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Iranian Democracy
A Century of Struggle, Setback, and Progress

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Introduction

On a warm evening in mid-June 2013, men and women took to the streets of cities across Iran in response to the official results of the presidential election. Many of those present had been in the streets in 2009, during the unprecedented protests and subsequent violent crackdown following the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president. But in 2013 there was no anger, no sense of disenfranchisement and no security forces present.

Celebratory cheering and singing filled the air as young people expressed mixed relief and joy at the election of Dr. Hassan Rouhani, the unexpected first-round victor in a race many believed would go to one of the five conservative candidates. Despite the closely managed circumstances under which presidential elections take place in Iran, many expressed a sense of having won something back from the government. Iranians had taken to the polls as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei had asked, and in return their voices were heard.

The stark contrast between elections in 2009 and 2013 may seem anecdotal, but it is a prime example of the back and forth Iran has endured in the constant struggle to build a democratic political system. First in Persia, then Iran, and currently the Islamic Republic of Iran, internal currents toward representative government have been obstructed by various challenges ranging from domestic power grabs to foreign intervention. Yet even with these seemingly constant barriers, the evolution of the Iranian political system since 1900 has moved the country closer and closer to democracy. This thesis will trace the evolution of the Iranian political system from 1900, immediately before the Constitutional Revolution, to the present day to show how the country arrived at the popular election of Hassan Rouhani and attempt to extrapolate from the current political system what lies ahead for the democratic process.

The case of Iran in the Middle East is unique, in that although it is often grouped together with neighboring Muslim states, the political evolution of the country is quite different. Along with being Persian rather than Arab, Persia was never part of the Ottoman Empire, was not colonized in the traditional sense and has a long-standing tradition of central rule. Many of the problems faced by the other Middle Eastern states have been avoided or experienced quite differently for Iran. Although power was centralized in the 1920s by Reza Shah, Iranian borders have been relatively unchanged for centuries. Iran as we know it today has had a central government, with more or less the ability to govern, since the time of empires. Because of this precedent, Iran was able to avoid much of the turmoil and instability experienced in post-colonial states after the end of World War II and the end of the Ottoman Empire. As neighboring states struggled to create a cohesive identity encompassing numerous tribes, Iran was able to focus energy and resources elsewhere.

Iran has seen numerous popular protests and uprisings since the early 1900s, which were led by charismatic individuals but bolstered by the strong support of an engaged populace. Michael Singh points out, “Indeed, although periods of upheaval tend to be remembered today as being driven by iconic leaders such as Mossadeq, in the 1950s, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in 1979, it is important not to forget how broad and long standing the popular movements behind them actually were.”¹ This is important to keep in mind when exploring recent political history, for although foreign forces have imposed their will upon the Iranian people, few historical Iranian leaders have succeeded domestically without garnering the support of the people. This is dissimilar from the broader Middle East, where those in power in the past

¹ Michael Singh. "Iranian Re-Revolution." *Foreign Affairs*, July 26, 2010. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66499/michael-singh/iranian-re-revolution>.

century have traditionally been military strongmen rather than the academic Mossadegh or the religious Khomeini.

What qualifies as democracy is difficult to determine, owing to the lack of consensus by the international community. The United Nations cites O. Engstrom and Goran Hayden's two criteria, including inclusive suffrage and "institutions and procedures through which citizens can express effective preferences about alternative policies at the national level and there are institutionalized constraints on the exercise of power by the executive."² The same report also quotes Larry Diamond's maximalist definition, which includes civil liberties, effective governance, and autonomy of the branches of government. The report does not, however, give an independent definition of democracy. The UN Charter does not contain the word "democracy" at all, even though a 2008 report claims it is implied by the opening "We the peoples".³

Since John Locke first pioneered the concept of governance by consent,⁴ the practical application of democratic government has resulted in its becoming the only truly legitimate form of rule. Former monarchies have implemented constitutional systems providing representative rule, while other states have done away with any form of monarchy. With the rise of the United States and the Cold War came the idea that democracy could be spread, allowing outside forces to introduce "of the people, by the people, for the people" governance. The result has created an emphasis on regime change as a viable means to introduce democracy from the outside, rather than allowing it to develop over time.

² United Nations Economic and Social Counsel, "Definition of basic concepts and terminologies in governance and public administration." Last modified Jan 5, 2006.

<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan022332.pdf>.

³ United Nations, "Democracy and the United Nations." Last modified 2008.

http://www.unis.unvienna.org/pdf/Democracy_UN_2008.pdf.

⁴ John Locke. *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Thomas Hollis (London: A. Millar et al., 1764).

Today, democracy is largely defined from the outside, rather than internally. Without international recognition of democracy, countries are often unable to overcome preconceptions of authoritarianism. For Iran, the result of U.S.-led rejection of Islamic-based democracy has been the assertion that the clerical regime is entirely illegitimate, despite high voter participation and largely peaceful elections, with the exception of the 2009 presidential election. To facilitate this examination of the Iranian political evolution, the author does not assume theocracy and democracy to be mutually exclusive. For the purposes of this discussion, democracy will be defined as government by consent through popular elections deemed free and fair by the population, as well as the protection of human rights and the rule of law.

The Ongoing Struggle Toward Democracy

The political history of Iran is littered with lost opportunities and hypothetical alternative timelines. As is the case with many countries' paths to democracy, minor victories are often overshadowed by major defeats as institutions and leaders rise and fall. Despite foreign interference, bureaucratic obstructionism and varying degrees of widespread oppression, progress is made slowly and at times silently. Iran has been on a trajectory towards full democracy for over a century, beginning with the Tobacco Revolts in the late 1800s. Iran has to make the transition towards democracy without outside interference to win domestic legitimacy, particularly in light of their experiences at the hands of the British, Russians, and the United States. As James Dobbins and Alireza Nader pointed out in the aftermath of the 2009 Green Movement protests, "Iran has the key ingredients to help create a more democratic political system— a young, educated, and politically active population with a large middle class that

wants to be part of the global community.”⁵ The potential of Iran for democratic evolution can only be realized if given time, free from foreign pressure, to develop naturally.

⁵ James Dobbins and Alireza Nader. "Gate Crashing the Opposition." *Foreign Affairs*, August 22, 2012. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/138046/james-dobbins-and-alireza-nader/gate-crashing-the-opposition>.

Part 1: Under the Peacock Throne

Monarchy in the area now known as Iran had a centuries-long history before its collapse in 1979. From the ancient rulers Cyrus and Alexander to the Sasanian Empire, through caliphates and dynastic families, history suggests that Persian monarchical tradition stretches as far back as 2,500 BC in numerous fashions and with varying degrees of central control. Persian empires conquered great swathes of territory, sustained global trade routes, and became great centers of learning and art over the course of centuries. Those empires that operated from or held what is today modern Iran were among the most influential in world history.

The period of time to be discussed in the following chapters could be described as the death throes of the Persian monarchy. Unable to adapt to a changing world order, the Qajar Dynasty, which held reign in Persia from 1749 to 1925, became stagnant and eventually so internally crippled that the pressure of foreign powers was too great to bear. From concessions granted to these powers to popular unrest caused by widespread poverty, the Qajars were unable to effectively lead their country into the modern era. While they were not the last to sit on the Peacock Throne, their lack of leadership sowed the seeds of unrest and subsequent mass protest that would eventually bring down the traditional monarchy.

By the time Reza Khan began the Pahlavi Dynasty in 1921, foreign domination was the established norm for Iran, widespread lack of education inhibited international competition, and economic conditions left no middle class to speak of. Most citizens lived in poverty. Despite reforms undertaken by Reza, the government could not stand up to the power of the British and the Soviet Union— a power that forced abdications, muted the power of the legislature, and further crippled the country economically by hoarding profits from the nation's oil fields.

As power passed to Mohammad Reza in the 1940s and the second half of the 20th century began, the inequality facing Iran and tension between the monarchy and the influential Shi'ite clergy created a broad coalition of opposition parties. By the late 1970s, despite a weak illusion of control, Mohammad Reza was confronted by a groundswell of unrest, carefully organized around the exiled Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Under the pressure of street demonstrations and widespread protests, the shah left the country and monarchy in Iran came to an end, ushering in a new phase in Iran's journey to democracy.

Constitutional Revolution

Nearing the end of their reign, the Qajar's Persia in the late 19th century was characterized by economic struggle and major concessions given to Russian and British companies that left large parts of the economy under foreign control. The great powers did not colonize Persia in a traditional sense. Rather, they opted to secure economic interests in a way that gave them substantial control of the country's finances and territory. The Reuter Concession of 1872 sold most of Persia's roads, mills, factories, telegraph services, and resource extraction to Paul Reuter, an entrepreneur known for founding the Reuters news agency, for five years, with 60 percent of net profits going to Reuter for 20 years.⁶ This particular concession was met with outrage not only in Persia but also in Russia, because Moscow believed it infringed on its interests in Persia. The Reuter Concession only stood for one year in face of widespread opposition, but it effectively rallied those factions against Qajar Shah's accommodating policy towards outside powers. It did not, however, reverse the broader state policy that allowed such an accommodation to be reached in the first place.

⁶ Nikkie Keddie. *Religion and Rebellion in Iran: The Tobacco Protest of 1891-92* (Frank Cass, 1966), 5

When Nasir al-Din Shah gave all tobacco rights to Major G. F. Talbot in 1890, the Russians began stoking frustration at the formation of a Tobacco Regie (or monopoly), which would require that all tobacco be sold to a foreign-owned corporation. Russia, which stood to lose from the arrangement, began fomenting unrest by arguing against the concession and encouraging citizens to protest. What became the Tobacco Revolts were joined by *bazaaris*, the powerful merchant class, in 1891, and that year a *fatwa*, or religious edict, against the use of tobacco products resulted in widespread protests and boycotts. Even within the Qajar court, women participated in boycotts to voice their displeasure with the direction of state policy. As a result of the popular movement, the shah cancelled the concession in hopes of avoiding civil conflict. This move by the shah also showed that it was possible to influence government policy through protest.

In 1905 that potential was capitalized upon again when protests against the rule and mismanagement of the country by Nasir al-Din Shah's successor, Mozaffar al-Din Shah, began with *bazaaris* before becoming a widespread popular movement. What began as protests against new tariffs to repay loans held by Russia gained support when the shah's agents entered a mosque to disrupt a gathering of activists. Capitalizing on the unrest caused by economic concessions and the experience of past large-scale protests, leaders were able to effectively pressure the shah to allow the creation of an elected parliament. The Majles, or Parliament, was to be the legislative arm of a constitutional monarchy, providing a democratic element to the Persian government for the first time.

As in the Tobacco Protests, the effective leaders of these protests were the clergy, with members of the *ulama*, or clergy, advocating boycotts, writing letters, and maintaining fervor through their platform at the mosque. This leadership by the clergy was a surprise to the British,

who had not expected the powerful clerical class to take a political stand with the masses. A British official working in Persia at the time reported, “One remarkable feature of this revolution here— for it is surely worthy to be called a revolution— is that the priesthood have found themselves on the side of progress and freedom. This, I should think, is almost unexampled in the world’s history.”⁷

This union of clergy and activists would be repeated often in protests under the various shahs, and eventually a coalition much like those in the early 1900s would put an end to the monarchy. These early lessons in mobilization, effective use of propaganda, and cooperation laid the groundwork for the continued use of protest as a tool to impact policy.

Elections were held hastily after the shah capitulated, and October of 1905 saw the first Majles convene under the direction of Speaker Morteza Gholi Khan Hedayat. A leader of the Constitutional Movement and subsequent political party of the same name, Hedayat would go on to hold posts including prime minister and finance minister before his assassination in 1911. Among the first acts carried out by the Majles was to approve the writing of a constitution, which was written hastily so the ailing shah could approve it.

In 1906, the Persian Constitution was put into place by royal proclamation. The document would be revised over coming years, but the initial iteration including fundamental laws to facilitate elections of the newly created Majlis. Among the articles were qualifications for holding office, manner of election, and restrictions regarding who could vote. Women were not granted suffrage nor were those with “mischievous opinions” or criminal record, active military personnel, and anyone under 25 years of age.⁸ Based on the Belgian Constitution, with

⁷ Stephen Kinzer. *All The Shah's Men* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2003), 35.

⁸ Foundation for Iranian Studies, "Iran's 1906 Constitution." <http://fis-iran.org/en/resources/legaldoc/iranconstitution>.

its system of parliamentary monarchy, the Persian Constitution was not largely inclusive. But for the first time the shah was put under the rule of law and representative government was born.

In 1907, the Majles amended and expanded the scope of the constitution. Supplementary laws primarily discussed the rights of land-owners but, interestingly, featured several key religious laws. The first article named Islam as the official religion of the state, and subsequent articles gave clerics the task of approving legislative acts. Equal rights, freedom of the press, and “judicial tribunals” were also affirmed by the amendments.⁹

With the death of Mozaffar al-Din Shah in 1907 came new challenges for the newly constituted Persian government. Muhammed Ali Shah succeeded his father and quickly turned on the Majles, seeking to use internal disagreement to undermine the power of the institution. The British and Russians quickly sided with the crown and sought to intimidate legislators and officials. Due to widespread public unrest, Muhammad Ali Shah detained members of his own cabinet and named successors in an attempt to head off tension. Despite this move, in February an assassination attempt increased the shah’s suspicion of opposition parties and organizations.

In 1908, the shah ordered the bombing of the Majles building, setting off a civil war. Officials were arrested and the assembly was closed, while in outer regions militias were formed. In Rasht and Tabriz, government forces clashed with Constitutionalists, those who wanted to restore the new constitution. The British and Russians implored the shah to stabilize the country by reopening the Majles and affirming his dedication to the Constitution.¹⁰ Fighting raged as Constitutionalist forces pushed towards Tehran, eventually taking the capital and re-establishing constitutional government.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ "Persian Civil War." *Taranaki Herald*, Vol LIV Issue 13748, Pg 5, Sept 10, 1908.
<http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&d=TH19080910.2.25>.

Foreign Interference in Persia

The next year, Muhammed Ali Shah was forced into exile by pro-constitution forces. The Majles voted into power his 11-year-old son, Ahmad, with a regent appointed to handle affairs. Under Ahmad, the Majles was able to enact reforms to rebuild the country following massive unrest and civil conflict. Ahmad Shah was, however, largely ineffective, due to his age and the numerous pressures bearing down upon him. This situation allowed the British and Russians to continue their interferences without effective resistance. Although unable to entirely shut down the Majles, by exacerbating tensions and bribing Parliamentarians the forces seeking to maintain sole control of Persian affairs were able to render the body ineffectual. In his book *The Strangling of Persia*, Morgan Shuster records his time serving in Persia during 1911 as the treasurer-general, a post he was appointed to by the Majles and forced out of by the Russians. In his account of his time in Persia, Shuster writes,

The Constitutionlists of Modern Persia will not have lived, struggled, and in many instances, died entirely in vain, if the destruction of Persian sovereignty shall have sharpened somewhat the civilized world's realization of the spirit of international brigandage which marked the *welt-politik* [italics added] of the year 1911.¹¹

Shuster's account of the interplay between Russia, Great Britain and Persia shows a clear picture of blatant usurpation of authority by the Great Powers. Shuster's task in Persia was to assist in organizing and managing the government budget. As his work revealed the extent to which foreign powers were exploiting the Persian people and stripping away the power of the elected parliament, the more harshly he was questioned, intimidated, and occasionally bribed by those powers in question.

¹¹ W. Morgan Shuster. *Strangling of Persia* (New York City: The Century Co. 1912), page xiv

During his time in office, Shuster began advocating for the Persian government on the international stage. In late 1911, he published a letter in *The Times* of London, quoted below, that attacked Russian interference in Persian affairs and further confirmed previous statements to the same effect. In response, the Russian government issued an ultimatum to the Persian Parliament, which was accepted, and Shuster was forced out of office.

As for the condition imposed upon Persia by the Russian ultimatum that Persia shall for the future appoint no foreigners to official posts without the consent of the Russian and British Governments (a condition modified later into a veto upon appointments), the demand put Persia in the position of either entering upon a war, which would be utterly disastrous to undertake, or of accepting terms which are a clear limitation of its sovereignty.¹²

Islam and Democracy in Persia

When Shuster published *The Strangling of Persia* in 1912, he coined the term “Muhammedan democracy,” linking Islam to politics in a way that had not yet been done in the West. Unlike Christianity, Islam and governance were functionally connected since Islam’s inception, with the Prophet Muhammad serving both as religious and political leader. The rapid spread of Islam and the empire built around it necessitated effective leadership, resulting in an outline for a system of government being developed within the tenets of the faith. Methods of taxation, exemptions for recognized religious minorities, and systems of trial and punishment became part of the teachings of Islam and were tested through implementation by empires over centuries. The question of whether an Islamic government can be democratic is one of the great debates of our

¹² “Russia and Persia.” *The American Journal of International Law* , Vol. 6, No. 1 (Jan., 1912): 155-159

time, given not only Iran but the rise of Islamist political parties in post-Arab Spring countries as well as Muslim countries such as Turkey.

Part of the difficulty in imagining a fully representative Islamic democracy is the deeply ingrained vision of democracy as seen in the West. For many, separation of church and state is critical, particularly in the case of Islam, which is seen by many as an inherently intolerant faith. Conflation of extremism with authority and historical experience with outcome of religious practice has led many to consider Islam and democracy at odds with one another in a way more inherent than other faiths, such as Christianity. The central flaw in assuming Islam and democracy are incompatible is the widespread belief that only Western-style secular democracy is valid. This absolutist approach, where a country either follows a Western model or does not achieve democracy, rules out cultural and historical experiences and contingencies that may influence the development of government. Brian Handwerk, of National Geographic, explains this problem as follows:

Ultimately democracy could evolve a bit differently in different cultures...It doesn't have to be a replica of the democracy we have in the U.S. You can't compare what we've achieved here as a society over two centuries with an emerging democracy, where people are just trying to test the boundaries and find out what democracy means.¹³

¹³ Brian Handwerk. National Geographic, "Can Islam and Democracy Coexist?." Last modified Oct 24, 2010. http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/10/1021_031021_islamicdemocracy_2.html.

World War I

It was against this backdrop of foreign interference that the First World War began. At the time, the shah was largely at the mercy of the British and Russian governments, and the Majles had little more than the illusion of power. The state was a financial disaster, with little control over its own trade and territory due to concessions. Although formally neutral, Persia became a battleground as Ottoman forces clashed with Allied troops on Persian territory. Fighting, though occasionally lulled, never left Persia for the duration of the conflict, leading to protracted financial and political woes.

Kamyar Ghaneabassari wrote, “During the war and immediately after, Persia was in chaos, both because of the war’s effects and because there was no effective authority over the country.”¹⁴ Financially, Persia relied on a British monthly payment of about £70,000 [\$4.4 million] and in 1919 received “a loan of £2,000,000 [\$110 million] and the appointment of British officials as financial and military advisers,”¹⁵ according to Edgar Turlington. The British felt they had a right to exercise control over Persia due to the geopolitical, strategic, and economic importance of the country. Lord Nathaniel Curzon, who served in key British offices, explained,

If it be asked why we should undertake the task at all, and why Persia should not be left to herself and allowed to rot into picturesque decay, the answer is that her geographical position, the magnitude of our interests in the country, and the future safety of our Eastern Empire render it impossible for us now— just as it would have been impossible for us any time during the last fifty years— to disinherit ourselves from what happens in Persia.¹⁶

¹⁴ Kamyar Ghaneabassari. “U.S. Foreign Policy and Persia, 1856-1921.” *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1/3 (Winter - Summer, 2002): 145-175

¹⁵ Edgar Turlington. “The Financial Independence of Persia.” *Foreign Affairs*. July 1, 1928. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68906/edgar-turlington/the-financial-independence-of-persia>.

¹⁶ Stephen Kinzer. *Reset: Iran, Turkey, and America’s Future*. (New York City: Macmillan. 2011): 26.

In 1917, Russia had been pulled from the war due to the Bolshevik Revolution, and as a result forfeited its position in Persia. Great Britain saw this as an opportunity to create a protectorate, much as it had in other Ottoman territories following the war. However, after the newly formed Soviet Union renounced all tsarist policies and claims to land in 1921, the British could not move forward with the plan without appearing outwardly imperialistic and antagonistic towards the Soviets.¹⁷ Soviet forces remained in the north and eventually attempted to march on Tehran, making the renunciation little more than a symbolic gesture, but the British abandoned the plan nonetheless.

The end of the Qajar Dynasty came in 1921. Reza Khan, a military leader in the north, led the Persian Cossack Brigade into Tehran in February of that year, heading off a Soviet march on the capital, and successfully staged a coup d'état by naming himself commander and chief of the army as well as minister of war. His ally, Seyyed Zia'eddin Tabatabaee, became prime minister. As a military man, Reza relied on his harsh persona to win him support among the population and regain control of the country. M. Reza Ghods explains,

During his rise to power, he succeeded in establishing internal stability in Iran. In addition to suppressing the revolts in Gilan, Khorasan, and Azerbaijan, in 1922 he suppressed a revolt of Kurdish tribesmen led by Simko. Simko was a Shakkak chief in Kurdistan who had terrorized Azeris, Assyrians, and Armenians in Western Azerbaijan ever since World War I.¹⁸

Reza's use of military force to put down revolts won him allies in the political classes, which had recognized the need for strong central authority to overcome the many problems plaguing the country. Reza proved deft at forming pragmatic alliances depending on his needs,

¹⁷ Turlington. "The Financial Independence of Persia." *Foreign Affairs* (July 1, 1928).

¹⁸ M. Reza Ghods. "Iranian Nationalism and Reza Shah." *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Jan., 1991): 35-45

changing loyalties frequently until he assumed complete control of the country. In 1925, the Qajar Dynasty officially ended when Ahmad Shah was deposed at age 27 and Reza took the Peacock Throne and the name Pahlavi.

The Pahlavi Dynasty

The Persia inherited by the Pahlavi Dynasty suffered from numerous problems, including a lack of education, infrastructure, and state revenue. Decades of foreign domination had left the government weak and ineffective, with little control outside of the capital. M Reza Ghods explains, “Russian and British troops occupied large stretches of the country, blithely violating Iran’s sovereignty.... Autonomous governments and movements in the provinces came to fulfill the administrative functions that had once been Tehran’s prerogative.”¹⁹ Despite these problems caused by the First World War, one advantage to modernization occurred. In 1936, Cecil Edwards observed, “It was the World War, of course, which started the [quest for modernization]. It put an end, in Persia at least, to that unquestioned authority of the West over the East which had lasted for two centuries.”²⁰

Coming from humble beginnings, Reza was harsh and calculating, but nonetheless strove to push his country forward. Among his greatest achievements was the building of the University of Tehran, the first university in the country. He built roads and the Trans-Iranian Railway, reformed education and increased the number of industrial plants in service. For the judiciary, Reza Shah and his intellectual allies established legal codes and regulations that rebuilt the republican elements brought into being during the Constitutional Revolution. Over the nearly

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ A. Cecil Edwards. “Iran (Persia) To-Day.” *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1931-1939), Vol. 15, No. 2 (Mar. - Apr., 1936): 245-267

two decades he was in control, Reza Shah was able to bring his nation back from the brink of collapse and lay the foundation of a modern state.

Not all of the enacted reforms were met with unanimous support, however, and today Reza's legacy is fraught with what many feel were misdirected policies that may have laid the foundations of the Islamic Revolution. Reza Shah was the first ruler of Iran to equate Westernism with modernity in public policy. The education system he built was based on a Western model, and he challenged traditional religious dress and cultural norms in an attempt to make his citizens look and act more like Western contemporaries. He mandated Western dress, making it illegal to wear religious clothing like the veil outside of the home. This act, which put him in direct confrontation with religious leaders and much of the conservative population, was met with protests and boycotts. His successful efforts to force nomadic tribes to settle, although necessary for the development of an effective tax system and state administration, also came under fire for disrupting the traditional lifestyles of many. Despite reforms in education and public health, rural and urban poor populations remained underserved and in many cases would until the Islamic Revolution.

In the realm of foreign affairs, Reza challenged the status quo by forcing the British to renegotiate the D'Arcy Agreement governing British control of Persian oil. The domestic problems facing Persia in the first decade of the 20th century were exacerbated when oil was discovered by William D'Arcy, a British millionaire who held the exploration rights for most Iranian territory. Despite searching for a number of years, it wasn't until 1908, after having decided to end the venture after losing £50,000 [\$5.9 million], that oil was discovered near Masjed Soleiman. In 1913, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company opened the world's largest oil refinery at Abadan, an island on the Persian Gulf. Under the D'Arcy Concession of 1901, signed

prior to the discovery of oil, the Persian government received only 16 percent of the profits of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC).²¹ In 1913, Winston Churchill negotiated the purchase of a controlling interest in APOC by the British government as part of his modernization of the British navy.

The shift from coal power to oil made Persia strategically important as well as an economic interest of the British government, which would later become key in legitimizing British presence following the end of the First World War. In 1923, Churchill successfully lobbied on behalf of APOC to secure sole rights to oil in Persia, removing any competition in the market.

The D'Arcy Concession stood for more than thirty years as Persia watched the revenue from the oil industry largely leave the country. Citing the age of the agreement as well as new developments ever increasing the potential revenue for APOC, Reza Shah in 1932 unilaterally canceled the concession, forcing the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, under de facto control of the British government, to renegotiate terms to maintain their monopoly. Officials notified the British "that the Persian government would only conclude a new agreement upon terms which safeguarded Persia's vital interests."²²

Since the end of the First World War, the economic significance of oil had only increased. This made the lucrative oilfields a central concern for the British, due as well to the multi-faceted international importance of oil control. At the same time, the British saw that Persia itself was not equipped to take full advantage of the economic potential of their oil fields due to all refineries being under foreign control. This provided an incentive for both sides to settle

²¹ Milestone Documents, "D'Arcy Concession (1906)."
<http://www.milestonedocuments.com/documents/view/darcy-concession/text>.

²² Peter J Beck, "The Anglo-Persian Oil Dispute 1932-33." *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Oct., 1974):123-151

negotiations, as the British were losing considerable profits and the Persians were unable to tap into the oil industry without the use of the foreign-controlled refineries. A.C. Millspaugh, in *Foreign Affairs*, explained,

At this juncture, an act which might throw the Persian oil fields open to international competition could hardly be viewed as less than disquieting. On the other hand, Persia has neither the capital, the technical resources, the distributing and marketing connections, the economic statesmanship, nor, let us hope, the courage to conduct her petroleum industry as a nationalistic undertaking.²³

After months of mounting tension, referral of the issue to the nascent League of Nations and the threat of military intervention by the British, an agreement was reached that limited the area under control of APOC, guaranteed an income of £750,000 [\$87.5 million] to the Persian government, and required the company to make payments in lieu of income tax. APOC also promised to build schools, roads, and hospitals, as well as recruit and train a higher number of Persian citizens to work in their refineries.²⁴

Despite this seeming victory for sovereignty, the new terms had little impact on operations. Many of the building projects promised were not undertaken, and corruption remained rampant. Working conditions in Persian refineries were deplorable, fueling public discontent with the oil industry and support for nationalization. Often tasked with dangerous duties, workers were uneducated, paid low wages, and at times lived in crude, shabby lodgings. As one Petroleum Institute Director described it,

Wages were 50 cents a day. There was no vacation pay, no sick leave, no disability compensation. The workers lived in a shanty town called Kaghazabad, or Paper City, without running water or electricity... In

²³ A. C. Millspaugh. "The Persian-British Oil Dispute." *Foreign Affairs*. 1 Apr. 1933. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/69353/a-c-millspaugh/the-persian-british-oil-dispute?page=2>.

²⁴ Beck. "The Anglo-Persian Oil Dispute 1932-33," *Journal of Contemporary History*.

winter the earth flooded and became a flat, perspiring lake. The mud in town was knee-deep, and ... when the rains subsided, clouds of nipping, small-winged flies rose from the stagnant water to fill the nostrils Summer was worse. ... The heat was torrid ... sticky and unrelenting, while the wind and sandstorms shipped off the desert hot as a blower. The dwellings of Kaghazabad, cobbled from rusted oil drums hammered flat, turned into sweltering ovens. ... In every crevice hung the foul, sulfurous stench of burning oil.... in Kaghazad there was nothing— not a tea shop, not a bath, not a single tree. The tiled reflecting pool and shaded central square that were part of every Iranian town ... were missing here. The unpaved alleyways were emporiums for rats .²⁵

Around this time, the shah was cultivating close relations with Germany. Historically, Persia had seen Germany as a viable ally due to their shared history of animosity toward the British and Russians. By 1939, Germany was the country's largest trading partner, accounting for over 50 percent of all trade.²⁶ Germany also provided assistance in a variety of areas, sending experts and resources to the shah's government to further modernization efforts. While the Soviet Union and Great Britain were seen as exploitative and solely driven by national interests, the relationship with Germany was reciprocal, providing the shah with needed goods and allowing him to pursue projects such as building schools and infrastructure.

World War II

Germany also played a role in one of Reza Shah's major diplomatic accomplishments. Although the international community had been referring to the country as Persia for centuries due to writings by the Greeks, domestically it had long been referred to as Iran. In 1935, Reza Shah asked that the country be referred to as Iran in all diplomatic correspondence, effectively reclaiming his nation from external identification in hopes of building his nation's image in a

²⁵ Kinzer. *All The Shah's Men*, 67.

²⁶ Keddie. *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*.

more nationalist light. Hooman Majd notes that “by the beginning of the modern age of the twentieth century, Iran was still an independent nation-state, but “Persia,” as it was known outside of Iran, was denoted a weak and backward country then, one ripe for exploitation.”²⁷

The significance of this change in regards to relations with Germany relates to the Aryan roots of Iran, which itself means “Land of the Aryans” in Persian. Germany cemented relations with Iran by emphasizing the Aryan connection, which put Iranians in a place of importance in the guiding ideology of the National Socialist Party. Although the shah was never formally aligned with Nazism, this place of prominence reflected well through Iranian nationalism and made Germany a more favorable ally than the consistently oppressive British or Soviet governments.

At first, the British and Soviets did not consider the German-Iranian relationship a threat to their own interests. Operations inside the country continued as they had, and many of the modernizations carried out by Reza Shah, such as roads and railways, benefited foreign companies as well as Iranians. When World War II arrived, Iran once again declared neutrality, and this declaration was respected by and large until 1941. As Germany invaded the Soviet Union, the British saw a looming danger in the large number of Germans in Iran and the closeness of the German and Iranian leadership. Iran’s proximity to the Soviet Union, the British oil interest, and the safety of the British position in Central Asia made the country of significant importance to the Allied forces and made the once seemingly benign German presence a potentially catastrophic problem.

Great Britain first responded to the situation by calling on the Iranian government to expel all German nationals from the country, although it was never considered likely that the Iranians would do so. This call, however, served to legitimize the course soon followed. After

²⁷ Hooman Majd. *The Ayatollah's Democracy*. (New York City: W.W. Norton & Company. 2011): 70.

weighing the options of the government, the British and Soviets agreed to work together on military action to secure vital interests and supply routes in Iran. “In the early morning of 25 August, British and Soviet forces from the South and the North of Iran respectively entered the country.”²⁸

Iran had prepared for the potential of invasion by Allied forces by building up military presence in the north and at oil refineries, as well as diplomatically by pledging to respond to any invasion by entering the war on the side of Germany. Iranian efforts, however, were quickly thwarted once the Anglo-Soviet invasion began, and a ceasefire was called by Reza Shah within forty-eight hours. F. Eshraghi summarizes,

The suddenness of the occupation, the poor preparations of the Iranian forces, and the unrestrained Soviet bombing of various Iranian cities in Azerbaijan and Gilan caused utter confusion, fear, and even desertion among Iranian officers. The Iranian forces in the path of the British advance to Kermanshah were caught unawares while asleep in their barracks, but those defending Abadan, under the command of General Mohammad Shahbakhti, proved to be the main exception in the general breakdown of army morale.²⁹

Allied Occupation of Iran

The British and Soviet governments also had plans for Reza Shah. One month after the invasion, he was forced to abdicate and allow his 21-year-old son, Mohammad Reza, to succeed

²⁸ F. Eshraghi. “Anglo-Soviet Occupation of Iran in August 1941.” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Jan., 1984): 27-52

²⁹ F. Eshraghi. “The Immediate Aftermath of Anglo-Soviet Occupation of Iran in August 1941.” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Jul., 1984): 324-351

him. After some deliberation on who should succeed Reza, his son was decided upon for several reasons. F. Eshraghi noted in 1984, “He had been warned by the fate of his father; constitutional procedures would not allow him freedom to intrigue; and his youth and inexperience would place him under the influence of the Cabinet.”³⁰ For these reasons and the military inadequacy of Iran, the new shah was unable to resist Soviet and British demands or influence during the occupation.

If the development of Iran between the wars had any impact on the Great Powers, it was to their advantage. Whereas in World War I there existed a largely decentralized country with little infrastructure, World War II found a united, more easily traversed Iran. Railways and highways made communication and movement of goods and people all the more simple for the Allied forces, while the government in Tehran was unable to offer viable, organized resistance to the invasion and occupation.

One of the most serious impacts on Iranian society during the occupation was the devaluation of the *rial*, which occurred in part due to the large volume of currency being bought by the occupying forces. Kamran Dadkhah explains, “The amount of notes in circulation which at the beginning of ... 1941 was 1.2 billion *rials* rose to 1.7 billion *rials* on 19 March 1942, a rise of 42.9 percent. This trend accelerated in the coming years. The amount of notes in circulation rose to 3.7, 6.0 and 6.6 billion *rials* at the beginning of each successive Iranian year.”³¹ Due to a favorable exchange rate to the Allied powers, Iranians suffered the devaluation heavily, while the British and Soviet forces saw little of the impact.

The occupation by Allied forces lasted the duration of the war. The Persian Corridor was the primary route for aid to be delivered to the Soviet Union, and it played a key role in supporting the Eastern front in the European theatre. In 1943, the Tehran Conference was held

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Kamran M Dadkhah. “The Iranian Economy during the Second World War: The Devaluation Controversy.” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Apr., 2001): 181-198

between the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union— the first such meeting of the allied powers. In 1942 American troops had joined British and Soviet forces in occupying Iran. That same year, the Allied powers vowed to leave Iran within six months of the end of the war and to respect the sovereignty of the Iranian government. At the conference, the three affirmed their commitment to an independent Iran after the completion of the war.

This, of course, was not the first time such a promise was made, nor was it the first time that the promise would be broken.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt felt Iran could serve as an “experiment” in how to handle relations with client states, and as such he sought to limit the role of the British and Soviets following the end of the war. Chris Paine and Erica Schoenberger explain, “Iran, because of its situation, its problems, and its friendly feeling toward the United States, is (or can be made) something in the nature of a clinic ... an experiment station ... for the President's post-war policies ... his aim to develop and stabilize backward areas.”³² Although the U.S. emphasized the independence and sovereignty of Iran in its rhetoric, in reality they saw the country as an opportunity just as the Russians and the British had before them. Iran was a state that could be influenced depending on the interests of the states wielding control, and in the post-World War II world, no country’s star was rising faster than the United States.

In 1945, the Soviet Union remained a key player in domestic events in northern Iran, their traditional sphere of influence. That year, the Azerbaijan Crisis erupted when the Soviet-backed communist Tudeh Party took control of the autonomous republic’s government. At the same time, a Kurdish republic was declared at Mashad with Soviet support. What followed was a heated diplomatic campaign by the United States to discourage Soviet actions in the north and

³² Chris Pine and Erica Schoenberger. “Iranian Nationalism and the Great Powers: 1872-1954.” MERIP Reports, No. 37 (May, 1975): 3-28

Soviet attempts to maintain some control over the country following the war. Soviet forces remained in Iran following the March 2, 1946 deadline for troop withdrawal. The United States responded by making it clear that a military response was on the table, should the Soviets linger any longer. By March 24, the Soviet Union removed its troops.

Despite the removal of troops, a legacy of the Soviet presence remained. The communist regime in Azerbaijan maintained control in the region, and concessions gave the U.S.S.R. controlling interest in a proposed oil company in the north. The United States provided Iran with assurances and affirmation of its right to reclaim Azerbaijan and to reject the oil treaty with the Soviet Union. In 1947, the Majles refused to ratify the oil agreement, and with the retaking of Azerbaijan the Soviet presence was expelled.³³

One of the lasting legacies of World War II was the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah. Put into power by the British through the forced abdication by his father, the monarch relied on the authority and resources of outside forces to solidify his power. This can be seen in 1953 with Operation Ajax, which ousted popularly elected Prime Minister Mossadegh; this will be discussed in detail shortly. Mohammad Reza favored the United States over the Soviet Union during the Cold War, banning the communist Tudeh Party and encouraging Western modernization and secularization. Despite reforms undertaken by his regime, the shah was never able to overcome the perception of his reign serving foreign forces rather than domestic interests. This widespread impression would be an important factor in the 1979 Islamic Revolution that unseated him.

It should come as no surprise that World War II played out very much like World War I for Iran, with foreign occupation and usurpation of authority violating declared neutrality.

³³ George Lenczowski. "United States' Support for Iran's Independence and Integrity, 1945-1959." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 401, America and the Middle East (May, 1972): 45-55

Although Reza Shah initially put up an organized resistance, something the Qajar Dynasty had not been able to do, he was quickly swept from power in favor of a younger, less experienced ruler who would not cause trouble for Allied interests. Economic and strategic interests, be they the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company or the Persian Corridor for supplying Soviet forces, provided rationale for the occupation of Iran just as they had during World War I.

Following the end of World War II, life in Iran continued by and large as it had under Reza Shah. The new young monarch had been educated in the West, returning to Iran to attend a military academy. His exorbitant spending would win him few friends in Iran, as he and his wife hosted lavish parties and enjoyed finery while the people of Iran struggled to make ends meet. Despite progress made in areas of public interest, access to education, wealth, and medical care remained in the hands of very few, as services would until the Islamic Revolution.

Mohammed Mossadegh and Operation Ajax

In 1951, Iranians elected the National Front to a majority of seats in the Majles, meaning the naming of a new prime minister from the ranks of career parliamentarians. Mohammed Mossadegh was an eccentric man as well-known for his speeches as for his often theatrical personality, which included public displays of melancholy. Well educated and charismatic, Mossadegh was a larger-than-life character in a political landscape that had very few visible leaders. He made his career in the Majles, where he fought for Iranian, rather than foreign, interests. At this time, the Majles was largely toothless, able to push through some reforms but typically obstructed by the foreign powers when their interests seemed to be at stake.

Mossadegh, however, brought to the legislature a fiery populism that reinvigorated those who hoped to rebuild Iran outside the shadow of foreign domination. His time in office saw a

resurgence in the strength of the Majles, giving the Irani people a functional representative government for the first time. Stephen Kinzer explains,

During Mossadegh's twenty-seven months in office, the promise of the Constitutional Revolution finally became real. Power was held by elected officials. Parliament addressed people's needs. The grasping shah had been pushed into the background. Iranians enjoyed more freedom than ever in their history.³⁴

In 1953, the British government approached the newly inaugurated President Dwight D. Eisenhower with a request for help. The Iranian prime minister was calling for the nationalization of oil, threatening the highly lucrative Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. It was the wish of the British government that the United States assist in toppling Mossadegh, a plan that had been discussed and rejected by President Harry Truman a year before. Truman, who visited Mossadegh in an attempt to negotiate an agreement between the parties, felt it unnecessary for the United States to protect British interests by so blatantly violating Iranian sovereignty. To win over Eisenhower, the British government relied on his desire to counter Communism and thus exaggerated Mossadegh's politics to suggest that he might ally Tehran with the Kremlin. Unwilling to allow the vast oil reserves of Iran fall under Soviet control, Eisenhower gave the Central Intelligence Agency the green light on Operation Ajax.

The CIA's new director, Allen Dulles, enlisted Kermit Roosevelt in concocting and implementing a plan that would become the first CIA covertly engineered coup. From the basement of a CIA safe house, Roosevelt and a small team of CIA officers recruited mobs to protest Mossadegh's policies, creating the illusion of political instability and polarization. Within weeks, violent clashes in the streets and an outcry from bribed officials resulted in the loss of public confidence in the National Front and Mossadegh.

³⁴ Kinzer. *Reset: Iran, Turkey, and America's Future*, 98.

The shah fled the country on August 15, when it appeared the coup would fail after Mossadegh challenged a royal decree calling for him to step down. Mohammad Reza fled the country, first to Baghdad and then to Rome. Four days later, mass demonstrations by bought crowds whipped Tehran into a frenzy. Clashes resulted in deaths as Tehranis opposed what was framed as a communist revolution. Mossadegh, after fleeing his shelled home, turned himself into the army rather than rally supporters. Military commander Fazlollah Zahedi, the face of the anti-Mossadegh leadership, was named by royal decree to replace Mossadegh. When the shah returned and Mossadegh was put under house arrest, the country's window of democracy closed tightly.

Iran After Mossadegh

The coup cast a long shadow over U.S.-Iran relations. Before the events of 1953, Iran had seen the United States as an ally, particularly given the American history of fighting for independence against the British. But when it came to light that the CIA was responsible for the overthrow of Iranian democracy, the United States became no better than the Soviet and British in the minds of many Iranians. Today, in Iran, the memory of 1953 mars U.S. rhetoric favoring democracy and any espoused good intentions towards Iran, as demonstrated by public statements by Ayatollah Khamenei, such as:

It is interesting to realize that America overthrew his government even though Mosaddeq had shown no animosity toward them. He had stood up to the British and trusted the Americans. He had hoped that the Americans would help him; he had friendly relations with them, he expressed an interest in them, perhaps he [even] expressed humility toward them. And [still] the Americans [overthrew] such a government. It was not as if the government in power in Tehran had been anti-American. No, it had been friendly

toward them. But the interests of Arrogance [a term Khamenei often uses to symbolize the United States] required that the Americans ally with the British. They gathered money and brought it here and did their job. Then, when they brought their coup into fruition and had returned the shah, who had fled, they had the run of the country.³⁵

Upon returning to Iran, Mohammad Reza quickly consolidated power and stripped the Majles of any remnants of power. Opposition parties were broken up and leaders were exiled or arrested, while protests were violently put to an end. Elections, while not suspended, were little more than a show to keep international backers happy, including the United States. A Parliamentarian described it as such: “The present system by which elections were cooked and politicians were forcibly enrolled into fake parties, was worse than a sham; it was corrupting and degrading the whole standard of public life and filling every Iranian who had any concern for the healthy evolution of his country with black despair.”³⁶

The 1953 overthrow of Mohammad Mossadegh is often regarded as a turning point in Iranian history and a lost opportunity. A large “what if” stands over the narrative surrounding the coup. What if Mossadegh had been able to pursue a more rigorous democracy in Iran? What would the situation look like today? Would the Islamic Revolution have taken place? Instead, that pivotal moment is when oppression and dictatorship came to Iran, destroying what little political progress had been made and laying the groundwork for massive protests that would bring about the end of the monarchy twenty-five years later. “Pahlavi absolutism suffocated the

³⁵ Akhbar Ganji, "Who is Ali Khamenei?" *Foreign Affairs*, 92, no. 5 (2013), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139643/akbar-ganji/who-is-ali-khamenei>.

³⁶ Kinzer. *Reset: Iran, Turkey, and America's Future*, 109.

natural development of democracy. This produced the explosion that led to Iran's present conundrum,"³⁷ explains Stephen Kinzer.

The Rise of Ayatollah Khomeini

The quarter century of the shah's reign following the overthrow of Mossadegh proved to be the end of Iranian monarchy. Many Iranians quickly became disillusioned with the United States, once thought of as an ally, after evidence pointed to CIA responsibility for the coup. Mohammad Reza, however, leaned heavily on his Western backers, creating an economic drain on the country as he purchased weaponry from the United States. Given its proximity to the Soviet Union, Iran became a bulwark against Communism in the Middle East, and the United States sought to bolster Iranian military capability to maintain containment.

In 1962, Mohammad Reza introduced a land reform plan referred to as the "White Revolution." Tacked on to the plan were education and welfare initiatives, as well as privatization of industry and nationalization of parks. Among those opposed to the plan was the clerical establishment, which felt its influence was threatened in traditionally religious areas such as education. Although the plan was marketed as a step towards modernization, it also served the purpose of reinforcing traditional power structures and solidifying the shah's central authority. Mohammad Reza sought to use land redistribution, curbing the power of landlords and increased state aid to win more support among the lower socioeconomic classes of the country, a segment of the society traditionally aligned with the clergy.

It was in the wake of this schism with the Shi'a clergy that a clerical leader was able to make his name. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was already in his early sixties when the death of

³⁷ Kinzer. *Reset: Iran, Turkey, and America's Future*, 139.

prominent leaders in the clergy gave him the opportunity to take his political teachings to a national level. Speaking out against the shah's land reforms, Westernization, and the meddling of the United States soon made the charismatic writer and lecturer a leader of the religious establishment. In 1964, Khomeini was exiled first to Turkey, then to Iraq and later to Paris, from where he was able to continue building and empowering a religiously led movement that eventually resulted in the toppling of the Pahlavi Dynasty.

Born in 1902, Ruhollah Khomeini's driving ideology was formed through Islamic teachings as well as Greek philosophy, particularly the works of Aristotle and Plato. As explored in his later works, Khomeini considered governance and Islam inextricably linked. He felt that the *ulema*—the Islamic clergy—had an obligation to use its leadership position in society to address political issues and as such wove political rhetoric into his sermons and teachings. When the shah targeted clerical influence, he gave Khomeini the perfect platform to attack Westernization policies and the shah's own secular approach to policy.

Anti-Westernization had become a common theme in intellectual circles, spanning political barriers. Iranian writers and intellectuals such as Ali Shari'ati and Jamal Al-e Ahmad had begun seeking ways to modernize Iran without turning to "Westoxication," as they called Western influence. These writers saw the power of the clerical establishment, calling it a "government within a government." For Shari'ati and Al-e Ahmad, both allies of Ayatollah Khomeini, Islam was part of the authentic Iranian culture they aspired to return to and which was necessary as a basis of legitimacy for revolutionary ideology. For these writers and their contemporaries, Islam and progress were not opposing forces, a theme that continues in Iranian rhetoric today.

Many of the themes explored by Shari'ati and Al-e Ahmad would appear in "Rule of the Jurisprudent," in which Ayatollah Khomeini outlined his case for the importance and function of an Islamic political system led by the clerical class. Khomeini cited foreign intervention and cultural obstruction as threats to the traditional Islamic nature of the Middle East, and he called for a government ensuring the preservation of religious tradition. The book outlined a system of government that includes both representative elements and religious guidance, the manifestation of which is the Islamic Republic.

During his exile, Ayatollah Khomeini was able to maintain influence within Iran through cassettes and statements smuggled into the country and played by his clerical allies. First in Najaf, the Shi'ite holy city in Iraq, and later from the suburbs of Paris, Khomeini recorded tapes calling on the citizenry to rise up against the shah. The tapes were disseminated through a network of clerics based in Qom and played in mosques across Iran. These tapes complemented internal efforts to organize resistance to the shah, mobilizing not only urban populations but villages as well,³⁸ while also allowing Khomeini to remain the leader of a growing movement against monarchical rule. Having relocated to Paris in 1978, Khomeini was able to expand his opposition activities considerably. Amir Taheri explained the advantages Khomeini found on French soil, including access to media. Khomeini was visited by thousands of supporters, received extensive donations, and eventually returned to Iran via an Air France flight.³⁹

³⁸ Baqer Moin. *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, Ltd, 1999), 194.

³⁹ Amir Taheri. *The Spirit of Allah: Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution*, (New York City: Adler & Adler, 1985).

The Shah's Iran in 1979

Domestically, by the mid-70s the shah's Iran had become a human rights nightmare. In 1975, Amnesty International declared that "no country in the world has a worse human rights record than Iran." Secret police called SAVAK terrorized opposition parties and those who spoke out against the shah. Individuals were arrested, tortured, killed, and "disappeared." Amnesty International estimated that the number of political prisoners held in 1975 was between 25,000 and 100,000.⁴⁰ While the United States and other Western states heralded the modernity of Iran and attended lavish galas held by the royal family, the average citizen struggled to attain education, medical care, and a livable wage.

Under the shah, access to higher education was divided along class lines, with the wealthy testing into universities while low-income students were often unable to afford the preparatory tools necessary for many to succeed. A mere 3 percent of the population received any college education in 1971, with expected years of schooling reaching eight in 1980.⁴¹ In 1978, women made up one third of the university population.⁴² In 1976, 35 percent of women were literate, with large disparities between rural and urban populations.

In 1977, the deaths of Ali Shariati and the son of Ayatollah Khomeini were widely believed to be assassinations carried out by the shah's agents. Unrest grew until 1978 when religious protestors were fired upon by government forces in what would become known as Black Friday. As late as that year the United States intelligence community saw no credible threat to the shah's hold on power, but with Black Friday those who had sought to topple the

⁴⁰ Amnesty International, "Amnesty International Annual Report 1974/1975." <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/POL10/001/1975/en/5e0e8396-d196-4382-a6b5-7f531d6a773c/pol100011975eng.pdf>.

⁴¹ United Nations, "International Human Rights Development Indicators." Last modified Oct 15, 2012. <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/indicators/69706.html>.

⁴² Haleh Esfandiari. United States Institute for Peace, "The Women's Movement." <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/womens-movement>.

monarchy had their chance. Unrest across political parties and religious barriers had allowed a strong and diverse coalition to build up under the shah's feet. The stage was set for the Islamic Revolution.

Part 2: The Islamic Republic

Spurred by Khomeini's taped rhetoric and his supporters in Iran, popular unrest came to a head in October 1977 as street demonstrations began against the shah. At the outset of demonstrations against the Peacock Throne, the movement was supported by a broad segment of the population. Stanford University's Abbas Milani explains, "Almost 11% of the population participated in it, compared to the estimated proportionate of citizens who took part in the French (7%) and Russian (9%) revolutions."⁴³ While the primary actors in organizing the revolution were Islamic and Marxist to varying degrees, non-ideological segments of society joined the movement out of desire to see the shah ousted.⁴⁴ The shah's economic policies had alienated the influential *bazaari* and merchant classes, as well as farmers. Students rallied behind the movement, drawing inspiration from the works of Ali Shar'iati and other anti-Western leftist thinkers.⁴⁵ The rhetoric of the revolution focused on democracy and freedom, a message that resonated across religious and political lines. J.S. Ismael explained the leadership role of the clergy in 1980.

The clergy ... assumed prominence because the secularist forces were in a state of disarray caused by the continuous pressure which the Shah and SAVAK inflicted upon these groups. The leaders of these groups were either in jail, exile, or dead.⁴⁶

⁴³ Abbas Milani. Open Democracy, "Iran's Islamic Revolution: Three Paradoxes." Last modified Feb 9, 2009.

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/iran-s-islamic-revolution-three-paradoxes>.

⁴⁴ Homa Katouzian. Middle East Institute, "The Iranian Revolution of February 1979." Last modified Jan 29, 2009. <http://www.mei.edu/content/iranian-revolution-february-1979>.

⁴⁵ Said Amir Arjomand. *The Turban for the Crown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 94.

⁴⁶ J.S. Ismael, and T.Y. Ismael, "Social Change in Islamic Society: The Political Thought of Ayatollah Khomeini," *Social Problems*, 27, no. 5 (1980): 601-619, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.wustl.edu/stable/pdfplus/800199.pdf?acceptTC=true&acceptTC=true&jpdConfirm=true>.

Over the course of the next year, strikes and protests brought the country to a standstill as political parties and opposition leaders came together to stand against the shah's rule. The groundswell brought together unlikely bedfellows, forming alliances that would shatter following the fall of the shah. Despite later violence, Khomeini discouraged his followers from using force to achieve the overthrow of the shah. The result was a victory for non-violent protest; "except for a series of short battles using light weaponry in the final hours of the uprising," the protestors heeded Khomeini's request.⁴⁷ According to Eric Rouleau,

Disregarding many of his advisers, he insisted that the battle be waged without recourse to arms, and never tired of repeating that the Shi'ite faith would prevail over brute force. His calculation proved well founded: a year later, the imperial army—the most powerful in the Middle East after that of Israel—succumbed to "bare-handed revolutionaries."⁴⁸

The shah ordered the violent breakup of demonstrations, further driving the public's fury. In January 1979, the shah fled the country, taking refuge in the United States for cancer treatment. Ayatollah Khomeini returned from Paris, greeted by throngs of supporters, and he oversaw the creation of an interim government. Meanwhile those with ties to the shah's government fled the country if possible, while others remained to endure the post-revolution turmoil to come.

⁴⁷ Stephen Zunes. International Center for Nonviolent Conflict, "The Iranian Revolution (1977-1979)." Last modified April 2009. <http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/index.php/movements-and-campaigns/movements-and-campaigns-summaries?sobi2Task=sobi2Details&sobi2Id=23>.

⁴⁸ Eric Rouleau, "Khomeini's Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, 59, no. 1 (1980), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/34265/eric-rouleau/khomeinis-iran?page=3> (accessed December 5, 2013).
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Rule of the Jurisprudent and the Islamic Iranian Constitution

The guiding force behind the formation of the Islamic government was *valayet y-feqih*, or rule of the jurisprudent. The constitution of Iran, rewritten after the revolution, codifies the rule of the jurisprudent into a complex hierarchical bureaucracy that in practice creates overlap between offices. The constitution itself marries religious and republican language when discussing the rights of the people and responsibilities of the state. The document contains 175 clauses, empowering the state to maintain religious identity and unity while also recognizing the role of the citizen in government. Although the core basis for the document is religious precedent, drafters looked beyond Islamic fundamentalism to incorporate contemporary practices. Ervand Abrahamian explains,

A closer look ... shows that the text of the constitution, not to mention its pretext, subtext, and context, is highly nonfundamentalist. Its central structure was taken straight from the French Fifth Republic, with Montesquieu's separation of powers. It divides the government into the executive, headed by the president, supervising a highly centralized state; the judiciary, with powers to appoint district judges and review their verdicts; and the national Parliament, elected through universal adult suffrage. For years Khomeini had argued that women's suffrage was un-Islamic. He now argued that to deprive women of the vote was un-Islamic.⁴⁹

At the top of the governmental hierarchy is the Supreme Leader, the final arbiter of issues in the country. The Supreme Leader is responsible for ensuring that the direction the country follows comports with Islam and personally oversees all foreign policy issues. To hold the position, a candidate must be a grand ayatollah and accepted as a descendant of the prophet Mohammad (a *sayyid*, as signified by the black turban). The office has only been held by two

⁴⁹ Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): 33. <http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft6c6006wp&chunk.id=d0e1049&toc.id=d0e1049&brand=ucpress>.

men since 1979, Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei, making it difficult to discern additional qualifications. The Assembly of Experts appoints and can impeach the Supreme Leader.

The Assembly of Experts is the second most important office in the government due to its oversight of the Supreme Leader. The assembly is responsible for the election of and potential removal of the Supreme Leader, a duty never seen in practice. The body ranges in size between 80 and 90 members, all elected by direct public vote every eight years. Abrahamian explains another facet of the Assembly's power as such,

The constitution added that if no supreme religious judge emerged after Khomeini, the leadership would pass to a committee of three or five senior clerics (*maraje^c-e taqlid*) to be chosen by the popularly elected Assembly of Experts. Najafabadi, the author of the controversial *Shahid-e Javid*, argued in a new book entitled *Velayat-e Faqih: Hokumat-e Salihan* (Jurist's guardianship: Worthy government) that this two-stage electoral process would help harmonize the concepts of divine rule and clerical supervision with those of popular sovereignty and majority representation. He also argued that the concept of *velayat-e faqih* implicitly involved the notion of a "social contract" between the religious judges and the population.⁵⁰

The Guardian Council is a twelve-seat body composed of six experts on Islamic law and six experts on constitutional law. Positions are filled through appointment, both directly through the Supreme Leader and through nomination by the judiciary and voting by the Majles. The council is responsible for the vetting of candidates for elected offices, overseeing elections, and interpreting the Constitution. The domestic influence wielded by the Guardian Council is considerable, not only due to the oversight provided on all stages of the election process, but also the ability to challenge laws and policies. All laws passed by the Majles must be approved by the Guardian Council, with the bill returning to the Majles for revision in the event it does not pass.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

If disagreement persists between the Majles and the Guardian Council, the dispute is resolved by the Expediency Discernment Council.

The Expediency Council is responsible for resolving disagreements between branches of government and for advising the Supreme Leader. All positions on the council are appointed by the Supreme Leader himself, and the body was given oversight of most government functions in 2005. The current chairman, Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, has served for three five-year terms in the leadership role. Most seats are held by current or former high level officials, including Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and former Revolutionary Guard commander Mohsen Rezaee. Appointments can be used by the Supreme Leader to reward or punish public figures, although members fall along the entire political spectrum.

Despite the shared title of president, the Iranian executive office does not hold the same authority as the U.S. equivalent. The Iranian president is the international face of his country, but his power is checked by the Supreme Leader on foreign issues and the Majles on domestic policy. The degree to which control is exerted over the president fluctuates depending on several factors, including the current domestic situation in Iran and the level of favor enjoyed by the president. The cases of Presidents Khatami and Ahmadinejad demonstrate the varying amount of power presidents are given. Khatami, although unable to effect sweeping change, was able to explore dialogue opportunities with the West and relax some restrictions on public life. Ahmadinejad was initially an outspoken international figure, but he found few allies in the Parliament. As his second term got underway, the Supreme Leader pulled away from Ahmadinejad, the result of which can be seen in his decreased international profile in the final years of his presidency.

The Majles, or Islamic Consultative Assembly, is the legislative branch of the government. It passes domestic laws and acts much as a parliament does in the West. Candidates

are vetted by the Guardian Council and elected by public voting. The Majles has direct checks on the power of the presidency, including budget approval and the ability to ask questions of the administration that require answers. The body also votes on cabinet post nominations put forth by the president, with the ability to reject them through votes of no confidence. But the United States Institute of Peace explains, “the 290-member parliament is weak compared with the presidency, as well as with the non-elected institutions such as the twelve-member Guardian Council” due to high turnover.⁵¹ Seats are reserved for religious minorities, and the speakership is voted on each year by the members.

Article 6 lays out the principle of relying upon public opinion to inform the affairs of the nation. Public elections of a number of offices, including president and representatives to the Majles, are the means by which the masses interact with the government. These representative bodies are in some cases mirrored by similar appointed offices with clerical leadership, such as the elected Majles and the appointed Guardian Council of the Constitution. In some ways, this governmental duality can be seen in the offices of the president and the Supreme Leader, a comparison supported by recent power struggles between Ayatollah Khamenei and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. However, as is often the case when representative and clerical bodies are in conflict, the office with significant religious legitimacy takes precedence.⁵²

In Article 9, the government is charged with the task of preserving the “freedom, independence, unity, and territorial integrity of the country” against not only external threats, but also internal actors. The article states that no institution can infringe on freedoms, even in circumstances designed to protect the country. However, it also states that “no individual ... has

⁵¹ Farideh Farhi. United States Institute of Peace, "The Parliament." <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/parliament>.

⁵² Article 6 states: “In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the affairs of the country must be administered on the basis of public opinion expressed by the means of elections, including the election of the President, the representatives of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, and the members of councils, or by means of referenda in matters specified in other articles of this Constitution.”

the right to infringe in the slightest way on the political, cultural, economic, and military independence ... of Iran.” Although in the case of foreign powers or political institutions these mandates appear practical enough on their face, in the case of individuals the implementation of this article is less clear. One example of these conflicting mandates is the modest dress regulations on women, which preserve the Islamic culture of Iran but impede the freedom of individuals to dress in the way they choose.⁵³

Section Three of the constitution outlines the rights of the people, as well as freedom of assembly and the press. Although qualified by ambiguous language favoring Islamic criteria, the constitution calls on government to protect fundamental human rights and the rights of prisoners, and it specifically highlights the need for government to create an atmosphere favorable for women. The brief articles of this particular section are largely vague and provide no guarantee of education, medical care, or more than basic representation in court. S. Waqar Hasib wrote,

A number of these provisions [outlining rights of the people] are self-contradictory. For example, “publications and the press have freedom of expression, except when it is detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public,” leaving one to wonder what exactly “freedom of expression” entails under Iranian constitutional law. Similarly, the Constitution guarantees a right to “freedom” of association, where parties, societies, and professional associations are permitted, provided “they do not violate the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, the criteria of Islam, or the basis of the Islamic Republic.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Article 9 states: “In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the freedom, independence, unity, and territorial integrity of the country are inseparable from one another, and their preservation is the duty of the government and all individual citizens. No individual, group, or authority, has the right to infringe in the slightest way upon the political, cultural, economic, and military independence or the territorial integrity of Iran under the pretext of exercising freedom. Similarly, no authority has the right to abrogate legitimate freedoms, not even by enacting laws and regulations for that purpose, under the pretext of preserving the independence and territorial integrity of the country.”

⁵⁴ S. Waqir Hasib, “The Iranian Constitution: An Exercise in Contradictions,” *Al-Nakhlah* (2004), <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/Al-Nakhlah/Archives/~//media/Fletcher/Microsites/al>

Despite these contradictions and deficiencies, the Iranian constitution has facilitated a functioning government for over three decades. The document has been amended and reformed, and the interpretation of those places where Islam and democracy intersect has been debated. Through elections with high voter turnout, the people have registered their preferences and feelings on the direction of the country. Reformers and activists have sought to use the constitution and the framework it creates to influence the political evolution of their country. S. Waqar Hasib points out, “The cornerstone of [human rights activist Shirin] Ebadi’s efforts [was] to use Iranian laws and Iranian institutions to advance Iranian human rights.”⁵⁵

This functionality and flexibility suggests that the Iranian constitution itself holds the elements that can lead to full democracy. Iran does not throw out the constitution when there is disagreement, but rather amends the document through debate and voting, both by members of the government and public referendum. Although rule of law as outlined by the document is at best vague and at worst easily used to the advantage of those in power, the ongoing respect shown for the procedure and mandates proscribed thirty-five years ago shows a stability not seen in other regional states. James Buchan notes, “The revolutionary constitution, with its novel mixture of clerical dictatorship and liberal democracy, has proved more resilient than anyone could have imagined in 1979.”⁵⁶

Early Years of the Islamic Republic: Consolidation of Power and War

Following his return to Iran from France, Khomeini set about consolidating power in his own hands by marginalizing and persecuting those not aligned directly with the clerical class.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ James Buchan. The New Statesman, "Ayatollah Khomeini's Funeral." Last modified March 12, 2009. <http://www.newstatesman.com/asia/2009/03/khomeini-funeral-body-crowd>.

Through Revolutionary Tribunals set up in early 1979, those seen as working against the Islamic Republic or aligned with the Shah's government were put on trial. Amnesty International described the criteria for those held as such:

Broadly speaking the [anti-revolutionary] category may be understood to encompass activities directly or indirectly in support of the Shah; the [counter-revolutionary] refers somewhat more specifically to activities directed or perceived to be directed against the Islamic Republic. In the case of "anti-revolutionary offences," criminal liability may be based only on participation in the "illegal" governments of the Shah.⁵⁷

These courts, set up hastily after the revolution, routinely tortured those being held. Many were detained for prolonged periods of time without being charged, were denied legal representation, and had no contact with the outside world. Although the total number of those executed during the interim period is difficult to say conclusively, it is estimated that by mid-1980 between 800 and 1,000 executions had been carried out by the Revolutionary Tribunals.⁵⁸

Although the Revolutionary Tribunals had the support of Ayatollah Khomeini, there was much discussion within the government about how trials should be carried out. While many cited "public outrage" as necessitating organized trials to avoid the people murdering former officials, many felt the questionable methods violated Islamic law. Regional *komitehs*, designed to coordinate with Tehran, were rampantly corrupt and acting independently of regulations passed by the interim government. Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan questioned the direction the country was headed in April 1979.

⁵⁷ Iran Human Rights Voice, "Law & Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran." Last modified 2009. http://www.ihrv.org/inf/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/law_and_human_rights_in_the_islamic_republic_of_iran_february_through_september19791.pdf.

⁵⁸ Amnesty International, "Amnesty International Annual Report 1974/1975." <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/POL10/001/1975/en/5e0e8396-d196-4382-a6b5-7f531d6a773c/pol100011975eng.pdf>.

We see reports of executions every day in the newspaper...and such things made us worried...all Iranians are worried...an imbalance has been created throughout society. Everybody is afraid and asks about the future— if these Komitehs and guardians of the revolution continue their activities and also people acting in the names of the Komitehs and the Imam in an irresponsible manner, especially when they are armed, what will happen to the nation, the country, and also the government?⁵⁹

Ayatollah Shariatmadari, who was part of the loyal opposition, challenged practices carried out by the tribunals and continuously sought to introduce regulations based on Islamic and international law. In 1979, Amnesty International quoted a speech he gave,

The criminals must undoubtedly be punished in view of the fact that our people have faced the ‘devilish’ order for 50 years. But the punishments must not exceed those stipulated by Islam. We cannot enforce the same vengeful laws as the former regime. Charges must be classified according to their intensity— those which justify execution, imprisonment, exile, bail, and so on.⁶⁰

Ayatollah Shariatmadari was critical not only of the practices of these pseudo-courts, but of the entire system of government being developed. Despite being a long-time ally of Ayatollah Khomeini and having played a key role in Khomeini’s being named grand ayatollah in 1963, Shariatmadari favored a fully democratic system of government, rather than a blended theocracy. Voices like his facilitated necessary debate within the government and, in some cases, resulted in the passing of updated regulations more in line with internationally-recognized human rights.

Shariatmadari, however, fell victim to the vicious infighting that took place during the early 1980s. Those aligned with the shah were not the only targets of purging. Many of those who fought alongside Ayatollah Khomeini were brought before courts and publicly executed or forced to leave the country as hardline elements strengthened their hold on power. Leftist groups,

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

secular movements, and clerics like Shariatmadari were arrested, tortured, or put under house arrest for speaking out against practices of the government or questioning the authority of Ayatollah Khomeini.

Among those forced from power was Mujahideen e-Khalq (MEK), a fringe religious organization that initially hoped to share power with Khomeini. Soon after the founding of the Islamic Republic, the ruling elite turned against MEK, with numerous members being executed or assassinated, and eventually the group was offered refuge by Iraq's president, Saddam Hussein. The group then began calling for regime change in Iran, fighting with Saddam against Iran and carrying out terrorist attacks allegedly at the behest of other countries. MEK has positioned itself as a viable alternative to the current regime despite having little to no support in country, thanks in part to considerable assets used to cement alliances with U.S. officials. MEK was taken off the U.S. terrorist watch list in 2012 following an intensive lobbying campaign by members of Congress.

The purges cast a long shadow on civil society, with oppression and targeting of opposition activists continuing today. Although the justice system has been reformed to make sentencing more uniform, provide representation, and allow for appeals, the atmosphere of strict control has ebbed and flowed for over three decades. During the early years of the Islamic Republic, leaders were in what Nancy Stockdale calls "revolutionary crisis mode" as they struggled with creating effective central control. That need to preserve the revolution from external and internal threats has remained a constant theme in public rhetoric and a justification for crackdowns. Despite the revolution having taken place almost thirty-five years ago, the leadership continues to use revolutionary identity to maintain an atmosphere of struggle, be it against the West or internal dissidents.

Hostage Crisis and Deterioration of U.S.-Iran Relations

In 1980, Iranian students stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran and so began one of the major diplomatic crises in recent history. For 444 days, students held the embassy workers within the compound walls, often parading them in front of television cameras blindfolded. Although some hostages were released due to health concerns, 52 remained within the embassy for the entirety of the ordeal before being released over a year later. Participants in the hostage taking cite concerns over a possible U.S. coup and claimed at the time to have found documents suggesting a plan was in the works. An Iranian who participated in storming the embassy told *GQ*,

When the revolution happened in Iran, young people were concerned about the intentions of the United States regarding the new regime. We believed the United States was against the revolution and that it was preparing another coup. When the Shah went to America, it was a confirmation of this belief... We believed we had a right to do this— that if we didn't attack the embassy, they could attack us.⁶¹

This was not the first time students had stormed the embassy, but it was the first time the Supreme Leader appeared to back the actions. Earlier that year, students had breached the compound walls only to be pushed back by Iranian security at the behest of Ayatollah Khomeini. It has never been verified whether the Supreme Leader was involved in orchestrating the taking of the embassy, despite decades of speculation on elite involvement. According to Ayatollah Rafsanjani, who was speaker of the Majles at the time, both he and then-president and future Supreme Leader Ali Khomeini were unaware of any plan to take the embassy.

⁶¹ *Gentleman's Quarterly*, "444 Days in the Dark: An Oral History of the Iran Hostage Crisis." Last modified Nov 3, 2009. <http://www.gq.com/news-politics/big-issues/200911/iran-hostage-crisis-tehran-embassy-oral-history>.

Ayatollah Khamenei and I were in Mecca when we heard news of the seizure of the American embassy over the radio at night, when we were on the roof of our domicile preparing to sleep. We were shocked, since we had no expectation of such an event. It was not our politics. Even early into the revolution's victory, when political groups shouted very extreme anti-American slogans, the officials helped Americans who were in Iran return to their country uninjured, and many of them even carried their property with them. Once, when an armed group attacked the American embassy and occupied it, a representative came on behalf of the provisional government and settled the problem. Thus, it is clear that neither the revolutionary council nor the provisional government was inclined to take such measures.⁶²

The hostage crisis was the end of formal U.S.-Iranian diplomatic relations, and diplomatic normalization has yet to occur despite recent overtures, which will be discussed below. The purposeful humiliation of the United States continues to tarnish Iran's image in the public eye, and the failure of President Jimmy Carter to resolve the crisis is invoked as a low point in U.S. power projection. The seeming irrationality and intractability of the affair left the lasting impression that Iran cannot be trusted and hopes to harm the United States, just as U.S. involvement in the only war Iran has been directly involved in did to the impression of the United States in Iran.

The Iran-Iraq War

Shortly after the ousting of the shah and the founding of the Islamic Republic, Iran was faced with invasion by Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The Ba'athist regime in the neighboring country was not pleased with the development of a Shi'ite clerical regime in Iran and sought to strike when the new government was at its weakest. It was felt in the West that Hussein could topple the theocracy, freeing the United States to reinstate pro-Western leadership. As a result, the UN

⁶² Ganji, "Who is Ali Khamenei?," *Foreign Affairs*.

Security Council did not condemn the Iraqi invasion and labeled Iran as an aggressor despite its not having provoked a war. Syria was the only nation that provided public support and assistance to Iran during the war, with most countries choosing to provide logistical support and weapons to Iraq.

As time wore on and the war continued to drag out, tactics deteriorated as each side sought the advantage. Civilians were targeted on both sides, seeking to break a stalemate and gain the upper hand. Iraq launched notorious chemical weapons campaigns against Iran's cities, including Tehran. Iran, which had a significant disadvantage militarily, called on identity politics to recruit youths. The government portrayed those who were killed as martyrs. Using Shi'ite symbolism, like Imam Hossein— grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and key figure in Shia Islam— on his white horse, the government was able to recruit young people who were willing to storm the Iraqi lines in waves and sweep minefields, regardless of the threat to their lives.

However, the prolonged conflict did not lead to the unraveling of the theocratic system. In fact, the opposite occurred. Following the traumatic eight-year struggle, a truce was mediated by the UN, and the Iranian government was still standing. Iranian leaders had taken on the power of the Western world, and while they didn't emerge victorious, they didn't come out defeated. This served to consolidate power in the hands of the mullahs and created another sticking point with the United States, which provided Iraq with the weapons used to kill or injure close to 100,000 in the conflict. Many other Iranians are struggling today with lasting health issues due to the chemical weapons that were used. Ray Takeyh explains,

The regime's ability to sustain an eight-year conflict reflected its resilience and ability to mobilize society and consolidate its power under duress. The state that was often viewed as a passing and

transient phenomenon proved that it could deal with domestic challenges and international isolation while waging a total war.⁶³

Perhaps the strangest aspect of this war was that Israel, the United States' primary ally in the region, was providing Iran, a sworn enemy, with the tools needed to weaken Saddam Hussein's regime. It has been alleged by ranking officials that the two countries worked together during the war, with Israel providing surveillance assistance to Iran. Israel saw Saddam Hussein as a greater threat than the Islamic Republic and as a result did not want to see an emboldened Iraq with influence in Iran. The war also resulted in the Iran-Contra Scandal, which rocked the Ronald Reagan presidency when it was revealed that the Reagan administration was selling arms to embargoed Iran and planned to use the money to fund the Nicaraguan Contras.

The conflict greatly influenced Iran's security calculations, and continues to do so today, which in turn impacts the viability of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty designed to keep member states from developing nuclear weapons. Among the lessons taken away from the eight year war was the willingness of world powers to turn against Iran, even in cases when Iran was not the aggressor. When Iran was unable to secure any substantial support through the United Nations, and powers like the United States began aiding Iraqi war efforts, the idea that Iran's security could be guaranteed by any other state was starkly called into question.

Iranian Security Calculations

One of the primary motivations for developing a nuclear weapons capability is the deterrence security it provides. Once a state goes nuclear, military options are effectively taken

⁶³ Ray Takeyh, "The Iran-Iraq War: A Reassessment," *The Middle East Journal*, 64, no. 3 (2010): 365-383, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/the_middle_east_journal/v064/64.3.takeyh.html.

off the table. Many states, including South Africa, have changed course and accepted the NPT bargain as working in their favor. For those states, the benefits of the bargain and the costs of building a nuclear weapon and maintaining its political value through delivery systems, updating weaponry, and general care make it a simple calculation.

But what happens if a state still has the memory of a devastating invasion conducted for political reasons and supported by the international community? It is a leap of faith to assume that Iran would have enough trust in the same countries they feel abandoned them in the 1980s to accept any kind of security assurances today. In the case of the United States, rhetoric aimed at dissuading Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons is compounded by a strong military presence in the region to create a picture that, to the Iranian regime, could look like a run-up to military action. More specifically, the United States has military forces— and has fought wars— in countries on either side of Iran: Afghanistan and Iraq. Through this lens, security assurances are meaningless due to Iran’s inability to truly trust another state to follow through on any agreement made.

The Iranian leadership suffers from what Hooman Majd calls “superiority and inferiority complexes”.⁶⁴ By this, he means that Iran is the “heir to the Persian Empire,” a history rich in art, literature, leaders, importance, and influence. But at the same time, Iranian leaders struggle with international isolation, economic hardship, and the sense of being something of an underdog. They are constantly seeking international influence and legitimacy; being in direct control of one’s own security is a primary measure of independence, in their minds. The regime has, since 1979, built its identity on the idea of non-alignment. During the Cold War, this meant a slogan of

⁶⁴ Hooman Majd, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 117.

“Neither East Nor West”⁶⁵; today, it means not allowing another state, especially the United States, to dictate one’s security strategy.

In 1989, Supreme Leader Khomeini passed away. Until shortly before Khomeini’s death, the assumed successor and seemingly anointed choice of Khomeini himself had been Ayatollah Montazeri, an established hard-line cleric with revolutionary credentials. But when Montazeri began challenging state policies Khomeini withdrew his support, and the government scrambled to find a replacement. With the charismatic leader of the revolution gone, the possibility of a power vacuum was a grave threat to the regime. Remarkably, even in the shadow of the war of attrition being waged with Iraq, officials followed mandated procedure and maintained order during the transfer of power. Although the Assembly of Experts could decide to do away with the office of Supreme Leader and fill the role with a three-member council, in the end Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani was able to bring together a coalition behind Ali Khamenei.

Ali Khamenei was serving as president at the time of his being named Supreme Leader. He had been a devoted member of the revolutionary elite, but had little of the clerical support enjoyed by his contemporaries. Having studied philosophy and literature, he had an admiration for parts of Western culture, including the works of Victor Hugo. Akbar Ganji, in his profile of Khamenei for *Foreign Affairs*, writes, “He was a man of music, poetry, and novels as well as religious law. No other present-day *marja* (senior ayatollah) or prominent *faqih* (Islamic jurist) has such a cosmopolitan past.”⁶⁶ This blending of Islamic teachings and global culture made him a unique and unexpected choice for Supreme Leader.

⁶⁵ Steven Heydemann. United States Institute for Peace, "Iran's Alternative Allies." <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-alternative-allies>.

⁶⁶ Ganji, "Who is Ali Khamenei?," *Foreign Affairs*.

Khamenei was not recognized as a grand ayatollah when his name was put forward. As a *hojatoleslam*, one step below Ayatollah in the Islamic clerical establishment, he could not officially be nominated for office. The advocacy carried out by Ayatollah Rafsanjani succeeded in not only securing him the title of grand ayatollah, but also in having him approved to follow Khomeini. His lack of clerical legitimacy forced him to rely on Rafsanjani in a way that he sought to distance himself from soon after assuming office, particularly through the use of *fatwas*. As his religious edicts were unchallenged by senior Shi'ite leaders, his power as a religious authority grew.

Iran After Khomeini

The period between 1989 and 1997 has been called a “Second Republic” for Iran. Having survived the Iran-Iraq War, the leaders were faced with internal issues ranging from the need to rebuild areas destroyed by bombing campaigns to an unsupportable birthrate. Robin Wright explains, “Iran's theocracy slowly came to recognize that it was endangering its own agenda by ignoring the state's real problems.”⁶⁷ In the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the political spectrum opened up as factions proposed solutions to the numerous challenges facing the country.

The extent of political differences in Iran is difficult to express. They do not follow religious lines as is sometimes suggested, with religious leaders falling at numerous places along the spectrum. The most widely used categories are not political parties as much as umbrella terms under which political actors can exist at several points on the spectrum. At one end are reformers, which includes groups that favor moderation, relations with the West, and the opening

⁶⁷ Robin Wright, "Iran's New Revolution," *Foreign Affairs*, 79, no. 1 (2000), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/55624/robin-wright/irans-new-revolution> (accessed December 8, 2013).

of society. Moderates or pragmatists can fall on either side of the center and often move between right and left, depending on conditions. Hard-liners are conservative, standing in opposition to relations with the United States and advocating strict adherence to Islamic societal guidelines, such as dress codes. Principlists fall at the far right, despite relying heavily on populism to gain support. They favor harsh rhetoric and resistance—the approach exemplified by former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose second term ended in 2013. Shireen Hunter further explains,

Many individuals who started as radicals went through a learning process about Iran's internal realities and the facts of international life. Under the impact of its economic and political problems, and the reactions of the outside world, these people have moderated their views...Whatever words are used to characterize the opposing camps, it is clear that the basic structure of Iranian society is marked by deep national dichotomies— between Persian nationalism and Islam, modernization and cultural purity, economic efficiency and social justice.⁶⁸

Two presidents served during the 1990s, both pushing Iran towards stability through economic growth and a more open society. The first, Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, moved from his role as speaker of the Majles to the presidency in 1989, succeeding Ali Khamenei. As a shrewd man with considerable personal wealth amassed since the revolution, he had a pragmatic side that lent itself well to the reconstruction of war-torn Iran. Rafsanjani embraced free market economics and encouraged industry and education to become more competitive. He introduced the practice of creating five-year economic plans, the goal of which was to create an environment conducive to foreign investors and economic liberalization. He also oversaw reform of the constitution, which streamlined government by doing away with the office

⁶⁸ Shireen Hunter, "Post Khomeini Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, 68, no. 5 (1989), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/45135/shireen-t-hunter/post-khomeini-iran> (accessed December 8, 2013).

of the prime minister and strengthening the presidency. Rafsanjani worked closely with the Supreme Leader, balancing policy initiatives with broader state policy to minimize conflict within the regime.

The second, Mohammad Khatami, was elected president in 1997 through a landslide victory, securing 70 percent of the vote. Suzanne Maloney notes the significance of Khatami's election, stating, "While politics in the Islamic Republic had always featured a strong element of competition among the array of factions that comprised the revolutionary coalition, the Second of *Khordad* was the first time since the revolution that an Iranian presidential election proved genuinely competitive."⁶⁹ The cleric and former minister of culture advocated a Reformist platform, focused on rebuilding relationships with the international community and greater leniency domestically. Nearly ten years after the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the Iran Khatami governed had largely settled into itself. The population was more educated, saw higher levels of literacy, and had begun to climb out of the economic struggles of the war. He built an administration drawn largely from Reformist circles, including Western-educated diplomats and officials, and worked hard to foster dialogue between Iran and the international community. To this end he sought to counter Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" with his own call for increased cooperation, resulting in the year 2001 being named the United Nations Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations. Since leaving office, Khatami has continued this work through his Foundation for Dialogue Among Civilizations.

⁶⁹ Suzanne Maloney. Brookings Institute, "The Legacy of Reform in Iran, Sixteen Years Later." Last modified May 23, 2013. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/iran-at-saban/posts/2013/05/23-khatami-anniversary>.

The Iranian Economy

The Iranian economy is a mix of nationalized industries and private holdings, with the regular involvement of the Revolutionary Guards. The Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is an elite arm of the military, which has enjoyed considerable influence under Supreme Leader Khamenei. The IRGC has been allegedly active in conflicts around the world, stretching Iranian influence in places across the region through training and arming fighters. Most recently, IRGC fighters have been reportedly supporting Bashar al-Assad in Syria. With the special operations Basiji forces, the IRGC has been able to build up an extensive economic empire. Through government contracts the organization has secured holdings in numerous infrastructure and energy sector projects, and it plays a role in NGO religious groups as well. The role played by the IRGC in the black market is murky and little understood, but it is believed that the group has a hand in a number of illicit activities, including the sale of software used to bypass internet censorship.

Over the course of the 1990s and under the guidance of Rafsanjani and Khatami, Iran saw considerable economic recovery. GDP growth, though remaining sluggish early on, hit 5.1 percent in 2000⁷⁰ while unemployment fell to 9.1 percent in 1996 before climbing to 16 percent four years later.⁷¹ The World Bank agreed to fund public projects, and investments from the public and private sector bolstered the energy and industrial sectors. The OECD rated the risk of doing business with Iran at four, rather than the previous rating of six, on a scale of ten. By 1999

⁷⁰ World Bank, "GDP growth (annual %)." Last modified 2013.
<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?page=2>.

⁷¹ Index Mundi, "Iran Unemployment Rate." Last modified 2013.
http://www.indexmundi.com/iran/unemployment_rate.html.

around 15 percent of the economy had been privatized, reversing the mass nationalization of industry and property undertaken after the fall of the shah.⁷²

With these economic changes also came a shift in society. As the economy rebounded, the educated Iranian population began calling for a more open society and greater interaction with the rest of the world. What had once been strict adherence to state policy became a more nuanced and ambiguous system, wherein laws forbid activities but lack of implementation or prosecution has led to practices hitherto unheard of since 1979. An example of this is the consumption of alcohol. Although technically illegal, under President Khatami a lack of serious efforts to prevent this behavior led to a vivid and active nightlife in Iran's cities. Among the classes that benefited under this more liberal state were urban students and women.

Women in Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a prime example of the oversimplification of Muslim women and their relationship to the state. In the case of Iran, the 1979 Islamic Revolution eventuated in a clean break with the Western world, a break that can be seen starkly when comparing images from before and after Islamic law was implemented. The images are striking. Before the revolution, women were seen wearing the latest Western fashions, just as comfortable on the streets of Tehran or Shiraz as they would be in New York or Chicago. Following the revolution, dark *chadors* and headscarves covered the hair and bodies of women in the street to varying degrees, conforming to individual interpretations of government-mandated modesty.

These visual impressions, however, do not provide a complete picture. The common discourse on Iran, which often laments the end of the shah's reign, falsely equates modernity and

⁷² New York Times, "Iran President's 5-Year Plan Would Privatize Major Industries." Last modified Sept 16, 1999. <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/09/16/world/iran-president-s-5-year-plan-would-privatize-major-industries.html>.

secularization, suggesting that women being able to wear skirts gives them greater freedom than granting them access to effective family planning. While certain areas of women's lives in Iran have been constricted and often repressed by the central government, there have been tangible gains in women's rights since the revolution, often championed by the theocracy itself. Although women still have a long road to equality, the Islamic Republic of Iran has instituted reforms that have improved the lives and status of women since 1979, challenging the dominant narrative of Islamist leadership and women's empowerment being mutually exclusive.

Healthcare is an area in which Iran has made important progress since 1979, be it overall access to primary care or providing access to family planning. Under the shah, large segments of the population were unable to get even the most basic healthcare, and women in rural communities were often unable to get the care they needed during pregnancy or childbirth. In response to these problems, the leadership in Tehran placed high priority on increasing access to healthcare around the country. To serve rural populations, Iran was able to develop a system by which medical professionals provide local care, with medical facilities at community, regional, and national levels providing necessary services. Community clinics serve as primary care providers, ensuring that rural communities get the medical care they need. This program successfully created 17,000 health care facilities, providing 23 million people with services. A similar program is currently being developed, based on the Iranian model, for use in the underserved Mississippi Delta.⁷³

One of Iran's greatest health care success stories lies in the ambitious family planning program implemented after the Iran-Iraq War. During the conflict, the government encouraged population growth in response to the high number of casualties inflicted by Iraqi forces. Once the

⁷³ Suzy Hansen. "What Can Mississippi Learn From Iran?" *The New York Times*, July 27, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/29/magazine/what-can-mississippis-health-care-system-learn-from-iran.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

conflict came to an end, it quickly became clear that growth rates were not supportable in the long term. The result can be seen today with the bulging youth population across the region. The Iranian government therefore embarked on a plan encompassing numerous means to reduce the population growth rate. Education in family planning methods, combined with free contraception on demand and financial incentives to keep family sizes small, has resulted in a drastic reduction in the growth rate to 2 per woman in 2000 from 6.6 births per woman in 1977 and an increase in the number of women using all forms of contraception. A USIP report explains, “In 2012, 74 percent of married women aged 15 to 49 practice family planning. Some 60 percent use one of several forms of contraception, while one-third rely on female or male sterilization. These rates are more or less comparable to those in the United States, according to the U.S.-based Population Reference Bureau.”⁷⁴

This program, however, has recently been changed due to the growth rate being too low to maintain the Iranian population. To combat the impending crisis, officials have increased mandated paid maternity leave and introduced paternity leave, as well as decreasing the financial incentives of maintaining small families. Universities have curtailed family planning courses, and funding for family planning has been cut from the budget. However, the Ministry of Health may not be able to fully remove family planning education from schools due to the many other health topics covered in such classes. Iranian men and women have now become accustomed to control over their reproductive health, and a total abandonment of the program will likely face strong opposition across the socio-economic spectrum.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Farzaneh Roudi. United States Institute for Peace, "Iran Reverses Family Planning, Calls for More Children." Last modified Aug 29, 2012. <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2012/aug/29/iran-reverses-family-planning-calls-more-children-0>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Through the family planning program and the healthcare initiatives undertaken, the number of women receiving medical care prior to and during childbirth reached nearly 100 percent due to increased access to health services for rural women. The maternal mortality rate has continuously dropped, and women's life expectancy at time of birth has increased to 70.4 years in 2010 from 54 years in 1970.⁷⁶

Education is another area where women have seen substantial gains, although recent university policies have threatened some of that progress; this will be discussed shortly. During the 1979 revolution, increasing rural access to education emerged as a central promise of the leadership, and by 1984 nearly 100 percent primary school attendance was achieved. Secondary education is also close to 100 percent, while higher education had been attained by 43 percent of the population as of 2010. Literacy rates have grown to 85 percent overall and 98 percent of those between the ages of 15 to 24.⁷⁷ Under the shah these numbers were at around 30%.

Women and girls have gained substantially under Iranian educational reforms. Gender parity has been achieved in primary school attendance and 97 percent parity at the secondary level. In higher education, women make up 60 percent of all graduates, with that number rising to 70 percent in some engineering and science programs.⁷⁸ Female literacy has gone to 80 percent today from 24 percent in 1976, with that number rising to 98 percent for women under the age of 24.⁷⁹ According to UNESCO, Iran had the highest ratio of women to men in higher education among sovereign nations as of 2005.

However, a number of Iranian universities recently announced plans to bar women from 77 programs, primarily in science and engineering. A similar proposal was put forth in 2011, but

⁷⁶ Trading Economics, "Life expectancy at birth; female (years) in Iran." Last modified 2012. <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/iran/life-expectancy-at-birth-female-years-wb-data.html>.

⁷⁷ UNESCO, "Iran- School Enrollment." <http://www.indexmundi.com/facts/iran/school-enrollment>

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ UNESCO, "Iran - Literacy Rate." <http://www.indexmundi.com/facts/iran/literacy-rate>.

was defeated after public officials denounced the plan. One of the most vocal opponents was President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose daughter received a degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Tehran. There are several reasons behind this proposal, ranging from high unemployment due to sanctions and high numbers of graduates to the need for increased population growth. The ban, regardless of the stated intentions, will result in the loss of an educational edge for women in critical technological fields, further isolating them from these careers in an already hostile workforce.

Iranian women, despite gains in education and access to family planning, continue to struggle in the labor market. Employment in Iran has fluctuated greatly since the revolution, due first to the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and more recently by consistently increased international economic sanctions owing to Iran's quest for nuclear power. Women's presence in the workforce has fluctuated with these events, their employment during times of crisis made more precarious by their being the last to be hired and the first to be fired. As of 1971, women made up 12.5 percent of the workforce, a number that rose to 43 percent in 2005 before falling in 2010 to 27 percent. In 1986, women made up just 6.1 percent of the workforce.⁸⁰

Since the revolution, women have entered the workforce in numerous roles, be they education, medicine, or even cab driving. Perceptions of gender still have a large impact on what positions are considered "women's work," as is true in many other countries. Women are barred from serving as judges due to their being too "emotional," although women are allowed to volunteer for the Basij military force. Regionally, Iran ranked above the Middle East and North

⁸⁰ Mehdi Moayedi. Pars Times, "Statistical Glance at Women's Employment in Iran." http://www.parstimes.com/women/glance_womens_employment.html.

Africa regional average for women's share of the labor force in 2006. It ranked second overall with 35 percent.⁸¹

Harder to measure is the role of women's political agency and their relationship to the state. It is impossible to reduce such a complex and fluid situation to comparable statistics and numbers in an effective way. As is true with women's agency around the world, gains and losses occur simultaneously across various areas, changing sometimes suddenly. Iran also complicates the matter further, with official policy differing from implementation in some cases.

Amnesty International reported in 2011 that female activists were subject to arrest, torture, rape, and general harassment by authorities. Although stonings were not reported during the particular time frame, laws in Iran continue to threaten women with this punishment. Laws requiring male permission for things like travel and marriage remain on the books, taking important decisions out of women's hands. These conditions changed very little between 2011 and 2013, with the Human Rights Watch report almost word for word reflecting the 2011 concerns for women's rights. Women's issues in Iran tend to be impacted by the broader political situation, with crackdowns on "immoral" behavior serving as a means for the regime to flex its muscles in response to real or perceived unrest. This trend can be seen in the aftermath of the 2009 protests, when numerous women's rights activists were arrested.

In the case of Iran and other Muslim majority nations, the blame for women's struggles and oppression tends to fall on Islamic fundamentalism. This term is often applied across sectarian and political lines, and across a number of policies in various countries with little attention paid to other possible forces at play. Islam has fewer explicit guidelines than other faiths, with much left up to interpretation and subject to the specific context. By neglecting this,

⁸¹ World Bank, "The Status and Progress of Women in the Middle East and North Africa." Last modified 2009. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMENA/Resources/MENA_Gender_Compndium-2009-1.pdf.

those who would use the term Islamic fundamentalism falsely paint Islamist leadership as monolithic and universally fanatic in their religious interpretation. For Iran, this simplification masks a dynamic domestic conversation on gender equality, with clergy, politicians, and the population falling at various points along the debate spectrum.

Iranian women hold government positions, with 27 percent of ministerial (or vice presidential) positions and 2.8 percent of parliament seats being held by women. This is low compared with 2000, when women held 4.9 percent of parliament seats. However, women are still barred from the presidency by the candidate vetting body, the Guardian Council, despite there being no direct restrictions on women running for or holding executive office.⁸² Under President Rouhani, the first female spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry was appointed, and Rouhani's campaign promises included increasing female representation in government.

Women live under a vague web of intersecting restrictions, including clothing requirements and bans on unmarried or unrelated men and women socializing. These two governmental regulations are a prime example of the complexity of Iranian policy towards women, with varying degrees of implementation and obedience. The rural/urban divide is very stark in Iran, with less attention paid to a young man and woman together on the streets of Tehran than may be the case in a smaller, often more religious village. As a means to get around such restrictions on men and women spending time together, temporary marriages ranging from one day to multiple years are common and official.⁸³

Although treated by many in the West as a one-size-fits-all limitation, government restrictions on women's dress actually varies greatly depending on the individual women in

⁸² United Nations, Women's Indicators and Statistics database, "Iran-Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament." <http://www.indexmundi.com/facts/iran/proportion-of-seats-held-by-women-in-national-parliaments>.

⁸³ Afshin Valinejad. Christian Science Monitor, "The rules of love, as told by an Iranian Cleric." Last modified June 29, 2012. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/0629/The-rules-of-love-as-told-by-an-Iranian-cleric>.

question. In some cases, women don full chador, with only their face showing. In others, women loosely cover their hair with colorful scarves and wear long, tight coats that differ very little from what one might see on a city street in the United States. Falling in the middle are women wearing traditional hijab and *manteau*, a long coat designed to obscure body shape, hair covered and figure mostly masked. Black is the color most often associated with Islamic dress, but images of Iranian streets show a rainbow of colors, patterns, and materials.

Wearing of the hijab is a charged topic across the Western world, serving as a visual representation of Islam's supposed hostility to women. Secular movements have often promoted banning the hijab, and in the U.S. and Europe it has become a target of Islamophobic propaganda. In Iran, women are required to conform to Islamic codes of modesty, which means wearing some form of hijab. This, however, is no less a restriction than denying women the choice of hijab at all, as has been done throughout history and more recently in nations such as France. Western rejection of hijab is no more than a reactionary denial of women's freedom of choice, falsely equating Western norms with modernity and Eastern norms with repression and regression.

Despite the Western depiction of Iranian women as nameless victims of male domination, many women in Iran have become successful activists, political figures, and champions of change in their respective fields. Zahra Rahnavard, the wife of former presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, captured the imagination of Western media by appearing alongside her husband and headlining her own political rallies in the runup to the 2009 presidential election. She was the first wife to take a leading role in a presidential campaign, prior to which she was appointed as chancellor of al-Zahra University in Tehran and was a key advisor to President Mohammad Khatami.

Although President Ahmadinejad's wife, Azam Farahi, has remained out of the limelight since her husband came into office in 2005, she has had a successful career. Farahi studied at the University of Tehran, where she eventually became a professor. When her husband was appointed mayor of Tehran and refused his salary, Farahi supported the family. As First Lady, she has championed some causes and written letters to leaders in the Middle East calling on them to provide assistance to Gazans.⁸⁴

Shirin Ebadi, though in exile since the 2009 crackdown on dissidents, was the first Iranian to receive a Nobel Peace Prize, awarded in recognition of her work on human rights in Iran as a lawyer and founder of the Defenders of Human Rights Center in Tehran. Masoumeh Ebtekar became the first female vice president of the Environmental Protection Organization in 1997, under the Khatami administration, and was active in international environmental initiatives. Following her term, she was elected as councilwoman in Tehran, running twenty working groups on environmental issues. She is also an accomplished professor, teaching immunology at Tarbiat Modares University, and has contributed articles to numerous books in the medical and environmental field.

The women's rights movement in Iran is described as one of the most dynamic in the region, buoyed by higher levels of education and the freedom that comes with access to family planning. Iran also has an advantage lost upon many countries in the Middle East: support among men. A 2007 Gallup poll showed that 89% of Iranian men and women feel women should have equal legal rights, 77% feel they should be allowed to hold leadership roles, and 60% feel they should be able to initiate a divorce.⁸⁵ Given the male-dominated public sector and political

⁸⁴ Jon Lee Anderson. The New Yorker, "Can Iran Change?" Last modified April 13, 2009. http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/04/13/090413fa_fact_anderson.

⁸⁵ Julie Ray. Gallup, "Iran's Election Brings Desire for Women's Rights Into Focus." Last modified June 11, 2009. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/120821/Iran-Election-Brings-Desire-Women-Rights-Focus.aspx>.

landscape, this support is critical for women to win more than token victories. Although often cast as unresponsive, the Iranian government has acted as a result of powerful lobbying. One example concerns transgender rights. Following an intensive campaign, not only were transgender rights recognized, but the government also agreed to offer financial assistance for sex reassignment surgery and to reissue birth certificates reflecting the change.⁸⁶

Iranian clerics and politicians, particularly Reformists, vocally support women's issues. Members of the clerical establishment often challenge restrictions on women through an Islamic lens, calling into question the basis of legitimacy for many Iranian policies. Former President Khatami was quoted in 2005 as saying, "We should have a comprehensive view of the role of women, and before anything else we should not regard women as second-class citizens. We should all believe that both men and women have the capability to be active in all fields, and I emphasize, in all fields."⁸⁷

In a much publicized recent protest, men across Iran dressed in women's clothing in response to a court-mandated punishment that entailed dressing a man in women's clothing and parading him through the streets of a Kurdish town in Northern Iran. Interestingly, this protest used the slogan "Being a woman is not a way for humiliation or punishment," not only rejecting the punishment but the idea that being a woman is shameful in itself. Members of Parliament also sent a letter to the Justice Ministry, calling the sentence "humiliating to women." A similar protest took place in 2011, after an arrested protester was accused of attempting to escape prison wearing a headscarf. Men took to the internet to not only post images of themselves wearing

⁸⁶ International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, "Iran LGBT Report." <http://www.iglhrc.org/sites/default/files/537-1>.

⁸⁷ Bill Samii and Fatemeh Aman. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Iran: Women Weigh Khatami's Legacy on Gender Issues." Last modified Aug 3, 2005. <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1060385.html>.

headscarves, but to take the opportunity to recognize women's political activity, such as this text posted by one supporter:

For many years, women in my country have been side-by-side with men, wearing men's clothes, struggling. Tonight I am happy and honored to wear women's clothes and be even a small part of the rightful struggle of people to express gratitude and excellence to the women of my country.⁸⁸

As women around the world continue to work for equal rights, Iran serves as an interesting example of the complexity of women's status in an Islamic nation and the ways in which Islam and female empowerment can work hand in hand. In supporting the women's movement and gender equality in Iran, it is important to remember that secularization and modernity are not necessarily synonymous, and to recognize the advances made by activists and political leaders alike. Through education and healthcare, the government has created a generation of women and men unwilling to accept gender inequality, and the future of Iran will be determined by those men and women.

Student Protests of 1999

In July 1999, Reformist newspaper *Salam* was shuttered by the courts. The publication was run by the Association of Combatant Clerics, the Reform party of which President Khatami is a member. In response, students in Tehran held peaceful demonstrations calling for press freedom. That night, the dormitories were raided by alleged members of the Basij paramilitary forces. At least one student was killed in the violence, while hundreds of others were wounded and arrested.

⁸⁸ Vidhi Doshi. Gay Star News, "Men in Iran don women's clothes to protest cross-dress punishment." Last modified April 23, 2013. <http://www.gaystarnews.com/article/men-iran-don-women's-clothes-protest-cross-dress-punishment230413>.

The raid sparked unrest not only in Tehran, but in cities across Iran. Demonstrations and riots were carried out for days, as police clashed with protesters and Basij tried to discredit demonstrators by carrying out vandalism while dressed as students. When students attempted to storm the Ministry of the Interior, President Khatami denounced the protests and called for an end to what had effectively turned Tehran into a war zone. Despite his likely hand in sending Basiji forces to target protesters, Ayatollah Khamenei urged restraint by the authorities, denouncing the use of force against those challenging the Supreme Leader and the regime.⁸⁹

The protests were the worst seen in Iran since the Islamic Revolution and are credited with creating the student movement. Although before 1999 students had been politically active, the unrest not only showed the level at which they were able to rally against oppressive policies, but the impact that organization could have. That potential was capitalized upon again in 2009, when the predominantly student supporters of Mir Hossein Mousavi rallied in the streets after the allegedly fraudulent re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In the crackdown on opposition groups that followed, university curricula and professors were targeted, with monitoring of student groups and dismissal of educators.

The young, educated classes are typically at the vanguard of reform, and Iran is no exception. The clashes that took place in 1999 have come to signify the ongoing conflict between reform and the entrenched regime, as young people continue to push against policies and practices they see as oppressive. The ability of the student population to organize is a very real threat to those elements of the theocracy that thwart the realization of full democracy, not only through protest but also through the ballot box. In the 2013 election, moderate Hassan Rouhani

⁸⁹ Iraj Gorgin. RFERL, "Looking Back at Tehran's 1999 Student Protests." Last modified July 9, 2008. http://www.rferl.org/content/Iran_Student_Protests/1182717.html.

was swept to office in a fervor not unlike that surrounding Mousavi, albeit more subdued, leaving his conservative challengers behind by a huge margin.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Nuclear Issue

In 2005, with President Khatami unable to run for a third term due to constitutional term limits, the mayor of Tehran entered the presidential race. Little known and not well liked by elites, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was considered an underdog, unlikely to beat big names like Rafsanjani. Yet when the runoff election found Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad competing directly, the former professor and once governor was elected and entered office not only with a popular mandate, but with the support of the Supreme Leader. Thus ended the Reformist era of Iranian politics, and what ensued was a period marked by ostracism and economic struggle.

Ahmadinejad's presidential campaign worked hard to portray the candidate as a man of the people, highlighting his piety, humble upbringing, and commitment to ending governmental corruption. As governor of Ardabil province and mayor of Tehran, Ahmadinejad cultivated his reputation carefully through both priorities in office and choices in his personal life. While serving as mayor, Ahmadinejad refused his salary, calling for the money to be used to better the city. At this time he and his family also refused accommodation at the mayoral compound, choosing instead to remain in their private, modest home. Priority was given to religious projects, including transit to a Shiite holy site outside of the city, and providing grants for small businesses— a project that failed to achieve the desired economic growth.

The greatest failure of the Ahmadinejad administration was, ironically, the same issue that swept him into office. In many ways, the 2005 election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was reactionary following the revelation of Iran's secret nuclear program. Voters were unimpressed by the meager progress made by the Khatami administration and responded to the anti-Western

rhetoric employed by the Ahmadinejad campaign in response to the sanctions imposed by the U.S. The regime saw the underdog candidate, with no international profile to speak of, as an ideal president following the strongly supported Reformist cleric Khatami. What Iran got instead, however, was a firebrand not at all reluctant to use an international platform to pander to his own constituents.

The Iranian Nuclear Program

Iran's nuclear program can be divided into two distinct periods. The first of these is prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In 1957, the United States reached an agreement with Iran to begin providing assistance in developing a peaceful nuclear industry under the Atoms for Peace Program. This was the beginning of American engagement in nuclear matters with the Pahlavi monarchy, a government in close alliance with the U.S., particularly on military matters. When the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty was opened for signing in 1968, Iran became a signatory, and when the treaty was ratified by the Majles the government was obligated not to pursue the weaponization of its nuclear program. The second period was subsequent to the Islamic Revolution, following which Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini did not terminate Iranian participation in the NPT. In fact the program was shut down until the 1980s, when the government resumed nuclear work citing energy needs.⁹⁰

Since 1968, Iran has at no time left the NPT or expelled International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors. They are beholden to a Safeguards Agreement that allows IAEA inspectors access to facilities and people connected with the nuclear program in order to verify that all declared nuclear material is being used solely for peaceful purposes. The IAEA has considered

⁹⁰ Shahram Chubin. United States Institute For Peace, "The Politics of Iran's Nuclear Program." <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/politics-irans-nuclear-program>.

Iran a special case since the secret construction of a nuclear facility at Natanz was exposed in 2002, and the agency has a virtually constant presence at many of their known facilities.⁹¹

Iran has enforced Additional Protocol in the past, which allowed access to facilities not covered by the Safeguards Agreement, but currently stands free from any obligations outside of the Safeguards Agreement, which requires access to all known nuclear facilities and workers engaged in the nuclear program. In 1978, just one year before the fall of the monarchy, Iran signed on to additional safeguards in exchange for “most favored nation” status with the U.S. government, which would ensure ease in reprocessing American fuel.⁹² This and every other agreement made between the United States and the Pahlavi government did not survive the revolution, however, and Iran withdrew from all additional obligations. In 2003, Iran’s leaders agreed to the Additional Protocol, a supplement to the Safeguards Agreement, which would allow inspectors increased access to the nuclear program, although it was never ratified by the Majles.⁹³ Iran has since withdrawn, citing international treatment after being referred to the United Nations Security Council.⁹⁴

In 2002, the fortunes of Iran changed drastically when secret nuclear facilities were revealed by the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) spokesman Alireza Jafarzadeh. The nuclear site at Natanz and heavy water reactor at Arak were being constructed without IAEA knowledge or oversight, an announcement that validated the U.S. calls for sanctions and isolation. At the time, President Khatami’s administration had developed working relationships with

⁹¹ Michael Adler. United States Institute for Peace, "Iran and the IAEA." <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-iaea>.

⁹² Semira N Nikou. United States Institute for Peace, "Timeline of Iran's Nuclear Activities." <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/timeline-irans-nuclear-activities>

⁹³ International Atomic Energy Agency, "Iran Signs Additional Protocol on Nuclear Safeguards." Last modified Feb. 18, 2011. <http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/2003/iranap20031218.html>.

⁹⁴ Nikou. "Timeline of Iran's Nuclear Activities."

numerous countries in the EU, and the president himself enjoyed warm professional relationships with a number of heads of state. Due to this, and the EU's dependence on Iranian oil, the U.S. still faced objection to sweeping sanctions although the seeds of mistrust had been planted. These secret facilities were particularly suspicious in light of the IAEA experience with Iraq, where Saddam Hussein used limited access to nuclear sites to create cover for a secret program being pursued.

In 2003, the year after international concern mounted following the revelation of Iran's nuclear program, Supreme Leader Khamenei issued a verbal fatwa, or religious edict, against the production, stockpiling, or use of nuclear weapons.⁹⁵ Under this edict, Iran would not be permitted to conduct a weapons program or use a weapon attained from another country. But the international community has concerns regarding the validity of the fatwa, which has not been put on paper as it were. Some cite a Shia teaching allowing followers to "lie" in order to protect themselves, although that applies only to hiding their Shia faith.⁹⁶ During his United Nations speech in 2013, President Obama referred to the fatwa, suggesting that U.S. officials are reconsidering the legal validity of the edict. Part of a 2012 Iranian proposal to the P5+1 included submitting the fatwa to the United Nations, making it a binding international law on the Islamic Republic. The talks stalled, however, and the proposal was shelved until negotiations resumed.

In November, 2013, the first agreement since 2003 was reached between the Permanent Five Members of the UN Security Council and Germany (P5+1) and Iran following intensive negotiation. The negotiations featured the first direct talks between high level American and Iranian officials since 1979, a breakthrough heralded by diplomacy advocates. The interim deal

⁹⁵ Mike Shuster. NPR, "Iran's Nuclear Fatwa: A Policy or a Ploy?." Last modified June 14, 2012. <http://www.npr.org/2012/06/14/154915222/irans-nuclear-fatwa-a-policy-or-a-ploy>.

⁹⁶ Gareth Porter. Truthout, "Report on Iran's Nuclear Fatwa Distorts Its History." Last modified April 19, 2012. <http://truth-out.org/news/item/8617-report-on-irans-nuclear-fatwa-distorts-its-history>.

stands for six months and has yet to go into effect. Under it, Iran will halt any activities that could increase their enrichment capacity, including work at the heavy water reactor at Arak. All 20% enrichment will cease and all stockpiles will be reduced to under 5% enrichment or be neutralized through conversion to fuel rods, while stockpiles of 3.5% enriched uranium cannot have any net gain in the six month period. Along with increased inspections and monitoring by the IAEA, these restrictions could considerably curb any breakout capacity. In exchange, limited sanctions relief and assistance totaling some \$7 billion will be provided by the U.S. and EU, including easing of crippling restrictions on the purchase of Iranian oil.

As it stands today, Iran is considered noncompliant with IAEA regulations, although negotiations will continue in attempts to build on the first agreement and resolve all disputes. The international community has doubts regarding the aims of their program, with many wondering if they are seeking nuclear weapons or nuclear weapons breakout capacity. Although Iran has maintained that the nation is operating a peaceful program, the IAEA is unable to verify the complete validity of this claim. In 2005, the IAEA Board of Governors found Iranian lack of cooperation troubling, and in a divided vote called on the government to increase and accelerate confidence-building measures to clear up any concerns regarding their nuclear program.⁹⁷ Since then, Iran's leaders have failed to fully convince the international community of their peaceful nuclear aims, and each IAEA report has called on them to resolve these issues. In a report released in June, 2012, the Director General of the IAEA said this:

The Agency continues to verify the non-diversion of nuclear material declared by Iran under its Safeguards Agreement. However, Iran is not providing the necessary cooperation to enable the Agency to provide credible assurance about the

⁹⁷ International Atomic Energy Agency, "Transcript of the Director General's Press Statement on Iran." Last modified Sept 24, 2005. <http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/transcripts/2005/transcr24092005.html>.

absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran, and therefore to conclude that all nuclear material in Iran is in peaceful activities. I urge Iran to take steps towards the full implementation of all relevant obligations in order to establish international confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear programme.⁹⁸

Prior to the 2002 revelation of Iran's Natanz facility, the United States voiced concern over their activities. Although sanctions were sought, other members of the UN Security Council were unconvinced of the U.S. allegations and as a result refused to back any action. When a deal made by President Mohammed Khatami offering voluntary enforcement of the Additional Protocol fell through following the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, the U.S.-led sanctions efforts resulted in a series of collective sanctions between 2006 and 2010, as well as unilateral sanctions imposed by the EU and the U.S.⁹⁹

Russia and China, however, have stood as barriers to the sanctions efforts. Unlike the United States, these two members of the UN Security Council have close trade relations with Iran and have worked with them on their nuclear program since 2002. The EU had relied on oil from Iran until 2012, when an embargo took effect. Russia and China resisted sanctions implementation on the grounds of uncertainty regarding the allegation of misappropriation of nuclear facilities and materials. Notably, Russia has helped complete and fuel the Iranian reactor at Bushehr, a project started by Germany before the revolution but halted after an Iraqi strike during the Iran-Iraq War. Other countries, including India and Turkey, have refused the enforcement of sanctions against Iran and continue doing business with the regime today.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Yukiya Amano. International Atomic Energy Agency, "Introductory Statement to Board of Governors." Last modified June 4, 2012. <http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/statements/2012/amsp2012n009.html>

⁹⁹ Shahram Chubin. United States Institute For Peace, "The Politics of Iran's Nuclear Program." <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/politics-irans-nuclear-program>.

¹⁰⁰ BBC News, "Q&A: Iran Sanctions." Last modified July 2, 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15983302>.

Since 2002, negotiations between Iran and world powers have been conducted in fits and starts, with no tangible progress made until this year. As recently as 2010 a tentative deal was reached that would remove most of Iran's highly enriched uranium stockpile and have it converted to fuel rods before being returned, but the deal was not approved by Supreme Leader Khamenei.¹⁰¹ Later that year, a deal was reached by Turkey and Brazil that would achieve nearly the same thing, but sanctions relief was rejected by the United States and the deal did not move forward.¹⁰² Negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 were resumed in May, 2012, but talks stalled before an agreement was reached. Although technical talks continued in the interim, it was not until the recent deal that negotiations yielded any progress. With a deal finally struck, it is believed by many that a solution to the nuclear crisis is the closest it has ever been, yet with the agreement still young the chances of it failing are considerable.

Ahmadinejad's Domestic Power Struggle

Domestically, Ahmadinejad's first term was an exercise in how the presidency could take power from other institutions. He favored executive orders to working with the legislature, an example of which was his early-on decision to allow women to attend soccer matches. The Majles very quickly reversed the act, but the cat and mouse-style tension between the presidency and the legislature remained high. According to the United States Institute of Peace,

He ignored established procedures, laws and regulations. He drew on the oil reserve fund for pet projects without consulting parliament. The Plan Organization, responsible for Iran's five-year development plans, was abolished, as he considered long-term

¹⁰¹ Kelsey Davenport. Arms Control Association, "History of Official Proposals on the Iranian Nuclear Issue." Last modified April, 2012. http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Iran_Nuclear_Proposals.

¹⁰² James Reini. The National, "US rejects Iran nuclear deal brokered by Turkey and Brazil." Last modified May 20, 2010. <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/us-rejects-iran-nuclear-deal-brokered-by-turkey-and-brazil-and-sets-up-new-sanctions>.

planning pointless. He stopped attending meetings of the Supreme Defense Council. Later in his two-term presidency, he named personal envoys on the Middle East, Afghanistan and elsewhere, by-passing the Foreign Ministry.¹⁰³

He clashed with the legislature repeatedly, garnering the reputation of being difficult and uncompromising. With influential figures such as current Speaker of the Majles Ali Larijani standing against him, Ahmadinejad relied on building up his base of traditionally religious urban and rural voters, a move that further alienated him from the often pragmatic elite. As a result, his administration continues to be investigated for corruption, and Ahmadinejad himself became the target of calls for impeachment, although no action was taken by the legislature. The United States Institute of Peace explains,

A populist in style and substance, Ahmadinejad distributed largesse to the poor and lower middle class. His presidency coincided with high oil prices. Oil revenue during his first five years equaled the total oil income for the previous 25 years, but was largely wasted on short-term, non-productive programs.¹⁰⁴

The eight-year presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was marked by the deterioration of relations with the international community. Incendiary rhetoric against Israel, questioning of the September 11 attacks on the United States, and general missteps such as asserting that Iran had no homosexual population resulted in the easy demonization of a country already poorly understood.

The Iranian economy saw major setbacks as international partners joined sanctions efforts aimed at limiting the nuclear program. Relations became difficult with countries like Saudi Arabia, a country already at odds with Shia-led Iran. Ever mounting U.S.-led sanctions,

¹⁰³ Shaul Bakhash. United States Institute of Peace, "The Six Presidents". <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/six-presidents>.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

recurring condemnation by international organizations, and growing stigma against Iran in the West caused many to turn against Ahmadinejad by the end of his first term. As elections drew nearer, it was unclear if the incumbent would be able to rally his supporters and maintain power. What transpired on election day was among the darkest days for democracy in Iran, and a turning point for the leadership.

2009 Elections and Challenge for Leadership

Few events in recent history have shaken the Islamic Republic as much as the 2009 presidential election. As sanctions mounted and international isolation increased, incumbent Ahmadinejad faced three challengers, including Mir Hossein Mousavi. Mousavi, a former prime minister and long-time regime insider, became the key challenger to Ahmadinejad after former president Khatami backed out of the race to support the Reformist frontrunner. Also in the race were Mehdi Karroubi, a mid-level cleric and Parliamentarian, and Revolutionary Guards commander Mohsen Rezai.

As the two week official campaign period began, attention began building around Mousavi both in Iran and the West. Using green as his official campaign color, Mousavi's platform relied heavily on hope and change to drum up support among disenfranchised urban youth and those impacted by sanctions. His wife, women's rights activist and university dean Zahra Rahnavard, was with him at rallies and on occasion held rallies herself—the first wife of a political candidate to do so. Moderate and Reform leaders backed the candidate, and rallies grew to thousands of people as the election drew nearer. In the U.S., media outlets presented Mousavi as an Iranian Barack Obama, coming from relative obscurity to global attention quickly with a new vision for his country's future.

The election itself achieved wide international coverage, although the question of whether it was really a free election remained on the table prior to election day. Although in retrospect this skepticism proved correct, it would be disingenuous to claim that the coming unrest was foreseeable given the largely orderly elections and transfers of power carried out in Iran. Journalists reported a high voter turnout, which they attributed to dissatisfaction with President Ahmadinejad. Fairly quickly after the polls closed, results were announced in favor of Ahmadinejad. Irregularities such as missing ballots and polls being closed earlier than expected were reported on widely.¹⁰⁵

The most pronounced oddity from the election was the landslide victory Ahmadinejad supposedly achieved. With about 63% of the vote,¹⁰⁶ he had a very clear majority and therefore the election would not continue to the runoff stage. It was this number— 63%— that raised concerns initially, due to the extreme disparity between his supposed margin of victory over the other three candidates and polls going into the election. Poll results differed greatly across the country, but official results in early June had Ahmadinejad leading by about twelve points.¹⁰⁷ Although there are many theories about why the margin was so high, the decisive victory was most likely handed down to avoid a runoff election. Had there been a second round, Mousavi and Ahmadinejad would have presumably gone head-to-head, and chances are that Mousavi would have won with the support of Karroubi.

In truth, the election itself spoke more to the insecurity felt by the regime than the strength of the opposition. It is clear that from the moment Ahmadinejad's victory was announced, those in power were unprepared for the kind of outcry that rose from the streets.

¹⁰⁵ Majd. *The Ayatollah's Democracy*, 5.

¹⁰⁶ John Simpson. BBC News, "Ahmadinejad Re-election Sparks Clashes." Last modified June 13, 2009. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8098896.stm>.

¹⁰⁷ Sam Wang. Princeton Election Consortium, "Analyzing Iran 2009: Part 1, Pre-Election Polls." Last modified June 18, 2009. <http://election.princeton.edu/2009/06/18/analyzing-iran-2009-part-1-pre-election-polls/>.

Khamenei struggled with what to do, as demonstrated by his back-and-forth decisions on the matter of a recount. Initially the protests were allowed to be conducted, and the option of a recount was left on the table¹⁰⁸. He had a small number of ballots recounted and some irregularities were allegedly investigated, but these gestures did nothing to placate the demonstrators. Khamenei met with representatives of the four candidates, although no agreement to end the protests was made.¹⁰⁹ Until June 16th, protests had been generally peaceful. But that evening, reports of violence came through as “protesters surrounded and attempted to set fire to the headquarters of the Basij volunteer militia... At least one man was killed.”¹¹⁰ On June 19th, seven days after the election, Khamenei announced that, “If there is any bloodshed, leaders of the protests will be held directly responsible.”¹¹¹

Following pleas for unrest to end and warnings of imminent crackdowns, the Basiji forces began clashing with protesters across Tehran. Internal rifts close to the Supreme Leader were exposed as the regime divided on what should be done, and while some of those voices were silenced through imprisonment, many of those speaking out were too powerful to eliminate completely. Leaders such as former president Mohammed Khatami and Grand Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who have strong public backing and high international profiles after years within the power elite, continued to support Mousavi and those calling for an investigation into voting irregularities. Much of the actual power struggle in Iran takes place behind closed doors,

¹⁰⁸ Robert F Worth, and Nazila Fathi. "Defiance Grows as Iran's Leader Sets Vote Review." *New York Times*, New York edition, sec. A1, June 16, 2009.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/16/world/middleeast/16iran.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹⁰⁹ Nazila Fathi. "Recount Offer Fails to Quell Political Tumult in Iran." *New York Times*, June 17, 2009.

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/17/world/middleeast/17iran.html?_r=1.

¹¹⁰ Worth and Fathi. "Defiance Grows as Iran's Leader Sets Vote Review."

¹¹¹ Scott Peterson. "Iran's Khamenei throws down hard line with protesters." *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 19, 2009. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2009/0619/p06s13-wome.html>.

and while speculation suggests that Rafsanjani was working to leverage his power possibly against the Supreme Leader himself, these matters are rarely made public.¹¹²

Many commentators asserted that the protesters hoped to overturn the Islamic Republic in favor of a secular democracy. During the Arab Spring, many sought to align Iran with the Middle Eastern countries rising up against their rulers. But was crippling the theocracy to the point of overthrow ever the true goal of the movement? Certainly within the ranks of protesters there were those seeking more radical solutions to the problems they faced, but one would be hard pressed to call that the norm.

In his book *The Ayatollah's Democracy*, Hooman Majd relays a conversation he had with Khatami shortly after the election took place.

“You know, some are calling it a revolution here and in the West in general,” I say.

“No!” says Khatami. “All we’re looking for is what is legal in Iran, for the law to prevail.”¹¹³

Later in the book, Majd describes the Green Movement as “Iran’s first real civil rights movement, one not so unlike the civil rights movement in the United States.”¹¹⁴ It was not the goal of Mousavi and Karroubi, who took the reins as leaders of the movement and were later put under house arrest, to overthrow the government. Although they donned the colors of the Islamic Revolution and chanted “Allah hu-Akbar” from the rooftops as they did in 1979, they were not seeking a new system. They wanted the rules of the system they were in to be played by. Those who stood up for the Green Movement within the country were members of the political elite. Karroubi is a mid-level cleric who has served as the Speaker of the Majles. Mousavi sat on

¹¹² Roger Cohen. "Iran's Children of Tomorrow." *New York Times*, June 23, 2009.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/23/opinion/23iht-edcohen.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹¹³ Majd, *The Ayatollah's Democracy*, 14.

¹¹⁴ Majd, *The Ayatollah's Democracy*, 43.

the Expediency Council, a title he technically held until 2012. Rafsanjani and Khatami are political insiders, to the extent that the Supreme Leader had to tolerate their speaking out on behalf of reforms. “Mousavi and Karroubi still believe in the Islamic Republic; they simply view Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as a Caesar who has subverted the republic that they helped create by monopolizing power at the expense of elected institutions.”¹¹⁵

Consequences of 2009 Unrest

The impact of the 2009 protests on political legitimacy in Iran is still felt today, both domestically and around the world. The unrest that took place marred what was a record of peaceful elections, providing a level of legitimacy to those calling for regime change. Since 2009, those who advocate military action in response to the nuclear issue were bolstered in their assertions that negotiations with the Iranian government were illegitimate and not worthwhile. But in many ways, the unrest of 2009 forced the regime to question its direction and the very viability of the oppressive system they had developed.

Despite the iron fist brought down against those seen as threatening hardliner elements in the regime, political infighting only increased following the 2009 election. Supreme Leader Khamenei may have thrown his support behind the incumbent president immediately following the election, but soon thereafter he began marginalizing Ahmadinejad and directly challenging the president’s authority. Members of Parliament resumed calls for investigations into the Ahmadinejad administration, and some began advocating impeachment within six months of his second inauguration. Being too closely aligned with the president became a political liability almost immediately following his re-election. In place of what was Ahmadinejad’s considerable

¹¹⁵ Dobbins and Nader. "Gate Crashing the Opposition." *Foreign Affairs*.

international presence, other high level officials increasingly outlined state policy in the media. Supreme Leader Khamenei launched an official Twitter account, using social media to translate his statements and past speeches into several languages.

This break between Ahmadinejad and those who supported his disputed re-election highlights the complex relationship the regime sees between itself and the people. It would seem that this rejection was due at least in part to the disapproval demonstrated by an easily mobilized portion of society, including students. Those in power were put there by similar protests, a reality they have not forgotten. Rather than continue to prop up a president with steadily declining domestic and international approval, leaders chose to distance themselves from an anchor that had tarnished all involved.

Although Ahmadinejad was given the cold shoulder, the Supreme Leader and his hard-line allies did not turn to the Reformists favorably. Instead, the once-prominent opposition group was largely forced from office unless willing to support hardline elements. Reformist newspapers were shut down, activists were arrested or exiled, and a general sense of oppression dominated the political atmosphere. This continued crackdown led U.S. State Department officials to call Iran a “police state”¹¹⁶ in late 2009.

Following the protests of 2009 and the subsequent infighting, the outlook for Iranian political society looked grim. When Parliamentary elections took place in 2012, it was initially unclear how the process would play out. Many leaders called for a boycott in response to the festering wounds of the 2009 unrest. Many Reformists had been forced from power, and those who hadn't were in the precarious position of choosing cooperation and some governmental participation or activism and loss of what little power they had maintained. Some Reformist

¹¹⁶ Voice of America, "US: Iran Increasingly a 'Police State'." Last modified Dec 23, 2009. <http://www.voanews.com/content/us-iran-increasingly-a-police-state-80050167/369461.html>.

leaders advocated boycotting the elections, citing the continued house arrest of Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi. Others, including former President Khatami, cast votes and as such were derided as having abandoned the Green Movement.

The division of the Reformist camp on what method elicits the most change has been an ongoing struggle. President Khatami champions working within the system to create reform, while others favor protest and non-compliance. Until the presidential election 2013, many felt the reform era had ended when Khatami left office, a sentiment sharpened by the 2009 election crackdown. What was missed in the interim between the 2009 and 2013 elections, however, was the division developing among hard-line factions. As economic pressure mounted, cracks in the conservative response began showing, which would eventually pave the way for a surprise victory in the 2013 presidential election.

The parliamentary elections took place peacefully and with no large-scale public demonstrations. The state released voter turnout numbers of around 66%, in line with average parliamentary election turnout though lower than for presidential elections.¹¹⁷ The breakdown of seats was predictable, with almost 60% going to hard-line candidates. 35%, the second largest coalition, was Reformist, while the remaining seats went to mandated religious minority representatives and independent candidates.¹¹⁸ The result suggested a consolidation of power by the hard-line elements of the government and the continued forcing out of Reformists, although the role that boycott played in the election is difficult to assess.

¹¹⁷ Thomas Erdbrink. Washington Post, "High turnout reported in Iran for parliamentary elections." Last modified March 2, 2012. http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-03-02/world/35450054_1_parliamentary-elections-high-turnout-preliminary-turnout.

¹¹⁸ Damien Pearse. The Guardian, "Iran election results cause major setbacks for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad." Last modified May 5, 2012. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/05/iran-election-results-mahmoud-ahmadinejad>.

As factions fought for control in the wake of national unrest, the central power in Iran was not untouched by the scandal. The official title for the office we call the Supreme Leader is *Rahbar*, a Farsi word that does not translate directly to English. A closer translation, according to Hooman Majd, would be “guide” rather than “leader.” Within the original framework Ayatollah Khomeini had designed through his writings on the role of Islam in government, the role of the Supreme Leader was envisioned as a religious voice to temper policies. It was this detached idea of the Supreme Leader, acting as a guide in public and pulling strings behind the scenes, that allowed Ayatollah Khomeini to maintain his approval ratings and stay well above political fray. This is not something that Ayatollah Khamenei has been able to do as adeptly, and as such has changed the way the public relates to the Supreme Leader.

Whereas Khomeini stayed well away from public infighting, Khamenei waded directly into the thick of it during the controversial 2009 presidential election. By allying himself closely with Ahmadinejad and speaking out publicly against protests, he made himself a target for unrest in a way Khomeini had carefully avoided. Khamenei’s consolidation of power proved to be a double-edged sword as responsibility fell solely on his shoulders. According to the United States Institute of Peace,

[Khamenei] has destroyed Iranian political institutions that might restrain him but that also could protect him by sharing responsibility for decisions. So when Khamenei weakens institutions, he alone then faces responsibility for every government action. This makes him vulnerable.¹¹⁹

Before 2009, presidents had taken the brunt of public unrest for unpopular policies, such as Khatami’s low approval ratings on leaving office due to his inability to secure reforms from

¹¹⁹ Mehdi Khalaji. United States Institute of Peace, "Assessing Iran's Parliamentary Elections." Last modified March 15, 2012. <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2012/mar/15/assessing-iran's-parliamentary-election-0>.

the more hardline elements in the government. During the 2009 protests, many protesters addressed the Supreme Leader directly, sending their ire to an office once thought of as off limits.

In the aftermath of 2009, the Supreme Leader was unable to rely upon Ahmadinejad as he previous had, and as a result he took on a far more public role. Although other officials were also more active, the sudden frequency of policy statements coming from the Supreme Leader was unprecedented given the secrecy of his office. This signified the major shift taking place, as the Supreme Leader pulled away from simply acting as a behind-the-scenes actor and becoming a political entity in and of himself. It is notable that since the inauguration of President Rouhani, Khamenei has slipped into the background, letting high ranking official speak on policy while he throws vague support behind various factions. Among the topics currently on the top of the Supreme Leader's social media agenda are book recommendations, something his office has taken to tweeting following a *Foreign Affairs* profile citing his admiration for literature.

The final four years of Ahmadinejad's tenure proved extremely challenging for the leadership. The international community continuously questioned the legitimacy of the Iranian government, while layering more and more sanctions on the country. Domestically, surveillance and crackdowns on journalists, activists, and students as well as the dismissal of professors led many to feel that the Iranian government may be replaced by a popular uprising, as was occurring in places like Libya and Egypt. By the time the presidential campaigning began for the 2013 elections, inflation in Iran had risen to 45%,¹²⁰ and the middle class began feeling the effects as basic goods skyrocketed in cost. Iran was also removed from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication, or SWIFT, crippling international transactions. USIP reported that "SWIFT's annual report notes that 19 Iranian banks and 25

¹²⁰ Reuters, "Iranian inflation accelerates, posing headache for new president." Last modified July 25, 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/25/iran-inflation-idUSL6N0FV1Y120130725>.

Iranian institutions use SWIFT, and that in 2010 they “sent 1,160,000 messages and received 1,105,000 messages.”¹²¹

Foreign currency reserves continue to dwindle, having “dropped from \$100 billion in 2011 to \$80 billion by July 2013... Only \$20 billion of that is fully accessible,”¹²² according to the *Christian Science Monitor*. Sanctions on the oil industry caused the loss of half the government’s oil revenue, which makes up 80% of total incoming funds.¹²³ Shortages in medicine have caused preventable death,¹²⁴ resulting in the restructuring of certain sanctions.¹²⁵ Although Ahmadinejad was unable to run for a third term, the question of whether his successor would continue on the path of resistance and rhetoric made the outlook for Iran look grim.

The 2013 Election

Iranian elections, though widely watched and reported upon, are little understood in the U.S. The primary players in any given election cycle are often officials without international standing, holding offices that may not have entirely clear purposes. Candidates for election must declare their intention to run, register with the Guardian Council, and make it through a vetting process that eliminates a vast majority of the names put forward. The result is a complicated pool of candidates that changes almost daily as candidates voluntarily leave the race or are dropped by the Guardian Council. Alliances and endorsements are important in Iranian politics, more so than

¹²¹ Khalaji. "Assessing Iran's Parliamentary Elections."

¹²² Ariel Zirulnick. *Christian Science Monitor*, "Iran sanctions: How much are they really hurting." Last modified Oct 15, 2013. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/1015/Iran-sanctions-How-much-are-they-really-hurting>.

¹²³ Thomas Erdbrink. *New York Times*, "Iran Staggers as Sanctions Hit Economy." Last modified Sept 30, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/01/world/middleeast/iran-staggers-as-sanctions-hit-economy.html?_r=0.

¹²⁴ Saeed Kamali Dehghan. *The Guardian*, "Haemophilic Iranian boy 'dies after sanctions disrupt medicine supplies'." Last modified Nov 14, 2012. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/14/sanctions-stop-medicines-reaching-sick-iranians>.

¹²⁵ BBC, "US opens more exports of medical equipment to Iran." Last modified July 25, 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-23453844>.

political parties. The potential of a well formed alliance and endorsement network can be seen in the 2013 election of Hassan Rouhani, who was able to win in the first round of voting after endorsements from leading Reformist and Moderate politicians and alliances that led to his being the only reform-minded candidate on the ballot. At few times are the dynamics of Iranian politics on display more clearly than during the brief, whirlwind presidential election cycle.

In 2009, the media was quickly caught up in the fervor surrounding the Mousavi campaign, drawing comparisons between the charismatic establishment insider-turned-Reformist icon overnight and President Barack Obama. In 2013, however, pundits seemed to expect the worst during the run-up to elections. This pessimism was not without reason; as the election got closer, crackdowns on journalists and activists seen as potential unrest agents occurred with more frequency. Many Iranians were considering a boycott of the election, unwilling to participate in what they characterized as little more than a game played by the elites for their own gain. The widespread disillusionment of voters prompted a rare candid pronouncement from the Supreme Leader, who encouraged even those who do not believe in or support the Islamic Republic to vote for the sake of the country.

In the U.S., the candidacy of Saeed Jalili received a considerable share of media coverage. The then nuclear negotiator and former Revolutionary Guards member was cast as the most likely successor to Ahmadinejad, due in large part to the bellicosity of his campaign. Jalili came to represent the path Iran seemed to be on, pushing the nation further into isolation and the regime further from the people. Close to the Supreme Leader, outspokenly pious, and showing no inclination to compromise with the West, Jalili was an extreme in a race dominated by Principlists. Following the disqualification of Rafsanjani, who was seen as the most formidable Moderate candidate to declare his candidacy, the path seemed clear for Jalili's victory. He was

supported by a number of conservative officials and clerical leaders, and many suggested he enjoyed the private backing of the Supreme Leader, seen as giving him the advantage early on in the official two-week campaign period.

One significant way in which the 2013 election differed from 2009 was the use of debates. In 2009, Iranian TV hosted the first debate between presidential candidates, although only Mousavi and Ahmadinejad were asked to participate. In 2013 all candidates participated in three debates, discussing national security, the economy, and other policy issues. Never before have candidates been put in a position to articulate and defend their positions in front of the Iranian people in this format, and it became clear early on that some knew better than others how to use it to their advantage. Among the first to struggle when put on the spot regarding the economy was Saeed Jalili, who was unable to offer concrete policy proposals to combat rampant inflation and unemployment. As the debates went on, including both questions from a moderator and questions shared between candidates, Jalili clung increasingly to slogans and revolutionary rhetoric, putting him at odds with most candidates who focused on clear policy ideas and emphasized moderation to some degree.

Hassan Rouhani, a cleric and former member of the Khatami administration, quickly but quietly surrounded himself with a cadre of Reformist leaders and officials. He was able to reach an agreement with the two other Moderate-Reformist candidates, who left the race and supported his candidacy— a move that undoubtedly led to his outright win. In interviews, he stressed moderation and distanced himself from those less willing to negotiate with the West. Rouhani ran on a platform of change and hope, similar to the platform of Mir Hossein Mousavi in 2009. He spoke out against the hard-line rhetoric that has effectively isolated Iran steadily since 2005 and discussed unemployment, particularly among educated women. Easing restrictions on

freedom of speech and expression was a prominent theme in his campaign, as was the importance of eschewing international concern regarding the disputed Iranian nuclear program. The memory of 2009 and the Mousavi campaign was invoked often, including the slogan, “A vote for Purple [the official color of Rouhani campaign] paves the way for Green.” Rouhani also advocated the release of political prisoners, including Mousavi, Karroubi, and their wives—a commonly repeated campaign promise that the Supreme Leader has not as of yet publically denied.

Prior to the opening of polls on June 14, many had begun decrying the election as little more than an attempt by the theocratic regime to reclaim some level of legitimacy. The question was not whether the election would be stolen again, but how it would be stolen and to whom it would be handed. At the very least, the election would show the insecurity of a regime still shaken by protests following the last presidential election, as they clambered to hold on to their waning claim to legitimate authority. As voting got underway, many were watching closely for signs of irregularities or intimidation at the polls. But no such problems were reported, and later in the day voter turnout increased substantially, leading to the extension of voting hours in areas where long lines were forming.

Late into the night and over the next day, the Ministry of the Interior reported polling results on state TV as the numbers were verified, allowing the public to monitor results as they came in rather than piecing it together after the fact. It became clear early on that Rouhani held a wide lead, with the five conservative candidates trailing far behind. That lead held, and as the day wore on many began wondering if the Reform candidate would be able to win outright, a feat that would require more than 50% of the vote in the first round. Candidates had promised prior to the election not to make an official statement regarding the election results prior to the

Ministry announcement naming the president-elect, a move likely intended to encourage the resolution of any issues behind closed doors rather than by mobilizing supporters in the streets as Mousavi and Karroubi had done in 2009.

When crowds gathered in the streets on June 15 following the announcement of Hassan Rouhani's victory, they were celebratory. Twitter was once again glued to Iran, this time filled with pictures of fireworks and dancing. The iconic image of the 2013 election was a laughing young woman spraying her friends with what appears to be shaving cream, a stark visual given the images of bloodshed following the 2009 election. No irregularities were reported from polling places, no security forces were dispatched, and no one challenged the election results. Remarkably, it would seem that the regime sought legitimacy in the only way that could help the image of Iran not only domestically, but internationally as well. The election was allowed to proceed with no signs of interference, a decision that undoubtedly led to the spike in voter turnout as the day progressed. The government called on the people to participate in the election and allowed them to do so, a choice that seemed revolutionary in light of the 2009 unrest.

Although the protests and subsequent crackdown that occurred in 2009 loomed large over the 2013 election, it was not ignored by officials. The Supreme Leader himself has acknowledged the events of the previous election, taking to Twitter to allow that in 2009 there was the "same excitement, but with insults." This kind of acknowledgement has continued, with Khamenei tweeting multiple times about 2009 in a way that falls short of condemning protesters. Some leaders have spoken out in support of protest, including President Rouhani, calling demonstrations "natural and popular."¹²⁶ Although this vague way of addressing such a monumental event in recent history may seem disingenuous, the fact that 2009 is being discussed

¹²⁶ Reza Sayah. CNN, "Rouhani: The man to revive Iran's reformist movement?." Last modified June 7, 2013. <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/07/world/meast/iran-rouhani-profile/>.

by elites at all is an indication that Iranian leadership understands the weight of the unrest and the importance of addressing it. As of yet, the primary action taken in regard to the 2009 unrest has been the release of numerous people arrested in the wake of protests, although Mousavi and Karroubi remain under house arrest.

Rouhani's Use of Social Media

In the 2013 election, social media usage changed dramatically for Iranian officials. Although Twitter and Facebook are ostensibly banned in the country, and were particularly censored following the use of such sites in organizing protests in 2009, presidential candidates and government officials began using social media to articulate state policy and platforms and to make statements on current affairs. The Supreme Leader's office opts for Twitter to translate various past statements and links to recent speeches, while other officials tweet in both Farsi and English.

Hassan Rouhani used Twitter regularly leading up to the election, live-tweeting debates and using hashtags such as #prudence and #moderation to epitomize his policy stances. This heavy use of Twitter has continued into his presidency, with both Farsi and English accounts run by volunteers. In a recent surprise, the president used the platform to wish the global Jewish community a "blessed Rosh Hashanah." In light of recent chemical weapons allegations rising in Syria, he also used Twitter to condemn the use of chemical weapons, although he fell short of pointing the blame at Bashar al-Assad and discussing Iran's own experience as a victim of chemical weapons attacks carried out by Saddam Hussein.

Another official who has begun using Twitter is Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, who also has an active Facebook page. Zarif personally tweets and posts to Facebook, unlike Rouhani, and has responded personally to critics such as Christine Pelosi, daughter of Nancy Pelosi, in a recent

exchange following his Rosh Hashanah greeting. While he uses Twitter for brief exchanges, either en masse or with specific users, Facebook has become a platform through which he can articulate his views on matters such as chemical weapons usage in Syria and the international debate surrounding possible punitive strikes. He also used Facebook to post a daily journal of his meetings at the United Nations General Assembly in October, providing an interesting behind-the-scenes look at the ongoing diplomatic efforts.

This use of social media is unique in that it has changed the dynamic between not only Iranian citizens and their leaders, who are now in a position to hear individual opinions and, in some cases, respond on a personal basis, but also between Iran and the international community. Through this informal medium, Iran's Foreign Minister is able to directly communicate with Americans regarding Iran's nuclear program, and the Supreme Leader can communicate in English without the intermediation of the Western press, something he has actively avoided doing throughout his career. This person-to-person dialogue has given average citizens in the West a window onto one of the most secretive governments in the world. It has also laid bare the divisions that exist in the ruling elite, including the rapid spread of video and audio of Rafsanjani condemning the chemical weapons use of Bashar al-Assad, which was quickly denied by Iranian state media even as it spread through the social media.

Part III: Looking Forward

Only time will tell what President Rouhani is able to accomplish while in office. Despite his liberalizing proposals, the Parliament and Supreme Leader still hold more sway than the President in making state policy. Early indications suggest that many members of the establishment have felt the pressure of sanctions and public unrest for the past four years and are interested in ways to alleviate the strain being put on the regime. The Supreme Leader himself has advocated what he calls “heroic flexibility,” signaling willingness to compromise.

We are not against proper and rational diplomatic moves, be it in the diplomatic sphere or the sphere of domestic politics... Your servant believes in what was coined years ago: ‘heroic flexibility.’ Flexibility is necessary on certain occasions. It is very beneficial.¹²⁷

Rouhani is in an interesting position, gaining legitimacy not only from his clerical standing but also from his direct experience in the upper echelons of governance. As the personal representative of the Supreme Leader on the Supreme National Security Council, Rouhani spoke with the Supreme Leader’s voice on matters of state security, giving him a perspective on Khamenei’s calculations to which very few have access. He served as the chief nuclear negotiator under President Khatami, an experience that will be invaluable in navigating P5+1 talks.

Rouhani’s presidency has at the time of this writing gotten off to a remarkable start, making diplomatic strides unthinkable even six months ago. Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif

¹²⁷ Tehran Bureau, "Iran: 'Hello diplomacy, so long martyrdom'." Last modified Sept 21, 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2013/sep/21/iran-heroic-flexibility-diplomacy-martyrdom>.

have reached out to the Jewish community with their Rosh Hashanah blessings via Twitter, and Zarif later backed up the comments by stating, “Jews are not the enemy of Iran.” Such a goodwill gesture was unheard of under Ahmadinejad and has met some criticism in Iran. But the leaders stood by their statements, and Rouhani was accompanied by the only Jewish Parliament member on his first United Nations visit in September.

Holocaust denial, long a boon in Iranian relations, is no longer part of Iranian rhetoric. The President and Foreign Minister have both sought to clear up concerns by condemning the “genocide carried out by the Nazis against the Jews,” although they have maintained the state policy of rejecting the use of the Holocaust as a pretext for the occupation of Palestine. More recently, Zarif told ABC’s *This Week* that any statements indicating the denial of the Holocaust on the Supreme Leader’s website is a mistranslation, and that the genocide is not “a myth.”¹²⁸ Although all statements regarding Israel are framed through the occupation of Palestine, this kind of tamed rhetoric has been a welcome change.

Rouhani and Zarif have also launched a major PR offensive, which is already changing the way diplomatic relations with Iran are framed. Reaching out to the international community has resulted in letters exchanged between Presidents Obama and Rouhani, meetings with foreign ministers from countries including Great Britain, op-ed pieces in U.S. and UK newspapers, and the kind of positive interactions unseen since the days of Khatami. The nuclear issue is at the top of everyone’s concerns, and following preliminary discussions with EU Foreign Minister Catherine Ashton and letters between Obama and Rouhani, negotiations resumed with the P5+1 in October. The recently-secured interim agreement resulting from these negotiations has been hailed as a victory for Rouhani and Zarif over hardline elements in the government, capping the

¹²⁸ Haaretz, "Iranian foreign minister: The Holocaust is no myth." Last modified Sept 29, 2013. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/1.549555>.

first one hundred days in office with much needed sanctions relief and the fulfillment of a key campaign promise.

One of the most significant and unexpected breakthroughs came at the tail end of President Rouhani's trip to the United Nations. The trip to New York, where Rouhani gave his first UN speech, was a whirlwind of speaking events, interviews, and meetings with heads of state. On his way to the airport for his departure, he and President Obama had a fifteen minute phone call—the first official contact between Iranian and American top leadership since 1978. The conversation reportedly reiterated their shared commitment to resolving the issues standing between Iran and the United States and ended with the two exchanging farewells in the other's native language. Supreme Leader Khamenei commented positively on the trip, lending credibility to the phone call and meetings with various heads of state by saying, "We support the diplomatic approach of the government and consider diplomatic efforts as important, and we support what happened in the latest trip."¹²⁹

Rouhani is not the first president to come into office facing daunting challenges. Just as Rouhani has now taken ownership of the worst inflation Iran has suffered since the 1980s and a seemingly unresolvable nuclear crisis, Rafsanjani came into the presidency with a mandate to end the crippling Iran-Iraq War and rebuild the economy. At that time, Rafsanjani was granted unprecedented independence in policy-making, allowing him to negotiate a ceasefire, reform economic policy, and rekindle lost trade ties around the world. He also stood to take the fall should his initiatives backfire, allowing the Supreme Leader to turn his loyalties as needed to maintain public approval.

¹²⁹ Jason Rezaian. Washington Post, "Iran's Khamenei approves of Rouhani's diplomacy, skeptical of US negotiations." Last modified Oct 5, 2013. http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-10-05/world/42734204_1_iran-president-hassan-rouhani-negotiations.

It may be that Rouhani, who has already been far more active in the public sphere than Ahmadinejad was during his second term as the Supreme Leader backs away from the spotlight, is in a similar situation. The central issue facing the Iranian economy is the effect of sanctions, which have resulted in Iran's being named the country with the world's highest inflation rate.¹³⁰ Although the deal reached at Geneva is a key first step, a long, difficult road still lies ahead for those negotiating a comprehensive solution. In order to have sanctions fully lifted, the nuclear issue must be dealt with in a way that allows Iran to maintain face while compromising with the West, which has proven a most difficult task in recent years.

If this is the case, and Rouhani is as empowered to resolve the crises facing Iran as he seems, the window is not open indefinitely. Hard-line factions are already pushing back against the president's diplomatic efforts, through the media and use of propaganda against the United States. Rouhani and his team have provided gains from negotiations with the P5+1 and direct contact with the U.S., which has gone far in validating their approach. Now the agreement must be adhered to on all sides, lest those gains be lost and hardliners are once again able to assert their resistance-based approach. Given the Supreme Leader's belief that "Western governments, led by Washington, wish to overthrow the Islamic Republic and destroy the Islamic revolution, just as they did to the Soviet Union,"¹³¹ the onus to prove that forging relations with the West pays concrete dividends falls upon Rouhani.

Nuclear policy is clearly a top priority for the administration, as Rouhani began reworking the manner in which negotiations are conducted only one month into his first term. It has been announced that the negotiations will be under the control of the Foreign Ministry rather

¹³⁰ MENA Financial Network, "Iran registers world's highest inflation in 2012." Last modified Sept 7, 2013. <http://www.menafn.com/ec97d912-76ee-47af-a43d-58f5d70c3ebd/BRIEF-Iran-registers-worlds-highest-inflation-rate-in-2012?src=MWHEAD>.

¹³¹ Ganji, "Who is Ali Khamenei?" *Foreign Affairs*.

than the National Security Council, signaling a shift in strategy. The Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, will be heading the talks himself, having previously served in the same post before being dismissed by Ahmadinejad. Zarif is well thought of in diplomatic circles, having studied at the University of Denver, and he speaks fluent English. His nomination was noted in the international media as a possible “peace-offering” to the West and a signal that the government was ready for meaningful negotiations.

Reforming Iran’s Foreign Policy

In many ways the election of Hassan Rouhani has provided the first viable opportunity for Iran to shed the revolutionary identity leaders adopted in 1979 in favor of a normalized position in world affairs. That normalization will rely on several factors, the most prominent of which is the nuclear issue. With the first steps taken on the journey to resolve deep-rooted concerns of possible weaponization, other outstanding issues cannot be forgotten. Although relations deteriorated after the outset of the Syrian civil war, support for Hamas has been a sticking point between Iran and the West, where Hamas has long been considered a terrorist group. Iran also helped create and continues to support Hezbollah, a powerful Lebanese political party and militant organization also classified as a terrorist group. Iran has been seen as a primary threat to Israel due to the ongoing conflicts waged intermittently with Hezbollah in the north and the southern Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip.

Iran has also allegedly been involved in sowing unrest in other regional states, funneling money and in some cases arms to Shiite populations in Sunni-ruled countries. This involvement has ranged from supporting the Afghani North Alliance against the Taliban to fomenting sectarian unrest in Iraq to alleged support for Bahraini “Arab Spring” protests. While Iran boasts

of having not invading a foreign land in 500 years, many see the activities of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in sovereign nations as a blatant violation of international law. For Iran, these activities provide much-desired regional influence, but they also undermine Iran's efforts to be taken seriously as an international player. This is a vicious cycle, wherein the source of Iran's influence is also what deprives the country of international normalization, which furthers Iran's need for sources of influence outside official channels.

It is possible to break the cycle, however, but negotiations are unlikely to yield results. Only through a demonstrated ability to co-exist without overt or covert aggression will the avenues that Iran has forged for itself become unnecessary, once a place at the table is created. While President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif have met with regional leaders and advocated rebuilding relations with countries like Saudi Arabia, longstanding mistrust of Iran's intentions must be overcome. On the same note, Iranians must have assurances of their own security, particularly in a region dotted with American military bases. Given recent U.S. military forays into Iraq and Afghanistan and open calls for military action by American and Israeli figures, as well as the growing number of drone strikes in the region, Iranian wariness regarding the intentions of Americans and their allies is equally valid.

Resolving concerns over the nuclear program is an important part of rebuilding Iran's international image, although continued harsh rhetoric between Iranian leaders and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu suggests that even a mild thaw between the two regional powers is far off. Iran has been a vocal supporter of Palestinian sovereignty, as have many regional powers. Iranian leaders have often stated they will support any peace agreement reached between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, a policy stance that has yet to be tested as talks on an agreement

continue to end in stalemate. The Palestinian issue has become the central sticking point, although certainly not the only one, considering Iranian support for groups such as Hamas.

Iranian and Israeli rhetoric has led many to believe that war between the two is imminent. Israel has called on the U.S. and Western allies to carry out pre-emptive strikes on Iranian nuclear sites— threats that Iran has responded to by vowing retaliation. Israel has also been tied to the Mujihadeen e-Khalq, which has carried out terrorist activities within Iran since the 1980s. Iranian officials have been embroiled in numerous controversies after translated statements appearing to call for the physical destruction of Israel come to light. While officials have stated that they favor a referendum of all residents, including Palestinians, to determine the future of Israel, the perception of Iran as militarily aggressive towards Israel looms large in the court of international public opinion.

The antagonistic relationship between Iran and Israel— albeit somewhat mollified on account of the Iran-American thaw, which has diminished the likelihood of a military strike against Iran— will likely remain in place regardless of internal political shifts. Opportunity for a change would be brought about by a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and short of that no imaginable incident could create the groundwork for mutual trust and accommodation. Iran's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is part of a complex, interwoven network of international law and relations, a detailed examination of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Domestic Policy

Domestically, significant steps have been taken to move forward with Rouhani's campaign promises. At time of this writing, support for Rouhani seems strong across political lines and with the Supreme Leader, something the new president seeks to capitalize on by

implementing numerous policies as quickly as possible. Although he currently has support, in the event that nuclear negotiations go poorly or economic growth remains elusive, it is likely that he will be stripped of his current independence and made to adhere to a more conservative agenda by the Supreme Leader.

Among the president's domestic agenda are several initiatives that could reverse the strict censorship put in place under Ahmadinejad. With members of his administration now avid users of social media, it has been asked repeatedly if bans on sites like Twitter and Facebook will be lifted. Rouhani has consistently repeated his hope to provide Iranians with access to all global information, and as such the ban on Facebook is being reviewed to determine in what circumstances and with what qualifications such access could be restored. Rouhani also reopened the Tehran Cinema House, a theater closed by Ahmadinejad, and the arts community has seen a resurgence.

Recently, Rouhani has spoken out against moral police persons serving as the primary arbiters of modesty in regards to dress. In his speeches, the president has stated that these types of positions should be a last resort, pointing instead to contributors to "immodest behavior" such as poverty and continued economic hardship.¹³² Soon after his election, Rouhani publically questioned the validity of dress codes as a guide for and barometer of societal modesty. Although as it stands women are required to wear hijab as discussed earlier, such public questioning of the requirement could indicate a debate going on in clerical and political circles.

Freedom of expression has been key to Rouhani's public agenda. His campaign platform and subsequent statements indicate that he hopes to pursue a relaxing of restrictions on students, professors, opposition figures, and the press. He has responded to and encouraged criticism of

¹³² Agence France-Presse, "Be lenient, Iran's Rouhani urges police on hijab issue." Last modified Oct 9, 2013. <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/afp/131009/be-lenient-irans-rouhani-urges-police-hijab-issue>.

his government, taking to Twitter to thank students who provided critical assessments of his policies. Since Rouhani took office, numerous political prisoners have been released, including internationally known opposition figures and activists. The question of Mousavi's and Karroubi's house arrest remains unresolved, but the issue is currently being reviewed by the Supreme National Security Council. Some have suggested that the Reformist leaders could be released in the future.

It is still entirely possible that efforts by Rouhani's administration could fail. Having taken office less than six months prior to this writing, there is a distinct chance that what seems promising could hit unexpected snags. But in the event that Rouhani is only able to secure token reform, or hard-liners are able to regain substantial control, the election of a moderate candidate reflects a level of pragmatism for which Iran is not often given credit. Rouhani's election and subsequent initiatives refute the idea of the Iranian clerical establishment being monolithic and Iranian leadership being universally hostile. After eight years of harsh rhetoric from a non-cleric hard-line president, the return of pragmatism and a conciliatory tone on the part of an established religious leader is striking. Rouhani was the only cleric in the pool of candidates in 2013, yet he was not the closest ally of the Supreme Leader. It suggests that even under a theocratic system, democratic change can be brought about within Iran through elections and gradual reform.

Former President Ahmadinejad

As Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's tenure as president has passed, some have asked what will become of the once outspoken, ubiquitous figure. Immediately following his leaving office, it was announced that he would sit on the influential Expediency Council, the task of which is largely to resolve disputes between the Majles and the Guardian Council. The Expediency Council is chaired by Hashemi Rafsanjani, one of the Ahmadinejad's most powerful detractors,

and the effectiveness of having someone so at odds with the ruling elite on the council has been questioned in the international media. It is not uncommon for high-ranking officials to enter the shadowy behind-the-curtains bodies and pull the strings of domestic politics, but few if any have left office with as heavy a cloud hanging over them. The former president will also be returning to his former position at the University of Tehran, where he taught engineering prior to being named mayor of Tehran.

Ahmadinejad left office with very little influence and an extremely low reputation among both leaders and citizens. Due to this, his seat on the Expediency Council surprised many Iran watchers. But his position in the country is far from secure, particularly in light of the almost personal crusade against him led by Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani ever since Ahmadinejad assumed office in 2005. Larijani has been one of his most outspoken critics, blocking policy and nominations when possible, calling for Ahmadinejad's impeachment and often questioning his administration. In July, Larijani announced unspecified charges being brought against Ahmadinejad, for which he will potentially stand trial. Members of his inner circle have been called in on charges of corruption in recent years, although it appears that court cases brought against him will focus on bureaucratic missteps and spreading false information, according to a recent report by the Tehran Bureau.¹³³

Changes on the Horizon

The greatest change facing Iran will be the selection of Ayatollah Khamenei's successor. At this time, there has been no outward indication of who the next Supreme Leader may be or how the choice will be made. Ayatollah Khamenei's health has often been called into question,

¹³³ Tehran Bureau, "Iran's Ahmadinejad dodges court date." Last modified Dec 2, 2013. Accessed December 8, 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/02/irans-ahmadinejad-scapegoat-court>.

and in the past long absences from public view have required him to appear on television to prove he had not passed away.¹³⁴ As the years pass, the likelihood of a new Supreme Leader increases exponentially, leaving the future direction of official state policy unclear.

As the final arbiter of Iranian affairs, the office of the Supreme Leader is most crucial to an understanding of where policy is headed. Although the continuity of official ideology seems assured, the composition of the ruling elite makes the decision far from clear. In the past, the role of Hashemi Rafsanjani was critical in making decisions with the Assembly of Experts, a constitutionally mandated body responsible for electing the Supreme Leader. This group is also able to dismiss the Supreme Leader from office, should his performance be found unsuitable. In the election of Khamenei, it was Rafsanjani who assisted in elevating the then-Hojatoleslam to the rank of Grand Ayatollah, required for assumption of office. This critical role earned him the reputation of “King maker,” as well as his being regarded as the nation’s second most powerful individual. Rafsanjani, although not as formidable as he once was, remains a key member of the religious and political elite, and his loyalties lie with the Pragmatists. It is possible that the Assembly of Experts could choose a centrist or center-left candidate for the most important post in the country, particularly if the moderate policies of Hassan Rouhani prove fruitful. Given Iran’s struggles over the past decade, hardline revolutionaries unwilling to compromise in order to integrate into the international system may well find themselves at a loss.

Another key change facing Iran today and in coming years is the changing demographics of the nation. From the time of the Islamic Revolution until today, power has been held by a small group of clerics, all of whom had been responsible for bringing about the revolution and building an Islamic government. Today, however, a majority of the country’s population is under

¹³⁴ Majd, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ*, 55.

the age of thirty.¹³⁵ This means that a great number of people have lived only under the Islamic Republic, with no first-hand experience of the government of the Shah. In many cases, they were either not yet born or too young to remember the Iran-Iraq War, the seminal event informing Iran's security calculations since the 1980s. These Iranians were growing up during the 1990s, when Reformist policies were allowing the economy to grow and society to push against rigid restrictions on things like clothing and access to foreign entertainment. They also came of age in a very different period of Iranian history from what they experienced growing up, due to President Ahmadinejad's harmful rhetoric and the expanding economic sanctions. Just as Americans coming into adulthood following the Recession feel that they have lost out on what had been a promised opportunity, so Iranians feel that they deserve the economic opportunities and international integration that the country enjoyed under Rafsanjani and Khatami.

As these Iranians assume more positions of power, replacing those who have long maintained a vision of Iran as a revolutionary state, Iran may evolve more quickly into a stable democracy. For those coming of age now, Iran as an Islamic state is all they have known and the framework from which they can progress— not a revolution they must maintain. Young people in Iran are among the most educated in the region, tuned in to international news and media and pushing cultural envelopes— all of which suggests that the future of Iran will continue building on gains made in recent years rather than stagnate or even regress.

¹³⁵ Omar Memarian and Tara Nesvaderani. United States Institute of Peace, "The Youth." Accessed December 8, 2013. <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/youth>.

Conclusion: Democracy in Iran

The sum of all these parts is an ongoing political evolution. What began as public protests calling for a constitution in 1905 has evolved and transformed over the past 110 years to bring Iran to the current system. Although the Islamic Republic is often treated as the end of history for Iran, a tragic misstep that cannot be undone without a complete reworking of the government, it is the outcome of a history that blends foreign intervention, clerical authority, and an ongoing debate on the value of Westernization. By dismissing the Islamic Republic as the antithesis to democracy rather than another phase on a long road to democracy ignores those working diligently to create a viable alternative to Western-style governance.

International rhetoric regarding democracy in Iran tends to look backward, focusing on the U.S. overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadegh as the end of any hope for democracy or glorification of the Shah's Iran in comparison to today's Islamic Republic. These approaches not only simplify Iranian politics, but the hard road to democracy for any country. Those who fought for a strong parliament in 1906, or demonstrated in the streets in 1979, or continue to push back against oppressive policies today are forgotten when commentators lament the hopelessness of democracy in Iran. There is no time limit or finite number of attempts to reach full democracy, even in Iran.

Democracy is, by its continuously evolving nature, essentially forward-looking. Iran has a long history of oppression, torture, and myriad human rights violations. It is a history that, someday, its leaders will have to answer for. But past transgressions do not preclude future reforms. In the near future, the Islamic Republic will face changes both inevitable and with great potential to change the political system. The coming power shift as revolutionary leaders are replaced by the next generation of elites and Supreme Leader Khamenei passes away will provide an opportunity to rethink policy and what it takes for the system to survive, resulting in changes. Reza Marashi notes that these changes could be “perhaps short of the regime change that some outside Iran prefer, but far from negligible to the millions of Iranians living inside the country who know they deserve better than the status quo.”¹³⁶

While resolving lingering concerns over Iran’s regional intentions is important, these issues do not preclude domestic reform. Iranian leadership has been engaged in democratization for over a century, and while there is still much work to be done, the foundation established since 1900 is strong enough to build upon. Iranians are educated and politically engaged, have access to medical care, and benefit from an established welfare system that provides the most vulnerable segments of society with necessary services. The country has reliable infrastructure and industry, with valuable natural resources and the stability needed to capitalize on their extraction.

After a century of struggle, over the course of which first Persia and later Iran completely overhauled the monarchical system of government in favor of popular representation and constitutional rule, today those who once stood against the oppression of the shah have become the obstacle to the full realization of democracy. Remaining revolutionary elements and the

¹³⁶ Reza Marashi and Jason Rezaian. The National Interest, "Iran: The Next Generation." Last modified June 29, 2011. <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/irans-next-generation-5541?page=2>.

insecurity felt as an international pariah have led to violent crackdowns, direct interference in the press and education, and lingering doubts over Iran's ability to fully embrace their own stated republican values.

Iranian leadership, however, has a demonstrated ability to redirect itself when the survival of the regime is in question. The 2013 election of Hassan Rouhani is a prime example of this pragmatism. Just four years after massive unrest, the candidate considered the least likely to win did just that, in the first round of voting. Suzanne Maloney of the Brookings Institute pointed out after the elections that the primary obstacle facing Iran is the revolution not moderating after time in power, but that perhaps the heated campaign period and landslide election of a moderate signaled a shift in state policy.¹³⁷

Living up to espoused values is a struggle for many nations, including stable democracies. For the Islamic Republic of Iran to survive and thrive, serious efforts must be made by those within the system that favor reform. To that end, President Hassan Rouhani introduced his Civil Rights Charter, an English translation of which is currently unavailable. But Iran does not lack words and promises of equality and freedom. To move past the current stalemate between progress and those who would hold Iran back, the promises already made must be acted upon.

Concrete actions must be taken before the victory for moderation that was heralded at the time of Rouhani's election can truly be considered manifest. While small successes such as the opening of the Tehran Cinema House or the banning of forced early retirement for politically-engaged professors may seem inconsequential, these steps are important to building a political system where fewer loopholes allow for oppression. Rouhani's ability to implement more systematic reforms, which would increase women's access to the workforce or transparency in

¹³⁷ Suzanne Maloney. Brookings Institute, "Iran Surprises Itself and the World." Last modified 2013. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/essays/2013/iran-surprises-itself-and-the-world-a>.

the penal system, will depend on the successes he attains in other areas and as such has yet to be seen.

The building of democracy is an ongoing challenge, and shades of gray exist at every stage. Democracy is in a sense an impossible ideal, with obstacles at every turn. If one were to require perfect adherence to democratic principles, surely no state would live up to the standard. Iran, with greater repression than some and greater freedoms than others, has long fought its own struggle for democracy, carrying a torch first lit by protesters in 1905. True realization of republican democracy will only come to Iran by internal channels, without the interference of outside powers, and in the fullness of time.

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