THE (DE)SECULARIZING IMPACT OF POLITICS ON IRAN’S THEOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

It has been three decades since religion has gone “public.” The Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Nicaraguan Revolution, and the establishment of the Moral Majority in the United States, all of which occurred in 1979, signified the “return of religion from exile.” The return of religion called into question the foundation of international relations theories, in particular realism, for ignoring non-material factors. Indeed, social scientists often refer to the Iranian Revolution and its aftermath, including the Hostage Crisis, the Iran-Iraq War, and the Rushdie Affair, as the ultimate example of the increasing role of religion in world politics. However, these scholars frequently fail to take into account the impact that these very incidents have had on Islamism itself.

This dissertation combines comparative politics and international relations theories to examine the evolution of the concept of Velayat-e Faqih (the Rule of the Jurisprudent) in post-revolutionary Iran. Against the background of domestic and international politics, it process-traces the way in which democratic and authoritarian interpretations of Islam have emerged in the country. Using a realist framework, it argues that a weak state may reduce the ideological fervor of its foreign policy and then adjust and institutionalize its official religious narrative to bless its pragmatism. However, if it
perceives itself as strong, the state will return to its core ideology, weaken its pragmatic institutions, and develop religious narratives corresponding to its rising position. The discursive consequences of critical junctures (i.e. war and other major foreign policy related events) become part of the domestic mechanism, which has its own similar logic. This dissertation demonstrates how religion, as a set of competing meanings and contested doctrines that alternatively emerge in various institutions, offers theological latitudes for political actions. The state as well as Islamic parties and factions benefit tremendously from this repertoire in their quest to challenge or strengthen the status quo.
To My parents and Caitlin
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# Table of Contents

Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter One - The “Return” of Religion: Theoretical Debates ........................................... 6

Chapter Two - The Secularizing Impact of the International Politics: The Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War (1979-1989) ................................................................. 34

Chapter Three - The (De)Secularizing Impact of Factional Politics .................................. 66

Chapter Four - The Mosque and Media Politics ................................................................. 98

Chapter Five - The De-Secularizing Impact of Post-9/11 Era .......................................... 154

Conclusion - Theoretical Implications and Other Cases ................................................... 208

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................... 232
**Introduction**

The Islamists are coming! Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers overthrew the pro-Western Shah of Iran in the 1979 Revolution. Across the Arab world in countries like Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and Jordan, Islamist parties gained popularity and influence throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) defeated Kemal Ataturk’s Republican People’s Party (CHP) in the Turkish elections of 2002. Then suddenly it appeared as though a cluster of Islamists may ascend to power as the “Arab Spring” of 2010 - 2012 removed a number of the secular pro-Western regimes in the region: Tunisia’s Islamist Ennahda Party won more than 41 percent of the vote in the first election of the post-President Ben Ali era in October 2011. In post-Hosni Mubarak Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party won a third of the vote in the first round of parliamentary elections in November 2011 and 40 percent in the second round in December 2011. Morocco’s “moderate” Islamists, the Justice and Development Party (PJD) took 107 out of 395 parliamentary seats in November 2011. At the same time, other Islamists battled to come to power in Jordan, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, Libya, Algeria, and much of the rest of the Islamic world.

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Most of these Islamic parties claim to be moderate and respectful of religious pluralism, individual liberty, and international norms. They pledge to remain loyal to the democratic rules of the game. Critics, however, warn of the Islamists’ “hidden agenda,” namely changing the constitution once in power and strictly implementing shari’a law against the popular will. Iran is their case study. Iranian revolutionaries removed a pro-Western despot in 1979 only to replace him with a religious dictatorship. Those critics conclude that bringing religion into politics will lead to little respect for human rights, democracy, and the secular international order, just as it did in post-revolutionary Iran.

These critiques, however, fail to take into account what happens to religion itself once it marries politics. True, the Iranian Revolution was soon followed by the Hostage Crisis, a devastating war with Iraq, and the killing and torture of tens of thousands of Iranian citizens, all in the name of Islam. Ayatollah Khomeini’s theory of Velayat-e Faqih (the rule of the jurisprudent), the cornerstone of the Islamic government since 1979, justified

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5 Here I use “moderation” not in a behavioral sense to describe whether or not a party is working within the framework of the political system to bring about the desired outcome, but in an ideological sense that defines a party’s commitment to pluralism and tolerance. Therefore, I follow Jillian Schwedler’s definition of term as “movement from a relatively closed and rigid worldview to one more open and tolerant of alternative perspectives.” See Jillian Schwedler, Faith in Moderation: Islamic Parties in Jordan and Yemen, (Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3.

6 Thomas Banchoff defines pluralism as “the interaction of religious actors with one another and with the society and the state around concrete cultural, social, economic, and political agendas. It denotes a politics that joins diverse communities with overlapping but distinctive ethics and interests. Such interaction may involve sharp conflict. But religious pluralism, as defined here, ends where violence begins.” See Thomas Banchoff, Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.
this all. But over years, domestic and international events have had a transformative effect on the concept and the institution of Velayat-e Faqih. It has evolved from a utopian ideology aimed at creating a replica of the Prophet Muhammad’s Islamic community and strictly implementing shari’a into a modern and pragmatic doctrine that puts the survival of the state above anything, including shari’a itself. It has also given birth to diametrically opposed theories, both with solid secular elements: one democratic and one autocratic. Iran’s Islamic government and its Islamists have transformed primarily due to their material interests and their positions within the international system and the domestic structure. In other words, statist principles have taken precedence over and shaped religious imperatives.

Focusing on Iran’s case, this dissertation will argue that bringing a religious doctrine into international and domestic politics has unintended consequences for that doctrine itself. Religious doctrines adjust themselves to the realities on the ground and interests of both the state and the actors. When faced existential challenge in the international system, an ideological state “socializes” itself by putting aside its revolutionary fervor. Its weakness forces it to resort to realpolitik, modify its religious doctrine, and establish institutions to promote pragmatic policies. But once it finds itself as a rising power, the same state may return to its religious and ideological core. It then deinstitutionalizes and individualizes pragmatism and empowers ideological institutions once more.
A similar logic applies to domestic politics if the faction replaces the state. An Islamist faction that finds itself weak and outside of the political scene can adopt secular notions such as nationalism and democracy in order to open the political process. However, it may also resort to authoritarian religious doctrines once it is in power. Under both conditions, the factions create new institutions or strengthen the old ones in order to produce the required religious-intellectual repertoire.

In Chapter One, “The ‘Return’ of Religion: Theoretical Debates,” I introduce a two-level theoretical framework and employ a realist/rational-choice institutionalist approach to elaborate both the secularizing and de-secularizing impacts of politics on religious discourses in Iran. Chapter Two, “The Secularizing Impact of the International Politics: The Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War (1979-1989),” is dedicated to the secularizing impact of the international factors, most importantly the Iran–Iraq War on the ideology of the Islamic state.

Chapter Three, “The (De)Secularizing Impact of Factional Politics,” examines the influence of domestic politics on Iran’s ideology of political Islam. It argues that the secular legacy of the first era of the Islamic Republic was further advanced, but in opposite directions, by the two dominant Islamic factions according to their diverging interests. The Islamic radicals, who were busy exporting the revolution or occupying the US Embassy in Tehran in the 1980’s, later became democratic after they were kicked out of the government in the 1990’s. On the other hand, the conservative Islamists, who
dominated the establishment in the aftermath of Ayatollah Khomeini’s death, applied his pragmatic legacy only to foreign and economic policy.

Chapter Four, “The Mosque and Media Politics,” examines the further development of *Velayat-e Faqih* against the background of factional politics by looking at the media. It details how the two main rival factions used the media to compete and negotiate over the meaning and interpretation of religious and political issues. The chapter demonstrates the unintended consequences of media politics on the relationship between the mosque and the state.

Chapter Five, “The De-Secularizing Impact of the Post-9/11 Era,” examines the return of ideology in Iran once the state perceived itself as a strong and rising power. If the negative experiences and adventures of the 1980’s forced the Iranian revolutionaries to become pragmatic, the perceived positive turn of events in the region since 9/11 has led the Iranian pragmatists to once again embrace ideologically motivated policies. These former pragmatists are now “purifying,” or rather hiding, the secular elements of Khomeini’s *Velayat-e Faqih* and returning it to its early utopian version.
Chapter One- The “Return” of Religion: Theoretical Debates

Introduction

It has been more than three decades since religion “went public.” The Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Nicaraguan Revolution, and the establishment of the Moral Majority in the United States, all of which occurred in 1979, signified the “return of religion from exile.” Later events such as the Solidarity Movement in Poland only further confirmed this phenomenon. The re-emergence of religion challenged several core assumptions of social sciences. First, it challenged sociological theories of secularization. Second, it underlined the importance of ideas and identity, as opposed to material interests and pure power, in shaping the conduct of states. The initial reaction of social scientists was to downplay these events as a mere “aberration.” After all, many scholars had “foreseen” the inevitable privatization and decline of religion in the secular modern world. However, eventually it became evident that religion, which according to nearly all sociologists was declining or even disappearing, had returned to the public square as a powerful force. This undermined the theory of secularization, whose basis was laid by sociology’s founding fathers, most notably Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim.

As the events of 1970s and 1980s unfolded and religious influence became more evident in the public sphere, many sociologists began to come to terms with the reality

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of religion as a social and political force. While some like Steve Bruce remained loyal to “traditional” secularization thesis, others such as Jose Casanova attempted to modify it. By distinguishing three different meanings of secularism (religious decline, differentiation, and privatization) Casanova argued that, “the thesis of the differentiation of the religious and secular spheres is the still defensible core of the theory of secularization.” The other two characteristics of secularism, namely privatization and the decline of religion, were contingent and wrong, respectively. Religion was not going to disappear or be marginalized, he asserted, but rather it has been “deprivatized.”

Casanova provided an analytical framework to examine the “varieties of public religion” at the three levels of state, political society, and civil society. Corresponding to these three levels, religion enters the public sphere to protect the “traditional lifeworld” from state penetration (as in the case of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Moral Majority in the U.S.), “contest the absolute lawful autonomy of the secular spheres” (i.e. American Catholic bishops questioning the arms race and U.S. nuclear policy), or to “protect not only its own freedom but also all modern freedoms and rights” (i.e. the Catholic Church’s role in Poland’s democratic transition).

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9 Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); and Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*.
10 Casanova, 7.
12 Casanova, 57-58.
Until recently, political scientists, especially in the field of international relations, have shown little interest in the study of religion and secularism, which was largely a sociological enterprise. A chain of events from the Iranian Revolution to the 9/11 attacks brought religion and its role in politics into the limelight. One of the key questions has been: can religious groups and parties come to terms with secular concepts such as the nation-state, democracy, and human rights? In other words, can they truly “moderate”? If yes, how? Comparative politics and international relations theories have approached these questions differently. Comparativists have often focused on religious factions in the political process, while scholars of international relations have mostly concentrated on the role of religious ideas in foreign policy making. Many of these works have purposefully bypassed the evolution of these very ideas, reduced them to mere strategic calculations, or examined them as independent variables influencing politics and policy.¹³ There have been few studies that trace the development of religious groups and their theological narratives, but they do not sufficiently address the role of political institutions and/or the international system.¹⁴


Religion and Comparative Politics

The “moderation” strategies of Islamic parties have been compared to those of the European Christian Democrats in the 19th century. The theory of Christian Democracy argues that the formation of confessional parties were the “unplanned, unintended, and unwanted by-products of strategic steps taken by the Catholic Church in response to Liberal anticlerical attacks.” These parties entered the political process in order to protect the Church’s interests, but popular elections became the catalyst for their independence from the church and ultimately their secularization. This contingent outcome was not the result of an exogenously induced adaptation, but rather a response to endogenous constraints. In response to electoral and non-electoral institutional constraints, religious parties are generally willing to moderate. If they are in minority in parliament, they must be in the secular coalition in order to have access to power. If they are the majority, they face a ruling military that can eliminate them. But the religious parties’ ability to moderate depends on their inclusion in the political process and whether the moderate leaders can prevail and silence the radical elements. Belgium is a successful case of the ability of the moderates to dominate and thus moderate the party due to the centralized character of the Catholic Church. Whereas in Algeria, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) suffered from internal divisions and weak institutions.

was eventually dominated by radicals, and thus could not prove its commitment to democracy.\textsuperscript{20} Bypassing the ideological and theological questions, this theoretical approach focuses on actors and institutions as opposed to ideology, which, it argues, “is a poor predictor of political action.”\textsuperscript{21}

A number of scholars have extended the theory of Christian Democracy to the Muslim world. Vali Nasr has argued that, similar to Christian Democracy in Europe, “it is the imperative of competition inherent in democracy that will transform the unsecular tendencies of Muslim Democracy into long term commitment to democratic values.”\textsuperscript{22} He acknowledges that Muslim Democrats shape their strategies partly in order to reduce military pressure and take advantage of political opportunity. Nasr, thus, focuses on street-level pragmatic actors with centrist strategies rather than on religious interpreters and reformists:

> Muslim democracy rests not on an abstract, carefully thought-out theological and accommodation between Islam and democracy, but rather on a practical synthesis that is emerging in much of the Muslim world in response to the opportunities and demands created by the ballot box.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} Nasr, “The Rise of Muslim Democracy,” 15.
\textsuperscript{23} Nasr, “The Rise of Muslim Democracy,” 5.
The Muslim/Christian Democracy theory builds on the works of earlier scholars who argued that political parties tend to moderate due to institutional constraints and electoral opportunities. From socialist to Christian to Muslim parties, nondemocratic factions face a strategic setting and institutional mechanisms conducive to moderation. But the “inclusion-produces-moderation” theories do not adequately explain why in a country such as Turkey, Muslim reformists did not emerge until recently, despite the presence of these factors for decades. Or why a potent democratic movement was born within the heart of Iran’s theocracy not because of inclusion, but exclusion. Why have secular interpretations of Islam emerged in Iran, not because of, but rather despite repression by the religious state? Why did these ideational transformations precede, not follow, behavioral changes?

Some scholars, including institutionalists, have noted that constraints and opportunities do not always moderate parties. The institutional configuration of regimes and the Islamists and international and economic factors have been proposed as possible explanations for moderation. But the presence of these factors does not always correspond to the emergence of Muslim reformists. In fact, a similar economic, political, and institutional environment can give birth to two diametrically opposed

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parties. The emergence of reformists in Iran was soon followed by the emergence of an unprecedentedly radical ideology in the conservative camp, which later brought President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power. In other words, Islamic parties do not always moderate and adopt secular principles in the course of campaigning. They can also move further towards unsecular politics and adhere to even stricter religious interpretations. Here religious change precedes political change, not the other way around, as many rational choice theorists and institutionalists argue. Therefore, a theory that accounts for both the moderation and radicalization of Islamic parties, details the evolution of their narratives, and goes beyond mere survival strategies of their elites in response to military repression and political opportunities is needed. The issue of political theology and its trajectories remain an important factor to be tackled. Instead of being bypassed, it should be addressed within the framework of institutions that harbor, enrich, and articulate ideas. However, religious actors and ideas are not always confined within the context of domestic politics. They can influence and be influenced by international politics as well.

**Religion and International Politics**

International relations theorists are struggling to come to terms with religion, which according to some has come back from “exile” and according to others had never left the scene at all. Realism, the dominant international relations theory for the past fifty years, has long perceived religion as merely an instrument of power for states whose main concern is survival and security. However, as they saw the impact of religion
reaching beyond society and domestic politics to foreign policy and world politics, some scholars began to doubt the “secular nature” of their frameworks. They have accused international relations theories, particularly realism, of neglecting religion and building their theories upon the “false promise of secularism.” In the aftermath of 9/11, Robert Keohane noted, “the attacks of September 11th reveal that all mainstream theories of world politics are relentlessly secular with respect to motivation. They ignore the impact of religion, despite the fact that world-shaking political movements have so often been fuelled by religious fervor.” But recent attempts to bring religion back into international relation theory as an important factor have been problematic since they do not account for the fact that the (supposedly) dependent variable of international politics can itself have a profound effect on the dominant religious interpretations and ideologies. These endeavors examine religious influence in terms of the general role of ideas in shaping politics and policies. While it is imperative to account for the role of religion in international relations, it is equally critical to trace the impact of international relations on religion and religious ideas and movements. If the Iranian Revolution was a case of religion going public, why not examine the ramifications of that process on religion itself?

The “Westphalian Presumption”

One of the targets of the critics of realism has been the “Westphalian presumption.” Scott Thomas criticizes the realists’ overemphasis on the role of the state, “Clearly, the impact of non-state actors, including the role of religious actors, is marginalized from the core of this approach to international relations – they became illegitimate international actors after Westphalia. If the role of religion is regarded at all in the realist tradition, it is mainly as the state has invented it, as an aspect of state power, as Lucretius and Machiavelli both observed.”

Some argue that Westphalia is a secular construct that comes from a particular Western experience. Elizabeth Hurd refers to two trajectories for Western secularism, namely laicism and Judeo-Christian secularism, both of which were constructed and strengthened to distinguish the West from the “Other”: the Muslim world. She explains, “The former refers to a separatist narrative in which religion is expelled from politics, and the latter to a more accommodationist narrative in which Judeo-Christian tradition is the unique basis of secular democracy.” She writes:

> International relations theory has struggled with religion because it has failed to consider the politics involved in the designation and enforcement of particular conceptualizations of the secular. It has not come to terms with secularism as a contested social construct. Confusion results from the fact that the religion and the political, the sacred and the secular, are presumed

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28 Thomas, 56.
to be stable categories aligned with familiar modern liberal divisions between public and
private.\textsuperscript{30}

The Westphalian system is a “foreign” concept to non-Western civilizations, especially
to Islam, whose teachings are focused on the \textit{umma} (Islamic Community), which is not
compatible with the sovereignty of states. Thus, Muslims view the Westphalian order,
so the argument goes, as \textit{kuf\textordmasculine} (disbelief) and do not recognize states as legitimate actors.
Similarly Daniel Philpott says, “What it [Islamic revivalism] primarily scorns … is a
secularized political order that challenges its own political theology of authority, along
with the particular offenses perpetrated against Islam by the United States, the most
powerful representative of this order.”\textsuperscript{31}

Indeed, many Muslim thinkers and activists have longed for the return of the \textit{umma},
which according to them inherently contradicts the nation-state system. This claim,
which they argue has a Qur’anic basis, has led many in the West and in the Muslim
world to conclude that there is an essential incongruity between Islam and modernity.
They assert that Muslims yearn to reverse the secular Westphalian order because it has
no divine foundation. On the other hand, referring to historical precedent, some like
Piscatori point out that history shows that many Muslim thinkers were also “realists”
and “gradualists” in the sense that they acknowledged and justified Muslim nationalism

\textsuperscript{30} Hurd, 12.
\textsuperscript{31} Philpott, 84.
as a way to protect Muslims against Western imperialism in the colonial era.\textsuperscript{32} Piscatori asserts that Muslims, like followers of other religions, modify their beliefs according to the realities of the world:

Reality constantly limits the ideal in history and this modifies what Muslims think that Islam is, or what ‘the theory’ says. Theory is certainly important, but it is important because Muslims feel the need to justify their conduct and belief by reference to some version of it. In doing so, theory has a way of changing in the direction of conduct and belief – a pattern seen in every religion, whatever they official expectation may be. But those who are skeptical about Muslim thought on international relations have underestimated this tendency, and as a result they have overestimated the degree of nonconformism that exists among Muslims.\textsuperscript{33}

He concludes:

The fact of the matter is that, in Islam, the nation-state is no less possible, or no more fraught with problems, than it is in the non-Muslim world. Indeed, over centuries of historical experience and the evolution of theory, Muslims have largely freed themselves of a model, which denigrates territorial pluralism and demands monolithic unity. In the process, another, rather different, consensus has emerged which says that the nation-state is, or can be, an Islamic institution.\textsuperscript{34}

It is imperative to refrain from concluding that there is an inherent incompatibility between Islam on the one hand and the nation-state and Westphalia on the other hand. It is also worth noting that the Treaty of Westphalia did not emerge as a peaceful and natural outcome of Western civilization. In fact, the calamitous Thirty Year War led

\textsuperscript{33} Piscatori, 100.
\textsuperscript{34} Piscatori, 150.
Europe to conclude that materializing the 1,000-year-old dream of Christian unity was neither possible nor desirable. As Philpott argues, this was essentially “a truce of exhaustion,” and the ensuing secular order “amounted to nothing deeper than a *modus vivendi*.“35 Although the Catholic Church condemned the treaty at the time, it was gradually blessed by Christian philosophers on the grounds that secularism would strengthen religious faith. Therefore, a solid connection between Christianity and secularism was established. But can the same political circumstances and theological developments that created and blessed “the Westphalian synthesis” in the West also occur in the Muslim world? Can the realities that pushed the Christian world towards religious pluralism lead Muslims to reach a similar “truce of exhaustion”? History shows that religions often acclimate to new circumstances. Catholicism, which had initially resisted modernity, absorbed it and entered in the public square with full force.36 In fact, the Church became a leading force in democratization movements in countries like Poland.

In their struggle against colonization by the Christian West, the defeated Muslims held fast to their own nationalist and religious identities. The failure of nationalism, socialism, and state-capitalism to bring justice and prosperity to their societies left many with one choice: to return to religion and revive it to use against the West. This is what Joel Migdal, following Michael Walzar’s *The Revolution of the Saints*, calls the

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35 Philpott, 74.
“politics of redemption.” Thus, many in the Muslim world may seek theocracy and the implementation of God’s Law as a tool to resist the West. But what if the revisionist theocracy that replaces “wicked” secular despotism turns not only into a religious despotism, but more importantly into a weak and compromising state as well? What if the theocracy that challenges the secular international order is forced to come to terms with it? Can the negative experiences of a full-fledged theocracy exhaust the redemptive revivalist project and unleash a powerful religious discourse on a communal journey towards a pluralistic society?

**Ideas: Causes or Consequences?**

Before 9/11 brought religion more deeply into the debates of the international relations theorists, the end of the Cold War led them to pay more serious attention to the role of ideas in the world politics. In an edited volume, Goldstein, Keohane, and others focus not on whether or not ideas matter, but rather “how ideas matter.” They are interested in how ideas influence policy outcomes. However, the consequences of these policy outcomes do not concern them. Ideas may lead to specific and certain policy outcomes, as the “idea-ists,” claim, but once these “outcomes” emerge, they can have unintended consequences as well. After all, their weakness or strength against competing ideas is

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only revealed when put in action. Thus, outcomes are susceptible to material interests and in turn can modify, or even fundamentally alter those very ideas.

Many of these works and debates are focused on how the influence of liberal ideas (New Thinking) on Soviet leaders and intellectuals contributed to the collapse of communism. Constructivists examine the “constitutive” impact of ideas in shaping the actors’ identities and interests and the “rules of the game.” For Alexander Wendt, the Cold War itself consisted of the Soviet leaders’ assessment of the relations between the capitalist and the communist blocks. Therefore, once those ideas changed, the Cold War effectively ended.\textsuperscript{39} After all, it is ideas “all the way down,” or at least “partly down.” But for realists such as Jack Snyder, ideas are mere reflections of material interests and power.\textsuperscript{40} They ascribe little autonomy for ideational factors. The actors use ideas instrumentally to advance, justify, and legitimize their own interests. Once material interests change, so will the ideas. For realists, Soviet foreign policy changed once its material conditions changed.\textsuperscript{41} Therefore, it is material interests that define the parameters and the “wiggle room” for ideas.\textsuperscript{42}


\textsuperscript{40} Jack Snyder, \textit{Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).


\textsuperscript{42} For a good analysis of the international relations debates on the role of ideas see: Nina Tannenwald, “Ideas and Explanation: Advancing the Theoretical Agenda,” \textit{Journal of Cold War Studies}, Volume 7, Number 2, Spring 2005, 13-42.
In *Theory of International Politics*, Kenneth Waltz pointed out that the anarchic structure of international system “limits and molds [state’s] behavior” through a process of socialization.\(^{43}\) He added, “The close juxtaposition of states promotes their sameness through the disadvantages that arise from a failure to conform to successful practices.”\(^{44}\) Thus, the Soviet Union of 1917, which “preached international revolutions and flouted the conventions of diplomacy,”\(^{45}\) soon learned the cost of non-conformism in a self-help system and came to understand the importance of the balance of power. However, Waltz limits his argument to the state’s behavior in international arena and does not account for possible domestic ideational developments.

Peter Gourevitch takes the argument one step further and suggests that international politics can affect a state’s “domestic behavior” as well. In “The Second Image Reversed,” he argues that, “Instead of being a cause of international politics, domestic structure may be a consequence of it.”\(^{46}\) According to Gourevitch, the distribution of power can affect domestic politics. However, he limits his argument to domestic organizations and policies, or as he puts it, “an entire range of domestic *behavior* [emphasis added].” His theory does not go beyond behavior or policy change to include the cognitive impact that the international state system can have on ideas, ideologies,


\(^{44}\) Waltz, 128.

\(^{45}\) Waltz, 127.

and religious narratives and discourses. In fact, he considers them to be other “external factors” that “can make a great difference to political development.”  

In *Political Power of Economic Ideas*, Gourevitch and others argue that it was the aftermath of World War II and international pressure and crucial domestic coalition building that allowed Keynesianism to dominate the academic policy circles in some Western industrial countries. Although ideas are seen here as powerful independent factors, their acceptance and “persuasiveness” are treated as a dependent variable. In the same volume, Peter Hall suggests that, “the ultimate influence of a new set of ideas does not depend entirely on the innate qualities of those ideas alone … It is congruence between the ideas and the circumstances that matters here, and changes in material circumstances can affect the pertinence and appeal of certain ideas.”

Ikenberry and Kupchan build a similar model to explain an expanded notion of socialization that includes the normative changes of the elites in “secondary states.” They point out that, “Socialization is principally an elite and not a mass phenomenon. For norms to have a consequential effect on state behavior, they must take root within the elite community.” To them, socialization is not about the conformism of a state to the structural norms of international politics, but “a process through which the value

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47 Gourevitch, 883.
49 Hall, 371.
orientations of a leading state are transmitted to elites in other nations, regardless of structural setting." Ikenberry and Kupchan also emphasize the importance of major turmoil such as war and political crisis, writing that, “socialization is most likely to occur shortly after war or imperial penetration … It is also during these periods that both defeated and victorious secondary states must cope with discredited elites, domestic fragmentation, and the task of political and economic reconstruction.”

Many social scientists have stressed the importance of “cleavages” and “critical junctures” in social and political development. Peter Hall describes how exogenous shocks can lead to ideational and ultimately even paradigmatic change in a belief system. It is during critical junctures, as Ira Katznelson puts it, that “the gap between the hypothetical and the optional is reduced” and the “moral value of the status quo” is called into question. It is in these circumstances that institutions are discredited, “many constraints on agency are broken or relaxed and opportunities expand so that purposive action may be especially consequential.”

Critical junctures are followed by increasing returns, which engender a path-dependent and self-reinforcing sequence. Similar critical junctures can lead to different outcomes

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51 Ikenberry and Kupchan, 290 (fn).
52 Ikenberry and Kupchan, 292.
in different settings. Collier and Collier point out that critical junctures “occur in different ways in different contexts and that these differences produce distinct legacies.”\textsuperscript{55} Thus, depending on the domestic context, a common international factor can have contradictory effects. Anarchy can create distinctive institutionalized legacies in different political settings. External pressures and shocks, such as wars, rooted in the anarchic structure of the international system can force a state to compromise, which can then discredit that state’s dominant beliefs and ideologies. The institutionalization of a state’s defeat, victory, or pragmatism can set the stage for diametrically opposed religious narratives.

**The Significance of War**

War has long been seen as a litmus test for many believers to vindicate their ideology and religion. Saint Augustine noticed that when Christian Rome became involved in long wars without quick victory, some started to question the truth of their new religion:

Many people are ignorant of past history, while some others feign ignorance, and if in this Christian era any war seems somewhat unduly protracted, they seize the chance for impudent attacks on our religion, crying out that if Christianity did not exist, and the divinities were worshipped with the ancient rites, this war would by now have been brought to an end by that Roman valor which, with the help of Mars and Bellona, so speedily concluded so many wars in the past.\textsuperscript{56}


The startling victories of the Israeli Army against its Arab foes during the Six Day War strengthened and added legitimacy to Zionism, but ended the era of Arab Nationalism led by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. While the Israelis called this victory a “miracle wrought by God,” many Egyptians ascribed their shocking and humiliating defeat to their distance from Islam and increasingly became attracted to Islamic revivalist ideas.

Iran has not been immune to this phenomenon. Almost all significant intellectual developments in Iran have followed a major war or a foreign-sponsored coup. The “awakening period” during which Iranians became familiar with Europe’s Enlightenment and modernity emerged after Iran’s defeat by Russia. The Iran-Russia Wars (1804-1813 and 1827-1828) resulted in a loss of massive territory to the Czar and forcing Iran to pay compensation. This humiliating experience, coupled with Russia’s own defeat by the tiny but newly modernized and constitutionalist Japan, paved the way for Iran’s own Constitutional Movement of 1905. More recently, the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), which took place in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, fundamentally challenged the powerful state ideology of Velayat-e-Faqih.

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Statement of Thesis and Research Goals
This dissertation examines how realism can help explicate ideational changes and the evolution of religious narratives. Waltz’s notion of international structure will be used, however not to describe the conformism and socialization of an ideological state in the system, as he does, but to explain the domestic normative changes of religious elites. This internal transformation is not limited to organizations and policies, as Gourevitch argues in “The Second Image Reversed,” but goes far beyond that to include a country’s religious discourse. However, the impact on religious discourse occurs only after external shocks and through critical junctures in which previous religious ideas are tested. These critical junctures lead to the creation of new institutions that put a country on a different developmental path. Thus, there is a two-level game involved here: an external structure and a domestic mechanism. The position of the state in the international system has doctrinal consequences for religious parties and institutions. Political factions use, develop, and pursue religious narratives according to their interests and corresponding to their position in the domestic political structure.

The Iranian Case
My story begins with the establishment of the Islamic state in Iran in 1979 and the drastic religious, political, and ideological changes instituted by its charismatic leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The new government pursued a religious-ideological foreign policy of exporting the revolution and aspired to create an umma (Islamic community) that would replace the current international order. Despite his earlier
disparaging remarks regarding the secular nation-state system, Ayatollah Khomeini soon understood the prime importance of the state and its security and survival. Although his mandate was to implement shari’a (Islamic Law), he subsumed this goal to the survival of his theocratic state. He claimed that the survival of the Islamic state was the most important religious duty of every citizen of the Islamic Republic, even if that meant other religious duties including prayer and hajj had to be stopped.

During the course of Iran-Iraq War while the country was under international sanctions, Ayatollah Khomeini secretly approved the purchase of weapons from his ideological archenemy Israel in order to continue the war against a fellow Muslim country, Iraq. Similarly, Khomeini forbade his people to fulfill their obligatory trip to Mecca after a violent conflict with another fellow Muslim country, Saudi Arabia. Hence, birth of the term “Ayatollah Realpolitik,” which was used by many commentators to describe Khomeini’s evolving pragmatism.\footnote{Henry Precht, “Ayatollah Realpolitik,” \textit{Foreign Policy}, No. 70, Spring 1988, 109-128.} Iran could have ended the war in 1981 under favorable conditions, but Khomeini’s unrealistic and ideological insistence that Saddam “has to go” prolonged the war for six more bloody years. In this period, the world mobilized and heavily supported Iraq to stop Iran. In the end, the seemingly infallible Khomeini, who had long promised his people victory over the “infidel” enemy, “drank the cup of poison,” and ended the war. The tragic war and its direct and indirect ramifications helped undermine Islamic revivalism as an ideology. Many of its original supporters, who had long blamed Western imperialism for everything that went wrong,
began to look internally. Rather than being the solution, the Islamic state revealed the difficulties of the dominant interpretation of religion in dealing with the modern world.

After Ayatollah Khomeini’s death in 1989, his followers split in a battle over his legacy, *Velayat-e Faqih*. The more moderate Right, which had managed to remove the radical Left from the political scene, pursued pragmatic foreign and economic policies, while domestically it continued to follow an ideological path. These opposing approaches were meant to consolidate the state and the faction internationally and internally, respectively. The Right justified these actions by citing Islamic jurisprudence. Anxious to return to the political arena, the radical Left, however, reinvented itself as reformist a decade later. Despite state pressures, it adopted a democratic platform and successfully challenged the Right in the electoral process in 1997. The Right, in turn, moved further to the right and employed a more anti-democratic interpretation of religion to eliminate the reformists again in 2005 and later in 2009. In the midst of this battle, a highly nuanced democratic and pluralistic debate on the role of Islam in politics emerged. But this theological “moderation,” which became the backbone of first the reform era and later the Green movement, was adopted and promoted by an unlikely faction. The weak Left, which had structured itself on radicalism and anti-imperialism when it was part of the establishment, had to restructure its ideology and resort to a more secular and liberal view of religion as a strategy to return to politics. On the other hand, the dominant Right, which was considered more moderate in the early years of the revolution, gave birth to an ultra-conservative faction. This faction, which was empowered by the rising
position of the Islamic state in the aftermath of 9/11, questioned the compatibility of Islam and democracy all together.

The puzzle: Why was a democratic movement born within the heart of Iran’s theocracy? How did Iran’s radicals become reformists and its conservatives become ultra-conservative? The larger question is: how do religious parties change their objective principles?

A Two-Level Game

I employ a two-level analysis to address the development of religious doctrines at the intersection of comparative and international politics. I argue that there is an external structure that imposes its logic on the state. There is also a domestic mechanism, which has its own imperatives for the political factions. On the international level, it is my contention that the compromise and the pragmatism that were forced upon the Islamic Republic by the international system had secularizing consequences for the ideology of the state. The logic of the international system not only socialized the theocratic state to pursue a realist foreign policy, but also set the stage for deeper domestic institutional changes to partly secularize religious discourses. On the other hand, once the state perceived itself as a rising power that no longer faced an existential threat in the system, it moved to return to it ideological core and selectively undermine pragmatic institutions.
Similarly, on the domestic level I will argue that factional politics can pave the way for both moderate and radical politics, depending on the political configuration and context. Rather than accidental democrats, weak and marginalized religious parties can be intentional moderates out of self-interest as a way to open the political process. These parties, if they dominate the polity, can also become autocratic to limit electoral opportunities for others. Thus, unlike what some rational choice theorists argue, that institutional religious interests influence politics, it is institutional political interests that influence religious doctrines.

**Methodology**

This is a within-case study for which I employ process-tracing to follow the developments of religious narratives against the background of domestic and international politics. As George and Bennett explained, through process-tracing “the researcher examines histories, archival documents, interview transcripts, and other sources to see whether the causal process a theory hypothesizes or implies in a case is in fact evident in the sequence and values of the intervening variables in that case.”61 This method will enable me to examine the impact of a variety of events and factors on different political and religious individuals and groups. I explore the relationship between international and domestic politics on the one hand, and religious discourse in Iran on the other, to examine how state and factional interests impacted religious

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paradigms. Thus, my dependent variable is religious discourses and my independent variables are state weakness and factional weakness.

I will systematically compare and contrast religious rhetoric, framing, and discourse during critical international and domestics events. In addition to the speeches and statements of Ayatollah Khomeini and other top political officials, the writings of intellectuals, clerics, journalists, activists, and other influential figures for the past thirty years will be thoroughly scrutinized. The development of religious and political ideas will be examined against the backdrop of domestic and international events to detect the type of relationship that exists between ideas and events.

Using mostly original Persian sources, I will process-trace how Khomeini’s concept of Velayat-e Faqih became more pragmatic in the 1980’s as the Islamic state weakened in the course of the Iran-Iraq War and how his pragmatism was institutionalized in the constitution, the Expediency Council, and other governmental and semi-governmental bodies. I will then look into the domestic consequences of Khomeini’s secular legacy, which his successors pursued selectively according to their interests and corresponding to their weaknesses. The faction that dominated the war-torn state adopted pragmatic foreign economic policy. The losing side, however, moved towards establishing democratic and human rights-friendly religious interpretations and institutions in order to facilitate their entrance into the political process. The end result was the confrontation of two public religions: political Islam vs. social (“moral”) Islam.
On the international level, I examine state weakness by looking at the regional and international threats that Iran faced from 1979 to 2012. External factors were critical particularly during two eras, which Chapter Two and Chapter Five will discuss: the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and in the aftermath of 9/11. Chapter Two, “The Secularizing Impact of the Iran-Iraq War,” will trace the emergence of the concept of expediency, its institutionalization in the Islamic state and the corresponding conditions in the battleground. In this chapter, the evolution of political and religious narratives are examined in parallel with various stages of the war. These narratives detail the changing goals of and expectations from political Islam, shari’a, and Islamic jurisprudence before and after critical junctures during three main stages of the war:

• From the Iraqi offensive to the liberation of Khorramshahr (1980-1982)
• From the war of attrition to the Iran-Contra Affair (1983-1987)
• The cease-fire (1988)

Chapter Five, “The De-Secularizing Impact of the Post-9/11 Era,” focuses on the post 9/11 era when the Islamic state perceived itself as a rising power in the region. Here, I will track the increasing influence of Iran in Iraq and Afghanistan, the success of its proxies (Hezbollah and Hamas) against a U.S. ally (Israel), and the advancement of Iran’s nuclear program. I will then present the resultant evolution of political narratives, religious doctrines, and their institutional embodiments. As the state’s weakness
declines, revolutionary ideology returns, expectations and promises of political Islam are enhanced, and the concept of expediency is de-institutionalized.

On the domestic level, my cases are the two main political factions the country: the conservative Right and the radical (later reformist) Left. Chapter Three, “The (De)Secularizing Impact of Factional Politics,” will examine their weaknesses in the political system in terms of their control over the establishment, namely unelected institutions (i.e. the Office of the Supreme Leader, the Guardian Council, the judiciary, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) and to a lesser extend the elected bodies (i.e. the presidency, the Parliament, and local councils). I will map the development, and in some cases even the reversal, of each faction’s religious and political narratives against its position within the domestic political structure. A faction that finds itself weak moves away from the dogmatism of political Islam and fosters democratic views of religion. The farther this faction is from the center of power, the more it articulates the sovereignty of the people. In contrast, the faction that controls the army and security forces and other unelected institutions cultivates religious views that justify and ensure the status quo.

Chapter Four, “The Mosque and Media Politics,” further documents the strategies of the weak faction, including its reliance on old and new media, its struggle for the freedom of the press, and its emphasis on the possibility of a U.S. invasion. It will analyze the contents of major reformist and conservative media in the immediate aftermath of 9/11
to demonstrate each faction’s depiction of the external threats for domestic gains. The marginalized reformists warn that only democracy at home can help the state to stave off external pressures, whereas the dominant conservatives continue with downplaying international threats.
Chapter Two - The Secularizing Impact of the International Politics: The Islamic Revolution and the Iran – Iraq War (1979-1989)

This chapter demonstrates how the ideological goals of the Islamic Revolution evolved and changed during the course of the Iran – Iraq War. It will trace the evolution of political Islam against the background of Iran’s foreign policy adventures and international politics during the first decade of the revolution. The war, which was initially welcomed by Tehran’s newly established theocracy, changed religious narratives, and ultimately forced the state to become pragmatic and put its survival above its ideology. After the war, Iran pursued secular foreign policy goals for almost two decades only to move back towards ideology again later. Now, as Iran sees itself as a rising power, ideology is crawling up again to play a more prominent role in Tehran’s foreign policy conduct. The religious narrative is becoming utopian again. I contend that anarchy is both secularizing (Chapter Two) and de-secularizing (Chapter Five) and can be a defining test for the ideology of a revolutionary state, as anarchy can either challenge or vindicate an ideology. An ideological state that finds its very existence in jeopardy may temporarily resort to pragmatism to ensure its survival. However, once the state finds itself in a powerful position in the region and beyond, it is likely to return to its ideological core. Both circumstances have implications for religious doctrines. In each situation, new institutions are born while old ones are dissolved or undermined. These institutions help the state to adjust its religious doctrines to its interests.
I begin by describing the dominant religious ideology in pre and post-revolutionary Iran. I then examine its developments in the form of changing narratives, institutions, and discourses in response to the political realities of the first era of the Islamic Republic.

The Rise of Political Islam

Islamism was not the first reaction to modernity in Muslim countries. Many Muslim countries started their journey to modernity under Western-supported constitutional movements. As their domestic institutions and the international environment were not conducive to these countries’ experiments, nationalism, socialism, and state capitalism emerged. After the failure of each of these movements to bring about independent, prosperous, and democratic societies, the inclination towards anti-Western ideologies grew. Interestingly enough, all of these ideologies had Western origins themselves. As a result of the “betrayal” of and humiliation by the West, redemption and independence from Western imperialism increasingly became an important component of modernization. The “injured self” needed to be redeemed.

The roots of political Islam, which is an ideological reconstruction of Islam, stretches back to the late 19th century. Seyyed Jamal Afghani and Mohammad ‘Abduh, the intellectual fathers of political Islam, were deeply affected by the legacies of

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colonialism. They sought to revive Islam in order to resist Western hegemony over Muslims. The revivalist movement was not particularly popular initially. But after the negative experiences of other endeavors, political Islam gained wide currency in the 1960s and 1970s. Local intellectuals “traced” Western hands in all of these failures. They argued that the West was “looting” their material and cultural resources and depriving them from their essence. In such a climate, the “return to Islam” became the solution.

From Egypt to Pakistan, Muslim intellectuals undermined and tried to overthrow Western supported corrupt autocrats and advocated a return to Islam. In Iran, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, a former member of the Tudeh (Communist) Party, lost his faith in Marxism after he saw the Soviet’s expansionist policies towards Iran and warned what he called *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxification), which he saw as a “cholera” eating the Iranian culture from inside.\(^6^4\) He argued that only Islam had a potential to resist the identity crisis that the Iranian society was suffering from as a result of modernization. Al-e Ahmad was followed by Ali Shari’ati, the French educated sociologist who Islamicized Marxism. He reinterpreted the entire history of Islam and reconstituted a powerful Shi’a inspired revolutionary ideology that ultimately helped bring down the Shah in 1978.

Thus, the Iranian Revolution successfully materialized a long-time dream of establishing a modern theocracy in which justice, virtue, knowledge, happiness, and

\[^{64}\text{Dabashi, Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Republic in Iran.}\]
prosperity would “prevail” over the “vices” that the West has brought to the world. The new government became a lab in which Islamic Law (shari’a) would be fully implemented. Of all the Muslim revivalist thinkers, from Jamal al-Din Afghani and Mohammad ‘Abduh to Ali Shari’ati and Ayatollah Khomeini, only the latter was able to witness his theory’s, implementation.

The Establishment of “God’s Government”

The Islamic Republic of Iran was founded in 1979 on the idea that Islam contains all of the laws and provisions to create the perfect man in a perfect society. Throughout the 1970’s, Ayatollah Khomeini revolutionized Shi’a theology by arguing that Islam was so comprehensive that its laws and teachings covered all aspects of the human being from “even before the embryo is formed until after he is placed in the tomb,” including judicial procedure, social interactions, and even international relations.\(^{65}\) In other words, “there is not a single topic in human life for which Islam has not provided instruction and established a norm.”\(^{66}\) Khomeini argued that the Prophet Muhammad was sent by God not only to expound and promulgate law, but also to implement law himself: “he cut off the hand of the thief and administered lashings and stonings.”\(^{67}\) However, the execution of the law did not end with the Prophet’s death, “The successor to the Prophet must do the same; his task is not legislation, but the implementation of the divine laws


that the Prophet has promulgated.” Khomeini then concluded that the establishment of an Islamic government is essential since it is the only political system that has all the necessary “executive organs.” This divine form of government can only be run by someone who understands the law, “It is only the just *fuqaha* (jurisprudents) who may correctly implement the ordinances of Islam and firmly establish its institutions, executing the penal provisions of Islamic law and preserving the boundaries and territorial integrity of the Islamic homeland.” Thus, the *faqih* (jurisprudent) has the same authority as the Prophet because government is not about status, but rather function. “God has conferred upon government in the present age the same powers and authority that were held by the Most Noble Messenger (the Prophet) and the Imams (peace be upon them) with respect to equipping and mobilizing armies, appointing governors and officials, and levying taxes and expending them for the welfare of the Muslims.”

Therefore, a state is needed to implement those divine ordinances. The state is a means to reach the goal of implementing the law. Although Ayatollah Khomeini despised the state-system as a Western plot to divide the Muslim world, he understood its paramount importance for his project, “If the Islamic order is to be preserved and all individuals are to pursue the just path of Islam without any deviation, if innovation and the approval of anti-Islamic laws by sham parliaments are to be prevented, if the influence of foreign

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powers in the Islamic lands is to be destroyed - government is necessary. None of these aims can be achieved without government and organs of the state.” Thus, it is a “duty to establish an Islamic government.”

**The Islamic Revolution**

With the Iranian Revolution of 1979, political Islam in the form of Khomeini’s *Velayat-e-Faqih* entered Iran’s constitution. Khomeini became the ultimate ruler, while various institutions were formed or assumed new functions to implement *shari’a*, which replaced the secular legal code. Unlike the 1905 Iranian Constitution, according to which the laws could not be in violation of *shari’a*, in the new constitution the laws must be written according to *shari’a*. In other words, *shari’a* was not a source, but rather *the* source of lawmaking. The Guardian Council, consisting of top jurists, was then formed to do exactly that: to make sure the laws that the Majles (parliament) passed accorded to *shari’a*.

The revolutionary government held a referendum in March 1979 to receive the public’s approval of a vague concept of “Islamic Republic.” It received 99 percent support. The day after the referendum, on “the first day of God’s government,” Khomeini tasked the state to “transform our educational and judicial systems, as well as all the ministries and government offices that are now run on Western lines or in slavish imitation of Western

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models, and make them compatible to Islam, thus demonstrating to the world true social justice and true cultural, economic, and political independence.”

The stakes were high, and so were the expectations. The jurisprudential government (hokoumat-e fiqahati) promised to eliminate poverty, establish social justice, and bring dignity and independence to the Iranian people and other “captive” Islamic nations. Time and again, Khomeini stressed that his goal was the “very goal of the Prophet,” namely “expanding divine justice and dear Islam.” That great goal would be challenged by “great obstacles and complications ahead.” The Prophet too, Khomeini argued, suffered enormously before he could successfully establish his state. The words “compromise” and “expediency” (maslahat) had no place in the Prophet’s lexicon, according to Khomeini. The early Muslims found themselves in various wars, through which they prevailed and dominated the Arabia and much of the world. Like the Prophet’s state, the Islamic Republic would not compromise with bullying powers and their puppets. Just as the Prophet’s followers had “defeated” the Roman and the Persian empires, the Islamic Revolution would challenge the contemporary superpowers. From early on, Khomeini positioned his state and his doctrine against the “unjust” international order. The revolution that toppled the Shah would go on to topple other corrupt rulers and corrupt wicked empires. In this climate, the Iran – Iraq War provided a new testing ground for Khomeini’s notion of political Islam.

The War (1980-1988)

The Iran – Iraq War began less than two years after the Islamic Revolution. Although Iran did not initiate the war, the leaders of the Islamic government welcomed it. The clerics effectively used the war, in parallel with the Hostage Crisis (1979-1981), to eradicate the remnants of liberals and leftists from the Iranian political scene and draft a constitution that ensured their ultimate control over all branches of the government. However, these gains were perceived as a minor benefit of the external battle. For a revolution whose mission was to perfect mankind, the war was the next natural step towards remaking the entire world. The same divine message that created the movement that toppled the Shah and fifth mightiest army in the world now had established a state that would challenge the international system. But this would not be the last battle. Khomeini stressed, “The Koran has not said ‘war, war until victory,’ but ‘war, war, until removing fitna (sedition) from the world’ and even more.”

In this long struggle, Khomeini made it clear that the Islamic Revolution, and now the Iran – Iraq War, were specifically about spreading Islam. He warned that hardship would follow: “this movement is not about your belly. … if the entire world closes itself to us … we prefer it [international isolation] to the open doors of the looting countries.” Therefore, economic difficulties were the expected price for the nobler goal of preserving the dignity of the Islamic nation. “We want to protect our dignity and

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76 Ettelaat, 22 September 1980.
we want to protect our dear Islam, which has everything; it has independence, freedom, and dignity. We want to protect it. We want to protect the Qur’an. It is worth that we all die for it. … We have to prepare for wars and we have power.”77 To Khomeini, a “peace between Islam and kufr (unbeliever) has no meaning.”

For Khomeini and his disciples, implementing Islamic law was the magic bullet that would sweep away all of the impediments to the materialization of the Revolution’s utopia. After all, “They attack us because we want to implement Islam’s progressive ordinances.” Therefore, there was an urgent need to overcome one of the major “shortages” Iran faced in the early years after the Islamic Revolution: the dearth of Islamic jurists and clerics who could quickly implement shari’a and disseminate the divine message of the Revolution and ensure the final victory of the Islamic state through the power of faith.

The divine message needed to be spread by modern technology to overcome the scarcity of not only clerics, but also manpower. According to Khomeini, despite their strength and great numbers, in the early days of Islam 60 Muslims ambushed and defeated 60,000 Romans, because “in the war, numbers don’t mean anything. What counts is the power of human thought, the same power that relied on God in the early Islamic era and defeated many armies.”78 Now with the additional power of technology, the victory might be just around the corner. Khomeini stated that the prophets worked

77 *Ettelaat*, 5 February 1980.
hard to spread their messages. Prophet Muhammad had to “wait months before a messenger could get his message to the rest of Arabia. Now through radio you could spread your message within hours.”

**War with the Superpowers, not Iraq**

From early on, Iraq was portrayed simply as a stooge of the U.S. and the USSR, Iran’s true enemies. Iranian President Abolhassan Banisadr said that Saddam Hussein did not decide to invade Iran on his own, but rather his “masters” ordered him to do so. In show trials, top members of the communist Tudeh Party “confessed” that the Soviet Union was aware that Saddam collaborated with the U.S. to invade Iran. They said the USSR was now afraid of Iran’s victories and advising Saddam to end the war. Member of Parliament Kazem Bojnourdi interpreted the war as the corollary of the revolution, “when we decided to overthrow the monarchy, it necessarily followed that we would have to fight with American imperialism as well.” Ayatollah Sadeq Khalkhali, who sentenced many members of the old regime to death and liquidated many more later in the consolidating years of the Islamic Republic, claimed that the U.S.’s main fear was not that Iran would become a major power, like others in the current international system, but rather return to the early days of the Islamic community. He argued that the U.S. knew that in that case, Iran would challenge the

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80 *Ettelaat*, 7 January 1980.
81 *Jomhuri Eslami*, 11 October 1983.
status quo and the “Reagans of the future will have to say farewell to their palaces for good.”

Clerics across the board gleefully saluted the war, because as Ali Khamenei, who later became president (1981-1989) and then the Supreme Leader (1989 to present), put it, “Islam was looking for a playing field. The enemy opened this field for it. We would not have attacked Iraq or enter any other territories, or start the attack. But the enemy started the attack. We demonstrated our power and now the enemy has no way back.” When criticized by the liberals for his aggressive approach, Ayatollah Khomeini simply said, “If fighting the U.S. is wrong, then all prophets were wrong.” The “new” prophet, therefore, needed to resist the “bullying” powers, which were first and foremost the U.S., and then, at least rhetorically, the USSR and China.

In a speech at the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a confident government minister, Behzad Nabavi said that Iran’s foreign policy was to reach out to the oppressed nations in the word and various anti-American liberation movements and to “negate any compromise [or] Machiavellism.” He reminded his audience that during the bloodiest days of the Islamic Revolution, China’s leader travelled to Tehran to meet with the Shah, “[therefore], even the East found this revolution ideologically against itself.” Iran was proudly defiant of international norms and distrustful of international

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83 Ettelaat, 3 February 1981.
84 Ettelaat, 27 September 1980.
86 Ettelaat, 15 February 1981.
organizations, all of which were “dominated” by foreign powers. Even the NAM needed to be purged. Iran asked the NAM to “change” and kick out its “dependent” member states.\textsuperscript{87} When the Lebanese ambassador asked the Iranian President why Tehran did not bother to complain about the Iraqi invasion to the United Nations Security Council, the response was, “because since the 1953 American coup [in Iran], we have been a victim of the foreign domination.”\textsuperscript{88}

During the first two years of the Iran – Iraq War, Iran managed to resist Iraq’s advancement and slowly push its enemy back. In this climate, the international community, which had initially remained quiet, put pressure on Iran to end the war. Sensing Saddam Hussein’s desperation and the concerns of his Arab and Western allies, Tehran became more adamant that it would continue the war. The Foreign Ministry told the intermediaries flocking Tehran that Iran “does not need a mediator [and] … will not sit at the negotiation table.” Moreover, other countries needed to know that they could no longer be “neutral”: they were either with Iran or against Iran.\textsuperscript{89} Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, once Khomeini’s designated successor and a future dissident, stated that sitting at the negotiation table with Saddam Hussein would mean “legitimizing all invasions throughout history.”\textsuperscript{90} Ayatollah Khomeini declared, “We want an Islamic peace; a real peace not a peace that Saddam wants. That type of peace is the same peace that led to the World War II.” He encouraged the Iraqi people to revolt and Iraqi

\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Ettelaat}, 15 February 1981.  
\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Ettelaat}, 24 September 1980.  
\textsuperscript{89} \textit{Ettelaat}, 30 September 1980.  
\textsuperscript{90} \textit{Ettelaat}, 7 February 1981.
soldiers to leave the barricades and follow the Iranians’ footsteps and overthrow their dictator. He warned the Iraqi army, “A war against Iran is a war against Islam, against the Qur’an, against God’s Prophet, and this is a cardinal sin that God will not forgive.”

All along, the war was going favorably for Iran. President Banisadr said the victory was near, “According to the Qur’anic promise, we will win in this war.” When hawkish factions removed Banisadr from power in 1981, his successor, President Khamenei continued the same line. He saw no other future in Baghdad, except a replica of what it had just been established in Tehran: “Velayat-e-Faqih is Iraq’s future line.” This optimism was not completely illogical. In a statement, the Foreign Ministry pointed out that if the Iranian people could “kick out the Shah with their bare hands,” now with their own truly independent state with its enormous natural, and more importantly, ideological resources, the sky was the limit.

In another statement, the Political Office of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) warned that although the war was imposed on Iran, negotiation would not be. It said that as the war was in its fourth month, both the U.S. and Saddam Hussein realized that they were “digging their graves with their own hands.” Confident that war was about to end soon and in Iran’s favor, Khomeini said that, “Even if Jesus, who brought

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92 *Ettelaat*, 7 January 1980.
95 *Jomhuri Eslami*, 5 February 1981.
dead back to life, comes, he cannot bring this dead man (Saddam Hussein) to life.” He predicted that all “deviants” and foreign agents would fade away and pressed the government to “move swiftly to implement Islamic law 100 percent.”

The more Iran managed to push the Iraqis back, the more aggressive its rhetoric became. The objective of the war was not to only resist the Iraqis. As Speaker of the Majles Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani pointed out, “It is not enough for us to say that we are not defeated. Because we have to show that the Revolution is very strong and that the mandate of the Revolution is a victory in this war and to open the road for the idea of the Revolution to expand.”

The war was a “shortcut” to export the Revolution.

In the lexicon the revolutionary Iran, there were few terms as humiliating as compromise, pragmatism, and expediency. MP Ahmad Tavakkoli warned that in implementing shari’ā, one should not be pragmatic, “We should not commit maslahat andishi (expediency).” All (that the) Qur’an emphasizes is that Islam must be implemented quickly (zarbati).” He added that the core belief of the Islamic Republic requires that “War lasts until there is no sedition. … We must not give in to weakness (sosti) and accept peace.” It was claimed that the U.S. failed in its plot to overthrow the Islamic Republic, and was now planning to force Iran to compromise. Muslim Students Following the Imam’s Line, who occupied the U.S. Embassy, selectively

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96 Etelaat, 30 September 1980.
97 Etelaat, 24 April 1981.
98 Etelaat, 24 April 1981.
published thousands of the shredded documents that they found during the Hostage Crisis (1979-1981). These documents “proved” that Washington’s goal was to “moderate” the Islamic government and force it to pursue a “conservative domestic and foreign policy.”

**Shifting to Israel**

From early on, the clerics perceived themselves at war with the superpowers, not just in Iraq but also across the Islamic world. Khomeini said, “Everywhere they create a crisis for Islam.” The conflicts in Iran, Afghanistan, Lebanon, etc. were part of a bigger plot against Islam. Muslims were at war everywhere; therefore, they should defend themselves by getting involved in all fronts. As the Iran – Iraq War shifted in Iran’s favor and Iraqi troops began to retreat, Tehran’s rhetoric focused beyond Baghdad. Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that, “The Army and the IRGC are ready to enter a war with Israel.”

Iran’s decisive liberation of the strategic port city of Khorramshahr on May 24, 1982 dramatically increased the international pressure on Iran to end the war. It put the clerics in the difficult position of trying to justify continuing the war, particularly to public opinion in the Islamic world. In this climate, Iran added an additional condition to end the war. Majles Speaker Rafsanjani said, “Since we have no borders with Israel, they [the Iraqis] have to give us a path through Iraq so we can send our forces quickly to

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99 *Ettelaat*, 3 February 1981.
100 *Jomhuri Eslami*, 21 April 1982.
Syria. This is one of our important conditions, since after the end of the war with Iraq, we see the battleground in Israel.”

Prime Minister Mousavi asked the Islamic world to join Iran to create “an International Islamic Quds (Jerusalem) Army.” The Foreign Minister announced that, “The complete elimination of the Zionist regime is one of the most important strategic goals of the Islamic Revolution.” Rafsanjani claimed that Iran could use the same “cheap” techniques that it successfully used against Iraq to fight with Israel. He predicted an “eight to fifteen day” war since Israel was smaller than Iraq both in terms of size and population. He said that there was no need for sophisticated weapons because cheap and small weapons would be equally, if not more effective.

Ayatollah Montazeri, who years later became one of the most outspoken critics of the Iran – Iraq War and even the establishment itself, said “the most natural path to Quds (Jerusalem) goes through (the Iraqi city of) Karbala.” He predicted, “Muslims will support this war [since] it gets us inside Iraq in order to reach Quds.” Iran’s Minister of Defense said, “It is inevitable for Islam’s soldiers to enter Iraqi soil” since it is the superpowers’ nightmare. Colonel Sayyad Shirazi, the Commander of the Army’s Ground Forces, proclaimed that Iran was “ahead of all countries” in its ability to deal...
with Israel militarily. He promised that after Iraq, Iran would take “more fundamental measures to liberate Quds.”

The emergence of this narrative coincided with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. In response to the invasion, Iran sent forces into Lebanon. Khomeini pointed out that Iran wanted to “save” Jerusalem, however, this was not possible without “saving” Iraq first. Hence, the emergence of the motto, “the road to Jerusalem goes through Iraq.” Rafsanjani stressed to Iran’s Arab neighbors, “We are Israel’s most important enemy.” The state-controlled media reminded the Arabs that, “Iran is the most determined ally of the Arabs in their struggle against Zionism.”

“Menstrual Stain”

Regardless of Iran’s true intentions to threaten Israel, it is clear that the leadership was aware of the enormous ideological and partisan benefits they were gaining from continuing the Iran – Iraq War. In addition to its ideological importance, the war had a major domestic benefit: the ability for the regime to eliminate its rivals. Speaker Rafsanjani repeatedly said the war was “politically beneficial.” He pointed out the domestic dimension of the war and its “good fruit,” namely that it would allow the

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107 Jomhuri Eslami, 10 July 1982.
110 Jomhuri Eslami, 23 May 1982
111 Jomhuri Eslami, 23 May 1982
regime to deal with internal conflicts against “anti-revolutionaries.” He said many had thought that the army would be an obstacle to the revolution, but now it was serving the revolution by fighting an external enemy. The Iran – Iraq War was also religiously beneficial. It was in this period that Ayatollah Khomeini eliminated his main rival, Grand Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari. In an unprecedented move in Shi’a history, another Grand Ayatollah Khomeini divested a top source of emulation from his religious and jurisprudential credentials. Shariatmadari was accused of collaborating with the U.S. to carry a coup and bomb Khomeini’s house. This frail man was forced to “confess” and pled for mercy before television cameras. As Rafsanjani cheerfully proclaimed, with the removal of Ayatollah Shariatmadari, “so was lost the hope of the moderates” who were seeking to put an end to the war.

With all political and religious obstacles removed, Khomeini could continue to prosecute the Iran – Iraq War for six more years. Even Ayatollah Mohammad Bagher Hakim, a top Iraqi Shi’a cleric living in exile in Tehran, praised Iran’s “completely Islamic” goals in the war and blessed Iran’s entrance into Iraqi territories. Iranians leaders bragged that their practical liberty and “open hands” in dealing with the war and its ramifications. Referring to the religious justifications that were employed to support the war, Rafsanjani said, “There is nobody under this sky who could fight with this much freedom. The U.S. has to satisfy NATO. We don’t. Independence cannot be

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112 Ettelaat, 30 September 1980.
113 Jomhuri Eslami, 4 May 1982.
114 Jomhuri Eslami, 7 July 1982.
higher than this.” He promised that Iran would turn the U.S. into an unclean “menstrual stain.”

Nevertheless, however optimistic the Iranian leaders were about the power of their ideology, the regional balance of power dramatically shifted after Iran’s counter-invasion of Iraq in 1983. The U.S. joined the Europeans, the Arab countries, and the Soviets to save Iraq from imminent defeat. The war of attrition cost hundreds of thousands of lives on both sides. Iran compensated for its military inferiority with revolutionary fervor and the power of Shi’a martyrdom. Iraq, on the other hand, relied on massive Soviet weapons, French Mirages and Super Etendards with Exocet missiles, American intelligence, and Arab money and soldiers to stop Iran’s human waves. However, to the Iranian government, this massive support only gave more credence to their analogy with the early Islamic era: The entire evil world was united against the only good power in the world, Iran.

The use of strong religious language in the course of the Iran – Iraq War only increased the enormous vested interest of the Islamic Republic in the outcome of the war and brought about a form of inevitability. A complete victory against Saddam Hussein was perceived as utterly imminent, since God was unquestionably on Iran’s side. The same God that surprisingly and easily removed the mighty, secular, wicked Shah, who had also enjoyed the backing of the world powers, would also remove the mighty, secular, and wicked leader of Iraq who was armed to the teeth by both the West and the East.
The Crushing Endgame

After the initial honeymoon, the Iran – Iraq War began to produce ugly realities for Iran’s Islamic government. Facing international sanctions, weapons and spare parts had to be bought from every possible corner of the globe, even Israel, in order to continue the war against a Muslim neighbor. As the former CIA analyst Bruce Riedel put it, “Israel was the only consistent source of spare parts for the Iranian air force’s US-built built jets throughout the war. Israeli leaders, notably Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, brought considerable pressure to bear on Washington and the Iran-Contra affair was in many ways their idea. American diplomats and spies abroad were told to turn a blind eye to Israeli arms deals with Tehran.”115

Nationalism, previously despised by the Islamic regime, was gradually employed alongside religious rhetoric in order to effectively mobilize the population to go to the front lines. The ultimate goal of exporting the Islamic Revolution justified these “non-Islamic” means. However, none of these “tactical” shifts helped Iran to achieve its final and much promised victory. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed as both sides found themselves in a stalemate. The Iranian leadership then began to admit the harsh truth. Rafsanjani bitterly acknowledged the cost of once-celebrated isolation of Iran, “Our army needs to know that in this world they [the foreign powers] have released

dogs … no one [helps us] get our rights." Talk of divine miracles and exporting the revolution slowed down. In the early years of the war, Iranian society had been bombarded with never-ending stories of God-sent miracles that helped poorly equipped Iranian soldiers to defeat the well-equipped Iraqis. As Iranian troops lost morale, those stories lost credibility even to the top leaders and ideologues. Frustrated with the lack of equipment, discipline, and organization in Iranian army, Prime Minister Mousavi confirmed major defeats on the battlefield and warned that Iranians should not simply wait for miracles from God before doing their homework, “We can only wait for divine help after we have mobilized all of our resources and we all have to believe this reality.” This was a reflection of how reality, fear, and expediency emerged in the vocabulary of the Islamic Republic. The day after Mousavi’s remarks, July 3, 1988, the USS Vincent shot down a civilian Iranian airliner. This incident was a turning point for Iranian leaders to end the war. They believed that this was a signal by Washington that the U.S. was moving towards a direct confrontation with Iran. Two weeks later on July 20 1988, Iran announced its willingness to accept the UNSC 598 Ceasefire Resolution with no pre-conditions.

Although the Security Council had first passed UNSC 598 on July 20 1987, Iran had consistently rejected it on the ground that it failed to determine the aggressor in the Iran–Iraq War. However, Iran now decided that it faced an existential threat by the U.S. and had no choice but to accept the biased resolution. Both Ayatollah Khomeini and

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Rafsanjani said for reasons that “we cannot tell for now,” it was in the interest of the state and the revolution to end the war. Rafsanjani state, “Recently it became clear that it was possible that some bitter events were about to happen. Its turning point was the shooting down of Iran’s civilian airliner by the U.S. … We considered it [the incident] a warning.” Iran was concerned that the U.S. was trying to prolong and expand the war. Majles Member Ayatollah Khalkhali echoed what many other officials believed and wanted the people to believe as well, that “the Kissingers and Brzezinskis wanted this war to continue.”

Thus, Khomeini accepted the humiliating ceasefire. He told his people:

In view of the opinion of all high-ranking political and military experts … I agreed with the acceptance of the resolution and cease-fire, and under the existing juncture I believe this to be in the interest of the revolution and the system, … I shall say again that the acceptance of this issue is more deadly to me than poison, but I am happy to submit to God’s will and drank this cup for his satisfaction.

Khomeini submitted not to God’s will, but rather submitted to the realities on the ground. The Islamic state was on the verge of annihilation. He compromised with the “bullying powers,” that he had promised to defeat. Khomeini desperately sent his top diplomats to the UN for a ceasefire to be mediated instantly. The Secretary General was woken up in the middle of the night on a weekend to be informed that Iran had finally

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accepted Resolution 598.\textsuperscript{122} Iran wanted the resolution to be implemented immediately. Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati went to New York with a mission not to return to Tehran without the ceasefire agreement.

But now it was Saddam Hussein who was trying to take advantage of Iran’s weakness on the ground and to reenter its territories. In order to buy time, Hussein claimed that Iraq was interested in negotiating directly with Iran and looked for a peace treaty not just a ceasefire. President Khamenei tried to appease his Iraqi counterpart, “If Iraq wants peace, every peace starts with a ceasefire.”\textsuperscript{123} However, for his unhappy domestic audience, who had been promised a decisive victory, Khamenei had a religious justification for Iran’s decision to end the war. He referred to the peace treaty of Hudaibiyah that Prophet Muhammad signed with his enemies and said that the benefits and “blessings” that that treaty brought to the Muslims were more than all the wars they ever fought.\textsuperscript{124} Rafsanjani used the same analogy and said when the Prophet signed this treaty with the “infidels” many Muslims were unhappy, but God promised them a big victory, “It was after this [treaty] that the Prophet could pay attention to (the regions) beyond the Hijaz (Arabia) to export Islam.”\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{122} See Giandomenico Picco, \textit{Man Without A Gun: one diplomat’s secret struggle to free the hostages, fight terrorism, and end a war} (New York: Times Books, 1999).
\textsuperscript{123} \textit{Jomhuri Eslami}, 23 July 1988.
\textsuperscript{125} \textit{Jomhuri Eslami}, 23 July 1988.
Indeed, the story of the Treaty of Hudaibiyah was always well known. Up until a few days before the acceptance of the UNSC resolution, Iranian commentators were arguing that the analogy of the Hudaibiyah Treaty did not apply to the Iran – Iraq War. The government also consistently brushed it aside as a possible parallel scenario. But once deemed useful, it was employed to rescue the regime.

Thus, the war ended on August 20th, 1988. Its jurisprudential ramifications and institutional legacies, however, had just begun.

**Jurisprudential Adjustment**

The development of the Iranian clerical and political establishment’s narratives was followed by the evolution of religious doctrine. From 1980 until 1982, when the Iran – Iraq War was going well, the Islamic state continued to claim it would mobilize all its resources to create the perfect man and “elevate humans from animal to angel status.” Even oil was “a means for transcending human culture,” as President Khamenei put it. For Prime Minister Mousavi, even sports were “a means for human, religious, and cultural transcendence.” Population control was simply a plot by the colonizers to make sure that “their own people will always control the economy.” The dominant view was that the Islamic jurisprudence was ready and had all the necessary tools to resolve domestic and international problems in every field. Ayatollah Ardebili, the head

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of the judiciary, marveled, “There has been 1,400 years of work on our jurisprudence. All we need is to take it out of the book.”  

However, as the Islamic Republic entered a war of attrition with Iraq, the view of religion began to shift. People asked: if the laws were divine, why then did social and economic problems persist? Why did the prices of basic goods continued to rise? Why didn’t lashings, mutilation, executions, and stoning solve Iran’s social problems? The Iranian banking system remained intact even though Khomeini that had called usury “worse than having sex with your aunt 70 times.”  

Khomeini now sanctioned the banking system because otherwise the country’s financial system would collapse. Countless such cases led many to doubt the capacity of traditional Islamic jurisprudence to function in the modern world.

The clerical leadership’s first justification for the government’s pragmatism was to argue that although Islamic law was complete, “specialized” research in the field was not. Rafsanjani argued that there should be more study of the preaching and writings of classic Shi’a scholars. He said, “There has not been research on what we need [to run an Islamic state.]” He insisted there were “miracles” in Shi’a jurisprudence; in some cases one sentence of Shi’a jurisprudence could resolve the most complicated and longstanding debates occurring at the word’s major universities.  

129 Jomhuri Eslami, 10 March 1982.
miraculous sentence needed to be found and decoded according to the context of the era. At first the Iranian regime had been confident that everything they needed to run an Islamic state was explicit and ready, now they needed to conduct research to find and interpret it according to the present context.

Nevertheless, the more convincing explanation for Iran’s massive domestic problems was that the country was at war. In fact, the war was prolonged “precisely” because Iran was working within the framework of Islamic law, which placed restrictions on Iran’s conduct during the war, the government argued. For example, Iran could not buy weapons from its ideological enemies or retaliate against Saddam Hussein’s use of chemical weapons or bombing of Iranian cities, because such actions would be un-Islamic. However, some of these principles were eventually replaced by another principle: the survival of the Islamic state. During the course of the war, the government was forced to compromise many of its ideals. It found a religious justification to bomb Iraqi cities, resulting in a phase of the Iran–Iraq War known as “the War of the Cities” in the mid-1980’s. Iranian officials also threatened to produce chemical weapons, close the Strait of Hormuz, and destabilize the Arab monarchies. For each of these actions, they emphasized, “we have [a] religious justification as well.” 132 In what became known as the Iran-Contra Affair, Iran searched every corner of the world, including its archenemies Israel and the U.S., 133 to buy weapons in order to continue the war against

133 Trita Parsi, Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Trita Parsi, “Israel-Iranian Relations Assessed: Strategic
its coreligionists in Iraq. Many of the missiles that arrived in Iran reportedly carried the Star of David. Indeed, it proved easier to justify the embarrassing Iran-Contra Affair religiously than it was to cover it up!

Pragmatism Institutionalized and Secularism Prevailed (For Now)

The change of narrative was eventually followed by an important step that put the weak, war-torn state above religion once for all. During the course of the Iran – Iraq War, the increasing problems of the state often brought literalist interpreters and those who had to run the country face-to-face with each other. This was not the conflict between two groups as much as it was a manifestation of the contradiction between the interests of the war-torn state versus the divine provisions of Islamic law. The Majles and the Guardian Council were the main institutional embodiments of each side. Time and again, Ayatollah Khomeini interfered to end the tension according to the interests of the state.\textsuperscript{134} His increasing pragmatism was eventually institutionalized in several forms, most important of which were the creation of the Expediency Discernment Council of the System in 1987 and the constitutional amendment of 1988. The first effectively limited the power of the Guardian Council’s jurists over the state’s interests, while the second allowed the position of Supreme Leader to be filled not by a top jurist, but rather a leading politician who only needed to be familiar with Islamic jurisprudence.

\textsuperscript{134} Khomeini and Safi correspondence.
On January 8, 1988, Khomeini issued what may be his single most important statement, which claimed that preserving the Islamic state supersedes all other ordinances:

The state, which constitutes a part of Prophet Mohammad’s *Velayat-e-Motlaqeh* [Absolute Rule], is one of the primary ordinances of Islam and has precedence over all the secondary ordinances, and even prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage . . . The state is empowered to unilaterally revoke any *shari’a* agreement that it has concluded with the people when that agreement is contrary to the best interests (*masaleh*) of the country and Islam. It can prevent any matter—be it devotional or non-devotional—when it contravenes the best interests of Islam for the duration that it is so.\(^{135}\)

In his treatise Islamic Government (1969), Khomeini had argued that the state was simply a means to implement *shari’a*. Now as a practitioner of statecraft and after experiencing a devastating war, he had to reverse this order. The state was no longer a means to the divine goal of implementing *shari’a*, but rather an ultimate “divine” goal itself. In the end, Ayatollah Khomeini chose a fundamentally secular path and put politics above Islam and Islamic law.\(^{136}\)

**Conclusion**

Anarchy is a double-edged sword. In one context it strengthens political Islam, while in another it helps give birth to its opposite. This chapter traced the evolution of Khomeini’s notion of political Islam (the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih*) in the first era of


the Islamic Republic (1979-1989). It demonstrated that not only that the survival of the Islamic state took precedence over its ideology, but more importantly, its security concerns formed and even secularized that ideology. In other words, contrary to the constructivists, who believe that religious discourse plays an important role in shaping Iran’s foreign policy, I argued that Iran's position in the international system affected the religious discourse, not the other way around.

Following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, the pragmatist men in power in Tehran pursued a less ideological foreign policy and improved Iran’s relationship with the West. Iran operated as a “rational” actor in the realist sense. In the words of Brenda Shaffer, Tehran’s rhetoric supporting the advancement of the causes of other Muslims and mostaz’afins (the oppressed) in general, “is only a small facet of Tehran’s activity in the region. In fact, in many cases, Iran uses Islam instrumentally to pursue material state interests as a way of contending with neighboring regimes or forcing changes in their policies. In this sense, culture serves the material interests of the Iranian state as opposed to being a factor shaping the policies of the state.”137 Thus, in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azeri Muslims and Armenian Christians, Iran supported Armenia simply because it was in its own interest to undermine the pro-U.S. Azerbaijan. During Russia’s war against the Chechen Muslims, Tehran remained quiet and in return received military cooperation and nuclear assistance. As Shaffer concludes, “Iran’s declaration of Islam as its state culture and commitment to promoting

Islamic goals and solidarity has not endowed the analyst with predictive power relating to Iran’s choice of allies.”\(^{138}\)

While realists emphasize systemic factors in explaining Iran’s shift from an ideological actor to a “normal” state, constructivists such as Ali Ansari look to cultural explanations. He stresses the “centrality of culture and civilizational identity to the formation of foreign policy, while at the same time indicating the limitations of these cultural factors and the importance of material experience in defining cultural parameters.”\(^{139}\) Ansari acknowledges that, “The harsh experience of war is arguably the ultimate test of any ideological drive, and it was soon apparent that faith alone could not win the war against Iraq. The war clearly tempered the ideology, but it could not eliminate all its excesses.”\(^{140}\) However, this experience directly affected Iran’s intellectuals: “The practical lessons of the war and the era of reconstruction encouraged Iranian intellectuals to rethink their understanding of the philosophy of international relations, which would also help resolve some of the many contradictions which continued in the Iranian worldview.”\(^{141}\) For Ansari, the international system affected different aspects of the Iranian culture, and strengthen one aspect (national and then modern/Western) at the expense of the other (Islamic). This shift in turn affected Iran’s

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140 Ansari, 248.
141 Ansari, 257.
worldview and consequently its foreign policy. “Policy is defined through the interaction of competing cultures and their interpretations of experience, providing the logic through which interests are rationalized and prioritized.”\(^{142}\) Thus, Ansari explains Iran’s shift toward a less ideological foreign policy after the war with Iraq in terms of the impact of external factors on intellectuals and the elite. For constructivists, a better appreciation of Western culture caused a less anti-Western foreign policy in Iran. But they don’t explain why these external factors affected different actors differently?

It is my contention, however, that the “interaction of competing cultures and their interpretations of experience” is not what has defined Iran’s foreign policy, as Ansari argues. Rather, the opposite seems to be the case: Iran’s foreign policy, itself subject to the constraints and imperatives of the international system, strengthens or undermines different aspects of Iran’s identity, including its religious culture and discourse. It is not the international system that “tempered Islamic ideology” by affecting the politicians and intellectuals’ worldviews, in turn impacting Iran’s foreign policy. Instead, the international system first forced Iran to soften its ideological tone and pursue a pragmatist foreign policy, which entailed compromise on critical religious issues. In other words, foreign policy is not an extension of culture or religion, as constructivists claim. It is the religious interpretation that is affected by foreign policy outcomes.

As we will further see in the next chapter, the compromise and the pragmatism that were forced upon the Islamic state by the international system had deep consequences

\(^{142}\) Ansari, 259.
for Iran’s competing factions and their religious doctrines. The logic of the international system not only socialized the theocratic state to pursue a realist foreign and economic policy, but also it set the stage for a deeper domestic religious and political transformation that pluralized and secularized religious discourses and thus shifted the locus of public religion from the state level (political Islam) to the societal level (social Islam).
Chapter Three - The (De)Secularizing Impact of Factional Politics

Introduction

The previous chapter examined the development of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s Velayat-e Faqih, or the rule of the jurisprudent, in the first era of the Islamic Revolution during the Iran–Iraq War. I argued that Khomeini’s concept of political Islam had to come to terms with the logic of the international system to ensure the survival of the state. In this chapter, I will continue to follow the evolution of Velayat-e Faqih, but this time against the background of Iran’s domestic politics. If weak states put their ideology aside and become pragmatic in the anarchic nature of the international system, weak factions are prone to democracy.

In Chapter Three, I will explain how the Islamist faction that emerged in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution later split into conservative Right and radical Left factions. After Ayatollah Khomeini’s death in 1989, these two groups were further divided in a battle over the legacy of Khomeini’s theory of Velayat-e Faqih. The more conservative Right, which had managed to remove the radical Left from the political scene, pursued pragmatic foreign and economic policies, while domestically it continued to follow an ideological path. These opposing approaches, which had religious justifications were meant to consolidate the regime internationally and the conservative faction domestically. Anxious to return to the political arena, the weak radical Left, however, reinvented itself as reformists a decade later. It adopted a democratic platform and
successfully challenged the Right in the electoral process from 1997 to 2001. The Right, in turn, moved further to the right and employed a more anti-democratic interpretation of religion to eliminate the reformists from 2004 onwards.

In the midst of this battle, a highly nuanced democratic and pluralistic debate on the role of Islam in politics emerged. But this theological “moderation,” which became the backbone of the Reform and later the Green movements (2009), was adopted and promoted by an unlikely faction. The Left, which had structured itself around anti-imperialism and anti-Westernization when it was part of the establishment in the 1980’s, later reconstructed its ideology and resorted to a more democratic view of politics as a strategy to return to the political arena. On the other hand, the Right, which was considered more moderate in the early years of the Revolution, gave birth to an ultra-conservative faction. This faction was led by members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the traditional religious institutions that emerged in reaction to electoral defeats by the reformists in 1997 and the challenges posed by the Green Movement. The ultra-conservative faction questioned the compatibility of Islam and democracy all together. The end result was the confrontation of two public religions\textsuperscript{143}: political Islam vs. social Islam.

Chapter Three provides empirical evidence to challenge the institutionalists as well as rational choice theorists who refer to the Christian Democrats to argue that behavioral

\textsuperscript{143} Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World.*
change precedes cognitive change. In their analysis, I argue, they miss an ideational step. After presenting a micro-level study of political and religious narratives, I will make a case that factional politics can pave the way for both secular and unsecular politics, depending on the political configuration and context. Rather than accidental democrats, weak religious parties can be intentional moderates out of self-interest as a way to open the political process. They can also be intentional hardliners in order to limit the electoral opportunities of others. Both groups create new institutions and use old institutions to develop the theological latitude that they need for political actions. Then, they enter the political scene.

The Battle Over Khomeini’s *Velayat-e Faqih*

Soon after the establishment of the Jurisprudential Government (*Hokoumat-e Feqhi*) after the Islamic Revolution, it became clear that there were different views on how to interpret and implement *feqh* (jurisprudence). In response to the challenges that social, political, and economic problems, compounded by the Iran – Iraq War, posed to *feqh*, the Islamic government split into two factions: the radical Left and the conservative Right.

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145 Kalyvas, “Unsecular Politics and Religious Mobilization.”
The Left believed in government regulation of the economy, land reform, and higher taxes. These younger revolutionaries and mid-level clerics were dissatisfied with the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, social injustice, and the “continued existence of the capitalists.” After all, the revolution didn’t seem to be fulfilling its utopian promises. The Right, on the other hand, which had a base in the bazaar (traditional marketplace) and orthodox religious circles, backed the private sector and foreign trade. The Right criticized the Left for pursuing a “communist” economic policy, while the Left accused the Right of being capitalists and backing “American” Islam. With its populist agenda, the Left dominated the Majles (parliament), but the Right, which was comprised of top theologians, controlled the Guardian Council\textsuperscript{147} and other key appointed bodies.

In the early 1980’s, the two camps’ differences became even more evident and confrontational. The increasing gap between the rich and the poor was a case in point. The Right criticized the Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi’s “Western tax system and Eastern [socialist] distributive system” and argued that there was nothing Islamic about his economic policies, which had “no jurisprudential basis.” The Guardian Council pointed to the class differences in the Prophet’s government and argued that the “adjustment of wealth and filling the gap between the rich and the oppressed” was “not Islamically correct.”\textsuperscript{148} These never-ending political and religious debates within and

\textsuperscript{147} The Guardian Council monitors laws passed by the Majles to make sure they are comply with Islamic law.

\textsuperscript{148} Cited in Baktiari, \textit{Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran}, 92.
between the Majles and the Guardian Council paralyzed the state. Prime Minister Mousavi complained in January 1985, “It is now two years since we sent up bills on taxation, land distribution, foreign trade, privatization and the limits of private sector,” (and) nothing has been done about them.”

Khomeini often interfered and resolved these issues according to what he saw as the interests of the state. But he also maintained an ambiguous position in these highly contentious and problematic debates. He eventually institutionalized his ad-hoc pragmatism by creating the Expediency Council in 1987 to settle the differences between the Majles and the Guardian Council. The Left welcomed this measure, which officially put the interests of the state above religion. It saw the Expediency Council as a powerful institution that could “open the hands of the government” to continue resisting the religious authority of the Guardian Council after Khomeini died. The Right, however, interpreted the creation of the Expediency Council as a temporary measure to be weakened or dissolved once the Iran – Iraq War had ended.

But Khomeini continued his political machinations. A year later, he approved a constitutional amendment that stated that the next Supreme Leader did not need to be a top jurist, but rather a politician required merely to be “familiar” with Islamic jurisprudence. Finally and most importantly, Khomeini extended the political power of

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149 Cited in Baktiari, Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran, 121.
150 Moslem, Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran, 75.
151 Resalat/ref.
*Velayat-e Faqih* at the expense of Islamic Law. As it was explained in the previous chapter, he argued that the interests of the Islamic state surpassed even religious duties. Here the Right was alarmed that it could lose its jurisprudential edge against the more populist Left, which controlled the executive and legislative branches at the time. Many conservatives opposed Khomeini’s statement regarding the paramount importance of the protection of the Islamic state or at least tried to tone it down. For instance, the conservative cleric Ali Khamenei, then president of Iran, tried to downplay Khomeini’s declaration. But the founder of the Islamic Republic rebuked Khamenei quickly and said that the he “clearly didn’t understand the ruling.”

Khomeini made it clear that the Supreme Leader had the same status and authority as the Prophet himself. In other words, he could abolish certain aspects of *shari’a* and replace them with new rulings.

Ironically, many of those right wing theologians and politicians who were publicly concerned with the consequences of concentrating so much power in the hands of one individual became the main proponents of this theory a decade later once they found themselves in a position to enjoy the powerful institution of *Velayat-e Faqih*. Ayatollah Khamenei himself is a case in point. In fact two decades later in 2010, Khamenei issued his own religious decree stressing that “*Velayat-e Faqih* … is a branch of … the prophet’s *velayat* (guardianship).” He claimed that he is the leader of all of the world’s Muslims, and that all Muslims are required to obey his orders.

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Khomeini’s death and the new political structure engendered new positions and even total reversals by both the Right and the Left.\textsuperscript{155} The Right which managed to succeed Khomeini put aside its reservations towards Khomeini’s interpretation of \textit{Velayat-e Faqih} and began to enjoy the powerful tools and non-democratic institutions that Khomeini had left behind. It selectively pursued secular and unsecular policies according to its own interests. It adopted a less ideological foreign policy and improved its relationship with the outside world. It also implemented open-market economic policies, expanded the private sector, and borrowed from foreign countries and international organizations to rebuild war-torn Iran. The Right’s promotion of secular foreign and economic policies was justified by the argument that since those policies strengthened the Islamic state they were ultimately Islamic acts. But when it came to domestic politics, an increasingly traditional reading of \textit{Velayat-e Faqih} was propagated. The new leadership, which lacked Khomeini’s powerful charisma and credentials, promoted more conservative and traditional interpretations of religion.

While the Right slowly moved to the far right, the Left nervously leaned further to the left. It needed to reinvent the wheel. From the moment that Khomeini died and the disadvantageous shape of the power structure he left behind became clear, the Left began to tailor Khomeini’s legacy in order to reenter the political process. To be more precise, both the Right and the Left’s point of departure was Khomeini’s \textit{Velayat-e}

\textsuperscript{155} Moslem, \textit{Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran}. 
Faqih. But they took it and moved in two opposite directions, even as they both armed themselves with Velayat-e Faqih in order to challenge one another. One faction traveled towards a more traditional and conservative path that would strengthen the status quo, while the other moved towards a more moderate direction that undermined the status quo. Both factions, however, selected both secular and unsecular politics. The Left took the notion of Velayat-e Faqih and baptized it into secular literature and presented a theory of “democratic religious government.” The Right, however, using the same concept, initially entertained some democratic ideas, but once they realized that this could be a dangerous game turned to the traditional right and framed Velayat-e Faqih as a divine and holy concept that required an absolute obedience unprecedented even under Ayatollah Khomeini.

The Right: Secular Economic and Foreign Policy and Unsecular Domestic Politics

After the death of Khomeini, the alliance of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the Speaker of the Majles, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, focused on the implementation of economic liberalization and a pragmatic foreign policy. They shelved the revolutionary and ideologically oriented polices of the 1980’s and established a team of technocrats to embark on a path of economic privatization and deregulation to more effectively interact with international financial organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Borrowing from the infidels was no longer forbidden. The
confrontational and revisionist foreign policy of the 1980’s was replaced by an attempt to integrate Iran into the international order.\textsuperscript{156}

The Islamic Republic that had belittled Arab leaders as Western puppets began to reach out to those same leaders. In 1989, Rafsanjani’s historic trip to the former Soviet Union, Iran had demonized as Godless and imperialistic for a decade, signaled that Iran’s next move would be to improve ties with the West. Indeed, Iran’s relationships with European countries expanded throughout the 1990’s and foreign companies were lured to Iran to invest and help reconstruct the country after the Iran – Iraq War. Iran continued its support of the Palestinians and Lebanon’s Hezbollah against Israel, but remained quiet when its fellow Muslims in Chechnya and Xinjiang were brutally suppressed by Russia and China respectively.\textsuperscript{157} Iran sided with Christian Armenia against the Shi’a Azeris in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In Central Asia, Iran followed its strategic interests in improving its relations with the region’s secular governments and used religion selectively and instrumentally.\textsuperscript{158}

All of these moves were justified in religious terms, partly to counter those on the Left who criticized the shift from a revisionist and revolutionary state to a typical \textit{status quo} power. The Right argued that a religious state needed to be strong and economically prosperous first in order to export the Islamic Revolution and serve as a model for the


\textsuperscript{157} Shaffer, “The Islamic Republic of Iran: Is It Really?”.

\textsuperscript{158} Shaffer, “The Islamic Republic of Iran: Is It Really?”.
rest of the Muslim world. To be sure, this moderate move in economic and foreign arenas was not repeated on the domestic political scene. In fact, the rival Left was gradually removed from the Majles, judiciary, administration, and other key positions by using a combination of electoral and non-electoral means. For the Right, pragmatic foreign and economic policy was perceived as a way to consolidate the state internationally, while continuing authoritarian domestic politics would preserve the establishment internally.

Lacking both Khomeini’s charisma and religious credentials, Supreme Leader Khamenei increasingly relied on traditional and rightwing religious circles to garner legitimacy and consolidate his appointed position. However, this was not enough for him. With the help of various tutors from seminaries in Qom, he strove to achieve the highest level of Islamic jurisprudence in order to establish himself as a top faqih, similar to Ayatollah Khomeini. Unlike Khomeini, who ended his jurisprudence classes once in power, Khamenei began teaching after he became the Supreme Leader. His exclusive and high-level classes of kharej, the equivalent of graduate courses, were specifically designed and publicized to demonstrate his top scholarship. The publication of Khamenei’s resalah surprised religious figures and worried his political rivals. The

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161 A book that contains a top jurist’s religious decrees on a wide variety practical topics (old and contemporary) based on his understanding of religious sources.
amended constitution in 1989 had lowered the bar so that a mid-ranking cleric such as Khamenei could become the Supreme Leader without the need to be a marja’ and publish a resalah. However, as Khamenei occupied an appointed position that could be contested by various religious and elected institutions, he needed a strategy to reach an unchallengeable status that would allow him to interpret *Velayat-e Faqih* and thus shape the political landscape according to his own interests.

As Khamenei moved to further right, his own camp split into two factions: the moderate Right and traditional Right. The latter, headed by then President Rafsanjani and backed by technocrats, understood the importance of elected bodies’ role in resisting the ultimate authority of Khamenei and other appointed officials. Rafsanjani thus gradually moved towards his old enemies in the Left who were spending their time soul-searching in various religious, political, and intellectual centers and institutions.

**The Left: Toward Secular Politics**

After it was pushed out of power in the aftermath of Khomeini’s death, the Left joined or created several political and religious institutions and debate circles in order to reinvent itself. Having participated in the eradication of major political parties in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, it knew well enough not to make the same mistake of either leaving the political scene altogether or becoming a militant opposition. Instead, it decided to modify its Islamic principles and sought a more democratic

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162 Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*. 

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interpretation of religion that would help it return to power. The Left needed a platform that was Islamic enough to ensure its survival, but at the same time democratic enough to open the political process.

Various topics emerged in the Left’s debate circles, mostly concerned with questions of political development, religious governance, theological methods, pluralism, civil society, and modernization. The Kiyan Circle, the Center for Strategic Studies, Salam daily, and the intellectual circles around Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri Najafabadi became the playgrounds to entertain various ideas and eventually launch what became known as the reform movement in 1997. At these forums, dominant revolutionary ideologies and religious ideas rooted in the 1960’s were reexamined by former practitioners who had seen the results of those ideas first hand while they were in power. Max Weber’s typology of forms of authority was employed to explain Khomeini’s charisma and how it unintentionally opened the way for a secular polity after his death. Sir Karl Popper’s Open Society and its Enemies and John Rawls’ Theory of Justice helped the Left to replace the ideological excessiveness, historicism, and essentialism that had shaped many Leftist activists and intellectuals in the past with the concepts of civil and political liberties, social justice, and human rights. Lecturers from around the world were invited to give talks on notions of the dependency

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paradigm, conspiracy theories, authoritarianism, and state formation. Armed with new theological methods, Islamic texts were reexamined and it was revealed that Khomeini’s *Velayat-e Faqih* was only one view, among many others, in the history of Shiism. These modern methodologies and theories helped tackle the many contradictions between the text and modern ideas, including the concept of human rights.

As it is explained below, the establishment was criticized and attacked by the Left from three fronts: political, jurisprudential (“inner-religious”), and theological/philosophical (“outer-religious”). The goal was to analyze “what went wrong” while building a powerful religious and political platform for the near future. The unintended consequence of this intentional move towards democracy was a gradual and cautious acceptance of the core notion of secularism.

**The Political Front**

In the early 1990’s several leftwing politicians, including Saeed Hajjarian, the architect of Iran’s intelligence apparatus after the Islamic Revolution, joined the Center for Strategic Studies in Tehran. There they immersed themselves in the social science literature on revolution, war, religion, etc. Influenced by both the experience of the post-revolutionary era and Western social scientists (especially Max Weber, Emile

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165 Mirsepassi, *Political Islam, Iran and Enlightenment*; and Mirsepassi, *Democracy in Modern Iran*.
Durkheim, and Charles Tilly), Hajjarian wrote a series of articles in Kiyan in the mid 90’s on how the nation-state is essentially a “catalyst” for secularization.\footnote{These articles were later published in Saeed Hajarian, \textit{Az Shahede Ghodsi ta Shahed Bazaari}, (Tehran: Tarhe No, 2001).} Referring to Ayatollah Khomeini’s move to put the state above religion, Hajjarian described the first decade of the Islamic Republic as the secularizing era. Hajjarian’s goal, however, was to take this process further and engineer a transition towards a more democratic society.

By examining Khomeini’s jurisprudential and political legacies, Hajjarian traced the foundation of a modern nation-state and argued that previous state-building attempts under the pro-Western Pahlavi dynasty created a “modernizing nation-state” but not a “modern nation-state.”\footnote{Hajjarian, 96.} According to Hajjarian, it was Khomeini who established the first “genuine” nation-state in Iran, a process reminiscent of the absolutist states of 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century Europe. As those states ultimately moved toward secularism and democracy, so would the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Hajjarian commended Khomeini for taking a pragmatic route to protect the Islamic state, which Hajjarian believed paved the way for the secularization process. As evidence, Hajjarian pointed to the numerous conflicts between the somewhat more pragmatic \textit{Majles} and the Guardian Council, which was created to ensure that all legislation was according to Islamic Law. However, the Guardian Council’s lack of flexibility ultimately forced Khomeini to create a third body, the Expediency Council. As explained earlier, it was designed to settle the differences between the
aforementioned two bodies according to the interests of the Islamic state. Although he had led a revolution to create an Islamic state in order to implement God’s Law, Khomeini had no choice but to reverse the means and end. Praising Ayatollah Khomeini’s “prudence,” Hajjarian perceives the creation of the Expediency Council as the ultimate example of “secularizing the sacred”:

> Accepting the concept of *maslahat*, (expediency) as the most important tool to quickly secularize the sacred jurisprudence apparatus is another important innovation that the Imam [Khomeini] brought into Shi’a thought.\(^{170}\)

Arguing that the Expediency Council was a vital institution where national interests were determined “with no [religious] limitation,” Hajjarian pointed out that this body is in fact what “distinguishes the old from the modern thought.”\(^{171}\) He then concluded that *Velayat-e Faqih* was the equivalent of the absolutist state in Europe, which according to him, eventually paved the way for modern secular state in Western Europe in 19\(^{th}\) century.\(^{172}\) Hajjarian portrayed the secularization process as the inevitable result of the creation of an Islamic state:

> “Essentially, the moment a religious apparatus moves towards creating a state, it will be imperative to do necessary changes in its religious laws in order to adjust to the new conditions. [But] it will have to accept its necessities and have a strong digestion to swallow the bite called the ‘state.’ The secularization process is a catalyst that has made the digestion of the state in the institution of religion possible and in turn it will cause the digestion of religion in the institution

\(^{171}\) Hajjarian, 85.
\(^{172}\) Hajjarian, 87.
Hajjarian argued that the more religion is involved with state, the greater capacity it will have for tolerance. In its tough struggle with governance, religion will be forced to adjust itself to the norms and rules of the day. As the secularization process deepens, its democratic capacities will expand and the participation of elite groups who represent the interests of other strata will increase. The dialectic relationships between the state religion and the religious state will lead to a more democratic society.

It is interesting to note that exactly at the time that modernization and secularization theories were being questioned and even rejected in Western academia, Hajjarian and other Iranian reformists found them useful to “understand” and open up the political process in Iran. These efforts, however, were not limited to politicians.

**The Jurisprudential (“Inner Religious”) Front**

Several traditional scholars had long criticized Khomeini’s theory of *Velayat-e Faqih*, but these voices were often silenced and not heard in the larger society. Criticism of *Velayat-e Faqih* was seen as reactionary and was typically overshadowed by Khomeini’s charisma and the revolutionary fervor of the 1980’s. But in the aftermath of Khomeini’s death and the end of the Iran – Iraq War, many of his own followers and students in religious circles began to reinterpret *Velayat-e Faqih* from a purely jurisprudential perspective.

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173 Hajjarian, 91.
174 Hajjarian, 145.
175 Hajjarian, 147.
176 Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*. 
Grand Ayatollah Montazeri and his seminarians revisited Islamic texts and sources to deconstruct the foundations of the *Velayat-e Faqih*. Montazeri himself was one of the main architects of the *Velayat-e Faqih* in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution. His perfect religious and political credentials led to his nomination to succeed Khomeini as Supreme Leader in 1984. A decade after he had fallen out of favor and was dismissed due to his disagreements with Khomeini, he became a prominent religious dissident and together with his students shook the jurisprudential foundations of the establishment.

While Khomeini had argued that during the Occultation,\(^{177}\) it is the jurists’ divine duty to rule and implement Islamic law, Montazeri stated that if there are other ways to implement Islamic Law, and provided that the “people want to implement (it),” then there is no need for a jurist to rule. Indeed, “in cases where God has not chosen a person or persons [i.e. a prophet or an Imam] for this [to rule], He has given this right to the people.”\(^{178}\) In other words, it is precisely during the Occultation that God gave the people the right to choose their leader. Therefore the source of legitimacy is “people’s selection … and not God’s appointment.”\(^{179}\)

Mohsen Kadivar, one of Montazeri’s most prominent and prolific students, published numerous books and articles and to demonstrate that *Velayat-e Faqih* is not a

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\(^{177}\) Occultation is a Shi’a concept that refers to an era during which the messianic figure, the Mahdi, has disappeared from earth.


\(^{179}\) Montazeri, 24.
requirement of religion, but rather simply a minor hypothesis within Shi’a scholarship.\textsuperscript{180} Kadivar’s typologies of Shi’a scholars’ opinion on the state showed that Ayatollah Khomeini’s theory of absolute rule of the jurist was in fact an anomaly. Kadivar quoted various verses from Qur’an to make the case that there is no obligation to form and follow \textit{Velayat-e Faqih}. Challenging Khomeini’s crucial argument that the prophets’ mission was to create a state and to rule, Kadivar made a clear distinction between prophethood and statesmanship. He referred to various cases in the Qur’an to point out the two are neither “necessarily connected nor mutually exclusive.”\textsuperscript{181} There were prophets who ruled, but there were also prophets who coexisted with and did not challenge the ruler.

However, the most important blow to \textit{Velayat-e Faqih} came from a philosopher who was once Khomeini’s choice to “Islamicize” the universities, Dr. Abdolkarim Soroush.

\textbf{The Theological/Philosophical (“Outer Religious”) Front}

By distinguishing between “accidentals” and “essentials,” prominent Iranian philosopher and reformist Abdolkarim Soroush criticized the notion of political Islam as an aberration and a new concept in the history of Shiism. In sharp contrast with Khomeini’s theory of \textit{Velayat-e Faqih}, Soroush argued that the prophets came to

\textsuperscript{180} Sadri, “Sacral Defense of Secularism: The Political Theologies of Soroush, Shabestari, and Kadivar.”
\textsuperscript{181} Mohsen Kadivar, Interview with Rahe No, p.15.
establish a “faithful-spirited community, not a legal-corporeal society.” Their mission was not governance, but “augmenting justice, eradicating tyranny, crushing pharanoic arrogance, teaching the lesson of servitude to God, and preparing the conditions of a blissful end.” If the Prophet Mohammad created an Islamic state, it was not the core of his mission, but rather a medium, which Muslims are not bound to follow in the modern world. Governance is not a God-given mandate, but a set of managing skills that require ever-changing scientific knowledge and should be open to constant critique. Soroush warned against religious essentialism, stating, “We cannot have a religious water (or wine, for that matter) and an irreligious one. The same would apply to justice, government, science, philosophy, and so on.”

By distinguishing the nonreligious from the antireligious, Soroush introduced his theory of secularism: “The story of secularism is the story of nonreligious reason: a reason which is neither religious nor antireligious. The veil that separates this reason from religion is none other than the metaphysical reason.” For him, secularism is necessary in order to keep religion clean from the polluting effects of government:

Secularism rejects God-like pretensions because it does not consider government to be an extension of the divine power within human society. Management skills require merely human, not God-like powers. In the modern world, the government and the rulers are the most

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183 Soroush, The Expansion of Prophetic Experience, 151.
184 Soroush, The Expansion of Prophetic Experience, 66.
185 Soroush, The Expansion of Prophetic Experience, 68.
responsible agents. They are, by no means, embodiments of the truth. The subjects do not await their high-handed generosity but rather demand their rights and participate in political affairs.  

Soroush attacks the very core assumption of political Islam: Islam is the solution. He argues that although Islam is complete, it is not comprehensive. Islamic knowledge should not be seen as Wal-Mart-like superstore that holds all tools that human beings could ever need. He points out that religions lack certain modern concepts, such as human rights, which are not necessarily against religion. Instead of opposing these concepts, they should be dealt with outside of religion and then introduced to it:

> It is the religious understanding that will have to adjust itself to democracy not the other way around; justice, as a value, cannot be religious. It is religion that has to be just. Similarly, methods of limiting power are not derived from religion, although religion benefits from them.  

If there is no tolerance in Khomeini’s *Velayat-e Faqih*, it is because religious principles and injunctions are limited to duties and do not include rights. If there is no mention of human rights or freedom of speech in religion, it does not mean that religion cannot accept these concepts. In fact, the compatibility of religion with human rights and democracy is both possible and desirable. In the modern world, a democratic society is the only fertile ground for religion:

> Sober and willing – not fearful and compulsory – practice of religion is the hallmark of a

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186 Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 64.
religious society. It is only from such a society that the religious government is born. Such religiosity guarantees both the religious and the democratic character of the government. Democracy needs not only sobriety and rationality but liberty and willing participation. … The acknowledgment of such varieties of understanding and interpretation will, in turn, introduce flexibility and tolerance to the relationship of the ruling and the ruled, confirms rights for the subjects, introduce restraints on the behavior of the rulers.\textsuperscript{189}

Soroush argues that the prophets’ message was close to today’s democracies. God’s prophets “refused to consider themselves captains of history and culture or to impose their views in matters of faith. They were willing to see all nations as equally captivated and fascinated by Satan as well as by their own customs. They spoke the truth and exposed the falsehood in order to discharge their divine duties and attain bliss in the hereafter. They did not set out to survive or win or wipe out ignorance, inequity, and evil.”\textsuperscript{190}

**Public Religion vs. Public Religion: Political Islam vs. Social Islam**

What these three main interrelated camps (political, jurisprudential, and theological) have in common is an attempt to alter the theological ideals established in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution. Their diagnosis is that religion has become obese; by slimming our understanding of religion, people can create a society that is both religious and prosperous.\textsuperscript{191} While still acknowledging the critical role of “public religion,” the end result of this view will shift its locus from the state to the societal level. Unlike the

\textsuperscript{189} Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 133.

\textsuperscript{190} Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 194.

\textsuperscript{191} Needless to say, within this minimalist perspective of religion there is a wide variety of views and arguments.
previous discourse (political Islam), which targeted the state and defined itself against the “West,” the new discourse (social or “moral” Islam) focuses on civil society, religious pluralism, and the necessity of secularism. The more this “project” is pursued, the “thinner” the notion of religion will become. It argues that a more visible and pronounced religious state is not necessarily beneficial to people’s religiosity. A religious government is a government run by religious people, not a government that follows a literal interpretation of the text. These ideas were critical for the Left to reinstate itself into Iranian politics.

In their quest for “religious democracy,” the reformists did not advocate a form of secularism that relegated Islam to the private sphere. They continued to ascribe a public role for religion. This reading of Islam entails what Casanova calls the “core definition of secularism” which is the “thesis of the differentiation of the religious and secular spheres,” and strives to “emancipate the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms.”192 However, the Iranian reformists turned this idea on its head and entered the debate from the other end: emancipating religion from secular institutions and norms. Their definition of secularization began as a process of walling off religious institutions from instrumental use by the state. As Alireza Alavi Tabar, a prominent reformist figure wrote:

> The government has no right to determine the direction and content of religious research and teachings based on its political expediencies. Moreover, it cannot promote and propagate

192 Casanova, p.7.
religious doctrines and execute religious rituals in a way to justify its legitimacy or guidelines and control them according to its interests and expediencies. Conversely, the independence of the institution of power has to be protected from the institution of religion. This means presence in religious institutions does not provide any special rights to play a role in the institution of power.\(^ {193} \)

In short, two forms of Islam entered a very public battle against each other: political Islam (Islamism) and civil Islam (“post-Islamism”).\(^ {194} \)

Two conclusions can be made from this discussion: 1) that institutional and factional interests helped the emergence and adoption of a more democratic/secular perception of Islam; 2) this was, however, not an accidental outcome, as some rational choice theorists would argue, but rather a very conscious and calculated plan. Hence the reformists’ use of the term “the unfinished democracy project.”\(^ {195} \)

Reentering the Scene

Armed with a new platform of civil society, rule of law, and democracy, the old radical Leftists reentered the political process as reformists. In a landslide election in 1997, their candidate, Mohammad Khatami, won 70 percent of the vote. Two years later, the reformists swept the local councils, and then in 2000 they won the Majles. Once they


\(^ {194} \) Bayat, Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn.

dominated the elected bodies they targeted the appointed institutions in the name of democracy. The media that flourished in this new liberal environment focused on the IRGC, judiciary, the Expediency Council, and even the office of the Supreme Leader. The Left no longer attacked the Right for promoting “American Islam,” but instead attacked the Right for their disregard of human rights and democratic ideals. In an interview with CNN, President Khatami praised American democracy and implicitly referred to democracy as the reformists’ ideal model through which religion could give birth to democracy:

The American civilization is founded upon the vision, thinking, and manners of the Puritans. Certainly, others such as adventurers, those searching for gold, and even sea pirates, also arrived in the U.S. But the American nation has never celebrated their arrival and never considered it to be the beginning of their civilization. The Puritans constituted a religious sect whose vision and characteristics, in addition to worshipping God, was in harmony with republicanism, democracy, and freedom.196

Khatami compared the Iranian Revolution to the American Revolution to point out that, like the American Revolution, the goal of Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution was to bring independence to his country.

The defeated conservative Right saw the reform movement as an existential threat, and thus needed to harden its conservative position. Gradually, hardliners came to dominate the conservative camp. Convinced that the reformist’s ultimate agenda was to remove

him, Supreme Leader Khamenei himself turned to the ultra-right and made sure that the reformists were expunged from the legislative and executive branches in 2004 and 2005 respectively. He used the appointed body of the Guardian Council to disqualify the reformists from the elections and barred most of them from running for parliament. Then, in 2005 and again in 2009, he employed the same tools, accompanied with reportedly massive electoral fraud, to bring about President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s victory at the ballot box. It is in this context that a neo-conservative movement, blessed by the nervous Supreme Leader, emerged in various religious and political circles. In fact, Khamenei, the moderate, mid-ranking conservative cleric of the 1980’s, reinvented himself as a top faqih, but this time with an ultra-conservative agenda cooked in various right-wing theological centers during the reform era.

The Emergence of the Neo-Conservatives

In the first years of the reform movement, the Right tried to play along with the idea of democracy, but the consecutive losses of the presidency, the local councils, and the Majles signaled a political avalanche comparable to the collapse of the Soviet Union in the aftermath of Glasnost and Perestroika. The portrayal of President Khatami as Iran’s Gorbachev by many supporters and commentators inside and outside of the country deepened the conservatives’ anxiety. The media’s attack against top conservative clerics

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197 It is crucial, however, to note that reformists’ own blunders, as mentioned, were an important factor that kept many disillusioned voters at home and mobilized many conservative to vote against them. The reformists’ lack of consensus on a single candidate divided their supporters and contributed to their defeat. It is also worth noting that the political landscape moved so much to the right that many of the old conservatives, including the right’s candidate in the 1997 presidential election, became centrists and potential allies of the left.
and bodies made the traditional Right determined to deal with what it saw as an existential threat. The immediate response was to unleash forces to crack down on the media and student movements. However, the more long-term reaction was to help create a neo-conservative political faction based on an ultra-right theology. Again, the point of departure was *Velayat-e Faqih*.

As the Iranian-French sociologist, Farhad Khosrowkhavar points out, “the unifying traits [of the neo-conservatives] include their recognition of the absolute supremacy of the Leader (*rahbar, vali faqih*) and their opposition to democracy, civil society, and religious pluralism. Some are imbued with the non-democratic (even anti-democratic) Western political thought.” 198 The neo-conservatives did not maintain Khomeini’s ambiguity with regards to the issue of sources of sovereignty. Khomeini famously stated that the “*Majles* is the head of all affairs,” while giving enormous power to the Supreme Leader and other non-elected bodies. It was a delicate balance that his much less popular successor could not maintain. The establishment, which had experienced serious blows during the electoral process in the late 1990’s, could not afford Khomeini’s double game and needed to reformulate and thus inoculate *Velayat-e Faqih* from the negative impact of the popular vote. Hence, the neo-conservatives’ increasing emphasis on the divine origin of *Velayat-e Faqih* and other non-elected bodies at the expense of the democratically elected institutions.

One of the neo-conservatives’ first steps was to emphasize the notion of duty at the expense of rights. Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani, a top theologian who is now the head of the judiciary thanks to his neo-conservative ideas, argued that:

In the Islamic state, according to *Velayat-e Faqih*, the source of legitimacy for the system is the authenticity of duty and not the authenticity of the individual. Therefore, while all the pillars of the state, whatever their significance, are important for the efficiency of the system, they owe their legitimacy to their divine origins ... As for those who say that in an Islamic government God has given to the people the right to choose their ruler, that they can do so and so with their votes, and that they may give the reins of power to anyone, these people are speaking from the liberal doctrine, and this is not in accord with the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih*.\(^{199}\)

The neo-conservatives revived and co-opted figures who had been isolated during Khomeini’s reign. Traditional jurists such as Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi had opposed Khomeini’s revolutionary ideology in the 1970’s and 1980’s. But Supreme Leader Khamenei found some of these reactionary ideas beneficial to his quest for divine sources of legitimacy. Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, who is known to be President Ahmadinejad’s mentor, has unequivocally rejected democracy and the will of the people as a source of legitimacy.\(^{200}\)

The neo-conservatives also have roots in non-democratic Western thought such as those of Martin Heidegger. This provides them with ammunition to launch an attack on the


reformists’ liberal position from a Western perspective as well. They claim that the views of the reformists are caricatures of selected Western thoughts that are bankrupt even in the West. Thus, they denounce liberalism and secularism not only as essentially incompatible with Islam, but also failed as ideologies.

To the neo-conservatives, *Velayat-e Faqih* protects the Islamic society from the dominating and wicked West. Unlike the Left, which argues that separating state from mosque is not only desirable but necessary for the future of Islam in the modern world, the neo-conservatives claim that secularism is neither universal nor compatible with Islam. They accuse the reformists of seeking to deprive Islam of its divine values and of limiting religion’s role in the name of human rights and democracy.

Targeting Hajjarian and other reformists who claimed that Khomeini himself had opened the door to secularism by institutionalizing the notions of expediency and pragmatism, Rahimpour Azghadi, another neo-conservative, argued that, “Khomeini did not secularize Islam, but, on the contrary, he Islamized the ‘century’ by submitting to religious law that part of tradition (urj) that had escaped it in the past.”201 In effect, according to the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih*, no social behavior can be autonomous from Islamic ends.

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201 Cited in Farhad Khosrokhavar, “Neo-Conservative Intellectuals in Iran,” 16.
While for the reformist Hajarian the first “genuine” state formation in Iran took shape through *Velayat-e Faqih*, neo-conservative Azghadi did not view the two concepts comparable at all. He argued that the nation-state was constructed in the Western secular world, while the *Velayat-e Faqih* is a divine concept that emerged to “religionize” all aspects of human life.\(^\text{202}\)

As Khosrowkhavar argues, the neo-conservatives “are ‘modernizing’ religion in a regressive way because social reality and the concrete evolution of society in today’s Iran are in the direction of secularization. This regressive modernization is a hyper-traditionalization based on the extension of *shari’a* (Islamic Law) to every aspect of life, thus submitting to Islamic regulations those acts that traditional religion used to consider as being neutral”\(^\text{203}\)

In conclusion, in the aftermath of the war when the Right dominated the state, it pursued a more secular approach in its economic and foreign policies, while in political arena employed a much more conservative interpretation of religion in general and *Velayat-e Faqih* in particular. It is important to note that the Left too pursued overall similar economic and foreign policies once it was in power and it too conceived of ideology as detrimental to the interests of the state in the international system. However, while the Left took *Velayat-e Faqih* and went towards a more secular and democratic direction to challenge the *status quo* in domestic politics, the Right came up with

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\(^\text{202}\) Khosrokhavar.

\(^\text{203}\) Khosrokhavar, 20.
increasingly conservative readings of *Velayat-e Faqih* that not only kept the appointed institutions under its control, but brought the elected bodies under the supervision of the Guardian Council to limit the Left’s access to the ballot box. Although democracy inevitably entered the Right’s lexicon as well, it was reinterpreted not as a source of legitimacy but only “complementary” to the divinity of the *Velayat-e Faqih*. With the help of the Guardian Council, the IRGC, and other right wing institutions of the establishment such as the Association of Combatant Clergy, the neoconservatives took the local councils (2003), the *Majles* (2004), and presidency (2005 and 2009) from the reformists. They also became more powerful within the conservative camp and in traditionally conservative bodies. Once again, institutional and individual interests consciously dictated the religious approach, but this time towards further unsecular politics.

**Conclusion**

During the last three decades, the Iranian Right and the Iranian Left have modified, reversed, and even swapped their theological ideals according to their political and institutional interests. They have both distanced themselves from Ayatollah Khomeini’s vision of Islamic Republic. One emphasizes the theocratic nature of the political system, while the other one stresses the importance of the republic and its institutions. But both started from the same legacy of the late 1980’s in which Khomeini placed the survival of the state above religious ordinances. As it was explained in the previous chapter, this
was a move in reaction to the existential threats that international factors, including the Iran – Iraq War, imposed on the Islamic government.

The moderation and radicalization of these two factions were preceded, not followed by, their ideologies, which in turn were institutionalized by the players’ strategic interests. In their quest for power, Islamic parties require theological latitudes to better survive state repression and utilize political opportunities. Depending on the Islamic or secular nature of their rivals, they need to capitalize on the “norms” of the establishment and shape them according to their interests. It is here that ideas matter, but they often follow interests. Institutions and centers can therefore be critical in providing the necessary repertoire for religious parties at certain critical junctures. While a religious party cannot control the scope of its ideological journey and its ramifications, it consciously becomes friend or foe of democracy to the extent that it is aware of its interests. In fact, a religious party dictates its own ideology based on its perceived interests.

Islamic parties both moderate and radicalize their behaviors based on strategic calculations, state repression, and political inclusion/exclusion. But the accompanying ideological change does not necessarily follow the behavioral change. In fact, various cases show that ideological change precedes behavioral modification because parties need to prove they are “still Islamic” to their constituency, while at the same time
develop tools to shield themselves from their enemies. Old and new institutions embody these ideological transformations and are influenced by the international environment.

Rational choice theorists criticize essentialist ideas of those such as Bernard Lewis for arguing against compatibility of Islam and democracy. They state that democracy can be independent from the intentions and ideologies of political elites. Like Christian Democrats, Muslim activists could inadvertently pave the way for the emergence of a democratic polity by participating in the electoral process. This chapter provided empirical evidence to qualify the thesis that, rather than making choices against their principles, Islamic parties change and even reverse their ideals to match the electoral opportunities and provide themselves with some form of political immunity. Religion is a set of competing meanings and contested doctrines that alternatively emerge in various political and religious institutions and circles to offer theological latitudes for political actions. At critical junctures, Islamic parties benefit tremendously from this repertoire in their quest to challenge or strengthen the status quo.
Chapter Four – The Mosque and Media Politics

Introduction

The previous two chapters examined diverging developments of Velayat-e Faqih against the background of external and internal factors. Chapter Two elaborated on why and how the Iranian state’s weak position in the international system compelled its leaders to compromise on their ideals. Eventually, the interests of the state were put above religion. Chapter Three examined the further trajectory of Velayat-e Faqih within the context of Iran’s factional politics. The chapter argued that the weak position of the radical faction in the polity compelled the radicals to construct a democratic interpretation Islam so they could secure a strong position within Iran’s elected bodies. The chapter also showed that the dominant position of the conservatives led them to rely on more autocratic readings of Islam in order to preserve the status quo and their control over the unelected institutions.

The goal of Chapter Four is to examine how this political battle and discursive contest was brought to the Iranian media and how it was reflected throughout the coverage of various topics, including the international news. In Chapter Three, I outlined the opposing viewpoints on Velayat-e Faqih and the relationship between religion and politics that emerged in various circles and institutions after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s death in 1989. I argued that in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, it was mostly academic and religious institutions that debated democracy and religious
pluralism in closed circles. However, by the late 1990’s, these universal norms and values were debated more and more in the media as the radicals, who had reinvented themselves as reformists and reentered the scene in 1997, decided to bring the esoteric debates of the past decade to a new level. These reformists endeavored to bring those discussions, and more importantly their daily social and political implications, to debates in the public square in order to further consolidate their popular support and open the political process. Their coverage of international stories, and more specifically the West, was consistent with both their factional interests and religious principles. The political weakness that had led the reformists toward democratic principles now pushed them to simultaneously portray the West both as a positive example of democracy and as a menacing threat to Iran’s sovereignty. The reformists’ portrayal of the West was carefully constructed to bolster their argument that the conservatives’ suppression of the reform movement would only invite powerful Western intervention. This trend became especially pronounced when the establishment used the judiciary, the Guardian Council, and other key institutions to purge the reformists for a second time in 2001. However, with the failure of the reformists’ media tactics, their subsequent defeat, and the advent of new media, both the concept and institution of Velayat-e Faqih came under unprecedented direct criticism from various religious and political groups and even moderate conservatives. The media, especially new media like satellite channels and social networks, played a decisive role in what became the ultimate showdown between two readings of Islam: the Green Movement of 2009.
Media and Media Politics in Post-Revolutionary Iran

Throughout the contemporary history of Iran, the media has played an increasingly important role in shaping the political battleground and influencing the masses. The Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 began after an editorial piece called Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini “a corrupt foreign agent.” That article unleashed a wave of nationwide protests that ended in the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime and the ascendance of the Islamic Republic in a mere thirteen months. Twenty years later, after the conservative establishment shut down the reformist daily Salaam, massive student protests unfolded all over the country and seriously challenged the Islamic government in a manner not seen since the Islamic Revolution. The government eventually had to resort to force to suppress the growing opposition.

The media, however, has not only created social and political upheaval in Iran. It has also provided the intellectual rendezvous and a critical public sphere in which scholars, activists, and journalists have gathered to discuss a variety of topics from politics to society and culture. Kiyan, a monthly journal established in 1990, is an example of the latter phenomenon. As is explained in the previous chapter, in addition to publishing original and theoretical articles ranging from the philosophy of religion to political sociology, Kiyan also brought together religious intellectuals to discuss contentious issues such as the relationship between religion and politics. The fruit of the “Kiyan Circle,” and similar institutions like the Center for Strategic Studies was a newly

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educated generation of former revolutionaries who resurfaced in the aftermath of the landslide election of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997 to become the intellectual engine of the reform movement.

After the 1997 election, these thinkers and activists took advantage of the newly born liberal era to bring their political and religious struggle into a new battlefield, the media. Mohsen Sazegara, who had moved from cofounding Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) to becoming a key founding member of the Kiyan Circle in the early 1990’s, opened the newspaper Jame’a (The Society), Iran’s first civil society newspaper. Saeed Hajjarian, who made a similar journey from establishing Iran’s intelligence service in the early 1980’s to becoming one of the main theoreticians of the reform movement in the 1990’s at the Center for Strategic Studies, became the managing editor of the Sobh-e Emrooz (This Morning) daily after the 1997 presidential election. Their reformist publications introduced the implications of forbidden topics relating to the interpretation of the sacred text of the Qur’an, the infallibility of the Supreme Leader, human rights, and the duty of believers to engage in public debate into the public sphere. They initiated a meaning-making process, contested official narratives, and engaged the public in fervent debates on daily politics. They also covered and interpreted international news and events in the light of their ideology, which claimed to bridge the old religious-secular cleavage. Iran’s frustrated youth welcomed this new perspective, which advocated integration with the rest of the world. The reformists understood that by addressing these issues and the people’s decade old grievances with the Islamic
Republic, as well as exposing the political and economic corruption of the establishment and appointed officials, they would be able to maintain their bottom-up popular force while at the same time negotiating at the top with the appointed figures and institutions. Hence, the famous motto “pressure from below, bargain from above,” coined by Saeed Hajjarian. The key was to maintain a crucial balance of Islam and democracy. This idea had been theorized in the previous decade by reformist intellectuals, but now needed to be introduced in a tangible way to take hold deep in the society in order to secure grassroots support.

Thus, in the late 1990’s the reformists intensified their discursive battle with the establishment through an instrumental use of the media. It was one of the few critical tools that the weak faction had at its disposal to challenge, expose, and compete with those who controlled the appointed state institutions. The advent of new media later added a different dimension to this interreligious confrontation, which became more direct, transparent, and radical. In the absence of political parties in Iran, politicians and activists had no other venue but journalism and the media to voice their message. The establishment, on the other hand, viewed the media as an existential security threat. It used a variety of methods, including the imposition of strict censorship laws, massive crackdowns against journalists, filtering, cyber attacks, and the spread of misinformation to counter the power of the media and stifle dissent. Although it was typically one step behind the media, the state showed an enormous determination as
well as capability to catch up with new media technology and adapt to the changing media landscape. This left little room for independent journalism in Iran.

In this war of religious and political narratives, both sides were highly calculating, goal-oriented, and interest-driven. Religious and secular ideas were simplified, framed, and introduced strategically to the public, while political narratives, both international and domestic, were narrated selectively. Each side brought their view of religion into the public sphere to articulate its political implications. Each tied its view of religion to the strength of the state, the independence of the nation, and the prosperity of the society and accused the other of undermining the foundation of the Islamic Revolution.

Through this process, coverage of the West increasingly became one of the key indicators of the two sides’ ideological and tactical differences. The conservatives viewed the media as an instrument of the Western cultural blitz and the West’s plot against Velayat-e Faqih. Their notion of political Islam entailed a confrontation with the “corrupt” and “collapsing” West; a view that the Left had once shared as well. However, the latter’s reformist discourse led to a shift away from this demonizing notion of the West. Instead, the reformists attacked the corruption of the establishment and relied on its new religious framework to seek a “dialogue” with the West and the broader international community. In the post-9/11 era, the weakened reformists added a security dimension to their coverage and warned that lack of democracy in Iran would lead to a confrontation with the West (by giving an excuse for American adventurism), which would not be in the interest of anyone in Iran, including the conservative
establishment. It was a tactical move that originated from their declining position in the domestic political structure. By providing constant coverage of external threats, the reformists hoped to convince the conservatives to open the political process. They argued that their “religious democracy” would bring unity at home and dialogue abroad. As the reformists’ grip on power weakened from 2001 and onward, this trend intensified as their media attacks on the corrupt conservative establishment were gradually replaced by a focus on international threats.

**Factional Politics and the Media War**

Throughout the 1990’s, the Islamic Republic’s radical Leftists were busy reinventing themselves as reformists and formulating a strategy that could help them challenge Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his allies and return to the government (as explained in Chapter Three). They needed a platform that was Islamic enough to shield them against state repression and democratic enough to open the political process. Their goal was to win the elected bodies and drive a wedge between the government and the establishment, between the elected and the appointed. Tapping into their intellectually enriched repertoire of “Islamic democracy,” they ran on a platform of freedom of expression, civil society, and rule of law. Against the entire state apparatus, including the state-controlled television and radio, a small number of reformist newspapers played a crucial role in conveying the reformist message to Iranian society, especially frustrated youth and women. The result was the landslide election of their candidate, former Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad Khatami, with the strong
mandate of 70 percent of the vote. It was a major embarrassment for Ayatollah Khamenei, who had unabashedly mobilized the system and the media apparatus behind his candidate, Speaker of the Majles Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri.

Thus, one of the few eras of relative freedom, including freedom of the press, in Iran’s contemporary history began. Like others before it, it too proved to be short lived. However, it was enough to open a Pandora’s Box and allow hundreds of newspapers to emerge. It was enough for thousands of young ambitious journalists to launch their careers go on to deeply impact their society throughout the decade to come. In this new climate, many reformists decided to enter journalism instead of government employment. Those who did take up top positions in the government understood the importance of the media and founded their own media projects. The fruits of this media opening were daily papers and weekly magazines with reportedly unprecedented circulations. The publishing houses could simply not meet the overwhelming popular demand. Newsstands were filled with newspapers and long lines of buyers. Newly born student organizations started their own publications on university campuses. Later, the advent of blogs opened a completely new arena for the youth to anonymously express themselves from the safety of their own homes. Many of these young people were noticed and subsequently hired to work as journalists in the print and online media. The wide variety of taboo topics, from the authority of the Supreme Leader to homosexuality, covered by the blogs signaled that their boldness and willingness to cross redlines could move from the virtual arena into the real world.
The conservatives’ position worsened when the reformists took control of other elected bodies, namely the local councils and the Majles, in 1998 and 1999. The reformists were banking on popular support and the electoral process to enable their return to government, and the media was a vital tool in this process. Reformist media presented forbidden topics such as religious pluralism and *Velayat-e Faqih* to the public for open debate. Saeed Hajjarian, the former founder of Iran’s intelligence service who later became the architect of the reform movement attempted to operationalize his strategy: “pressure from below, bargain from above.” While serving as a political advisor to President Khatami, Hajjarian became the managing editor of *Sobh-e Emrooz* (This Morning), a daily that published critical comments, editorials, and articles. The confident reformists relentlessly used their news outlets to attack figures within the establishment, some of whom were their allies. For instance, *Sobh-e Emrooz*’s investigative journalist, Akbar Ganji ran a series of articles implicating former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in the brutal killing of several intellectuals in 1998. These media adventures, however, profoundly alarmed the IRGC, the Supreme Leader, and other conservatives within the establishment. They also alienated centrist figures such as Rafsanjani, whose initial support for the reformists was seen by many as critical to the movement’s success in 1997.

The frightened conservatives responded by taking advantage of the reformists’ divisions and weak leadership and unleashed the security forces to crack down on thinkers and
journalists. In June 1999, the daily *Salam* published a classified document that claimed a new legislative bill to further restrict the Iranian press was the brainchild of a now deceased top intelligence official that had masterminded the murder of several secular intellectuals in the previous year. Salam, a radical-turned-reformist paper, published the document a day before the bill was put to vote in the conservative Majles. The judiciary subsequently shut down *Salam* for publishing a classified document. The closure of *Salam* angered university students and unleashed a massive student movement that shook the foundation of the Islamic Republic for the first time since 1979. However, the security forces brutally put down the demonstrators and the media paid a dear price for its role in the unrest.

In March 2000, Saeed Hajjarian, the “brain” of the reformists, political advisor to President Khatami, and the managing editor of the daily *Sobh-e Emrooz*, was shot in the head, allegedly by the regime. Akbar Ganji, the investigative journalist who had accused several top officials of deadly plots against intellectuals, was imprisoned. One after another, editors, commentators, reporters, satirists, cartoonists, and activists experienced long periods of solitary confinement and brutal torture at the hands of the intelligence and security agents. Those who had relied on the mandate that 20 million voters had given to the reformists in the 1997 elections to speak out against the regime soon learned that an inexperienced 28-year-old judge in Branch 1410 of the Press Court

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205 The agent was Saeed Emami. He was arrested, but “committed suicide.” Many reformists believe that he was killed by the conservatives to prevent the investigators from tracing his actions up his chain of command.
could single handedly put an end to the freedom of expression. Saeed Mortazavi, known as the “butcher of the press” closed more than hundred newspapers, blocked websites, and arrested journalists, bloggers, and student activists. Mortazavi reportedly even participated in the interrogation of Zahra Kazemi, the Iranian-Canadian photojournalist who died while in detention in 2003.206

Unable to suppress the media in the name of religion alone, the Islamic state decided to demonstrate a typical characteristic of authoritarian states: rule by law, not rule of law. Article 24 of the Iranian constitution guarantees the freedom of the press “except when it is detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public. The details of this exception will be specified by law.”207 Vague and broadly defined provisions in the Islamic Penal Code and Security Laws allow judges to charge anyone, at anytime, with “insulting” religious or government figures, “acting against national security,” or “planning for a soft [velvet] revolution.”208 These laws are the state’s main tools to suppress the freedom of expression.209 In response, the reformists’ argued that under these laws even the publication of the Qur’an could be suspended and the Prophet Mohammad could be put in prison for acting against the Islamic state!

208 Islamic Penal Code, Book Five, State Administered Punishments and Deterrents, ratified May 9, 1996.
Recognizing the danger posed by the press law, one of the first priorities of the reformists after winning the Majles in 2000 was to change the law so that the judiciary could no longer stifle the media. The reformists introduced a press amendment bill three weeks into the new Majles session. On August 6, 2000, before the Majles had begun debating the bill, Speaker Mehdi Karroubi read a letter he received from Ayatollah Khamenei. Iran’s Supreme Leader said that he could no longer remain silent, because the new bill was “not legitimate and in the interest of the system and country.” He warned, “If the enemies of Islam, the Revolution, and the Islamic System control the press or penetrate in it, a big danger will threaten the security, unity, and faith of the people.” It was the first time that Khamenei directly and blatantly interfered in the affairs of the Majles. He has saved this illegal and extrajudicial act as a last resort for a crucial matter.

The Decline of Reform and the New Media Response

From this point until 2005, the pressure on the media and the declining reformists only increased. The political establishment became more sophisticated at cracking down on any form of freedom of expression. After the Guardian Council disqualified many reformist candidates, the reformists lost control of the local councils, the Majles, and eventually the presidency. Despondent over the frailty of their internal political leverage, the reformists gradually shifted their focus to an external force, or threat, to use as an instrument to increase their bargaining power against the conservative establishment. They argued that their reformist version Islam would bring not just
democracy, but also security, to the country. This tactical shift coincided with a strategic shift in post-9/11 American foreign policy. The Bush administration claimed that the undemocratic nature of regimes was relevant to U.S. national security. Despite Iran’s critical support in Afghanistan, President Bush labeled Iran a member of the “Axis of Evil.” If during the Clinton Administration the reformists had hoped that rapprochement with Washington would empower them domestically, under the Bush administration they tried to take advantage of the U.S.’s willingness to undertake foreign policy adventures in neighboring Afghanistan and in Iraq and use the threat of U.S. action in Iran to gain leverage against the conservatives. Their message was that internal unity could prevent external attacks.

Despite alleged orders by the Supreme National Security Council instructing the media not to report on U.S. threats against Iran, reformist newspapers widely covered any American statement that implicitly or explicitly isolated and threatened the country. Thus, their indirect message to the conservatives was that the only way to preempt the imminent threat of U.S. action was to unify behind the reformists’ plan to liberalize Iranian society, democratize the political system, open up the electoral process, and establish a “religious democracy.” On the other hand, the conservatives argued that 9/11 was nothing but a project carried out by the U.S. government to justify a declaration of war against Islam, and therefore Iranians needed to stand firm and defend their system of Islamic government. The conservatives also tried to minimize the American threat by portraying the U.S. as a paper tiger who was about to fall and bring about the inevitable
end of Western civilization. The difficulties that the U.S. troops soon faced in Afghanistan and in Iraq eventually strengthened the conservatives’ narrative and their religious doctrine (Chapter Six).

The coverage of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent U.S-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq is presented here as a case study to showcase the war of narratives between the conservatives and the reformists, and also to explain how factional weakness and religious views can affect the use of the media to interpret a major international issue. A number of newspapers and news agencies belonging to both the conservative and the reformist camps have been selected for an analysis of their content in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. First, the conservative media’s portrayal of the U.S., its theories with regard to 9/11, and its apocalyptic vision of the West are examined. Previously, the reformists had held a very similar view of the West, which they subsequently pivoted away from. Next, the reformist newspapers’ instrumental use of the U.S. threat against Iran is detailed and explained. This comparison demonstrates how views and coverage of world politics are tied to factional interests and consistent with the theological trajectories explained in earlier chapters.

**The Conservative Media Narrative: Apocalypse Now - The Inevitable Collapse of the West**

In January 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini sent a religious delegation to the Kremlin to meet with Mikhail Gorbachev, the final leader of the Soviet Union. Following the footsteps
of the Prophet Muhammad, who wrote letters to the Persian and Roman Empires inviting them to Islam, the founder of the Islamic Republic had a very simple message for Gorbachev: your empire will collapse; convert to Islam. Khomeini wrote, “Your country’s main problem is not ownership, economics, or freedom. Your main problem is lack of true belief in God.” He added, “Now . . . I want you to seriously investigate Islam - not because Islam or the Muslims need you, but because Islam can bring comfort and salvation to all people and solve the problems of all nations.” Gorbachev thanked the Iranian delegation for the long trip but preferred to remain godless. Two years later, the Soviet Union fell apart and with it the Communist ideology. That event further hardened the beliefs of the conservative followers of Ayatollah Khomeini to the point that today they invoke the second part of his prediction: the West will be next to fall. The conservatives and their mouthpieces argue that Western civilization will implode as a result of corruption, immorality, and injustice. The underlying tone of many editorials in various conservative Iranian media outlets is the inevitability of the fall of the U.S., and with it Western civilization. They postulate that this will be followed by the resurgence of Islamic civilization and its golden era, inspired by Khomeini’s *Velayat-e Faqih*. Hence, the 9/11 attacks, regardless of who the perpetrators were, constitute the beginning of the end of Western Civilization.

Five weeks after September 11, 2001, the ultraconservative newspaper *Kayhan* ran an editorial entitled “The End of History is the Beginning of our Path.” After selectively quoting famous scholars such as Francis Fukuyama, Karen Armstrong, and Jurgen
Habermas, *Kayhan* concluded:

Today is the end of history for the failed liberal democracy. The train of progress has collided against the fortress of capitalism. In the midst of the ruined remains of democracy we will be able to lead mankind towards salvation and security, with the light of guidance which Imam Hossein, peace be upon him, has placed in our hands for shedding light of the bewildered humanity at the end of history.\(^{210}\)

The conservative newspaper *Jomhouri Eslami* cited the French author Emanuel Tode’s work, *After the Empire*, in order to argue that, “The U.S. is imploding because of its growing budget deficit and the fact that it is no longer on the cutting edge of science, knowledge, democracy, and freedom.”\(^{211}\) According to *Jomhouri Eslami*, Tode wrote that this explained why the U.S. “needed” terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda in order to justify its attacks on other countries and to postpone its eventual fall.

Similarly, *Resalat*, another conservative newspaper, wrote an editorial in which it claimed, “No philosopher or sociologist has any doubt about the fall of the West.”\(^{212}\) According to *Resalat*, the two important Western philosophies, namely liberalism and socialism, have ignored human rights, especially with regard to women, putting Western civilization “on a slide towards collapse.” The editorial quoted Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei as stating that the West had committed “a capital crime” by preventing women from playing “her unique role in the family.” *Resalat* wrote that the

\(^{210}\) *Kayhan*, 20 Oct 2001, FBIS.
\(^{211}\) *Jomhouri Eslami*, 11 August 2005.
capital crime of “reducing the value of women to a consumer good” and ignoring her humanity and her “shining” status in the center of a civilization would eventually lead to the downfall of the West. This same newspaper also warned that American society is on the brink of disintegration because of its lack of morality. To bolster its claim, Resalat listed numerous statistics, including the “fact” that, “Ten percent of American male chefs are suspected of having a kind of sexual disease called ‘fetishism.’”

The Coverage of the 9/11 Attacks

The Iranian government was one of the first to condemn the attacks of September 11th. Within hours after the tragedy took place, then President Khatami strongly denounced the attacks and expressed his condolences on behalf of the Iranian people, stating, “I condemn the terrorist operations of hijacking and attacking public places in American cities, which have resulted in the death of a large number of defenseless American people.” The Iranian population expressed their sympathy by holding candlelight vigils, signing the condolence book at the Swiss Embassy in Tehran (which represents U.S. interests in Iran), and holding a moment of silence at a soccer game. However, the conservative establishment and their media, including state-owned television, radio, and newspapers, followed a different path. On September 12, 2001, Tehran radio said, “The planning of operations, the selection of targets, and the savage way in which the operations were carried out on America show that non-American groups are incapable

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of carrying out such attacks." English language conservative paper *Kayhan International* wrote:

Six months after the September 11th hijacking of aircraft from Boston airport and their crash into the financial and military symbols of the U.S., some startling facts are coming to light. The [events] bear a striking resemblance to the Boston Tea Party in 1773, when a group of New Englanders disguised as Red Indians boarded His Majesty’s ship to dump crates of Indian tea into the Atlantic. The initial blame was on the poor Amerindians before the British realized that it was the handiwork of rebellious American colonists. We had doubted in this column the involvement of Arabs or any outside forces in the flattening of the 110-story twin-tower World Trade Centre in New York and the simultaneous crashing of a third ‘hijacked’ aircraft into the Pentagon in Washington. Our views have been corroborated with the revelation that the whole scenario was planned by American Intelligence in league with the Zionists . . . One-time U.S. presidential candidate Lyndon Larouche has disclosed that the intricate operation was a prelude to a war of civilizations against Islamic countries by the American administration . . . According to Larouche, who serves as Contributing Editor to Executive Intelligence Review Magazine, among the culprits in this terrorist campaign, which has claimed the lives of thousands of Americans, brought death and misery to Afghanistan, and worsened the plight of Palestinians, are former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and ex-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger . . . Like King George III, who misjudged the Boston events and lost the American colonies, God-willing President Bush will preside over the end of the U.S. as a world power, but not unless he creates more catastrophes for other civilizations.215

On the first anniversary of the attacks, *Kayhan International* published an editorial in which it claimed that, “Research done on the September 11, 2001 incident by

independent investigators both inside and outside the United States leave little doubt that the said attacks could not be the work of al-Qaeda or any other foreign organizations." In order to prove this claim, Kayhan International referred to 911: The Big Lie, a book written by French “investigator” Thierry Meyssan.

In the years that followed, the conservative media continued its drumbeat. A story that was reprinted by several newspapers, including the conservative papers Resalat and Jomhouri Eslami, the ultra-conservative Fars, and the (then) centrist IRNA news agency quoted an American pilot, Russ Wittenberg, as saying that “the 9/11 attacks were carried out by the U.S. government.” Fars translated this story from Arctic Beacon, a conspiracy-focused website based in Alaska. This is an example of the conservative media using fringe sources from the Western media or taking legitimate quotations out of context to lend credence to their view that the American government had itself caused the events of September 11th.

After former CIA official Michael Scheuer published a book describing how the U.S. administration failed to capture Bin Laden in Afghanistan, the conservative Iranian media interpreted this failure as having been an intentional plan by the White House.

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220 www.arcticbeacon.com
221 Michael Scheuer, Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror, (Virginia: Brassey’s Inc., 2004).
The Mehr news agency wrote an article entitled “Bin Laden’s Escape was America’s Work.”\textsuperscript{222} Referencing the same book, Kayhan quoted Sharif news agency (a newly born conservative news outlet), “A CIA Agent Reveals: Washington intentionally let Bin Laden escape when it attacked Afghanistan.”\textsuperscript{223} In fact, the actual story was that the former CIA operator claimed that the administration failed to act quickly to arrest Bin Laden in Tora Bora. Scheuer had not written anything about a U.S. conspiracy revolving around Bin Laden’s escape.

Kayhan employed the same technique in a report that used the 9/11-Commission Report to claim that President Bush had been “aware” of the attacks prior to September 11\textsuperscript{th}, 2001.\textsuperscript{224} In fact, the report did not refer to any specific warnings of the attacks, but rather referred only to general warnings that President Bush had received from his advisors in his daily briefings. Similarly, in its coverage of the London bombings of July 7, 2005, Kayhan used a British fact-finding report to conclude that Washington and London were involved in 9/11 and 7/7 attacks on the U.S. and U.K. respectively.\textsuperscript{225}

The “expediency” of the Islamic state, long sanctioned by Ayatollah Khomeini, justified these exaggerations and lies.

The U.S. Invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq: “A Good Omen”

\textsuperscript{222} Mehr News Agency, 8 August 2005.
\textsuperscript{223} Kayhan, 30 July 2005.
\textsuperscript{224} Kayhan, 12 April 2004.
Iranian conservatives often argue that the U.S. “needed” the 9/11 attacks in order to have a justification to wage its war against Islam, to protect Israel, and to sustain the flow of oil to the West. They interpreted the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq from this angle, but at the same time argued that it was the beginning of the end of the American era. Twenty days after the U.S. attack on Afghanistan, *Kayhan* wrote:

All the indications and evidence suggest that the United States and its allies are carrying out attacks on Islam. The Muslim nations have no doubt that Bin Laden and [the] Taliban are nothing but excuses to attack the Islamic world . . . the Americans, by their own decisions, have set foot in [a] swamp, and the Islamic world and Muslim nations have for years waited for this moment. From this perspective, although the military attacks by the United States and its allies on Afghanistan and the massacre of the oppressed people of that country are ugly, deplorable, and painful, the presentation of the real face of America and the open entanglement of this bloodthirsty imperialist power in the dreadful swamp of Afghanistan should be taken as a good omen.226

A few months before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, *Kayhan* wrote:

The attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York were planned and implemented jointly by the rulers of the United States and Israel. Afterwards, they could blame Muslims for this and in the light of the media propaganda against Islam and Muslims they could undertake a major massacre of the Palestinian people, thereby resolving Israel’s problem forever. This is exactly what they did . . . Today, America’s main aim for an attack against Iraq is once again the matter of Israel . . . America does not and has never had a problem with Saddam [Hussein]. Just as he stepped alongside the United States during the eight years of the imposed [Iran-Iraq] War and acted in coordination with the United States, today it could be the same . . .

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Through an attack on Iraq, the United States wants to bully and force the real owners of Palestine to abandon their homes and become homeless refugees or else be imprisoned in their homes. On the one hand this would bring peace and security to the occupying Zionists and on the other it would strengthen U.S. control over the richest oil fields in the world [in Iraq], considered to be the lifeline of the industrialized world.227

Iran’s state-owned TV and Kayhan’s front pages rarely missed an opportunity to display images of U.S. soldiers’ brutality in Iraq and Afghanistan. Kayhan also used derogatory words to describe U.S. actions and casualties in Iraq. For example, they often referred to U.S. casualties as halakat, which has a negative connotation and roughly translates as “dying for nothing.” This is the same word used for the Iraqi casualties during the Iran-Iraq War.

In addition, the conservative media selectively quoted and misquoted American scholars and Western media to suit their own purposes. For example:

- Noam Chomsky: The U.S. President Should be Executed.”228

- Then under this headline the newspaper adds: “The war crime law ratified by the 1996 Republican dominated Congress says that disobeying the Geneva Convention is a war crime carrying a penalty of capital punishment.”

- Samuel Huntington: “The U.S. will not Win in Iraq.”229

- Samuel Huntington: “Along with 540 thousand Americans, 105 U.S.

227 Alireza Malekian, “Note of the Day” Column: “America should not be too optimistic,” Kayhan, 12 October 2002, 2, FBIS.
228 Resalat, 16 August 2005.
congressmen want to impeach Bush.”

In an attempt to show that Iran was much more popular in Iraq than the U.S., FarsNews Agency published a story with this headline: “The Christian Science Monitor: Unlike America’s Rule by Force, Iran has a Place in the Heart of the Iraqi People.” There is a bit of exaggeration here. In reality, The Christian Science Monitor simply quoted an analyst as saying, “The Americans have hard power in Iraq, but the Iranians have soft power, and they are able to do things. It is a much more subtle influence than the Americans.” In fact, there was no mention of the word “heart” in The Christian Science Monitor story.

The gruesome stories of massive human rights abuses at the Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib prisons were a gift to Iran’s conservative politicians and their media. They ran countless front-page stories on America’s human rights violations abroad as well as inside U.S. territory to “expose” Washington’s hypocrisy and double standards with regard to human rights.

- FarsNews Agency published an Amnesty International report on U.S. human rights with the following headline: “The U.S. is the Leading Human Rights

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230 Kayhan, 18 June 2005
231 FarsNews Agency, 22 May 2005. The story was reprinted by another conservative newspaper, Resalat, 22 May 2005.
Violator in the World.”


- *Jomhouri Eslami* released a special report on U.S. torture of Afghan prisoners.

- *Jomhouri Eslami* quoted Newsday as saying: “Bush defends the torture of prisoners.”

- *Kayhan* claimed: “Because of the Abu Ghraib Scandal, Bush and Rumsfeld are summoned to court.”

- After a tragic bridge stampede took place in Iraq in summer 2005, *Kayhan* indirectly blamed the U.S. and published this front-page headline: “Massacre in Kazemein Under the Occupiers’ Watch.”

“World-Wide Hatred Towards the U.S.”

The increase in anti-American sentiment throughout the world during the Bush Administration was another running theme in the conservative Iranian media, especially *Kayhan*. Below is a sampling of the type of headlines that appeared on the papers’ front pages on a daily basis:

- “Tens of Thousands of Greeks call Bush the World’s most Dangerous

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237 *Kayhan*, 1 September 2005.
Terrorist”

- “200 Thousand Cubans Scream Against the U.S. with One Voice”
- “The People of Ecuador Overthrow U.S.-Backed President”
- “The Europeans’ Growing Hatred of the United States”
- “Labor Day Demonstrations in Several Countries Turn into Anti-American Protests”

**America, A Paper Tiger against Iran**

The conservative media also portrayed the United States as a paper tiger caught in a quagmire in Iraq and Afghanistan. Conservative Iranian media often selectively quoted the American media and U.S. scholars in an attempt to support this portrayal. For example, in 2005 Kayhan ran the headline “An American Quarterly: Iran will Lead Developments Middle East.” In fact, the author of this article was a Russian strategist, but Kayhan preferred not to put this in the headline and instead emphasized that it was an American journal that made this claim. In addition:

- *Kayhan* quoting former U.S. Secretary of State Zbigniew Brzezinski: “Unlike Eastern Europeans, the Iranian people cannot be separated from their governments.”

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238 *Kayhan*, 10 October 2005.
243 *Kayhan*, 3 September 2005.
244 *Kayhan*, 20 July 2004.
• Kayhan again quoting Brzezinski: “Washington’s accusations against Iran are
demagoguery and imaginary.”245

• Kayhan quoting The New York Times: “Possible U.S. attack on Iran would be
disastrous.”246

• Kayhan quoting then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice: “Our speculations
about Iran always turn out wrong.”247

• Kayhan quoting former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger: “We cannot bring
Iran to its knees.”248

• Kayhan: “An American analyst: What can we do against Iran? Nothing!”249

• Kayhan quoting Time magazine: “The foreign media’s reaction to Iran’s action
[restarting its uranium enrichment program], Time: Tehran can play with
Washington as long as it wants.”250

• Resalat quoting an American scholar: “Professor William A. Beeman, Director
of Middle East Studies at America’s Brown University: The U.S. cannot deprive
Iran of its nuclear technology.”251

In addition, the conservative media often covered natural disasters in the U.S. and their
aftermath to prove that the U.S. government was unable care of its own people and

248 Kayhan, 3 May 2005.
249 Kayhan, 30 July 2005.
250 Kayhan, 16 August 2005.
251 Resalat, 28 August 2005.
clean up messes in its own backyard. *Kayhan’s* front page in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina read, “A disaster more terrifying than Hurricane Katrina, America on the verge of a political crisis.” Again and again, the conservative media tied America’s “moral corruption” to its decreasing global stature (both soft and hard power). The conservative media also did this in part to neutralize the reformists’ instrumental use of the U.S. as a threat against the conservatives, which is examined below.

**The Reformist Media: In Search of External Leverage for Internal Gain**

There was no love lost between the reformists and the United States. As mentioned earlier, a number of the leaders of Iran’s reform movement were among the students who occupied the American Embassy in 1980. However, many of these former occupiers had since modified their attitudes toward the United States. Unlike the conservatives, the reformists did not necessarily argue that the U.S. is on the brink of collapse, but rather that its influence may be on the wane due to several factors such as the rise of China, the emergence of the E.U., and the repercussions of the U.S. Global War on Terror. Many of the reformists envisioned the possibility of a multi-polar world in the future. However, in the meantime they asserted that the U.S. is an important country and is the key in solving some, if not most, of Iran’s problems.

Factional weakness remained the crucial factor that explains the reformists’ position. Since 2000, the reformists had seen their share of power decline. During this period,

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252 *Kayhan*, 4 September 2005.
they began to emphasize the U.S. threat against Iran in order to advance their own domestic agenda. According to the reformists, Tehran could prevent Washington from taking action against Iran by increasing the legitimacy of the Iranian government by power sharing with the reformists. One example of this trend occurred when a White House spokesman announced two conditions under which the U.S. would not oppose Iran’s bid for WTO membership, the first of which was a complete halt on Iran’s nuclear activities. However, the reformist daily Aftab Yazd published only the second requirement in its headline, “The U.S.’s Condition for Supporting Iran’s WTO Membership: A Free Presidential Election.” In other words, opening up the political process would improve Iran’s international status.

**The U.S. Attack is Imminent: Let’s Share Power**

In the post-9/11 era, the reformists’ few remaining newspapers often published stories pertaining to the seriousness of U.S. threat towards Iran. Therefore, it was not surprising that hawkish statements of members of the Bush administration such as then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made their way into the front pages of the reformists’ papers. This occurred despite the Supreme Council for National Security’s warnings to the media not to “disturb” the public by publishing stories about a possible U.S. attack on Iran. The followings are examples of this trend:

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• “Rice: Iran Continues its Secret Nuclear Program”\textsuperscript{254}

• “Rice: The International Community should not Tolerate Iran”\textsuperscript{255}

• “Rice: America is Committed to bringing about Change in the Middle East”\textsuperscript{256}

• “Rice: Military Attack Against Iran is not Ruled Out”\textsuperscript{257}

• “Rumsfeld: Iran is Behind the Explosion in Israel”\textsuperscript{258}

• “Rumsfeld: Iraq should take an Offensive Position against Iran”\textsuperscript{259}

• “Deputy to the U.S. Secretary of State: We are Losing Hope because of Iran’s [Nuclear] Actions”\textsuperscript{260}

• “The U.S. is Seeking to Impose more Constraints against Iran at the NPT Conference”\textsuperscript{261}

• “Bolton’s Presence Necessary in the U.N. to put Pressure on Iran”\textsuperscript{262}

• “The U.S. is Preparing a Plan of Nuclear Attack on Iran’s 450 Military Sites”\textsuperscript{263}

• “U.S. State Department Spokesman: We are in the Moment of Great Historic change [with regard to Iran]”\textsuperscript{264}

• “Bush and Karzai Agree on a Long-Term Presence in Afghanistan”\textsuperscript{265}

• “The U.S. is Selling Israel 100 Bunker-Busting Nuclear Bombs”\textsuperscript{266}

\textsuperscript{254} Aftab Yazd, 21 April 2005.
\textsuperscript{255} Aftab Yazd, 25 May 2005.
\textsuperscript{256} Aftab Yazd, 25 May 2005.
\textsuperscript{257} Hambastegi, 2 February 2005.
\textsuperscript{258} Aftab Yazd, 14 July 2005.
\textsuperscript{259} Aftab Yazd, 28 July 2005.
\textsuperscript{260} Aftab Yazd, 28 August 2005.
\textsuperscript{261} Aftab Yazd, 2 May 2005.
\textsuperscript{262} Aftab Yazd, 28 April 2005.
\textsuperscript{263} Aftab Yazd, 28 July 2005.
\textsuperscript{264} Aftab Yazd, 20 August 2005.
\textsuperscript{265} Aftab Yazd, 25 May 2005.
• “The U.S. Prepares to Attack Iran and Syria through Turkey’s Incirlic Base”\textsuperscript{267}

• “Madeline Albright: Iran’s Nuclearization is not Acceptable”\textsuperscript{268}

• “\textit{New York Times} Analyst: American Neo-Cons are Preparing to Attack Iran”\textsuperscript{269}

Reformist papers often ran stories to counter Iran’s conservatives’ over-confidence in dealing with the U.S. For instance, \textit{Aftab Yazd} wrote, “The three month revenue of a single American oil company is 1.5 times more than Iran’s annual oil revenue.”\textsuperscript{270} They also emphasized that, unlike Iran, the rest of the world, even sworn enemies of Israel, would like to engage Washington in dialogue:

• “Hamas is Ready to Talk to the U.S. and Britain”\textsuperscript{271}

• “Syria Requests an Improvement in its Relationship with the U.S.”\textsuperscript{272}

Reformist newspapers often argued that, unlike what conservatives believed, the Europeans and the Russians could not be used as counterweights against U.S. threats because those countries were concerned with their own national interests, which include full coordination with U.S. policies:

• “The Coordinated Position of Bush and Putin on Iran’s Uranium Enrichment

\textsuperscript{266} \textit{Aftab Yazd}, 28 April 2005.
\textsuperscript{267} \textit{Aftab Yazd}, 23 April 2005.
\textsuperscript{268} \textit{Aftab Yazd}, 23 April 2005.
\textsuperscript{269} \textit{Aftab Yazd}, 26 July 2005.
\textsuperscript{270} \textit{Aftab Yazd}, 2 May 2005.
\textsuperscript{271} \textit{Aftab Yazd}, 24 May 2005.
\textsuperscript{272} \textit{Aftab Yazd}, 28 July 2005.
• “Iran’s Nuclear File, the Nexus of Bush and Putin’s Negotiations” 274

• “Asefi [then Iran’s foreign ministry’s spokesman]: ‘Our Agreement with the Europeans is the Result of U.S. Pressure’” 275

• “Mojtahedzadeh [an Iranian political scientist]: Europe has Fallen in Line with the U.S.” 276

• “The U.S. and France Seek Iran’s Concrete Guarantees” 277

• “France is After the U.S.: It has been reported that France has promised that during the nuclear negotiations the French will follow America’s desire to win concessions from Iran.” 278


During the U.S-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the reformist media welcomed the collapse of the Taliban and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and the subsequent elections in these countries. On the eve of the fall of Kabul, the daily Towse’a implicitly hailed the overthrow of the Taliban and published this headline, “With the Support of Americans, the Northern Alliance Forces are Moving towards the Seizure of Kabul.” 279

While conservative newspapers focused on America’s Islamophobia, the reformists
emphasized America’s collaboration with Afghanistan’s Northern Alliance, Iran’s longtime ally.

Whereas the conservatives were hoping to see the U.S. mired in Afghanistan and Iraq, the reformist newspapers focused on the democratic future of Iraq. For example, *Hambastegi* optimistically projected “The Dawn of Democracy in Iraq” in a 2005 headline. In contrast, the conservative media reacted to the Iraqi election as a victory for the Iraq Shi’a and therefore an indirect victory for the Shi’a regime in Tehran. For the reformists, the free nature of the election was more important and enviable. For instance:

- Reformist *Shargh* wrote: “72 percent of Iraqis Participated in the Election: The Iraqi Nation’s Choosing Day”  
- *Shargh*: “The World Welcomes the Iraqi Election”

Thus, the reformists had a markedly more positive approach toward the political developments in the Middle East than the conservatives. Their editorials argued that democracy was the region’s destiny; if not by choice then by force. The message was: you either open the electoral process or the US will open it by force.

American Culture and Science: Broadening the Audience, Maintaining the

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282 *Shargh*, 1 February 2005.
Battleground

Unlike the conservatives, who believed an American “cultural blitz” was directed against Muslim nations, the reformists published stories about culture, art, and science in the U.S. on a daily basis. In large part this was driven by a desire to encourage higher circulation of their newspapers among the increasingly politically disillusioned people, especially the youth, at a time when government subsidies were mostly allocated for the pro-establishment media.

This kind of stories included recently released movies and music albums, books published in the United States, Hollywood gossip about actors or actresses, and the latest scientific developments:

- *Hambastegi*: “Will Basic Instinct 2 be Made? A Fourteen Million Dollar Offer to Sharon Stone”\(^{283}\)
- *Aftab Yazd*: “The American Directors Chose Clint Eastwood”\(^{284}\)
- *Aftab Yazd*: “Nicole Kidman’s $435,000 Demand for a 25-Minute Speech”\(^{285}\)
- *Shargh*: “Robert Redford Turns 68”\(^{286}\)
- On July 1, 2004, *Shargh* lead with the death of Marlon Brando (including a large picture): “The Death of Cinema’s Godfather”\(^{287}\)

\(^{284}\) *Aftab Yazd*, 1 February 2005.
\(^{286}\) *Shargh*, 18 August 2005.
\(^{287}\) *Shargh*, 4 July 2004.
• *Aftab Yazd*: “Clinton’s Saxophone Album is Released”\textsuperscript{288}

• *Aftab Yazd* even included this bit of celebrity gossip: “The reason that [Condoleezza] Rice attacks Iran is her failed relationship with a young Iranian man.”\textsuperscript{289} The newspaper also quoted an Iranian member of the parliament saying that Iran is ready to compensate Rice for her broken heart.\textsuperscript{290}

• When the Nobel committee announced the winners of the Nobel Prize in 2004, *Shargh* noticed that most of them were Americans. *Shargh*’s headline read: “Nobel in the Hands of Americans”\textsuperscript{291}

It is important to note that art, science, and culture stories were potentially less risky for the reformist media because they did not necessarily contain the political messages that often crossed the regime’s redlines. Unlike the political sections, which were battlegrounds for political factions, these pages were more reflective of popular taste. This type of content maintained the newspapers’ circulations so they could survive and remain on the political battlefield. Needless to say, they also painted a markedly different image of the United States than what is publicized by the conservative media.

**The Ahmadinejad Era**

The reformists’ tactic of using the post-9/11 international environment to curb the power of the conservatives did not yield the desired results. In fact, Iran’s conservatives

\textsuperscript{288} Aftab Yazd, 16 August 2005.
\textsuperscript{289} Aftab Yazd, 30 June 2005.
\textsuperscript{290} Aftab Yazd, 30 June 2005.
\textsuperscript{291} Shargh, 6 October 2004.
proved to be the real winners. The Americans were now desperate for Iran’s help in Iraq and Afghanistan. Ayatollah Khamenei saw the failure of Israel to defeat Iranian proxies Hezbollah and Hamas in the 2006 and the 2008 invasions of Lebanon and Gaza as Iran’s victory. On the nuclear front, Iran’s defiance had also paid off. Despite international pressure and U.S. threats, Iran continued to advance to new levels and significantly expand its uranium enrichment facilities. As will be explained in Chapter Four, Khamenei attributed this success to his resistance to the West and steadfast loyalty to political Islam. Khamenei’s international triumph coincided with a domestic victory, the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency. Khamenei could now run the whole state directly and through his new president. Conservatives praised President Ahmadinejad’s absolute loyalty to Velayat-e Faqih and some called his controversial election the “miracle of the third millennium.” In this environment, Khamenei had even less tolerance for his critics. He repeatedly warned the media not to project a “black” image of the Islamic state, but rather to support his narrative that political Islam had brought Iran power and prestige.

Many disillusioned voters, especially the youth who had boycotted the 2005 disputed election after eight frustrating years of attempted reform, suddenly realized that their plight could get a lot worse. A new wave of emigration from the country began. Countless dissidents, intellectuals, activists, journalists, and bloggers fled Iran and appeared in the capitals of the Western countries. However, this exodus only

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292 Fatemeh Rajabi, who runs the ultra-conservative site Rajanews, published a book titled The Miracle of the Third Millennium.
“vindicated” the state’s constant accusation that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had been funding the reform movement. Some émigrés joined their Iranian colleagues at London-based BBC Persian Service, Washington-based Voice of America (VOA), Prague-based Radio Farda, and Dutch-funded Radio Zamaneh. Others initiated their own sites and blogs. The new-media brain drain profoundly enriched the aforementioned news services. A fresh, young, ambitious generation of journalists, trained during the reform movement and well-versed in the nuances of the Iranian society and politics, resumed its profession in these newly found media refuges. Now they could analyze and debate political and religious issues without worrying about the Islamic Republic’s redlines. As many lost hope that they would ever return to Iran, their critiques of Velayat-e Faqih became more radical and their advocacy of a secular government turned more blatant.

Those who stayed in Iran, however, had to further improve their political gymnastic skills or pay the price for crossing ever the expanding redlines. Despite the pressure, the youth continued to join the endangered profession in a country that has been repeatedly branded as the world’s biggest prison for the media.293 In contrast, the new environment provided a ripe environment for the growth of conservative media. Countless websites and blogs belonging to ultra-conservative figures and groups emerged. They attacked the reformists and the reformist era for its contribution to the West’s “cultural

onslaught” against Iran. The reformists were accused of collaborating with George Soros, Francis Fukuyama, and other Westerners to “undo” *Velayat-e Faqih* and pave the way for a soft revolution in the country. Fukuyama was quoted by the conservative media as saying that the only way to bring down the Islamic Republic was through “reverse engineering,” i.e., the process of disassembling *Velayat-e Faqih* through insiders, namely the reformists. Thus, the conservatives deemed any critique of *Velayat-e Faqih* subversive. Fukuyama’s denial of the statement attributed to him did not reduced the charge or the conservatives’ appetite for the quote, whose original source remains unclear. Thus, the conservatives successfully mined the public sphere for any adventurist journalists, activists, and intellectuals who dared to question or criticize the establishment. Debate was either silenced or came from Iranian émigrés abroad.

**The Birth of the Green Movement and the Advent of New Media**

Iran’s political landscape was about to change precisely at the time that its leadership was at the zenith of its confidence. Domestically, the conservatives controlled all of the government’s elected and appointed bodies. Regionally, there were no serious threats against Iran. Internationally, the U.S. was busy dealing with the 2008 financial crisis and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Ayatollah Khamenei concluded that Iran’s rising status in the region was due to his successful leadership. Therefore, Khamenei decided to make sure that there were no further reformist obstacles during the 2009 presidential election. He publicly asked President Ahmadinejad to continue governing
as he was going to be president for the second term. The reformists, on the other hand, began to strategize for the 2009 election and ponder who would be the ideal candidate in the light of this massive political shift to the right. They understood that their candidate was required not just to be popular, but to also possess impeccable revolutionary credentials that could pass the Guardian Council’s vetting process. The reformists were enthusiastically aware of the traditional right’s contempt for Ahmadinejad, whose new faction strove to marginalize others. Therefore, an ideal candidate was one who could exploit the new cleavage among the conservatives. However, a political platform that appealed to the “moderate” conservatives could potentially alienate other restless young constituencies. In this climate, two candidates emerged: Mir Hossein Mousavi, the former wartime prime minister, and Mehdi Karroubi, former speaker of the Majles. Mousavi portrayed himself not as a reformist, but a “reformist-principlist,” who wanted to reform the system and at the same time “revive” the “golden” years of the 1980’s, when he was the prime minister. To the dismay of Khamenei, Mousavi’s well-known loyalty to original notion of *Velayat-e Faqih* and the late founder of the Islamic Republic appealed to the rank of file members of the IRGC and other revolutionary organizations. Karroubi, on the other hand, emphasized more drastic changes, including the reformation of the press law and even the constitution. His radical approach appealed to more restless voters, particularly students. In addition to the reformists’ private circles, the media remained one of the main venues for election-related deliberations. As usual, the establishment

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demonstrated some limited tolerance for freedom the press before the election in order to increase voter turnout in order to shore up the regime’s legitimacy. What the establishment couldn’t foresee was the role that new media was about to play on Iran’s political scene.

The 2009 Iranian presidential election brought political factions’ use of the media to a new level not seen before in the Iranian election cycle. While newspapers had played an important role during the 1997 election, in 2009 satellite TV channels and the Internet accompanied the “old” media. The BBC Persian Service, VOA Persian News Network, and many other satellite channels provided millions of Iranian viewers with news and analysis that the state-controlled TV would not and the reformist press could not. Facebook became a place to debate and share the latest stories about the presidential candidates. It brought video clips, audio files, newspaper articles, blog pieces, etc. together in one easily accessible location. Millions of Iranians inside and outside the country found a single forum to share and converse about nearly everything. While the state was busy dealing with the “old” media, new media contributed critically to informing and politicizing a new generation of young Iranians. If the state-controlled media emphasized the “achievements” of the Ahmadinejad era, the new media pointed out the “lies,” “religious superstitions,” “hypocrisies,” and “obtuse” management of this period. During the 2005 presidential campaign, Ahmadinejad had criticized the morality police for going after young girls over their dress. In a television debate, he asked, “Really, our people’s problem is the form of our children’s hair? . . . Is our country’s
problem really the clothes that such and such a girl wore? Is it really our people’s problem?” Despite these types of statements, attacks against “Westernized” youth only intensified during Ahmadinejad’s presidency, a fact that the new media repeatedly brought to the public’s attention. Similarly, after his first address to the United Nation General Assembly, Ahmadinejad told top Ayatollah Javadi Amoli that there had been an “aura” around his head while he addressed the Assembly and that world leaders “not even blink” in his presence. Despite Ahmadinejad’s later denial of this statement, the video of his conversation with the aggravated cleric emerged on YouTube shortly after. The aura story was never forgotten by the youth or forgiven by the offended clergy. On another occasion, Ahmadinejad claimed that a 16-year-old girl, “discovered nuclear energy” in her basement by acquiring some parts from the bazaar. Now, people were sharing his countless gaffes and discussing if they could stand another four years of Ahmadinejad. New media platforms made it impossible for the people in authoritarian states to forget the contradictions, lies, and failure of their rulers. Iran’s conservatives learned this lesson the hard way. Years after the election, the IRGC acknowledged the “surprising” power of the “new tools” of social media.295 Although one step behind the voters, the reformist candidates themselves too began to attack Ahmadinejad for relying on “lies” and “superstition” to manage the country. The overwhelming wave of anti-Ahmadinejad criticism in the virtual world was finding its way in the real world.

Failing to deal directly with new media, President Ahmadinejad’s strategy was to fight back through the more traditional outlets. His plan was to rely on the support of conservatives and the lower classes. In a series of the highly rated TV debates, Ahmadinejad accused his rivals of “corruption,” “nepotism,” and “deviating from the values” of the Islamic Revolution. His calm and yet aggressive and sarcastic style angered his opponents and their supporters. He brought documents to “expose” Zahra Rahnavard, Mousavi’s wife, for being admitted to a PhD program without going through the normal procedures, and accused Hossein Karroubi of receiving money from an imprisoned embezzler. In the end, these debates backfired for Ahmadinejad. He lost many conservatives who were offended by his style. Later, Ayatollah Khamenei criticized state-controlled TV for not managing the election debates properly. He saw that the establishment’s “sanctity” was about to crack before his eyes.

A week before election day, huge green waves (the official color of the opposition) in major cities indicated that, like 1997, the election was turning into a movement. The establishment saw this movement as potentially even more destructive than the reform movement had been. Supreme Leader Khamenei believed that the “cultural” avalanche that he had first warned of nearly two decades earlier had finally arrived. His media mouthpieces followed the old line that the reformist candidates were being backed by the West and had no place in the hearts and minds of the Iranian people; that many of those who voted for them were deceived by the “seditionist” media; and that Ahmadinejad was going to be the clear winner by a large margin. The term “sedition”
referred to the climate, created by the reformists, in which the people could not choose between right and wrong because the reformists relied on their revolutionary background and presented such a powerful religious discourse that voters were blinded by their hidden secular and subversive “plot.”

While behind the scenes the entire state apparatus was preparing for the post-election unrest, conservative officials and commentators were predicting an easy victory for Ahmadinejad. Thus, fears of election rigging rose among the reformists. On June 11, 2009, the eve of the election, Etemad Melli, Karroubi’s paper ran the headline, “Tomorrow night, We Are ALL Awake,” implying that the people should be watchful against election irregularities. On election day, the conservative media reported that Ahmadinejad was in the lead, while reformists projected that their candidates would win. A YouTube clip showed the angry wife of former President Rafsanjani exiting a voting booth and telling a reporter that rigging was “highly likely,” and that the people should “pour to the streets.” The pervasive expectation among Ahmadinejad’s opponents was that he would lose if the votes were properly counted. However, hours before the voting ended, the semi-official FarsNews projected election results (60 percent for Ahmadinejad) that turned out to be very close the official figures (64 percent) that were later released. Several conservatives had predicted Ahmadinejad would get 20-22 million votes, close to the 24 million votes the government eventually reported he had won. This, together with other circumstantial evidence, led many people to believe that the election was stolen. Mousavi only received 33 percent of the
vote, while Karroubi received less than 1 percent, even less than the number of discarded or blank ballots. Both candidates lost their home provinces. In some cities, there were more votes cast than registered voters. To many, the results were more like a clumsy joke than real numbers. Nevertheless, Ayatollah Khamenei rushed to congratulate Ahmadinejad on his victory before the Guardian Council had even confirmed the election results. As the ultimate “decider,” Khamenei’s message was the election was over.

In the following days, however, history began to unfold under the watchful eyes of the media. Seldom before had the world witnessed such heartbreaking moments of humanity through the eyes of “citizen journalists.” Millions of protesters poured into the streets throughout the country. The initial slogan was one word: “where is my vote?” The media broadcast hundreds of YouTube clips from peaceful protests hours, or in some instances, just minutes after the marches took place. The surprised establishment responded with a violent crackdown. In order to decapitate the movement, major reformists figures were arrested over night and newspapers and websites were shut down. The security forces were deployed across the country. The disproportionate reaction was designed to quickly stifle what had become known as the Green Movement. The state’s brutality, however, backfired and radicalized the movement. The protesters were now targeting Khamenei instead of Ahmadinejad. “Death to the Dictator” and “Down with Khamenei” appeared on street walls and were chanted by the protesters. The protests were no longer about the election, but were targeting the heart
of the “sacred establishment.” Gruesome images of the security forces beating young protesters shocked not just the world, but also many diehard supporters of the Islamic Republic. The last moments of Neda Agha Soltan, the philosophy student shot during a protest, shook the world’s conscience. Within hours, that image was on YouTube and from there hundreds of international media sites. The state accused the BBC of planning and killing Ms. Agha Soltan. The regime realized that its brutality was extremely costly; nevertheless, it decided that for the moment its survival was more important than its image. As the crackdown intensified, so did its coverage. At one point, the BBC Persian was receiving five videos a minute from inside Iran. Iranian monarchists had often accused the BBC Persian Service of fomenting the 1979 Revolution because of its wide coverage of the demonstrations against the Pahlavi monarchy. Now, once again mere images of a massive movement were increasing domestic and international support for the protesters.

Political prisoners smuggled out letters that described brutal interrogations, torture, and rape. Some statements also contained political analyses that laid out the strategies of the Green Movement. These letters soon appeared on opposition websites and were then picked up by the mainstream media. New reformist sites such as Jaras (run by reformist cleric, Mohsen Kadivar), Kalemeh (close to Mousavi), and Saham News (close to Karroubi) emerged and became reliable sources for Western media outlets such as the BBC, CNN, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Times.
The video clips and pictures of these events captivated the public equally at home and abroad. Only later, the heads of the Basij, Law Enforcement Forces, and the IRGC admitted the deep split that the Green Movement’s religious and revolutionary language managed to create within their own rank and file. These officials pointed out that they had to initiate “briefings” in order to “enlighten” their members on the true nature of the opposition. A leaked audiotape from a similar session revealed the desperate techniques that the establishment used to buy legitimacy and demonize its opponents. In his meetings with local officials around the country, Deputy Minister of Intelligence General Moshfeq had a surprising narrative about the reformists that started during the early days of the revolution. He claimed that the reformists had been directly connected to the CIA since 1979, when they “staged” the occupation of the U.S. embassy in order to undermine the newly born Islamic government. He accused former President Khatami of being connected to the Mossad and repeated history that the reformists were following Fukuyama’s advice to “reverse-engineer” the Islamic system by targeting Velayat-e Faqih. However, Moshfeq also revealed the depth of the IRGC’s involvement in the controversies surrounding the 2009 presidential election. In response to these revelations, seven prominent reformists wrote an open letter to Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani, the head of the judiciary, from prison complaining of the politicization of the

military and security forces.\textsuperscript{298} Other opposition figures and organizations asked the government and the Supreme Leader to prohibit the IRGC’s interference in politics. The IRGC’s only reaction came from its Political Office, which stated that the commanders would continue with their “enlightening” briefings.\textsuperscript{299}

\textbf{Media and the Unintended Consequences}

The outcry of the international community and the media over the suppression of the Green Movement put the reformists in an awkward position. Two decades earlier, these former radicals attacked dissents and opposition groups by claiming that the “foreign media’s” sympathy with their cause proved their anti-revolutionary agenda. Indeed Mousavi and Karroubi themselves had often angrily criticized their “liberal” opponents and asked why the \textit{BBC} and other “foreign radios” paid so much attention to them. Now, they were the “new liberals” and had to face the same question from the conservatives.

Moreover, despite its initial ability to rapidly and effectively spread information, the media soon became a double-edged sword for opposition groups as well. Over time, it contributed to the deepening and publicizing of divisions among opposition groups, whose level of religiosity differed. When a prominent dissident, Akbar Ganji, said to a

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BBC correspondent that he did not believe in the Hidden Imam (a highly provocative statement in Shi’a Islam), other opposition figures condemned his statement. The state-controlled media opportunistically bombarded viewers with that clip to validate the state’s claim that the opposition consisted of secular, Westernized, and alienated figures who did not share the people’s fundamental beliefs. Conversely, when Mohsen Kadivar, a dissident cleric, claimed on VOA that during a demonstration in Iran, people were chanting “both Gaza and Lebanon, my life for Iran,” many angry activists attacked him that the slogan was in fact, “neither Gaza, nor Lebanon, my life for Iran.” In the end, he was forced to “clarify” and partly acknowledge his error. His attempt to neutralize the establishment’s accusation that the reformists had no feelings for the plight of their fellow Muslims backfired. These incidents and the government’s tactic of questioning the opposition’s religiosity were quite effective in dividing the Green Movement and prevented those moderate conservatives in the “grey area” between the regime and the opposition from becoming green.

At the same time, the establishment also unintentionally made controversial statements that were exploited and spread by the opposition. The focus of opposition was mostly the establishment’s disregard for the people’s rights. During a rally, President Ahmadinejad told his supporters that the protesters were “dirt and dust.” His statement further aggravated the angry protesters and led many silent figures and even conservatives to attack the president for his use of insulting and provoking language. He

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later “clarified” and “corrected” the media coverage of his statement.\textsuperscript{301} Supreme Leader Khamenei made a similar gaffe. A year after the controversial election, Khamenei stated, “The 1388 [2009] sedition vaccinated the country against the social and political microbes.”\textsuperscript{302} In a rare moment, his website was forced to immediately defend the Supreme Leader against the overwhelming reaction of the Diaspora media against this statement, stressing that Khamenei did not mean all protesters were microbes.

The establishment’s blunders centered mostly around the people’s fundamental rights. However, the opposition often stumbled upon people’s religious beliefs. Both sides exploited each other’s weakness and used the media to widely publicize it.

**The Media, “More Dangerous than the Atomic Bomb”**

As the state finally managed to suppress the protesters and control the streets at the beginning of 2010, the government devised a multipronged approach to root out “sedition.” In October of that year, Ayatollah Khamenei said of the power of the media:

> Today, the most effective international weapon against enemies and the opposition is the weapon of propaganda and the media. Today, this is the most powerful weapon and it is even worse and more dangerous than the atomic bomb. Didn’t you see this weapon of the enemy during the post-


election unrest? With this very weapon, the enemy was following our affairs second by second and giving advice to those who were evil [the opposition].

Khamenei characterized the entire conflict as a “media war” and mobilized all of his resources to deal with it. The IRGC was ordered to focus on the “soft war” and prevent a “velvet revolution” from taking place in Iran. More newspapers, websites, and blog pages emerged to denounce the opposition and analyze and publicize their “Western” roots. Heidar Moslehi, Iran’s Minister of Intelligence, claimed that the “enemy” spent 17 billion dollars on the “soft war” of the post-election demonstrations. In response, the Iranian government reportedly allocated five billion dollars for this new battle.

New laws were introduced to further limit the media, especially new media. After Twitter and Facebook, Google+ was the latest social network to be banned; it was banned just two weeks after it was introduced in the U.S. and months before it actually become available in Iran. The state acquired better technologies to jam satellite channels and monitor Internet activities. A cyber army was created to attack the websites of the “enemy” and a plan to create a “clean” Internet was revealed. Radio Zamaneh, VOA, and the personal sites of dissents such as Mohsen Sazegara were hacked by an entity calling itself the “Iranian Cyber Army.” The Iranian Cyber Army

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305 It is important to note that unlike what many in the West suggested at the time, the Green Movement does not seem to have been a Twitter revolution. A week into the June 2009 unrest, U.S. Secretary of the State Hillary Clinton asked Twitter to delay its maintenance so the Iranian protesters could use it to communicate and organize. In fact, there is no evidence to show that Twitter had many users inside Iran at the time. Instead, it seems that other sites such as Facebook and YouTube played a critical role in informing the people of the latest events. See Golnaz Esfandiari, “The Twitter Devolution,” Foreign Policy, 7 June 2010.
claimed that it was not connected to the Iranian government, but the praise that it received from official media suggested otherwise. In April 2011, Google announced that hackers impersonated the giant search engine to snoop on its Iranian users. In an interview with the New York Times, an Iranian hacker claiming to be a 21-year-old university student operating independently from the government stated that he had decided to monitor the activities of what Google estimates to be 300,000 users. In short, although the state was initially several steps behind the Internet-savvy protesters, it managed to catch up. But that was not the end of the story.

In a sign of serious legitimacy crisis, dissidents, clerics, activists, and political prisoners increasingly addressed Ayatollah Khamenei himself through open letters that held him directly accountable for the human rights violations committed by the Iranian security forces. In one of the first and most widely spread letters, Abdolkarim Soroush joyfully predicted that “religious tyranny is crumbling.” He addressed Khamenei:

I am most grateful to you. You said that “the ruling system’s sanctity has been violated” and its integrity ravished. Believe me, I had never heard such good news from anyone in my life. Congratulations, you have acknowledged and announced the sordidness and wretchedness of religious tyranny. . . .

You were prepared to shame God rather than to be shamed yourself. To have people turn their backs on religion and the prophethood rather than to turn their backs on your guardianship. . . .

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know that you are going through difficult and bitter days. You made a mistake. A grave mistake. I showed you the way out of this mistake twelve years ago. I told you to adopt freedom as a method. Never mind about its rightfulness and its virtue; you should use it to attain a successful state. Don’t you want this? Why do you send out spies and informers to discover what is in the people’s minds or to use tricks and ploys to make the people tell them something against their will? Why must you listen to reports that are based on information that is obtained by stealth and contains a mixture of truths, untruths, and half-truths? Allow newspapers, parties, associations, critics, commentators, teachers, writers, etc. to operate freely. The people will tell you what’s on their minds plainly and in a thousand different ways. They will open the windows of news and views to you and help you run the land and the state. Don’t strangle the newspapers. They are society’s lungs.  

Mohammad Nurizad, a former columnist for the ultra-conservative Kayhan daily who was later imprisoned after a change of heart, wrote weekly letters to Khamenei. In these letters, he employed respectful yet critical language and attacked the Supreme Leader and his security apparatus. In one of the letters, which coincided with the anniversary of holy day of Ashura, Nurizad compared Iran to the Battle of Karbala:

Why are you crying, Sir? Are you crying for the plundering of Imam Hossein’s assets? Plundering is (taking place) here. Look at the monies that the IRGC and the head of Administration and his buddies have looted and are looting, [look at] the monies that go from the

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people’s pockets into the pocket of the killer, Bashar al-Assad. Plundering is (taking place) here in front of my and your eyes, in Iran’s Karbala.\textsuperscript{308}

In another letter, Nurizad asked Khamenei to invite all current and former officials, security and IRGC authorities, Members of the Majles, religious judges, etc. to formally apologize to the people, the youth, women, students, religious and ethnic minorities, workers, farmers, the families of martyrs, immigrants, etc. for the “repression,” “humiliation,” and “ruination” of their country’s resources, and the “burning” their homeland for thirty three years.\textsuperscript{309}

Nurizad invited other figures to join his campaign and write to Khamenei. He specifically named several prominent figures, including former IRGC General Hossein Alaie. On January 9, 2012, the General wrote a piece coinciding with the on the 34\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of a controversial article that had insulted Ayatollah Khomeini and sparked movement that led to the fall of the Shah. Alaie’s piece appeared in the same newspaper, \textit{Ettelaat}, which had published the aforementioned article in 1978. Although Alaie’s letter was also addressed to the Shah, it was widely interpreted as directed to Khamenei. General Alaie stated that if the Shah had not “ordered fire at the protesters,” “put prominent figures under house arrest,” and “accused his opponents of acting

against the country’s national security,” he would not have been overthrown. Alaie’s references and vocabulary left no doubt that he was drawing an allusion to Khamenei’s suppression of the Green Movement. Subsequent physical and verbal attacks by vigilantes, the conservative media, and some of the IRGC figures forced General Alaie to deny that he intended to compare monarchy to the Islamic Republic. Without mentioning Khamenei’s name, he stressed his loyalty to Velayat-e Faqih. Some interpreted this as questioning whether the current leader was the true follower of the founding father of the Islamic Republic. Further pressure led him to emphasize that he continued to “obey” Khamenei since the days when the future leader was first preaching in the Karamat mosque in Mashad before the 1979 Revolution. The General stressed that the number of “pictures [of Khamenei] surpassed anyone else’s” in his house. However, when Hossein Shariatmadari, the managing editor of Kayhan who had been appointed to the position by Khamenei, attacked the General, Alaie fired back, stating “respect people’s intelligence and if someone does not think like you, don’t call them the enemy’s puppet or prey.”

Conclusion

In the absence of viable political parties, the Iranian media become a critical battleground for Iran’s domestic tensions as the reformists and the conservatives

312 Kayhan, 16 January 2012.
brought their political and religious clash into the media arena. The reformists’ declining position in the domestic structure coincided with the international pressures on the state in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001. Thus, the U.S.-Iran relationship became a key part of the struggle between the conservatives and the reformists in the media. Each side attempted to portray the U.S. in a way that undermined the other side in order to maximize its own influence and popularity among the Iranian people. The conservative media focused on stories that “revealed” the U.S.’s weaknesses, hypocrisies, and double standards. It attempted to illustrate that President Bush was supposedly aware of the 9/11 attacks but refused to prevent them. The conservatives also selectively translated and reprinted the U.S. press to “prove” that American soldiers were bogged down in Iraq and therefore could not challenge Iran. The Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo prison fiascos were boons for the conservative media. State-owned TV, radio channels, and newspapers, continually displayed pictures and stories pertaining to Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo in order to demonstrate American double-standards with regard to human rights and to provoke the public against U.S. For most ultra-conservative newspapers such as Kayhan, the U.S. was a purely evil power whose very nature led it to stand against the Islamic Republic. On the other hand, the reformists’ few remaining newspapers constantly warned of the imminent military threat that the U.S. posed towards Iran, while at the same time calling on the Iranian government it institute political reforms that might persuade the U.S. not to act on its threats. The reformists reminded the conservatives of how reckless the Bush administration’s foreign policy could be. The White House’s harsh rhetoric often made
it to the front page of reformist papers. In their editorials, the reformists made the case that the only way the Iranian leadership could prevent a possible U.S. attack was through democratization and free elections. They argued that with the expansion of political participation in Iran, Washington would have no leverage to take action against the country. They contended that religious and political reform was the single best way to isolate the U.S. on the nuclear issue and bring the E.U. closer to Iran’s side.

Iran’s rising power after 2003 (which will be discussed in the next chapter) defused the reformists’ tactic. The establishment’s perception of its international power was translated into an intense domestic crackdown. However, as the freedom of the press was stifled, new media began to assert its clout. It was new media that helped turn the 2009 presidential election into a massive movement that deeply cracked the establishment.

With the use of the brute force, the establishment managed to contain the growing post-election discontent and remain intact. It won the battle, but it might have lost the war. In the end, what Mousavi and other opposition figures had asked for materialized, “one citizen, one campaign,” and that “every individual should become the media.” The rise of social media inflicted a major blow to Khamenei and his version of Velayat-e Faqih. But it also revealed the depth of divisions within the opposition. It was no longer

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a taboo to call Khamenei to take off his cloak of *Velayat-e Faqih* and return to his pre-revolutionary job as a preacher at the Karamat mosque.\(^{315}\) But it was also evident that the opposition groups were widely fragmented on a variety of political and religious issues and had little tolerance for each other. The media intensely publicized the contradictions and weaknesses that existed within each camp, whether it was the conservative’s lack of respect for individual rights or some reformists figures’ disregard for certain religious beliefs.

Chapter Five – The De-Secularizing Impact of Post-9/11 Era

In Chapter Two I process-traced the way in which the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih* was institutionalized in Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. However, the challenges that the newly born Islamic state faced in the international system, especially during the Iran-Iraq War, forced the state to reverse its goals and the means it used to achieve them and put the survival of the state above its Islamic ideology. In short, not only did the weak state have to pursue pragmatic policies, but even the founding father of the Islamic Revolution had to adjust his theory of *Velayat-e Faqih* to face the challenges of the international system.

In this chapter, it is my contention that as the Islamic state perceived itself as a rising power in the aftermath of the U.S.-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, a political and religious narrative reminiscent of the early revolutionary years surfaced and the official reading of *Velayat-e Faqih* took an ideological turn. In other words, as Iran’s security concerns ebbed, its revolutionary ideology, which had taken a backseat for two decades, once again became more pronounced. The confident establishment moved to de-institutionalize the pragmatism that had emerged during and in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War and introduced new narratives of the past events. For instance, revisionist views of the war and the Iran’s cultural revolution blamed the “secular” reformists for the failure of the revolution’s original promises. The ruling faction also interpreted regional developments, surrounding the Arab Spring of 2010 – 2012, as a new wave of
“Islamic Awakening” and the continuation of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Here, again, *Velayat-e Faqih* remained a focal point. In the war of narrative with the opposition, the establishment increasingly relied on its regional triumphs to heal its legitimacy crisis. In light of the increasing power of the state *vis-à-vis* its external enemies, both the institution of *Velayat-e Faqih* as well as the person in charge of it, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, claimed unprecedented holiness. The establishment pursued hard power, in the realist sense, in the international system in order to advance both the security of the state and its version of political Islam. At the pinnacle of this search for hard power lay the nuclear program. Iran desired nuclear capability not only for deterrence, as realists argue, but also to heal the regime’s legitimacy crisis.

In this chapter, I will present the process through which Iranian leaders came to perceive the state unprecedentedly powerful. I will then demonstrate the ideological consequences of the state’s perception of its hard power.

**The Zenith and Decline of Pragmatism**

Iran’s pragmatic behavior that began during the Iran-Iraq War (discussed in Chapter Three) reached new heights in the aftermath of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Iran watched in horror as the Iraqi regime that it had tried to defeat for eight long years was toppled by the U.S. within three weeks and Iraq’s strongman Saddam Hussein was pulled out of a hole. Even worse, the Islamic state now believed that it was
next on the Bush Administration’s hit list. In Washington, the talk of the town was, “Men go to Baghdad, but real men go to Tehran.” It was time to take out another lesson from Ayatollah Khomeini’s handbook of realpolitik. In May 2003, Iran sent a proposal to the White House through the Swiss Embassy in Tehran. The proposal, which reportedly had been blessed by Iran’s Supreme Leader, declared Tehran’s readiness to end its support of Hamas and pressure Hezbollah to disarm, its backing of the Saudi initiative for the Arab-Israeli peace process, and its willingness to submit Iran’s nuclear program to international inspections. In return, Iran demanded, above all, respect for its “security interests” in the region. The message was clear: Don’t attack us! We give you everything you have ever dreamed of! Sure enough, an overconfident Washington rejected the deal and even reprimanded the Swiss Ambassador for attempting to mediate between the two countries. The Islamic state had been ready to put everything on the table and negotiate with the “Great Satan” in the face of an existential threat. Nonetheless, as the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld declared, in the post-9/11 era, “We do not speak to evil.”

However, the realities on the ground soon began to change. The U.S. Army found itself in the middle of a bloody civil war in Iraq. Iran successfully seized the opportunity to keep the U.S. busy with the growing insurgencies in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq. Only

two years earlier, Iranian diplomats had worked with their American counterparts to help Hamid Karzai to come to power in Afghanistan. Reformist President Khatami convinced Supreme Leader Khamenei that it was in Iran’s interest to cooperate with the U.S. to overthrow the Taliban and slowly resolve its outstanding issues with Washington. However, the Bush Administration thanked Iran by labeling it a member of the Axis of Evil in President Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address. This act simply vindicated Ayatollah Khamenei’s old view that Iran’s gestures of goodwill only served to embolden the U.S.

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) quickly took charge of Iran’s policy in Iraq. As the U.S. fell deeper and deeper into the Iraqi quagmire, the IRGC expanded its network and support of various Iraqi political and militant groups, above all the Shi’a. Despite its increasing frustration and accusations against Iran, the Bush Administration was forced to recognize Tehran’s influence in Iraq and reach out for help. Iran’s tough stance seemed to have paid off. Now, it was Iran and that was not interested in a dialogue. Ayatollah Khamenei authorized Iranian diplomats to negotiate with the U.S. only to “remind them of their responsibilities in Iraq.” But other outstanding issues, such as Iran’s enrichment program, remained off the table. In 2005, Iran ended its suspension of uranium enrichment, a step that the reformists had agreed to with the three European countries, Britain, France and Germany in 2003. The new conservative president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, ordered the breaking of the enrichment facilities’ seals and Iran’s centrifuges began to spin and expand. In May 2006, in a major policy
change, the White House dropped all of its preconditions for negotiations with Iran about its nuclear program. But Iran remained defiant of the West’s “carrot and stick” policy.

Around the same time, Iran’s proxy in Lebanon was about to score a major victory. In reaction to the kidnapping of its soldiers by Hezbollah, Israel launched a massive attack on Lebanon. Within 33 days, the Israeli army inflicted immense pain and colossal destruction on Lebanon’s infrastructure. However, Hezbollah survived and saw itself as the winner of the war. Iran viewed Hezbollah’s survival as an Iranian victory against Israel and celebrations were held across the country.

Iran was clear about its “strategic depth” against its adversaries and was willing to use it. As Major General Hassan Firouzabadi, the Armed Forces Joint Chief of Staff, pointed out, Iran’s support of non-state actors was not only consistent with the Islamic Revolution’s ideology, but also “an element to maintain national security and regional authority” for the country. He added, “from a strategic perspective, supporting the Palestinian ideals or any other anti-colonial and anti-oppression movement is not only inexpensive for the establishment, but is a kind of investment for acquiring regional and international concessions from the perspective of national interests.”

Support for non-state actors was a bargaining chip that Iran could not afford to lose easily and thus

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maintained fiercely. A few years later, Mahmoud Zahar, a co-founder of Hamas, told the BBC Persian Service that in the case of a war between Iran and Israel, the Palestinian group would not intervene, “Hamas is not part of the regional conflict. We are here to defend ourselves against the Israelis. If Israel attacks us, we will react. If we are not attacked, we will not get involved.”\(^{318}\) The next day, the conservative Fars News outlet, which is close to the IRGC, rushed to publish another interview with Azhar claiming that the number two Hamas man denied the BBC quote and said that if Israel attacks Iran, the Palestinian group will respond with “full force.”\(^{319}\)

Meanwhile, in the U.S. the Republicans lost the control of both chambers of Congress as a result of the 2006 congressional elections. Ayatollah Khamenei claimed that the Republicans’ loss was a victory for Iran because the election was a reaction to the failures of the Bush Administration in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Iran had contributed to these failures. Tehran’s “victory” was repeated in the 2008 presidential election with another defeat for the Republicans in the election of Democrat Barak Obama. The Iranian establishment’s commentators declared that Iran was now even dictating local and domestic U.S. politics.\(^{320}\)

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\(^{320}\) Kayhan
Back in the Middle East, Iran’s proxy Hamas survived Israel’s invasion of Gaza in 2009-2010. Again, Iran’s conservatives declared this as one more Iranian victory in the region. Without any direct involvement, Iran had brought the Americans to their knees in Iraq and Afghanistan and defeated Israel not once, but twice. Moreover, Iran’s uranium stockpile continued to grow while the oil price skyrocketed. Then came the moment that Iran had waited for many years: In a Nowruz message to the Iranians, the new U.S. President reached out to what he called “the Islamic Republic,” its “leaders,” and its “people.” Thus, he acknowledged what Iranian officials across the political spectrum had long asked for: the reality of the Islamic Republic. President Obama’s call was later followed up by two written messages to Ayatollah Khamenei that Ambassador Susan Rice reportedly delivered to the residence of her Iranian counterpart at the UN, Ambassador Mohammad Khazaei. The Islamic state, now fully in the hands of the conservatives, had never enjoyed such a powerful position in the region and respect from the U.S. It is not surprising, then, if all of these “achievements” were ascribed to the Supreme Leader, his vision, and his IRGC. It was also in this climate that the establishment was determined to keep the reformists out of the government, even if this required a bloody crackdown in the aftermath of a controversial Iranian presidential election of 2009.

Thus, if the devastating impact of the war with Iraq and the subsequent weak position of the Iranian state in the 1980’s brought pragmatism into the lexicon of the Islamic Republic and its Velayat-e Faqih, the “rise” of the Islamic state in the late 2000s would
have its own ideational consequences as well. If in the first era pragmatism was institutionalized, in the next era a de-institutionalization process was initiated.

**Why is the U.S. “Afraid” of the IRGC?**

The main lesson that the conservative establishment learned during this period was that resistance and aggression pay off and that the IRGC, and especially its Quds Force (which conducts covert operations abroad), brought security to the Islamic state and empowered its ideology. The success of the Quds Force in the region brought the rhetoric, hopes, ideas, and ideals of the early years of the Islamic Revolution and the initial stages of the Iran-Iraq War (described in Chapter One) back to the fore. Ironically, the more pressure the U.S. put on the IRGC, the more this perception and narrative was reinforced. For instance, when the U.S. imposed sanctions on the Quds Force and blacklisted its head, Brigadier General Ghasem Soleimani, in 2011, the establishment interpreted it as evidence that Soleimani had “personally played a key role in inflicting a blow to the arrogance of the U.S. war machine in the Middle East.”

As a conservative commentator, close to the office of the Supreme Leader wrote:

> The first and foremost fear of the Quds Force is the fear of the mobilizing the uncompromising force of revolutionary Islam. Unlike what the retarded American brain imagines, the main job of the Quds Force is not providing weapons and [carrying out] special intelligence operations. Its main job is to remind Muslims that a doctrine that compromises with kufr [disbelief] and

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oppression and thinks that a low number [of manpower] is enough reason for the lack of action and struggle is not Islam.\textsuperscript{322}

The Quds Force was not simply a “an elite operational force, but rather a thought that recognizes no border and carries keywords and statements that are in constant conflict with the most fundamental values and methods of the Western civilization.”\textsuperscript{323}

Successful operations by the Quds Force demonstrated the power of political Islam, the successful marriage of religion and politics, and the expansion of the Iranian model. The U.S. blacklisted the Quds Force and its head because Washington understood the force was its most important strategic problem.

Equally importantly, the success of the Quds Force also demonstrated the bankruptcy of the secularist and pragmatist view of the Iranian reformists. The conservative commentator continued:

The fear of the Quds Force means the fear of the triumph of ideological behavior over pragmatic behavior. The Americans, more than anyone else in this world, appreciate the meaning of this sentence. Consider two cases: the nuclear case during the Second of Khordad [Reform] era and the case of Iraq. One was run by the pragmatists, the other by the students of Haj Ghasem [Soleimani].\textsuperscript{324}

The more the U.S. demonized and took action against the IRGC, the more the
conservative establishment was convinced that its policy was right on the money. As another conservative commentator wrote in the pro-regime newspaper *Kayhan*:

The [U.S. officials’] statements insist that the IRGC is the one to blame for U.S. failures, not just in Iran, but in the entire region. And they don’t realize that [by blaming the IRGC for U.S. failures] instead of hurting the IRGC, they make it 100 times more popular. It’s quite clear that if the U.S.’s audience is Israel and their domestic friends [the reformists in Iran], then the IRGC is a great threat. It is only the IRGC that has succeeded in defeating both the U.S. regional projects in the past few years and its domestic projects in the past eight months [during the 2009 Green Movement]. That is the reason that the U.S., despite all of its current problems, is focusing only on the IRGC. If the IRGC were not really successful in neutralizing the American plans and in forming a new revolutionary regional order, then why on earth would the Americans be so angry and flagellating themselves so much over it?\(^\text{325}\)

While Iran experts and Western officials, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, were warning that the IRGC was hijacking the establishment and the Iranian state was becoming militarized, the IRGC itself had a different view. Its commander, General Mohammad Ali Jafari, said that the IRGC was a “revolutionary and not essentially military organization.” He added, “This does not simply mean that the IRGC has no military … nature. [In the past] the IRGC’s military aspect prevailed [over its revolutionary aspect] because of the conditions [imposed by] the [Iran-Iraq] War. Otherwise, the [IRGC’s] main dimension is totally revolutionary. [It is] a unique phenomenon in today’s world and has interaction and overlap with different social

\(^{325}\text{Kayhan, 18 February 2010.}\)
strata. The IRGC is the multitasking tool of the revolution.” As Jafari and other members of the establishment saw it, during the first decade of the revolution the IRGC protected the country militarily, in the second decade it entered the economic arena to reconstruct the war-torn country, and in the third decade it expanded into to the realm of media and culture in order to confront the West’s soft war against the Islamic Republic.

A Revisionist Approach towards the Iran-Iraq War

With a rise of Iran’s power came reinterpretations of past events and new answers to old questions. The most consequential event in Iran since the Islamic Revolution was the Iran-Iraq War and its unfavorable ending. Why was the IRGC successful in penetrating Iraq after 2003, but not in the 1980’s? Why was Khomeini forced to drink from the poisonous chalice to end the war in 1988, while Khamenei managed to push the U.S. to drink from their own poisonous chalice and accept the reality of the Islamic Republic? The establishment blamed “conciliatory” figures such as Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, and Mohammad Khatami for bringing Iran to a position where the late Supreme Leader had no choice but to end the Iran-Iraq War without a final victory. Because of their fundamental ideological weakness, they deviated from Islamic ideology and undermined the Islamic Revolution during the war, and later, during the economic and political reforms of the 1990’s. As it is described below, various interviews, letters, and documents emerged later to substantiate this revisionism and ascribe Iran’s failure in the Iran-Iraq War to pragmatism and ideological deviation.

326 Jame Jam, 23 September 2009.
It has long been known that in the final months of the Iran-Iraq War, then Speaker of the Parliament Akbar Rafsanjani asked the commanders of the Army and the IRGC to make a list of what the country needed in order to win the war. Rafsanjani received an assessment from Prime Minister Mousavi stating that the country could not financially meet those demands. After that, Rafsanjani attached a letter from Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad Khatami stating that the people were no longer volunteering to go to the frontlines. He took the entire folder to the Islamic Revolution’s Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, who only then realized the country was on the verge of bankruptcy and could not continue to prosecute the war, let alone win it. Now two decades later, some former commanders of the IRGC referred to these letters to argue that in the last years of the war, Rafsanjani and Mousavi failed to appropriately manage the state and to cooperate with the IRGC. As a result, they forced Ayatollah Khomeini to accept a bitter cease-fire.

At the height of the Green Movement, Mohsen Rafiqdoost, the Minister of IRGC during the Iran-Iraq War and a close ally of Supreme Leader Khamenei, attacked former Prime Minister Mousavi’s administration by publicly blaming him for categorically ignoring the urgent needs of the IRGC to continue the Iran-Iraq War:

Right before accepting the [598 UNSC] Resolution, we thought that the country did not have great resources. But that was not the issue. The issue was that these resources were not allocated to serve the war the way the military wanted. Most of the time, when there was a proposal in the
cabinet about the war, they [the administration] would oppose it and constantly say, “You know that you cannot occupy Baghdad, why don’t you give up? Why don’t you end the war?”\(^{327}\)

The implicated figures did not remain quiet in the face of these allegations. Mousavi, who was now leading the Green Movement and had not yet been placed under house arrest, shot back, “I cannot believe that you have forgotten that four billion out of Iran’s six billion dollars in annual oil revenue were going to the war,” leaving only two billion to feed the people.\(^{328}\) Indeed, Mousavi in turn blamed Rafiqdoost and “his friends” for the failure of the Iran-Iraq War. He said these factions within the IRGC kept his administration in the dark, which resulted major military disasters for the country. Towards the end of the war, when the Mousavi administration was finally given more leverage to run the war, the situation began to shift in Iran’s favor, according to Mousavi, who also threatened to reveal the “untold” stories of the war.

As the row continued, a correspondence between Rafsanjani and former head of the IRGC, Mohsen Rezaie became even more revealing. Rafsanjani defended his actions during the end of the Iran – Iraq War by saying that the country had reached a point when it could not even buy shoelaces for its troops. He denied that he had set the stage to end the war and claimed that initially he had simply asked IRGC Commander Rezaie how he envisioned Iran’s eventual victory, saying, “You keep talking with the Imam


[Khomeini] about the Ashurai War. What is your plan? … Do we have money? We have five to six billion dollars in oil revenue, which is enough for our basic needs and that is it. We have to provide for the living of our people as well. If the people behind the frontlines have no bread and water, they will not support [the war].”

According to Rafsanjani, when Mohsen Rezaie specified what the IRGC needed in order to win the war, Rafsanjani replied, “Instead of telling me … write your demands to the Imam so that he knows what you want. If we can, we will provide and if we cannot, we have to follow whatever decision he makes. This is not right as the people die and the war of attrition continues.” Rafsanjani denied that he provoked Rezaie into make a list of demands or influencing to write the list in such a way that it would make Supreme Leader Khomeini realize that he had no other alternative but to accept a ceasefire with Iraq.

However, Mohsen Rezaie denied that he had written a letter to Khomeini on how to end the war and claimed that he had in fact made a list for Rafsanjani of what the IRGC would need to “win the war.” He alleged that Rafsanjani took the list and other similar lists, assessments, and letters from Prime Minister Mousavi, Minister Khatami, and the commanders of the regular Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran (the Artesh) to Khomeini and said, “This is what the military says, while the political and economic authorities say that we don’t have the money [to continue the war]. You decide what to

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do. Then Imam agreed to accept the ceasefire.\textsuperscript{331} Rezaie claimed that the IRGC could and wanted to continue the war, but ultimately, it was “the politicians” who met with Khomeini and decided to end the war.\textsuperscript{332}

Rezaie said that in his 1988 letter to Khomeini, he had pointed out that there would be no victory in the next five years. His letter continued, if the army could get the equipment that it needed, including 2,500 tanks, 3,000 artillery weapons, 300 jet fighters, 300 helicopters, the expansion of the IRGC by seven times and the Artesh by two fifths, then it would be possible to go on the “offense” against Iraq. However, there was still one other condition necessary to win the Iran-Iraq War, “of course, we have to kick the U.S. out of the Persian Gulf as well. Otherwise, we will not succeed.”\textsuperscript{333} When Khomeini saw Rezaie’s long list of equipment needs, he asked how the state could meet those demands and also kick the U.S. out of the Persian Gulf. Rafsanjani claimed that in a meeting, Khomeini said, “We have repeatedly said that we will stand and continue this war until the last breath and last drop of our blood, even if the war lasts for twenty years. These words are in the people’s ears. We don’t want them to lose their trust on us.”\textsuperscript{334} Rafsanjani then implied that Khomeini proposed that he would resign as Supreme Leader, “He first said a point, which we did not accept.”\textsuperscript{335}

In this 2009-2010 correspondence Rafsanjani and Mousavi pointed out what Khamenei and the IRGC did not want to acknowledge, “Overall it was clear to the Imam and to us, the heads of the powers [branches of government], that the world powers would not allow us to win.” These statements pointed to the fallibility of Khomeini and undermined, if not invalidated, his original theory of *Velayat-e Faqih*. How could a top jurist who only implemented God’s law and followed in the footsteps of the Prophet fail the Islamic state? Now Khomeini’s successor, Ayatollah Khamenei, sought to blame the deviation of his rivals Rafsanjani and Mousavi for not accommodating the needs and demands of the IRGC to win the war. The conclusion was that these figures forced Khomeini to drink the poisonous chalice, but they would not be granted another opportunity.

**An “Islamic Awakening” not an “Arab Spring”**

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 was supposed to ignite similar movements across the region and the world. Iranian leaders viewed the Iran-Iraq War as a “shortcut” to export their revolutionary ideology. However, the realities of war soon replaced the expansion of their utopian ideas with security considerations. Iran’s failure to export the revolution remained an ideological question. Three decades later, the uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa that came to be known as the “Arab Spring” were received with

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great enthusiasm in Tehran. These events were interpreted by Iran’s conservative leadership as the natural extension of the Islamic Republic, although with some delay. The establishment considered the term “Arab Spring” an utter misnomer; they saw the uprisings as not Arab, but rather Islamic; not as a spring, but instead like the Islamic Revolution in Iran, permanent. For Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, the Arab Spring was in fact an “Islamic awakening,” the flowering of seeds that were sown three decades earlier by the Iranian Revolution of 1979. As Mohammad Ali Ja’fari, the Commander of the IRGC said, although the Western media postponed the Islamic awakening, the message of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 finally reached the “ears of the world’s Muslims” in 2011.337

The landslide electoral victory of Tunisian Islamists in the aftermath of President Ben Ali’s escape from the country seemed to vindicate the Iranian establishment’s view of the Arab uprisings and signal an avalanche of support for the “Islamic awakening” across the Middle East. In his 2011 message to the hajj pilgrims, Ayatollah Khamenei declared, “Despite the dominance and efforts of the secular rulers and their visible and veiled attempts to remove religion in these countries, Islam … has become the guide [for] hearts and tongues…. Undoubtedly, free elections in every Islamic country will not have a different result than what took place in Tunisia.”338 Now was the time for Iran to enter the scene. That same year, Tehran organized its First Islamic Awakening Conference. At the convention, Khamenei spoke as he had “been there and done that.”

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337 Kayhan, 10 March 2011.
He provided the 710 participants from 80 countries with an articulate roadmap based on the experiences of the Islamic Revolution. Having emerged from a grave conflict with his fellow revolutionaries, he warned against the temptation to make ideological deviations in response to promises or threats from the West. He also cautioned that “untrustworthy” factions would receive financial or media support from the West in order to marginalize the “true” revolutionaries. Khamenei’s solution was to write down the slogans and principles of the revolution and stick to them. Otherwise, “seditionists” would undoubtedly come to dominate again. Every downfall starts with ideological deviation, period.

Khamenei stated that the new wave of Islamism across the Arab world was real: “Speaking of an Islamic awakening is not speaking of an unclear and vague concept that is a matter of interpretation. It is speaking of a tangible and touchable reality that has filled the space and created great revolts and revolutions and has overthrown dangerous agents on the enemy’s front and removed them from the scene. Nevertheless, the scene is still fluid and needs to be formed to reach its end.” Khamenei believed that this Islamic awakening would soon overwhelm Europe:

The awakening movement has not emerged only in the North African countries and in the west of Asia, where we are located today. This awakening movement will go to the heart of Europe. There will be a day that these European nations will rise up against the politicians and rulers who surrendered them entirely to the cultural and economic policies of America and Zionism.

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339 Vatan Emrooz, 18 September 2011.
This awakening is certain. This is the extension and depth of the movement of the Iranian nation.”

Khamenei also concluded that he had hit the jackpot with the Occupy Wall Street Movement of 2011:

In the financial center of America, in the economic capital of America, meaning New York, specifically on Wall Street, which is the center of world capitalism, thousands gather and say ‘we don’t want capitalism.’ These are neither immigrants, nor all black, nor from lowers classes of the society. There are university professors and politicians among them; student groups have joined them and they say ‘we don’t want capitalism.’ Well, this is exactly our word. We said it from the beginning 'neither East, nor West,' which means neither a capitalist system, nor a socialist system. The one that went to the hell was the socialist version, this [capitalist] one is slowly coming down. After this incident, the appeal to Islam will expand. This is another wave; the Third Wave.342

For the establishment’s media and thinkers, the trend was against the reformists and their Western reading of Islam:

There is no doubt that political Islam has returned to the Middle East and this means a total failure of the 400-year-old secularism project. Until recently, the Westerners really believed that they had eradicated religion from political decisions all over the world for good and that Iran was the only unconquered barrack and that it will not resist much longer. Now, the Americans

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see that the religious front is expanding and each day there are new trenches. Iran is now the strategic depth of this front, not the forefront.\(^{343}\)

Not every country had to follow the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih*. They would find their own path. Iran was becoming a model with local variations, conservatives argued:

It is true that Christianity is not in a position to provide the ideological backup for the social movements in Europe and the U.S. since it became empty of ideological core due to the reform process. However, there is not doubt that revolution will find its own ideology. The question of the collapse of the modern world is only a matter of time.\(^{344}\)

Khamenei could not be more assured of his power, vision, and intellect:

We are moving forward, advancing. Our enemy's curve is towards weakness, our curve is towards strength. The *taghut* system - the invasive and oppressive world capitalist system - whose symbol is the U.S., is much weaker today than ten, twenty years ago. On the opposite side, Islamic thought and the Islamic Republic system is much stronger and more advanced and prepared today than ten, twenty years ago.\(^{345}\)

**Cultural Revolution: Act II**

Along with the return of early revolutionary rhetoric and ideology came the return of the Iranian cultural revolution. In the immediate aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, the new government shut down the universities and a group of clerics and religious social scientists were picked by Ayatollah Khomeini to “Islamicize” the higher

\(^{343}\) *Kayhan*, 27 October 2011.

\(^{344}\) *Kayhan*, 27 October 2011.

education system. Thirty years later, the universities became a hotbed of anti-establishment activities. Figures such as Abdolkarim Soroush, once a member of the Cultural Revolution Committee, were now leading liberal and secular thinkers. Indeed, the establishment blamed these “deviants” for the failure of the first cultural revolution. Conservatives argued, “Neither Mousavi [a long time member of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution], nor Soroush, nor the others, had fathomed the depth of what the Revolution’s Leader and other revolutionaries were saying. Perhaps it was because of their deficient comprehension that the first cultural revolution did not reach its goals, as both Mousavi and Soroush were two defenders of the cultural revolution from 1357 to 1362 [1979 to 1983].”

A few months after the Green Movement began June 2009, Ayatollah Khamenei expressed concerns that about two to three million Iranian students studying humanities and the social sciences, which he saw as “materialistic and [based in] lack of belief in divine and Islamic teachings … and promoting skepticism.” Around the same time, Saeed Hajjarian, a leading reformist figure now in prison, was brought to court and later on to TV to “confess” that his praxis was erroneous because his theory was worthless. Hajjarian was forced to declare that Max Weber’s theory of rationalization and his model of charismatic leadership, which influenced Hajjarian’s own thoughts, did not apply to Iran’s Islamic government. Along with Weber, other social scientists and

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346 Kayhan, 30 October 2010.
philosophers such as Jurgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, and Karl Popper one after another were indicted by the government.\textsuperscript{348} Supreme Leader Khamenei even asked students and scholars to refrain from reading Karl Popper, whose work, including The Open Society and Its Enemies, had brought the late British philosopher unmatched popularity among Iranian reformists.\textsuperscript{349}

In reaction to these Soviet-style show trials, many opposition activists and intellectuals targeted what they deemed to be the expanding interpretation of Velayat-e Faqih. Abdolkarim Soroush diagnosed the problem as follows:

Is it difficult to comprehend this puzzle of how the leader of the Islamic Republic, who is the Guardian of Feqh, and according to the theory of Velayat-e Faqih is entitled to only give an opinion or issue a 
fatwa\n or an order on jurisprudential and political issues, could enter these [humanities] areas? Mr. Khamenei … has no right to say such and such a theory in philosophy is valid and such and such is invalid. … It is neither his expertise nor his responsibility.\textsuperscript{350}

The Iranian state took actions to operationalize the Supreme Leader’s view and re-ideologize the educational system. In October 2010, Minister of Science and Higher Education Kamran Daneshjoo announced that twelve majors in the humanities and social sciences needed to be revised since they were not with Islamic principles. They included law, political science, sociology, philosophy, psychology, education, human

\textsuperscript{350} Soroush, interview with Jaras, 14 January 2010.
rights, and management. The ministry of Science and Education prevented the expansion of these majors and promised “revisions of at least 70 percent” in their curricula within the next five years. The second wave of Islamization was not limited to the universities. The Ministry of Education announced a new collaboration with the seminaries that entailed basing a cleric in every school across the country to provide religious consultation.

The return of ideology was compounded by the move of Basij militia, the guardian of ideology, to center stage. The Basij would also have a stronger presence in the schools, universities, mosques, and government offices, because in Khamenei’s view, “As long as there is the Basij, the Islamic System and the Islamic Republic will not be threatened by the enemy. It is an essential element. In various events, the Basij has utterly shown its effectiveness.” It would create a façade of popularity since the Basij were the “ordinary people.” As Khamenei declared, “the Basij is dependent neither on money, nor title, nor position, nor to a decision from above. The Basij’s criterion is intuition and faith. Faith springs out of its heart and forces to act.”

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351 *Hamshahri*, 24 October 2010.
353 *Khorasan*, 26 November 2009.
For Khamenei, resisting secularism was not only a matter of ideology, but also central to the material success of the Islamic Revolution. He attacked those who spoke of “rationalizing” the Islamic Republic and advocated less ideological domestic and foreign policies. He acknowledged that pursuing revolutionary principles created difficulties for the country’s progress both domestically and internationally. Khamenei referred to the Rushdie Affair to note that there were some top officials who asked the late Ayatollah Khomeini not to issue the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie because its consequences for the country. However, “He [Khomeini] did not capitulate. He insisted. These challenges continue to this day.” According to Khamenei, if the state gave up on its principals and spiritual goals, its pragmatic goals would not be realized. At various times, revolutions deviated from their principles, and this was the beginning of their end. Therefore, Khamenei argued, you remain true to your ideology in order to guarantee both spiritual and material success, “We tested and noticed that it is possible to keep [to our] principles and reach [our] achievements as well.”

Rationalism, pragmatism, secularism, and de-ideologization were all different terms that Supreme Leader Khamenei used to describe the soft war that the West and its local agents were waging against Iran. He argued that since the 1979 Revolution, the world had tried to overthrow the Islamic Republic through coups, ethnic conflicts, and war. These “hard” confrontations against Iran failed. Now, the enemy was looking into a soft war, which according to Khamenei “means war with cultural tools; with influence, lies,

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and the spreading rumors with the advanced tools that exist today. [These] communication tools did not exist ten, fifteen, and thirty years ago but have spread today. [This] soft war is creating doubt in the people’s hearts and minds.” The popular protests in the aftermath of the controversial election in June 2009 were a result of the creation of a foggy climate in which people could not distinguish the truth from the untruth. Hence, the use of the term “seditionists” by the conservatives to describe the reformists, who had used powerful religious language to mobilize the people.

The De-institutionalization of Pragmatism

With the return of revolutionary rhetoric and ideology, the institutions became the next target of the establishment. By taking steps to de-institutionalize its own pragmatism, the Islamic Republic was about to come full circle. The Expediency Council, the embodiment of the system’s pragmatism, was increasingly neutralized and there were even hints that it might be dissolved. In 2010, when the Expediency Council, led by centrist figures, released a proposal to limit the vetting power of the Guardian Council over the elections, Supreme Leader Khamenei put the pragmatic body in its place. He pointed out the views of the Expediency Council were not binding but only “consultative.” He warned that the electoral authority of the Guardian Council,

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356 Khorasan, 26 November 2009.
357 Shargh, Special Issue, 21 January 2012.
including “monitoring and discerning the qualifications” of candidates should not be “invaded.”

Furthermore, the establishment suggested that the presidency might be weakened and replaced with a parliamentary system. In the early days of following the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian government had been characterized by a powerful Prime Minister with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini’s pragmatist hand governing alongside highly ideological and religious institutions like the Guardian Council. In the aftermath of Khomeini’s death, the position of the Prime Minister was removed and replaced by a strong President to suit Rafsanjani. In October 2011, Khamenei announced the possible revival of the position of Prime Minister. “If one day, probably in the far future, it is felt that it would be better for a parliamentary system to choose the head of the executive branch, there is no problem with changing the current mechanism.” In fact, a year earlier Khamenei had reportedly tasked an “expert legal team” to look at “tens of clauses” in the constitution that “needed to be revised.” Article 107 of the Iranian constitution permits the Supreme Leader to authorize the heads of the three branches of the government, members of the Expediency Council, and others to study his recommendations on the “problems” of the constitution. However, the principles of the Islamic state such as, *Velayat-e Faqih* would never be touched. Therefore, as a senior Member of Parliament who was familiar with the debate pointed

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out, in order to “rejuvenate” the Islamic Republic’s political system, “the second layer of the political structure” needed to be changed. The goal was to change the political structure from a presidential to a parliamentary system. A president was simply too powerful because unlike, the prime minister and the Supreme Leader, he was elected by people’s direct vote. Then, in order to further control over the parliament itself, in 2010, Khamenei asked the legislative body to pass a bill to “monitor” members of the parliament.

The stated rationale for this shift was that Iran’s political system in reality was not presidential. The head of the state was unmistakably the Supreme Leader, even though it was the president who was elected directly by the people. But the real reason for the change was that Khamenei wanted to put the last nail on the coffin of the Republic and turn it into an Islamic Government, as Ayatollah Khomeini had envisioned in his original theory in the early 1970’s. Khomeini later accepted the adjective “Republic” to popularize his message among the middle class. Now, Khamenei seemed to seek to revive the most traditional reading of political Islam. He had experienced the danger of elections-turned movements. He had experienced the peril of a president-turned rival even if it was his own pick, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. These experiences contributed to Khamenei’s belief that these modern institutions had no place in Shiism.

Khamenei’s ally, conservative cleric, Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, went even further and declared what Khamenei could not. He denounced democracy, not just as a Western phenomenon, but also as a Sunni plot of the first caliphs who had not permitted the Prophet Mohammad’s son-in-law, Ali to succeed the Prophet Muhammad after his death. According to Mesbah Yazdi, even though the Prophet had designated Ali as his successor, others gathered at a place called the Saqifeh and selected Abu Bakr as the next leader of the Muslim community with the justification that, “the people have to choose the government … therefore, the foundation of democracy was laid in the Saqifeh … the foundation of secularism and the separation of religion and politics was laid in the Saqifeh as well.”

Khamenei’s “Holiness” and the Expansion and Contraction of *Velayat-e Faqih*

Concomitantly, the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih* needed to be upgraded to suit the status of Ayatollah Khamenei, who fancied himself a Grand Ayatollah and the leader of a powerful Islamic country. In July 2010, Khamenei issued a *fatwa* that established the new parameters of *Velayat-e Faqih*:

> The guardianship of the faqih [jurisprudent] is the ruling of the qualified faqih in the absence of the Infallible Imam. It is a branch of the guardianship and rule of the Prophet Muhammad and the Infallible Imams. You may ensure commitment to the guardian faqih by obeying his administrative rulings.

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361 Kayhan, 10 March 2011.
In other words, all Muslims including the “grand jurists, let alone their followers” must surrender to the Vali Faqih [Guardian Jurist]. “We believe commitment to Velayat-e Faqih cannot be separated from commitment to Islam and the Guardianship of the Infallible Imams.”363 Khamenei followed by stressing what many thought was a reference to the Green Movement. “The decisions and authority of the Guardian Faqih, as far as it is pertinent to the public interests of Islam and Muslims, take precedence and prevail over the will of the masses if they are in contradiction.”364 Khamenei argued that obeying Velayat-e Faqih’s political orders are compulsory for all people, even top jurists. Their excuse that they might be more qualified would not be accepted.

Widespread reaction, ridicule, and criticism by dissidents and the Iranian Diaspora forced Khamenei’s official website to downplay his fatwa. His website pointed out that the concept of Velayat-e Faqih had long been established and defined by the Prophet Mohammad and the Imams and was later revived by Ayatollah Khomeini. It added that in his fatwa, Ayatollah Khamenei simply clarified what commitment to Velayat-e Faqih meant, interpreting it broadly according to his “maximum attraction, minimum repulsion strategy.”365 Conservative clerics such as Ayatollah Mohammad Gharavi

defended Khamenei’s “minimalist” view, which stressed only a “practical” commitment to *Velayat-e Faqih*. Gharavi argued that according to the minimalist view, citizens do not need to believe in *Velayat-e Faqih* in their hearts, they only need to obey it.\(^\text{366}\)

However, the opposition continued to fiercely attack Khamenei’s *fatwa*. With his usual candid tone, opposition leader Mehdi Karroubi stated that the power of *Velayat-e Faqih* had expanded and surpassed that of the Prophet Mohammad himself. He went on, “I do not believe that God has considered a right for such treatment of His creatures [by other creatures] even for Himself.”\(^\text{367}\)

Khamenei was derided for inflating his rule to include the most private aspects of people’s lives from cradle to grave. After the dissident cleric Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri passed away, Khamenei issued a statement that he hoped God would “forgive” Montazeri for his “worldly” mistakes and allowed Montazeri to be buried at a holy shrine next to his martyred son. Montazeri’s student, Mohsen Kadivar, sarcastically reacted to reports of Khamenei’s statement:

> Although I have studied various facets of the sphere of the absolute *Velayat-e Faqih* for years, I have to confess that I have never paid attention to this field of the sphere of the absolute *Velayat-e Faqih*: the guardianship over graves. According to the theory of absolute appointed *Velayat-e Faqih*, the leader not only has guardianship over life, but death, not only one’s worldly home,


but one’s other-worldly resting place… [The leader apparently has guardianship over] who is
buried where and into which grave goes which dead.\(^{368}\)

Shortly before his death, Ayatollah Montazeri had apologized for his role in
institutionalizing *Velayat-e Faqih*:

I am a firm defender of the rule of religion and one of the people who laid the foundations of
*Velayat-e Faqih* – of course not under its current shape and form, but the one in which the
people elect the leader and supervise his activities – and I made much scientific and practical
endeavor to implement it. Now, I feel humiliated before the informed Iranian people for the
oppression that is being carrying out in the name of *Velayat-e Faqih*. I feel responsible before
God.

Montazeri even opposed Ayatollah Khomeini’s famous statement that the survival of
the Islamic state was an utmost religious duty. He viewed this statement as an excuse
that could justify any type of wrongdoing:

One of the points frequently mentioned these days is that safeguarding the system is an
obligation. Safeguarding the system is not a [religious] obligation *per se*. This means that if we
violate Islamic instructions, the system will not be secured. Securing the system is a prelude to
safeguarding and carrying out Islamic instructions. If we take anti-Islamic actions with the
excuse of safeguarding the system, neither the system nor Islam will survive.\(^{369}\)

\(^{369}\) BBC Monitoring, 14 October 2009.
However, the establishment continued to expand Khamenei’s authority. Major General Hassan Firouzabadi, the Armed Forces Joint Chief of Staff, stated, “Velayat-e Faqih is not simply an issue of governance and the preeminent power in the country, but rather the guardianship of science, knowledge, and wisdom.”370 Ayatollah Mahdavi Kani, a prominent “moderate” conservative figure, scorned opposition leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi for not believing in Supreme Leader Khamenei’s “holiness.” He recalled Mousavi’s socialist economic policies during the Iran-Iraq War, but more importantly added that the head of opposition never accepted Khamenei first as a president and later as an ayatollah and the Supreme Leader:

We don’t believe in Mr. Khamenei’s leadership in the general sense that is common in the world. We say he is the vice regency of the Hidden Imam and believe in a kind of holiness for this position. Mr. Mousavi does not believe this. He may say that he recognizes the Leader according to the constitution. But this is not enough for us … If he did [believe in Khamenei’s absolute rule] he would have accepted the result of the election and returned to participate in the future elections. But he did not.371

The reformists saw this ideological trend as “moving the issue of the leadership away from the earth towards the sky as much as possible.” Mid-ranking cleric Hojjatoleslam Mousavi Khoeiniha, a former radical mentor of the students who occupied the U.S. Embassy, pointed out that many other jurists do not share Ayatollah Khomeini’s view of absolute Velayat-e Faqih. However, Khoeiniha argued since Velayat-e Faqih is in the

constitution, it is a “national contract which only requires practical obedience, not belief in the heart, since many citizens are followers of the jurists who do not believe in this absolute jurisprudential view.” According to Khoeiniha, the conservatives aimed to ensure no one dared to pose the “least criticism of towards the leaders’ smallest deed.” He accused the conservatives of reducing the “entire constitution, Islam, and that Islamic Republic to the articles that are pertinent to Velayat-e Faqih.”

Khamenei’s opponents questioned not just the theory of Velayat-e Faqih but also the Supreme Leader’s authority and even his selection for the position. Opposition leader Mehdi Karroubi claimed that while Ayatollah Khomeini laid in a coma during the last hours of his life in June 1988, the Assembly of Experts convened to decide on the question of succession. Karroubi alleged that in that meeting, “no name was mentioned as a successor,” and instead those present supported the creation of a leadership council consisting of three or five clerics. However, according to Karroubi, in a subsequent meeting a week after Khomeini’s death, “there was a different atmosphere.” The word “absolute” was added to the authority of the Supreme Leader after right wing Ayatollah Azari Qomi referred to a letter by General Afshar, then the head of the Basij, indicating that the IRGC wanted the phrase inserted into the constitution. Karroubi asserted that Khamenei (the future leader) supported the idea of granting absolute authority to the Supreme Leader, although “this was not at all approved by the Imam.” Karroubi also stated that the Assembly of Experts initially voted to reduce the life time term for the

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Supreme Leader to ten years: “The [Assembly of] Experts believed that the Imam [Ayatollah Khomeini] was a different personality because he was the founder of the system and he was old as well. But in the present time, the term of leadership should be limited.” However, according to Karroubi, again another right wing cleric, this time Ayatollah Khazali, torpedoed this proposal and, hand-in-hand with other conservative clerics, the conservatives blocked a “final vote” on this critical issue. The final obstacle to the ascendance of Khamenei was the condition that the Supreme Leader must be a marjaiat (source of emulation). According to Karroubi, in a meeting of the Assembly of Experts, conservative cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi proposed the idea that this condition should be removed since ijtihad (the independent interpretation of shari’a) was enough for the Velayat-e Faqih. As a result, the mantle of leadership was tailored to fit the mid-ranking Khamenei. Karroubi added that the conservative right wanted to change other republican institutions and democratic aspects of the constitution, including ending local elections, but they could not consider any steps beyond the cases that the late Supreme Leader had specified for revision. After that, the meetings of the Assembly of Experts moved its venue from the Majles to a building “next to the office of Mr. Khamenei,” a clear political message to the leftist faction that the right was dominating the scene, according to Karroubi.

To be sure, even fellow conservative clerics silently questioned Khamenei’s dubious rise to marjaiat, although it had been lifted as requirement for his position. Nonetheless, they remained allies of Khamenei until the outbreak of the Green Movement in 2009,
when they began to silently move to a grey area between the reformists and the pro-establishment conservatives. They were not happy with Khamenei’s support of Ahmadinejad and implicitly objected the brutality of the security forces and the massive crackdown against the protestors.\textsuperscript{374} For example, Khamenei’s long-time backer, right-wing top cleric Ayatollah Abdollah Javadi Amoli, a senior member of Assembly of Experts who once conveyed a message from Khomeini to the Mikhail Gorbachev and later became agitated when President Ahmadinejad claimed that there was an aura around his head at the UN, resigned from his position leading Friday prayers in the city of Qom. His decision followed the 2009 election and a came few months after Rafsanjani’s absence in leading Friday prayers in Tehran. Ayatollah Javadi Amoli apologized to the people if he was “unable to fulfill his duties for the Friday prayer.” He added that a Friday Imam has to address the “hundreds of problems” that the people face daily and if those problems persist, he has failed. One after another, top conservative clerics were marginalized in religious institutions and circles. Instead, low and mid-ranking figures, who were absolutely loyal and “dissolved” in Khamenei’s view of \textit{Velayat-e Faqih}, were handpicked for meteoric promotions.\textsuperscript{375}

\textbf{A New Shi’a-Sunni Divide?}

Time and again, various top officials across the board from the left to the center and the moderate/traditional right called for “reconciliation” and “unity” in the wake of unrest following the 2009 presidential elections. They blamed Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for

\textsuperscript{375} \textit{Etemad Melli}, 29 November 2009.
driving a wedge within the establishment and between the “two pillars” of the Islamic Republic, namely Supreme Leader Khamenei and (now former) Chairman of the Assembly of Experts Rafsanjani. Ali Larijani, the conservative Speaker of the Majles, warned that the nation could “fall apart” if the conflict continued. He commented on the “contributions” of figures such as Khamenei and Rafsanjani during the early days of the revolution and hoped that they would bridge the gap that had grown between them. Larijani implicitly attacked Ahmadinejad for his “humiliating” tone and indirectly referred to some in the opposition who “might make political mistakes but are not traitors.” These “moderate” conservatives were concerned that the IRGC and the Basij were becoming too political. Numerous calls for Rafsanjani to return to the public sphere and resume leading Friday prayers in Tehran did not bear fruit. In the end, Supreme Leader Khamenei was not willing to bring these prominent revolutionaries and politicians, even Rafsanjani the kingmaker who had helped him to succeed Khomeini, back into his fold. Confident with his handling of the country’s foreign policy, Khamenei was determined to run the show alone. After all, as long as he had the IRGC and the petrodollars, why couldn’t he?

Paradoxically, Supreme Leader Khamenei felt less self-assured domestically than internationally. The brutal suppression of the Green Movement had taken an unparalleled toll on his legitimacy. The opposition, led by Mousavi and Karroubi, protégés of the founding father of the Islamic Revolution, irreversibly deepened the

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376 Hayat-e No, 5 December 2009.
377 Aftab Yazd, 26 November 2009.
profound fissure that had split the Islamists in the aftermath of Khomeini’s death in 1989. This divide was comparable only to the dispute over the leadership of the Muslim community early Islamic era. Once again, a prophet died and his people were divided over who should succeed him. Each side relied on its own credentials to prove it was the only true follower of the prophet. Ironically, in this new Shi’a-Sunni divide, it was not clear which side was Shi’a and which side was Sunni. By drawing countless parallels with various figures and events of 7th century Arabia, each side accused the other of being the “bad” Sunnis and portrayed themselves as the “righteous” Shi’a.

Khamenei had to rely more than ever on his foreign policy success to win this domestic ideological war. In these circumstances, the nuclear program was of particular importance to win back his legitimacy and the alienated religious institutions and political factions. Not only would it provide the regime with deterrence against its external enemies, but more importantly it would serve as a decisive tool to demonstrate that by joining an exclusive club of countries with nuclear capability, Khamenei had finally delivered on the Islamic Revolution’s promise to elevate Iran on the world stage. In this regard, even increasing international pressure on the country demonstrated Iran’s global importance.

Khamenei perceived and portrayed the U.S. sanctions as a sign of the growing power of Iran. In 2010, in an apparent reference to then U.S. Treasury Department’s Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Stuart A. Levey, Khamenei said,
“The U.S. government has appointed one of its top economic and financial officials to ... run committees, travel around the world, contact countries’ leaders, and constantly force other countries against Iran.” He drew “several points” from this and claimed that these actions stemmed from the “the increasing power of awakening Islam.”

Sitting before a large crowd of elderly clerical members of the Assembly of Experts, Khamenei strove to make a case that his two decades of leadership had paid off:

> When you see the that other side [the U.S.] is nervous and anxious, knocks on this door, knocks on that door, does this, sees that, meets this; it shows that this side [Iran] has gained some power that [the U.S.] is fearful and anxious. If we were weak, if we were vulnerable, if they could bring us to our knees with one blow, all of these attempts would have been unnecessary. This attempt is a sign of this side's authority. That is the truth of the matter.

Khamenei reminded the very body that appointed him in 1989 that, as president in the early days of the Islamic Revolution, he had to go around the world and beg for weapons “i.e. 20-30 tanks” to continue the war against Iraq: “I went to Yugoslavia, which received us really well and with a lot of respect. Nevertheless, however much we insisted, they did not agree to give us these conventional weapons.” Conscious that he was undergoing an unprecedented crisis of legitimacy following the presidential election in 2009, Khamenei concluded that those days were long gone and under his leadership the country has reached a top position in the Middle East. Today it was the

U.S. who was in the weak position of begging at the doorsteps of various countries to join the sanction effort against Iran.

The Challenging Rise of Turkey’s Islamists

As Khamenei was busy cleaning up the mess after his regime’s purge of the reformists, a similar group of “moderate” Islamists were coming to power next door in Ankara. Khamenei originally viewed the rise of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey with much enthusiasm. However, Khamenei’s dream soon turned into a nightmare. The ascendance of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the AKP initially thrilled Tehran, which hoped that as Turkey moved toward Islamic government it would become ideologically closer to Iran. Conservative Iranian commentators argued that the AKP’s goal was an Islamic republic, even if it were to be achieved through elections rather than a revolution. Iran looked at Turkey's special relationship with the West and East not as a threat, but as an instrument to reduce Tehran’s isolation and protect its interests. During meetings with Prime Minister Erdogan and President Abdullah Gull from 2006 to 2010, Supreme Leader Khamenei congratulated Turkey for its political and economic achievements and emphasized that the AKP’s move toward the Islamic world would “strengthen” Muslim countries while further domestically and regionally popularizing the AKP. In addition, Iran was eager to use Turkey’s new stance to its

own advantage. Iran welcomed Turkey’s mediation, along with Brazil’s, on the nuclear issue in 2010, even if that gambit ultimately failed. But then the landscape began to shift. Much to the surprise of the Iranians, Turkey became a regional competitor, and its model of moderate Islamic politics proved more popular than Iran's hard-line approach. Turkey turned not to be a proxy for either Iranian or for U.S. interests, ultimately pursuing a foreign policy all its own, without compunction for the sensitivities of the Iranian leadership.

In May of 2010, the Gaza Flotilla incident erupted after the Israeli military intercepted the Turkish-supported “Gaza Freedom Flotilla.” In their condemnations of the Israeli attacks on the humanitarian ships bound for Gaza, Iranian leaders expressed support for the Palestinians but remained nearly silent on the leading role of Turkey in the confrontation. Instead, the Iranian media and officials expressed concerns that Iran’s role in the incident was not prominent. Anxious to reassert Iran into the Palestinian issue, governmental organizations announced that Iran would soon send its own humanitarian ships to Gaza. Iran’s Red Crescent Society even set the date of the departure, but the ships were never launched, for Iran was not really seeking a direct confrontation with Israel. A commentator came up with a telling suggestion: Iran should grant citizenship to the supporters of the Palestinians who die during such


humanitarian incidents and help their families. It was one way of inserting Iran into the narrative. It did not happen.\textsuperscript{381}

Then came the “Islamic Awakening” in the Arab world, which Iran perceived as the fruit of the 1979 Revolution. But it was Turkey, not Iran, which seemed to seize the moment. Tehran watched in horror as Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan was received rapturously during his post-revolution trips to Arab countries. His advocacy of a “secular” model of government that respected Islam set off alarm bells not just in Iran's political capital, Tehran, but also in the religious city of Qom. Both the political and religious establishments in Iran protested. Even “moderate” ayatollahs attacked Turkey's “liberal” and “Western” interpretations of Islam and warned that Iran had fallen behind Turkey in the region.\textsuperscript{382} Their voices were initially louder than the voices of Tehran’s government officials.

What finally sent Iran over the edge was Turkey's shift on Syria. Prime Minister Erdogan went from being a good friend of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to telling al-Assad to either reform or be ousted. Turkey hosted conferences for the Syrian opposition and sheltered anti-regime fighters. In response, Tehran sent several messages to Ankara, making it clear that Syria was its “redline” and warning Erdogan not to cross it by backing the anti-Assad opposition.\textsuperscript{383} Turkey did not heed Iran’s warning. Instead it announced that it would install a NATO radar system, which was said to be a shield

\textsuperscript{381} Kayhan, 8 June 2010.  
again Iran’s ballistic missiles, in Turkish territory.\textsuperscript{384} Iran’s tone then became more aggressive and even threatening. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and other political and military officials warned that Iran would be forced to respond accordingly, as the NATO radar system had been put in place to protect its enemies.\textsuperscript{385}

Conservative columnists then opened fire. They criticized Turkey for being a Sunni dictatorship that did not represent the other “50 percent of Turkey's population,” meaning the Alevi and the Kurds. However, they failed to mention that Iran and Turkey are closely cooperating over the challenges posed by their Kurdish minorities.\textsuperscript{386} These commentators, who usually voice trends within Iran's establishment, implicitly warned that Turkey should be aware that it could easily become unstable. Conservative media close to the office of the Supreme Leader argued that Shi’a Alevi, who consists of “27 percent” of the population want Ankara to move closer to Tehran and Damascus, while Turkey's Kurds are angry at the “brutality” of the Turkish army. Pointing to Turkey’s fault lines, they added that its people yearn for the implementation of Islamic law, but that the AKP has only provided them with a “veneer of Islamism.” Moreover, the commentators argued that Turkey, unlike Iran and Egypt, lacks a long tradition of


jurisprudential scholarship and therefore it does not have nearly the intellectual heft necessary to lead the Islamic world. Last but not least, establishment commentators argued that the Arabs would not forget their “bitter” memories of the Ottoman period.\footnote{387 See: http://www.basirat.ir/news.aspx?newsid=221647, (Accessed 1 March 2012).} Thus, Ankara's euphoric moment would not last since the new Egypt would once again reassert itself and balance Turkey.

The new Iranian narrative fingered Turkey as part of a bigger U.S.-Israel-Saudi plot to derail the new wave of Islamic awakening. The theory alleged that because the United States was losing its puppets (Mubarak, Ben Ali, etc.) in the region, it decided to use the Turkish model as a damage control measure. The U.S. would also use the AKP as a tool to implement its regime change policy in Iran after the failure of the Green Movement in 2009, the argument continued. This was a sensitive point to make, however. The Iranian government was aware of the ideological affinity between Iran’s reformist opposition and the AKP. Although they were born in diametrically opposed political systems, both strive to strike a balance between Islam and democracy. Iranian leaders feared that the AKP may inflict the same type of damage to their legitimacy as the Iranian reform movement had. They acknowledge that the reformists, although defeated for now, managed to crack the heart of the establishment and bring many die-hard supporters of the regime to their side or neutralize them. The establishment feared that the AKP could create a similar legitimacy crisis for the Islamic government on a regional level, weakening Iran's soft power and undermining its popularity in the
Muslim world.

**The (Nuclear) Plan for Ideological Redemption, Domestic and International**

Against the background of these various emerging and shifting ideological fault lines internally, regionally, and internationally, the establishment looked to the nuclear program as a remedy for its notion of *Velayat-e Faqih* and the broader concept of political Islam.

From 2005, Khamenei and his IRGC circumspectly devised a nuclear policy that would bring them international power and domestic legitimacy. The latter became much more urgent in the aftermath of the Green Movement and again during the emerging conflict between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad. To accomplish these goals, the establishment would build on their “successful” experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan detailed earlier in this chapter.

As Iran gained an upper hand against the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan, its nuclear program took a more confrontational turn as well. After Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became president in 2005, Iran ended the suspension of the uranium enrichment that the reformist administration (with Khamenei’s blessing) had agreed with the EU3 two years earlier. The failure of the Europeans to provide enough incentives for Iran to continue its suspension of the program, along with the declining threat of a U.S. invasion, led the establishment to conclude that it was now safe to restart enrichment. As President
Ahmadinejad said years later, the suspension was not going to bear any fruit: “A few years ago three European countries came and sat in Sa’d Abad [the presidential palace] and said ‘you have to negotiate for ten years. After ten years, we may allow you to build a few research centrifuges.”388 Within a few years, the number of Iran’s centrifuges jumped from 50 to nearly 10,000. Once again, defiance seemed to have paid off. Iran now claimed that its enrichment program was more advanced than the programs of nuclear powers such as Pakistan. Javad Larijani, the head of the Human Rights Council and the International Deputy of the Judiciary, argued that Iran was stronger than some other nuclear powers “because many of these countries got their atomic bombs from their heavy water reactors, which are not advanced compared to Iran.”389

However, when President Ahmadinejad himself tried to come to a deal with the P 5+1, the establishment cut him off. In October 2009, Western media reported that Iran had made a “concession” and agreed to a fuel swap, but the establishment eventually rejected the deal. When Ayatollah Jannati, head of the Guardian Council, and later Hossein Shariatmadari, the Khamenei-appointed chief editor of Kayhan, criticized the proposal, it was clear the agreement had been killed. Conservative members of the Majles later confirmed what many had suspected; Khamenei’s opposition put an end to the deal.390 Later, Ahmadinejad implied that the proposed deal would have paved the way for a rapprochement with the U.S. In an interview with state-controlled TV, he

388 Etemad Melli, 8 February 2010.
389 Aftab Yazd, 10 February 2010.
390 Aftab Yazd, 26 November 2009.
said, “Some countries have truly accepted the idea of cooperating with Iran, which has concerned some such as Britain and the Zionist regime. They have said that if confrontation becomes interaction, the deal is finished.” However, conservatives attacked Ahmadinejad for his implicit enthusiasm for negotiations with the U.S. He was reminded that, in the words of the late Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, the U.S. has a deep-seated antagonism towards the Islamic Republic and therefore was not to be trusted.\textsuperscript{391}

The opposition criticized Ahmadinejad’s proposed agreement as well. Mousavi attacked Ahmadinejad for giving away the “achievements” of the past years, while Hassan Rohani, the chief nuclear negotiator under Khatami, said that Iran should be paying money, not giving the uranium for the fuel needed for the Tehran Research Reactor.\textsuperscript{392}

The reformists, who previously had been attacked by Ahmadinejad and other conservatives for suspending the enrichment program, were claiming that giving up the 3.5 percent enriched uranium that the country produced since 2005 was tantamount “to a four-year suspension and not having done anything.”

The Iranian leadership decided to take a position that neither Ahmadinejad’s faction nor the opposition nor outsiders could exploit. It had concluded that by 2009, its uncompromising approach with regard to the nuclear issue, along with its military strategy in Iraq and in Afghanistan, forced the U.S. to come to terms with Iran’s nuclear

\textsuperscript{391} Kayhan, 7 February 2010.
\textsuperscript{392} Eteman, 21 February 2010.
program. But just as the P5+1 was about to accept Iran’s conditions on the enrichment process, the Green Movement emerged and created a false hope in the West that there were new “options” as the establishment faced down the street protesters. After the election, Khamenei warned the opposition that world powers would take advantage of domestic tensions. “Some will have to answer to God for doing something that the enemy perceives as divergence in the country and [makes the enemy] become more audacious.” According to this conservative narrative, there was a strategic shift in Western capitals to move the focus from compromising with the ruling faction to helping the opposition. Therefore, in the eyes of the regime the new sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council and later the unilateral U.S. and EU sanctions against Iran’s energy sector and financial institutions were designed to help the opposition to topple the regime. In the light of this view, Iran’s nuclear strategy was to up the ante and project an uncompromisingly strong image. Consequently, after every Security Council resolution, Iran’s reaction was to demonstrate that pressure would only bring pressure. Immediately after the UNSC Resolution 1929 in December 2009, Tehran announced that it would end all its voluntary cooperation with the IAEA, build ten new enrichment sites (in addition to Natantz and Fordo), and increase the level of enrichment from 3.5 to 20 percent.

Conservative commentators argued that there were two reasons behind the decision to undertake 20 percent enrichment: to show that no one, including Ahmadinejad, could

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393 Hayat-e No, 7 December 2009.
394 Kayhan 22 June 2010, and 1 November 2010.
alter the establishment’s official and stated nuclear policy; and that, counter to the claims of U.S. officials and experts, the post-election conflicts did not affect Iran’s foreign policy. By announcing the intention to build another ten enrichment sites, the establishment hoped to “make the West understand” that it could never exploit domestic conflict in Iran. By increasing the level of enrichment, again the establishment strove to send the message that Tehran would not budge.\textsuperscript{395}

It did not take Iran that long to conclude that its latest strong reaction had paid off again. Influential analysts argued that with every aggressive step that Iran took, the West dropped one of its preconditions. For instance:

Many may not know, but it has been years since the Westerners have inhumanely stopped selling radioisotopes, which has no use except for medical purposes, to Iran. Last Wednesday (21 Bahman), Philip Crowley, an aid [deputy spokesperson] to the U.S. Secretary of State, unexpectedly announced that the U.S. is ready to sell isotopes to Iran [for the Tehran Research Reactor]. After that, in a letter to the head of the IAEA, three countries (the U.S., France and Russia) stressed that even if Iran does not accept the Vienna proposal, it can buy radio isotopes from the international market and does not need the 20 percent enrichment [program] Surely, Iran disregarded this proposal because it was clear that the Westerners only showed a kind of tactical flexibility in order to stop 20 percent enrichment in Iran.\textsuperscript{396}

Despite his apparent defiance, Khamenei was careful not to cross certain redlines such as leaving the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). He also

\textsuperscript{395} Kayhan, 9 February 2010.  
\textsuperscript{396} Kayhan, 18 February 2010.
emphasized his “religious” opposition to the use of nuclear weapons. He indicated that he had said “several times” that nuclear weapons were “forbidden and haram.” His media mouthpiece complained that the West had ignored this “fatwa.” “Up until today, the Westerners have consistently stressed that Iran’s decisions in the foreign policy and national security arenas are ideological. That’s fine. If the West truly believes in what it says, then why has its media has boycotted the explicit and clear fatwa of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution on the use of the nuclear weapons being forbidden.” However, as conservative commentators pointed out, the door for a deal was open. “The U.S.’s big problem is that it cannot conceive of the characteristics of a probable win-win deal with Iran. The Americans’ reaction to the Tehran Declaration clearly demonstrated this.” Conservative commentators argued that if the U.S. accepted the terms of the Turkish-Brazilian mediated agreement on nuclear fuel shipment, “it is probable that the results of the Vienna II negotiations provide a platform toward deeper talks.” It was clear that Khamenei was in search of a scenario that bolstered his (not the reformists’, not the conservatives’, not the clerics’, not even Ahmadinejad’s, but his) legitimacy and grip on power.

Khamenei brought Ali Akbar Salehi, the former head of Iran’s Atomic Organization, to lead the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to further nuclearize Iran’s foreign policy. Salehi’s appointment was not a result of his MIT education and perfect English, which

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397 Aftab Yazd, 20 February 2010.
398 Kayhan, 21 October 2010.
399 Kayhan, 13 September 2010.
put him in a perfect position to negotiate with the U.S., as some inside the beltway have suggested. Instead, Khamenei made the appointment to showcase his own military and ideological commodities to better position Iran on the world stage. Khamenei also appointed the former head of the feared Quds Force to lead the Defense Ministry and placed other IRGC commanders in charge of the Ministry of Oil and other key institutions. This was not militarizing the polity and marginalizing the clerical establishment, as some U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton argued. Instead, Khamenei was in full control of the IRGC and creating a robust security state to prevent any U.S./Israeli military adventure by projecting a more aggressive and ideological posture and signaling that Iran was ready to go all the way.

Conclusion: The Nuclear Issue and the Unfinished Project of Bringing Back Ideology

Iran’s rising power strengthened the concept of political Islam and led to a new narrative of contemporary and even past events. It also compelled the establishment to actively pursue more material power precisely to fix its ideational conflicts. At the pinnacle of this endeavor was Iran’s nuclear policy, which was carefully designed to salvage the establishment’s legitimacy and its bankrupt political reading of Islam. Three decades after a revolution that was spurred by a promise to bring justice, dignity, and independence to Iran and the Islamic community, Tehran was in a serious crisis. Its leaders were desperate to demonstrate to the Iranian people and the world that despite

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war, international isolation, and a string of economic and political disappointments, the power of political Islam has been able to deliver at least something: membership in the exclusive nuclear club. The nuclear program was not simply a national cause for self-sufficiency and honor, as Iranian diplomats claimed. Nor was it about expediting the return of the hidden Imam, as right-wingers in the U.S. suggested. Nor was it only for deterrence and the survival of the Islamic government, as some realists argued.

The nuclear program was carefully designed to do multiple things for multiple audiences and constituencies, both at home and abroad. It aimed to establish Iran as a successful model for the “awakened” Islamic nations and the larger world; to end the internal deadlock that had arisen since the Green Movement and allow Khamenei to demonstrate to his people that he was a legitimate leader; to disprove the secular/intellectual argument that under the Islamic Republic, religion had become obese and that Islamic knowledge should not be seen as Wal-Mart-like storehouse that held all the tools that human beings could ever need; to stave off international threats; and to bring the U.S. to the table as an equal power (not partner) and cut a deal, while being able to leave the negotiating table as anti-American as ever.

Thus, the nuclear issue was the pinnacle of the Islamic state’s quest for ideological redemption. It allowed Iran to sit confidently at the same table as the major world powers for years and then walk away each time and say “not interested.” The Iranian government was not just using the P5+1 talks to buy time, as many in the West
suggested. These talks were important achievements in and of themselves. They projected Iran’s soft power and ensured that the country remained in the global headlines. A bad name was better than no name. The more threats that came from Western capitals against Iran, the more the Islamic Republic was able to demonstrate its power by showing it can frighten its foes.

Thirty years earlier, Supreme Leader Khamenei’s predecessor, Ayatollah Khomeini attempted to create a “perfect man” on earth based on his utopian theory of Velayat-e Faqih. The outcome, however, was different from what he and his followers had expected. Stoning adulterers, amputating the hands of thieves, and imposing dress codes did not resolve social and economic problems. The Islamic Republic’s performance on the world stage was equally unsuccessful.

As explained in Chapter One, the leaders of Iran welcomed Saddam Hussein’s all-out invasion of their country in 1980. Despite early victories, the war soon threatened the very existence of the replica of the Prophet’s State that Iran’s leaders claimed to have created. The war forced Iran to acquire weapons from its archenemies, the U.S. and Israel, in order to continue the bloodshed against its coreligionists in Iraq. It brought much despised pragmatism into the lexicon of the Islamic Republic and eventually forced Khomeini to drink from the “poisonous chalice” and agree to end the war.
Khamenei and the IRGC were desperate to repair the country’s ideological image by creating a powerful state and curing Iran-Iraq War syndrome by scoring a major victory on the nuclear issue. Ideological firmness was simply a matter of survival. Khamenei carefully studied the Cold War and concluded that the Eastern block collapsed the moment its leaders deviated from their anti-Western principles and changed their aggressive posture. The 2011 rebellion in Libya was the latest case in point. “With one empty threat, he put his entire nuclear facility on a ship and gave it to the West,” said Ayatollah Khamenei of Colonel Muammar Kaddafi in March 2011, as NATO was busy bombing Libya. Pointing to his unswerving leadership, Khamenei’s conclusion was clear, “Look where our nation is, and where they [the Libyans] are!”  

Similar experiences had different meanings and lessons for different parties. For Khamenei and his IRGC, pragmatism worked better if it is hidden within layers of anti-Western ideology. The emerging talks about changing the political system and eliminating the Expediency Council, the pragmatic institution designed to resolve conflicts among the country’s religious and political bodies, could be part of a bigger plan by Khamenei to de-institutionalize pragmatism and bring “expediency” into his hand alone.

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Power and Ideology were both construed as essential for the survival of the Islamic state. There was a time when Iran relied on its revolutionary ideology to project power. Now it had to rely on power to protect and project its worn-out ideology.
Conclusion: Theoretical Implications and Other Cases

Ideational and material factors are mutually constitutive. They shape, reinforce, and undermine each other. Max Weber refers to the “affinities” and “co-determination” of ideas and material interests. However, in dealing with religion, the recent literature, particularly in international relations, has mainly focused on the shaping influence of ideas and tended to ignore material factors. This is partly due to the lack of two-way communication between historical sociology/comparative politics on the one hand, and international relations on the other. Neither sociology/comparative politics nor international relations theories are equipped to deal singlehandedly with the dynamic and changing relationship between religion and politics. The study of religion is a multi-disciplinary enterprise for which all of these fields and subfields should merge. Recent attempts to import sociological concepts to international relations by constructivists have helped to explain how ideas shape the interests of states. After this “sociological turn” in international relations, there seems to be a need for a marriage between realism and rational choice institutionalism to better explain how material factors influence ideas. The osmosis between the two fields can shed new light on the relationship between religion and politics.

International relations studies of religion, particularly Islam, often approach their cases

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from a security perspective and search for potential links between adherents of a specific religion and conflict.\footnote{See Sultan Tepe and Betul Demirkaya, “(Not) Getting Religion: Has Political Science Lost Sight of Islam?,” in Politics and Religion (2011), 4 : pp 203-228; and Wald Kenneth D., and Clyde Wilcox. 2006. “Getting Religion: Has Political Science Rediscovered the Faith Factor?” American Political Science Review 100:523–529.} Here, religion is a crucial factor (an independent variable) that can help shape the worldviews of state and non-state actors. Many comparativists, on the other hand, study religion as a dependent variable that may or may not moderate depending on certain institutional contingencies as well as the strategic calculations of elites. They often ignore the external factors that may discredit certain ideas and fundamentally transform religious narratives.

This dissertation examined religion as a dependent variable that is susceptible to both factional politics and international relations. It offered a two-level analysis to revisit the religious and political narratives of Iran’s political factions for more than three decades. It relied on original sources and archival materials (many of which have never been translated into English) to trace the development of political Islam in parallel with the vicissitudes of the state and factional interests. Using a realist framework and expanding on Peter Gourevitch’s “Second Image Reversed” argument, it established a link between a state’s position in the international system and its official religious narrative: Anarchy is both secularizing and de-secularizing. A weak state may shelve certain aspects of its ideological foreign policy and then adjust and institutionalize its official religious narrative to bless its pragmatism. Statist principles take precedence over religious imperatives. However, if the state perceives itself as strong, it may return to its
core ideology, weaken its pragmatic institutions, and develop religious narratives corresponding to its rising position. The discursive consequences of these critical junctures (i.e. war and other major foreign policy related events) become part of the domestic mechanism, which has its own similar logic.

If weakness increases a state’s proclivity for pragmatism, it may tilt a faction towards democracy. Religious parties tend to become “moderate” if they see themselves in a weak position in the electoral process. They can also shift towards more authoritarian readings of religion according to the degree of their control over power centers. On each level, religion provides the necessary latitudes for political action.

Thus, this dissertation contended that moderation is not an “unplanned, unintended, and unwanted by-product” of strategic calculations by religious actors. In other words, political change does not precede religious change, as many rational choice theorists argue. Rather than accidental democrats, religious parties can be intentional moderates out of self-interest in order to open the political process. These parties, if they dominate the establishment, can also rely on more authoritarian readings of religion in order to limit electoral opportunities for others. Thus, factional politics can pave the way for both moderate and radical politics, depending on the political configuration and context. In the end, it is institutional political interests influence religious doctrines, not the other way around.
Chapter Two demonstrated that after an ideological state that challenges the international system faces existential threats it will move towards pragmatism to ensure its survival. This will have key institutional and as well as ideological implications for the state. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 established a utopian theory of governance, *Velayat-e Faqih*, whose goal was implementing Islamic Law (*shari’a*) by the means of the state. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini revolutionized Shi’a theology by arguing that Islam was a comprehensive religion whose laws covered all aspects of the human “before the embryo is formed until after he is placed in the tomb.” Islam was the answer to social, economic, and political problems. Khomeini added that Islam was essentially a political religion and that Muslims must follow in the footsteps of their Prophet and establish an Islamic state whose mission was to implement the divine law. To be sure, only a top jurist who understands Islamic Law could run this form of government.

However, in the course of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the Islamic state found itself breaching its ideological imperatives to simply survive. For example, during the Iran-Contra Affair (1984-1986), it acquired weapons from Israel and the U.S. in order to continue its fight against its co-religionists in Iraq. These incidents ultimately forced the founding father of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, to “upgrade” his theory of *Velayat-e Faqih* and reverse the means and end. He labeled protecting the Islamic state a vital religious duty and announced that the survival of the Islamic state was more important than religious obligations. In other words, the state was more important than *shari’a*. He also institutionalized his pragmatism in the constitution and various bodies.
such as the Expediency Council. The weakness of the state in the international system not only changed its behavior but also fundamentally changed its ideology.

In Chapter Three, I argued that Ayatollah Khomeini’s pragmatism was used by his successors selectively according to their interests. The conservative Right, which had originally expressed reservations about Khomeini’s new version of *Velayat-e Faqih*, found it useful once it dominated the political scene. It pursued a realist foreign policy and borrowed heavily from international financial institutions to rebuild the war-torn country. It was no longer a sin to take out loans from the infidels as long as it strengthened the Islamic state. However, the Right followed an increasingly authoritarian domestic politics.

The radical Left, on the other hand, found itself marginalized. In response, the radical Left took Khomeini’s pragmatic view of *Velayat-e Faqih*, baptized it in democratic literature, and reinvented itself as reformists. The former students who had occupied the U.S. Embassy and other radical elements of this faction were now advocating for an Islamic democracy (*mardom salari-e dini*). Now that they were in a weak position, they needed to develop an ideological platform that would help them return to the political process. They had to be Islamic enough so the establishment could not easily remove them from the scene and yet democratic enough to open the political process and get back onto the stage. The result was a highly nuanced pluralistic and democratic view of Islam that emerged in various religious and intellectual institutions and became the
backbone of the reformists in the landslide election of 1997 and later the Green Movement in 2009. This “moderation” was adopted and promoted by an unlikely faction, the Left, which had structured itself around anti-imperialism and anti-Westernization in the 1980’s when it was in power. They eventually replaced their political Islam with civil Islam.

The Right, whose control over the appointed institutions was now shaky after losing the elected bodies, shifted to the far right. This faction, which was generally viewed as more moderate in the early years of the Islamic Revolution, developed religious interpretations that questioned the compatibility of Islam and democracy. This camp was as much in debt to religious texts as to non-democratic Western theories, such as those of Heidegger. In this climate, the neo-conservative faction that eventually removed the reformists from the polity was born. To the neo-conservatives, *Velayat-e Faqih* protected the society against the nefarious West. Unlike the reformists, who argued that separating state from the mosque (not religion from politics) was not only desirable but necessary for Islam to survive and flourish in the modern world, the neo-conservatives claimed that secularism was neither universal nor compatible with Islam. They accused the reformists of aspiring to deprive Islam of its divine values and of limiting religion’s role in the name of human rights and democracy. At the same time that they continued to pursue a more secular approach in their economic and foreign policies, in the domestic political arena the neo-conservatives employed a “hyper-traditional” and ultra-conservative interpretation of religion.
The fruit of this rivalry was the confrontation of two public religions: political Islam vs. civil Islam. The political moderation and radicalization of these two factions were preceded, not followed, by their theological transformation. Chapter Three emphasized the importance of taking into account this ideational step, which some social scientists tend to bypass and consider a poor predictor of political action. In their search for power, Islamic parties require theological latitudes to utilize political opportunities. Depending on either the Islamic or secular nature of their rivals, they seek to capitalize on the “norms” of the political establishment and shape them according to their interests. It is at this stage that ideas matter. Intellectual and jurisprudential circles and debates can therefore be crucial to providing the necessary repertoire for religious parties. Although religious parties cannot control the scope and consequences of their ideological trajectory, they consciously become friend or foe of democracy to the extent that democracy is in line with their interests. Chapter Three concluded that institutional and factional interests helped create both democratic/secular as well as authoritarian interpretations of Islam.

Chapter Four followed this war of narratives into the battleground of the media. In the absence of free political parties in Iran, the media played an essential role for leading actors. Competing factions brought their views of religion into the public sphere to articulate their political implications. Each tied its interpretation of Islam to the strength, independence, and prosperity of the state and accused the other of undermining the
foundation of the Islamic Revolution and Khomeini’s *Velayat-e Faqih*. In 2000, when the reformists faced a massive crackdown by the establishment, they used the media as an instrument to challenge the conservatives and to shore up more popular support. Thus, they intensified their discursive battle through the instrumental use of one of the few critical tools that the weak faction had at its disposal to compete with those who controlled the appointed state institutions. The advent of the new media later added an important dimension to this interreligious confrontation, making the battle even more direct and transparent.

In the post-9/11 environment in which the Bush Administration tied the authoritarian nature of some regimes to its national security, the reformist media emphasized external threats in their coverage and warned that the lack of democracy in Iran would provide an excuse for American adventurism. It was another tactical move connected to their declining position in the internal political structure. By providing constant coverage of external threats, the reformists intended to convince the conservatives to open the political process. They claimed that only “Islamic democracy” would bring unity at home and security abroad. The conservatives, on the other hand, argued that 9/11 was a project carried out by the U.S. and Israel to justify a war against Islam. They conservatives also downplayed the American threat by portraying the U.S. as a paper tiger whose inevitable fall would bring about the end of Western civilization. The challenges that the U.S. troops soon faced in two wars in Iraq and in Afghanistan eventually strengthened the conservatives’ narrative and their ultra-right doctrine.
The Iranian presidential election June 2009 brought the instrumental use of the media by political factions to a whole new level. Satellite TV channels and the Internet now accompanied the newspapers that had played a key role during the 1997 election. The BBC Persian Service, VOA Persian News Network, and many other satellite channels beamed programs critical of the government to millions of Iranian viewers who could now illegally watch news and analysis that the state-controlled TV would not and the reformist press could not broadcast. The new media, especially Facebook, brought video clips, audio files, newspaper articles, and blog pieces together in one easily accessible location. Millions of Iranians inside and outside the country found a single forum to share and converse about nearly everything. The conservatives viewed the media as “more dangerous than the atomic bomb” and as part of the Western cultural blitz. They used brute force against journalists and bloggers, blocked threatening websites, and jammed critical satellite channels. The establishment managed to contain the growing post-election discontent and remain intact. Nevertheless, the opposition groups were able to use the media to inflict a major blow to the establishment’s interpretation of Velayat-e Faqih. However, the establishment was also able to make clever use of the media to support their cause. The media intensely publicized the ideological contradictions and weaknesses that existed in each faction; whether it was the conservative’s lack of respect for democracy and individual rights or some reformists figures’ disregard for certain Shi’a beliefs.
Chapter Five returned to the international level by process-tracing the official reading of *Velayat-e Faqih*’s new ideological turn. The return of religious and political narratives reminiscent of the early revolutionary years coincided with an era in which the Islamic state perceived itself as a rising power in the region. Iran’s proxies in Lebanon (Hezbollah) and the Palestinian Territories (Hamas) scored major victories against Israel in 2006 and 2009 respectively. The U.S. Army faced serious challenges in Iraq and Afghanistan and sought cooperation from the Iranians. Despite international pressures, Iran’s nuclear program continued to advance while oil prices skyrocketed. In this climate, Iran’s security concerns significantly ebbed and its revolutionary ideology, which had taken a backseat for two decades, gradually returned. The confident establishment moved to deinstitutionalize the pragmatism that had emerged in the aftermath of the bitter experiences of the Iran-Iraq War. The Expediency Council was undermined, while the IRGC, the Guardian Council and last but not least, the Office of the Supreme Leader, assumed even more critical influence. With the state’s rising power and confidence against its external enemies, both the institution of *Velayat-e Faqih*, as well as the person in charge of it, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, claimed unprecedented holiness. Khamenei issued a *fatwa* claiming that commitment to his Guardianship is tantamount with commitment to Islam and his authority would “take precedence and prevail over the will of the masses if they are in contradiction.” Thus, obeying his order was compulsory to all people, even top jurists.
The establishment launched a second cultural revolution against the West, including a new attempt to Islamicize Iranian universities. The Minister of Science and Higher Education announced that twelve majors in the humanities and social sciences (i.e. political science, law, sociology) needed to be revised since they were based on secularism and against Islamic principles. Opposition figures were subjected to Soviet-style show trials and forced to denounce Western social scientists such as Karl Popper and Jurgen Habermas. At the same time, the Ministry of Education began a new collaboration with right-wing theological seminaries and the Basiji militias to reintroduce and protect the Islamic ideologies in school.

As the ruling faction was going through an unprecedented legitimacy crisis in the aftermath of the Green Movement, it strove to capitalize on its success on the international stage to salvage its ideology. In particular it looked to the nuclear program as a remedy for its bankrupt notion of *Velayat-e Faqih* and the broader concept of political Islam. Three decades after the Islamic Revolution, which was based on a utopian ideology, Iranian leaders were in search of hard power to prove to their own people as well as the world that despite massive social, political, and economic problems, their country was a major power on the world stage. They wanted to claim that their success was thanks to *Velayat-e Faqih* and political Islam. If in the past Iran relied on its ideology to project power, it now had to rely on hard power to defend and project its bankrupt ideology.
The two international and domestic levels of independent variables (state weakness and factional weakness) do not necessarily work simultaneously. Depending on both the international environment and as the domestic context, they can emerge independently and consecutively. External factors were more pronounced during the Iran-Iraq War and later again in the post-911 environment. It was after the end of the Iran-Iraq War that the rivalries between Khomeini’s successors gave birth to civil (“moral”) Islam. It was in the aftermath of the U.S. adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan that an ultra-conservative reading of Islam emerged.

There is also a link between these two levels themselves. Like other political groups, religious parties claim that only their approach will empower the state in the international system. Ayatollah Khamenei believed that his anti-Western ideology provided Iran with a powerful edge against its adversaries. The opposition, on the other hand, claimed that their reformist Islam would reduce the international pressure against Iran and bring prosperity to the country. Each side was willing to use external threats as leverage to advance its own domestic position. Conversely, factional rivalries can cripple the state’s foreign policy. In the process of articulating its nuclear policy, the establishment often found itself constrained not just by the reformists’ criticisms, but also by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his circle, who would like to cut a deal with the West. As the establishment gradually marginalized President Ahmadinejad, he attempted to expand his popularity among the youth and thus consolidate his domestic position.
Political actors seek a position that serves both factional as well as state interests. But if there is a conflict between state interests and factional interests, it appears that factions are inclined to pursue their own interests, sometimes even at the expense of the state’s interests, simply to ensure their own survival. Iran’s post-revolutionary history is filled with policies that weakened the state while empowering the ruling group. The Hostage Crisis is a case in point. While it isolated the newly born Islamic Republic, it allowed the Islamists to purge the liberals and their other rivals from the scene. Iran’s current nuclear policy is another example. While the international sanctions have undermined the state’s economy, they have empowered Ayatollah Khamenei, the IRGC, and other appointed institutions that benefit from the country’s isolation.

However, political actors are aware of the detrimental impact of failure on the international stage on their domestic positions. Therefore, they strive to strike a balance between state interests and factional interests. Religion is often used to consolidate this delicate balance. Khamenei’s nuclear fatwa, which declared the production and use of nuclear weapons forbidden in Islam, is an example. The ceremonious announcements of this policy, often made at the time when the Islamic state faced serious challenges, contained two messages for two separate audiences. It set the stage for negotiations and a possible compromise internationally, while at the same time preempting Khamenei’s domestic rivals from accusing him of weakness. The fatwa projected both consistency and strength, while opening the backdoor for the possibility of reducing international
pressure on Iran to a more manageable level.

The media adds a new dimension to these already complex dynamics. It deepens and exposes the ideational divisions between and within political factions. Actors have yet to fully understand both the efficacious and detrimental effects of the media, particularly the new media on their political and religious platforms. The media brings the contradictions and weaknesses that existed within each camp onto the public square. It imposes further restrictions on articulating platforms and policies that may seem in violations of either religious or democratic principles. Iranian reformists often found themselves in the position of defending their “true” religious nature, while the conservatives had to prove why the Absolute Guardianship of the Jurist was not in contradiction with democracy and the people’s right to vote. The net result was that both factions were forced to take public positions that appeared to be closer to each other than they were in reality.

**Other Cases**

What does this all mean for other Islamic countries and groups? How does this theory apply to Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP), and Tunisian’s Renaissance Party (Ennahda)? Let us look at Turkey.

In many respects, the political environment in Turkey stands in sharp contrast to that of Iran. While Iran’s political system is based on the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih*, in Turkey...
a strictly secular establishment explicitly bans the “irresponsible” use of Islam. Whereas Iran’s IRGC has a mandate to protect the Revolution and its Islamic character, the Turkish military’s mission is to preserve the Republic and its secular nature. While shari’a is the source of law in Iran, the Turkish legal system is “purified” from religion. Yet, these two contrasting environments have produced two strikingly similar opposition movements: Muslim reformers. Iran’s reformists needed to adopt an approach that was religious enough so they could survive the sweeping power of Velayat-e Faqih, and at the same time democratic enough so they could challenge the status quo through elections. In Turkey, the Muslim reformists had to be secular enough in order to enter politics without risking removal by the army, and at the same time religious enough to remain loyal to their beliefs and constituencies. In each case, the opposition walked a fine line and struck a delicate balance with regard to the role of religion in politics in order to open the political process. The Iranian opposition has exercised restraint when it came to secular ideas, while their Turkish counterpart has had to keep its Islamic agenda on a relatively short leash. In Iran, the radicals moderated despite government repression, while in Turkey the Islamists moderated partly in response to state repression. The former moderated after exclusion, while the latter moderated before inclusion. In Iran, the opposition needed a powerful theological base to challenge the theocracy, hence theorizing what they call “moral Islam” as opposed to political Islam. The AKP too shifted from political Islam to what it branded as “social Islam” in order to assure Turkey’s secular institutions that it did not intend to change
the rules of the game if it gained power. It redefined secularism in terms of a lack of state interference in religious practice and thus promoted freedom of religion, instead of freedom from religion, which was the establishment’s definition of secularism. How did this happen?

The Justice and Development Party ascended to power in 2002 following decades of interventions against Islamists by the Turkish military. Unlike previous Islamic parties that opposed a secular state and were banned or removed from the political scene, the AKP invented itself as a conservative party and supported the secular Republic. Compared to the Islamist Welfare (Refah) Party, which denounced all reforms that had taken place since the Ottoman’s Tanzimat and positioned itself against integration with the EU, the AKP shifted its priorities to economic growth and EU membership and took advantage of the liberal environment. As many scholars argue, military repression did not radicalize the Islamists, but instead marginalized their more uncompromising factions, such as the Felicity (Saadet) Party. Electoral opportunities reinforced the Islamists’ moderation. The correlation between repression/reward on the one hand, and moderation on the other, is not strong. State repression and political inclusion existed in Turkey decades before the Islamists moderated. Moreover, moderation is often used as a term to describe a change in elite behavior to work within the framework of the

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404 The balance between Islam and secularism is essential in that it could also help divide the ruling party and bring more moderates to its side. Aware of this tactic, the ruling party often encouraged and framed the other side as extremists with a subversive agenda so that the ruling party could strengthen its unity and possibly divide the opposition.

system. But as it was mentioned earlier, here moderation has been used in an ideological sense as a move towards secular politics. As Gunes Murat Tezcur points out, “The [Turkish] reformists, who generally belonged to a generation that reached maturity in the 1970’s and 1980’s, collectively decided to adopt more moderate positions that justify a greater range of political action as a result of debates and discussions. Their strategic interests coincide with their ideological preferences, which had becoming more moderate since the early 1990’s.” In other words, moderation was not simply an unintentional byproduct of behavioral modification in Turkey, as some rational choice theorists would argue. As in Iran, it followed years of “self-critical voices in Islamic circles.” Thinkers such as Ali Bulac created the intellectual engine of the AKP. However, the nature of these debates in Turkey have differed from Iran’s because the AKP was positioning itself against a highly secular establishment. Therefore, its shift from political Islam to social Islam had a different trajectory. The Turkish Islamist intellectuals made a case that in fact it was the Muslim reformists who could materialize the true Republic that Ataturk had envisioned (like Iranian reformists who argue that they are the real followers of Khomeini).

However, what distinguishes the Turkish experience from the Iranian case is, among other things, the hierarchical power structure in the AKP. Recep Tayyip Erdogan,
unlike Mohammad Khatami, managed to assume full control over his party and reach a *modus vivendi* with the state institutions. Khatami, on the other hand, was undermined by various hawkish and conservative individuals and factions in his camp who made any possible deal with the establishment even more remote. International factors also contributed to the undermining of and division within Turkey’s secular establishment and thus were also critical to the AKP’s success. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, when the West was looking for a democratic model in the Islamic world, the Turkish army faced tremendous international pressure against any intervention in the electoral process.\(^{409}\) On the other hand, the Iranian reformists received a major blow after President Bush branded Iran a member of the Axis of Evil and promoted a policy of regime change in 2002. This further fed into the conservatives’ paranoia that the reformists’ moves towards the West only increased to vulnerability of the establishment.

As the AKP consolidates its position by amending the Turkish constitution, restructuring the judiciary, and reshuffling the army, its view of political Islam can change. Once it does not see a major threat from the secular establishment, once it becomes the establishment, there could be a move towards implementing some aspects of *shari‘a* law. Recent attempts to impose restrictions on the consumption of alcohol are

a case in point.\textsuperscript{410} On the international level, the stronger the state sees itself, the more likely to pursue an “Islamic” foreign policy. Turkey’s new approach of “looking to the East,” and its support of the Palestinians and aggressive tone towards Israel could signal this tendency. Turkey’s foreign policy success could enhance its domestic ideological bent. However, the various challenges the AKP faces internationally, as well as internally, have limited this ideological maneuver for now.

Now let us examine another case that embarked on the opposite ideational journey. The Islamic Liberation Front (FIS) is similar to the case of Iran’s conservatives in that both moved away from moderation towards less tolerance. However, their shifts occurred under different circumstances. The FIS was an opposition party challenging the secular establishment, whereas the Iranian conservatives \textit{were} the establishment being challenged by what it believed to be a secular opposition. In Iran, the ultra-right emerged with the help of the IRGC and other key institutions after the defeat of the Right in the 1997 election by the reformists. The FIS, on the other hand, was dominated by radical factions after its victory over the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) and the ensuing army intervention. In the course of the electoral process, the FLN became more confident and thus radical. Its ideologically rigid factions took control and denounced democracy as a heresy, made compromise less likely, and paved the way for civil war.

The FIS was born after the massive protests in 1988 against the Algerian government’s policies, high prices, and unemployment. In a relatively open environment where some political parties were allowed to form, the FIS tapped into people’s grievances and immediately became popular. In a landslide victory in the 1989 local elections, its candidates won 55 percent of the mayoral and council seats. The ruling FLN reacted by changing the electoral law in 1991 to give disproportionate power to the rural areas, where the FIS was weak. As the establishment was moving to curb the Islamists, the latter that was confident of its popularity and became more hawkish and critical of the secular state. The first round of the National Assembly elections in 1991, in which the FIS won 188 seats of the total 231 seats, deepened the gap between the ruling and opposition parties. The FIS now had the 75 percent of assembly seats necessary to change to constitution to accord with Islamic law, the very outcome that the army and other state institutions feared. The army stepped in, postponed the elections indefinitely, and arrested the FIS leadership. The FIS denounced the nation-state and adopted Seyyed Qutb’s notion of al-takfir, whose strict interpretation was later put into practice by its armed branch, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), to target its enemies during the bloody civil war. As the Islamists were put down and their popularity waned during the civil war, attempts were made by more moderate factions to compromise with the army.

Unlike the Turkish case, the international environment was conducive to the strengthening the secular regime. Many Western countries were skeptical of the FIS’s
“hidden agenda” and afraid of a “second Iran.” The FIS’s support for Saddam Hussein in the first Gulf War certainly did not reduce this fear. The international environment further empowered the establishment. The Algerian army took advantage of these domestic and international factors and removed the Islamists.

Islam: The Solution that Wasn’t

In the 1960’s and 1970’s, the slogan “Islam is the solution” began to gain wide currency. Islamists blamed secular ideas for “what went wrong” in the Muslim world. They claimed that Islam provides an answer for every human need from the cradle to the grave. Its divine shari’a is not for the other world, but precisely tailored to meet all worldly political, economic, social, and moral needs. Islam is the complete religion. The Prophet Mohammad was the Seal of all Prophets because he perfected the messages of his predecessors. He did not simply bring humanity shari’a law and then leave us on our own. He created a government, became a statesman, and executed the divine law. For a over a thousand years, Islamic civilization expanded and experienced a golden era militarily, scientifically, culturally, economically, and politically simply by following the Prophet’s path. Therefore, it was now incumbent upon Muslims to eschew secular western models, since their religion has it all and even more. Many on the far right of the Western political spectrum echoed this view of Islam as an all-encompassing way of life and government. These figures furthered argued that Islam is “essentially” a political and violent religion since its Prophet himself was a statesman who cut off

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hands and killed the enemies of his religion. Therefore, Islam is a cruel religion, although Muslims can be peaceful people.

Commentators, pundits, and even many scholars often forget that that view of Islam was not popular until recently. Indeed it was after the failure of constitutionalism, nationalism, and socialism in the Middle East and North Africa that many began to think maybe it was time to “return” to their religious roots. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many clerics joined lay intellectuals, politicians, and others in an endeavor to heal the pain of their societies. Influenced by the success of the West as well as ideals of the French Revolution, constitutional movements emerged throughout the Ottoman Empire and neighboring Iran. Although these ventures had different degrees of success, in the end they failed to empower the people and liberate their societies from the domination of colonial powers. The failure of constitutionalism paved the way for nationalism and socialism, both of which contained both Western elements with anti-Western rhetoric. Again, many intellectuals as well as clerics joined these movements, which once more failed due to a lack of strong institutions and foreign intervention. The US-British sponsored 1953 coup in Iran and the 1967 Arab-Israeli War were the final straws that put an end to nationalism in much of the Islamic world.

It was in this climate that many even hardcore leftists began to look at Islam as a weapon against the “evil” West that was now dominating them not just their economics and politics, but also their culture and very identity. The increasing appeal for religion, however, had a strong revolutionary component. They needed an Islam that could be
used as a sword against other political ideologies. As a result, an Islamic ideology with a leftist Marxist vocabulary emerged. Muslim intellectuals in the 1960’s and 1970’s constructed an Islamic ideology highly influenced by popular Western ideologies such as Marxism and Existentialism. These Islamic movements gradually surpassed all other ideologies in popularity and posed most serious challenges to the Western-backed leadership of many Muslim countries.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 was the most successful of these movements. Grand Ayatollah Khomeini arrived in Tehran after thirteen years of exile to implement his theory of *Velayat-e Faqih*, which he had first articulated in his book *The Islamic Government* a decade earlier. However, his naïve view of governance would soon change. Political realities forced Khomeini to reverse his framework and put the survival of the state above the implementation of *shari’a* law. Those who succeeded Khomeini effectively and selectively pursued his secular legacy to further entrench both the Islamic state as well as their own faction. Nonetheless, the Islamic solution failed to create the just and prosperous society that Iranians had struggled to obtain for over a century. Once the Islamic Republic was forced to make major concessions in its foreign policy, many began to wonder about the possible meanings and implications for their religious ideology. If the interests of the Islamic state were more important than its ideological goals, then how far off the table could those goals potentially be pushed? This in turn led many intellectuals as well as marginalized political groups in Iran to question the immutability of the dominant ideology. Pushing for a “post-religious” Iran,
many intellectuals asserted that Islam’s completeness did not mean comprehensiveness. Islam is not and never claimed to be a mega store filled with ready-made commodities to satisfy every human need. Religion has become obese. It has to be slimmed down and freed from ideology and jurisprudential dogmatism.

Now, as the Islamists are coming to the center stage in the Middle East, it is important to note that their religious “agenda” is not set in stone. They may enter with a particular ideology, but the realities on the ground can very well transform their religious doctrines. The international system will test those ideologies while at the same time the internal political processes will further shape and prepare them for action. Depending on the nature and strength of the establishment, the Islamists will develop and frame their religious and political narratives. Moreover, Islamic factions can split once they dominate the scene. New factions are born with new perspectives on the relationship between religion and politics.

Ideas matter, not “all the way down,” as some constructivists say, but all along. They are salient, and yet transformable. As they empower (not just influence) actors, they are shaped by contingencies and critical junctures. Their intentional use by actors has unintended consequences that should be addressed and analyzed at the intersection of international relations and comparative politics.
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- Eqbal
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- Hayat-e No
- Hurriyet
- Ilna News
- Javan,
- Jomhuri Eslami
- Kayhan
• Khorasan
• Mehr News Agency
• New York Times
• Rah-e No
• Radio Farda,
• Resalat
• Sharq
• Towse’a
• Vatan Emrooz
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