



# The Point of No Return

## Iran's Path to Democracy

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Mohsen Sazegara

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Patrick Clawson, Series Editor

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Front cover: Iranian students walk during a demonstration entitled, "The anti-dictatorship gathering of students," at Tehran University, December 7, 2002. Thousands of students called for a nationwide referendum to break the political deadlock in which unelected Iranian hardliners use the courts they control as a political instrument to stall voted presidential reforms. Copyright AP Wide World Photos/Hasan Sarbakhshian.

## About the Author

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Mohsen Sazegara is a visiting associate professor at Yale University's Center for International and Area Studies, having previously been a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. While at The Washington Institute, he focused on the prospects for political change in Iran and the role of the international community in the movement for democracy in Iran.

In the late 1970s, as an undergraduate at Sharif University of Technology in Iran and Illinois Institute of Technology, Mr. Sazegara was a leader in the Iranian student movement against the shah. During the 1979 revolution, he returned with Ayatollah Khomeini to Iran, where he served as a founder of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and as managing director of the National Radio of Iran (1979–1981). During the 1980s, he served as political deputy in the prime minister's office, deputy minister of heavy industries, chairman of the Industrial Development and Renovation Organization of Iran, and vice minister of planning and budget.

Mr. Sazegara became disillusioned with the revolutionary government and left it in 1989. He later served as publisher of several reformist newspapers closed by regime hardliners, including *Jamee*, *Toos*, and *Golestan-e-Iran*. He was also managing director of Iran's press cooperative company, whose membership included more than 450 Iranian journal and newspaper publishers. He earned his master's degree in history at Iran's Shahid Beheshti University, and in 1996 completed his doctoral thesis at the University of London on religious intellectuals and the Islamic revolution.

When his candidacy for president was rejected by the Guardian Council in 2001, he initiated a campaign for a referendum on replacing the Iranian constitution. Mr. Sazegara was arrested by the Ministry of Intelligence in 2003. While in jail, he went on two lengthy hunger strikes that caused deterioration in his health; he was permitted to go to London for medical treatment in 2004. Four months ago, Mr. Sazegara helped launch an internet petition for a referendum on the Iranian constitution that has so far garnered the support of more than 35,000 signatories as well as 300 political and cultural activists in Iran and abroad.

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# Executive Summary

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The conflict between modernity and tradition during the last two centuries in Iran is an unresolved problem. Its most important aspect is the conflict between democracy and despotism. The nation of Iran has tried on numerous occasions and through various means to solve this problem but has yet to succeed.

Iran's Islamic Revolution is the latest mistake. The regime that resulted from this revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran, has been defeated in many respects. It has failed not only in the economic domain but also in its cultural, social, and political accomplishments. The defeat of this regime has been not simply the defeat of an ideological, revolutionary, maximalistic version of Islam, but also the defeat of all the revolutionary products of Iranian intellectualism of the 1960s, whether Muslim or Marxist, secular or religious.

The present regime is in the midst of a legitimacy crisis. The regime has tried unsuccessfully to reform itself. It conspicuously lacks popular legitimacy and finds itself unable to address the problems of the country and the people or even its own problems. In addition, the reform movement that aimed to change the regime from within has been defeated. The combination of an illegitimate regime and a lack of prospects for internal change has put the country on the razor's edge.

## **CHANGING SOCIETY**

To understand where the country is headed requires examining how Iran has changed since 1979 during the course of the Islamic Republic. Many transformations have evolved from within Iranian society, such as spreading urbanism, improved literacy, increased involvement of women in social and economic affairs, growth of industry, and intensification of international relations. Among their other

effects, those changes have had a profound political effect: each one has pushed the society toward democracy.

Along with these societal transformations, elites and intellectuals have changed their ideas. No longer are revolutionary ideas the dominant theme. Indeed, a new paradigm of liberalism and democracy is apparent in Iran. Members of the young Iranian generation, who form an absolute majority of the country, appreciate this new paradigm and reflect those changes within society more than other social groups.

In addition to the changes within Iran, foreign and internal changes in the policies of other countries toward democracy have affected Iranian society. The role of the United States has vastly increased, particularly after its interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. The democratic changes in Turkey, one of Iran's closest neighbors, have also been very influential.

The changes taking place within opposition groups provide another force for democracy. Contrary to Iran's Islamic Revolution and overthrow of the shah, in which none of the main opposition groups had democratic ideals, most of the groups opposing the Islamic Republic support democracy.

## **CHANGING REGIME**

On the other side of this equation is the regime itself. The Islamic Republic of Iran has passed through three stages (or republics):

1. The republic of revolution and war—from the successful revolution until the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini (1979–1989). In this period, all of the revolutionary ideas were applied. The result was a disaster and complete defeat for the Iranian people.

2. The republic of terror (1989–1997). In this period, economic policies began to change, but because of poor policies in cultural, social, and political affairs, such economic reforms were not successful.
3. The republic of reform (1997–2004). In this period, democracy, human rights, civil society, and good international relations were the goals of the reformists. However, it became quickly apparent that reaching those goals within the framework of the present constitution was impossible.

The third republic has now ended. The country is on the path toward a fourth republic, which will not be an Islamic republic. Though Iran's leader and some Islamists wish to return to the policies and values of the first republic, this retreat is not possible. The conflict between the majority view—which desires democratic governance and freedom—and the current leadership is leading to a crisis in the nation. The changes that have already occurred within Iran have set the country on a path toward democracy from which there is no turning back, no matter what the temporary setbacks.

# Introduction

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Changes in Iran over the last decade demonstrate why the country's march toward democracy is inevitable in the long run. Some historical background will lead to a better understanding of two centuries of failure in the Iranian struggle for modernity.

At the crux of this issue is the contradiction between democracy and Iran's traditional despotism. Iranians have attempted several times to solve this problem. The Islamic Revolution is the latest failed attempt. This regime has failed to respond to two profound challenges. First, the new theories of religious intellectuals have challenged the ideological foundations of the regime. Second, social transformations and international changes, particularly in the era of globalization, have pushed Iran firmly toward democracy. These two challenges are the main pillars for democratic change in Iran. That change will take place through the efforts of Iran's young generation, which is a vast majority of the country.

# Iran's Long Struggle to Achieve Modernity

Iran is an expansive country that has been administered in a tyrannical way for centuries. On this basis, the king or the ruler has been the proprietor of the people's honor, life, property, and kin. His word has been tantamount to law, and his actions have been beyond the realm of accountability. The traditional tyrant in Iran was considered to belong to a different race and lineage than the rest of the Iranian people. He has had the backing of God for his rule and has been a kind of vice-regent for celestial powers on earth. The ruler has had the country's main economic resources under his control. Iran has had an agrarian economy for centuries. The main elements of such an economy—land, water, and even people—have been directly or indirectly at the sultan's disposal.<sup>1</sup> He could grant anything to anyone and seize anything from anyone. In this economic system, which would more accurately be described as plunder and pillage, any individual or tribe that took over the state would, as a first step, take over vast economic resources from the administrators of the previous state and distribute them among their own appointees and relatives.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, throughout the course of Iran's long history, well-formed social classes have never existed. In contrast to the West, where social classes—whether slave owners, feudal lords, or the bourgeoisie and, in recent centuries, the lower and middle classes—have had a hand in the formation of the state, in Iran, the state has formed the so-

cial classes. Hence, those classes have never had any power in relation to the state.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, organizations allied to social classes, such as trade unions and parties, have not developed in Iran or, if they have come into existence, have lacked real power in the social arena.

Iran has been described as a land of immense contrasts and unexpected events. This description is undoubtedly rooted partly in the country's geography and climate. Most of the population (about 80 to 85 percent) for centuries lived in far-flung farming villages or belonged to livestock-breeding nomadic tribes. Only about 15 percent of Iran's population lived in towns and engaged in trade or a profession. Tribes that have conquered the towns and founded a new political dynasty or regime have formed nearly all Iranian states until modern times. Villagers were far removed from political conflicts. In this political climate, the tyrannical state, the economy, the religion, and the rites and rituals have been attuned for centuries, especially since the Safavid era. The amalgam of Sufism, Shiism, and monarchy created a society that encompassed all aspects of Iranian life. This situation prevailed until the modern world arrived in Iran and upset all these relationships.

The Irano-Russian wars of about 200 years ago serve as the best marker for the arrival in Iran of the manifestations of the modern world. In the course of those two wars, lasting

<sup>1</sup> Ann K. S. Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia: A Study of Land Tenure and Land Revenue Administration* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1991). Lambton's work is a classic exposition of the relations between landlord and peasant. See chapter 5, "The Growth of Absolutism: The Safavids," on the dominant influence of central authority.

<sup>2</sup> 'Ali Reza Quli, *Jami'ahshinasi-i khudkamagi: tahlil-i jami'ahshinakhti-i Zahhak-i Mardush* (Tehran: Nashr-i Nay, 1998), pp. 82–91.

<sup>3</sup> "[E]ven though the European feudal landlord did not enjoy perfect freedom to alienate, transfer or dispose of his property at his own will, his title to ownership and his right of enjoying its fruits were inviolable. The Iranian 'landlord' enjoyed no such right to his title, or security of his income. The Iranian 'landlord' was certainly in a higher stratum of the society than, say, the merchant. But this was not because of his ownership of land: on the contrary, it was because of his relation to the state, from which he derived his landed privileges." Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran: Despotism and Pseudo-Modernism, 1926–1979* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1981), pp. 19–20.

nine years (1804–1813) and two years (1826–1828) and leading to the Treaties of Golestan and Turkmanchai, respectively, the Iranians suffered a heavy defeat at the hands of the Russians and lost large areas of territory.<sup>4</sup> This defeat awoke Iranians, raising serious and important questions for them about what had changed in the world while they slumbered. A new world had been born in the West, a world that was in conflict with their traditional universe. Until Iranians resolve this disconnect between modernism and their traditions, they will make no progress.

The first attempts to solve this problem began from the top by state officials. Abbas Mirza, crown prince under Qajar King Fath' Ali Shah, embarked on reform in Iran about forty years before the Meiji Restoration, which marked the start of Japan's march toward progress. In less than fifty years, the Japanese were able to suitably reconcile the modern world and their own society's traditions, and to bring about the required changes in their religion, rites and rituals, and social structure. By solving the problem of tradition and modernization, they took the first step down a road that has turned them into one of the world's biggest economic powers today. But the efforts of Iranian reformers failed. Although great reformers, such as Abbas Mirza, Qa'em Maqam Farahani, Mirza Taqi Khan, Amir Kabir, Hossein Khan Sepahsalar, and Ali Khan Amin-al-Dowleh, first introduced the manifestations of the modern world into Iran, they were unable to entrench them properly in the soil of Iranian society so that they took root.

When those top-down efforts failed, the Iranian nation organized itself at the bottom and in the body of society for revolution and change. The Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1910 was the product of that effort.<sup>5</sup>

The edict on constitutionalism issued in 1906 and the tussles between the revolutionaries and the royal court finally led to the formation of a parliament and a written constitution. The clergy, a large segment of which had initially supported constitutionalism and the ideas of intellectuals, gradually either became opponents or adopted neutrality. Only a small number of them stood by constitutionalism to the end. The framework of Shiism, which was not in accord with constitutionalism and legislation by a national parliament, did not change and even gradually opposed this movement, transforming the national parliament into a national consultative parliament—meaning that parliament could only provide consultation and that God was the legislature. The clergy even imposed the presence of five senior clerics for controlling parliament's ratifications and ensuring that they were in keeping with religion.<sup>6</sup>

Fourteen years after the Constitutional Revolution, which was supposed to restrain the absolute power of the shah and, through a separation of powers, to make parliament sovereign, Reza Shah began the rise to power that led him in 1926 to become a traditional Iranian shah. Thus, the Constitutional Revolution failed and was unable to solve the conflict between modern political trends and traditional ruling styles. Although Reza Shah modernized some aspects of the country, and the creation of a powerful central government and the provision of security was able to meet part of the demands of constitutionalist leaders, he did not solve the fundamental and structural problems deep within Iranian society of a traditional culture faced with the modern world. The economy and its major resources remained in government hands, and Reza Shah, like his predecessors, transferred large amounts of land to his own name. When oil was discovered and became a mo-

<sup>4</sup> Ali Asghar Shamim, *Iran dar Dowreh-ye Saltanat-e Qajar* (Tehran: 'Ilmi, 1992). See the chapter on Iranian-Russian relations during the reign of Fath 'Ali Shah.

<sup>5</sup> See Mangal Bayat, *Iran's First Revolution: Shi'ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1909* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Mashallah Ajoudani, *Mashroute-ye Irani va Pish Zamineha-ye Nazari-ye Velat-e Faqih* (London: Fasl-e Ketab, 1997). This excellent research shows how the intellectuals made the mistake of reducing constitutionalism to a religious idea.

nopoly of British Petroleum, which only dealt with the Iranian government, a new element was added to the state's economic power. Later, with the nationalization of the oil industry, the state's power over the people and its unaccountability increased even more. Despite the clergy's retreat in the face of the blows inflicted by Reza Shah, by preserving its traditional structure and gaining popular support for the traditions that it was guarding against Reza Shah's bullying, the clergy covertly enhanced its role and popularity. Despite creation of a new judicial system, the shah's absolute power remained beyond the law, and many of Reza Shah's officials or political opponents were killed, jailed, or sent into exile using a few contrived legal charges such as "causing public anxiety," "plotting against the central government," and the like. Some manifestations of the modern world entered Iran, but traditional Iranian tyranny remained. No fundamental change occurred in traditional society.

The most important theoretical underpinnings of the modern world—such as the sovereignty of reason, respect for individual rights, the rule of law, parliamentary legislative institutions, democracy, a market economy, and foreign investment—remained absent from Iranian society. Interference by foreigners, especially Russia and Britain, which had begun in the nineteenth century, had aroused Iranians' hatred, which evolved into a sense of xenophobia. The reaction of a backward, humiliated society in the face of new colonialist powers became entrenched in Iranians in the form of the conspiracy theory, especially because Reza Shah came to power in the 1920s with a coup that the British planned and backed. After the Bolshevik Revolution brought the departure of Britain's longtime Russian rival for influence in Iran, the British reigned supreme and the newly discovered oil proved its importance for British naval dominance and the West's growing industry. In the light of subsequent events in

Iranian history, this process—in which every untoward occurrence is seen as a foreign, especially British, conspiracy—became one of the strongest factors in the Iranian society's consciousness. The conspiracy theory has remained strong to this day in the minds of not just the bulk of the people but also of intellectuals and the elites, acting as one of the main obstacles to the political development of Iranian society.<sup>7</sup>

The outbreak of World War II brought the intervention of foreigners, especially Russia and Britain, that is, the two colonial powers that Iranians hated. They detained Reza Shah and sent him into exile. Despite Iranians' longstanding hatred of Russia and Britain, they were glad about Reza Shah's departure. Over the course of history, whenever Iranians have reached the limit of their endurance in the face of rulers' tyranny, they have reacted in this way. In the years following World War II, in order to solve the problem of their backwardness in relation to the modern world and as the sense of longing gave way to an inferiority complex, Iranians indulged in projection. They shut their eyes to the fundamental weaknesses within Iranian society and, by strengthening the spirit of nationalism, laid all the blame on colonialism, the most important representative of which was Britain—and its symbol was the oil industry.

The nationalization of the oil industry became a national demand and, under the leadership of Mossadeq, was finally fulfilled. Although Mossadeq was a democrat and a freedom lover who was in fact considered a worthy son of the Constitutional Revolution, he came under pressure from Iran's tyrannized society, with all its latent impediments. During the twenty-seven months that he served as prime minister, most of his problems originated among his own friends, clerics, the Tudeh Party, and other elements within Iranian soci-

<sup>7</sup> Yarvand Abrahamiyan, Ahmad Ashraf, and Muhammad 'Ali Humayun Katuziyan, *Justarha'i darbarah-i ti'oriyi toti'ah dar Iran* (Tehran: Nashr-i Nay, 2003).

ety.<sup>8</sup> Americans, whom Iranians saw as a liberation force at that time, made the big mistake of siding with the British to take back the oil industry. That action led to the coup of August 19, 1953, and the toppling of Mossadeq's national government.<sup>9</sup> Had it not been for the internal weaknesses in Iranian society, the differences of opinion within the oil nationalization movement, and the people's despondency, the coup could definitely not have succeeded. The defeat of the oil nationalization movement showed that Iranian societal problems could not be solved through projection that places the blame for everything on foreigners. Once again, the nation was humiliated.

The sweet taste of victory against Britain achieved by nationalizing the oil industry was transformed into bitter hatred against them and the Americans who were their partners in backing the coup. Mohammad Reza Shah's government never managed to heal the rift between the shah and the nation that resulted from the coup. His opponents also made sure that his lack of legitimacy as the beneficiary of a foreign-made coup was never forgotten. Mohammad Reza Shah, too, turned into the traditional Iranian tyrant. He took control of the main economic resources, especially oil; made parliaments obey him; and turned the law and lawmaking into his playthings. He repressed and imprisoned opponents and established a military-security state.<sup>10</sup> Yet the

manifestations of the modern world continued to enter Iran. Factories, universities, roads, and cities grew, but the absence of democracy and a free economy, as well as the lack of legitimacy of what appeared to the people to be a foreign-made state, deepened the rift between the nation's populace and the state.<sup>11</sup>

Iran's Islamic Revolution was another effort by the Iranian nation to solve the long-standing problem of achieving modernity, progress, and freedom. Along the lines of Karl Popper's famous saying that "Marxism is one of the many mistakes we have made in the perennial and dangerous struggle for building a better and freer world,"<sup>12</sup> one has to say that, in Iran's 200-year struggle to achieve modernity and freedom, the Islamic Revolution was among the greatest mistakes. The reason for that judgment becomes clearer when one examines the revolution's claims to legitimacy.

<sup>8</sup> See chapters 10, 12, and 13 of Homa Katouzian, *Musaddiq and the Struggle for Power in Iran* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1990), for a detailed account of the destabilizing elements that Mossadeq had to contend with.

<sup>9</sup> In James A. Bill and W. Roger Louis, *Musaddiq, Iranian Nationalism and Oil* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988), the argument is made that U.S. hostility toward the Mossadeq regime in part led to the rise of the anti-Americanism that fueled the later revolution. See especially the introduction and James A. Bill's article on "the politics of intervention." "The intervention actually stifled the natural growth of nationalism in Iran. When it finally burst out in 1978, it did so with explosive force and extreme anti-Americanism" (p. 12); "American policy in Iran during the early 1950s deeply alienated Iranian patriots of all social classes. This paved the way for the incubation of extremism both of the left and of the right. This extremism became unalterably anti-American" (p. 288).

<sup>10</sup> See chapter 9 of Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), for a description of Mohammad Reza Shah's efforts to consolidate power and stabilize his rule.

<sup>11</sup> In his book *The Political Economy of Modern Iran*, Homa Katouzian describes the Pahlavi regime as a "pseudo-modernist despotism," modern in appearance but lacking a liberal democratic structure. See especially, chapter 7.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p. viii.

## The Islamic Republic's Lapsed Legitimacy

Iran's Islamic Revolution came to power with great legitimacy, which it has lost over time because of mismanagement and its inherent contradictions. What was once a widely accepted government has become a source of resentment.

### SOURCES OF LEGITIMACY

The Islamic Republic has enumerated five bases for its legitimacy, each of which has over time dissipated: political Islam as the true expression of religiosity; emulation of a religious authority; revolution as the mission of history; independence, defined as leaning neither eastward nor westward; and popular support.

**Political Islam as the True Religiosity.** The first basis for the revolution's legitimacy was its religiosity, which it defined as putting into effect a kind of political Islam based upon a maximalist version of religion that started to gain strength in Iran beginning in the 1950s. In the 1960s, those thoughts found their final form in the works of the Islamic theorists in Iran. The late Dr. Ali Shariati was the most important theorist of this line of thinking. The theory, which must be considered a kind of revolutionary Islamism, defines the religion of Islam and the Shiite denomination as first of all maximalist—meaning that it believes that religion must and does have solutions for all aspects of personal and community life and all economic, social, cultural, and political activities. Second, this theory holds that intervening in politics and the institution of a regime is not merely the right—but also the responsibility—of Muslims. Third, this theory holds that Islam is revolutionary, meaning that Islam is based upon the act of revolution and that such action is a historic responsibility that rests

squarely on the shoulders of revolutionaries. Fourth, this theory holds that Islam is utopian, which means that Islam is capable of building an ideal society in which ideal human beings are brought up and put at the service of humanity. When Dr. Shariati spoke of the extraction and refining of cultural resources, he was seeking to include these revolutionary and utopian concepts within the accepted norms of Islam and Shiism. He sought to build a revolutionary ideology from Islam and a complete political party out of Shiism, and he succeeded in doing so.<sup>1,2</sup>

From this definition of religion, the Islamic Revolution was born, and the child of this revolution, the Islamic Republic, extracted the first basis of its legitimacy from the heart of these concepts. The regime propagated belief in the idea that the message of the prophets, especially that of the prophet of Islam and the Shiite Imamate, has been that of interference in politics and of the institution of a regime by revolutionary methods. Because religion is justified by and receives its right to exist from God, the rule of prophets and their successors is also a necessary part of religion with a God-given justification. By this logic, the ruler of the

<sup>1</sup> Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998). Dr. Shariati's thinking was influenced by the "Movement of God-Worshipping Socialists," a clandestine organization formed in the early 1940s that maintained that "Islam was an internationalist idea, capable of providing solutions for all oppressed peoples" (Rahnema, pp. 25–26). See chapters 19 and 20 of Rahnema's biography for an exposition of revolutionary Shiism. See also Dr. Shariati's work "Extraction and Refinement," available online ([www.shariati.com/](http://www.shariati.com/)).

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Shariati was the most influential theorist of this period. However, the writings of other Islamic thinkers of the period are also full of the same concepts and beliefs based on the same foundations. See, for example, the writings of the late Mahdi Bazargan (especially *Marz-i Miyan-i Din va Siyasat*), Ayatollah Taleghani, Ayatollah Mottahari, Dr. Habibollah Paiman, Ayatollah Beheshti, or the writings of People's Mujahedeen, as well as many others who in the 1960s and 1970s wrote of the same ideas in different words.

Islamic Republic has a God-given justification for his rule and for his oversight of popular affairs. The Supreme Leader, under the principle of the rule of the jurispudent, is the successor to the Imam-e Zaman (the twelfth imam, who is in hiding and who will return to earth at the time of the end of the world in order to establish a truly just rule). The Supreme Leader in turn, continues the line of the imams and serves as the successor of the prophet of Islam.

**Emulation of a Religious Authority.** The second basis for the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic lies in the concept of the duty of Shi'ite source of emulation. According to the *fatwa* (religious edict) of Shi'ite clerical leaders, if a person is not a source of emulation, then, in religious matters, he must emulate one of the sources of emulation, meaning that he must obey the basic rules of religious law in accordance with the *fatwa* of that source of emulation. He must also pay his expected, legally decreed, religious taxes to that source of emulation.<sup>3</sup> In the last 120 years, this concept of the source of emulation has become important in the Twelver Shi'ite denomination. Because Ayatollah Khomeini himself was a source of emulation, he wedded the concept of the rule of the jurispudent and leadership of the Islamic Republic with the concept of the source of emulation. An emulator had to follow an Islamic cleric in matters of governance, in the same way that he would emulate him in matters of religious importance. In other words, according to this definition of the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic, the justification of the rulers for their authority over the people is the religiously necessary emulation of the source of emulation by the people. Through his actions, Ayatollah Khomeini turned this equation into a matter of religious responsibility for the people.

<sup>3</sup> Ruhollah Khomeini, *A Clarification of Questions* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1984), pp. 242–244.

**Revolution as the Mission of History.** The third basis of the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic regime is defined from a revolutionary perspective. Usually revolutions have a historic justification, and revolutionaries believe they have been born at the watersheds of history. The regimes born of such revolutions carry the banners of those historic missions and believe that their responsibility is to carry out those historic missions. They justify their rule based on the justifications of those historic missions. Two examples of this phenomenon are (1) Napoleon Bonaparte, who claimed to carry the banner of the French Revolution; and (2) the Bolsheviks, who claimed to be carrying out the mission for the rule of the proletariat. Iran's Islamic Revolution was no exception. Islamic revolutionaries believed they were offering a new spiritual path to human beings who were tired of materialism. The liberalist civilization of the West had reached a dead end, and the communist East was on the threshold of collapse. The Islamic Republic was a third way that would first make Iran reach its ideal state, followed by all the Islamic countries and then the rest of the world.<sup>4</sup> This historic mission, born of Iran's Islamic Revolution and instituted by the revolutionaries, not only allowed the regime to consider its justification to be God-given, but also allowed it to believe that this mission should be prescribed for—and exported to—the rest of the world.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Shariati wrote about the destiny of Islam and its victory over the rest of the world. In his treatise "A Message to the Enlightened Thinkers," a commentary on the Quran's surah "The Romans," he refers to the verse "The Romans were defeated," and infers that the time is ripe for the present-day world powers to be similarly defeated: "Conditions today are very similar. In fact, not even the terminology has changed. East and West rule the world while the Muslims, who are in the middle, are considered part of the Third World. Unfortunately, many intellectuals who have been overcome by the present superpowers believe that the survival of the Third World nations depends on their allegiance to one of these powers. Of course, such a position is contrary to the Islamic belief that Allah is the Almighty and Omnipotent." (www.shariati.com)

<sup>5</sup> A number of Ayatollah Khomeini's sayings relating to global Islamic revolution can be found in Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: The Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, translated by Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981): "Give them Islam, proclaim to the world the program of Islamic government; It is the duty of all of us to overthrow the *taghut*; i.e., the il-

**Independence.** Because of the shah's dependence on the United States and the problem of the coup d'état against Mossadeq, independence was one of the slogans of the revolution against the shah. The simplistic understanding of this slogan was reflected in the speeches of the leaders of the revolution, who claimed that the U.S. and British ambassadors literally dictated all the shah's actions (which, of course, was not true). The revolutionary leaders propagated the idea that independence means having a government that stands tall in the face of Western or Eastern powers. Playing on the humiliation of the nation at the hands of developed countries during the Irano-Russian wars (in the early years of nineteenth century) is a key issue that can help any regime mobilize the people behind it whenever it claims to be confronting developed countries. This issue still helps maintain legitimacy for the Islamic Republic.

**Popular Support.** The fifth basis of the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic is its popularity and popular orientation. After all, Iran's Islamic Revolution was born of a revolution in 1978–1979 that the majority of the Iranian nation supported. Many Iranians sacrificed their lives for the revolution.<sup>6</sup> After the victory of the revolution, the newborn Islamic Republic garnered 98.2 percent of the people's support in a referendum. Since then, in every election and demonstration, the leaders of the Islamic Republic have tried to show that the majority of the people still support this regime, and

that, therefore, because of its popularity, this regime still possesses legitimacy.<sup>7</sup>

### PROBLEMS WITH EACH SOURCE OF LEGITIMACY

In the last twenty-seven years, however, each of the bases of the legitimacy of the regime has encountered problems. The easiest way to see how they have eroded is to start with the last and work back to the first.

**Losing Popular Support.** To sustain popularity, any regime must provide security and a sound economy. On those fronts, the Islamic Republic has failed. With regard to security, it is true that the police can confront thieves and murderers and secure the roads to a certain extent. However, the most important and the worst form of security problem for the citizens of a society is when the regime itself creates insecurity. In that situation, the citizens of a country do not have a sense of security or protection when confronted with the deeds of the regime. In totalitarian regimes, security organizations are allowed—beyond the rule or purview of any law—to interrogate or arrest the citizens.

The most extreme communist regimes provide an example. Though Soviet crime rates were very low, Soviet citizens lived in a state of utmost anxiety and insecurity because, according to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, under such regimes at any moment and in any place one might receive a visit from security personnel and be arrested.<sup>8</sup> Totalitarianism has

legitimate political powers that now rule the entire Islamic world" (pp. 138, 147).

<sup>6</sup> Based on findings by Emad al-Din Baghi, a former researcher at the Martyrs Foundation (Bonyad Shahid), journalist Cyrus Kadivar concluded that the number of "martyrs" in the antishah movement between 1963 and 1979 amounted to 3,164: 2,781 casualties were reported in the 1978–1979 clashes with the shah's army and security forces, 341 between the 1971 Siahkal incident and the February 1979 insurrection, and 32 in the June 1963 pro-Khomeini riots. Another ten names were added to the list, including Dr. Shariati and the Ayatollah's son Mustapha Khomeini. The total number is much lower than the tens of thousands claimed by Khomeini and his successors. Cyrus Kadivar, "A Question of Numbers," *Rouzegar-Now*, August 8, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> For example, shortly after the June 25 presidential run-off elections and the announcement of Ahmadinejad's victory, Supreme Leader Khamenei addressed the Iranian people on state television as follows: "You illustrated the secret of your solidity and power against the expansionist policies of the arrogance of the world. Despite its babbling, your enemy is now humiliated deep inside because of your greatness and the transparency of your democracy." The terms "arrogance of the world" and "enemy" mostly refer to the United States. Lamia Radi, "Iran Hardliner's Election Triumph Upsets U.S. Mideast Policy: Analysts," *Agence France Presse*, June 25, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> "For several decades political arrests were distinguished in our country precisely by the fact that people were arrested who were guilty of nothing. There was a general feeling of being destined for destruction, a sense of having nowhere to escape." Aleksandr I Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956: An Experiment*

been compared to a bird of prey that sinks its bloody claws into all homes. When the ruling regime is present in all aspects of the people's lives, including their neighborhoods, streets, and homes, this omnipresence results in the worst kind of insecurity. The Islamic Republic's track record is even worse than that of the communist regimes, because not only does the Islamic Republic interfere in all the usual spheres in which security forces have purview, but it also interferes in the appearance, dress, religion, opinions, social behaviors, and cultural trends—basically in all the personal aspects of its citizens' lives.

Regarding the economy, statistics best prove the regime's complete failure in all aspects of economic activity. The fact that per capita income has fallen illustrates the widespread poverty in the country. Per capita income has fallen from \$5,200 in 1978 (by 2005 prices) to \$2,300 in 2004; in other words, income today is less than half the pre-revolutionary level.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, per capita investment has fallen, leading to an unemployment rate in some places as high as 21 percent. To make matters worse, mismanagement has led to a rapid increase in the money supply, at a rate of 29 percent in 2004–2005, which suggests that unofficial estimates of inflation as 25 percent are more plausible than the official inflation rate of 15 percent.<sup>10</sup> Finally, anti-inflationary policies, coupled with

the political confusion and inefficiency prevalent after the American invasion of Iraq and the presidency of Ahmadinejad, have put the country in a situation of inflation combined with stagnation, namely, stagflation.

Iran's time bomb, unemployment, especially among the younger generation, is the cause of many other ills and problems. According to the 2005 UN World Drug Report, Iran has the world's highest rate of opium addiction at 2.8 percent of the population over fifteen years of age; Iranian government agencies estimate that 4 million members of an about 70 million population regularly use the drug.<sup>11</sup> Iran also has a high divorce rate; in 2004–2005, the number of divorces was 11 percent of the number of marriages.<sup>12</sup> Recent years are said to have seen an increase in financial crimes and bounced checks. Those ills are just a small part of the crises caused by unemployment and economic problems.

Thus, the Islamic Republic regime's crisis of inefficiency has resulted in a crisis of popularity and acceptability. In every election, by citing the high rate of participation of the voters, the regime's leaders have tried to underline the people's support of the regime. However, the city and village council elections of 2003, the election of the seventh Majlis in 2004, and the ninth presidential elections in 2005 have exposed this illusion. For several years, the regime's opponents have said that preordained street demonstrations or elections in their current mode do not prove popular support of the regime. The best solution is to put the ballot boxes under the supervision of neutral international organizations and hold a referendum on the regime itself. That process would allow the electorate to reveal whether the majority supports the regime or not. Of course, the regime will not

*in Literary Investigation*, translated by Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> The income figures come from the World Bank's *World Development Report* for 1980 and 2006 (the 1980 report lists per capita gross national product in 1978 at \$2,160, which is about \$5,200 in 2005 prices). Depending on how one converts the country's income in rials into dollars, the figure in dollars could be even lower. The official rate of the U.S. dollar is 8,900 rials, and this number will definitely be reduced further, meaning that the income expressed in dollars will drop further. The 2004–2005 gross domestic product was about 20 million rials per person, which at 8,900 rials per dollar is about \$2,300 per person. However, President Khatami's economic minister, Dr. Safdar Hosseini, in his May 2005 report on Iran's economy, stated per capita income to be 5,050,000 rials, which is only \$567 at 8,900 rials per dollar.

<sup>10</sup> Official data for 2003–2004 are in International Monetary Fund Country Report 04/307 and Staff Report 04/306, September 2004. The official unemployment rate of 11 percent is based on a gross underestimate of the number of people seeking work, especially women; only 46 percent of those fifteen years of age and over are listed in the official figures as being in the labor force.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Vick, "Opiates of the Iranian People: Despair Drives World's Highest Addiction Rate," *Washington Post*, September 23, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> "Registered Marriages and Divorces," Statistical Center of Iran. Available online ([www.sci.org.ir/Englishhold/SEL/F2?S2\\_24S.htm](http://www.sci.org.ir/Englishhold/SEL/F2?S2_24S.htm)).

agree to such a referendum without international and popular pressure.

### **Changing the Concept of Independence.**

Iran's isolation after the revolution has shown its people that they have to live with the world. The globalization era is a new concept in Iran that has been noted by many of the intellectuals. They have discussed the concept of nation-state and the necessity of redefining the concept of independence, or national sovereignty. The international community must take cognizance of this very sensitive issue. The best policy is to distinguish between the regime and the people of Iran. If foreign countries show they do not want to interfere in Iran except to defend human rights and democracy and to prevent terrorism, that policy would be effective. Sanctions or other kinds of pressure must relate to democratic and human rights issues, even those sanctions caused by nuclear weapons policy. Policies such as the recent American announcement of \$25 million in aid "to support the cause of freedom and human rights" in Iran can be harmful and humiliate Iranians. Iranians need political support, not money.<sup>13</sup>

**Passing of the Revolutionary Moment.** The same thing happened in Iran that has happened all over the world: with the passage of time, the country's next generation became the majority. In Iran, because of the high rate of

population growth, this postrevolutionary generation makes up 70 percent of society. When the regime justifies itself by citing the export of revolutionary Islam, the younger generation very simply answers, "Forget about exporting the revolution. What have you done for the country itself?" For this young generation, the Islamic Revolution and the shah are both parts of history that it has studied in school textbooks. No particular sympathy or antipathy exists among the young generation for either *Zellollah*, "The Shadow of God on Earth" (the title of kings), or *Ayatollah*, "The Sign of God on Earth." Very simply, the young measure the legitimacy of the regime based on its record of accomplishment, unlike the older generation that was involved in the revolution and that operated from certain specific ideals and feelings.

Because of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, Iran today has a middle generation, called the war generation, between the revolutionary generation and the democratic generation. By underlining the sacrifices of that generation and the sacred values of the defense of the homeland, the current regime is trying to define another base of legitimacy for its rule, alongside revolutionarism. That base is the preservation of the moral values resulting from the war. The problem, however, is that the war is over. No matter how many ways the regime commemorates the war (in the form of the War Week or the Week of Victory of Khorramshahr, for example), and no matter how much the regime shows scenes from the war on the television, the war is no longer at issue. The culture of war belongs to the war itself, and it cannot be artificially propagated during peacetime. Additionally, the war generation itself is a very disillusioned and dissatisfied generation. That generation talks of feeling upset and feeling like a failure more than the other generations. In the heart of society, especially for the youth, the war generation is the very image of the failure of the

<sup>13</sup> Condoleezza Rice, Testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, February 14, 2006. The original budget proposal for fiscal year 2006 had been \$10 million; Rice was explaining the proposed increase to \$25 million. The Bush administration also proposed adding \$50 million to the budget for U.S. broadcasting to Iran, plus adding \$5 million for university scholarships and \$5 million for internet initiatives. Her full explanation for the original \$10 million was: "Over the past two years, the Department of State has invested over \$4 million in projects that empower Iranian citizens in their call for political and economic liberty, freedom of speech, and respect for human rights. We are funding programs that train labor activists and help protect them from government persecution. We are working with international NGOs to develop a support network for Iranian reformers, political dissidents, and human rights activists. We will devote at least \$10 million to support these and other programs during this year [FY 2006], and we are eager to work more closely with Congress to help Iranian reformers build nationwide networks to support democratic change in their country."

Islamic Republic.<sup>14</sup> With the change in generations, the legitimacy derived from revolutionarism and the historic mission of revolutions can be judged only by considering the track record of the government in dealing with people's everyday problems.

**Lacking Leadership to Emulate.** The equation holding that the source of emulation is the country's political leader, and that therefore the religious obligation to obey the source of emulation is equal to obeying the rule of the regime, underwent a crisis with Khomeini's death because Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khamenei, was not a source of emulation and did not have any emulators. Also, the effort to find emulators for him among religious people did not yield any results. Second, Khamenei's fights with other sources of emulation, especially Ayatollah Montazeri, although disposing of that mighty opponent, were self-defeating in the end. They managed to prove that not every source of emulation needs to be emulated and that a source of emulation can be deprived of the right to lead and can be kept housebound. This struggle had begun at the time of Ayatollah Khomeini during his fights with sources of emulation such as Ayatollahs Shariatmadari, Ghomi, Shirazi, and Rouhani, but because of Ayatollah Khomeini's personality and popularity, it had not become known at the societal level. Following Khomeini's death, the continuation of this disagreement with Ayatollah Montazeri, as well as with Vahid Khorasani and Javad Tabrizi and others to a certain extent, has proved the emulation equation invalid.

With the changes of the last twenty-seven years, the percentage of religious believers and emulators among the younger generation has decreased drastically. In other words, not only has the principle of religion and religiosity

in the form of emulation of grand sources of emulation been questioned, the equation of the source of emulation with the right of leadership is also questioned.

**Replacing Political Religion with Humanized Religion.** From 1989 onward, with the formation of the Kian School<sup>15</sup> around the articles and writings of Dr. Abdolkarim Soroush, a current of thought has posed fundamental questions about religion's relation to politics, challenging the most basic theories of the revolution and of the Islamic Republic. In a nutshell, during this period, the religious intellectuals' project was to humanize religion and, through this path, to make religion's peace with the modern world.

Initially, Soroush, in his articles on "The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Shari'a,"<sup>16</sup> reduced religion to a personal understanding of religion and thus introduced religious knowledge as a human subject matter that could interact with other fields of human knowledge. He did so to open the way for modern reason. He then freed religion from ideology and called it a subject "Weightier than Ideology."<sup>17</sup> Religion is viewed as a mysterious matter, whose principal indicia—God and the day of reckoning—are themselves mysterious and belong in the realm of faith and the heart. Soroush demystified the official organization of religion—

<sup>14</sup> Although the ninth president, Ahmadinejad, and his companions pretend that they represent this war generation, in fact only a few people among that generation, even among the Revolutionary Guards, have such political ambitions.

<sup>15</sup> *Kian* is the title of a monthly periodical that is now suppressed by the regime, but about fifteen years ago it started to publish in the field of philosophy of religion and was active for more than seven years. The Kian School is the title of the new religious ideas introduced by this periodical.

<sup>16</sup> The English translation of this article can be found in Abdul-Karim Soroush, "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge," in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 244–251. This article has been published in a book under the same title. The book has been reprinted many times by Sirat Publications. An abridged Persian-language collection of Soroush's works has also been recently released: *Aeen Dar Aeeneh* (Tehran: Mu'assasah-i Farhang-i Sirat, 2005). An English-language compilation is Abdul-Karim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam*, trans. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> A book under the same title has been reprinted many times: Abdul-Karim Soroush, *Farbihtar az idiolzhly* (Tehran: Mu'assasah-i Farhang-i Sirat, 2000). It challenges the most pivotal part of Dr. Shariati's theory.

the clergy—and proved that in their role as builders of “The Ceiling of Living over the Pillar of Religious Law,”<sup>18</sup> the clergy is a completely human organization. Being a member of the clergy is a way of making one’s daily living. He showed that for the sake of “Freedom and the Clergy,”<sup>19</sup> it is better for the clergy not to make its daily living through religion. Of course, the clergy strongly reacted to this article, all the way up to the Supreme Leader himself.

In his book *Straight Paths*,<sup>20</sup> Soroush started the discussion of religious pluralism in the Iranian society. He argued that the followers of a particular religion and belief, such as Twelver Shiites, cannot claim they hold a monopoly on righteousness and truth. By admitting religious pluralism, the way opened for cultural pluralism and then for political pluralism.

In continuing the project of humanizing religion through publication of “The Ethics of the Gods,”<sup>21</sup> Soroush introduced the discussion of ethics and the question of the foundations of humanity, religion, and ethical values to Iranian society. Finally, with the publication of the article “The Expansion of the Prophetic Experience,”<sup>22</sup> Soroush took up the subject of revelation. He transformed revelation from a monologue emanating from God to the Prophet into a dialogue between the Prophet and God. And, with other dimensions of this subject in “Essential and Accidental in Religion” and “Minimalist and Maximalist Religion,” he proved that the revelatory experience was intertwined with the personality of the Prophet (who himself was a product of his own time and place).

Those efforts replaced the maximalist reading of religion with a minimalist reading, arguing that many matters are earthly. These theoretical efforts have transformed the austere and grim face of religion painted by the clergy into the kind and loving face painted by mysticism, which has proven more popular with the young generation. Throughout Iranian history, whenever the rule of the clergy has become authoritarian and strict, the attraction toward mysticism has subsequently strengthened.

By relying on the spiritualism project as the essence of religion, and by relying on the hermeneutics of the Quran and the *Sunna* (the Prophet’s expressions and behaviors), other hardworking intellectuals, such as Mostafa Malekian and Mohammad Mojtahed Shabastari, have expanded the depth and breadth of this humanizing project. Defenders of the rule of the clergy and supporters of revolutionary and ideological Islam have confronted with physical violence these efforts to bring religion more in line with modernity. However, they have not provided suitable answers to the challenge posed by the intellectuals, and these persecutions have themselves made these ideas more attractive to the young generation. These theoretical efforts have not only caused the principles of revolutionary Islam to be questioned, but have also caused its products—such as building a utopia through social engineering and the necessity of religion’s involvement in politics—to come under suspicion.<sup>23</sup>

Although certain religious intellectuals belonging to the first generation of the revolution still follow the intellectual trends of the 1960s,<sup>24</sup> the young generation especially has welcomed these intellectual efforts with open arms. They have questioned this intellectual basis for the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic in the most fundamental sense. These intellectual efforts have provided a suitable ground

<sup>18</sup> An article under this same title has now been published in the book *Moderation and Management*, available in Persian. Abdul-Karim Soroush, *Modara va mudiriyat* (Tehran: Mu’assasah-i Farhangi-i Sirat, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> Soroush, *Modara va mudiriyat*.

<sup>20</sup> Abdul-Karim Soroush, *Serat-hay-e Mostagheem* (Tehran: Mu’assasah-i Farhangi-i Sirat, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> Abdul-Karim Soroush, *Akhl gh-i Khod y n* (Tehran: Tarh-i Naw, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Abdul-Karim Soroush, *Bast-e Tajrobeh-yi Nabavi* (Tehran: Mu’assasah-i Farhang-i Sirat, 1999), where the next two articles can be found.

<sup>23</sup> The influence of this intellectual effort on the change in the discourse in society is discussed further in the next chapter.

<sup>24</sup> See the works and articles published by the Liberation Movement of Iran and other nationalist-religious groups.

from an intellectual standpoint for the rule of reason and civic wisdom, and thus for liberalism and democracy.

Thus, in all five pivotal bases of its legitimacy, the Islamic Republic has encountered crises. With the failure of its reform movement, the Islamic Republic appears unable to solve its problems. In the next chapter, discussion of the transformations within society and the Iranian people makes clear why the chasm between the people and the regime has reached this crisis point and why the country has no alternative over the long term but democracy.

## A Transformed Society

Every nation deserves the government that rules it. As society changes, so must government. In the last thirty years, Iranian society has changed, in its social character and institutions as well as in its opinions and views. Iranian society is no longer suited to its current government; in other words, its government is not good enough for the Iranian nation, and so that government must eventually change.

### CHANGING SOCIETY

Since the 1979 revolution, the main changes in Iranian society have been expansion of cities, literacy, the middle class, women's participation, global communications, and industry.

*Urbanization.* For centuries, the Iranian population lived in villages and tribes. The 68,000 villages of Iran were home to 85 percent of its population. This number started to change about 100 years ago, and in the last census (1996) city dwellers constituted 61 percent of the population. The 2006 census is expected to reveal that city dwellers have increased to 70 percent of the country's population. More than half of this city-dwelling population lives in Tehran and five other large cities. Urbanization and population concentration have their own peculiar exigencies, as seen in European history, when urbanization transformed the society of the middle ages. In Iran, too, the growth in urbanization has brought with it complicated social organizations, increased exchange of information, division of labor, and many other features of modern life. Those transformations are not consistent with the rule of a traditional regime in Iran.

*Universal literacy.* For the first time in the history of Iran, more than 90 percent of the young population is literate. Iran has about 2 million university students, several million university graduates, and 16 million school

students.<sup>1</sup> It is the first time Iran has had such a large literate population.

*Growth of the middle class.* In addition to the growth in the number of city dwellers, the middle class has had a high growth rate. This class has certain qualities that make it the most powerful determining social class in the whole world. All the political parties and all the politicians of the world carefully follow changes in the middle class. If one defines the middle class as bureaucrats, teachers, technocrats, and labor's upper echelons, then today in Iran a powerful middle class has arisen that can play an extremely important role in political equations.

*Growth in women's participation in the social and economic arenas.* More than 61 percent of undergraduate university students are female. Educated and uneducated women alike have the opportunity to enter the social and economic arenas, earn an income, and gain economic independence. Women's economic independence has changed familial relationships. Men can no longer continue the old paternalism by counting on monopolizing the sources of income. Certainly, the changes in the paternalistic patterns in the family unit will bring about congruent changes in the political arena. Monarchic regimes or the absolute rule of the Supreme Leader has been the reflection at the societal level of the paternalism in Iranian families. When the balance of relationships inside the families changes, of necessity,

<sup>1</sup> National Youth Organization, "Iranian Youth Today," March 1, 2006. Available online ([www.nyoir.org/eng/Iranian-Youth-Today-Education.htm](http://www.nyoir.org/eng/Iranian-Youth-Today-Education.htm)). Data on students, including the breakdown of men to women, can be found in the Statistical Yearbook of Iran (Tehran: Statistical Centre of Iran: 2004–2005), p. 1383. Note that although in 2004–2005, 61.5 percent of students studying for a bachelor's degree and 54.2 percent of those studying for a doctorate were women, men predominated among those studying for an associate degree or a master's degree, so that women accounted for 53.9 percent of the students at universities and institutes of higher education.

the political and social byproducts will bring about changes within society at large.

*Growth of global communications.* Although one may keep a closed society backward, as soon as that society begins to have a regular connection with the world, one can no longer keep that society behind closed doors and make it accept certain ideas and opinions. When the telegraph entered Iran, it made possible the 1906 Constitutional Revolution. Cassette tapes and telephones made the Islamic Revolution possible. In today's world, the existence of satellites and the internet will certainly bring about changes in Iranian society in tandem with the changes in global communications. No exact statistics exist, but one can estimate about 7 million internet users and 5 million to 7 million satellite TV users, both of which groups are growing rapidly. (Because the average size of Iranian families is at least 4.6 persons, 5 million to 7 million satellite TV users translates into 23 million to 32 million Iranians living in families with satellite TV.)<sup>2</sup>

*Growth of industry.* Because Iran was historically an agricultural country with an authoritarian regime, social classes did not form and society was fragmented. Properly formed social classes economically independent of the government can build associations (such as guilds or unions) and other "civil society" institutions that are not possible in a "mass society," such as that which historically characterized Iran. In modern societies, one of the most powerful social classes capable of sustaining "civil society" has been industrialists. Now, for the first time in Iranian history, the country has a powerful industrial class. Today the industrial sector directly produces more than 25 percent of Iran's gross domestic product (GDP). With its influence on agriculture, the indirect share of the industrial sector is about 50 percent.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The 1996–1997 census listed the average household size as 4.85 persons. Iran's Central Bank reports that in 2004–2005, 98 percent of urban households had a television and 21 percent had a computer (*Ettemad Melli*, February 25, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> The statistics in this section are from the "Iran Economics" software, produced by the Center for Studies in Programming, Organi-

Iranian industrialists lack powerful organizations and a share of political power in the government and in the parliament suitable to their economic power. However, behind the scenes, many of the struggles within Iranian society today are between the industrialists and the merchants. The most suitable regime for industry, both in economics and in politics, is a competitive system. A market economy and democracy are therefore the desires of the young industrialist class of Iran.

### CHANGING PUBLIC VIEWS

Much as society has been changing, so have the views of the elites and of the public as a whole. Understanding the nature of these changes requires a historical context. Over the last 100 years, four paradigms have characterized elite opinion in Iran, of which the two most recent are most important for understanding contemporary Iran.

The first stirrings of modern thought occurred during 1906–1910, which was characterized by a constitutional movement based on the model of the French Revolution. Less than a year after the Constitutional Revolution and the writing of the constitution, however, pressure from the clergy resulted in a constitutional amendment whose second article negated all the theoretical results wrought by the Constitutionalists. In their naiveté, the intellectuals had thought that the Constitutionalist movement created all the desired results. They were proven wrong, however, because the clerics insisted that the constitution provide for a panel of five *mojtahids* (high-rank clergy)<sup>4</sup> who would have the power to overrule parliament, whose name was changed from the National

zation of Planning and Management of Iran. By contrast, the Central Bank data produced in the IMF report cited in chapter 2, note 10, of this Policy Focus, list industry as 24 percent of GDP in 2003–2004, of which manufacturing (as distinct from construction, mining, water, and power) is 17 percent of GDP.

<sup>4</sup> According to the constitution, these five people were to be chosen from among twenty other sources of emulation, at the recommendation of other sources of emulation and with the ratification of the Majlis. However, in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, the six clerical members of the Guardian Council are appointed by the Supreme Leader. Of course, in both constitutions the major absentee is democracy.

Parliament to the National Consultative Parliament. Thus, the rule of religious law won over modern reason, and it became obvious that the real spirit of democracy and the modern world had not yet come to Iran.<sup>5</sup>

Next came a nationalistic discourse, based on shallow emotional nationalism rather than any mature concept of nation-state. This nationalism in Iran was much like European nineteenth-century nationalism, which reached its apogee in the twentieth century and gave humanity the gift of two world wars. Perhaps because of the chaos of World War I and the occupation of the country by Great Britain and Russia, intellectuals concentrated on the need for a strong, central government. They saw this government relying on Iranian nationalism so that it could defend Iran's borders against the occupying enemy forces. Self-defense was especially important after the division of the Ottoman Empire brought an end to the unity of the world of Islam. In its place, Turkey—the propagator of nationalism and pan-Turkism—became one of Iran's western neighbors. In addition, pan-Arabism started to emerge in nearby Arab countries, such as Egypt. Reza Shah's rise to power in Iran, therefore, was not a mere accident but a reaction to those events.<sup>6</sup>

**The Revolutionary Discourse.** In the 1960s, the paradigm of nationalism gradually underwent a transformation and another paradigm shift happened in Iranian society. The 1960s, when an ideology of revolution seized hold of the intellectuals, was an important decade in the intellectual life of Iran. This revolutionary ideology included the following characteristics:

- Ideologism, that is, a belief in the sacredness of the revolution, not as a means but as an end. Ideologism is a form of searching for the foundations of knowledge outside of knowledge itself. When this ideological effort is concentrated on the justification and explanation of Islam and explains Islam as a historic necessity, a revolutionary Islamic ideology is born. According to this ideology, whether the revolution will have good results is not important; the existence of the revolution itself and revolutionarism as a sacred and moral concept are important.
- A maximalist reading of religion, which is supposed to take over all the aspects of life—from government to economics, from culture to society, from private life to all legal rules, from birth until death—found its ultimate form among Muslims and religious intellectuals. This maximalist reading of religion was the only difference the religious intellectuals had with other intellectuals, such as Marxists.
- Socialist economics, that is, a command economy based on distributive justice instead of presenting everybody in society with the same opportunities and chances.
- Anti-Westernism and suspicion of foreigners. Independence was defined through the lens of Mossadeq's concept of "negative balance." Whereas in a minimalist-maximalist sense this theory is simply balancing off the different foreign powers so as to negate the influence of each, the more influential view was that "negative balance" meant rejecting any solution from outside, looking only inside Iranian society for any solution for social problems.

<sup>5</sup> The best of account of this period is provided by Mashallah Ajoudani, *Mashroute-ye Irani va Pish Zamineha-ye Nazari-ye Velat-e Faqih* (London: Fasl-e Ketab, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> I do not wish to discuss here in detail the coup d'état of March 1921 and the role of Great Britain, oil, and other factors. My intent is only to discuss the intellectual grounds. A good account of the coup d'état can be found in Homa Katouzian, *State and Society in Iran: The Eclipse of the Qajars and the Emergence of the Pahlavis* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2000).

- The glorification of traditional classes and personalities. The position of the clergy among the intellectuals (despite their record during the Constitutional Movement and the age of Reza Shah) was rebuilt during this period. In the majority of the literature and the movies produced during this and the next decade, traditional persons—such as proprietors of teahouses, proprietors of carriages for hire, and traditional farmers—are all depicted as symbols of good people and as a sort of defense against the West and modernity.
- Economic self-sufficiency as the solution for the fight against “Westoxification,” a term introduced by the popular and influential writer Jalal Al-e Ahmad.<sup>7</sup> It meant an emphasis on agricultural production and on import-substituting industry.
- Anticapitalism and anti-imperialism as ideological values. These concepts gained the status of moral values, not just political platforms. Among the religious intellectuals, imperialism and capitalism became akin to symbols of evil.

The revolutionary discourse, with the qualities just mentioned, became more influential in Iran as the 1960s progressed, replacing the nationalistic discourse. As the 1970s unfolded, the revolutionary discourse became nearly universal among Iranian society's intellectual elite, with the attendant rejection of the shah's rule.

The generation of the 1970s (myself included) put those theories into the realm of

practice, and the product was the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Although the shah's opponents had many differences, all of them—including the Islamists who prevailed—agreed on the revolutionary ideology. During the 1980s, after the Islamists took over the government, they put into practice almost all the prescriptions of the intellectuals of the 1960s for the ills of the society. On that basis, they carried out their policies in economy, culture, foreign and domestic policy, the structures and institutions of the government, and the shape of the new consumerism of society.

Among the most important policies put into practice during this period were the following: the closed-door economic policy, which emphasized self-sufficiency (both in agriculture and industry) and viewed foreign trade and investment with suspicion; nationalization of much of the economy, including the banks and many industries; socialistic policies focused on economic justice and suspicion of private enterprise; anti-Westernism, such as taking over the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and more generally opposing the United States and Israel as the symbols of Satan; the rule of the clergy as one of the most traditional classes; and, above all, a revolutionary and violent encounter with all of the regime's opponents and exportation of the revolution. Those policies, however, failed completely.

**The Liberal Democratic Paradigm.** By the 1990s, a new paradigm, which must be called the liberalist and democratic paradigm, came to prevail among Iran's intellectuals. The most important reasons for this paradigm shift were three. First were the failures produced by the revolutionary paradigm.<sup>8</sup> Second were global changes: the end of the world of communism; the era of globalization; and the rise of liberal and neo-liberal discourse in many parts of the world, including greater support for the mar-

<sup>7</sup> There are a number of translations of the term *Gharbzadegi*, including “Westoxification” and “Occidentosis.” See Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, trans. R. Campbell (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1984), for references to the theme of industrial self-sufficiency, especially chapter 10 on “Mechanosis” and chapter 6, titled “How to Break the Spell”: “The third road is to put this jinn back in the bottle. It is to get it under control, to break it into harness like a draft animal. The machine should naturally serve us as a trampoline, so that we may stand on it and jump all the farther by its rebound” (p. 79).

<sup>8</sup> These failures have already been discussed in chapter 2.

ket economy and democracy.<sup>9</sup> As has long been the pattern, transformations in the world, especially in the Western world, have greatly affected the Iranian nation and Iranian intellectuals. A look at the list of books that have been written or translated in Iran during the last fifteen years shows that the mentality of intellectuals in Iranian society is attentive to Western mainstream thought.

The third important factor in the new discourse was a transformation in religious thought. Religious intellectuals overcame one of the important obstacles to the rule of intellect and modern reason.<sup>10</sup> If one considers “Dare to Know” (*Sapere aude*, which Kant borrowed from the Latin poet Horace), as the most important essence of enlightenment—the structural foundation of liberalism—then, through the efforts of the religious intellectuals, especially Soroush, this daring or courage came about among Iran’s young in the 1990s.<sup>11</sup>

The transformations that took place in Iranian intellectual trends laid the foundation for the victory of the reform movement in the May 23, 1997, presidential election. Eight years followed in which the revolutionary trend refused to change along with the transformation of Iranian intellectual thought. This struggle has not ended.<sup>12</sup> Sooner or later, however, the realities within Iranian society will make the regime undergo a transformation. At issue now is the process of this transformation and how it will take place. It would, of course,

be ideal for this transformation to take place with a minimum of damage and with a high level of freedom and democracy.

<sup>9</sup> The book by Muhammad Tabibiyān, Musa Ghani-Nizhad, and Husayn Abbasi Ali Kamar, *Azadi Khvahi-i Nafarjam: Nigahi az Manzar-i Iqtisad-i Siyasi beh Tajrubah-i Iran-i Mu'asir* (unsuccessful freedom-seeking) (Tehran: Gam-i Naw, 2001), is a good example of this attention.

<sup>10</sup> A short account of this transformation was given in the previous chapter.

<sup>11</sup> I gave an account of the relationship between religion and reason in Iranian society in a lecture titled “The Essence of Freedom and Its Enemies,” at Azad University (Free University of Tehran), summer 2001. A summary of this account is available online ([www.IranForum.com](http://www.IranForum.com)).

<sup>12</sup> The ninth presidential election in Iran ought to be considered as another effort of the regime to resist societal changes. The Supreme Leader is attempting to go back to the First Republic. This struggle can only produce further pains for the birth of the Fourth Republic.

## Transformed Foreign Role

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Not only internal developments but also transformations in the countries influencing Iran—first its neighbors, and then the West—have led Iran away from revolutionary discourse. The considerable effect that the outside world has on Iranian political developments raises the question of how foreign developments can expedite the process of change in Iran.

### **LESSONS FROM NEIGHBORS: TURKEY, RUSSIA, AFGHANISTAN, IRAQ**

Westerners may not fully appreciate the effect of the opening to the outside world and the greater political freedoms in every direction around Iran: to its west in Turkey, to its north in Russia, to its east in Afghanistan, and to its southwest in Iraq. The fact that all around Iran, autocracy has been on the retreat and democracy on the rise has had a considerable cumulative effect on Iranian thought.

**Turkey.** Turkey has continuously served as Iran's gate and pathway to Europe and the West. It is also, in a way, Iran's most influential neighbor. In the years after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, because Turkey did not require a visa for Iranian citizens, many Iranians were able to travel and witness with their own eyes the successful transformations in Turkey. Despite Turkey's close ties to Israel, Iran has tried not to lose its good relations with this neighbor. Based on longstanding historic tradition, the Turkish model has seriously influenced the thoughts of Iranian politicians and the general public.

The regime of Turgut Ozal in Turkey took place almost at the same time as the premiership of Hossein Moussavi in Iran (1981–1989). These two prime ministers took their respective countries in very different directions. Turgut Ozal took on the policies of pri-

vatization, opening economic and political doors, and encouraging foreign investment and movement toward democratization. At the same time, during Moussavi's regime revolutionary thinking influenced Iran. Under the Islamic Revolution, nationalizing the economy became the policy, and the economy came under the complete control of the government. Enmity with the United States and Israel and competition with the West became the pivots of Iran's foreign policy. Also, all political freedoms were restricted. Turkey pronounced itself neutral in the matter of the Iran-Iraq War and tried to get the utmost economic profit from both sides.

These two opposing policies resulted in economic success in Turkey and economic failure in Iran. After traveling to Turkey in the last year of his premiership, Moussavi was heard to say that Turkey's successful economic path was worthy of analysis.

The Turkish Islamists gradually gained knowledge of the mistakes of the Iranian Islamists and tried not to repeat them in Turkey.<sup>1</sup> For this very reason, the Welfare Party of Turkey, led by Necmeddin Erbakan, won the Turkish elections under circumstances where it explicitly announced that it did not wish to repeat the example set by the Iran's Islamic Revolution. The Welfare Party actually announced that, if victorious, it would not involve itself with people's food, dress, or sleep. Even now, the ruling Justice and Development Party, under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is not politically Islamist, although the leaders and the party's activists are Muslim. That means that this party does not follow a maximalist model of religion. Thus, in Turkey a model has been executed

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<sup>1</sup> Roya Hakakian, *Washington Post*, Outlook, August 21, 2005.

that, despite certain difficulties, has been able to take Muslims into a position of power within a democratic framework while not harming Turkey's secularist structure.

**Russia.** Much as the French Revolution influenced Iran's Constitutional Revolution, without a doubt, the October Revolution influenced Iran's Islamic Revolution. Although the slogan "neither east, nor west, but Islamic Republic" contained within it a rejection of communism, the influence of the principles of leftist thought on religious ideological tendencies in Iran has been strong. Despite the feelings of competition between Muslims and Marxists and the very violent conflicts of the Muslims with the leftists after the Islamic Revolution, the former U.S.S.R. was never the same object of enmity under the Islamic Republic as the United States. Particularly after the 1989 fall of the communist government in Afghanistan and Iran's increasing confrontation with the United States, the Soviet government gradually extended its relations with Iran. Besides economic and political fields, those relations have extended to the fields of security and information intelligence.<sup>2</sup>

The fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R. and the failure of the revolutionary and socialist model had a very important influence on the minds of the public in Iran. This influence has yet to be properly analyzed. However, the model of the "velvet revolutions" in Eastern Europe is one of the most important models of transition to democracy currently enjoying the attention of democrats in Iran. Many of the reactions of the Iranian regime toward its opponents and toward the democratic forces of Iran are intended to prevent the repetition of that model in Iran.

No matter how positive the influence of the movement of the Russian people and the newly liberated republics neighboring Iran has

been on Iran, the record of the Russian government, which has defended authoritarian rule in Iran, has been very negative. Among Iran's neighbors, the government of Russia is perhaps the most important supporter of Iran's current regime. This fact is not congruent with the movement of the peoples of the Eastern bloc.

**Afghanistan.** In recent years, Iranians have carefully followed the fall of the Taliban and the stationing of multinational forces led by the Americans in Afghanistan. Positive transformations in Afghanistan serve to underline the helplessness and backwardness of the Iranian regime in the minds of the Iranian public. For this reason, Afghanistan's transition to democracy and economic development is having a very serious and shocking effect on Iranians. Perhaps it is because they recognize this mentality that Iran's official propaganda establishment, especially radio and television, constantly tries to make the news of the security problems and the conflicts in Afghanistan appear worse than they actually are. The regime's media try to persuade the Iranian people that invasion by foreign troops is a failed model and that it cannot be the source of any good for a nation. After the fall of the Taliban at the hands of the people of Afghanistan with the help of American and multinational forces, I have personally heard many times in various gatherings of the opponents of the Islamic Republic regime the slogan, "Death to Taliban, whether in Kabul, or in Tehran." In any case, one still cannot speak of a definitive, positive influence by the transformations in Afghanistan upon the trend of democracy in Iran. More than anything, this outcome depends on the success of the Americans and the young government of Afghanistan in rebuilding a destroyed and underdeveloped country. Especially because of economic pressures in Iran, Afghanistan's success in developing its economy and building a livelihood for its people will strongly influence Iran. I have often heard

<sup>2</sup> One night, while I was jailed in Evin Prison, section 209, I heard from the intelligence ministry physician that they had some meetings with Russian Intelligence Service delegations.

ordinary people in Iran say, with great regret, that eventually, in order to find work we must go to Afghanistan, not just to Dubai. This possibility is particularly jarring to Iranian sensibilities because Afghanistan has historically been so much poorer than Iran; even before the 1979 revolution, perhaps a million Afghans sought work in Iran in menial jobs.

**Iraq.** The American and British invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein's Baath regime in March 2003 have caused relations between Iran and Iraq to enter a new phase. On one hand, Iran seeks to create a strong foothold of influence for itself in Iraq by using the 60 percent majority of Shiites in Iraq and even the Kurdish minority in that country. On the other hand, the influence of the events in Iraq—especially movement toward democracy, human rights, and economic changes—has been substantial. The fall of Saddam Hussein in twenty-one days and the fact that, with the stationing of American troops in Iraq, the United States now actually shares a border with Iran were shocks, not just for the leaders of the Islamic Republic, but also for the Iranian nation.

Gradually, however, with the passage of time and growing security problems in Iraq, the attraction of a military solution wore off for the people and youth of Iran. Given the ongoing developments in Iraq, in the last three years the government of Iran has consistently tried to show two things through its propaganda: (1) that, with the fall of Saddam Hussein and the American invasion, the people of Iraq have suffered a terrible fate and they continue to suffer a great deal; and (2) that the Americans are in a quagmire and that they are not able to properly administer Iraq. The Iranian regime is trying to tell Iranians that, as Shamlou (the contemporary Iranian poet) said, "the issue of the rising of the sun is currently moot." (Of course, Shamlou had uttered this sentence about Iran's Islamic Revolution.) Despite this propaganda, because of

the broad cultural communication between the two countries, Iranians are still highly sensitive to events in Iraq, and they carefully follow the issues there. The ambiguity in Iran's political relations with Iraq is also an issue. It can be traced back to the Algiers Agreement of 1975, which was meant to solve the border and military disputes that led to the Iran-Iraq war only a few years later. Today, the same issues still cloud the relations between the two countries with weighty diplomatic problems.

Iranians desire for travel to Iraq for pilgrimage and the welcome that Iraqis show Iranians because of Iraqis' financial needs are other important reasons why Iranians follow day-to-day events in Iraq. In addition, Ayatollah Sistani's role in Iraq encourages interest in Iraq by his many emulators in Iran. The family and tribal relations of many Iranians with Iraqi Shiites, the presence on the Iraqi political scene of Iraqi politicians who lived in Iran for years, and dozens of other factors continue to keep Iranians very sensitive toward the events in Iraq.

Until now, the Iranian regime has largely succeeded in controlling the current of influence of the transformations in Iraq on the Iranian people. The recent news about U.S. requests for negotiations with the Iranian regime on security matters in Iraq is helpful for the regime in this regard. A democratic and economically developing Iraq, however, would have a major positive influence on the project of democracy in Iran. Because of the uncertainty about the fate of Iraq, one cannot make a final judgment on this matter.

**Pakistan and the Gulf Sheikdoms.** Pakistan has become separate from the religious and cultural pluralism of the Indian subcontinent, especially with the growth of Wahhabism in Pakistan and the increasing anti-Shiite prejudice in that country. One result has been some violent attacks by Pakistani extremists on Iranians working in Pakistan; and Iranians generally blame Pakistani extremists for the 1994

bombing of the most important religious site in Iran, the Imam Reza Shrine in Meshed, sacred to Shiites.<sup>3</sup> For those reasons, Pakistan has no positive influence on the democratic trend in Iran. Indeed, because of Pakistan's distancing from religious, cultural, and political pluralism, the country appears to be a threat sitting on the eastern borders of Iran. Possibly, as with the Taliban in Afghanistan, a highly religious and hardline group supported by the Pakistani army could gain power and actually go to the brink of war with Iran.

As for the sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (especially the emirate of Dubai) in particular have become important windows on the outside world for Iran. Much Iranian capital has gone to those countries. Many activities that are forbidden in Iran are allowed in this region. A large part of Iran's imports enters from Dubai, and, in exchange, even innocent Iranian girls are exported to this region. The improved livelihood of the people of these emirates, the increase in their per capita income, and the region's economic development have greatly influenced Iranians, who ask why their country—with its great history and skilled people—has fallen so far behind the sheikhdoms. The dependence of a large part of Iranian merchants on this region and the disdain that they sometimes feel from the Arabs during their travels greatly upsets the people of Iran. Nevertheless, these sheikhdoms do not have a cultural or political influence on the people of Iran. The reasons are many, including the long history of difficult relations and the lack of cultural cohesion in the sheikhdoms.

### THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE WEST

The potential for the West, especially the United States, to influence Iranian politics has sharply increased because of several trends: the Iranian people's friendship toward the

United States, greater U.S. emphasis on supporting democracy and human rights, America's presence all around Iran, and the close U.S.-European cooperation against the Iranian regime's stance on nuclear matters. Continental Europe's changing its policy to side with the United States can be very influential in undermining the self-confidence of the leaders of the Islamic Republic and strengthening the Iranian people's democratic movement. At the same time, Americans may fail to appreciate the depth of Iranian suspicions about the role of Britain; many Iranians strongly believe that the British are the main supporters of the clergy and the Islamic Republic.

**United States.** The United States, which during the Qajar Dynasty in the nineteenth century was a symbol of a far and unreachable place and highly favored, gradually acquired in the minds of Iranians perhaps the most negative image of any country. The first turning point, and the worst mistake of American policy toward Iran, was the coup d'état of August 19, 1953, against the national government of Mossadeq. Although the coup was carried out with cooperation and pressure from the British, it was written up in history as mostly the work of the Americans. In addition, the decades-long propaganda of leftists, including the Tudeh Party supporters of the U.S.S.R., who took over many Iranian cultural and intellectual centers, made anti-Americanism—or, in the parlance of the leftists, anti-imperialism—a cultural, revolutionary, and national value. Furthermore, the shah's continued and unconditional support of the United States, and the Americans' position as the most important supporters of the shah's regime, resulted in Americans becoming the object of Iranian hatred as the shah's regime became more hated. Americans, who had decades earlier been considered the messengers of freedom and democracy, gradually became the main supporter of Iran's authoritarian regime. Thus, the Iranian nation's anti-

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Borowiec, "Iran's Foes Say Regime Planted Bomb at Shrine," *Washington Times*, June 25, 1994.

authoritarian struggle became one with the anti-American struggle. Finally, the image of America in the world in the 1960s and 1970s was a military image. War was in progress in Vietnam, and numerous coups d'état and assassinations in Latin America took place with American support. In Palestine and the Middle East, Israel's conflict with the Arabs was supported by the United States. The Communist bloc's propaganda among the people of the Third World proved effective in making this image worse.

With the victory of the Islamic Republic, enmity with the United States took the form of an ideological and even a religious value at the top of the agenda of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. Ayatollah Khomeini referred to the United States as the "Great Satan." Not only was anti-Americanism a foreign policy or national security issue, it took the shape of a religious necessity. Ayatollah Meshkini, the current head of the Assembly of Experts and the Imam Jum'a of Qom, once said, "The merit earned for saying 'Death to America' is greater than that earned for performing the prescribed prayer five times daily." The Tudeh Party of Iran inscribed that sentence on thousands of doors and walls in Tehran and other large cities.

The events surrounding the occupation of the American Embassy on November 3, 1979, were the worst mistake in the foreign policy of Iran toward the United States. After attacking the embassy, the students asked for a message from Ayatollah Khomeini, and he sent a message that was without precedent in the history of diplomacy: he called this deed a revolution larger than the first revolution.<sup>4</sup> Thus began a crisis that lasted 444 days. This crisis must be considered the nadir of U.S.-Iran relations.

Gradually, the Iranian people's anti-Americanism cooled off. The youth of the

revolutionary generation reached middle age, and extremism gave way to moderation. Parallel to the lack of success of the Islamic Republic in realizing the people's desires and the increase in the people's opposition to the regime, the people became opposed to whatever the government propagandized. At the same time, the new and younger generation, which grew up and entered the social arena during the revolution, did not have the revolutionary sensitivities and anti-imperialistic fervor of the revolutionary generation. Thus, not only did the majority of the country's youth not become anti-American, but also many of them actually turned out to be pro-American. Indeed, if the regime of the Islamic Republic, at least in its propaganda, is the most anti-American regime in the region, then the people of Iran, especially the young generation, are the most pro-American nation in the region.

In the meantime, the bipolar world fell apart and the Cold War ended. Thus, the pretext for anti-American propaganda disappeared. The world's view of America also gradually changed; human rights policy, which started in the Carter era, became a pivotal slogan in American foreign policy and merged with the slogan of supporting democracy. The year 1991, the year of the fall of the Soviet Union and America's first invasion of Iraq, must be considered the second turning point in American policy toward Iran.

The events of September 11, 2001, the ensuing message of condolence to the United States from the Iranian president, and America's attack on Afghanistan must be considered the third turning point in Iran-U.S. relations. In this new phase, America's direct military presence in the region actually caused the fall of two unpopular regimes to the east and west of Iran. Although the fall of the Taliban's fundamentalist regime in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime in Iraq took away two enemy regimes of the Islamic Republic in Iran, the lightning-quick fall

<sup>4</sup> I heard several years later from Ibrahim Asgharzade, who was one of the student leaders, that they planned to attack the American Embassy simply as an anti-American protest and they thought it would last at most twenty-four hours. However, Ayatollah Khomeini's message changed everything.

of those two regimes with the involvement of foreign troops created much fear among Iranian leaders.

The main effect of those transformations, however, was on the mentality of the Iranian nation. Whereas during the entire reformist movement, Ayatollah Khamenei had tried to instill fear of the regime in the people and claimed he could stop any move against himself or the regime, the Iranian people were now faced with a demonstration of a military power, such as the United States, overthrowing a dictatorial regime through a direct invasion and replacing it with a democratic regime chosen by popular vote. The subsequent events, especially in Iraq, made the Iranian people doubt the appropriateness of the American method. The Iranian regime's propaganda, too, constantly maximized the problems of the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq and the suffering and hopelessness of the Iraqi people, to convince Iranians not to hope for foreign involvement.

Those trends—the Iranian people's friendship toward the United States, greater U.S. emphasis on supporting democracy and human rights, America's presence all around Iran—and the close U.S.-European cooperation against the Iranian regime's stance on nuclear matters all work in the same direction: they create circumstances in which the United States can affect political change in Iran. The more the United States supports democracy and human rights in Iran not just with words but also with actions, the more effective its labors will be. This subject is for another study, however. Suffice it to mention here that a central issue is terrorism. The Islamic Republic's support for terrorism has cost the lives of many Americans and of many Iranian strugglers for freedom inside and outside Iran. Putting pressure on the regime for the trials of certain individuals in the Iranian leadership will create a situation that divides the regime and will encourage the people in their struggle for freedom.

**Great Britain.** Belief in conspiracy theories is very strong among Iranians. In truth, the strength of this theory among Iranians is nothing but the reaction of a backward nation to the modern world. In popular belief, Britain's role is close to all-powerful. Through the Freemasons' network, Great Britain is thought to have a presence among all the elite of the country, most especially the clergy. In this widely held view, the Zionists, capitalists, and bankers—all headquartered in London—run the world. One must not imagine that this strange conspiracy theory belongs only to the ordinary people. The country's elite and leaders, too, believe in this theory. Once, in a one-hour speech, the Supreme Leader used the word "enemy" fifty-six times. If one seeks what he really meant by "enemy," one will find a sort of board of directors, which has its nest in Britain and which controls all the world leaders, even Americans. I have many times heard different members of the political elite, both inside and outside Iran, mention Britain's and its agents' conspiracies when they wish to render an analysis of the country's situation. The more one insists on negating the conspiracy, the more Iranians will become suspicious that one is the source of that very same conspiracy. This bitter and sad story, which has caused a nation to be afraid even of itself and to be suspicious of its own achievements, has become one of the most important obstacles to political development in Iran.

Many people strongly believe that the British are the main supporters of the clergy and the Islamic Republic. For this reason, in many of the antiregime demonstrations, one hears the slogan "Death to England." One can say that Britain has taken the place that America had before the revolution. At this time, among Iranians, America is at the height of its popularity and Britain is at the low ebb. For this reason, if Great Britain, as America's closest ally in the invasion of Iraq, defends democracy and human rights in Iran explicitly

and, through sending clear messages to the people of Iran, shows that it has absolutely no intention of supporting the current regime, it will have a serious effect on the people of Iran. People have wrongly believed that the British have stopped the Americans from changing the regime in Iran. Therefore, convincing the Iranian people that the British no longer wish for the continuation of such a regime in Iran would go a long way in helping them gain the trust of the Iranian people. The recent positions of Mr. Blair's government on the defense of human rights and democracy in Iran, particularly its defense of the imprisoned journalist Akbar Ganji, have made some impact in this regard.

Three sources mold the Iranian people's judgment of Great Britain. First is the British government and the formal assertions of its top officials. Second are the stances of BBC's radio broadcasts and its news website, which has many Iranian visitors. The people of Iran consider every word or news broadcast by the BBC to be the position of the British government. British Petroleum, as an old company with a long history of struggle in Iran, is the third source, which the Iranian people consider the symbol of the foreign policy of Britain toward Iran. For this reason, British Petroleum's announcement in the winter of 2005 about its lack of presence in Iran is important for the Iranian people. There is still a long way to go, however, before reaching the point where Iranians will believe that the British do not wish to preserve the current situation in Iran.

**Continental Europe.** In the years after World War II, because of the possibility of finding employment, many students from the middle or lower classes of Iranian society were able to go to Germany for their education, especially in the engineering and technical fields. That generation still acts as an important base—through the hundreds of commercial companies belonging to and run by Iranians

living in Germany—in the economic relations between Germany and Iran. In addition, the Islamic Republic regarded Germany as its “older brother.” Emblematic of this relationship was the ability of Iran's Intelligence Minister Fallahian to travel to Germany in 1993; many in Iran think that while there he signed a security agreement.

After the Iran-Iraq War, France's economic role in Iran developed greatly, and French companies have become very active in Iran's oil industries, automobile industries, and many other areas. This development has also been somewhat combined with the anti-American stance of the French government, which increased the self-confidence of the leaders of the Islamic Republic.

However, in 2005, Iran's relations with both Germany and France became worse over the issue of Iran's nuclear policies. Because an important base of Iran's foreign policy in recent years has been Iran's insistence on the gap between America and Europe, changes in European policy to side with the United States could be very influential in undermining the self-confidence of the leaders of the Islamic Republic and strengthening the Iranian people's democratic movement. If Germany and France were to go further in pressing the Islamic Republic for advancing the cause of democracy and human rights, they could prove very effective. In recent years, when, from time to time, the Germans have brought up a matter, either openly or in private, the leaders of the Islamic Republic have taken it very seriously and have showed that they will not tolerate a rift in relations with Germany.

**China.** In recent years, China has taken steps toward an open economy and, with its high economic growth, has developed into a miraculous phenomenon in the world. From this viewpoint, China has proved influential in Iran in two ways. On one hand is China's economic presence. This presence has flooded Iran with Chinese-produced goods and has

seen increased cooperation with Chinese companies in petroleum and power plant projects and in transportation. In addition, with China's increasing demand for oil in the world market, naturally China has become one of Iran's oil clients. On the other hand is the Iranian regime's consideration of the Chinese economic development model. These leaders see the Chinese model as a process for achieving economic development without the need for accompanying political development and democracy or increased regard for human rights.

Unfortunately, the Chinese regime is not like the Western governments, which, even if only on a superficial level, speak of defense of democracy and human rights as principles of their foreign policy. China has taken no issue with the popular suppression or the violations of human rights in Iran. Thus, in recent years, parallel to the development of its economic and political relations with Iran, China's role with respect to the Iranian people's quest for democratization has taken a negative form. In addition, the Iranian regime tries to use China's weight in the international arena to lessen diplomatic pressure on Iran. China must be considered one of the countries that currently take the opposite direction of the wishes of the majority of the Iranian people for democracy and human rights.

## Chapter 5

# Iranian Political Movements

No matter how active foreign governments become in encouraging change in Iran, their influence will remain secondary to that of Iranians themselves. Therefore, the question becomes what is the state of politics among Iranians. This section addresses one part of the answer, an evaluation of the democratic credentials of different political groups.

At least as important—but more speculative—is an examination of the prospects that opposition groups can undermine the grip of the Islamic Republic. Such an examination would go well beyond what is possible in a short, introductory essay such as this paper. The author will be turning to this issue in his further work.

In general, nearly all the political groups active in the Iranian political arena in the last 100 years can be grouped into four classes:<sup>1</sup> monarchists, nationalists, leftists, and Islamists. At the time of Iran's Islamic Revolution, almost all members of the last three political groups mentioned were united against the monarchists. Although those groups opposed the shah's dictatorship, their discussions did not include a consideration of democracy in its true and fundamental meaning. The groups that were the largest and had the most supporters among the people—the clergy, the Mujahedeen-e Khalq (the combatants of the people), and Fedayeen-e Khalq (the sacrificers of the people)—did not have a theory of democracy at all.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, the chances of creating a democratic regime after the fall of the shah were nearly zero.

As explained in the previous chapters, however, the circumstances of Iranian society have changed. The revolutionary paradigm

has ended, and the prevailing paradigm of Iranian society is liberalism and democracy. This chapter quickly examines each of the four classes of political groups to see whether they, too, have been able to change along with Iranian society and whether their main dispute with the regime of the Islamic Republic is about democracy and human rights or something else.

First, a word about the role of religion in public life. In the years since the Islamic Revolution, the Islamists have constantly squabbled among themselves over which reading of Islamism must rule. Apparently, no solution exists for this situation; it seems to be part of the character of the theory of Islamists. If Islamists wished to set different readings of Islam side by side and tolerate each other, they would need to tolerate religious pluralism. In order to accept a pluralistic view of religion, support must exist for a minimalist view of religion. As soon as someone supports a minimalist—rather than a maximalist—reading of religion, that person is no longer an Islamist.

To return to the main discussion, the elimination and ostracism by the Islamists of those who think and believe differently than they do has resulted in the gradual departure from Iran of the leaders and elite of all other political classes. They leave Iran and reside abroad in order to save their lives. Such elimination and ostracism is part of the character and theory of Islamists. Islamist leaders and activists, however, although they may be opponents of the regime of the Islamic Republic, stay mostly in Iran and, because they are Islamists, their lives are not in as much danger.

### MONARCHISTS

A fundamental difference exists between the proponents of monarchy and the other politi-

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Ahmad Tahmassebi first made this classification.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Abdolkarim Soroush first mentioned this matter in a speech he gave in Bojnourd in 2003.

cal classes. The monarchists have a specific, clear, and inescapable symbol in Reza Pahlavi II, the son of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Naturally, Reza Pahlavi's views are very important and hold a special place for the monarchists. An analysis of Reza Pahlavi's interviews, speeches, and books demonstrates that, at least verbally, this countryless king is quite different from his father.<sup>3</sup> In a nutshell, his writings and speeches impart the impression that he supports the inherent dignity of the individual, human rights, parliamentary democracy, and secularism. The people's vote is a principle for him, and he believes in a monarchic regime whose coming to power depends on the vote of the people. In an interview in California, he announced that, if the majority of the people vote for the establishment of a secular republic in Iran, 90 percent of his wishes will have come true.<sup>4</sup> Of course, the remaining 10 percent is his heartfelt desire for monarchy.

Two political organizations are prominent among the monarchists. One is the Constitutional Party of Iran (CPI; Hezb-e Mashroute-ye Iran), led by Daryoush Homayoun. The other is the Constitutional Movement of Iran (Front Line) (Sazeman-e Mashroutekhahan [Khat-te Moghaddam]), led by Mehrdad Khanssari. Both of these organizations, their leaders, and activists support a parliamentary democracy and consider their main problem with the current Iranian regime to be over democracy and human rights. In particular, the Constitutional Movement of Iran (Front Line) does not consider the statements by the shah's son to be determinative, even during the current phase of the struggle.<sup>5</sup>

### NATIONALISTS

In Iranian politics, the roots of the nationalists go back to the Constitutionalist Movement. They are the elites who struggled against the

Russians and their supporters as well as against the British and their supporters. However, the height of this movement came at the time of the government of the National Front of Iran (Jebhe-ye Melli-ye Iran), led by Mossadeq. Although Mossadeq himself was a secular Muslim democrat, democracy was not the prevailing characteristic of the National Front. In any case, given our discussion, because the banner held aloft by nationalists is Mossadeq and because he was pro-democracy, generally speaking, all the nationalist groups take a democratic stance against the current Iranian regime. Perhaps the most important problem of all nationalist groups is their lack of theoretical separation from nineteenth-century-style nationalism. Another of their major problems is that they cling to Mossadeq's "negative balance" theory when the trend of globalization has made it irrelevant.

### LEFTISTS

In Iran, leftists have been synonymous with communists. Only in recent years has an Islamic left arisen and a sector of the former communists become more like European socialists.

With the growth of the Islamic movement in the late 1970s, the new political Muslim groups considered leftists their bitter rivals. After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, this rivalry and suspicion grew into violence. With the start of armed engagements in 1981–1982, the two main communist organizations, the Tudeh Party and the Organization of the Guerillas of the People's Fedayeen of Iran (Sazeman-e Cherik-ha-ye Fadayeen-e Khalghe Iran) became the targets of attacks by the regime of the Islamic Republic. Many members of those organizations were killed. Some of them left the country. Several thousand of them were imprisoned.<sup>6</sup> Many of those imprisoned were executed during the well-known murders of 1988, and a number of the

<sup>3</sup> Reza Pahlavi, *Winds of Change: The Future of Democracy in Iran* (Washington, D.C.: Regency Publishing, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> See [www.RezaPahlavi.org](http://www.RezaPahlavi.org) and his interview in January 2005.

<sup>5</sup> For Constitutional Movement of Iran (Front Line), see [www.cmi-fl.org](http://www.cmi-fl.org) (interviews with the General Secretary). Also see Daryoush Homayoun's site, [www.talash.de](http://www.talash.de) or [www.d-homayoun.info](http://www.d-homayoun.info).

<sup>6</sup> See [www.asrenou.com](http://www.asrenou.com) for the list of about 4,000 executed prisoners in summer of 1988. The majority of these executed prisoners were the members of Mojahedeen'e Khalgh organization.

survivors who were released either abandoned politics or left Iran.

Among journalists, publishing companies, artistic centers and artists, the writers' association, and theatrical and cinematic activists, supporters of leftism still exist, despite accelerated repression by the Islamic Republic.<sup>7</sup> The People's Fedayeen Organization (Majority) (Sazeman-e Fedayeen-e Khalgh [Aksariyat]) still has an active presence outside Iran.<sup>8</sup> The Tudeh Party of Iran exists in a very anemic state.<sup>9</sup> More important than those two groups, Unity for a Democratic and Secular Republic in Iran (EJI; Ettehad-e Jomhourikhahan), which started its activities two years ago, has become a center for gathering and cooperation among the leftist forces, including People's Fedayeen (Majority). This union comprises many of the prerevolutionary, active, leftist elements outside the country.<sup>10</sup> Many of the former leftists in Iran and EJI have completely abandoned communist thinking for the European social democratic model. This transformation to freedom seeking, based on human rights and far from revolutionary leftism, places a large section of the opponents of the Islamic Republic regime within the circle of the struggle for democracy. Of course, both in Iran and abroad, Marxist groups still exist, such as the Communist Workers Party or People's Fedayeen Guerrillas (Minority) (Cherik-ha-ye Fedayee-e Khalgh [Aghallia]). However, such groups are very small.

## ISLAMISTS

Islamism is a maximalist vision of religion—requiring that politics be subordinate to this conception of religion—separate from Muslimness in the general sense. An extensive part of the active political groups in Iran falls within the Islamist spectrum, from the most hardline elements supporting the worst poli-

cies of the current regime to a wide array of technocratic and reform elements.

Those within this broad category of Islamism constantly bicker over the justification of their own reading of religion. Despite those differences, however, they agree with each other on several points. First, almost all of them agree on not allowing those who think differently to take part in the body politic and on driving other political classes from the arena of political competition in Iran. Even until today, despite certain liberal-sounding slogans, no Islamist trend has cooperated with any non-Islamist group; indeed, every Islamist trend has either stood silently by or actively joined in when certain Islamist sectors suppress non-Islamists.

Second, they all more or less agree on a maximalist reading of religion, meaning that they wish to derive all political, social, cultural, and economic values from religion. Certain sectors, such as the Militant Clergy of Tehran (Rohaniyyat-e Mobarez-e Tehran) and the Coalition of Islamic Associations (Hey'at-ha-ye Motalefe-ye Eslami), believe that this reading should be strictly in accordance with traditional jurisprudence and *sharia*, rather than newer revolutionary thought, while others give priority to their own revolutionary readings of religion. Nevertheless, all agree that religious principles should determine all other aspects of society.

Third, they consider the rule of reason to be contingent upon the permission of religious law. In other words, they consider human reason subordinate to the dictates of religion. Thus, they cannot oppose the existence of an institution such as the Guardian Council to ensure the consistency of the products of human reason with *sharia*. At most, they protest the manner in which the council operates, such as its assertion of the power to approve the qualification of candidates for parliament and president—which is referred to as its “probationary oversight.” Ultimately, the Islamists' way of thinking cannot lead to

<sup>7</sup> Serial murders have occurred, especially the murders of Mohammad Mokhtari and Ja'far Pouyandeh, activists of the Iranian Writers' Association. See the print media (*matbou'at*) of 1999.

<sup>8</sup> See [www.fadai.org](http://www.fadai.org)

<sup>9</sup> See [www.rahetudeh.com](http://www.rahetudeh.com)

<sup>10</sup> See [www.jomhuri.com](http://www.jomhuri.com)

democratic expectations. That is why, until now, none of these groups has gone the beyond boundaries of the current constitution of the Islamic Republic: they all still try to form their political struggle within the framework of that constitution. Unfortunately, the experience gained from the reform movement in 1997–2005 proved that no possibility exists of moving the democratic movement forward within the framework of the constitution of the Islamic Republic and the fundamentalist theoretical structure of these groups.

Despite the enormous efforts of religious intellectuals in general and Soroush, in particular, to offer a minimalist reading of religion that would agree with modern reason and allow the country's youth to welcome these thoughts, so far, the existing Islamist political groups in Iran have not gone in that direction. This failure to adopt a vision of religion consistent with modernity is the root cause of the defeat of Khatami and the reform movement. Their inability to reconcile democracy with their vision of an Islamic society has become the main obstacle to realizing democracy in Iran and has caused a chasm between such groups and younger generations of Iranian society. In addition, certain sectors of traditional and fascist Islamists who, in general, do not even believe in democracy are charged with the responsibility for guiding the machinery of elections and for suppressing free speech.<sup>11</sup> In short, the Islamist groups are thus far the main obstacle to democratic transition and liberalism.

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<sup>11</sup> A detailed discussion of Islamists and their transformation or inactivity is a very important matter that will be dealt with elsewhere. Also, another Islamist group must be named, the People's Mojahdeen Organization of Iran (PMO), which is headquartered—or prisoners of the Multinational Forces—in Iraq. With more than 3,000 persons in Camp Ashraf in that country and with members in European and American countries, the PMO operates as a closed religious sect. This group still has not shown that it has deviated from its theoretical stances, which are revolutionary Islamic, violent, struggle seeking, and leftist. Orally, the leaders of this organization have mentioned democracy, but this possibility has not appeared in serious theoretical articles or books.

# Conclusion

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Iranian society has been transformed in the depths of its structures and beliefs. Because of its institutions and intellectual foundations, the current regime has not been able to reform itself along with society. For this reason, the chasm between the nation and the regime has deepened. The bases of the regime's legitimacy have become weak, and the regime has lost the option of reforming itself. The failure of the reform movement in the last eight years has proved that the current institutions of the regime do not have the ability to reform the regime.

Certain social and cultural demands of social groups, such as the youth, women, and ethnic and religious minorities, have the potential quickly to turn into political demands. Active political groups in Iran can play a serious role in the country's political transformation only when they themselves have changed in step with society, especially with Iranian society's paradigm of democracy and liberalism. A passing glance at Iran's four political classes—the monarchists, the nationalists, the leftists, and the Islamists—shows that some parts of each of these groups remain attached to the intellectual legacy of the 1960s. Most of them have changed, of course, and, can come under the umbrella of a general understanding, which creates the conditions for gradually creating a democratic front. The failure of political groups to evolve in step with society is among the difficulties that make every freedom-seeking political movement face a dead end—the lack of a political leader acceptable to society. At present, none of the organizations discussed in this paper has the capability on its own of becoming an alternative to the current regime.

The disillusionment and depression experienced by Iranian society after the defeat of the reform movement will eventually pass. When political change comes, it is likely to

have as its leaders figures from the postwar, postrevolution generation, although they may bring along with them a number of people from the previous generations. Indeed, it is likely that many officials within the current regime will be important supporters of change. Quite possibly the organization that will unite the forces of change will be similar to a parliament or a coalition.

The global community's clear and transparent support of the Iranian people can add impetus and speed to the Iranian people's movement for realizing democracy. The Iranians themselves need to find a new structure to replace the Islamic Republic. Every reason exists to believe that, in the end, a democratic and secular structure will replace the Islamic Republic.

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