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Thirty Years after the Iranian Revolution: Islam, Democracy and the Crisis of Legitimacy

The 2009 presidential election in Iran marks an epoch not only in Iranian history but in the Middle East as whole. For the first time after the 1979 revolution, the three defeated candidates with extensive revolutionary credentials openly challenged the validity of the election, accusing the government of massive fraud that had resulted in the reelection of the incumbent president Mahmud Ahmadinejad. To be sure, the previous election (2005) was not entirely devoid of controversy as the candidate Mehdi Karrubi had leveled fraud accusations against the

government, but the controversy was little more than ephemeral and posed no serious challenge to the government's authority. However, the latest allegations and the ensuing protests in Tehran and other major cities struck an unprecedented blow to the legitimacy of the entire political system, which has over the past three decades relied on people's votes to meet the exigencies of a republic.

While the protests started with a simple slogan—"where is my vote?"—they ostensibly targeted more than a seemingly fraudulent election. Indeed they called into question the legitimacy of a government that could no longer be trusted with safeguarding people's rights and interests. The 2009



presidential election has thus uncovered inner conflicts that had long lain dormant in the foundations of the Iranian political system—conflicts that raised serious questions about the extent to which ideological and factional interests could take precedence over both democratic principles and Islamic ideals of governance.

More importantly, the 2009 election has induced the emergence of the Iranian Green Movement as a broad-based platform for a host of social, economic, and political demands. The Green Movement's strength lies in its pluralistic character and its nonviolent strategy. While the unfettered violence, perpetrated by the Iranian government and its militia surrogates, has helped curb the eruption of street protests, the Green Movement seems to have retained its vast potentials for mobilizing political forces within Iranian society.

The Movement's leadership—consisting of the two defeated candidates, Mir Hossein Moussavi and Mehdi Karroubi, plus the former president Mohammad Khatami—has emphasized time and again that a viable solution to the current crisis must be sought within the framework of the Iranian constitution, which embraces both Islamic principles and democratic procedures. Yet the government's denial of any political crisis as well as its interest in putting the Movement's leader on trial has dashed any hopes for a reconciliatory rapprochement. Many of the Green Movement's supporters, on the other hand, feel strongly about the government's violent crackdown on peaceful demonstrations, its torture and killing of political dissidents, and its utter disregard of the citizens' civil rights, which in turn has rendered any compromise ineffective.

It is hard to predict the outcome of the current deadlock. It is clear, however, that the Green Movement will continue to serve as a platform for a

variety of public demands. This issue of the Sociology of Islam and Muslim Societies Newsletter provides insight into this political crisis. A number of scholars and specialists of Iranian contemporary politics offer their analyses on the current state of affairs and the future prospects of change in Iran. The Newsletter's editors hope that the six articles and one interview in this issue will contribute to a better understanding of the ongoing crisis in Iran.

*Tugrul Keskin
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Reflections on Democracy, Non-Violence and Political Change in Iran

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Struggles for democracy generally require three critical ingredients for success: effective and incorruptible leadership, a strategy for mass mobilization and a sense of hope that engenders sacrifice. Last year at this time, none of these existed in Iran. The clerical oligarchy was firmly in control, the Reform movement was in disarray and political apathy reigned supreme. Today, eight months after the disputed presidential election, all three key ingredients are now firmly in place. Defying expectations, Iran's Green Movement (Jonbesh-e Sabz-e Iran) soldiers on in the face of an authoritarian regime whose brutal suppression has failed to intimidate or subdue it. Whether this movement will be triumphant is unknown but what is clear is that an indigenous movement for democracy has delivered a major blow to the Islamic Republic: Iranian politics henceforth will never be the same. How did these three elements come together?

Understanding the origins and the defiant posture of the leadership of the Green Movement requires returning to an event in August 2000 that marked a critical denouement for the reformist-conservative struggle in Iran. At this time, the Reform Movement was in its prime, winning landslide elections at the presidential, municipal and most recently the parliamentary level. Hope for democratic change was in the air as Reformers captured all of the key democratically-contested institutions of the state in

quick succession, to the shock and bewilderment of their conservative rivals.

The first item on the legislative agenda of reform-dominated 6th parliament (2000-2004) was to overturn an illiberal press law passed in the final days of the outgoing hard-line parliament. The print media in Iran had flourished during President Khatami's first term and quickly became a bastion of support for pro-democracy activists. Courageous journalists and editors were breaking political taboos by transcending the narrow ideological confines of Iran's post-revolutionary elite consensus. A public sphere was created whereby Iranian society was in full scale debate – to the mortification of the ruling clerical establishment – about the relationship between tradition and modernity, religion and democracy and the moral basis of legitimate political authority.



Nader Hashemi

As parliamentary debate on the press law began with the eyes of the nation upon it, the speaker suddenly intervened to halt the proceedings. He announced that he had just received an important summons from the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei demanding that the existing (illiberal) press law not be revised and that all debate in on this topic cease immediately. Khamenei's letter – which angry MPs forced the



speaker to read into the parliamentary record – specifically warned that “should the enemies of Islam, the revolution and the Islamic system take over or infiltrate the press, a great danger would threaten the security, unity and the faith of the people....The current [press] law ... has been able to prevent the appearance of this great calamity, and [therefore], its amendment and similar actions that have been anticipated by the parliamentary committee are not legitimate and not in the interest of the country and the system.”(1)

Scuffles and fistfights broke out among rival members of parliament. Several deputies walked out in protest as chaos soon enveloped the parliamentary chamber. The speaker tried to restore calm by reminding everyone that the Supreme Leader’s actions were legally permissible. “Our constitution has the elements of the absolute rule of the supreme clerical leader [velayat-i motlaq faqih] and you all know this and approve of this. We are all duty-bound to abide by it.”(2) The speaker at the time was Mehdi Karoubi, a 2009 Reformist presidential candidate and today one of the courageous leaders of the Green Movement, famous for exposing a policy of systematic rape in Iranian prisons. His defiance of Khamenei today, in contrast to his deference nine years ago, is worth noting.

After the June 2009 election, and following a week of demonstrations that brought three million people into the streets of Tehran, Khamenei delivered his much anticipated Friday sermon. He publicly endorsed Ahmadinejad as president, declared the election to be free and fair on balance and then went a step further. Similar to his August 2000 intervention, he forcefully demanded a halt to all debate on the topic, declaring the issue resolved while threatening the opposition with violence if their defiance persisted. This time, however, the senior leadership of the reform movement stood firm and boldly defied the explicit wishes of the Supreme Leader. This

marked a critical turning point in the relationship between reformers and the Islamic Republican establishment. Their disobedience inspired millions of Iranians and provided Iran’s democratic forces with the internal leadership it desperately sought and previously lacked.

By all measures, the leadership of the Green Movement comprised of the troika of Mir Hossein Mousavi (former Prime Minister), Mehdi Karoubi (former Speaker of Parliament) and Muhammad Khatami (former President), can be characterized as relatively mild and measured in their speeches and political statements. All remain loyal to the Islamic Republic, its current constitution and the political theology of Ayatullah Khomeini, albeit emphasizing a democratic and humanistic reading of this legacy. Nonetheless, despite repeated warnings from the Supreme Leader and a growing chorus of hard-line opinion demanding their arrest – and more recently their execution – the leadership continues its defiance of established power and its steadfast support for the civil and human rights of their fellow citizens. The future of the Green Movement and any hope for an eventual democratic transition in Iran will be dependent on the ongoing resistance of these leaders.

The strategy of mass mobilization and street protests has at best a tenuous link to Iran’s Green leadership. It has been accurately reported that leaders are responding to and being led by society and not the opposite. In his most recent statement to the nation, (No. 17, January 1, 2010), Mousavi explicitly acknowledged the point that protests are occurring not because he has called people into the streets but rather due to the prevalence of “widespread social and civil networks that were formed during and after the election through the people themselves and which continue to self generate.”(3) This fascinating development suggests the extent to which the Green Movement has penetrated key sectors of Iranian society based on the



existence of underground networks of activists scattered in major cities who rely on the internet and mobile phone technology to spread their message. This also explains why the movement has been hard to crush, notwithstanding the best efforts of the regime.

And finally there is the issue of hope. In a recent in-depth report on the state of human rights Iran after the June election, Amnesty International noted that “human rights violations in Iran are now as bad as at any time in the past 20 years.”⁽⁴⁾ To date, the Islamic Republic has imprisoned almost every leading opposition figure, human and civil rights activist, student leader and dissident journalist. In fact, it is hard to think of the name of prominent Iranian pro-democracy activist that the regime has not arrested. In its desperation, it even picked up the sister of Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shireen Ebadi, an apolitical figure, with the sole intention of intimidating her more famous sibling.

Yet notwithstanding this repressive atmosphere replete with show trials, torture, rape, death and threats of mass executions, Iranians who sympathize with the Green Movement today are experiencing a deep sense of hope, cautious optimism and at times exhilaration about the prospects of a better future. There is a general appreciation that a transition to democracy will not emerge without significant sacrifice and a long-term commitment to oppositional activity. A rejection of violent revolution and a commitment to a strategy of nonviolence resistance by necessity demands patience, prudence and time. In the words of Columbia University Professor Hamid Dabashi: “This is not sprint but a marathon.”

A realization that there are no quick fixes to the problem of political authoritarianism in Iran is informed by the fact that the Iranian regime, despite being shaken and confused, remains firmly in control of the key institutions of violence, the administration

of justice and economic production (largely oil). Evidence that this control has weakened is shaky at best. Moreover, the Iranian regime, in part due to its control over the media, retains significant support in rural and poorer areas of the country including a core group of loyal devotees who dominate the upper echelons of the security forces, many of whom believe that Ali Khamenei is God’s representative on earth.

The next stage of confrontation is set for early summer. Expectations are for a similar repetition of defiant street protests, a harsh government crackdown and then a wave of mass arrests. Meanwhile Iran’s Green Movement continues its nonviolent resistance. Its future success will depend on whether the three key ingredients for democratic change – effective leadership, a strategy for mass mobilization and hope – remain in place and grow stronger with time.

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NOTES:

¹⁾ The full text of Khamenehi’s letter appeared in *Hamshahri* (Tehran), 7 August 2000.

²⁾ Nazila Fathi, “Iranian Leader Bars Press Bill of Reform Bloc,” *New York Times*, 7 August 2000.

³⁾ Statement No. 17 (January 1, 2010) taken from Mir Hossein Mousavi’s Official Website: <http://www.kaleme.org/1388/10/11/klm-7047> (translation is mine).

⁴⁾ I’m quoting from the press release available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/report/post-election-iran-violations-among-worst-20-years-20091210>. The full report’s uses identical language and is accessible at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE13/123/2009/en/1e69a8fb-dcf1-4165-a7fc-a94369e364bf/mde131232009en.pdf>



Counter-Revolution and Revolt in Iran

An Interview with Iranian Political Scientist Hossein Bashiriyeh

By Danny Postel

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Hossein Bashiriyeh is one of post-revolutionary Iran's key political thinkers. Known as the father of political sociology in Iran, he has influenced, through his voluminous writings and his 24 years teaching political science at the University of Tehran (1983-2007), both the study and practice of politics in Iran.

In his recent book *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*, Mehran Kamrava describes Bashiriyeh as "one of the country's most influential and most serious thinkers and analysts." Bashiriyeh's two and a half decades as a scholar and mentor in Iran, Kamrava writes

have left indelible marks on successive generations of political science graduates, many of whom have gone on to become academics themselves or have secured policy-making positions in the state bureaucracy.(1)

Bashiriyeh has figured critically in Iranian public life, says Ali Mirsepassi, author of *Intellectual Discourse*

and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran, by "introducing democratic theories and ideas to a generation of Iranian intellectuals and political figures who latter played significant roles in the democratic and reform movement."(2)

Sadly for those of us not literate in Persian, only one of his numerous books is available in English: the monumental *State and Revolution in Iran*, a largely Gramscian analysis of the Iranian Revolution published in 1984 — alas, long out of print and extremely difficult to find (only a single used copy is available via Amazon and not one via Powell's). (3)

His books in Persian include *Revolution and Political Mobilization* (1991), *Political Sociology* (1993), *History of Political Thought in the 20th Century* [Volume I, *Marxist Thought*, Volume II, *Liberal and Conservative Thought*] (1994-96), *The Kingdom of Reason* (1993), *Civil Society and Political Development in Iran* (1998), *New Theories in Political Science* (1999), *Sociology of Modernity* (1999), *The State and Civil Society* (2000), *20th Century Theories of Culture* (2000), *Obstacles to Political Development in Iran* (2001), *Lessons on Democracy for Everyone* (2001), *Political Science for Everyone* (2001), *An Introduction to the Political Sociology of Iran: The Era of the Islamic Republic* (2002), and *Transition to Democracy: Theoretical Issues* (2006).

His translations from English to Persian include Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow's *Michel Foucault, Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, and Robert Holub's *Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere*.(4)

Among the subjects Bashiriyeh explores in his 2003 essay collection *Reason in Politics* are the Frankfurt School, liberalism and anarchism, Weber and Islam,



and class struggles, political ideology and identity-building after the Iranian Revolution.

In the summer of 2007 Bashiriyeh was fired from the University of Tehran (the handiwork of the “Committee of Cultural Revolution and Purges of Universities”). (5) The previous year, President Ahmadinejad had challenged Iran’s university students to “scream” and ask, “Why are there liberal and secular professors in universities?”(6)

Bashiriyeh has since taken a position in the Department of Political Science at Syracuse University, where he teaches courses on Middle Eastern Political Systems, Islamic Political Thought, Social Theory and the Middle East, the Politics of Modern Iran and Comparative Revolutions.

The following interview was conducted via e-mail between June and August of 2009.

Danny Postel: As the author of a classic study of the Iranian Revolution (*The State and Revolution in Iran*), and given your recent comparative work on “transitional situations,” what are your impressions of what’s been happening in Iran in the aftermath of the June 12 presidential election?² Some have argued that we are witnessing “a great emancipatory event” (Slavoj Žižek)(7); “something quite extraordinary, perhaps even a social revolution” (Hamid Dabashi); a “velvet coup” (Anoush Ehteshami); “the final acts of a protracted war for the control of the Iranian economy” (Behzad Yaghmaian); even an attempt to abolish the people (Pepe Escobar).(8) How would you characterize the situation?

Hossein Bashiriyeh: I think that the aftermath of the election constituted a catalyst for a potentially revolutionary situation facing a government caught in a number of crises. More specifically, it has signified a fatal crisis of cohesion and unity. Of course the

basically authoritarian electoral theocracy had been more or less experiencing a number of crises, affecting its bases of power: ideological-authoritarian regimes, generally speaking, may develop crises in the sphere of their ideological legitimacy, administrative efficiency, internal elite cohesion, and coercive capacity. If all these crises occur at the same time, the situation may be described as revolutionary; out of these crises emerge the necessary ingredients for a political opposition too, i.e. mass discontent, ideology, leadership and organization.

So for a revolutionary situation to develop at least eight factors are required: the four regime factors (crises) and the four revolutionary-movement factors. Obviously all these factors are dialectically interrelated and enhance each other. In the case of the Iranian regime before the election, I would say that a considerable degree of the first two crises had already come about, but the crisis of unity and cohesion had been contained since 2004, and there was no crisis of coercion or domination at all. I think that the aftermath of the election signified a quite unprecedented crisis of elite cohesion and unity, further intensifying the crises of legitimacy and efficiency. Never before had an internal rift caused such a large-scale mass mobilization of opposition.

In the specific case of the Iranian regime, a more or less chronic crisis of legitimacy had been caused by a number of factors and developments. Four major causes can be identified: (1) the rise of a more republican interpretation of the dominant Islamist ideology; (2) the contradictory nature of the Constitution, in terms of seeking to combine theocratic and democratic principles of legitimacy; (3) an increasingly noticeable gap between ruling-class practice and its legitimizing ideals; and (4) a widening gap between public opinion and official ideology as a result of the increasing secularization of social values and attitudes. In any case even if the elected offices may be said to be periodically legitimized by popular



elections (although elections are controlled), the unelected offices are no doubt subject to an erosion of legitimacy as a result of the four factors I've outlined. As I will explain later, I think the grave crisis of cohesion and unity resulting from the June election has also actualized the underlying crisis of legitimacy.

In terms of a crisis of efficient management, I would argue that the Islamist government has suffered from a chronic crisis of efficiency throughout its rule; the more recent intensification of the crisis since 2005 has resulted from irregular and erratic economic policies and practices, political nepotism and general mismanagement. The adoption of a politically useful discourse of alms-based Islamic welfare policy by the Fundamentalist faction in power has, according to expert views, caused economic disruption, inflation, recession and more unemployment. Irregular redistributive policies, price intervention, and a reduction in interest rates have contributed to the critical situation. Obviously in the absence of a crisis of cohesion and elite unity, economic problems may have no political outcomes, but as rifts develop within the regime, they may expand the possibility of political mobilization by opposition forces. However, in the actual mass political mobilization in the aftermath of the election, the motivating force was not the economic conditions, but rather what I consider to be a sense of political frustration and inefficacy mainly on the part of the urban middle classes, who found their vote and their political participation to be of no consequence in changing the political situation. The mass mobilization resulted from a gap between rising political expectations and the outcome of the election — a gap which has become very intolerable indeed.

But the real meaning of the aftermath of the June election seems to me to lie in the unprecedented intensification of a crisis of cohesion and unity. Such a crisis had emerged and persisted in the 1980s under

Ayatollah Khomeini himself. But as mentioned, never before 2009 had internal divisions led to such a mass political mobilization and massive repression. From the beginning, the Islamic state witnessed internal divisions over economic policy, the interpretation of Islamic law, emphasis on the Islamic vs. republican nature of the Constitution, and so on. In the 1980s two parties emerged: the Party of Tradition and the Party of Khomeinists; the former supported non-intervention in economic affairs and a traditionalist jurisprudence; the latter advocated economic intervention and redistribution, as well as a dynamic jurisprudence — but this division was contained as a result of Khomeini's arbitration.

Then in the early 1990s a new division emerged within the Party of Islamic Tradition itself, as the ruling elite under Rafsanjani sought to modernize the Islamic state and to readjust it to the requirements of globalization. That internal division did not lead to popular mobilization, as the ruling elite succeeded in containing the rift as an internal affair. The division within the ruling parties and elites was intensified from 1997, when the old Khomeinists came to power and sought to democratize the Islamic state by augmenting its republican aspects. That division led to the political activation and mobilization of new middle classes, the rise of new parties and violent confrontation. However, from 2004 the core clerical elite, led by the office of Leadership, sought to minimize internal divisions by ousting the supporters of modernization and democratization from power and by creating new political formations and alliances, especially the Party of Fundamentalism (Party of Principles). The power bloc since 2004 has been occupied by an alliance of the Fundamentalist and Traditionalist-Conservative parties to the detriment of the Reformists. Given the controlled nature of popular elections in the country, the ruling factions have now sought to retain their positions by what the reformists regard as an electoral coup followed by repression.



What is meant by an electoral coup is in fact a late “political abortion” or an “abortive coup” preventing the reformist baby from coming into life.

So on the whole I think developments since June 12 can be understood and explained in terms of a grave crisis of elite cohesion and unity, which has not been solved by arbitration as in previous episodes, but has been met with violence and repression. Generally there is little doubt about the vital importance of internal divisions and opposition for change under ideological regimes such as the Islamic Republic, particularly in the absence of any organized external opposition. However, the issue of disunity has not led to a crisis of coercion and domination; there are no apparent rifts within the armed forces, no rival military force, and the ruling elite’s will to power and repression seems to be intact. But crises of cohesion cause other problems for ideological regimes, such as further undermining regime legitimacy, paving the way for the organization of popular discontent, and providing leadership and ideology, as other necessary ingredients of a revolutionary situation.

At any rate, the aftermath of the June election can be understood in terms of the intensification of internal divisions and polarization between ruling factions. But unlike previous episodes, it has led to the mobilization of popular opposition on a very large scale. The highest degree of internal division in the regime’s history has now been reached, causing polarization, confrontation, and an expanding circle of “counter-revolution.”

DP: As you observe, never before in its 30-year history had the Islamic Republic seen such mass political mobilization. So why *now*, in your view?

HB: Obviously mass mobilization or the mobilization of a large number of people for political purposes — especially in a polarized form and under an

authoritarian regime — does not come about easily or frequently; it is only rarely and under exceptional circumstances that political leaders or parties succeed in calling people onto the streets in huge numbers, as happened for a few days following the June 12 election in Iran. Given this, we need to know what those exceptional circumstances and conditions that make mass mobilization possible are.

Since mass mobilization is a rare occurrence in the politics of authoritarian regimes, it follows that its outbreak cannot be explained by reference to “ordinary” situations prevailing under those regimes, such as economic problems and crises, government incapacity, general mass discontent, or political repression. Although these may constitute the eventual ingredients of the mobilization episode, the mobilization itself requires specific mechanisms in order to come about; it is through these mechanisms that those raw elements may be articulated. As the history of mass mobilization shows everywhere, the phenomenon is not a mechanical one, resulting from some “objectively” undesirable socio-economic and political conditions per se; it is the “subjective” channeling of those objective conditions which is the key element.

In general, three rather complementary theories have been advanced in order to explain why and how mass mobilization becomes possible: first the theory that regards mass mobilization as a rare and exceptional psychosocial or existential condition which results from the development of an intolerable gap between popular expectations and the possibility of meeting them. From this psychosocial perspective, for example, persistent poverty or persistent prosperity do not lead to mass action; rather it is going from prosperity to poverty or from poverty to prosperity that creates the gap between expectations and the possibility of meeting them. According to this famous Davies J-Curve theory, collective action may take



place at the point where the gap is most intolerable. So the theoretical dispute and debate concerning whether it is abject poverty or prosperity that leads to insurrection is thus resolved. Another major theoretical debate has been going on concerning whether mass collective action becomes possible in a mass society or in a society experiencing the development of a civil society; this dispute is similarly resolved in the theory of segmented civil society, according to which there is no possibility for mass political mobilization in a repressed mass society on the one hand, and there is no need for such a mobilization in a fully grown and developed civil society, on the other; so it is under conditions of segmented civil societies that mass mobilization of the type we have witnessed in Iran may come about. A third, political, theory relates the possibility of mass action and mobilization to internal ruling elite disunity. In the specific case of Iran in June 2009, a combination of these three factors made the large-scale mobilization of the people possible.

First, an intolerable gap resulted from rising expectations before the election and violent repression after the election. The result was public indignation and anger on an unprecedented scale. Obviously the rising expectations were political in nature, not economic (as in the theory mentioned above). For a few weeks, a large, mainly urban middle-class-based socio-political movement emerged around the two reformist candidates (Moussavi and Karroubi), mobilizing a large segment of the population in the name of the Green Movement for reform and change. The period of the electoral campaign was marked by festivities, public discussions and gatherings, heated debates, hopeful projections for change, intriguing TV debates between presidential candidates, popular excitement, relative press freedom, critique of government performance, political publicity and propaganda, and the reactivation of political groupings and parties.

As the unexpected election results were announced, the atmosphere changed completely and a mood of public despair and anger replaced the exuberant mood of hope and expectation. The focus on a single issue — the rigging of the election — polarized the population, leading to mass street demonstrations against the manipulation of the election. The first week after the election witnessed the height of the gap mentioned above. The leaders of the movement were also successful in concentrating and focusing on the single issue of fraudulence. The second week, however, witnessed a rather different situation as the Supreme Leader vowed, in the Friday prayers, to suppress any street demonstration and endorsed the official election results as accurate. So on the whole the gap resulting from rising political expectations and hopes for freedom and change, on the one hand, and the anger, disappointment and indignation caused by the manipulation of the election, on the other, was the reason for the mass mobilizations which have had no precedent during the 30 years of Islamic rule in the country. In the weeks since, however, the sense of anger has been gradually replaced by a sense of fear, as the security forces have shown no sign of mercy in ruthlessly and violently crushing any public gathering or demonstration.

Regarding the second factor — the civil society vs. mass society debate — I would argue that developments during the so-called Reconstruction Period from 1989 to 1997, as well as the Reform Period from 1997 to 2005, had to a certain degree paved the way for a slow transition from mass society to a segmented civil society. The emergence of civil associations, independent student organizations, associations of writers and journalists, a rather independent press and increasing independence of arts and culture from government control were all signs of this transition from mass to civil society, albeit in a circumscribed way.



A number of similar (though much more limited) collective actions and mass protests had already occurred during the Reconstruction and Reform periods (like the uprisings in Islamshahr, Qazvin, Mashad and the 1999 Student Uprising, known as 18 Tir), but the recent mass mobilization was very different in nature, scope, intensity of government reaction, and particularly in terms of its consequences in disclosing the real character of the political system for the majority of the people. The violent confrontation took place on a mass scale; the lines of division between the government and the public opposition were clearly drawn; and a state of disillusion came about. On the other hand, it seems that the civil-society base of the mass mobilization was not wide or strong enough to sustain the opposition movement — though the role of political repression has been much more decisive in this regard.

Finally, the widening divisions within the ruling elites and popular awareness thereof were highly effective in generating the public outburst. Internal disunity took place on a number of levels: first, despite sharp differences between the ruling Fundamentalists and the contending Reformists, the Reformist candidates had been approved by the Council of Guardians; and the Reformists obviously confirmed their allegiance to the Constitution and the theocratic system; all this (apparently) provided a margin of safety for the public to come out on the streets and demonstrate in large numbers; in this way they were supporting some of the candidates and political figures who had, presumably, been endorsed by the core clerical elite.

At a second level, emerging signs of division between the Fundamentalist faction in power and the Traditionalist-Conservative parties within the power bloc (especially between Rafsanjani and the Fundamentalists) generated the expectation (or perhaps the illusion) that the Traditionalist-Conservative clerics would actively support the Green movement; so the

perception was that the movement enjoyed the tacit support of some Conservative parties who had become disenchanted with the economic and foreign policies of the ruling Fundamentalist faction. And finally, on a third level, signs of some emerging divisions *within* the ruling Fundamentalist faction, in parliament and outside, and reluctance on the part of many Fundamentalist MPs to support the current president's candidacy, might have been further encouraging for the supporters of the opposition movement. Of course, following the announcement of the election results, and with increasing polarization of attitudes, some of those more secondary rifts would disappear as the Conservative and Traditionalist parties would rush to the support of the government and the position of the Supreme Leader at a time of deep crisis threatening the very existence of the Islamic regime.

On the whole, although such an occasion for mass mobilization had been dreamt of by the external or even internal opposition groups for a long time, it had not been planned in any way; rather, it was the result of a rare political conjuncture — as is the case with almost all revolutionary situations.

DP: The other night at a panel discussion on the situation in Iran held in Chicago, the sociologist Ahmad Sadri argued that we are witnessing the “beginning of the end of the Islamic Republic.”(9) Do you agree?

HB: In order to begin to think about any breakdown, we need to know the consequences of the recent crisis and confrontation for the political system; that is, we need to ask what difference the recent developments have made to the regime in terms of the eight various analytical factors I laid out earlier. The consequences of the recent crisis and confrontation are manifold; and we need to assess the durability of the government in terms of these consequences.



My general argument has been that if the political system had previously experienced any sort of crisis, it is now intensified and has gone through a qualitative change. In terms of ideological legitimacy, the preexisting deficit has now become a first-degree crisis of legitimacy. The Islamic Republic claimed, from its inception, to be at least partly based on popular support and consent; one could argue that in the conception of the Islamic Republic, “Republic” as the noun is more essential than “Islamic” as the adjective of that noun (at least in the Persian language this is the type of perception we have about nouns and adjectives). Elections have been held regularly and even the Supreme Leaders have considered elections and popular participation as a major basis of the political system. Of course, as we know, elections in the Islamic Republic are restricted in the sense that all candidates in all elections have to be declared as qualified by the Council of Guardians, which is the legislative arm of the Supreme Leader. In any case, according to the opposition, which enjoys a mass following, even the institutionally restricted elections have not been respected by the regime itself.

During the June election, all four candidates had been endorsed by the Council of Guardians and indirectly by the Supreme Leader; yet popular support for the two Reformist candidates has increasingly been regarded by the regime as counter-revolutionary, and as we have seen, peaceful protesters have been beaten and crushed for legally protesting against the official election results. In the eyes of supporters of the mass Green Movement, they had done nothing except legally protest against the election results, but they were treated ruthlessly and violently (even the Council of Guardians itself admitted that on the basis of a partial recount some three million votes had been manipulated; and if a full recount had been allowed,

perhaps the allegations of the Reformist candidates would have been corroborated). The Supreme Leader’s endorsement of the official election results — even before the partial recount, which he had himself allowed — caused the sense of illegitimacy to spread, in the eyes of the protestors and opposition, from the government to the entire political system.

Furthermore, the Supreme Leader’s rather explicit permission for the ruthless suppression of any demonstrations, and their actual violent suppression, further intensified the crisis and deficit of legitimacy. If previously there was a second or even third degree crisis of legitimacy, in the sense that the policies of the government had faced popular objection, now with the recent turn of events a first-degree crisis of legitimacy has come about, throwing into question the legitimacy of the entire system.

In terms of legitimacy, therefore, the recent confrontation has had several consequences. Firstly: it has somewhat exposed or uncovered the nature of the power structure; previously the Supreme Leader had been regarded (at least by the politically uninformed or misinformed) as being neutral in factional rivalries and as standing above the various factions like an impartial judge; but this illusion was shattered by the Leader himself when he announced that he had personal political preferences and actually supported the current government and policies and would endorse them at any price. Previously there was a disagreement concerning the role and position of the Supreme Leader; some political activists and commentators regarded him as politically weak or impartial; accordingly, he did not have a base of social support for himself, despite his great institutional powers, and so he had to adjust to the policies of whatever government was in power (Rafsanjani’s from 1989 to 1997 and Khatami’s from 1997 to 2005).



But in fact, he had been trying to uphold his own power and position; this had not been possible during Rafsanjani's presidency or during Khatami's; but Khamenei eventually emerged as the architect of a fundamentalist alternative to reform and democratization after 2004 by encouraging the formation of the fundamentalist bloc which won the various elections in 2003, 2004, 2005, 2008 and now 2009.

So the Leader's own pronouncements and actions demonstrated that he was the core figure and the real coordinator. In terms of legitimacy, however, this was not in his self-interest, as he removed all the mists of illusion and put himself in direct confrontation with the popular opposition. In a superficial sense, which is very meaningful in the history of modern Iran, he was moving from a constitutional to an absolutist sort of *velayat* (rule). So, on the whole the recent confrontation has made the power structure of the regime more transparent for the general public.

A second consequence of the recent crisis and confrontation is going to be a growing belief among the ruling cliques about the disruptive nature of elections and high popular participation; elections will be considered disruptive; mass participation of the people in elections will not be seen as an advantage for the regime; if this is going to be the case, then the legitimacy of the regime will be further undermined. Thirdly, and in a parallel way, the people can be expected to lose *their* belief in the value of voting and political participation, which is yet another factor in the erosion of political legitimacy. So in this way the electoral aspect of the theocracy is going to be discredited from both directions, and apparently the regime will have to rely more heavily on the undemocratic or clerical-aristocratic aspect of the system.

A fourth outcome of the recent confrontation, which should be taken into account in any assessment of the future course of events, is the expansion of the circle of "counter-revolution"; some hardliners are already talking about the "new hypocrites" (referring to the Mujahedin-e-Khalq, or MEK, which was ousted from the political arena in the early years of the revolution and which was labeled as the party of hypocrites).(10) I think the most important impact of the current upheaval and confrontation (which again has to be reckoned with in any projection of the future) is the increasing disappearance of the feeling of fear, which has been the main basis of the political order; a feeling of courage to express long pent-up grievances is the hallmark of the current developments. As a rule, both on an individual as well as a social level, anger kills fear; the government did everything it could, in the span of a few weeks, to make the general public angry, frustrated and desperate. The "counting" of the votes, the humiliating arrogance, the intimidation, the brutality, the detentions, the violent repression, and so on, caused widespread anger and indignation. If all the pent-up grievances had been tolerated for years because of fear, now anger caused by imprudent government action is paving the way for a catharsis.



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Authoritarian regimes usually attempt to compensate for the loss of ideological legitimacy either by resorting to more coercive and repressive measures or by turning to more public welfare services. In the case of Iran after June 2009, what has happened is the expansion of the coercive dimension or base of the regime as a compensation for the legitimacy deficit. This in itself means a transformation in the character or type of the regime, which is becoming more militaristic; a militaristic language is now utilized by the armed forces in reference to the opposition movement. This tendency is of vital significance for the future course of developments, if the political system is to remain in place. Given the prevailing economic situation mentioned above, as well as the limited managerial capability of the government, there is little chance of success for any attempt at compensation for the loss of legitimacy through the expansion of the public sector and provision of welfare; indeed, the system had already been suffering from a crisis of efficient management.

Out of the four main bases of regime stability — legitimacy, efficiency, elite unity, and coercive capacity — it seems that only the latter has remained functioning, at least for the time being. The unity of the ruling elites of the Islamic Republic has also been somewhat damaged. To be sure, factionalism, as discussed above, had always existed among the ruling elites. Interventionism vs. non-interventionism, socio-economic modernization vs. adherence to tradition, and Islamization vs. democratization have been some of the major points of contention in the life of the Islamic Republic over the last 30 years. But in a sense, all these cleavages and rifts had been non-antagonistic; the significance of the recent confrontation is that it has turned non-antagonistic divisions and rifts into antagonistic ones. Several moderate and reformist parties which had been regarded as members of the family of the Revolution are now being castigated as counter-revolutionary. The

unity of the ruling elites is being damaged as antagonistic rifts are emerging, firstly between Reformist and Fundamentalist parties, secondly within the clerical institutions, and thirdly within the military elite. More indications of increasingly antagonistic rifts are emerging every day.

It seems that the Reformist parties are not to be tolerated any more, as hundreds of party leaders and members are being detained and imprisoned.⁽¹¹⁾ They are already disqualified as illegitimate and counter-revolutionary parties; in fact it seems that political party activity will become meaningless in the emerging power structure; so the reformist parties will definitely find themselves in an entirely different situation and consequently will have to adopt new positions, if they can continue to exist at all. The Participation Front has been hit the hardest. There are also some indications of growing division within the clergy associated with the Supreme Leader and the more independent-minded clerics in Qom, who have tacitly or explicitly opposed the crackdown.⁽¹²⁾ There are even some signs of division within the Revolutionary Guards; in the early years there were some differences of opinion between the commanders of the Western and Southern war fronts; following the crackdown an open letter has been written by a number of older commanders to the Supreme Leader, questioning his endorsement of the election results before full investigation and the violent repression of the protest demonstrations. Still it seems that the regime's point of strength lies in its coercive capacity and the unity of its coercive forces, at a time when the legitimacy of the political system is coming under question. So in responding to your question, the strengths and weaknesses of the regime should be taken into account.

Likewise, we need to take into account the state of the opposition movement, its strengths and weaknesses.



We need to consider the four factors in relation to the opposition movement that has erupted. In analyzing socio-political opposition movements, as already mentioned, we need to examine the state of mass discontent, the organizational network, the ideology and the leadership of the movement. Concerning popular discontent, historical experience shows that potential mass dissatisfaction and discontent in authoritarian regimes becomes effective when made actual through a specific catalyst. Socio-economic and cultural discontent must become politicized to have political effects. What politicized all the pre-existing potential discontents was the issue of fraud in the election as alleged by the opposition candidates supported by a large popular movement. We have already explained why and how public anger and indignation was produced as a result of government actions. Now all the grievances were finding a political focus or epicenter; the annulment of the election was the first public request, but as intimidation and suppression followed mass demonstrations, a new cause for anger and frustration was added to the initial one, now targeting the leadership of the Islamic Republic. The steam of general public discontent, as it were, was now finding a political engine. Thus public discontent was being organized into a specific public demand. As we have seen, public discontent without organization and mobilization leads to nothing. In terms of organization, a quite adequate organizational network (including the electoral headquarters, student organizations, electronic means of communication, the Internet and so on) has emerged and has proved capable of providing the necessary rudimentary functions. Of course the organizational capability of oppositions has a converse relation to the coercive capacity of regimes. In our case so far, government coercion has almost demolished the organizational capability of the opposition, but things are not going to remain as they are now. For one thing, the organizational capacity of the opposition is a function

of its leadership. A number of people have emerged as leaders, but as usually happens in such situations, moderate leaders will be gradually replaced with more radical ones. So far Mossavi, Karroubi and Khatami have led the movement very cautiously and moderately; on the other hand Ayatollah Montazeri has issued a very significant statement justifying public rebellion against the theocratic system and considering the regime as already deposed because of its unjust and cruel treatment of the protestors.⁽¹³⁾ The gradual replacement of more moderate by more radical leadership would also mean an escalation in the ideology of the movement, from questioning the election results to questioning the very legitimacy of the whole power structure.

So two factors stand out as decisive in the outcome of the turmoil: the coercive capacity of the government and its ability and readiness to use it; and the leadership of the movement and its ability and readiness to redefine its ideological objectives and enhance its organizational capability.

DP: Speaking of the leadership of the movement, some have questioned whether it has any. What do you make of this? Is Moussavi the movement's leader, or is he being led *by* the movement? To the extent that the movement has a horizontal or decentralized structure, do you view this as a weakness or a strength — or neither? And what does this all portend for the movement's prospects?

HB: Usually, leaders of revolutionary or oppositional movements can be classified into three main types: ideologues; mobilizers/orators; and managers. Sometimes all the three types may merge into a single leader, but most of the time different leaders represent the various types. Ayatollah Khomeini was both an ideologue and a mobilizer/orator; but the management of the movement was left to local leaders, as he was in exile at the time. Lenin turned out to be a combination



of the three types, as was Mao. In the case of today's Green opposition movement in Iran, the role of leadership is not concentrated in one person, so the three leadership functions are not performed. There is no ideological leader, in the sense of grand ideological schemes; it is more of a democratic than an "ideological" movement; the aspirations of the movement are clear enough and some of them can even be traced back to the current Islamic Constitution. Statements and pronouncements issued by Moussavi and Karroubi as well as some high-ranking clerics such as Montazeri, Saanei and Kadivar clearly indicate the movement's ideological aims.

Oppositional ideologies can be offensive or defensive in posture. Revolutionary movements usually require an offensive ideology, projecting a completely different or novel socio-political order and structure, whereas defensive ideologies usually present public grievances or complain about the encroachment of the regime upon the rights of the subject population; defensive ideologies and ideological leaderships are usually characteristics of "revolts" rather than revolutions; peasant revolts, tax revolts, bread riots and aristocratic rebellions are usually based on a defensive ideology. We could call Iran's Green movement an "electoral fraud revolt." The religious revolt or rebellion of 1963 against the Shah's policies, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, was a defensive revolt; it attempted to safeguard the Constitution against the modernizing autocratic tendencies of the Shah. In a sense, the current Green movement is rather similar to the 1963 revolt, in that it is similarly a protest against autocratic and militaristic tendencies and repressive policies in the name of the existing Constitution (although the repression now has been much more brutal than it was then). Ayatollah Khomeini had similarly asked for the proper implementation of the Constitution. But a defensive

movement or revolt can *turn into* a revolutionary movement, as was the case with the Puritan Revolution in England and the American Revolution. I think that the Green movement can resurrect the ideals of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, as well as the aspirations of the early phase of the revolution of 1979. And this would be good enough, as the most fundamental political conflict and cleavage in Iran since the end of the 19th century has been that between autocracy (whether royal or clerical) and democracy/popular sovereignty. To become more offensive, however, the ideology needs to be differentiated from the dominant theocratic tendency in the constitution; and this is what the current oppositional leadership seems to be rather reluctant to propose.

More recently, however, the office of the Supreme Leader has come under attack for carrying out repression and engaging in illegal acts; two open letters reportedly issued by the Association of Previous Majles (Parliament) Deputies and the Association of Qom Religious Teachers and Clerics have blamed the Supreme Leader for what has transpired since June 12 and have declared him incompetent to continue as the Supreme Leader according to the constitution. They have called on the clerical Assembly of Experts to reconsider the leader's competence for leadership. If the Assembly of Experts could gain some independence from the office of the Supreme Leader and could represent the clergy at large and exert control over that office, the democratic aspect of the theocracy would be highly enhanced; in that case, the independent members of the clergy could emerge as the main leadership group in a would-be transition from absolutist theocracy to constitutional theocracy, or even to a pure and simple democracy.

With regard to the second function — mobilization



— given the state of repression, the current opposition leadership is severely restricted; the existing, rather weak civil society associations have been further repressed and restricted. There is an obvious connection between repression and mobilization: with increasing repression, the chances for mass mobilization decrease, as the cost of political activity rises, while less repression on the part of the regime, or more toleration — or at least vacillation — encourages mass action. In the case of Ayatollah Khomeini and his close associates in the 1978-79 revolution, political mobilization was facilitated by the fact that they were in exile and could easily call on the people to rise against the regime and risk their lives in the face of repression. But the current oppositional leadership does not enjoy the same immunity. They are not ready to go to the extreme in the face of severe repression. Finally, the managerial structure of the leadership is not well knit together, again because of repression. As a rule, opposition leaderships in revolutionary movements gain decisive importance and roles under two types of conditions: first, when the state has more or less lost its monopoly on the use of the means of violence (as in the case of the English, Chinese, Cuban and Nicaraguan Revolutions), and second, when the regime is in a state of vacillation and hesitation vis-à-vis the use of violence, and as a result the opposition gets the opportunity to mobilize (as in the case of the 1979 Iranian Revolution). As we have already seen, revolutions do not take place merely because there is mass discontent and a large opposition movement and a revolutionary ideology and leadership; they still do not take place even if, in addition to all that, the regime suffers from severe crises of legitimacy and efficiency and unity. What usually sounds the death knell for authoritarian regimes is a crisis of coercion and domination. Obviously a strong and ideologically-dedicated leadership can contribute to such a crisis of domination and coercion, by

constantly enticing the public in the face of severe repression and by resorting to all forms of political campaign.

Finally, under the current circumstances I think that the rise of a dissident cleric, such as Montazeri, at the head of the movement, could make a great deal of difference in terms of political mobilization and the realignment of political forces and actors.

DP: Several parallels have been drawn between the present events and those of 1978-79, the most obvious being the mass street demonstrations and the echoes of *Allahu Akbar*. In fact during the revolution of three decades ago it took much longer — many months — for the crowds to grow to the size we saw within a matter of days in June 2009. On the other hand, some argue emphatically that this is not a revolutionary movement or situation, pointing to the fact that the “Green Wave” phenomenon is bound up with the presidential candidacy of a figure (Moussavi) who was operating within the framework of the Islamic Republic.⁽¹⁴⁾ How do you view this? As a scholar of the 1979 revolution, do you see parallels between the two moments?

HB: To me it seems that the current confrontation may well turn into a thoroughly revolutionary situation, given the intensity of popular anger and frustration and the humiliating way the government has responded to it. But there are, as always, both similarities and differences between the two historical situations; and in any case there is no need for the current confrontation to be an exact replica of 1979 in order to turn into a revolutionary situation; it may do so on its own merits.

Now we can elaborate on the similarities and differences in terms of the several theoretical criteria we have already used to explain the nature of the



situation. So first, in terms of a crisis of legitimacy, it seems that the Islamic regime has been depleting its own legitimacy from within, by violating its own rules: the reformist candidates had been allowed to stand for election but then peaceful protests on the part of their supporters regarding the disputed results are violently and brutally suppressed. The Shah's regime at the time was facing the opposition of an outside contender in Khomeini, one who would normally be repressed by an authoritarian regime. So for such a regime, the Shah's repression could seem more "normal" (norms of repression) than the Islamic regime's repression, as it is repressing an opposition which is an insider, or part of the family, as some say. From another perspective, legitimacy has also something to do with longevity and durability; the imperial monarchy had been in place for 2,500 years, whereas Islamic theocracy has been around only for 30 years. Obviously the institution of Persian monarchy had been in a state of crisis since the late 19th century, leading to the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911), which provided a criterion for gauging the legitimacy of the system, i.e. the Shah was to reign and not rule, and the breach of the constitution in this regard was a sure sign of the royal government's crisis of legitimacy.

A similar argument could be and has been developed in the case of the Islamic Republic, in the sense that the Sovereign Theologian (or Supreme Leader) should stand above factional conflicts. However, there is a great deal of difference between the constitutions of 1906 and of 1979 in that the latter is evidently not constitutionalist but absolutist: there is no real separation of powers and the Ruling Jurist (or Supreme Leader) has supremacy over the three branches of government. So we cannot speak of a deficit of legitimacy only in this very technical and restricted sense, since the Ruling Theologian both reigns and rules. This in itself, on the other hand, is

obviously in contradiction to the ideals of a popular revolution which was supposed to restrict the power of the ruler; and it points to the more general and historical problem of legitimacy as far as the theocracy is concerned. But there is a more mundane sense of a legitimization crisis usually felt by the general run of the people, and that is when instead of persuasion, force is used to keep a people in its place; and this is exactly the meaning of the crisis of legitimacy as it is unfolding. The crisis of legitimacy as a major ingredient of a revolutionary situation has become grave.

A clear difference between the two historical situations is to be found in the rulers' will to repression. The Shah's regime, after an initial period of suppression, lost its will to power and gradually shifted to a policy of moderation, toleration and compromise: the Shah's hearing of the message of the revolution, the negotiations with the National Front, the Bakhtiar regime, the Paris negotiations, the Shah's flight and so on; apparently the Carter human rights policy and U.S. pressure (in the context of differences of interest and opinion between Washington and Tehran following the oil embargo of 1973) had something to do with the loss of the will to repression. But so far the Islamic regime's will to repression has remained firm; maybe it is still too early to judge, given the circular nature of demonstrations and protests taking place every now and then, in a fashion reminiscent of the events of 1978. In terms of U.S. -Iran relations, it seems that the current administration's approach may have contributed to the will to suppression.

The decline or continuation of the will to suppression is partly a result of the state of unity within the ruling group; in the case of the Shah's regime, elite unity was in a sense damaged by the Carter human rights policy, and the Shah vacillated between repression



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and relative toleration. As we have already seen, some major signs of division within the ruling elite of the Islamic Republic are also emerging. Once begun, such divisions and rifts are hard to contain; they tend to escalate and drag all political actors into the abyss. Hence the current confrontation seems increasingly to be creating a revolutionary situation.

Differences also exist in terms of the nature of the opposition. In terms of popular discontent, a similar pattern has occurred, a pattern I have already explained in terms of the J-Cure theory. In the case of the Shah's regime, a long period of economic stability and growth from 1962 to 1976 was followed by a sharp reversal and downturn, creating an intolerable gap between popular expectations and government capabilities. In the case of the Islamic Republic, the same pattern has come about albeit with a different content, which is not economic but political: a long period of moderation and relative toleration under Rafsanjani and Khatami from 1989 to 2005 (the post-Khomeini period) was followed by a sharp reversal and downturn under the militaristic-fundamentalist regime of Ahmadinejad. The specter of its repetition in June 2009 caused widespread fear, anger and dread and led to the confrontation.



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In terms of ideology, it seems that the current confrontation is more specific in nature than was the case with the slogan of "Islamic Republic" in 1978-9. Indeed its specificity makes it non-revolutionary, since (at least as far as the top leaders are concerned) its aim is to annul the disputed election; however, as with the early phase of the 1978-9 revolution, the moderate opposition was calling for the implementation of the constitution and a constitutional monarchy; obviously it was the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini which made the difference, calling for a complete revolution — something the reformist leaders have not been willing to take up; the most they have called for so far is the holding of a referendum for endorsing or annulling the election results (which has to be allowed by the leaders of the Islamic Republic).

So, on the whole it seems that some of the ingredients of a revolutionary situation have already come about but some others have not (yet) materialized.

DP: What do you make of the responses of certain leftists in the Western Hemisphere to the events unfolding in Iran — from the likes of James Petras defending the official election results and dismissing any doubts about their authenticity as an imperialist "hoax" to MRZine (the online organ of the venerable socialist magazine *Monthly Review*) openly defending Ahmadinejad as an anti-imperialist to Hugo Chávez embracing Ahmadinejad as a "revolutionary" ally and the Foreign Ministry of Venezuela denouncing the Iranian street demonstrations:

The Bolivarian Government of Venezuela expresses its firm opposition to the vicious and unfounded campaign to discredit the institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran, unleashed from outside, designed to roil the political climate of our brother country. From Venezuela, we denounce these acts of interference in the internal affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran,



while demanding an immediate halt to the maneuvers to threaten and destabilize the Islamic Revolution.(15)

It's important to note that there have been strong critical responses from others on the Left to such statements — those of Reese Erlich, Hamid Dabashi, Saeed Rahnema, the Campaign for Peace and Democracy, and others.(16) What is your impression of these contending positions?

HB: To me it seems that such unfavorable reactions to the popular movement in Iran are not hard to explain. I think they result from three factors: first, ignorance of and misinformation about the nature of the political system in Iran since the Revolution, the various historical phases it has gone through and the widening gap between official ideology and public opinion, particularly the rapid secularization of society under the theocracy; consequently such regimes end up being more popular among some foreigners than among their own people. Secondly they result from financial and commercial self-interest and the special favorable commercial relations Iran has with some of the countries mentioned; obviously they think more of their own national interests than the interests of the Iranian people. In my opinion, analyses resulting from such positions and interests are not much worth discussing from an academic point of view. Ideological regimes tend to create their own satellites or close friends, who obviously endorse their policies and actions. Here we can add Islamist parties and organizations in the Arab world and their ideological/commercial ties with the Islamic Republic. Thirdly, such analyses result from the analysts' attachment to and use of obsolete theoretical and conceptual frameworks, divorced from current developments (what Ulrich Beck calls "zombie categories"); as a result, they accept demagogical positions at face value and confuse Fascism with Socialism.

I think that the leftist responses you have mentioned have forgotten all about the democratic dimensions of Marxism and have fallen prey to demagogy in this case. They sometimes forget that the extreme Right and the extreme Left deceptively look alike. In the case of Venezuela, a combination of pseudo-leftist appraisals and commercial interests have been at work. The Venezuelan government knows nothing about the political situation and public opinion in Iran, which is increasingly turning against the foreign allies of the Islamic Republic. Russia's support has already brought about chants of "Death to Russia" from protestors on the streets of Tehran.

Regarding more theoretical responses, I would say that the type of class analysis applicable to the case of Iran in a long-term sense is very different from the type of class analysis usually applied in a short-term sense. From a long-term historical perspective, the main social conflict has been taking place not among the social classes belonging to one social formation, but between those belonging to two social formations: pre-modern and modern. The historical meaning of various political developments in Iran should be understood in terms of this underlying conflict: the Constitutional Revolution signified the victory of the social classes of the modern formation over the social forces of the traditional/pre-modern formation. In its own peculiar way, the absolutist state structure of the Pahlavi regime further strengthened the modern social formation (albeit in the framework of modernization from above under a dictatorship). The traditional social forces made a comeback after the revolution of 1979 and imposed the traditional political-cultural pattern of elitism, authoritarianism, patrimonialism and cultural order, discipline and obedience under the rule of a theocracy. With the subsequent development of the modern formation and its social forces, advocating the ideas of citizenship, political equality,



democracy, popular sovereignty and socio-cultural freedom (as partly seen in the Green Movement), the underlying contradiction between the world of coercively-reconstructed tradition and the democratic path is bound to come to a head, as we are witnessing now.

DP: There are discordant views among progressives on whether the Obama administration should move forward in engaging Iran at present, given the circumstances. Some progressives — particularly Iranians — argue that the U.S. should hold off for the moment on engaging Iran; Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace recently gave expression to this view:

For the first time ever, I think we shouldn't even be talking about engaging Iran, we should take a wait and see approach. The strategic imperative to have relations with Iran will always remain, but let's wait until the dust settles in Tehran. ... By prematurely calling for engagement I think we run the risk of demoralizing the opposition and the millions of people who took to the streets and who continue to reject the legitimacy of the Ahmadinejad government; we implicitly endorse an election that is still being hotly contested in Tehran and tip the balance in favor of the hardliners.(17)

Others — particularly in the American peace movement — call for engagement and diplomacy regardless of the post-election aftermath. Thus Reza Aslan, author of *How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization, and the End of the War on Terror*, recently argued that one

must not ignore the dramatic opportunities for long-term change in Iran that have emerged as a result of this crisis, opportunities to which the international community must respond through

a confident and coherent policy of engagement. ... [A] concerted dialogue with Iran ... will offer moral and political support for the genuine expression of the will of the Iranian people at a time when the regime's authority is at an ebb. Most important, it will offer Iranians hope. ... if the West keeps talking to Iran, it can empower its citizens to change their society from the ground up, and to influence those who have the capacity to act from the top down.(18)

What is your view on this question?

HB: I am definitely in agreement with those arguing against engagement. I too think that engagement would in a sense grant legitimacy to a regime confronting a very deep crisis of legitimacy, on the one hand, and would alienate a democratically-inclined and growing opposition movement, which expects moral support from all democratic nations, on the other.

I think that now is the worst time for the U.S. government to pursue a policy of engagement, as the regime in Iran is at its worst; it should have tried when the Iranian regime was at its best, that is during the Khatami presidency (of course the Iranian fundamentalist groups were opposed to it at the time). As we all know, rational decision-making in general and in the field of foreign policy in particular should take many factors into account — the current political environment, reactions of other decision-makers, intended and unintended consequences, among others — and not just react to the policies of a previous rival administration. One specific factor which needs to be taken into account in this case (regardless of the issues relating to regional and international security) is the impact on the Iranian democratic opposition in the shorter as well as the



longer run.

Although the Iranian government's perception that no threat now comes from the U.S. under the new administration (unlike its perceptions following the invasion of Iraq) may have made it feel more comfortable dealing with and suppressing the opposition movement recently, and the government may have thus indirectly benefited from the new foreign policy orientation in the U.S., any engagement policy would definitely (and this time directly) embolden the government vis-à-vis the democratic opposition, which would be another instance of a familiar foreign policy pattern particularly common during the Cold War era. We all remember the case of British and American support of the regime of South Africa and its Apartheid system during the Cold War, which played a part in stifling the anti-Apartheid movement and which endorsed the apartheid regime. On the other hand, the new western foreign policy towards South Africa that was gradually adopted towards the end of the 1980s, with the end of the Cold War situation, contributed to the weakening of the Apartheid regime and encouraged the anti-Apartheid movement. More generally as a rule, if democratization gained pace in many parts of the world in the 1990s, it was partly due to the abandonment of the security-based western foreign policy supporting all sorts of regimes opposed to the Eastern bloc. More precisely, it was not active support for the democratic oppositions, but rather disowning the non-democratic regimes, that contributed to the transitions. In the case of Iran-U.S. relations, the U.S. government has already experienced a similar episode, when it gradually withdrew its support from the Shah's regime and thus encouraged the anti-Shah opposition.

DP: I'd like to close by discussing your intellectual biography. How would you locate yourself on the

intellectual-political map? What are, and have been, your main theoretical reference points and influences? There are strong Gramscian flavors in your book *State and Revolution in Iran*, which you wrote as a doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Ernesto Laclau. Has Gramsci continued to influence your thinking? Has Laclau? How would you characterize the arc of your outlook over the last three decades? How have your views changed over the course of time?

HB: I studied the Marxist literature on political sociology at the University of Essex where Ernesto Laclau and Bob Jessop taught me. I was and have remained interested in many aspects of the political-sociological ideas of Marx, Gramsci, Poulantzas, Laclau and Barrington Moore, and I have used them in my works. Later on I developed an interest in the work of Michel Foucault and his analysis of power, and I have used some aspects of his ideas in my more recent works. I have always considered these thinkers as building blocks for political sociology, an area still under construction. More recently I have focused on the political sociology of democratization, especially with reference to the Middle East.

DP: What occasioned this shift in your thinking from a largely Marxist frame of reference to a more post-Marxist/Foucauldian one?

HB: I considered Foucault's work on discourse and power as a culmination of Marx's understanding of ideology and power; somehow they seemed akin, but Foucault's provided a wider scope for application.

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NOTES:

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The role of religious agents in modern Iran

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The secularization thesis has dominated in social science for more than a century (Klein Goldewijk 2007: 30). The idea was that the role of religion would decrease due to modernisation (Philpott 2002: 81). This thesis disregarded the cultural and historical foundations of religion in many societies, but time showed that people didn't stop believing nor that religious organizations would cease to exist. But Iran shows that religious actors are as vibrant as ever. Although now scholars say the number of political religious actors increased after 9/11, in Iran religion has played a political and social role since the 15th century.

Background of the Shi'ism

Shi'ism is rooted in a political movement in the 7th century Arabia (Eickelman 2002: 256). The principle Shi'i belief is that succession must be granted to the son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed, Ali or his descendents. The Safavid empire (1501-1722) made Shi'ism the state religion in Iran and eliminated other forms of Islam (Lapidus 2002: 242). The Safavids also created a state-controlled Islamic bureaucracy. As a result the Ulama became a strong social network.

After the fall of the Safavids in the 17th century, the Ulama was liberated from state control (Lapidus 2002: 244). The Shi'i scholars challenged the legitimacy of the Shah as the primary bearer of Shi'ism, just like Khomeini questioned the Shah's legitimacy. The Ulama asserted that religious

scholars bore the highest religious authority. During the Qajar dynasty (1779-1925) the Ulama increasingly grew stronger (Lapidus 2002: 469).

Religious actors kept playing a role to defend their own interests in the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911), the oil nationalization movement of Mossadeqh (1950s), and the Islamic revolution (1977-1979) (Mansourian 2007: 219). According to Lapidus *'the struggle between the Ulama and the state, was a principle feature of Iranian history [for 200 years]'* (Lapidus 2002: 469). But the religious establishment didn't only oppose the shah, they also played a vital role in the countermovement that led to the failure of the opposition (Mansourian 2007: 221). The Ulama were primarily concerned with limiting the power of the Shah and the secular opposition and followed their own class interests (Mansourian 2007: 219).

Religious agents in the revolution

Before the Islamic revolution there was a strong link between the bazaar in Teheran (merchants) and the Ulama. The Ulama depended on contributions of bazaar merchants, and the Ulama gave the merchants legitimacy in the business world (Mansourian 2007: 220). As a result the Ulama supported the bazaar merchants, when the central authorities tried to limit their power.

In 1953 Mossadeqh was overthrown (Lapidus 2002: 480). The restored regime of Reza Shah ruled as a secular dictatorship and launched modernization programs to increase state power. This resulted in active hostilities of the Ulama, bazaar and intelligentsia who opposed the growing power of the shah, his dependence on foreign support and the created economic hardship for the peasantry and lower middle classes (Lapidus 2002: 481). The ultraliberal market reforms marginalized both the Ulama, bazaar and secular civil groups.



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The opposition was easily crushed by the Iranian regime, but the Shah couldn't beat the Ulama's resistance to the state, which was provoked by land reforms. In 1962 Mehdi Bazargan said that the collective struggle for a better society was the role of the custodians of Islam (Lapidus 2002: 482). Dr. Ali Shari'ati created a new reform movement which saw shi'ism as a form of religious protest, which also inspired the militant leftwing Islamic Mojahedin-i Khalq.

In 1971 Ayatollah Khomeini formed the concept velayat e-faqih, which meant the control of the state by the religious establishment (Lapidus 2002: 483). He became the symbol of protest against tyranny. In 1978 the government newspaper criticized Khomeini, which resulted in the closure of the Bazaar and unrest (Mansourian: 226). In the 1970s the number of religious and non-religious protests were growing because of bad political and economic conditions. Eventually the Shah fled the country, while the army did nothing (Lapidus 2002: 484).

Masses of Iranians had been mobilized by a coalition of religious and liberal leaders under the guidance of the highest Iranian religious authority, Ayatollah Khomeini. The revolution came in the name of Islam and not a secular ideology as socialism. Victorious militant clergy transformed Islam as the idiom of the insurgency into Islam as object of the revolution.

In the beginning the Ulama agreed to compromises with other social groups and democracy (Mansourian 2007: 227). But later few religious figures who opposed Khomeini's concept of velayat e-faqih on religious grounds couldn't get public support and were crushed. Ayatollahs Taleqani and Shariatmadari were marginalized. Former socialist, liberal and minority nationalist allies were mostly executed or fled.

Religious opposition against the Islamic republic

Later the Islamic leftist group Mojahedin-I Khalq became one of the most important opposition groups

against the republic and the religious Sunni leader of Iranian Kurds in that time, Ezzedin Hussein, stated that "many governments in the past have claimed to act in the name of Islam, but in reality they were not Islamic. The Safavid and Ottoman governments were cases in point; more recently we have the case of Khomeini in Iran. They are qeshri – backward and vulgar-and have ruined Islam and its spirit. What we have is not religious government, but a dictatorship under the name of Islam. In Sunni Islam there is no imam as political leader or na'ib (deputy) imam. The role of the clergy is to be morshed, or guide, in knowing God. You will also find some Shi'i clergy who reject Khomeini's concept of faqih. It is not an Islamic regime." (Olson 1984: 924).



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Mansourian (2007: 228) agrees that there is clerical resistance. He says the new dominance of the Ulama over the state destroyed the grassroots support of the bazaar and elites for the Ulama. As a result they became an apparatus of control and not a popular instrument of resistance. Mansourian says, that although it's still a minority, a dissident religious class is rapidly growing in number and popularity among the elite, to resist the Velayat-e Faqih and to establish a democratic system of government. An example he says, is the liberal president Khatami who



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lead the government for a short time, but was marginalized by more Islamic conservative forces. During Mohammed Khatami's rule between 1997-2005, there was a government based on more liberalism, openness and reforms.



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The rise of the Green movement

In 2005 the hardliner Ahmadinejad came to power and the 'reform era' ended. During the recent presidential elections on June 12 2009 he was challenged by the reformist Mir Hussein Mousavi, but officially he still won. The opposition claimed the election was rigged, but the victorious candidate Ahmadinejad disputed this. The demonstrations against the election results in June, on Jerusalem day (last day of Ramadan) which is meant as a day to support Palestinians, the 30th anniversary of the U.S. embassy on 4 November were all covered in the green colour of Islam. Green was the campaign colour of Mousavi. One of the popular methods of the pro-Mousavi supporters was going on the top of their roofs to shout "Allahu Akbar" (God is greatest). This is one of the methods of protest used by those who took part in the 1979 revolution.

According Mehdi Khalaji (2009), the opposition front runners, despite being lauded as modernizers,

Mousavi, Khatami and Karroubi are deeply loyal to the ideals of Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, and advocate a theocratic political system. This in contrast to the young men and women in the streets, who aim to bring down the very system of which their leaders are part. But even the young demonstrators use Islamic symbols.

It also lead to a 'reformist' tendency among some members of the Ulama. Ayatollah Motazari, who was the deputy of Ayatollah Khomeini, until a dispute between them led to Motazari being sidelined and eventually forced out of Iran's power elite, have recently resurfaced as a spiritual symbol of the reformist movement, says the Kurdish opposition politician Loghman H. Ahmedi (2009).

Concluding remarks

The 'reformists' as well as the hardliners legitimate their political claims with Islam. Both the green movement leaders and the hardliners are loyal to the Islamic revolutionary foundations of Iran. This loyalty to the Islamic state shows the vibrancy of Islamic actors in Iran and disapproves the secularization thesis. Although the secularization thesis predicts an end to religion, in Iran religion is alive as ever and will continue to play a role in the political system of Iran. Therefore an end to Islamic republic is unlikely. Even if the protests of the Green movement are not completely focused on Islam, Islamic actors will continue to play an important role in Iran.

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Identity Narratives among Second-Generation Iranians in the United States

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The elimination of national origin quotas in immigration policies increased the flow of immigrants to the United States from Asia, Latin America, and the African continent. As a result, new questions have been raised about how non-European immigrants are incorporated in the United States and how they come to understand and construct their identities in the United States. In my research, I focused on the children of Iranian immigrants who migrated to the United States following the hostage crisis of 1979. Iranian-Americans are uniquely situated immigrants within the larger population of immigrant groups given the context of global politics that surrounds their identity. The context of incorporation and belonging for Iranians is embedded in the political tensions between the Iranian regime and the United States that has spanned over the last three decades, and the focus on global terrorism following the events of September 11th. Through my in-depth interviews and the subsequent analysis I was able to illustrate that second generation Iranians utilized three particular narratives to understand their Iranian background and situate themselves as Americans.

Immigrant narrative: becoming American by losing “Iranian-ness”

The first narrative that emerged was grounded in the classic immigrant story. The first subtopic within this narrative encompassed the immigrant success story.

Within this framework, American society was perceived as the “land of opportunity” in which the “American dream” could be achieved. With resilience, hard work and good work ethics immigrants can achieve upward mobility and ultimately become incorporated into U.S. society. Second-generation Iranians utilized the lived experiences of their parents and extended families in order to illustrate the possibility of achieving the American dream. Thus for them, as long as they worked hard enough and “pulled themselves up by their boot strings” then the “American dream” was widely open to them. This framework also allowed some of the participants to look down upon other immigrants and minority groups who had not achieved upward mobility. Thus, some segments of the American population had either not wanted to succeed or had not worked hard enough. Among my interviewees it was apparent that they fully believed in the notions of individualism, equal opportunities, and eventual success in America. For them, success was defined as monetary mobility and financial stability. Second-generation Iranians in my sample were quite optimistic and fully invested in the “American dream,” which is indicative of their indoctrination into the American ethos.

The second subtopic within this larger narrative was centered on certain Iranian societal/interactional styles such as “taroff,” which is most commonly used when guests are visiting another’s home. However, it is not exclusively limited to these social affairs; rather, it is also utilized during everyday interactions. This interactional style can take the shape of a back and forth offering between two or more people in which one person offers something and the other person is supposed to decline what is being offered. Ultimately, the recipient of the offer usually accepts what is being offered. Among my respondents “taroffing” had to be modified in order for second-generation Iranians to feel that they belonged to,



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American society. The interviewees were cognizant that “taroffing” created a certain degree of culture clash with their American friends and co-workers. However, at the same time, some of the respondents felt that “taroffing” was an important aspect of their Iranian identities and that those Iranians who did not engage in this interactional style were looked upon negatively by the wider Iranian community. Thus, ultimately, these behaviors had to be altered when interacting with Americans because for non-Iranians “taroffing” may be an indication of having low self-esteem, being fake or too modest. For many of the respondents “taroffing” was culturally appropriate with other Iranians or in Iranian social settings; however in public these types of interactions would remain hidden.



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The Persian Empire

The second narrative that emerged was centered on the Persian Empire and it was primarily utilized as a means to create distance from the current Iranian regime and the controversies surrounding it. Within this narrative, I uncovered two subtopics. First, the history of the Persian Empire and its glories were used by second generation Iranians to create cultural and regional superiority over other Middle Easterners. The persistent images entailed the history

of Persia, its mighty kings, and the vastness of the Persian Empire. Thus, the countries that surround Iran were argued to provide no match to Iran’s rich history or that of the Persian people. Some of the participants seemed to harbor some resentment towards Arabs and Saudi Arabia because of the invasion that converted the majority of Iranians from Zoroastrianism to Islam. This resentment was more complex when respondents coupled it with feelings of moral and cultural superiority over other Middle Easterners, which was frequently contextualized with statements about the “uniqueness” of Persians.

Furthermore, it became clear that there were benefits for second generation Iranians to label themselves as “Persian” instead of “Iranian.” First, they could distance themselves from the negative connotations of Iran in the western imagination. For my respondents the term “Iran” brought forth images of the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Iranian hostage crisis, the Islamic republic of Iran, the “Axis of Evil” speech by President Bush, and most recently the Nuclear Proliferation stand-off between the United States and Iran. In comparison, the term “Persia” conjured up images of exoticism, Persian cats and carpets, and may sound more “beautiful.” Second, by labeling themselves “Persian” second generation Iranians could avoid or at least bypass some of the direct discrimination that the “Iranian” label might create. This allowed them to cover their ethnic/national identities, however the extent to which these mechanisms work in escaping marginalization and discrimination are questionable and remain to be seen, yet they indicate the attempts of my respondents to come to terms with their marginality in U.S. society.

Race and Whiteness

The third narrative that I uncovered dealt with the racial classifications of second generation Iranians and their perceptions of whiteness. The first subtopic within this narrative explored the struggles that



second generation immigrants have in their attempts to come to terms with their racial and ethnic classifications in the United States. Most of my respondents felt that the U.S. Census' classification of Iranians into the white race category was appropriate. Most of my respondents saw themselves as racially white, but ethnically Iranian. However, there was some confusion about how race is related to phenotypic features, such as skin color and eye color. Some of the respondents felt that they had a "typical" Iranian nose, which they perceived signaled to Americans that they are Middle Easterners and not white. In this regard, Iranians who displayed "typical" Middle Eastern or Iranian features such as darker hues of skin and "distinct" facial features had more difficulties blending in with the mainstream, and consequently stood out compared to other Iranians of different phenotypic features. The interviewees persistently tried to understand the official placement of Iranians into the white race category, while dealing with their "not quite white" status.

This issue of racial and ethnic classification became more complex and multifaceted when the linguistic origins of "Iran" were interrogated to show that its linguistic roots were tied to "Arya," which was argued to mean "land of the Aryans." Throughout this argumentation it became obvious that the respondents' desires to be perceived and accepted into the white race category were directly tied to them not being perceived as dangerous and irrational "Middle Easterners." The inherent contradiction is that groups, including Iranians, who are seen as "potential terrorists" or "Islamic fundamentalists" by the mainstream media and the U.S. government are simultaneously categorized as "white." This was at the heart of the discussions that took place within the narrative of race and whiteness. The extent to which second generation Iranians can position themselves as racially white is questionable considering the global

politics that complicate their identities in the United States. These complications have been addressed by the scholarship of Portes and Rumbaut (2001), Ansari (1988), and Mostofi (2003), who underscore the complexities that pertain to "whiteness" and racial classifications for second generation immigrants of non-white descent. In my sample, I found that Iranians in the United States aim to classify themselves as white due to the positive connotations and potential benefits that are associated with the white race category. However, they attempt to do this by avoiding ethnic and social associations with other Middle Easterners. Iranians aim to place themselves within the white race category without accepting the Middle Eastern racial category. This rejection of Middle Eastern groupings creates social distance for Iranians from populations that are seen as being "dangerous" in American society.



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Conclusion

The narrative themes that were employed by my interviewees were used as a means to counteract the negative dominant discourses that are perpetuated about Iranians and Middle Easterners in western societies. Thus, it is clear that some participants in my interviews utilized the immigrant narrative about



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upward mobility to illustrate their equal standing with mainstream Americans, as a way to signal that the Iranian cultural heritage also values independence and individualism. The narratives about the Persian Empire and its rich history were critical in positioning Iran as a civilized and progressive nation, which was viewed as superior to other Middle Eastern nations. Lastly, the contradictory narratives about race illustrate the subjects' anxieties about racial classification in the United States. This anxiety was heightened when the Middle Eastern classification was conceptualized as a racial category, because this is the classification that my interviewees attempted to distance themselves from, due to the global politics that are assigned to it. In order to achieve this social and political distance some participants engaged in a discourse about the "Aryan race" and Iran as being the true "land of the Aryans." Second generation Iranians are invested in these narrative themes in order to incorporate and belong to American society. Iranian-Americans occupy a unique position that is situated in the larger context of global politics. Therefore, the narratives that this population utilizes in understanding their Iranian background while attempting to become American is embedded in the conflicts and hostilities of the last 30 years between the Iranian regime and the United States.

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Writers' Inferno

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Censorship in Iran is greatly pervasive even today, which makes it very difficult for Iranians to access a wide range of accurate information about everyday news. This is an important issue because the media is a means of giving a voice to the people. Freedom of the press often means unveiling the conduct, errors and failures of governments and presidencies. With liberty of thought and speech, people share opinions and ideas, which can become more powerful than arms and can threaten rulers. Freedom of speech is also a basic civil right, essential to preserving peace and order, and without which it is hard to understand and resolve differences of opinion. In this article, I examine the situation of the writers, namely their freedom of expression, social and human rights, and their experiences with censorship in Iran before and after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to office. An important part of my paper will be about blogging which has grown extremely quickly due to the fact that print media can no longer meet the needs of writers and readers due to strict censorship and extreme punishments for not complying with the law.

Censorship under the current President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has put the print media into a state of a coma—unconscious and waiting to awaken. Iranian journalist Arash Sigarchi, recipient of the 2007 Hellman/Hammett award for writers who have suffered political persecution, writes in his article “Jail for Journalists”: “Toward the end of Mohammad Khatami's term (1997-2005) and the beginning of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's administration (2005-present), the Ministry of



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Information and Security, Iran's intelligence ministry, began to summon all newspaper journalists to ask them to cooperate with the system. Their message was clear: Those who cooperate can work; those who do not will go to prison. Those who cooperated with the regime received economic privileges. Some of my former colleagues chose to accept the regime offers and today hold positions of power.” (Sigarchi) Freedom of expression and association came under attack throughout the years as a result of flagrant flaws in the administration of justice, coupled with a deeply politicized judiciary system, according to human rights watchdog organization Amnesty International and its 2005 annual report. Journalists faced politically motivated and arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention, unfair trials and imprisonment. The laws used to arrest and imprison journalists, relating to defamation, national security and disturbing public opinion, were vaguely worded and at variance with international standards. (Egendorf 61-62) The human rights watch group also states that Taqi Rahmani, Alireza Alijani and Hoda Saber, intellectuals and writers associated with the National Religious Alliance (Melli Mazhabi), remained arbitrarily detained without any prospect of release. For over a year, the court where they had lodged their appeal refused to issue a verdict. (Egendorf 62)



The following cases of journalists' and writers' experiences of their freedom of expression in Iran, reveals the mechanisms through which censorship is exercised in the country. In one of its issues, the *Economist* talks about the closure in 2007 of the daily newspaper *Shargh* by the Ministry for Culture and Islamic Guidance. *Shargh* published an interview with Saghi Ghahreman, a "counter-revolutionary" Iranian poet living in Canada, who Iran accuses of promoting homosexuality. The *Shargh* paper had only just returned to the streets after being banned in 2006 for cartooning President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as a donkey. It was one of a handful of liberal papers to have fitfully survived the clampdown that followed his election in 2005, which signaled the end of the reformist period under his predecessor, Muhammad Khatami. Another reformist paper, *Ham Mihan*, was closed in July, shortly after reappearing from a seven-year ban. Last month Emadoldin Baghi, a former editor of *Jomhouriat*, was jailed for three years for "activities against national security" and "publicity in favor of the regime's opponents". (Economist) A court last month sentenced Adnan Hassanpour, a journalist from the now closed *Kurdish-Persian* weekly paper, to death on charges of endangering national security and propaganda against the state. (Economist) In his article "Can Iran Change?" Anderson reveals the sad story of Zahra Kazemi, an Iranian-Canadian photojournalist, who was arrested while taking pictures outside Evin prison. She died after nearly three weeks in custody. Initially, the authorities claimed that Kazemi had suffered "a stroke" and an "accidental fall." A Defense Ministry doctor, who later fled to Canada, said that he had examined Kazemi four days after her arrest, and found that she had been raped and beaten; several of her fingernails had been pulled out and her skull was fractured. Amid an international outcry, an intelligence agent was charged with her "quasi-intentional murder." He was acquitted when the authorities ruled her death an accident. (Anderson)

During a session of the U.N. General Assembly in New York, someone asked about Iran's crackdown on academic freedoms and the media, writes Anderson. "You see, in Iran, the freedom is a very privileged freedom," Ahmadinejad replied. "Just as you'd arrest a man for traffic violations, there must be social laws. . . . We have to become clean human beings. Man has to keep moving along a sublime path." (Anderson) Because transgressing the censorship laws in Iran can even be fatal, many journalists prefer to exercise self-censorship in order to avoid facing the harsh repercussions ranging from long unemployment to possible death. This has created a situation unique to the Iranian culture of censorship. Both social and self-censorship have become an extension of physical power, now they branch into the realm of controlling the mind and the spirit. In this way, censorship plays a crucial role in gaining and securing power in Iran.

As in China, where the Internet is having a profound impact on political discourse, the Internet in Iran is challenging the Islamist regime's ability to control news and shape public opinion, particularly among Iran's well-educated younger generation. (Berkeley 71) According to Bill Berkeley, an author and a writing professor at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, in his article "Bloggers vs. Mullahs: How the Internet Roils Iran" the first web-blogs in Farsi were established in September 2001. There are now more than 75,000 blogs in Farsi with Farsi being the third most frequently used language in the blogosphere, behind only English and Chinese. (Berkeley 72) The Iranian Internet has its roots in the short-lived flowering of an independent press in Iran that followed the election of the reformist President Mohammed Khatami in 1997. Some of the prominent Iranian journalists during that time used blogs to bypass strict state censorship and to publish their work online. Exiled Iranians worldwide use blogs to communicate with those



still at home in Iran. (Berkeley 72) President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has one too, though he almost never posts, explains author Sarah Elton. Jon Lee Anderson in his *New Yorker* article “Can Iran Change?” clarifies, his blog is called Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Personal Memos, in which he expounds on God, philosophy, and his childhood, and answers e-mails from readers. The signature videos for his 2005 Presidential campaign were two thirty-minute productions that expertly portrayed him as a man of the people. In one scene, Ahmadinejad is in line for lunch at a self-service canteen; in another, he walks among the poor.(Anderson)

Unsurprisingly, many Iranians write blogs anonymously, yet some prominent bloggers still write under their own names. One is Bijan Safsari, former editor and publisher of several pro-democracy newspapers that were shut down over the last several years. “At a time when our society is deprived of its rightful free means of communication,” he blogged in February 2004, “and our newspapers are being closed down one by one—with writers and journalists crowding the corners of our jails...the only realm that can safeguard and shoulder the responsibility of free speech is the blogosphere.” (Berkeley 72-73) In his fascinating new book “We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs”, which chronicles the rapid growth of the Iranian blogosphere the young Iranian journalist Nasrin Alavi quotes one blogger writing in November 2004, “I keep a weblog so that I can breath in this suffocating air.... In a society where one is taken to history’s abattoir for the mere crime of thinking, I write so as not to be lost in my despair, so that I feel that I am somewhere where my calls for justice can be uttered.... I write a weblog so that I can shout, cry and laugh, and do the things that they have taken away from me in Iran today.” (Berkeley 72)

In recent months, Iran’s blogosphere has faced a new setback. Iran now has one of the world's most sophisticated Internet censorship systems with filters

blocking access to all sorts of sites, including an Iranian site: hoder.com. All ISP subscribers must sign a contract promising not to access "non-Islamic" sites, and a bill passed recently restricts access to high-speed Internet. (Elton) This is the reason why many Iranians who choose to be politically involved in their country, immigrate abroad where they enjoy safe freedom of expression but at the price of being away from their homeland and relatives. Hossein Derakhshan (of hoder.com), according to Sarah Elton’s article “Blogging for a Revolution”, is the godfather of the Iranian online democracy movement. In Toronto, Derkhshan has a second life as a Web designer, with clients in Canada and Europe, but over the past two years, he has spent a lot of time overseas, conference-hopping and networking with others working for online democracy. He credits Canada with politicizing him. "If I had not left Iran, I would not have discovered blogs and become political," he says. "If I were there now, I would have to leave." Having already been detained once, he dares not return. (Elton)

Iran has found another important and remarkable way to use the Internet. Twitter, with its 140 character limit and its cult of immediacy, has emerged as a key source of news and updates from Tehran. (Morozov 12) Roused by the declaration that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won the presidency in a landslide, incredulous voters took to the streets. Using Twitter, thousands of Iranians sent micro-messages to the outside world, like: “Confirmed. Army moving into Tehran against protesters” some with an accompanying photo or video link. Twitter’s ad slogan “What are you doing?” took on new meaning once the Iranian government cracked down on protesters and constrained journalists. (America 4) It is, indeed, a great shortcut to viewing the photos, videos, or text updates from the Iranian streets that resurface on our favorite blogs a few hours later. (Morozov 12)



Thousands of Iranian young people may now want to experiment with Twitter and see what it has to offer, embracing it as a useful tool to generate and spread views critical of regimes like Ahmadinejad's. (Morozov 14) According to Alec Robinson, the author of the ABC News article "Iran powerless to stop revolution by proxy", students in Iran are bypassing Iranian censorship in an effort to preserve their basic personal freedoms such as the right to assemble. Even though banned, the social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook, can be accessed through a proxy site "where you can view a site within the site—hiding what you're really looking at." (Robinson?) All over Iran, students are using these proxy websites and servers to send images of the protests to the outside world and using it to keep in touch with one another. The young Iranians also use these sites to download illegal Farsi rap, which is critical of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. (Robinson)

What seems to be the most interesting aspect of contemporary Iranian politics is the juxtaposition of post-revolutionary dynamics and democratic processes generated out of a political stalemate or gridlock. (Fahri 169) This inevitably reflects on the situation of the print media and the writers in Iran. An important event is the so-called press revolution, which occurred in the midst of the presidency of Khatami from 1997 to 2005 when for a couple of years the journalists and writers got to taste the true freedom of speech. With the election of Mohammad Khatami, which itself was a reflection of the highest level of elite competition the Islamic Republic had seen since its inception, an open press season was set loose. In a span of less than one year, the number of publications throughout the whole country reached 850 (561 of which started between 1997 and 1999). The first professional organization pursuing the interests of journalists, the Association of Iranian Journalists also began operating in the fall of 1997. (Fahri 154) Competitive politics influenced the rise of

competitive press. The interaction of these dynamics became highly explosive after Khatami's election, when the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, now controlled by the pro-reform faction, began giving licenses to an increasing number of daily, weekly, and monthly papers throughout the country. (Fahri 154) Shortly after Khatami's assumption of the presidency, the Islamic reformers in the press managed to establish the Union of Journalists. (Afshari 204)

The appearance of the newspaper *Jame'eh* (Society) in 1998 signified a new phase in the struggle for the right to freedom of opinion, expression, and the press. *Jame'eh* began with a circulation that exceeded by far those of the semiofficial daily papers, sometimes reaching up to 300,000 copies. (Afshari 204-205) The daring language of the newspaper was a claim to a total independence from the established order. *Jame'eh* opened up a hidden world to a reading public thirsting for something more than official pronouncements, clerical sermons, and scripted rallies in support of the establishment's domestic and foreign policies. It broke taboos and challenged the notion of the red lines, the vague no-go areas comprising the fundamental political, religious and social spheres of the hard-line clerics who dominated the system. (Abdo and Lyons 162) "One can criticize the decisions of an Islamic government" and still remain a good Muslim, a lengthy interview with a leading intellectual cleric assured readers. In the same issue, the front page featured a picture of the French actress Juliet Binoche, with her hair fully exposed in contradiction to Iran's Islamic dress code. (Abdo and Lyons 162) "We did not respect the so-called red lines because they were man-made," recalled Jalaiepour, one of the founders of *Jame'eh*. Jalaiepour soon began to keep a packed kit bag, including a toothbrush and a change of underwear, at his side in case he was hauled off to jail without warning. "Some conservatives say that the red lines came from God, but we did not believe this. For example, before and



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Jame'eh you could not see pictures of women on the front page...every newspaper put the supreme leader's speeches on the front page, but we used to cover it on page two... We were avant-garde for the time, but originally we just wanted a newspaper to protect democracy, tolerance, things like that." (Abdo Lyons 159) Other new, popular publications included *Sobh-e Emruz* (Said Hajjarian's daily), *Rah-e Now* (Akbar Ganji's bi-monthly), and *Khordad* (Abdolla Nuri's daily). (Afshari 205) Even more popular was the column written by the witty Sayyid Ibrahim Nabavi, which appeared in *Jame'eh*, *Tous*, *Neshat*, *Asr-e Azadegan*, and *Arya*. (Afshari 207)

The relative freedom of expression in 1998-2000 allowed the reformist press to initiate a rational, journalistic discourse, implicitly validating many of the charges of violations that almost everyone within the regime denied previously. (Afshari 207) The terminology and political analysis, most notably the notions of civil society and the rule of law, were unleashed on a receptive and restless public. *Jame'eh* newspaper, and its broader promise of grassroots democracy, pluralism, and freedom of expression, had to be stopped. (Abdo and Lyons 165) Eventually the hard-liners used their influence within the judiciary system and other administrative systems to revoke the daily paper's publishing license for allegedly undermining religious and revolutionary values. (Abdo and Lyons 165) *Tous* was the successor of the banned *Jame'eh*. In its debut editorial, the founder of the newspaper wrote, "*Tous* seeks to safeguard human rights and general freedom, and to revive the forth pillar [of democracy]." (Abdo and Lyons 165) The newspaper was eventually shut down and its founders, license holder and the popular satirical columnist Ebrahim Nabavi were rounded up. (Abdo and Lyons 166)

The attack on *Tous* revealed the old dynamics at work in reference to the freedom of expression and the press. The attacks were initiated politically and outside of the judicial process by the powerful hard-

liners in the security network. (Afshari 209) One hard-line cleric said publicly the editors faced possible death sentences for "fighting against God." This charge, although rarely applied in practice, was among the favorite tactics of the conservative establishment, which sought recourse to its own reading of Islamic law to crush any hint of dissent. (Abdo and Lyons 166-167) Just a few hours after his rhetorical assault on the pro-reform press, Khomeini convened a meeting... to draw up arrest warrants for the top five people at *Jame'eh*. (Abdo and Lyons 168)



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The fact that Khomeini did this reveals much about the importance all sides place on the issue of free expression under the Islamic political system. The leader's intervention also revealed the fundamental weakness of the Iranian press and its inability to serve as a keystone of a new, civil society within the Islamic political system. (Abdo and Lyons 194) Since around 2000, the hard-line "conservatives," as they are called, have successfully crushed the reformists, not just by shutting down the reformist press but by vetoing reformist legislation and disqualifying thousands of electoral candidates, and jailing, torturing and in a number of notorious incidents, assassinating reformists and student activists. (Berkeley 73)



Brothers Manuchehr and Akbar Mohammadi, and Ahmadi Batebi, who were among the young students detained, tortured and sentenced after unfair trials following student demonstrations in 1999, they continued to face violence while in custody. Six years after the murders of two political activists and three writers—a case known as the “Serial Murders” no steps have been taken to bring those who ordered the killings to justice. (Egendorf 63) Nasser Zarafshan, a human rights defender and the lawyer for the families of the two political activists, remained incarcerated following an unfair trial in 2002. (Egendorf 64) Journalists and human rights defenders Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh and Omid Me’mariyan were arrested for a period of several weeks...possibly in connection with their Internet writings and the support they had given to independent non-governmental organizations. Many of other civil society activists faced harassment through summons and interrogation. Those detained had “confessed” while in custody although later [they] reported to a governmental commission that these “confessions” were extracted under duress. (Egendorf 64-65)

Though enlightened, elegant, and dapper, President Khatami thoroughly disappointed his supporters. Ultimately, he was unable, or as some would say unwilling, to implement the reform programs for which he was overwhelmingly elected. (Gheissari 130) A young student blogger wrote in January 2004 about Khatami, who time and again failed to stand up for student demonstrators who were jailed and beaten on his watch: “It’s unfair to say that he [Khatami] did nothing. We got concerts, poetry readings, carefree chats in coffee shops and tight manteaus [the mandatory overcoats for women]. But is this all that my generation wanted? It was also during this time that the students of my generation were labeled hooligans and Western lackeys...and again Khatami was silent.” (Berkeley 73)

Iran’s hard-liners wield real power through non-elective institutions like the judiciary, the so-called

Guardian Council, which can veto legislation and disqualify candidates for elective office, and the army, the Revolutionary Guard, and allied militias like the Basij and Hezbollah. Any foreigner who visits Iran is struck by the gap between the image projected by the regime to the outside world and the reality of Iranian society. The blogs quoted here vividly convey the bitter disillusionment many Iranians feel not just toward the hard-line mullahs, but toward the failed reformist project and its erstwhile leader, Mohammad Khatami. (Berkeley 73) Despite the sentiment that Iran is no place to be a journalist, gay or even a woman, I also noticed a simmering optimism that change will come one day. The point is perhaps best expressed by Emadeddin Baghi, a leading journalist and human rights advocate who spent three years in prison: “Society itself, not the government, creates change,” Baghi wrote “And there are deep transformations occurring in Iran. Out of sight of much of the world, Iran is inching its way towards democracy.” (Berkeley 78)



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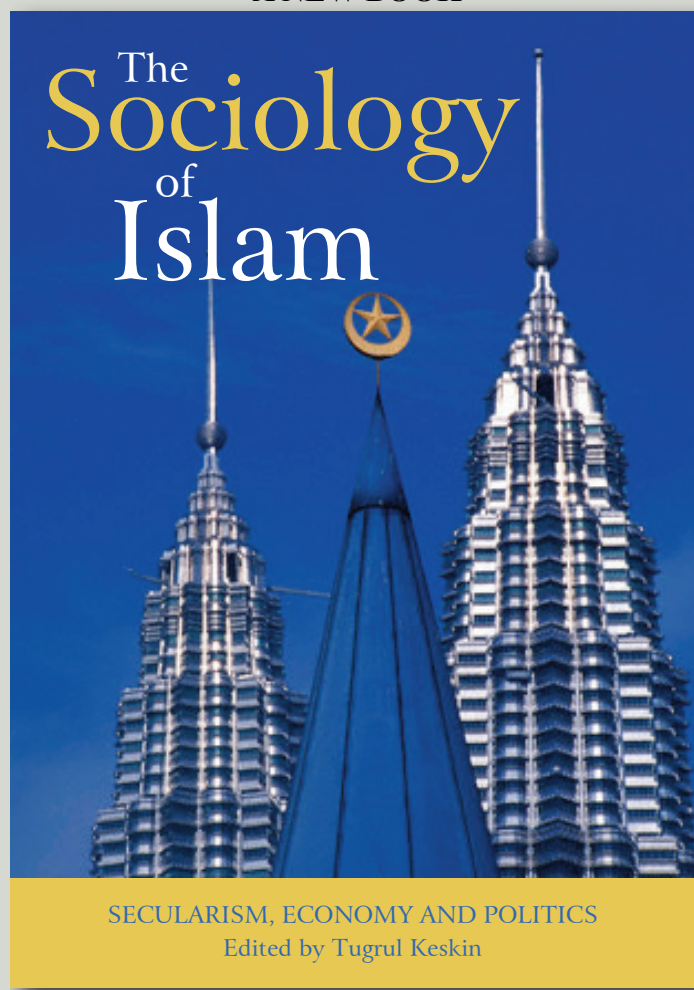
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Iran-Yemen Relations and Regional Implications

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Before the Iranian revolution on 1979, Iran and Yemen's relations were dominated by the Shah's policy toward its regional allies. The Shah supported the Yemeni royalists against the republican forces in Yemen's civil war that lasted from 1962 to 1970. At the time, there was an Egyptian-backed coup d'état in Yemen during Gamal Abdel Nasser's leadership, against royalists backed by Saudi Arabia. Yemen was divided into North and South, but after the war, North and South Yemen declared unity in 1990. In 1994, another war started between the central government in Sana'a and Yemen Socialist Party (YSP), who were fighting for the secession of southern Yemen, but were defeated.

Despite Yemen's military support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, bilateral relations were not strong during the first two decades of the Iranian revolution, but a shift in Iranian policy toward the Arab world resulted in stronger ties with Yemen. In recent years, a number of high-level meetings took place between the two countries' officials stressing cooperation. One sign of this was seen in 2003, when, following Iran's request for the participation in the Arab League as an observer, the Yemeni foreign ministry announced its support noting the fraternal cooperation between the Arab and Islamic states."²

In 2007, the Yemeni ambassador to Tehran submitted Yemeni President Ali Abdallah Saleh's message to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, that Tehran-Sana'a relations are strong, and was anxious to expand relations with Iran. Iranian officials also referred to the friendly relations between the two states and called for an expansion of mutual ties.³

In May 2009, at a meeting between the country's foreign ministers, Iranian Manouchehr Mottaki told his Yemeni counterpart, Ali Muthana Hassan, "The Islamic Republic of Iran is always committed to the consolidation of its friendship and deepening of its ties with Yemen."⁴

Nevertheless, the relationship soured when Yemen accused Iran of arming the Shia Houthi militia and aiding them in intrastate attacks. In September 2009, President Ali Abdallah Saleh revealed in an interview with Aljazeera that Iran had secretly offered him its services as a mediator with the al-Houthi, an indication that Iran already had connections with the insurgents.⁵

Tensions increased when armed Yemeni rebels engaged in incursions across Saudi border, triggering a strong Saudi response. There were accusations of Iran's military and financial support for the Houthis though. Yemeni officials also admitted the Houthis are financed by several non-governmental Shia groups other than the Iranian government.⁶ In October 2009 Yemeni officials seized an Iranian-crewed vessel containing weapons near the Houthi stronghold in the north.⁷ Still, US official deflected claims of evidence of Iran's military assistance to Houthi rebels.⁸

In March 2007 there was a demonstration in Tehran outside the Yemeni embassy protesting the "massacre" of Shiites in Yemen. The protesters demanded the closure of the embassy and expulsion of the ambassador.⁹

Despite Iran's awareness of the scope of Saudi Arabia's influence in Yemen, Iran continued to expand its presence within the Shia community in that country. Yemen has repeatedly accused Iran of attempting to create a Shia state in north Yemen, while Iranian officials have blamed the Yemeni officials of discriminating against the Shia minority.



In response, Yemeni officials have cited Iran's dismal human rights record as the reason it should stop interfering in Yemeni affairs. An official Yemeni response came from Yahya Salih, Yemen's chief of security, who dismissed claims by Manouchehr Mottaki as being baseless. 2

At the height of the rhetorical war, Yemen renamed Iran Street in the capital of Sana'a after Neda Agha Soltan, who was shot dead during post-election demonstrations in Iran. In retaliation, Iranian officials have designated a street in Tehran, The Martyrs of Sa'ada, after the remote and mountainous Yemeni province where Shia insurgents are battling government forces.

According to Saudi-owned al-Arabiyya TV, another road in Tehran was recently renamed after Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, a rebel leader killed in the fighting. In the past, renaming a street in north Tehran to Martyr Khaled Islambuli, the army officer who assassinated Egypt's president Anwar Sadat was a serious barrier in Iran-Egypt diplomatic relations.3 4

On November 25 2009, Yemeni demonstrators in Sana'a appealed to the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh to sever relations with Iran. Similar demonstrations took place in Tehran in support of the Houthis.5

Despite the tension, during a meeting with his Egyptian counterpart, Ali Larijani, Iran's Parliament Speaker, criticized Saudi Arabia for its role in Yemen's internal dispute.6 "In Yemen issue, we criticized our Saudi brothers not the Yemenis", said Larijani in Cairo and reiterated Iran's readiness to resolve the crisis in Yemen.7

The evidence of Iran's support of the al-Houthi is mostly based on Yemeni government claims, but the al-Houthis' Shia identity and their ability to fight six wars against the government since 2004 suggest that they must have substantial foreign support.

Iran-Saudi Proxy War:

Iran's ambitions and influence following the Iraq war have deepened tensions with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Persian Gulf countries, and highlighted the old Shia-Sunni divide. These issues point to a shift in Iran's policy after the Iraq war, and its view that no regional enemy poses a serious security threat.

The Iran and Saudi rivalry are reflected in Yemen. Both countries have supported proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. Iran's support for the minority Shia who are under attack from both Saudi and Yemeni forces does not sit well with the Saudis. But the Islamic Republic of Iran has always sought the opportunity to expand presence beyond its borders and portray a strong image, especially in the aftermath of the disputed elections and the spreading internal turmoil.

Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia have not been friendly in the past few years and became more antagonistic following the recent clashes in north Yemen. The contentious relationship hit new heights when Shia rebels crossed over to Saudi Arabia.

On the Iranian side, several articles in hard-line newspapers such as Kayhan and Fars conducted interviews with a Houthi spokesman and wrote in support of the Yemeni Shia.8 In most news pieces, the Saudi army is called the aggressor and the Houthis are portrayed as successful defenders of Yemen.9

The Iranian media outlets, including Press TV, al-Aalam, Iran's Arabic language TV station, have been taking a pro-al-Houthi position since the beginning of the sixth war, which began in August 2009. They frequently host Yemeni opposition figures and accuse Saudi Arabia of participating in the war in Yemen. Most notably, Manouchehr Mottaki warned against foreign intervention in Yemen's internal affairs. "We strongly warn the regional countries to be careful and



vigilant. Certain people add fuel to some crises should be assured that the fire will entangle them.” said Mr. Mottaki.²

The latest came from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad when he was addressing the people of the city of Ahwaz “Saudi Arabia was expected to mediate in Yemen's internal conflict as an older brother and restore peace to the Muslim states, rather than launching military strikes and pounding bombs on Muslim civilians in the north of Yemen.” Ahmadinejad criticized Riyadh for not using “its military weapons against Zionists to defend Gazans” during the Israeli 22-day war in Gaza in January 2009. In response, the Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal denied any Saudi involvement in military attacks against the Yemeni Shia fighters, “I don't know where he got this accusation that the kingdom is waging war on the Houthis. The real accusation is that Iran is the one that meddles in Yemen's internal affairs.” al-Faisal said in Riyadh.²

Despite the threat of al-Qaeda to both Iran and Saudi Arabia, Iran has made connections with al-Qaeda when it deemed beneficial. Iran's connections to al-Qaeda are to advance its regional goals, hurt American interests, and to work against the Saudis. The Shia in Iran are not in good terms with the Wahabis and several statements from Qom are a testimony to that.³ But Iran's hegemonic foreign policy intentions dictate such connections.

The history of the Islamic Republic and Wahhabism has been an unfriendly one. The father of Iran's revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was unalterably opposed to Wahhabism and to the House of Saud, which adopted that particular strain of Sunnism as the state religion of Saudi Arabia. Indeed, Khomeini often used the term “Wahhabi” as a pejorative in reference to the Saudi ruling family.

Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda organization has taken Wahabism a step further in the direction of justification of violence—regardless of the death and destruction wreaked on innocent bystanders—to inflict harm on real or perceived enemies of Islam. Oddly enough, bin Laden and the Islamic Republic share a common enemy in the Saudi ruling family—an enemy against whom they have been unable to make common cause.

The Shia Factor:

The conflict with the Shia tribesmen has been going on for years, but has been more intense since 2004. Branded as the home of the bin Laden family, Yemen has a religious conflict between Shia tribes, and pro-al Qaeda Wahabi Sunnis. The Shia fighters are followers of Shia Islamic radical cleric Hussein al-Houthi.

In 2005, nearly a thousand troops and tribesmen died in a battle near the Saudi border.⁴ In 2007, Yemen's president ordered a crackdown against rebels, accusing them of trying to oust his government and impose Shia religious law.⁵ In the same year, the Yemeni Ministry of Defense published a fatwa on its website authorizing and obligating the use of deadly force against the Believing Youth, a small band of Shiite Zeydi rebels that has been battling the government on and off since 2004.⁶

The Houthis belong to the Zeydi sect of Shia Islam at odds with the predominant version of Shiism practiced in Iran known as Twelver Shia, the official religion in Iran. In recent years, religious centers in Qom have provided fellowships to Zeydis in Yemen so they can convert to Twelver Shiism. Shia cleric, Hussein al-Houthi, leader of the Houthis who was killed in 2004, was known for being close to Qom clerics. The relationship between Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, to Hussain



Houthis, was considered deep, and almost as friendly as the leader's relationship to Hezbollah's leader, Seyyed Hassan Nasrollah.²³

Many Shia web sites and forums have condemned the discrimination against the minority in Yemen.² Amnesty International's 2009 report on Yemen showed a grim picture of human rights in that country,³ and warned that Yemen's response to al-Qaeda may cause an increase in human rights violations against government critics.⁴ Iran has called for an end to the discrimination it claims has been ongoing for years. Iran has also accused the Saudis joining the Yemeni government in its crackdown on the Shia since August 2009.⁵

It is natural for the Iranians to support Shia factions and minorities with a history of repression around the globe. But the Iranian regime has proved that it only supports groups that enhance its sphere of political and military influence and authority. The Iranian regime's intentions are more political than emotional. As seen in the past, the IRI takes side in political disputes based on political alliances. The IRI took the side of Armenia over Muslim Azeris and kept quiet in Russia's Chechnya and China's Uyghur conflicts. IRI's support for the minority Shia in Saudi's Eastern Province, Bahrain, and Yemen is perceived to have political and strategic motives, rather than ideological ones.

Terrorism:

Recently, the top State Department counter-terrorism chief warned that al-Qaeda turning to under-governed nations like Yemen and Somalia to plan and conduct terrorist operations.⁶ Yemeni government is also troubled by the growing al-Qaeda presence⁷ 8, a weak government, and civil conflict. Al-Qaeda's attempt to hide in politically unstable or failing states makes Yemen a favorable spot. The closure of the US and British embassies sounded the alarm that Yemen is the new terrorism hotspot. Despite Yemen's membership in

the United Nations, the Arab League, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and the Non-aligned Movement, the country has had no luck with national unity and terrorism.

The conflict in Yemen has created an internal tension between the Sunni central government and the Houthis in the north, and sporadic years of insurgency have claimed hundreds of lives and ensuing domestic conflict and instability and chaos that al-Qaeda needs to operate. The Saudis see a threat on their southern border while the Iranians contentedly watch events attempting to divert attention from their own neighborhood. In a sense, the fight -----between Sana'a and the Houthis has created a security vacuum in which al-Qaeda has taken advantage to establish itself in Yemen.

Several strategic elements have caused this conflict to find regional dimensions. Al-Qaeda's presence in Yemen, Iran's presence within the Shia community in the north, Saudi Arabia's historic influence and proximity, and US interest to combat terrorism have all made Yemen a strategic crossroad. Overall, with both the Houthi and the al-Qaeda threat alive in Yemen, prospects for national reconciliation are grim. It is apparent that insurgency, lawlessness, the cash and weapons flow from foreign countries and, declining oil reserves make Yemen a fresh front on the fight against terrorism.

NOTES:

¹ <http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/031203/2003120313.html>

² <http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=23338§ionid=351020101>

³ <http://www.yobserver.com/local-news/10016372.html>



⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82u9kVpAPoc>

⁵ <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=6113&l=1>

⁶ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/yemen/6449122/Yemen-accuses-Iranian-religious-institutions-of-backing-armed-rebellion.html>

⁷ <http://www.iiss.org/whats-new/iiss-in-the-press/december-2009/global-insights-us-and-iran-continue-diplomatic-dance/>

⁸ http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2007/03/070303_mf_yemen.shtml

⁹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EKR36ubonY&feature=player_embedded

¹⁰ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/nov/27/iran-yemen-street-cred-rename>

¹¹ <http://www.asriran.com/fa/pages/?cid=92173>

¹² <http://www.almotamar.net/en/6985.htm>

¹³ <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,5042996,00.html>

¹⁴ <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8809301223>

¹⁵ <http://www.kayhannews.ir/880912/16.htm#other1602>

¹⁶ <http://www.kayhannews.ir/881017/16.htm#other1606>

¹⁷ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8352783.stm

¹⁸ <http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=116192§ionid=351020101>

¹⁹ <http://www.bfnews.ir/vdchinkjldiljknlggfmhjfdgpfhklhlolnekglicaphfgc abjbmkbfbboomnonebmnhnoedohbhcnlpekolgbjhbiba aokoebenp.html>

²⁰ <http://www.strategypage.com/qnd/pothot/articles/20060213.aspx>

²¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6362017.stm>

²² <http://www.globalpolitician.com/22563-yemen>

²³ <http://www.ayandenews.com/news/13285/>, <http://www.hawzah.net/Hawzah/Magazines/MagArt.aspx?MagazineNumberID=6326&id=70645>

²⁴ <http://www.shiachat.com/forum/index.php?topic/58422-discrimination-against-shias-in-yemen/>

²⁵ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/yemen/report-2009>

²⁶ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/news/rights-risk-yemen-amid-increased-security-crackdown-20100125>

²⁷ <http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=112862§ionid=3510303>

²⁸ <http://in.news.yahoo.com/43/20091210/914/ten-us-counter-terrorism-chief-warns-of.html>

²⁹ <http://www1.voanews.com/persian/news/africa/Al-Qaida-Yemen-2009-12-17-79524987.html>

³⁰ http://www.forbes.com/feeds/ap/2009/12/17/general-ml-yemen-al-qaida_7219979.html

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Reconstructions, Reform and Ahmadinejad: Iran's Political Revolutions 1989-2009

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Iran has for centuries been a territory coveted by many and understood by few. The Iranian consciousness is one of deep appreciation for its national heritage, myths and heroes. Recently Iran has dominated headlines over its nuclear development program and created stumbling blocks for world leaders attempting to contain and engage an aggressive regime in Tehran. Iran today stands on its own as a force demanding attention and respect from the world. With its massive deposits of natural resources and geo-strategic importance, Iran is trying to position itself as a regional hegemon and provider of energy to countries like Russia and China.

Preceding Iran's current place in the world has been a journey as dramatic as any nation in contemporary history. The 1979 Revolution saw the birth of a unique and contrarian system of government: the Islamic republic. Ever since, Iran has struggled to define itself, its goals and its leaders. This struggle continues today with the neo-conservatives of Iran playing power politics not just with the reform movement that dominated the late 1990's and early 2000's but also with a traditional conservative party struggling to stay relevant. Both the election of Ahmadinejad and the ascension of Iran's neo-conservatives have had repercussions felt by all levels of Iranian society. In the following both the fall of the reform movement and the electoral victories of the neo-cons in 2005 as well as Iran's turn to Russia and China for economic and political opportunities will be discussed. First, the origins of Iranian neo-conservatives and their experiences in the

Iran-Iraq war that shaped the movement will be reviewed with respect to these developments.

Within Iran, neo-conservatives are known *Osoulgarayan* (Principlists) which is a generic term covering a range of conservatives. The official name of Ahmadinejad's party is *Abadgaran Iran-e-Islami* (Developers of Islamic Iran). In academia and within the world of political punditry, Iran's political parties are often categorized as either 'left' or 'right'. This oversimplification can cause confusion to foreign observers as the simplicity implied by these terms don't do justice to the complexity of Iranian political life. The neo-conservative movement in Iran bloomed out of the rot of the conservative establishment. Conservatives in Iran had lost significant electoral ground to the reform movement and its leader Mohammad Khatami. A new conservative element sought to distance itself from the corrupt, establishment elite and be reborn in populist terms and they borrowed heavily from the reform movement itself. Equality, Islam and nationalism were the rhetorical weapons the new conservatives would use to advance their agenda.

This new movement to break off from the failing conservatives would come from the "war generation" (Takeyh). Ahmadinejad's party, for example, is highly driven by the revolutionary ideals they embraced under Ayatollah Khomeini and fought for during the grueling eight years of war with Iraq (1980-1989). Many members of this new conservative movement are veterans of the Iran-Iraq war and it is that conflict that gives context to the neo-conservative ideology. The eight year war with Iraq began in the feverish aftermath of the 1979 Revolution. Although conscription was used in the later years of the conflict, volunteer enlistment made up a bulk of Iran's armed forces. The Iran-Iraq war might be viewed as a battle of ideologies in which Iranians were called to sacrifice.

Saddam Hussein's secular Ba'athist regime promoted pan-Arabism. Iraq and Hussein stood in



stark contrast to Iran's Shi'a brand of theological government that was intent on exporting its revolution to all Muslim nations. The war became an opportunity to consolidate and legitimize the revolutionary regime and to win the war would serve as the ultimate validation of Khomeini's theocratic vision for Iran. Volunteers for the war came largely from a deeply religious and poor segment of Iran's society. Upon returning to society, they were dismayed at what was seen as a departure of revolutionary ideals and an embrace of Western culture by the wealthier segment of the youth. The young and rich of Iran were largely unaffected by the conflict (Takeyh).

As the war ended in the late 1980's, the Iranian Republic found itself in a precarious state. Although coming out intact, Iran was a deeply wounded and traumatized nation. Iranian casualties were an estimated 500,000 and the charismatic architect of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, died the year after the war's end in 1990. Additionally, domestic issues had been largely sidelined during the length of the war. It was time for Iran to focus on civil and economic concerns that had been put on hold since the 1979 Revolution. The role of leading the domestic transition from a state of war to a stable nation state would be left to Hashemi Rafsanjani.

Rafsanjani reflected a practical conservatism that operated within the clerical establishment to which he belonged. His strong ties to the mercantile elite where he had flourished in the pistachio trade provided him support from some of the wealthier segments of Iran. These close ties to the clerical and trade classes made him an ideal leader to put the pieces back together domestically. Rafsanjani would however approach Iran's economic development by doling out state projects through informal and opaque dealings where cronyism often trumped merit. This along with the lack of government regulation fueled an environment of short term thinking and opportunism. Foreign investors came to Tehran in the

hopes of an open economic environment receptive to long term investments. The lack of transparency and accountability in business dealings would deter foreign investment in the long run. It quickly became apparent that the rich were getting richer. Ordinary Iranians began to resent the growing stratification of wealth in their society, however, because of his connections with the clerical class and the fact that this class often benefited from the economic climate encouraged under Rafsanjani, religion was used to pacify the population.

Into his second term, Rafsanjani would begin to lose his clerical support and at the same time, a moral liberal reformist movement began to pressure Rafsanjani for serious democratic reform. Hardliners began to balk at Rafsanjani's moderate positions and as the conservatives fought, the reformers organized (Ansari M). A charismatic leader emerged in Mohammad Khatami whose service to Iran and international experience made him an ideal candidate to reach out to the West. Khatami had served in the military although his service was under the rule of the Shah, not in defense of the revolution. He also ran the Islamic Centre in Hamburg and studied Western philosophy. Khatami had a pragmatic approach to the West that reflected his experience. In 1997, Khatami was elected to the presidency by an overwhelming majority of Iranians. He immediately began to formulate strategies to change Iran's foreign policy and reach out to the international community. His tactics centered on cultural engagement attempting to break the social constructions he saw as ruling international relations; particularly the mythology surrounding US-Iranian relations (Ansari M, Confronting Iran).

Great strides were made under Khatami in opening Iran's foreign policy and furthering debate domestically about the future of Iran. Notions about the legitimacy of religious rule were being openly questioned and debated. Many began to wonder whether the Velayat-e Fiqh was responsible for the



day to day business of the state. Scholars like Mohsen Kadivar where scrutinizing the constitution and calling for evaluation and clarification. However due to the large expectations put on reformers and their inability to enact substantial, lasting reform the movement lost momentum. In 2004, the conservatives came back with a vengeance, criticizing Khatami and his allies for his strategy of rapprochement with nothing to show for it (Ehteshami and Zeiri). A year later in 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the presidency of Iran.

Ahmadinejad came from humble roots as the son of a blacksmith who purportedly sold his house giving half the sum to charity and buying a more modest house. His family moved to Tehran from the small town of Aradan when Ahmadinejad was the age of one. His simple beginnings would later come to his aid as he fashioned himself a man of the people (Ehteshami and Zeiri). As a young man Ahmadinejad was a member of the IRGC. His service record remains uncertain but it's been reported that he served with the Basiji, one of Iranian paramilitary security forces (Kukis). Ahmadinejad's experiences as a soldier during the Iran-Iraq war might have helped in shaping his views of the West.

Veterans of the war typically have a distrust of the West that goes deeper than the standard mythologies surrounding the 1953 coup. The documents seized from the US embassy during the hostage crisis and many other issues were the touchstones of anti-Americanism ingrained in Iranian society. Veterans of the war were fighting an aggressor state that the US tacitly supported. The lack of intervention by the US when Iraq illegally used chemical weapons against Iran during the war was proof to many that the US was bent on destroying the Islamist regime. Ahmadinejad is adept at invoking the past wrongs committed by the West upon Iran to shore up domestic support. It's suggested that a good deal of any particular Iranian administrations protestations

against foreigners and Iran's foreign policy at large is for the consolidation of power domestically (Takeyh). Additionally, his refusal to meaningfully negotiate with Western powers on Iran's nuclear development has connected with populist sentiments of national sovereignty and achievement.

Ahmadinejad's political career has been described as unlikely by pundits of Iranian politics (Kukis). In 2004, the 7th Majli's elections where looked at by neo-conservatives like Ahmadinejad as an opportunity to exact their revenge for the sweeping electoral wins seen by the reformists in the last contests. With the reform movement beginning to sputter, conservatives knew they could not face another embarrassing loss. They would go to great lengths to prevent this from occurring. The 2004 elections are largely described as rigged even by Iranian standards. Approximately 3,000 candidates were barred from running, including incumbent deputies, President Khatami's brother and a large number of reformists. All of these were disqualified on the vague accusation that they were "un-Islamic.

The seizure of Parliament by the neo-cons can be looked at as a turning point in the Iranian political landscape. The election of a conservative candidate to the presidency didn't come as a huge surprise however that the candidate was Ahmadinejad came as a surprise to many. Out of eight candidates permitted to run, only three stood a real chance in the eyes of observers; the conservative Qalibaf, the reformist Mostafa Moin and the centrist former President Rafsanjani. The conservative vote was split between Rafsanjani and Qalibaf. Rafsanjani lacked the political support of the Supreme Leader and was looked at as corrupt. Still, he was the candidate considered most likely to win (Ehteshami and Zeiri). As polling began leading up to the election, hard-line leaders decided to switch their support from Qalibaf to the trailing Ahmadinejad (Ansari M, Iran Under Ahmadinejad). This influx of money and resources

launched what had been a well-run but limited campaign to one of a national contender. The first round of voting had the top two candidates; Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad —in that order. During the second round of voting, the reform press now without a candidate to support, threw their influence behind Rafsanjani. This was problematic because they had been heavily criticizing Rafsanjani's insider status and alleged corruptness.

Ahmadinejad won the 2005 Presidential Elections however was met with consternation from many Iranians. Opponents and reformist press outlets labeled him the "Iranian Taliban" and feared he would roll back social reforms made by the two term president Khatami (Dehghanpisheh). Although his victory marked a huge triumph for the neo-conservative movement, his tenure as president has been less than stellar. Iran's economy is currently in crisis and oil prices have dropped significantly thus Iran's economy has suffered. Iran is plagued with high and rising unemployment with inflation being reported at near 30% (Aspden).

Due to the strained relations with the West, Iran has looked East for both political and material support. Russia and China stepped in to provide the support and have used their positions on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to protect Iran from condemnation by Western powers frustrated with Iran's nuclear progress.

In 2006 and 2007, Russia backed the passing of sanctions against Iran in regards to its nuclear program. However since then it has shielded Iran in the UNSC. In October 2009 while addressing Asian leaders in Beijing, Putin warned of pursuing further sanctions against Iran in regards to Iran's nuclear program. Calling them "premature," and he offered that there is, "no need to frighten the Iranians." (Associated Press, 2009) All is not what it seems in Moscow however. A month earlier in September 2009, Obama announced the reversal of a Bush-era project to establish a missile defense system

in Poland, ostensibly being built to combat Iranian medium-range missiles. Russia objected on the grounds that it too greatly affected Russia's strategic security. It is widely speculated that Obama's decision to scrap the defense system was a gamble to persuade (or extort) Russia into taking a harder line on Iran within the UNSC. (Spiegel, 2009) Obama's gamble appears to have paid off, at least for now. In late November of 2009, the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) passed a resolution on Iran's lack of co-operation in its nuclear program referring the matter to the UNSC. The vote passed with support from both Russia and China. Russia's positive comments on the possibilities of sanctions can be seen as a direct quid pro quo for the US's decision to scrap the missile program. (Cooper & Broad, 2009)

Chinese-Iranian relations have been positive for many decades. Iran and China started coming together in the late 1960's as China became more antagonistic towards then Soviet Russia. The Shah saw an opportunity as Russia's support for the Communist Tudeh party within Iran had caused the Shah domestic headaches. Trade relations continued to increase and normalized diplomatic relations began under the Shah in the early 1970's. The toppling of that regime in 1979 would have only a momentary effect on relations. The Chinese government wasted no time courting the fresh revolution —apologizing for any cooperation with the Shah and recognizing the new Islamic Republic of Iran. By the end of the 1980's, total trade between the two countries totaled \$1.627 billion. (Dorraj & Currier, Summer 2008)

Iran and China have become linked economically in more dynamic ways than those in which Iran had become previously linked with Russia, making the situation much more difficult for the United States than it had been previously. With the growth of China's middle class, there has been an increase in that country's energy consumption. Currently, 14% of China's oil is imported from Iran



and that's just the start.

China's state owned China National Petroleum Corp., over the last year and a half, has signed multiple deals to develop Iran's oil fields. These deals to date total an estimated \$120 billion dollars. (Walt, 2009) With most contracts throughout the Middle East owned by Western companies, it represented an opportunity to establish lucrative contracts, guaranteed energy for its ever increasing population and opening up new markets for Chinese goods. China is now Iran's top trading partner, importing everything from consumer goods, infrastructure supplies and weapons. (Walt, 2009) China makes no effort to disguise this growing relationship. At a meeting between Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and an Iranian official in Beijing, Wen was quoted as saying, "The Sino-Iran relationship has witnessed rapid development, as the two countries' leaders have had frequent exchanges, and cooperation in trade and energy has widened and deepened," (Xiang, 2009) These energy deals could have huge consequences for nuclear negotiations with Tehran. As China invests more into Iran and seeks ever greater oil supplies from Iran, it will give Iran a boldness to demand more from China on its behalf. Sanctions that involve withdrawing business investments or boycotting Iranian oil could be damaging enough to China that they would, in fact, need to veto the measure in the UNSC.

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