

CHAPTER 6

The Crucible of Radical Islam: Iran's Leaders and Strategic Culture

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Introduction

U.S.-Iran relations have been strained ever since the Islamic Revolution. Those relations have witnessed open but limited conflict, as in the hostage crisis in 1979 and the naval clashes in the Persian Gulf in the late-1980s. The 1990s were largely characterized by Washington's efforts, through sanctions and other measures, to contain Iran (and neighboring Iraq). The election of reformist president Mohammad Khatami in 1997 raised hopes of a possible relaxation of U.S.-Iran tensions. Those hopes appear dashed for now with President Bush's recent declarations that Iran is part of an "axis of evil" and incapable of reform.

Against this backdrop of enduring and growing tensions, this analysis provides an assessment of Iran's current leadership. First, it is important to begin with a description of Iran's power structure and the underlying strategic culture. Second, this analysis profiles Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamene'i, and the national security policymaking structure over which he presides. Finally, we will look at Khamene'i's strongly held views on the United States and their impact on future U.S.-Iranian relations.

The Structure of Power in Contemporary Iran

Iran's system of governance is complex and does not readily lend itself to simple description. This complexity stems from multiple and competing centers of power located in both the formal and informal

structure of governance. Shi'a doctrine infuses both of these power structures, further complicating understanding by non-Muslim observers.²

The central premise of Iran's post-revolutionary power structure lies in the concept of *velayat-e faqih*. This concept combines religious and state political authority in the person of the leading Shi'i jurist, originally Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The concept of *velayat-e faqih* was enshrined in Article 110 of the 1979 constitution and thus forms the legal basis of rule in contemporary Iran.

In essence, the *faqih* is the supreme leader of the nation, appointed for life. As originally conceived, the *faqih* is the absolute authority on all matters of religion and state. He has the power to mobilize the armed forces and declare war and peace. He also has the power over key appointments in the formal government structure, such as the head of the regular military (the *Artesh*), the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC or *Pasdaran*), and the law enforcement forces. Upon his death in 1989, Khomeini was succeeded as *faqih* by Ayatollah al-Udhma Sayyid Khamene'i. While the transfer of power went relatively smoothly, it was not without controversy, which endures to this day.

Under the supreme leader, multiple and competing centers of power include the president, currently Mohammad Khatami; parliament (*Majlis*); and the judiciary. This separation of powers is in some cases analogous to western models. For example, the president and his ministers can be removed by a two-thirds majority vote of no-confidence by the Parliament. In other cases, the Iranian system breaks with that model. In particular, while the judiciary presides over civil, criminal, and clerical courts, it does not have constitutional review powers. Those powers are found elsewhere in the Iranian system, namely, the Council of Guardians.

The Council of Guardians reviews legislation passed by the parliament and rescinds those measures deemed "un-Islamic." The Council is comprised of 6 clerics appointed by the Supreme Leader and 6 lay jurists appointed by the Parliament on the advice of the head of the judiciary, who, it turns out, is appointed by the Supreme Leader. The Council of Guardians is empowered to interpret the constitution and a ruling by three-fourths of its members has the same weight as the constitution itself. Notably, the Council also decides if parliamentary and presidential aspirants are sufficiently Islamic and loyal to the regime to

stand for election. This prerogative effectively limits the exercise of democracy in contemporary Iran.

Inherent in the relationship between the *Majlis* and the Council of Guardians is the potential for legislative gridlock. To counter this, yet another constitutional assembly was created as final arbiter, the Expediency Council. In addition to its power to resolve disputes between the Parliament and the Council of Guardians, the Expediency Council also has the authority to pass its own “emergency” laws. Such laws passed by the Expediency Council cannot be repealed by the *Majlis* or Council of Guardians.

The Expediency Council also provides something of a check on the Supreme Leader, forcing him to consult with the Council in the (rare) event that the Leader cannot resolve a state problem through normal means. Permanent members of the Expediency Council include the heads of the three branches of government and clerical members of the Council of Guardians. Other members are appointed to five-year terms by the Supreme Leader. The current Chairman of the Expediency Council is the former president and former speaker of the Parliament, Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani. The secretary of the Expediency Council is former commander of the *Pasdaran*, Mohsen Reza’i.

The final constitutional body is the Assembly of Experts. The Assembly consists of 86 clerics who, after being vetted by the Council of Guardians, are popularly elected to 8-year terms. The purpose of the Assembly is to elect the Supreme Leader from within their own ranks. The Assembly can also remove the Leader if he is unable to carry out his duties or if he is determined to have lost one or more of the qualifications to hold the position. Most members of the Assembly also hold positions in other government or revolutionary institutions.

By design, Iran’s formal government structure is decentralized and power is relatively dispersed. This stands in marked contrast to neighboring regimes. This multitude of government power centers, a number of them unique to Iran, has been created to keep political-ideological factions in a constant state of maneuver and negotiation and thus less likely to mount a coup threat.

Permeating this formal government structure is Iran’s informal power structure, described as the “four rings of power.”³ In the center ring is the core group of politically powerful Shi’a clerics, referred to as the

“patriarchs.” The patriarchs are led by Ayatollah Khamene’i. Religious hierarchy does not necessarily equate to level of influence among the patriarchs, however.

For example, a *hojjatoleslam* (proof of Islam) or mid-level cleric is subordinate to an *ayatollah* (sign of God). Yet, President Khatami, a *hojjatoleslam* is considered to have more influence in Iran than *Ayatollah* ‘Ali Meshkini, the head of the Assembly of Experts. Similarly, *Hojjatoleslam* ‘Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, chairman of the Expediency Council, is considered more influential than President Khatami. Government office likewise is not a fully reliable measure of standing within the patriarchy, as *Hojjatoleslam* ‘Abbas Va’ez-Tabasi, head of the Imam-Reza Foundation, is judged more influential than ‘Ali Meshkini.

By all accounts, the patriarchs of all ranks represent a minority of Shi’a clerics both inside and outside of Iran. For example, there are approximately 28,000 *hojjatoleslam* in Iran, yet only about 2,000 are regime clerics. Similarly, while there are approximately 5,000 *ayatollahs*, only 80 are regime clerics. The rest are apolitical. At the more senior rank of grand *ayatollah*, which number about 20 worldwide, 14 reside in Iran. Of those, all but one, Hosein ‘Ali Montazeri, are opponents of the *velayat-e-faqih* concept, the very foundation of the Islamic Republic.

The second ring of power is populated by the highest ranking governmental functionaries. These individuals are found in all branches of the government at the national and provincial level. The third ring comprises the regime’s power base. It is made up of individuals who control revolutionary institutions, such as the para-statal foundations, the media, and security forces, like the IRGC. This ring is responsible for propagating the clerical regime’s ideology and countering threats against it. The final ring is inhabited by formerly influential individuals and groups. These elements constitute a semi-opposition in that their goal is peaceful reform of the current regime from the inside.

The informal power structure in contemporary Iran is sustained by various shared experiences and family connections. The top leadership is bound not just by their status as Shi’a clergy, but also their direct personal connections with Ayatollah Khomeini and common struggle against the Shah. Educational experiences among the leadership provide additional linkages. For example, the current supreme leader also was a student of Ayatollah Khatami, the late father of the current president. Indeed, the

Khatami and Khamene'i families have been close friends over the years.⁴ Inter-marriage further solidifies this elite. For example, President Khatami's sister-in-law, Zahra Eshrai, is the granddaughter of Ayatollah Khomeini.⁵

Such connections permeate Iran's national security structure, as well. For example, many of the top personnel in the Intelligence Ministry come from a leading theological school in Qom, the *Madrasse-ye Haqqani*.⁶ Similarly, intermarriage among religious families is an important linkage among IRGC commanders. Thus, typical family functions become an informal opportunity for the IRGC leadership to share views with the religious/political elite.⁷

Commonalities among the top leadership cascade down through the power structure in the form of personal patronage networks. Individuals in power instinctively turn to immediate relatives to fill subordinate posts within an organization. In turn, these immediate relatives draw in relatives and friends of their own. While such patronage is by no means unique to Iran, it has been noted that its practice in the Islamic Republic undermines institutions and often puts the functioning of the government structure at its mercy.⁸

All of this is not to suggest the absence of disagreement within Iran's elite. Indeed, there are crucial differences over such issues as the economy, personal freedoms, and relations with the west. Nonetheless, the shared experiences and common background of the clerical leadership help set the boundaries for debate and compromise.

Iran's Strategic Culture

The Islamic Republic did not necessarily begin with a clean slate in 1979. Various historical and cultural influences continue to shape Iranian perceptions and actions, irrespective of the relative novelty of the current clerical regime. Indeed, the emergence of an Iranian theocracy has actually facilitated the inculcation of certain traditional Shi'a traits into the contemporary Iranian state. The culmination of these historical, cultural, religious, and geographic influences is considered to constitute Iran's "strategic personality" or "culture."⁹ They provide yet another dimension to understanding Iranian behavior.

Modern day Iran sits atop a history of Persia that can be traced back nearly 3,000 years. An immense sense of identity and pride stems from this cultural continuity. A less flattering manifestation is Iran's sense of superiority over its neighbors. Against this backdrop, then-president Hashemi Rafsanjani revealed in 1995 a rather strident Iranian attitude toward its Gulf neighbors: "Half of the coast line belongs to Iran, so Iran alone has the same amount of rights and responsibility as all those [other littoral] countries put together . . ." ¹⁰ In more recent years, Iran has taken a more diplomatic tone towards its neighbors to the south, hoping to woo them out of defense relationships with the United States rather than intimidate them. Yet, few could doubt that Iran seeks to live up to its proud history by re-establishing its regional dominance.

Paradoxical to this sense of cultural superiority and manifest destiny is Iran's deep sense of insecurity. That insecurity stems from a series of conquests suffered by Persia over the centuries, which have left Iranians highly suspicious of foreigners. Indeed, these periods of foreign domination appear to have fundamentally shaped Iranian inter-personal and, by extrapolation, international behavior. Living under foreign rule imbued Persian life with a sense of uncertainty. Personal fortunes could rise or fall suddenly depending on how skillfully one anticipated the foreign master's whims. Tools such as artifice, flattery, dissembling, and treachery became standard for survival. Carried to the international arena, the need to outmaneuver greater powers induces Iranian diplomats to attempt to be more resourceful than their western counterparts.

Similarly, to cope with the uncertainty of life under foreign domination, belief in conspiracies was fostered as a way of explaining erstwhile random events. Indeed, the greater the power, the more clever it is assumed to be in secretly manipulating events. Iran's belief that the 1988 shoot-down of the Iranian Airbus by the *U.S.S. Vincennes* was not an accident but rather a deliberate act by Washington designed to coerce Tehran into accepting a ceasefire with Iraq is a modern manifestation of this proclivity for conspiracy theories. It is this mistaken belief in the omnipotence of the United States and its obsession with Iran that poses perhaps the greatest risk of inadvertent conflict between the two.

Specific attributes of Shi'ism, which was adopted by Persia in the sixteenth century, both reinforce and expand certain traits in Iranian strategic culture. For example, to protect the sect from mainstream Sunni

Islam and other early enemies, Shi'ism encouraged its practitioners to conceal their faith if their lives were at stake. This practice of *taqiye* adds a religious and moral justification for dissembling. That it can be practiced collectively by a group of clerics inevitably leads to doubts about the professed intentions of Iran's current leadership.¹¹

Shi'ism also introduces concepts and drives Iranian behavior in ways that are not readily grasped by the west. In particular, the Shi'a attitudes toward war are less goal-oriented than western concepts. As evidenced by Khomeini's conduct of the 8-year war with Iraq, struggle and adversity are to be endured as a sign of commitment to the true faith.

Defeat is not necessarily equated with failure. This emphasis on continuing the struggle against oppression and injustice rather than on achieving "victory" is seen as producing a high tolerance of pain in Iran. The cult of martyrdom inherent in Shi'ism, specifically, the honor accorded those who give their life to defend the faith, may give Iran certain practical military advantages. How committed Iran remains to these concepts of warfare, now that the initial fervor of the revolution has long since passed and the Iranian economy has become more brittle, remains to be seen.

Profile of Ayatollah Khamene'i

At the apex of Iranian power stands Ayatollah al-Udhma Sayyid Khamene'i. He is very much a product of the Islamic Revolution, having held virtually every major government and revolutionary post. While a direct descendent of the Prophet Muhammad, his relatively limited religious credentials place tangible limits on his influence. Perhaps because of these limitations, his main motivation appears to be upholding the legacy of Ayatollah Khomeini rather than making his own mark on Iranian society.

Khamene'i was born on July 15, 1939 in the holy city of Mashhad in northeastern Iran. He was born into a religious family, his father being a *hojjatoleslam* and his grandfather, a prominent cleric who later migrated to the holy city of Najaf in Iraq. Biographies of Khamene'i typically stress that he grew up in poverty. His formal religious education began at age five, with classes on the Koran. In 1958, Khamene'i moved to Qom where

he studied under Ayatollahs Sheikh Hashim Qazwini, Ha'iri, al-Udhma Burujerdi, and Khomeini. In 1964, Khamene'i returned to Mashhad to care for his father.¹²

Khamene'i's political activism was first stirred by Nawwab Safawi in the early 1950s. Safawi advocated reviving Islam and establishing an Islamic government in Iran. Inspired by Safawi, who was later "martyred" by the Shah, Khamene'i participated in the Islamic movement of 1955-56, protesting, for example, against the mayor of Mashhad for failing to close the city's cinemas during the holy months of Muharram and Safar.

Khamene'i's activism in Mashhad caught the attention of Ayatollah Khomeini, who used him to organize the Islamic resistance in the Khurasan province. Between the early 1960s and the 1979 revolution, Khamene'i was arrested by SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, a half-dozen times. Khamene'i is credited with helping to found the *Ulama Mujahidin*, a precursor to Khomeini's Islamic Republican Party. Following Ayatollah Khomeini's exile to Iraq and then Europe, Khamene'i went underground in Iran, where he continued to agitate for an Islamic state. During this time, he spent nearly a year in a safe house with 'Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who also rose to prominence in the Islamic Republic.¹³

Khamene'i's key role in supporting the revolution from Mashhad was rewarded by his appointment to the Ayatollah's Revolution Command Council, which was charged with setting up Iran's forthcoming Islamic government. Khamene'i also helped set up the Ayatollah's reception committee to arrange his triumphant return to Iran, and was appointed head of the information bureau in Khomeini's Office of the Imam. Khamene'i held a quick succession of revolutionary, religious, and government posts, including the following:

- Commander of the IRGC
- Special Envoy to the Sistan and Baluchistan provinces
- Revolution Command Council representative to the National Defense Council
- Deputy Minister of Defense
- Imam's representative to the National Defense Council
- Friday Prayer Imam in Tehran

Khamene'i was also elected to the first Islamic *Majlis* in 1980, representing a Tehran constituency, and was a key figure in the Islamic Republican Party, serving as its Secretary General until it was disbanded.

Khamene'i fell victim to the violence that accompanied the revolution. On June 27, 1981, he was wounded in an assassination attempt. The next day, a bomb blast in Tehran killed the leading members of the Islamic Republican Party. Another bomb in August killed the newly elected President 'Ali Raja'i and Prime Minister Javad Bahonar. This prompted a new presidential election in October, which Khamene'i won.

Khamene'i was re-elected and served as president until Ayatollah Khomeini's death in June 1989. Under the 1979 Constitution, an extraordinary meeting of the Assembly of Experts was convened to select Khomeini's successor. Khamene'i was not generally considered to be in the running to succeed Khomeini.

The path for Khamene'i was cleared by two events, the first being the falling out between Khomeini and his officially chosen successor, Grand Ayatollah 'Ali Montazeri. The second was a decision by Khomeini and the clerical leadership to lower the religious requirements to hold the post of *faqih*.

In essence, an amendment to the Constitution in 1989 dropped the requirement for the *faqih* to be a grand ayatollah and *marja'-e taqlid*, or source of emulation for Shi'i. It was Khomeini's standing as a *marja* that gave authority to his religious pronouncements and edicts, or *fatwas*. Upon Khomeini's death, Khamene'i, then only a *hojjatoleslam*, was promoted to ayatollah, and after meeting for 20 hours, the Assembly of Experts elected Khamene'i *faqih*, reportedly by a vote of 60 out of the 74 members present.¹⁴

While lowering the qualifications to become *velayat-e faqih* helped ensure a smooth transition of power following Khomeini's death, it greatly compromised the legitimacy of his successor. It also offered no quick remedies. For Khamene'i to become a true *marja*, he would have to complete another three decades of religious study and write a major thesis that is recognized by other grand ayatollahs. An attempt by Khamene'i in 1994 to gain the title of grand ayatollah following the death of Grand Ayatollah Mohammad 'Ali Araki failed in the face of opposition from numerous leading Shi'i clerics from within and outside Iran.¹⁵

The limitations imposed on Khamene'i by his weak religious credentials are significant. While he cannot claim to be a source of

emulation to Shi'as in Iran, he has staunchly claimed such a role for Shi'as outside of Iran.¹⁶ Yet, in a key test of this claim, Hezbollah's leaders have not adopted Khamene'i as their source of emulation.¹⁷ This rejection of Khamene'i dilutes Iran's moral and religious influence over Hezbollah, although other connections certainly exist. More importantly, Khamene'i is left open to attack by his religious and political foes within Iran.

A major challenge to Khamene'i's legitimacy was mounted in 1997 by Ayatollah Montazeri, Khomeini's would-be successor. In a sermon to his followers in Qom, Montazeri challenged the intervention of the *faqih* in all aspects of Iranian life, contending that the position was one of mere supervision to ensure conformity with Islamic rules and justice. Montazeri claimed that Khamene'i was unsuited to be *faqih* due to his insufficient religious credentials and therefore lacked the authority to issue a *fatwa*. Montazeri's challenge coincided with similar criticism from another prominent Ayatollah, Ahmad Azari-Qomi.

Conservative allies of Khamene'i rushed to his defense and Khamene'i himself censured Montazeri and Azari-Qomi indirectly, warning that foreign enemies were using "domestic agents" to target the leadership and should be tried for treason. Azari-Qomi was stripped of his membership in the Association of Seminary Theologians of Qom and reportedly put under house arrest until his death in 1999. Conservatives tried to embarrass Montazeri by publishing a 1989 letter from Ayatollah Khomeini to him, which laid out the reasons why Montazeri was not qualified to succeed him. He was also placed under house arrest.¹⁸

Opposition to the legitimacy of Khamene'i did not subside in 1997. Rather, the cause was joined by lay intellectuals and students and has become wrapped up in the broader political debate over individual freedom.¹⁹ By March 2002, the issue was being debated in the Assembly of Experts itself. Thus, for the foreseeable future, Khamene'i will have to labor with this religious Achilles Heel.

Against this backdrop, the carefully managed image that the Office of the Imam portrays of Khamene'i is of a devoted Islamic scholar, constantly reading books on Islamic jurisprudence and meeting with prominent clergymen. He is also portrayed as a pious, frugal man. Interviews granted by those closest to him, including his wife, emphasize time and again the austere nature of his lifestyle.²⁰ These portrayals appear largely defensive. It has been suggested, for example, that by

outdoing Khomeini's public austerity, Khamene'i is attempting to compensate for other inevitable shortcomings compared to his predecessor.²¹ More practically, Khamene'i is also trying to guard against charges that he is raiding the public treasury to feather his nest, a ploy used against him in 1985 when he served as president.²²

Khamene'i is depicted as being in excellent health despite his advancing age. In 1999, he was reported to go mountain climbing on a weekly basis. He is also described as a literary figure and poet. Although the specifics are lacking, Khamene'i apparently has good access to information. His office provides him with a press summary that he supplements with morning and afternoon newspapers. He also is reported to read weekly, monthly, and quarterly journals. He is particularly interested in reading editorials. In the evening, Khamene'i is said to watch television news.²³

Khamene'i's typical work day begins at 8 a.m., following morning prayers. His morning revolves around official visits from civilian and military authorities. These meetings continue until the noon prayers, which he performs in the office. Lunch and rest follow, and he resumes his work at 4 p.m. Afternoon meetings last until maghreb prayers. In the evening, Khamene'i makes regular unannounced visits to the families of martyrs, those who gave their lives on behalf of the regime.²⁴

In some sense, Khamene'i is an "accidental ayatollah." His background provides no indications that he aspired to become Supreme Leader. While he was active in the Khomeini movement, his appointments in various revolutionary bodies, such as the Revolutionary Command Council, appear to be of secondary importance. The assassination, death, or exile of more prominent religious and revolutionary figures appears to have cleared the way for Khamene'i's ascension into the highest levels of Iranian power, first as president and then as *faqih*.

Whatever his aspirations, Khamene'i appears to appreciate the immense burden placed on him as supreme leader. In essence, it is Khamene'i's duty for the remainder of his life to uphold the legacy of Ayatollah Khomeini and preserve the Islamic regime. This burden has forced a modification of Khamene'i's political orientation. Initially, Khamene'i was associated with the moderate wing of the revolutionary establishment.²⁵ Throughout the 1980s, his positions closely mirrored those of the pragmatic Hashemi Rafsanjani.²⁶ However, once elevated to the position of *faqih*, Khamene'i

gravitated towards the conservative camp. This shift stems from the inherent weakness of Khamene'i's position. What Khamene'i lacks in religious qualifications to hold the position of supreme leader, he must make up for in hard-line positions that suit the most fervent supporters of the *veleyat-e faqih* concept, the conservatives.

Over time, Khamene'i has demonstrated more flexibility. In 1992, his public pronouncements facilitated the sacking of then-culture minister Mohammad Khatami for failing to be sufficiently vigilant against the western cultural onslaught. Yet, in response to the mounting crisis between conservatives and reformers in 1998 over the fate of the reformist mayor of Tehran, Gholam Hossein Karbaschi, Khamene'i sided with then-president Khatami. Khamene'i sided with Khatami again the following year, when mass demonstrations posed a serious threat to the regime. Specifically, Khamene'i compelled his own protégé and commander of the *Pasdaran*, General Yahya Safavi, to rescind IRGC threats of a coup d'état if Khatami did not abandon his reform program.²⁷

What had changed in Khamene'i's attitude between 1992 and 1998-1999 was that Khatami had come to represent the vast majority of Iranians who were disenchanted with the failed policies of the conservatives and demanded real change. Khamene'i thus has demonstrated that he is willing to placate this increasingly powerful constituency at the expense of his conservative backers in order to hold the Islamic regime together. Some have speculated that the rise of Khatami's populist front as a major force in contemporary Iranian politics may actually enable Khamene'i to reduce his traditional reliance on the conservative camp.²⁸ Others have questioned whether conservative leaders such as Ayatollahs Ahmad Jannati and 'Ali Meshkini, chairmen of the Council of Guardians and Assembly of Experts, respectively, would allow Khamene'i to steer a more moderate course.²⁹

National Security Decision-making

As with the division of powers at the national level, Ayatollah Khamene'i, as Commander-in-Chief, presides over a complex array of entities and agendas in the national security apparatus. This apparatus comprises the branches of the regular armed forces, or *Artesh*, a parallel force structure in the IRGC, and a large para-military force known as the

Basij. The motivation for these overlapping and competing organizations is to reduce the prospects for a military takeover of the government. Other key national security entities include the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS).

Notably, the president is not part of the military command structure and has no authority over the intelligence services.³⁰ His influence is exercised mainly through the Foreign Ministry, although the Supreme Leader maintains his own emissaries abroad, thus making it difficult for Iran to act in a coordinated fashion or speak with a single voice. By virtue of his power of appointment and other special laws, Ayatollah Khamene'i has ensured that the coercive arms of the government are firmly in the hands of clerical and other loyalists.

The principal forum for national security decision-making is the Supreme Council for National Security (SCNS). Membership in the SCNS includes two representatives of the Supreme Leader, head of the Judiciary, Speaker of the *Majlis*, Chief of the General Staff, and head of the MOIS. The President acts as the SCNS chairman. Decisions of the Council only take effect with the approval of the Supreme Leader.

As with other dimensions of Iranian decision-making, the SCNS is the scene of vigorous debate between conservative and reformist elements. To achieve consensus, lowest common denominator positions tend to be adopted by the Council though they remain subject to constant renegotiation. Even then, there appears to be considerable latitude as to how the Council's decisions are implemented, resulting at times in inconsistent or conflicting Iranian behavior. Informal networks further complicate national security decision-making.³¹

Khamene'i has considerable experience in national security decision-making, dating back to his days as Ayatollah Khomeini's representative to the forerunner of the SCNS, the Supreme Defense Council. Later as President, Khamene'i acted as the day-to-day Commander-in-Chief on behalf of Khomeini throughout most of the war with Iraq. It appears that Khamene'i has upheld this pattern, leaving to the president and his top military commanders day-to-day decision-making on foreign and defense affairs.

Recent major decisions reached by the SCNS provide insights into the risk-taking propensity of Khamene'i. Iran had been wary of the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s. Basic friction between

Shi'a Iran and Taliban Sunni extremism escalated in 1998 after 11 Iranian diplomats and journalists in Afghanistan were killed by Taliban forces. As tensions mounted, the SCNS met in emergency session. Despite mounting support from conservative elements for a war with the Taliban, President Khatami and Expediency Council chair Rafsanjani, with the support of the *Artesh*, advised a diplomatic solution to the crisis. The Supreme Leader sided with Khatami and Rafsanjani.

Rather than risk a war which would jeopardize Iran's Islamic rehabilitation and invite meddling by the United States, Khamene'i opted for a considerable show of force along the border with Afghanistan and diplomatic negotiations brokered by the United Nations to reduce tensions. At the same time, Iran stepped up its support to anti-Taliban forces in northern Iraq.³² Khamene'i adopted a similar course the following year, when Iranian and Turkish forces clashed along their common border. Rather than risk escalating to a potential war with a member of NATO and close ally of the United States, Khamene'i settled for a modest demonstration of force followed by diplomatic efforts to defuse the situation.³³

In other areas, however, Khamene'i has been much more militant. Specifically, Khamene'i continues to publicly promote Palestinian groups that reject the peace process with Israel. He has openly called for Israel's annihilation and has praised Palestinian suicide bombers. He has also supported an oil embargo against Israel and its supporters. Behind the scenes, Khamene'i has sanctioned the training, funding and organization of such rejectionist groups as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command. Such training is under the direction of the IRGC and is provided in Lebanon as well as Iran. Khamene'i's stance toward Israel and the Palestinians reflects both the desire to uphold Khomeini's legacy and extend Khamene'i's religious influence, such as it may be, beyond Iran's borders.

Khamene'i has similarly blessed the brutal repression of regime opponents. In 1997, a German court concluded that the assassination of four Iranian dissidents in Berlin in 1992 was authorized by Khamene'i, then-President Rafsanjani, and other senior government officials.³⁴

Khamene'i and U.S. Relations

Another area where Khamene'i has been consistent rhetorically is his hostility toward the United States. Here, too, Khamene'i can be seen trying to preserve the legacy of Ayatollah Khomeini. Khamene'i has routinely denounced the United States for its arrogance, greed, and contempt for the Iranian nation.³⁵ As noted above, Khamene'i also sees the United States as leading a "cultural onslaught" designed to undermine the Islamic Republic. Thus, Khamene'i has echoed Khomeini's view that Iran has no need for the United States and should keep a safe distance from it. It has been suggested that Khamene'i intentionally uses this anti-Western ideology to keep reformist elements in check.³⁶

President Khatami's desire to initiate a dialogue with the United States, expressed shortly after his inauguration in 1997, has opened an intriguing chapter in U.S.-Iran relations, one that features all the nuances of Iranian politics, as well as its ambiguities, particularly with regard to Khamene'i's intentions. No real progress was made in thawing U.S.-Iran relations by the end of the 1990s. Indeed, in June 2001, the United States publicly linked Iran to the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, which killed 19 American servicemen and injured 372 other Americans. However, the Al Qaeda terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, provided a new stimulus for interacting with the United States. President Khatami quickly expressed Iran's sorrow for the attacks, which he condemned. In contrast, Ayatollah Khamene'i waited a week before publicly commenting, and only condemned the attacks generally, comparing them to other "acts of slaughter," such as Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Sabra and Shatilla, and Bosnia.

Wary that American retaliation for the terrorist attacks might somehow be directed against Iran, Khamene'i is reported to have turned to President Khatami and authorized him to take whatever actions were necessary to spare Iran any harm.³⁷ Evidently, Khatami used this opening to reduce Iran's own support for terrorism, at least temporarily, provide low-level cooperation to the U.S. war in Afghanistan, and resume efforts to put U.S.-Iran relations on a more normal footing.

Specifically, Tehran agreed to a U.S. proposal to rescue any American pilots that might be downed on Iranian territory and consented to allow

food and humanitarian assistance to pass through Iran to northern Afghanistan.³⁸ Additionally, Iran lowered its profile abroad, withdrawing some 700 intelligence and military advisers, including IRGC advisers to Hizballah in Lebanon, a move reportedly sanctioned by the Supreme Leader in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief.³⁹ All the while, Khamene'i continued his verbal assault on the United States, rebuking President Bush by declaring that "we are not with you and we are not with the terrorists either."⁴⁰

By early 2002, a series of events threatened to derail this potential opening in U.S.-Iran relations. Namely, the United States objected to apparent attempts by Iran to destabilize the interim government in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Washington was also concerned that Iran was harboring Al Qaeda operatives who had fled Afghanistan. Finally, the United States was dismayed by the discovery of a large shipment of arms sent from Iran to the Palestinian Authority aboard the freighter *Karine-A*.⁴¹ It was against this backdrop that President George W. Bush labeled Iran part of an "axis of evil" in his January 29, 2002, State of the Union Address.

The impact of the Bush speech in Iran appears to have been two-fold. As to be expected, Iranians expressed unity and their readiness to defend the country against U.S. attack. Some of this rhetoric, particularly on the part of the IRGC, became quite inflammatory. Reportedly, at President Khatami's request, Ayatollah Khamene'i intervened and warned military commanders against interfering in foreign policy matters.⁴² In turn, the potential for tensions to spin out of control led to a redoubling of efforts by Iranian officials to establish a dialogue with the United States.

Khamene'i's role in this matter has remained cloaked in ambiguity. In April 2002, it was reported that he had quietly authorized the SNSC to assess the merits of starting talks with the United States.⁴³ Other reports from Tehran stated that Khamene'i had given Hashemi Rafsanjani, who had previously advocated normalized relations with the United States, the go-ahead on secret contacts with Washington.⁴⁴ On May 21, for the first time in two decades, the *Majlis* debated in closed session the prospect of resuming relations with the United States. The following day, Khamene'i warned that establishing contact and holding talks with America ". . . is both treason and foolishness."⁴⁵ Shortly thereafter, the Judiciary banned Iranian media from reporting on the prospects of talks with the United States. By the end of May 2002, President Khatami, in a

surprising move, urged his reformist allies in the *Majlis* to abandon their efforts to achieve better relations with Washington, citing growing U.S. belligerence toward Iran.⁴⁶

Presumably, Khatami was referring to remarks by National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice the month before that Iran's behavior with respect to terrorism and proliferation put it "squarely in the axis of evil," and that Iran's reformers were not yet capable of changing that behavior. Without naming Iran specifically, Rice added that, "We must recognize that truly evil regimes will never be reformed. And we must recognize that such regimes must be confronted not coddled."⁴⁷ On May 21, the U.S. State Department released its latest annual assessment of global terrorism and identified Iran as "the most active sponsor of terrorism in 2001."⁴⁸

Given the complexity of Iranian politics, and the ambiguous relationship between Khamene'i and Khatami, this episode is open to multiple interpretations. One such explanation, consistent with this chapter's portrayal of Ayatollah Khamene'i and Iran's strategic culture is that Khamene'i and Khatami are in a tacit partnership to break the stalemate in U.S.-Iran relations. The motivations to do so are primarily economic and security in nature. Namely, Iran desperately needs to get more integrated into the global economy to shore up domestic support for Islamic rule.

Iran's fragile state makes it all the more important to avoid the wrath of the U.S. war on terrorism. Thus, according to this theory, Khamene'i is merely utilizing the Shi'a practice of *tarqiyah* to mask his true intentions by steadfastly denouncing the utility of normalized relations with America. The delicate balancing act comes from establishing the groundwork for improved ties without inadvertently stoking conservative and nationalist sentiments. Khamene'i's warning to the IRGC not to inflame U.S.-Iran tensions would be consistent with this theory. One can imagine that as Khatami made progress behind the scenes, i.e., winning some face-saving concessions from Washington, Khamene'i's rhetoric could soften to the point where dialogue with America could be tolerated. That Khatami appears to be the one to ostensibly pull the plug on the initiative suggests that he lost confidence in his ability to manage the normalization process carefully. What is of greater concern is the possibility that a crucial opportunity to avert conflict between Iran and the United States may have been missed.

Looking Ahead

Iran's support for terrorism and pursuit of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons has put the country on a path of confrontation with the United States, now even more so in the wake of September 11th. Whether outright conflict can be avoided in the near-term hinges largely on who the real Ayatollah Khamene'i is. If he is genuinely and philosophically committed to the conservative camp, then little moderation of what U.S. leaders see as objectionable Iranian behavior can be expected. If, on the other hand, Khamene'i is a "closet pragmatist," only compelled to toe the conservative line because of his own insecurity, a tacit partnership with President Khatami to tone down provocative behavior, while maintaining the cleric moral high ground, may help Tehran stay out of harm's way. Information presented here supports both scenarios.

The United States will find Iran to be a formidable adversary should the march to confrontation go unabated. As noted above, competing and overlapping power centers, as well as informal mechanisms, bolster the Islamic Republic against political or military attempts at decapitation. Iran's religious leadership remains in tight control of the military and internal security apparatus. The military's possession of weapons of mass destruction, long-range missiles, and reliance on asymmetric strategies suggests that it can substantially raise the costs of military action against Iran. The Ayatollahs, as demonstrated time and again, can be ruthless in their suppression of meaningful dissent.

This is not to suggest that Iran is an impregnable juggernaut. The rifts in Iranian society are real and seemingly growing. The erstwhile center of gravity of the regime, the concept of *velayat-e faqih*, rests on a shaky foundation in light of Khamene'i's meager religious qualifications. The economy is in a shambles and Iran's unemployed youth, which number in the millions, are increasingly restive and dissatisfied with religious rule. Iran's leaders recognize these vulnerabilities if only for the potential opening they provide the United States to manipulate events in and ultimately undo the Islamic Republic. It is in their recognition of Iran's own vulnerabilities and the potential for enormous losses from a direct conflict with the United States that perhaps holds the greatest hope for encouraging prudent leadership in Tehran.

Notes

1. This chapter does not necessarily reflect the views of Science Applications International Corporation or any of its U.S. Government sponsors.
2. A notable exception in this regard is Wilfried Buchta's *Who Rules Iran?* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2000), upon which this section draws heavily.
3. Buchta, 6-10.
4. Dariush Zahedi, *The Iranian Revolution Then and Now* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 176.
5. Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 244.
6. Buchta, 166.
7. Daniel Byman, Shahram Chubin, Anoushiravan Ehteshami, and Jerrold Green, *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001), 26.
8. Buchta, 6-7.
9. This section draws extensively upon Graham E. Fuller, *The "Center of the Universe,"* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 8-33.
10. Excerpts from Rafsanjani's interview with George A. Nader, editor of *Middle East Insight*, were reproduced in "From Tehran to Waco," *Washington Post*, July 9, 1995, C3.
11. Information in this paragraph was drawn from Nikola B. Schahgaldian, "Iran After Khomeini," *Current History*, February 1990, 62.
12. *A Brief Biography of Ayatollah al-Udhma Sayyid Ali Khamene'i*, Islamic Center, London, <http://www.islam-pure.de/imam/biograph/biogricel.htm>. This document contains autobiographical excerpts from Khamene'i.
13. Ibid. See also, "The Rahbar: 'Ali Khamene'i and the Iranian Culture Wars," *The Estimate*, vol. XII, no. 17, August 25, 2000, <http://www.theestimate.com/public/082500.html>.
14. "The Rahbar."
15. Buchta, 52-55.

16. Ibid., 55.
17. Byman, *et al*, 81-82.
18. David Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 26-32.
19. Ibid., 32.
20. See, for example, "A Day in the Life of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution," *Ettela'at International*, January 6, 1999, 6. Accessed through <http://www.islam-pure.de/imam/others/others1999.htm#06.01.1999>. See also, "Interview with Mrs. Khamene'i, *Mahjubah, The Magazine for Mulsim Women*, Sept. & Oct. 1992, Accessed through <http://www.islam-pure.de/imam/others/others1992.htm#September%201992> and "Mrs. Khamene'i Message on the Great Global Gathering of Women," *Mahjubah*, Sept. 1995. Accessed through <http://www.islam-pure.de/imam/others/others1995.htm#01.09.1995>.
21. Ali M. Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2000).
22. Bahman Baktiari, *Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996), 128.
23. "A Day in the Life."
24. Ibid.
25. Ansari.
26. Zahedi, 177.
27. Ibid., 186-192.
28. Ibid., 192.
29. Buchta, 55.
30. Ibid., 164. Anthony Cordesman, however, speculates that a subcommittee of the SCNS, comprising the President, Supreme Leader, and the head of MOIS likely oversee nearly all intelligence operations. See his book, *Iran's Military Forces in Transition*, 34.
31. Shahram Chubin, *Iran's National Security Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1994), 69-70. See also, Daniel Byman, *et al.*, 21-29.
32. Buchta, 146-148. See also, Daniel Byman, *et al.*, 69-72.

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33. Daniel Byman, et al., 65-69.
34. Ibid., 93-94.
35. See, for example, Menashri, 187-188.
36. Brumberg, 2.
37. Ali Nurizadeh, "Iran Makes Security and Military Preparations to Face a War on Its Eastern Border," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 18, 2001, 4, translated in Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), "Iran Reportedly Makes Military Preparations on Borders with Afghanistan, Iraq," GMP20010918000118.
38. Judith S. Yaphe, "U.S.-Iran Relations: Normalization in the Future?," *Strategic Forum*, No. 188, January 2002. Accessed through <http://www.ndu.edu/inss/strforum/sf188.htm>.
39. Parviz Mardani, "Iran to Recall Its Military and Intelligence Units From Abroad," *Iran Press Service*, November 8, 2001, http://www.iran-press-service.com/articles/_2001/nov_2001/iran_withdrawal_81101.htm.
40. "Statement by Supreme Leader of Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei," Islamic Republic News Agency, September 26, 2001. Accessed through <http://www.mediareviewnet.com/irna.htm>.
41. For an excellent account and assessment of this incident, see Robert Satloff, "The Peace Process at Sea: The Karine-A Affair and the War on Terrorism," *National Interest*, Spring 2002. Accessed through <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/satloff-peace.htm>.
42. "Three Words That Shook Iran," *Iran Report*, March 11, 2002, vol. 5, no. 9. Accessed through <http://www.rferl.org/iran-report/2002/03/9-110302.html>.
43. Guy Dinmore, "Iran's Centrists Seek to Break Taboo of Talks With US," *Financial Times.com*, April 23, 2002, <http://news.ft.com>.
44. "...But the Possibility Brings Out Old Faces," *Iran Report*, May 6, 2002, Vol. 5, No. 16. Accessed through <http://www.rferl.org/iran-report/2002/05/16-060502.html>.
45. "Any Questions About U.S.-Iran Relations?," *Iran Report*, May 27, 2002, Vol. 5, No. 19. Accessed through <http://www.rferl.org/iran-report/2002/05/19-270502.html>.
46. "Iran Abandons Push To Improve U.S. Ties," *Washington Post*, May 30, 2002, A18. Accessed through <http://www.washingtonpost.com>.

47. Arshad Mohammed, "Bush Says Iran 'Squarely in the Axis of Evil,'" *Reuters*, April 30, 2002. Accessed through <http://asia.news.yahoo.com/020430/reuters/asia-102638.html>.

48. U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001*, May 21, 2002. Accessed through <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2001/html/10249.htm>.