating the public criticism of Ahmadinejad's travels.¹¹ Second, the visits have bolstered the president's support outside of Iran's major urban centers, a segment of the country that has become increasingly relevant to securing elective office in Iran.

Ahmadinejad's presidency has also been marked by the increasingly prominent role of military institutions and individuals in Iranian politics. In

10. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, speech in Tehran on June 30, 2007.

11. Ibid.

particular, the Revolutionary Guards have assumed a more prominent role in Iran's economy, securing key stakes in major projects including the energy sector, which until recent years remained the province of the state oil company and its affiliates. Additionally, a number of current and former Revolutionary Guard commanders have moved into the parliament and political posts across the Ahmadinejad administration, most notably in the Interior Ministry, which not only commands Iran's internal security forces but also is charged with implementation of elections. The expanded role of the military leadership in Iran's politics and economy represents a significant shift with respect to Iran's recent history of distinctly separate civil and military spheres of authority, although it is to some extent the predictable result of the eight-year war with Iraq, a formative experience for the postrevolutionary state and leadership.

The role of military commanders and organizations is complemented by what one expert on Iran's internal politics has described as the "security outlook" of the current leadership; in other words, "a newly security-conscious state, bordering on paranoid, has indeed emerged."¹² This heightened sense of suspicion and defensiveness appears to reflect both the innate predilections of the new configuration of power in Iran and the perception of intensifying American pressure. In a sense, the two factors have served to reinforce one another, particularly as Washington has singled out the Revolutionary Guards for targeted sanctions and financial restrictions.

Predictably, however, the resurgence of Iran's conservatives over the past five years has contributed to their fragmentation; having propelled the reformists to the sidelines, Iran's hard-liners are now fighting among themselves in a much more public fashion than ever before. Divisions within Iran's orthodoxy have existed since the earliest days of the revolution, but today they are exacerbated by the postrevolutionary generation's coming-of-age. Many traditionalists have been unnerved by Ahmadinejad's scathingly candid attacks against Iran's political insiders, such as Rafsanjani, as well as the presumably unintended consequences of his radical discourse and policies. "Someone who drives at such a speed should be more careful about his performance," observed Mohammad Reza Bahonar, deputy speaker of the parliament, on Ahmadinejad's call for officials to keep up with his fast pace. "If he does not foresee the obstacles in the way, the accidents will be even more terrible."¹³

And while Ahmadinejad is part of this new cohort of leaders, these younger conservatives are more diverse than is often depicted, and several

12. Farideh Farhi, "Iran's 'Security Outlook,'" *Middle East Report Online*, July 9, 2007, www.merip.org/mero/mero070907.html (accessed April 15, 2008).

13. Aresu Eqbali, "Iran Conservatives Slam Ahmadinejad on Economy," *Agence France-Presse*, December 23, 2007.

of the political vehicles associated with the younger generation hard-liners began distancing themselves from the president even before he took office. MP Emad Afruq, a conservative politician who originally chaired the current parliament's cultural committee, has become one of the most outspoken critics of Ahmadinejad, accusing the president's political faction of having "embraced a creed of religion-state union that does not make politics religious and moral. This creed makes religion and morals political and struggles for power in the name of religion and morals," adding that this tendency is more dangerous than secularism because it "taints the good name of morals and religion."¹⁴ Such conservative splintering has helped dilute their influence at the ballot box since their 2005 apex, and the December 2006 elections for the Assembly of Experts and local councils were widely viewed as a rebuke to Ahmadinejad and a signal that the conservative reconquest of Iran's elective institutions would be neither permanent nor unchallenged.

For their part, Iran's reformists are beginning to reassert themselves on the national political stage, focusing their message on Ahmadinejad's excesses and seeking to reclaim some place within the country's elective institutions. The internecine debates within the reformist camp have largely been overshadowed by their shared antipathy to Ahmadinejad and his policies. By nominating a number of moderate members of the Islamic Republic establishment for the 2008 parliamentary elections, the reformists hoped to claw their way back to political relevance, assume greater influence in shaping Iranian policies, and position themselves to credibly contest the 2009 presidential election. As the results of that contest demonstrate, the conservative domination of the electoral system as well as the reformists' own strategic disorientation, a comeback for the Khatami camp is at best an iffy proposition. And even if they were to somehow regain a foothold in the Majlis or other state institutions, it remains unclear if the reformists can advance a common, positive agenda for Iran's future beyond their critique of the government.

Former president Khatami has emerged as an elder statesman for the reform movement, playing a central role in election strategizing and once again winning ovations from student audiences—a sharp contrast from the jeers he received at the close of his two terms.¹⁵ Khatami's approach has certainly not been vindicated, but popular opinions of his presidency have risen if only by comparison with the current environment. Additionally, after vilifying him during their heyday, Iran's mainstream reformists also appear to have made their peace with Rafsanjani, and it is possible to envision Iran's

14. Emad Afruq, "Repulsive Stench from Electoral Competitions," *Etemaad-e Melli*, June 19, 2007, as translated by World News Connection, document number 200706191477.1_6fd800507af307ca.

15. See the analysis of Hamed Tabibi, "University Welcomes Khatami," *Etemad*, December 12, 2007, www.etemaad.com/Released/86-09-21/150.htm (accessed May 9, 2008).

politics moving toward a grand coalition of centrists, incorporating political actors from both ends of the political spectrum.

The most trenchant critiques levied by reformists as well as conservatives have focused on Ahmadinejad's handling of Iran's economy, an issue that will be explored in greater depth below. Notwithstanding the president's shrewd deployment of popular economic grievances to boost his standing at home, his administration has only exacerbated the underlying distortions that plague Iran's economy and has done little to capitalize effectively on the record oil windfall of the past few years. As a result, the conservatives in power now risk repeating their predecessors' blunders by raising public expectations of rewards that they have little prospect of delivering. Should Iran's government fail to live up to the minimalist expectations of a disillusioned citizenry, the relative quiescence of the Iranian population could well erupt into a much more serious challenge to the system and its legitimacy than the Islamic Republic has yet faced.

Many analysts have commented that the conservative reconquest of Iran's elected institutions will not usher in the end of reform in Iran simply because the movement emanated from social conditions that remain even more applicable today than in 1997. Iran's disproportionately young population, more urbanized and better educated than at any point in history, are just now coming into their own, and their impact will ultimately preclude any lasting return to the authoritarian impulses that dominated the Iranian revolution's first decade.

However, even if Iran's Islamic order is beginning to crumble thirty years after its inception, the state that it forged has proved ever more enduring. Although the rhetorical jousting over Ahmadinejad and the occasional evidence of popular backlash against the regime raises hopes that meaningful change is on the horizon in Iran, the reality is probably less promising. Throughout the Islamic Republic's history, its political elite have consistently engaged in fratricidal partisanship. One revolutionary stalwart commented recently that "what you see in relation to the supporters of Ahmadinejad, you need to look at the archives, as you would be able to find the same for the supporters of Mr. Khatami and Mr. Hashemi Rafsanjani in there."¹⁶ This contested internal political battlefield rarely threatens the system's stability; rather, Iran's multiple spheres of influence and jockeying political factions ensure considerable consensus that is the hidden strength of the system.

Moreover, while there is broad-based antagonism toward the regime, there is no real opposition movement or a credible strategy for mass mobilization. For now, Iranians—though unequivocally frustrated and disenchanted with

16. "Asgarowladi's Criticisms of the Conduct of the Government's Supporters," *Etemad*, August 28, 2007, www.etemaad.com/Released/86-06-06/150.htm (accessed May 9, 2008).

the ephemeral promises of reform—have demonstrated that they are not yet prepared to take that frustration to the streets. Nor has an organization or potential leader yet emerged from the chorus of complaints that appears to have the discipline or the stamina to sustain a major confrontation with the forces of the government. Having endured the disappointment of their last democratic experiment going awry, Iranians are weary of political turmoil and, at least for the time being, resigned to a waiting game with respect to regime change.

Despite his manifest difficulties with both Iran's political elites as well as its population, it would be a mistake to presume that the era of Ahmadinejad is therefore on the wane. As Iran approaches a presidential election in mid-2009, the president benefits from the authority to stack the deck in his own favor, as well as from his patrons in the hard-line clergy, the Revolutionary Guards, and the supreme leader's office. Moreover, even if Ahmadinejad somehow passes from the scene, there is every reason to believe that the legacy of his ideological fervor and the constituency whose worldview he has represented—"neoconservatives" or second- and third-generation ideologues—will continue to shape the options available to any future Iranian leader.

Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that few analysts have successfully predicted the outcomes of Iran's routinely surprising presidential contests, including the upset victories of Khatami in 1997 and Ahmadinejad in 2005. This is partly a function of the profound limitations on our information and understanding of internal Iranian developments, but also reflective of the power of unintended consequences in shaping Iran. Its popular, peaceful revolution begat a vicious theocracy, and a decade later, the regime's attempt to marginalize opponents of its postwar economic reforms spawned a political and cultural reform movement. At a time when Iran is dominated by an unreasonable leadership and gridlocked internal politics, it is worth remembering that Iran's politics are likely to resist simple prognostication and to defy the expected outcomes.

Iran's Domestic Dynamics and Its International Approach

In its early years, the Islamic Republic's worldview was characterized by an uncompromising vision of Iran's interests as encompassing the umma, as well as by a revolutionary preoccupation with independence or detachment from great power politics. These influences molded an antagonistic Iranian approach toward the established states along its border as well as toward its former patron in Washington. From the outset, however, the nationalist underpinnings of Iranian foreign policy have continuously asserted themselves and assumed increasing primacy as a result of the long and costly conflict with Iraq.

With the end of the war in 1988, via a cease-fire that was itself a belated submission to pragmatism, and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini the following year, Iran's foreign policy began to shed some of its revolutionary radicalism. From this point onward, Iran's national interests increasingly appeared to trump ideological considerations in shaping its interaction with the world—with some notable exceptions. In the late 1990s, a domestically focused political reform movement made the case for the primacy of national interest in foreign policy decision making, with some notable successes in reining in the excesses of Iran's ideologues.

As the reformist strategy of managed change stumbled, however, the internal political landscape shifted yet again, and the ascendance of Ahmadinejad reoriented Iranian foreign policy toward a considerably harder line and revived the ideological themes of the revolution. "We cannot have a foreign policy without ideas," commented Said Jalili, foreign ministry official and close Ahmadinejad confidant, before his promotion to serve as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator. "There was a time when people were saying we have to eliminate ideology from our foreign policy. I never understood this."¹⁷ In fact, Jalili spent much of his first one-on-one meeting with European Union (EU) foreign policy chief Javier Solana—a five-hour session—lecturing the EU official.

The impact of Ahmadinejad was felt sooner and more dramatically in Iran's foreign policy than its internal sphere through Iran's accelerating nuclear program; its emboldened regional posture and involvement with Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iraq; and, of course, the president's rancorous statements about Israel and the Holocaust. With their internal adversaries on the wane, Iranian hard-liners began asserting a newly reborn brashness and greater audacity on the international scene.

This approach reflects their innately Hobbesian worldview, a legacy of the revolutionary decade and the war with Iraq, and an aversion to compromise that is grounded in the conviction that acceding to international demands will be read as weakness and intensify pressure on the regime. As a columnist in a hard-line newspaper declared last year, "our world is not a fair one and everyone gets as much power as he can, not for his power of reason or the adaptation of his request to the international laws, but by his bullying."¹⁸ Molded by their perception of an inherently hostile world and the conviction that the exigencies of regime survival justify its actions, Iranian leaders seek to exploit every opening, pursue multiple or contradictory agendas,

17. Said Jalili, interview by Morteza Qamari Vafa and Akram Sharifi, Fars News Agency, March 7, 2007, www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8512130522 (accessed May 9, 2008).

18. Mehdi Mohammadi, "The Meaning of Wisdom," *Keyhan*, February 4, 2007, www.kayhan-news.ir/851115/2.HTM#other200 (accessed May 9, 2008).

play various capitals against one another, and engage in pressure tactics—including the limited use of force—to advance their interests.

Iran's assertive foreign policy since Ahmadinejad's election also underscores the regime's perverse but compelling incentive to preserve the long-standing antagonism toward Washington, as it reinvigorates the hard-liners' domestic constituencies and justifies their extremist policies. Finally, for much of the Iranian leadership, the paradoxes of the regional context validate a more belligerent, forceful approach. High oil prices and American difficulties in stabilizing Iraq are offset by the proximity of the U.S. military; rising frictions with the United States, Europe, and many of their Sunni Arab neighbors; and the uncertainty about Washington's intentions and motivations.

But even since the hard-liners have consolidated control over all institutions and decision making, Iranian foreign policy is neither immutable nor monolithic. In fact, it is only since 2005 that Iran has finally abandoned one of its most fiercely guarded revolutionary shibboleths, the rejection of diplomatic dialogue with its old adversary Washington. Following an intensifying internal debate over the utility of direct contacts with Washington, Ayatollah Khamenei proclaimed in March 2006 that "there are no objections" to talks with Washington "if the Iranian officials think they can make the Americans clearly understand the issues pertaining to Iraq." He also cautioned, however, that "we do not support the talks, if they provide a venue for the bullying, aggressive, and deceptive side to impose its own views."¹⁹ His announcement echoed calls by conservative MPs and Iranian power brokers such as Larijani and Rafsanjani and marked the first time in postrevolutionary history that the entire Iranian political spectrum, at the highest level, has publicly endorsed talks with the United States. Khamenei has reiterated his willingness to countenance a better relationship with Washington as recently as January 2008.

Moreover, it is clear that a critical mass within the Iranian political elite dissociate themselves from the stridency of the Ahmadinejad approach to foreign policy. The conservative-dominated parliament summoned his foreign minister for grilling over the president's denial of the Holocaust, and a number of U.S. officials have gone on record in late 2007 with praise for apparent Iranian cooperation in stemming the flow of roadside bombs to help U.S. efforts to stabilize Iraq. A more centrist Islamic Republic would most likely avoid some of the worst excesses of the Ahmadinejad era, and could over time develop a more constructive role vis-à-vis U.S. interests and allies in the region. Hassan Ruhani, the former chief nuclear negotiator who remains close to Rafsanjani, has been one of the most prominent and persis-

19. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, speech in Mashhad on March 21, 2006, broadcast by the Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 1, World News Connection.

tent advocates of a more moderate international approach. In a November 2007 speech, he counseled that Iran “must act wisely in order to distance ourselves from tensions because these tensions in no way serve the interests of the country’s economy, or indeed the interests of any political or economic aspect of the country. We should not give excuses to the enemies, and we should not provoke them with rash remarks.”²⁰

Still, in looking toward the future, it is important to note that a positive shift in Iran’s internal politics—one that swings the pendulum back toward the center or even toward a more liberalized domestic order—will not necessarily facilitate new cooperation on the international front. The power struggle that dominated Iran during the reformist zenith complicated its decision making, and the exigencies of internal competition constrained even those leaders who might have been amenable from reaching out to Washington. Thus, after auspicious initial signals at the outset of Khatami’s first term, the reformers refrained from overtures to the United States simply to avoid provoking hard-line reactions from their rivals. Moreover, shifts in Iran’s internal politics may undermine whatever international consensus remains on Iran, which could stymie efforts to address the most problematic elements of Iran’s foreign policy.

20. “Ruhani: Societies That Make Up Enemies Always Fail—Cannot Eliminate Rivals,” *Farhang-e Ashti*, November 22, 2007, www.ashtidaily.com/detail.aspx?cid=119783 (accessed May 9, 2008).