5  Post-revolutionary Iran
Resisting global and regional hegemony

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The Middle East was in the forefront of human progress during much of world history but – along with other parts of Asia and Africa – fell into the role of underdeveloped Periphery with the rise of the modern World System, in which a fundamental gap in power and wealth divided a group of Center countries in Europe and areas of European settlement from the rest. Iran in particular was the seat of some of the world’s most powerful empires, starting with that of the Achaemenids under Cyrus the Great and later sporadically resuming its imperial role under the Parthians, Sassanians, and Safavids to rival the Romans, Byzantines, and Ottomans. According to the historian Marshal Hodgson, in the Islamic civilization the Persian language “had more than purely literary consequence: it served to carry a new overall cultural orientation within Islamdom” and came closer than any possible rival – notably “the relatively parochial French or Latin” – during the 1500s to acquiring the status of a worldwide medium of communication.

However, the world has changed and the Middle East today – including Iran – is “highly dependent on the avatars of the world’s geopolitics.” Is World System theory capable of explaining these changes in global politics? It seems that no single grand theory can problematize the rise and fall of empires, civilizations and power centers. Nonetheless, an essential component of World System theory, meaning the Center–Periphery and/or hegemony–rivalry continuum, seems satisfactory. The Center–Periphery inequality is, as Galtung argues, a major form of structural violence in the current World System. In his words:

The world consists of Center and Periphery nations; and each nation, in turn, has its centers and periphery. Hence our concern is with the mechanism underlying this discrepancy, particularly between the center in the Center, and the periphery in the Periphery.

There is – as Galtung further explains – disharmony of interest between the periphery in the Periphery and the periphery in the Center but there is greater harmony of interest between the “bridgeheads” at the center in the Periphery, or the elites that constitute the center in a Periphery, and the center in the
Center. “Bridgeheads” have more in common with the center in the Center than with the periphery in the Periphery.6

We suggest here that there is an unequal relationship between the Center and the Periphery reinforced by the World System. However, states in the Periphery maintain some degree of autonomy to exercise their leadership in response to the internal forces of their societies. In other words, both international and internal forces/constraints shape the institution of the state and its behavior and policies. A triangular relationship among the global structure of power, regional states and social forces/movements shapes the international politics of the Middle East. Put simply, the interaction among the trilogy of the global economic and political system, the institution of the individual state and the dynamics of civil society in each country determine the international politics of the region.5 Two relentless forces of global structure and state-society relations shape state behavior. Regional and international relations of the state are formed by interactions between the World System from without and civil society/social movements from within. More specifically, we subscribe to the following theoretical outlook: first, a realist approach to the study of international relations of the Middle East is useful – complementing Galtung’s imperialist approach – in that it stresses the centrality of the institution of the state, its national security, and “the relations of global system to regional actors.” However, realism “deeps too narrow a concept of the state, and ignores both state-society and transnational factors. It may, as the study of revolutions and social movements shows, obscure the underlying dynamics of change.”5

Second, contrary to the state-centrism of realism, “Foreign Policy Analysis takes us inside the society and the decision-making process, but in so doing it loses its focus on the state itself.”7 It also undermines the persistent force of the World System but overemphasizes culture and value system in shaping the state behavior.

Third, the role of ideas, political ideologies and cultural values is evident. A constructivist account of international relations holds that culture, norms and shared values shape the perceptions and policies of the state in global politics. Nonetheless, culturalist explanations often serve the hegemonic global order to rationalize the superiority of the West and the subordination/inferiority of the rest.8 This chapter keeps a clear distance from “regional narcissism,”9 meaning the exaggeration of the unique nature of the Middle East culture, history, society and politics. The Middle East is one among other regions of the World System. It is too naïve to attribute state behavior to a timeless, eternal and essentialist concept of Islamic mindset. State behavior is shaped by the interaction of many socio-economic and political factors in the contemporary World System. Moreover, one needs to maintain some degree of “skepticism about the weight of history” in explaining the national, regional and international policies of the Middle Eastern states. The “past, remote or more recent, cannot on its own explain the present.” It is in fact, “contemporary forces which make use of the past: they select and use those elements of the past, national, regional, or religious, which suit their present purposes.”10 In other words, “ideologies, nationalist or religious, that do most to invoke the past are themselves modern creations, selected, when not invented, fetishes of the age.”11 The regional and global relations of post-revolutionary Iran provided a case in point where relentless forces of global structure and state-society relations, or interactions between the World System from without and civil society/social movements from within, have shaped state behavior.

We aim to shed light on the trajectory of post-revolutionary Iran’s regional and global politics under changing leadership. Although the constitution and the governmental system have remained in place since 1979, it is useful to think in terms of four distinct periods of leadership, which we term separately as “repubblicas.” We will closely analyze the development of Iran’s foreign policy under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini (first republic: 1979–89) and then the administrations of President Rafsanjani (the second republic: 1989–97), President Khatami (the third republic: 1997–2005), and President Ahmadinejad (the fourth republic: 2005–13). As will be shown, Iran’s foreign policy has gone through various stages, each posing various challenges. These challenges were related to the geopolitical realities of pre-Cold War, post-Cold War, and post-9/11 developments, and Iran adopted specific measures to counter or cope with each of them.

The focus will be exclusively on policies involving the US, the EU, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, Hezbollah, and Syria. We also will shed some light on Iran’s nuclear policy and the impact of the pro-democracy Green Movement and the discourse about “the Shi’ite Crescent” and the Arab Spring on Iran’s global and regional influence/policy. These policy cases have been carefully chosen because each highlights an aspect of Iran’s post-revolutionary foreign policy strategies, which are multidimensional and complex in nature. A number of general observations will be made regarding Iran’s unique approach in order to support the following specific arguments: that there is a pattern of continuity and change in foreign policy making; that there is a reciprocal relationship between domestic developments and foreign policy strategies; that the foreign policy agenda is characterized by an ongoing fluidity and dynamism; and that Iran has taken both ideological and pragmatic approaches.

**The Khomeini era (1979–89): idealism and revolutionary ideology**

Ayatollah Khomeini transformed Iran’s last monarchy into the Islamic Republic. However, the regime he founded was a complex mixture of Islamic clericalism and secular republicanism. He created a hybrid regime that simultaneously has combined elements of totalitarian, authoritarian, and democratic politics, with each of these principles coming to the fore during successive periods – termed “repubblicos” here – since 1979.12 The First Republic (1979–89) of the Khomeinist state was essentially a
"one-man show" dictated by Ayatollah Khomeini. Nonetheless, in the post-Khomeini era, with no charisma in politics, no war, and growing domestic opposition, disagreements over socio-political issues divided the Khomeinist forces. The post-Khomeini state went through three different political periods: the second republic (1989–97), the third republic (1997–2005), and the fourth republic (2005–13). Each republic presented a different face of Khomeinism.

The ideological discourse that informed Iran's foreign policy under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini was called "Khomeini's way" or khat-e-imam, represented by popular slogans of the time, such as "exporting the revolution" and "Neither East, Nor West." This vision was idealistically grounded in the view that foreign policy should be based on Islamic values and principles. Khomeini attributed major problems of the Muslim world, including Iran's, to the world's dominant powers in general and the US in particular. The imperial arrogant West, or estekhbar, was seen as a source of corruption, political turmoil, and instability throughout the globe.

It is not surprising that "Khomeini's way" and his mission extended beyond the borders of the Muslim world to take on global dimensions. This mission was driven by the Islamic principles that advanced Khomeini's "universalist" agenda in the sense that Islam became the panacea for addressing the ills of the world. For example, in a 1989 letter to the then Soviet leader Michael Gorbachev, Khomeini announced the bankruptcy of Western and Eastern ideologies and called upon the Communist leader to adhere to Islamic principles for "the well-being and salvation" of his nation. Khomeini wrote: "Islam is not peculiar to a country, to several countries, to a group of people or countries, or even the Muslims. Islam has come for humanity. … Islam wishes to bring all of humanity under the umbrella of justice." Such statements reflected the revolutionary nature of Iran's policies during Khomeini's era, which alienated regional neighbors and provoked paranoia among them. Iran's policy of exporting the revolution was hostile towards the conservative Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf states. As a result, Iran's Arab neighbors took defensive measures to impede Iran's ambition to export its revolution. As Shirin Hunter contends, "Iran's Islamic universalist pretensions and its revolutionary and antimonarchy discourse, a discourse influenced by left-leaning Third Worldist views that considered the Arab reaction, together with imperialism and international Zionism, as forming a triangle of evil." It can therefore be argued that Iran's regional ambitions under Khomeini's leadership were focused on altering the "balance of power in favor of Islamist and radical forces." Iran had Syria's blessing for this effort, and Syria—with its secular Arab nationalist Ba'athist ideology and a leadership dominated by members of a heterodox Shi'ite sect, the Alawites—was "the first state in the region" to support Iran during its war with Iraq. Syria was worried about the effect that a possible victory for Iraq would have on "the intra-Arab balance" and calculated that Iraq's defeat and the replacement of its government with a pro-Syrian Ba'athist regime would create conditions that would give it a strategic advantage in the Middle East.

Iran's regional revisionist policy constituted in focused on its influence and increasing its presence on the Israeli borders with both Syria and Lebanon, where Shi'ite Muslims made up major parts of the population. This reaffirmed the Islamic Republic's initial promise to give the Shi'i-Alawite Syrians and the Lebanese Shi'ites political, military, and economic support. Iran and its Revolutionary Guard were thus influential forces in the creation of Hezbollah in 1985. This is evident in the following remarks made by the former Iranian Minister of the Interior, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi:

Hezbollah is part of the Iranian rulahship ... a central component of the Iranian military and security establishment; the ties between Iran and Hezbollah are far greater than those between a revolutionary regime with a revolutionary party outside its borders.

Nonetheless, the Iranian involvement with Hezbollah did not make it "merely an instrument of the Iranian leadership's desire to spread the revolution." To argue that Hezbollah was simply an extension of Iran's power in Lebanon "would be just as absurd as to conclude that the Maronite militias, which received $150 million from Israel during Yitzhak Rabin's government in 1974–77, were nothing other than instruments of Israeli policy." Hezbollah enjoyed a deep social base in the Shi'ite community in Lebanon and welcomed support from, and strategic alliance with, post-revolutionary Iran. For Iran's policymakers, "Lebanon was the ideal locus for realizing the supranational pretensions of the Iranian revolution," putting Iran in the forefront of the struggle against Zionism and furthering its plan to empower Shi'ite communities to support its interests.

The Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf reacted to Iran's perceived threat by financially supporting Iraq during the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88). In 1981, they created the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as "a protective mechanism" against the spread of Iran's influence in the region.

During this period, Iran's radical and revolutionary policy was evident in the American hostage crisis, which has been called the "most explicit rejection of the pillars of international society ... and the institutions of international law" in recent times. During this crisis, Khomeini openly supported the occupation of the American embassy and used it to solidify his internal position as the undisputed leader of post-revolutionary Iran. In so doing, he encouraged "a period of radicalization," in which he opposed the leftist and liberal factions of the Revolution, specifically liberal/nationalist Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan. In general, the seizure of the US embassy was a manifestation of Khomeini's universal Islamic ideology in that it symbolized "the 'total' victory of the Islamic Revolution, kindling flames of hope in the hearts of the enrowned nations."
The Rafsanjani era (1989–97): pragmatism and reconstruction

Ayatollah Khomeini died in 1989, but he marked his legacy on the regime. Before his death he issued a juridic ruling, or fatwa, against Salman Rushdie's novel *Satanic Verses*. The fatwa created much tension between Iran and the West and lasted into the post-Khomeini era. Moreover, in the summer of 1988, a year before his death, he made a difficult decision to save the Islamic Republic. He reluctantly accepted the ceasefire in the eight-year Iran–Iraq War, as it no longer served the interests of the state. Despite his fiery talk against imperialism and the disbelieving (kafr) enemy, as the founding father of the republic Khomeini had no choice but, to use his own phrase, to drink from “the poisonous chalice.” “The poisonous chalice” of the peace with Saddam Hussein with no clear victory, however, enabled the regime to survive, although Khomeini's death brought some shifts in Iran's regional and global policies.

The second republic (1989–97) under President Hashemi Rafsanjani routinized the revolutionary charisma and institutionalized the office of the Faqih (jurisprudent) under the leadership of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Iran in the 1990s was experiencing a growing socio-ideological disenchantment. Civil society managed to challenge the repressive intentions of the state. For conservatives, the harsh truth to accept was the emergence of a growing gap between their socio-cultural values and those of the youth, the post-revolutionary generation. The state had failed to create the man/woman or the society Ayatollah Khomeini had envisioned. With almost two-thirds of its population under 30, Iranian youth remained a powerful social force. Post-secondary education, internet and satellite televisions made the youth well-informed about national and global issues. However, they were socioculturally disenchanted, politically disappointed, and economically dissatisfied. Pressures from civil society – especially the middle class, women and the youth – and the escalated elite factionalism forced the regime to open up public space and allow a limited degree of socio-political liberalization. This domestic crisis also brought some shifts in Iran's foreign policy.

Rafsanjani's presidency coincided with the end of the Iran–Iraq war and marked an era in which Iran was urgently pursuing policies that addressed its “practical needs” for post-war economic and social reconstruction.28 The exhaustive eight-year war “forced the Iranian regime to realize the limits of its power” and to modify a number of its major policies.29 To this end, Rafsanjani de-emphasized Khomeini's idealistic approach to focus on national interests, which impacted on the country's internal and external policies in a number of ways. For example, he realized that Khomeini's ideological commitment to exporting the revolution would not help post-war Iran to recover economically. His statement that “we cannot build dams with slogans” expressed his intent to preserve and maximize the country's national interests.30

In order to achieve his objective of reconstructing (sazandegi) Iran's economy and “cop[ing] with the new world order formed with the demise of the Soviet Union and the supremacy of the US,” Rafsanjani adhered to a pragmatic approach to foreign policy.31 This involved rereading and softening the once cherished slogan of “neither East nor West” and adopting a regional “good neighbor policy” that Rafsanjani contended was based on “respect for territorial integrity as well as social and religious values of other peoples.”32 As he wanted the Persian Gulf to “become like an area around a home, like a common farmland,” his regional policies were non-confrontational and invited the cooperation of Arab countries.33 Rafsanjani was particularly concerned about mending Iran's relationship with Saudi Arabia, which had been characterized by hostility during Khomeini's era, with Iranian pilgrims staging frequent political demonstrations on Saudi soil during the annual pilgrimage or *Hajj*. The Iranian regime under Khomeini had utilized the *Hajj* as a vehicle to export the Islamic Revolution, to wage an attack against “so-called American Islam, and to propagate its anti-US and anti-Israeli views by staging political rallies and protests.”34 When Rafsanjani ascended to the presidency, he put an end to the demonstrations.

During this period, Iran's relationship with Shi'ite groups in the region, especially Hezbollah, was heavily influenced by Rafsanjani's pragmatic foreign policy. Hezbollah's ideology is based on the theory of Governance of the Religious Jurist (Ve'layat-e-Faqih), which Khomeini elaborated upon in his famous tract on Islamic government. According to this theory, the authority of the *Faqih* has no limits and his wisdom derives from God and the Prophet Muhammad's family.35 At the beginning of the 1990s, Hezbollah leaders (e.g., Ayatollah Mohammed-Hussein Faddullah) were promoting the ideal of an Islamic Republic in Lebanon, which they defined as a state ruled by Islamic law.

However, the political landscape of post-Khomeini Iran, the new thinking in its foreign policy and Rafsanjani's pragmatism led to a shift in Hezbollah's political outlook. Sheikh Subhi al-Tufayli, Sayyid Abbas al-Musawi, and Sayyid Husayn al-Musawi were at the center of a major debate on its future in Lebanon. They asserted that it was not in Hezbollah's interest to wage *jihad* (striving; the Islamic equivalent of the Christian “just war”) against the West, given that Iran was calling for a truce. Instead, they advocated rapprochement and favored integration into mainstream Lebanese politics. Rafsanjani identified and supported their position.36 Moreover, “Hezbollah did not abandon the ideal of an Islamic state, [but] it was now argued that, given Lebanon's demographics, the establishment of an Iranian-style system of government was unfeasible.”37

The aftermath of Khomeini's death also resulted in a heightened level of cooperation between Iran and Syria in Lebanon. At this time, Syria was occupied with containing the Maronite resistance led by General Michel Aoun, who had the blessings of Iraq. It sought Iran's help in squashing the resistance, and the consequent alliance with Iran empowered Syria to oppose Saudi Arabia and the Arab League, which were both seeking to “mediate the crisis at the expense of Syria's exclusive role in Lebanon.”38 Iran's support for Aoun
therefore solidified the Tehran-Damascus relationship. Iran organized an anti-Aoun coalition in Tehran, which included Mahdi Shamsaddin of the Shi’ite Higher Council and Palestinian radicals such as Abu Musa and Ahmed Jibril, among others.³⁹

Further, Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August of 1990 and the start of the Persian Gulf War boded well for Iran and its relationship with Persian Gulf states since Iraq replaced Iran as the “threat to the security and integrity of [the region].”³⁴⁰ Both Iran’s decision to condemn the Iraqi invasion and its subsequent policy of neutrality during the war signified its willingness to forge closer ties with Arab states and the West. This stance was particularly favorable, as it provided Iran with an opportunity to strengthen its relations with European states, including two permanent members of the UN Security Council – Russia and France. As a result, Europe felt “a general sense of optimism about Iran’s political direction after the accession” of Rafsanjani.⁴¹ Europe’s economy made it a valuable partner for Iran, as the partnership clearly distinguished between European countries and the United States. The US imposition of sanctions on Iran (e.g. passage of the 1996 Iran-Libya Sanctions Act) had increased hostility between the two countries, causing Iran to welcome Europe’s support.⁴² However, Iran-EU relations remained uneasy. In 1992, the EU initiated a “critical dialogue” with Iran over a host of issues, such as Khomeini’s fatwa against Salman Rushdie, Iran’s human rights record, and its policy vis-à-vis Israel, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation. In 1997, EU-Iran relations deteriorated when a German court issued a verdict against Iranian officials for their involvement in the assassination of Iranian opposition leaders in Germany. This was a turning point for the EU-Iran relations: the verdict put an end to the policy of “critical dialogue,” and all European countries withdrew their ambassadors from Tehran. “Relations seemed beyond repair, at least from the EU vantage point.”⁴³ In the last year of President Rafsanjani in office, Iran’s foreign relations were in a deep crisis, one striking indication of which being that no European ambassador remained in Iran. The Islamic Republic needed a new face and new policy towards detente.

By the late 1990s, the catastrophe in Iran’s foreign relations, and the domestic socio-cultural and economic crisis had intensified factional politics within the elite, providing much opportunity for the unexpected victory of the reformist presidential candidate, Mohammad Khatami, on May 23, 1997. Khatami became the candidate standing for change, and received the protest vote, making him a “Cinderella candidate”⁴⁴ and eventually an “accidental president”⁴⁵ of the Islamic Republic. In the aftermath of his landslide victory, President Khatami maintained Rafsanjani’s pragmatic approach but shifted its emphasis to what came to be called a “reformist agenda.” The reformist approach was based on two central pillars: political reforms in the domestic arena – which included strengthening civil society as well as facilitating an open press, freedom of speech – and the rule of law.⁴⁶ It sought a condition of dialogue and détente that would normalize Iran’s relationship with other countries. To this end, Khatami put forth two key initiatives: (1) the principle of a “Reduction of Tensions” (Tashanoj Zodat) and (2) a “Dialogue of Civilizations” (Gostojeye Tamadonha). Both of these were intended to enhance Iran’s stance regionally and internationally and had significant connotations for the kinds of policies Iran adopted during Khatami’s era. Khatami expressed his regret for the 1979 US hostage crisis. In a 1998 interview with CNN, he went so far as to state that he admired the fundamental socio-political and moral principles and values on which the US was built. However, this statement was expressed in such an adulatory manner that even proud Americans tended to find it excessive.⁴⁷

While Khatami embarked upon his mission to stabilize Iran’s relationship with the world, Iran implemented a policy of generous economic and political support for Islamist groups in the region, notably Hamas and Hezbollah. This policy was supported by the supreme leader, Khamenei, and reflected the complex and multipolar character of decision-making in Tehran.⁴⁸ Khatami’s policy towards Lebanon and Hezbollah was consistent with his policy of détente and dialogue. “As Hezbollah became a major player in Lebanese politics and achieved electoral successes, politics in Iran also became more animated” under President Khatami.⁴⁹ In 1996, he visited Lebanon and met with representatives of all communities, including political rivals of Hezbollah among the Maronite Christians and the Sunni Muslims, as well as the Shi’ite Amal Party. His speech during a 2003 visit to Lebanon demonstrated passion for peace and pluralism: “Lebanon is the nation of love and justice and consciousness. It is here that the earth takes on a celestial form as the love of Jesus melds with the wisdom of Muhammad and the Justice of Ali.”⁵₀

Further, the Iranian-Syrian relationship was strengthened during this period due to the Turkish-Israeli strategic partnership in the mid-1990s during the 1991 Madrid Conference and the 1993 Oslo Process. As these developments had undermined Syria’s position in the region and added to its insecurity, Damascus saw Iran as a strategic partner that could reinforce its position in the Middle East. Hafez al-Assad’s visit to Tehran in 1997 and Khatami’s visit to Syria in 1999 signified the heightened level of cooperation between the two states.⁵¹

Although Ayatollah Khomeini sought to reduce the US military presence in the region, his policies failed to achieve that result. Khatami’s policy on the Persian Gulf states was a departure from Khomeini’s radical ideology of “exporting the revolution.” As Shahram Chubin explains, Khatami believed that good relations with the Persian Gulf states would lead the US to leave the region because this would remove the threat to its interests. Khatami’s policy in the Persian Gulf therefore aimed “to consolidate a system of regional security through bilateral confidence-building measures that might, eventually, lead to institutionalize regional security arrangements and make the presence of US forces superfluous.”⁵²
During the 1997 presidential election campaign, Khatami made it clear that he would pursue a policy of détente. "In the field of foreign policy," Khatami argued, "we would like to announce that we are in favor of relations with all countries which respect our independence, dignity and interests."53 Once elected president, his first attempt was to improve Iran's relations with both Europe and neighboring countries. Iran was still recovering from the prolonged eight-year war with Iraq, and its economy was suffering due to a lack of investment in various industries, which had increased the unemployment rate. Opening Iran up to foreign investment was seen as a means to solve its economic problems. Shortly after he became president, Khatami therefore pursued policies that would improve Iranian-European relations and gain economic help from Europe. But when Khatami assumed the presidency in 1997, no European ambassador was stationed in Iran. A major step was taken when Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi assured European countries that Khatami's government would not uphold the 1989 fatwa against Salman Rushdie.54 Europeans then reopened their embassies in Tehran. In welcoming Khatami's action, the European Union declared that this "increases the possibility that closer cooperation can be discussed in renewed dialogue."55

Contrary to the United States' approach, the European Union engaged in a "critical dialogue" with the Iranian government, demanding greater respect for political and human rights. For the most part, Iran's response was positive. As a result, the first time since 1979 the UN Human Rights Commission — in opposition to the United States — declined to put Iran among the countries that violated human rights. Moreover, Khatami realized that Iran could not normalize relations with the Persian Gulf sheikhdoms as long as it did not harmonize its relations with Saudi Arabia. Khatami successfully established amicable relations with Saudi Arabia, which nullified the dispute between Iran and the United Arab Emirates over Abu Musa and the Lesser and Greater Tunb islands. Only a few months after the 1997 election, in December of that year, the eighth Summit of the Islamic Conference Organization convened in Tehran, a success for Khatami's policy of ending an era of Iran's isolation.

Shortly after his election, in an interview with CNN, Khatami praised American civilization, expressed his appreciation for American democracy and its link with religion, paid respect to the American people, acknowledged the legitimacy of the American government, condemned all forms of terrorism, and even expressed his regret for the 1979 American hostage crisis.56 Nonetheless, Khatami criticized American foreign policy for the "mode of relationship" it pursues with nations such as Iran; he also condemned American foreign policy for its dependence on Israel and vice versa. In his words,

... a bulky wall of mistrust [exists] between us and the American administration, a mistrust rooted in improper behavior by the American governments. As an example of this type of behavior, I should refer to the admitted involvement of the American government in the 1953 coup

d'état which toppled Mosaddeq's government, immediately followed by a $45m loan to strengthen the coup government. I should also refer to the capitulation law [i.e., the status of forces agreement that Khomeini condemned during the 1960s] imposed by the American government on Iran.57

President Khatami pursued a policy of indirect dialogue with the US, through non-governmental contacts, although Ayatollah Khamenei saw this as "even more harmful than" restoring formal ties.58 In his address to the UN General Assembly in September 1998, Khatami emphasized that all civilizations need to understand and to engage in dialogue with one another, and the United Nations Organization followed this up by declaring 2001 The Year of Dialogue between Civilizations. Khatami's speech "raised hopes for détente" with the US.59 Washington's response to Khatami's initiatives was positive, and it toned down the anti-Iranian rhetoric and took some small positive steps. On June 17, 1998, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright responded by announcing that:

... we are ready to explore further ways to build mutual confidence and avoid misunderstandings. The Islamic Republic should consider parallel steps. ... As the wall of mistrust comes down, we can develop with the Islamic Republic, when it is ready, a road map leading to normal relations.60

The Iranian president's speech opened up a series of exchange activities in sports, academia, and the arts. After half a century, for the first time Madeleine Albright admitted that the United States had "orchestrated the overthrow of Iran's popular Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq"61 in the 1953 coup. Such longtime members of US foreign policy establishment as Zbigniew Brzezinski, Brent Scowcroft, and Richard Murphy called for an end to the "duel containment" of Iraq and Iran.62 With the support of the US, Iran received over $500 million in loans from the World Bank. The US met with Iranian officials at the UN to discuss the Afghanistan issue, added the Iranian opposition group People's Mojahedin Organization (MKO) to the list of terrorist organizations, and removed Iran's name from the list of major drug-producing states.63

In the beginning, the administration of President George W. Bush did not alter the Clinton administration's opening to Iran. Post-9/11, Iran was instrumental in removing the Taliban government and establishing a pro-American regime in Afghanistan. Not only did Iran continue its support for the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, but, as Americans admitted, it was "extremely helpful in getting Karzai in as the president."64

The 2002 "axis of evil" speech of President Bush, in spite of choosing his words to attack "non-elected" sections of the Iranian state, proved counter-productive. The speech was instrumental in launching an anti-American united front, which united Khamenei and his hardliner-conservative allies, the pragmatist-conservatives headed by Hashemi Rafsanjani, the reformist
President Khatami and the reformists. The hardliners were quick to cite national security when attacking the reform institutions and the reformers. The speech contributed in several ways to the rise of Iran's hardliners to power. According to Ervand Abrahamian,

Although billed as supporting “Iranian citizens who risked intimidation and death on behalf of liberty, human rights, and democracy,” the speech had the exact opposite consequences. It created a mood of the past, especially of the 1953 coup. ... It emboldened conservatives with the argument that the notion of “dialogue” is naive, and that “homeland security” is the most vital issue of the day. It persuaded some reformers to tone down their public demands; others to put their hopes on the back burner waiting for better days. It also energized exiles – especially Pahlavi royalists – who dread reform and hope that ultraconservative obstinacy will bring about a revolution.65

President Bush's speech raised much speculation about a US plan for regime change in Iran. Resorting to the “ethnic card” in Iran, an American intelligence officer suggested that “poking ethnic issues could bring down the whole regime in a spectacular fashion.”66 Even prominent American scholars such as Bernard Lewis implicitly claimed that when Iranians saw Americans invading Iraq they would urge them to “come this way please”67 – that is, “liberate us too.” Washington began to repeat its charges that Iran was opposing the Arab-Israeli peace process, engaging in international terrorism, violating democratic and human rights, and developing nuclear weapons. Of these four charges, the last has remained the most significant one, raising the level of tension and hostility between the two states.

As Abrahamian rightly observes, from the American point of view two issues of democratic and human rights as well as Iran's involvement in terror were more “polemical and peripheral” in nature. The US remained silent and indifferent during Iran's reign of terror during the 1980s and never raised public objections over assassinations of exiled Iranian opposition leaders. Ironically, America's reaction to Iran's violations of human rights began post-1997, when Iran's behavior had dramatically improved thanks to the election of President Khatami. Similarly, there is not much hard evidence supporting Iran's involvement in anti-American terrorist activities. With the exception of Iran's support for Lebanon's Hezbollah, and insignificant aid to Hamas and Islamic jihad, Iran's role in the Arab-Israeli peace process has been marginal.68

The international situation following 9/11 thus put an end to Iran's efforts to normalize foreign relations. Khatami's “dialogue among civilizations” lost its momentum following Bush's “axis of evil” speech, which placed Iran among rogue states. It then became obvious that, contrary to the hopes raised by the reformists, Khatami's discourse and foreign policies could not provide the Islamic Republic with security and stability. Likewise, for the hardliners, Khatami's discourse no longer served as a safety valve for protecting the entire regime from international pressures. The strategy of regime change implemented in neighboring Afghanistan and Iraq, together with escalating tensions over Iran's nuclear program, created a renewed concern with national security and helped the hardliners consolidate their power by splitting the reformists and marginalizing their agenda for democratic transition. American foreign policy under the neoconservative-dominated Bush administration contributed to the rise of Iran's neoconservatives as a mirror image. Bush rejected Khatami's proposal in May 2003 for a comprehensive compromise with the US. The American neoconservatives believed that they were winning the war in Iraq and that Iran would be the next target. The Bush administration declined the proposal, and the State Department even reprimanded the Swiss ambassador for conveying the Iranian proposal.

The structure of international power has profoundly contributed to the radicalization of Iran's domestic and foreign policies in three interrelated ways: First, the post-9/11 world order – Bush's discourse and policy of “regime change” and “axis of evil” – weakened Iran's reformists and empowered the hardliners. Second, the conservative hardliners were quick to take advantage of global politics to pursue Iran's revisionist regional and international policies. Because of US military actions, Iran's most dangerous enemies in the East, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Saddam Hussein of Iraq to the West, made way for pro-Iranian regimes and movements, including, in the case of Afghanistan, the Karzai government, the Northern Alliance and the former governor of Herat, Ismail Khan. In Iraq, Iran has successfully established close ties with the Shi'ite community – notably, the Islamic Dawa Party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, a radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, and the United Iraqi Alliance of Ayatollah Sistani – as well as both major Kurdish parties, the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party). Furthermore, the difficulty Americans faced in Iraq was part of the reason why the conservative hardliners in Iran felt confident enough to take unprecedented risks in the 2005 presidential elections. Third, as will be discussed later, the impact of world politics in radicalizing Iran's nuclear policy was profound. Iran under Khatami continued to talk to the UK, France, and Germany (the EU3) and suspended its nuclear enrichment for two years (2003-5). But the effort never led the US, as Iran expected, to abandon its regime change policy and lift economic sanctions. Only in December 2007 did the US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) announce that Iran had suspended its nuclear weapons program in 2003. But Iran's hardliners had already seized the moment to radicalize nuclear policy, defeat the reformists and elect a hardliner, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as president, in 2005.

The Ahmadinejad era (2005–13): rhetoric and radicalism

The 2005 presidential election marked the beginning of a new era in the Islamic Republic of Iran: an era of neoconservative Khomeinism, which was
consolidated in June 2009 with Ahmadinejad's disputed re-election. He was promoted by the office of the Faqih, the state-security apparatus, and Iran's neoconservatives—a group of young members of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps cultivated in the post-war period. Iran's neoconservatives aspire to revive the social base of the regime among the urban and rural Poor, which became eroded in the post-Khomeini era. The president of the fourth republic speaks about distributive social justice, promises to fight Iran's new class of mafia-like rentiers, the clerical noble-sons (aghazadeh ha), and assures the Poor that he will bring the "oil money to their table." Ahmadinejad's slogans may sound like progressive social radicalism rather than regressive conservatism. However, the reality is that his social conservatism and neoliberal socio-economic policies have been costumed with his populist discourse and rhetoric of social justice. Moreover, the irony is that neoconservative Khomeinists are blessed by the state rents and shadow economy run by the revolutionary foundations controlled by the office of the Faqih.61

Like the Shah's regime, the Islamic Republic remains a rentier state and derives its major financial power, not from citizen's tax, but mainly from petrodollars and oil resources. The regime has used this power, making the state a domain dominated by particular rent-seeking interests and imposing certain policies and importing certain goods to buy loyalty and organize antidemocratic groups. The rentier state has produced, to use Milovan Dijela's classic concept, a "new class" of agha-zadeh ha, which continues to enjoy its privileged position in the political domain. Ahmadinejad's populist discourse and his rhetoric of social justice are instrumental in serving his pragmatist purpose, i.e., to replace the old oligarchy with a new one and to establish a populist, centralized state backed by the lower classes and sponsored by petrodollars. For this reason, his government has spent the oil revenue with the intention of absorbing popular votes for the 2009 presidential election and the 2012 parliamentary elections.62 It has also been accused of having distributed $720 million interests of sahem-e edalat (justice shares) among some particular sections of the society shortly before the controversial 2009 presidential election.61

It is widely believed that with the rise of Iran's neoconservatives to power the Islamic Republic's social base may be shifting from a mulla—merchant coalition— to the predominance of revolutionary security and military forces. For the first time, a Khomeinist (ex)military man and—since the short administration of Abu al-Hasan Banisadr (1980–81)—not a Khomeinist religious scholar is the president of the Republic. The conservatives, in spite of their internal conflicts, have gained complete control, and the absolute rule of the supreme leader, Khamenei, in internal, regional and global matters seems at hand.

Iran's pragmatic approach to foreign policy was severely undermined in the aftermath of 9/11 when George Bush applied the term "axis of evil" to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. Iranian hardliners—conservatives, or principlists (osul gerayen)—exploited America's foreign policy. What followed was the rise of "a security state" in which most members of the regime took on a hardline stance in order to criticize Khatami's foreign policy measures for being weak, naïve, and ultimately ill-suited to serve Iran's external interests. As a result, Iran's 2005 presidential election ended with hardline conservative forces seizing power. Ahmadinejad's cabinet consisted of "military, intelligence, security and prison administration" backgrounds.62 The subsequent domestic policies advocated by Ahmadinejad had a strong anti-American stance, which was to be advanced at the expense of undermining freedom of the press and weakening civil society. It is thus plausible to assert that Bush's policy "contributed to the domestic triumph of radicalism and resurgence of an anti-Western foreign policy stance" that made Ahmadinejad the winner.63

The two key US responses to 9/11—the invasion of Afghanistan and then of Iraq—were major watershed in the Middle Eastern political landscape. They had a profound impact on security concerns of the countries in the region, including Iran, which embarked on establishing new roles.64 In 2004, it was geographically surrounded by American troops occupying Afghanistan and Iraq and the US military presence in the Arab monarchies to the south and the former Soviet republics to the north.

When Ahmadinejad took office in this climate of insecurity, he hoped to establish a "balance between 'regionalism' and 'globalism'."65 During his first term, Iran's international objective was to further solidify its economic and political relations with the EU. The success of this effort was evident when Iran became "a willing supplier of energy to Europe and welcome[d] European investment."66 Concurrently, Iran aimed to undermine America's offensive policies, which became increasingly more vocal and threatening because of Iran's controversial nuclear program and the economic and military aid it provided to Shi'ite groups. Strengthening its ties with Europe also gave Iran a means to "avoid [having to face] a US-EU united front."67 Although the US and the EU shared general policy positions in regard to Iran's nuclear endeavors, Iran increased its efforts to strengthen its relationship with EU members.68 The EU in return adopted a rather mixed policy approach towards Iran. On the one hand, it criticized the nuclear program, at least on the surface, and offered economic and political incentives to refrain from developing nuclear weapons. On the other hand, the EU members, apart from the UK, welcomed the policy of countering American hegemony in the region as "a staunch critic of US interventionism in the Middle East."69

In the aftermath of the US occupation of Iraq, the Shi'ite groups there received Iran's moral, military, and economic aid. Iran's regional influence reached the point that "the entire fate of the US efforts to stabilize Iraq and a peaceful transition to power rested on Iranian intentions."60 Some of these groups, such as the Mahdi Army and the Dawa Party, grew politically and competed in the country's national election.61 Consequently, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf grew increasingly concerned. As Hunter points out, the relationship between Iran and the Arab states has "historically been [and continues to be] characterised by competition, deep-rooted mutual suspicions and misgivings."62 The Arab states interpret Iran's involvement in regional developments...
and its sympathy with liberation movements and/or Shi’ite groups as part of its persistent drive to achieve supremacy in the region (a desire that pre-dates the 1979 Revolution) and the ongoing ideological and Shi’ite-oriented nature of the Islamic Republic.

Iran also sought to reinforce its partnership with Syria to advance their shared effort to undermine US presence in Iraq. Iran gave its full support to Syria in the aftermath of US political pressure on the latter to assume accountability for its alleged involvement in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. The result of that was a joint effort by Iran and Hezbollah “to rebuff pressure against the Syrian regime.”83 Iran supported Syria, and in return, Syria gave Hezbollah arms and economic support, demonstrating the existence of a triangular alliance to resist the activities of US and its Arab allies. Iran’s partnership with Syria and Hezbollah has subsequently grown stronger. For example, Al-Ahram Weekly reports that Iran’s investment in Syria reached an estimated $3 billion by the end of 2008.84

Iran’s generous financial and military support to Hezbollah has also increased significantly in the aftermath of 9/11 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. This helped Hezbollah to successfully resist the Israelis in the 2006 war, which makes it apparent that Ahmadinejad’s government has had the backing of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and has restored Khomeini’s foreign policy agenda and shares Khomeini’s revolutionary ideological strategies, including the aspiration to facilitate the “popular mobilization and the spread of revolution outside of Iran’s borders.”85

Nuclear Iran? Regional and global impact

Iran’s nuclear program, begun under the Shah’s regime in the early 1970s, was interrupted by the Revolution and war and was revived only in the early 1990s. The international power structure contributed greatly to the revival. All US intelligence agencies have declared that the weapons component of the program was dropped in 2003 and has not been resumed. The US is not the world’s single hegemon, although some observers think for a while that it had attained that status. However, the US is by far more powerful militarily than any other country and continues to play a central role in world politics. US policy in the Middle East rests on three pillars: the priority of stability over democracy for allied regimes like that of, say, the Saudis — previously Mubarak of Egypt, or the Shah of Iran; the security, survival and regional superiority of Israel; and the free flow of oil — except sometimes in the case of regimes that resist the Center. US policy vis-à-vis Iran is no exception to this. The current policy of the West, including the US, towards the nuclear issue provides a case in point. A nuclear-armed Iran — or to some extent even one with a level of nuclear technology that would allow it to weaponize at a later date, the so-called “Japanese option” — would shift the balance of power in the region. It would end Israel’s nuclear monopoly that allows it to act with a large degree of impunity. It would probably foster a nuclear arms race with other countries in the region and encounter the hostility of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Despite all the virulent rhetoric (such as the prediction that the regime ruling Jerusalem will eventually vanish from the pages of time, repeatedly mistranslated in the Western media as a threat to “wipe Israel off the map”), the Islamic Republic knows that a nuclear attack against Israel or the US would be suicidal. A nuclear-armed Iran would not constitute an existential threat to the West or Israel. Instead, it would counterbalance the dominant nuclear regime. Hence, putting aside the rhetoric, it seems that stability/status quo of the hegemonic position of Israel and the US in the region remains the driving force for US and Israeli policy towards Iran, and many Israelis feel that without the absolute security provided by their nuclear weapons monopoly the Zionist project would decline in the face of decreased immigration and increased emigration.

The rationale for Iran’s nuclear policy is threefold: First, Iran is a major regional power and seeks to be on the cutting edge of science, specifically nuclear technology. This is a matter of national prestige. Second, Iran is the home of the world’s third largest oil reserves – not including less desirable or less easily extracted oil in Canada and Venezuela – and the second largest gas reserves. Yet, thanks to the targeted economic sanctions by the West, the oil and gas industry has not developed, and the country is currently importing a great deal of refined oil. Iran sees nuclear power as an alternative source of energy. Third, according to Abrahamic, like Japan, Iran is interested in a “full nuclear cycle,” not for making bombs but for the “option of having it.” Iran is not the only country to pursue this right; there are about 30 countries in the world that hold to the “Japanese option.” The goal is to protect national security, and the rationale is deterrence.86 On a legal level, the Non-Proliferation Treaty recognizes that the development of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes is an “inalienable right.”

Three major factors contribute to Iran’s national security concern: First, there is the eight-year Iran–Iraq war (1980–88), started by Iraq – following provocative talk about exporting the Islamic Revolution – and backed by Western countries and their Arab client regimes. Since war and peace were “imposed” on Iran, the authorities planned to ensure the very survival of the state, pushing for the revival of the nuclear program. Second, Iran is surrounded by nuclear powers, including Russia, Pakistan, India, China, and Israel, not to mention the US itself, given the existence of American bases in many neighboring countries, e.g. Azerbaijan, Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Persian Gulf and in former Soviet republics such as Georgia and Uzbekistan. Third, Bush’s “axis of evil” speech in 2002, the quick American invasion of non-nuclear Iraq, the hesitancy to invade a nuclear North Korea, and the continued policy and/or discourse of regime change have contributed to the radicalization of Iran’s nuclear position. The recent case of military intervention in Libya to overthrow Gaddafi evoked the compelling conclusion that had he continued to develop his own deterrent rather than dismantling his nuclear
program in 2003 the Libyan leader would have been insulated from such outside action.

Neither Iranian nor American politics is monolithic. In both countries the authorities share common concerns about national security, yet differ in approaches. In the US, liberals, conventional conservatives and neoconservatives are divided on how to deal with the question of Iran. The “regime change” idea is pursued mainly by the neoconservatives, many of whose leading spokespersons belong to think-tanks such as The American Enterprise Institute and the Project for the New American Century and were securely established in the Pentagon and to a lesser degree in the White House during the younger Bush’s administration. Unlike their fellow conventional conservatives, they do not distinguish between factions inside Iranian politics and are determined to undo the loss of an important client regime in the 1979 Revolution.

Similarly, Iranian authorities, in spite of their common concern for the survival of the revolutionary regime, are divided on how to pursue this goal. For the reformists, the strategy of “regime change” in general, and the American opposition to Iran’s nuclear program in particular, have no military solution and must be confronted at once with democracy at home and diplomacy abroad. Security and democracy are interconnected, and democratization will ensure the security and survival of the state. They worked with Europe, Russia and Japan to undermine US efforts to isolate Iran, slowed down military programs in return for good relations with Europe, allowed more inspections, and signed an additional protocol to assure the UN that Iran’s nuclear program is peaceful.

By contrast, for the conservative hardliners, the nuclear issue, like the American hostage crisis and the Iran-Iraq war, serves as a pretext to dismantle reforms and reverse the democratic wave. Liberalization and democratization, the hardliners believe, provide Americans with the best opportunity to overthrow the Islamic Republic. Not all the reformists have been strong enough to counter the anti-American rhetoric: some have been “won over,” some have practiced “self-censorship,” some “put the issue of reform on the back burner,” and only a few continue to fight for both democracy and national integrity.87

Kenneth Waltz, a renowned scholar of the neorealist approach (which emphasizes that the constant pursuit of power is dictated by the nature of the international system, unlike traditional realists, who attribute it to the mal-evolence of human nature), recently argued that “Iran should get the bomb” because “nuclear balancing means stability.”88 A nuclear Iran would contest Israel’s nuclear monopoly in the Middle East, bringing nuclear balance of power that would stabilize the region. Waltz correctly argues that, “despite a widespread belief to the contrary, Iranian policy is made not by ‘mad mullahs’ but by perfectly sane ayatollahs who want to survive just like any other leaders.”89 Moreover, he contests the fear of an arms race in the region should Iran get a bomb:

Should Iran become the second Middle Eastern nuclear power since 1945, it would hardly signal the start of a landslide. When Israel acquired the bomb in the 1960s, it was at war with many of its neighbors. Its nuclear arms were a much bigger threat to the Arab world than Iran’s program is today. If an atomic Israel did not trigger an arms race then, there is no reason a nuclear Iran should now.90

Waltz’s realist approach is matched by his ethical concern, as he advises the US and its allies to pursue diplomacy with the Iranian state and lift economic sanction, let alone war and military intervention:

The United States and its allies need not take such pains to prevent the Iranians from developing a nuclear weapon. Diplomacy between Iran and the major powers should continue, because open lines of communication will make the Western countries feel better able to live with a nuclear Iran. But the current sanctions on Iran can be dropped: they primarily harm ordinary Iranians, with little purpose.91

Waltz’s position on this matter is compelling for a region in which one state — Israel — already has nuclear weapons and cannot realistically be expected to give them up. An Iranian nuclear capacity could create a counterbalance — a “balance of terror” — that would prevent either of the rivals from acting from impunity, as has been the case with Israel. In a better world, the appropriate compromise would be a nuclear-free zone for the Middle East (allowing for a balance of power at a less dangerous level, with only conventional weapons), but only a utopian would think of that as a real alternative at the moment — and might actually be more feasible in response to a future Israeli-Iranian nuclear balance of terror. The US and other Centers nations could impose such a nuclear-free region if they were determined to do so, but the overwhelming influence of pro-Israeli forces in the US today makes this almost unimaginable in the foreseeable future.

The Green Movement and realpolitik

Iran’s pro-democracy Green Movement, formed in the aftermath of the disputed presidential election of June 12, 2009 provides a clear example of a revolt of part of the periphery against the center in the Periphery, although in this case the center in the Periphery has broken its ties with the Center and is challenging its hegemony.

The post-election revolt demonstrated a serious political conflict between the reformist elite and the conservatives. However, the revolt was much deeper and broader than an intra-elite conflict. It was truly a social movement, a revolt of periphery against center. This needs clarification: first, the Green Movement is largely, but not exclusively, a middle class movement. This is evident in the slogans, discourse, and methods of participation. However, this
is still a movement of the periphery, as the middle class and even the upper middle class are deprived of political and economic power. Second, it is true that the regime still enjoys a degree of support from the Poor in the rural and urban areas. Nevertheless, the Poor are no longer the main social base of the regime. As mentioned earlier, the Islamic Republic is ruled by a new class of oligarchs consisting of the security apparatus, the high-rank ing clerics, and top merchants supported by the state. Third, Iran's more than four million wageworkers — excluding the salaried middle class — have remained relatively ineffective in recent pro-democracy movement. This is largely due to the state's strict control over all labor organizations and the reformists’ inability to communicate with the working class. However, the current economic crisis and the failure of Ahmadinejad's populist socio-economic policies have disappointed the middle class Poor and the working class. The Poor may not have yet actively participated in the movement, but it is no longer the backbone of the regime. Fourth, although significant in number and well educated, the youth and women remain a part of the periphery in Iran's political structure. It is estimated that a million young men and a million young women attend universities. The under 30s constitute almost two-thirds of Iran's 75 million people and have remained the most vulnerable to unemployment, inflation, and economic instability. They are disappointed with the socio-economic and cultural policies of the state and constitute the backbone of the Green Movement.

The response of the center of the Center to this movement has a profound impact on both periphery and center in the Periphery. More specifically, international politics continues to play a significant role in the future success or failure of the current pro-democracy Green Movement. On the one hand, the main casualty in the event of an American and/or Israeli military collision with Iran would be the latter's democratic movement, while, ironically, the US and Israel would enhance popular support for the current regime.

The Iranian youth are disenchanted with socio-cultural policies and dissatisfied with the economic situation. Yet they are looking for an Iranian solution to such Iranian problems. The US “would be making a huge mistake if it concluded that these young Iranians are automatic allies of the West.” On the other hand, a real challenge for a legitimate democratic opposition is to balance the national interest with international opportunities by learning how to fight for democracy and national sovereignty while working within boundaries imposed by the World System.

Democratization in Iran encounters three conflicting interests/priorities of three different parties. The main concern of the Islamic Republic is survival, while the priority of the global hegemon is to maintain its own hegemony. And the key demands of most Iranians are good governance, social justice, and representative government, i.e., a pragmatic definition of democracy. Hence, the Green Movement is caught between a rock and a hard place — between an authoritarian repressive local regime and a hegemonic global order guided by realpolitik.

Iran and the “Shi’ite Crescent”: the clash of cultures or geopolitics?

The “Shi’ite Crescent” is a politically motivated concept coined by King Abdullah II of Jordan in December 2004. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia reinforced this notion, and then-President Mubarak of Egypt even claimed that Shi’ite communities in the Arab world are more loyal to Iran than to their own countries. He argued, for example, that "Iran has an influence over Shia who makes up 65 per cent of Iraq's population." The alleged Shi’ite Crescent comprises Iran, Iraq, Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in the Gaza Strip — all of whom challenged the interest of the status quo axis made up of the US, Israel, and conservative Arab regimes. This implies that Iran plays a central role in the Shi’ite Crescent mobilizing Shi’ite communities and exploiting their socio-political grievances along sectarian fault-lines to secure its own regional dominance.

The discourse of a Shi’ite Crescent and the consequent “Shiophobia” seem problematic for a number of reasons. First, Hamas is not a Shi’ite movement, and Iran is not the single advocate of Hamas in the region. Hamas is a Sunni organization, an outgrowth of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, and receives significant financial support from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Moreover it now has distanced itself from Syria and Iran by siding with the Syrian Sunni Islamist opposition, Turkey, Egypt, and other conservative Arab (and Sunni-dominated) countries. This partial defection from alliance with Iran is not based on a cultural and religious fault-line (Sunni–Shi’ite divide). Instead, it is clearly a political and strategic choice in the context of changing geopolitics of the region. Like other political actors, Hamas and Iran shift their political alliances over time based on their political interests.

Second, members of the Alawite subset of the Shi’ites dominate the Syrian regime but its adherents constitute no more than 13 per cent of the population, while several factors make the “sectarian” explanation of the Iranian–Syrian alliance problematic. With influences of Christianity and various other beliefs that could under different circumstances put them outside the pale of Islam incorporated among their doctrines, the Alawites represent such an orthodox form of Shi’ism that only recently – whether representing greater ecumenicalism or simply political opportunism – has this group been accepted by mainline Shi’ite scholars as a part of their own branch of Islam. And while the Assyans rely on a network of Alawite families and a broader Alawite population that fear a future radical Sunni regime that might be motivated by both religious intolerance and retribution against them for supporting the current rulers, the Ba’athist ideology of the Syrian government ironically represents secularism and the idea of one Arab nation without sectarian distinction. Finally, there is much reason to believe that Damascus would have dropped its alliance with Tehran and made peace with Israel long ago had it been able to recover the Golan Heights peacefully.

Third, the Iraqi case is equally problematic, as it simply overlooks divisions among the Shi’ites and Sunnis, and the alliance between Shi’ite Arabs and
Sunni Kurds in post-Saddam Iraq. It ignores the US role in the country and underestimates the Turkish and Saudi factors in the ongoing crisis in Iraq. The Shi’ite Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maleki, and the Shi’ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr hardly would sit at the same table. Moreover, President Jalal Talibani, a Kurdish Sunni Muslim, is a friend of Iran, while Ayad Allawi, the leader of the opposition and the opponent of Iran’s role in Iraq, is a Shi’ite Muslim. Interestingly, the Saudi regime, the champion of Sunni Islam in the region, supports Ayad Allawi, a secular Shi’ite. Besides, despite Iran’s advice, Muqtada al-Sadr joined a supra-sectarian coalition with Ayad Allawi to defend Iraq’s national interests. Iraqi Shi’ites are not proxies of the Iranian regime; they are first Iraqis and then Shi’ites. Take the following case, for example: In early and late October 2012, the Iraqi Shi’ite government ordered two Iranian cargo planes heading to Syria to land in Baghdad to ensure that they were not carrying weapons to Syria. One wonders about the reality of the alleged Shi’ite Crescent when the Shi’ite Iraqi government searches two cargo planes of the Shi’ite Iranian government to ensure that the Syrian Shi’ite government does not receive weapons to fight Sunni rebels. The simple point is that political interests and geopolitics most often prevail over abstract religious fault-lines. Furthermore, there has been conflict among the Sunni organizations in Iraq, for example between “Awakening Councils” and al-Qaeda of Mesopotamia. The American invasion, in sum, has profoundly contributed to sectarian politics in Iraq, and Iran has clearly gained more influence in the region. Iran has pursued a policy of engagement with Iraq to strengthen economic and political ties to prevent another war with Iraq.

Fourth, both Pakistan, a Sunni majority state with some 30 million Shi’ites, and India, a secular state with some 15 million Shi’ites are completely ignored in this analysis. There is not much hard evidence supporting Iran’s interference in the internal affairs of Shi’ite communities in Pakistan and India to expand its influence in South Asia. Likewise, the Shi’ites in these countries have not picked Iran’s interests over their national interests.

Fifth, the Lebanese Hezbollah arguably is the strongest component of the so-called Crescent in the Arab world, and yet the usual discourse misrepresents some facts about the nature and aims of this organization: Iran did play a central role in the creation of Hezbollah, but it was not a coincidence that the organization rose in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The ongoing alliance between Hezbollah and Iran is a reality. However, as Hassan-Yari observes,

It appears that the Hezbollah’s interest is limited in scope and mainly to the Lebanese national territory and rhetorically to the Gaza Strip. Sunni and Shia Arabs see Hezbollah as the only credible military force that resisted and defeated Israel’s military power. The unprecedented growing sympathy for Hezbollah among Arabs worries the rulers of Sunni Arab countries who are often seen as docile tyrants incapable of saying no to Americans and Israelis. In other words, in the absence of strong Arab

Six, it is interesting that Bahrain, a country with 75 per cent Shi’ite population but ruled by an autocratic Sunni minority elite, is not included in the Shi’ite Crescent. Bahrain is excluded because its regime is a conservative Arab one allied with the West and the home to the US Fifth Fleet in the region. Likewise, Shi’ite communities in other conservative Arab countries, particularly in Saudi Arabia, are marginalized and do not enjoy full religious, cultural, and socio-political rights. Hence, “by insisting on the fabricated idea of Shia Crescent, the Arab rulers deepen the suspicions in their own societies and encourage sectarianism.” The Shi’ites in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are not proxies of the Iranian regime. Like Saudi Arabia, Iran is a major regional power, aiming to expand its regional influence. This might include supporting Shi’ite communities in the region. However, the point is that the Arab client regimes use the overstated threat of Iran to silence the local legitimate demands for political reform in their countries. In the past few years, Human Rights Watch has harshly criticized Saudi Arabia and Bahrain for torture of their Shi’ite citizens and blatantly discriminatory policies against Shi’ites.

Last but not least, the discourse about the Shi’ite Crescent implies that the religious mind provides the superior explanatory factor for the Muslim policies. It undermines the complex network of economic and political factors in international relations. It reduces the political into some constructed religious fault-lines and reinforces the Orientalist discourse. We argue that religion and cultural values are often politicized to serve the interests of global and regional power. In many cases geopolitical interests overshadow religious values. Realpolitik bypasses and trumps cultural fault-lines.

Post-revolutionary Iran is a case in point: Iran and Iraq, the two greatest Shi’ite-majority countries fought over eight years (1980–88). Iran never challenged Russia over the violation of basic rights of the Chechen Muslims, nor did it defend the rights of Muslims in East China. Iran has overlooked, to say the least, a systemic killing of several thousands of Muslims in the current crisis in Syria. In the territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh in the 1990s, Iran sided with Armenia, not with the Shi’ites in Azerbaijan. And the Shi’ite political authorities in Iran killed, imprisoned, and suppressed the ordinary Shi’ite population of their own country during the 2009 pro-democracy movement. Hence like other states, the Islamic Republic most often picks its immediate political interests over some abstract shared cultural and religious values.

Iran, in sum, has evidently expanded its regional influence in the post 9/11 period, particularly in the post-Saddam era. The cardinal question is whether and how the concept of Shi’ite Crescent is capable of explaining the complex picture of politics in the region. We argue that this concept overemphasizes sectarianism and religious fault-lines (the Sunni–Shi’ite divide). It oversimplifies the nature of conflicts and cooperation. It overlooks the intention of the
political elites who coined and constructed this concept. It singles out Iran as the unique and immediate threat in order to avert attention from other matters. Like Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other regional powers, Iran has used religion, ideology and ethnicity to maximize its political interests. However, the big elephant in the room is that the discourse about the Shi’ite Crescent is used as an excuse to ignore the legitimate socio-political rights of the “forgotten Muslims,” or the “Arab Shi’as.”

It serves as an ideological tool to suppress the Shi’ite communities under the rule of Arab client regimes.

Iran and the Arab Spring: declining or increasing influence?

Iran’s foreign policy has been relatively popular among the common people (i.e., periphery in the Periphery) of the Middle East – particularly in Palestine, Lebanon, and Egypt – because it openly opposes Zionism and client regimes (the center in the Periphery) and US foreign policy in the region and supports the Palestinian cause. “This is so despite the fact that the mainstream Arab media and politicians portray Iran as a non-Arab, Shia threat to the Sunni Arab world.”

However, “the majority [in the predominantly Sunni Arab world] is critical of the role of Iran in Iraq” and sees Iraq under Shi’ite leadership as a “battleground for the US and Iran to settle their differences.”

The June 2009 Green Movement in Iran changed popular perception of Iran’s foreign policy in the region. As Dr Elaheh Rostami-Povey’s field research demonstrates, “the secular left, nationalists and Islamists” in the region have raised questions about the brutality of the Islamic Republic in suppressing peaceful demonstrations and “feel they cannot trust a regime that is not accountable to its own people.” Nonetheless, they are also sceptical of the support of the West, Israel and the conservative Arab regimes for Iran’s pro-democracy movement and are “wondering whether this is an attempt to destabilize Iran.” For this reason, the popular support in the region for the pro-democracy movement in Iran is “limited.” Likewise, Iran’s pro-democracy movement has not actively supported “the movements in the region on the ground that the anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist position is monopolized by the [Iranian] state.” Thus Iran’s revolutionary Islamism has begun to lose its credibility and popularity among Muslims in recent years. “In the eyes of many people in the region, Turkey – a secular state [if now with an Islamic face], supporting Palestinians – is replacing Iran.”

Moreover, Turkey under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) is seen as a modern and moderate Islamic alternative to radical Islamism and to autocratic secular nationalism. During and after the Arab Spring in 2011, many began to sympathize with the Turkish model rather than with Iran’s revolutionary Islamism. Furthermore, while Turkey clearly supports opposition forces in Syria, Iran’s regional policy in support of Bashar al-Assad in the ongoing uprising undermined Iran’s popularity.

Syria has become a battleground for two different forces in the region. On the one hand, the West, the conservative Arab states (particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar), Turkey under the AKP, a post-revolutionary Egypt under Muslim Brotherhood leadership, and, interestingly, Hamas are siding with the revolutionary opposition. On the other hand, Russia, China, Iraq, Hezbollah and Iran support the Assad regime. As Vali Nasr argues, “Washington has seen the developments in Syria as a humiliating strategic defeat for Iran.” While Iran remains a significant player in the Syrian crisis, the West and its allies have excluded it from any diplomatic role in the matter. The Obama administration fears that such involvement “would throw Tehran a lifeline and set back talks on Iran’s nuclear program.” However, while Iran is unable to desert Assad, saving him seems not to be possible either. Iranian political elites are deeply divided on whether to terminate their “unwavering support.” Iran would certainly like to participate in diplomatic discussions in order to look after the interests of Syrian Shi’ites, including Alawites, and especially in order to rebuild its “damaged prestige in the Arab world” for the post-Assad era.

Iran’s policy towards the Arab Spring deserves a closer examination. First, Iran saw the uprisings as an opportunity to expand its political influence in the region, marginalize US influence, advance its anti-Zionist policy, and develop strong ties with Islamists who would replace the pro-Western dictatorships. Second, Iran sought to win over the rising Islamist parties in these countries. Khamenei compared the Arab uprisings to the 1979 Islamic Revolution and used a new narrative of “Islamic Awakening” to underline the Islamic character of these movements. Iran’s foreign policy makers probably knew that the Arab Spring – as in the case of the Iranian Revolution more than three decades earlier – was not exclusively Islamist, but rather drew participants – both Muslims and Christians – from the secular left, liberals, and nationalists, as well as religious forces (who, however, would win big victories in most of the free elections that were being demanded). There was nothing inherently Islamist in the Arab Spring. However, Iran’s regional policy aimed to exploit subsequent developments. Third, an alliance with Tunisia and Egypt would provide an asset to minimize the pressures of economic sanctions against Iran and maximize support for Syria. Hence, Iran gave a warm welcome to the first president of post-revolutionary Egypt, Mohamed Morsi, in his visit to Tehran to participate in the 16th Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) summit in August 2012.

However, Morsi’s opening address disappointed Iran. He clearly distanced himself from Iran’s position on Syria, sided with the West and its allies, and asked Assad to step down from office. Moreover, he opened his speech with words that seemed to draw attention to the original issue dividing Muslims into sects 14 centuries ago and add salt to an old wound with greetings not just to the Prophet Mohammad but also to the four “Rightly Guided Caliphs” accepted by Sunni Muslims, as though to challenge the Shi’ite rejection of the legitimacy of the first three of these. This was probably a message both to Shi’ite Iran and to fellow Sunnis, particularly the Saudis and to the Salafis of the Nour Party in Egypt, that post-revolutionary Egypt would not accept Iran’s regional hegemony. Morsi also used the concept of Arab Spring and ignored Khamenei’s alternative narrative of Islamic
Awakening. The post-Arab Spring governments have many common interests with post-revolutionary Iran, but they engage in regional rivalry and are not automatically its natural allies.

**Conclusion**

Under the Shah’s regime, Iran was a close ally of the West, acting as its major regional policeman in the Persian Gulf. Together with Saudi Arabia, Iran stood as one of the twin pillars of US influence in the region. Fitting into the Israeli “periphery doctrine” – of allying with non-Arab states in what this volume has called the “Outer Circle” of the region – it was a close ally of Israel. It was an active member of the Western security alliance in the region (CENTO) and carried out proxy intervention in Oman on behalf of the West. By contrast, the 1979 Revolution brought a dramatic shift, and in the subsequent era Iran emerged as the main regional revisionist power, challenging US and Israeli hegemony and clashing with centers in the Periphery allied with the center in the Center. The rise of Iran as a major regional power, with alleged nuclear ambitions and the specter of a “Shi‘ite Crescent” feared by US-aligned Arab autocrats has created new political fault-lines throughout the Middle East. This struggle has extended into political competition between Iran and the US/Israel/Saudi Arabia tacit alliance in the proxy settings of Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq and Syria. Although the pro-democracy Green Movement in 2009 brought a serious crisis of legitimacy to the regime, the Islamic Republic has remained secure and continues with its strategic aims, threatening a possible conflagration with the United States and/or Israel.

A triangular relationship among the global structure of power, the state, and social forces/movements shapes the regional and international politics of post-revolutionary Iran. Two relentless forces of global structure and state-society relations shape Iran’s policies. Regional and international relations of the state are formed by interactions between the global political system from without and civil society/social movements from within. Moreover, while the role of ideas, political ideologies and cultural values in international relations is evident, it would be naive to attribute the behavior of the Iranian state to an abstract, timeless, and essentialist Islamic mindset. The state’s foreign policy is shaped by many socio-economic and political factors in the contemporary world.

I have evaluated the pattern of Iran’s foreign policy strategies in the first republic under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini and its aftermath under Supreme Leader Khamenei, as manifested in what are identified here as the second, third, and fourth republics under presidents Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Ahmadinejad, respectively. Following the 1979 Revolution, Iran sought to reassess and redesign its foreign policy agenda in a fashion that deeply reflected the ambitions of its ideological mastermind, Ayatollah Khomeini, who embarked on a policy agenda that was starkly confrontational toward both the West and the East. For Khomeini, Islam was the panacea for the ills of the world, and its application to international relations had the potential to address the “toothless” aspirations of both communism and liberal capitalism.

Although Khomeini’s agenda with regard to the West was chiefly ideologically driven, his foreign policies nonetheless had aspects of compromise and fluidity. Kenneth Waltz aptly contends that all revolutions are ultimately “socialized to the international system.” Khomeini’s Iran was no exception when he: (1) unconditionally accepted the 1988 UN Security Council Resolution 598, which called for ending the war with Iraq, because he realized that Iran might lose the war due to the support that the US and other Western countries were giving to Iraq, and (2) agreed to an arms deal with the US and Israel in an ironic turn during the Iran–Iraq war, which he justified on the ground that the country “needed arms to defend itself against Iraqi aggression.” It could, therefore, be argued that Khomeini laid the groundwork for Iran to adopt a foreign policy position that was both fluid and dynamic. As the ideological doctrine that became his legacy informed subsequent policy-making processes, he can be seen as the political as well as the spiritual “tutor” of post-revolutionary Iran’s foreign policy makers. “The important cautionary point is that the fluidity of Iranian revolutionary politics is such that today’s idealists may be tomorrow’s realists and vice versa.”

Post-1979 Iran’s foreign policy arena has illustrated both continuity and change. Khomenei’s slogan – or policy – of “exporting revolution” serves as a case in point. Rafsanjani and Khatami moved away from this policy and advocated non-confrontational policies that responded to the new realities of the post-Cold War global and regional order. However, Ahmadinejad somehow returned to the confrontational approach towards the US, reviving Khomeini’s famous slogan of “America cannot do a damn thing to us,” (Amrika hich ghalaiti nemitavanad bekonad). The controversy over Iran’s nuclear policy and its alleged regional ambitions, as well as its policy towards Israel and the US presence in the region suggests that “the post-Khomeini regime’s legitimacy is almost entirely based on the Revolution and the system founded by Ayatollah Khomeini; it cannot negate Khomeini’s principles without negating itself.” Ahmadinejad’s foreign policy does not signify a radical discontinuity with Khomeini’s era, but rather, is just “a re-packaging and/or re-ordering of Iran’s foreign priorities given the dictates of certain national security interests.”

There is a dialectical interaction between domestic and foreign policy. The regional and global policies of four republics of the post-revolutionary regime reflected the domestic policies of the political elites and the dynamic of social forces in different periods. Rafsanjani took a non-confrontational approach to the rest of the world in order to reconstruct Iran economically and socio-politically after the Iran–Iraq war ended. Khatami pursued a partnership with the EU in order to address Iran’s economic ills and adopted a moderate foreign policy approach based on “reduction of tensions” with the West in aiming to strengthen the rule of law and promote the freedom of the press as
well as the advancement of civil society. As Chubin notes, during Khatami's era foreign policy was a “means to address domestic political problems.”

Furthermore, President Khatami's idea of “Dialogue among Civilizations” gained recognition by the UN, declaring the year 2001 the official year of Dialogue between Civilizations. Khatami's UN speech “raised hopes for détente” with the US. But President Bush's “axis of evil” speech in 2002 raised much speculation about a US plan for regime change in Iran. The speech shocked the reformists and contributed to the rise of Iran's neoconservatives in a number of ways. According to Ervand Abrahamian, the speech “created a mood of the past, especially of the 1953 coup,” forced the hardliners to raise the flag of national security, persuaded some reformers “to put their hopes on the back burner waiting for better days,” and energized “Pahlavi royalists – who dread reform and hope that ultraconservative obstinacy will bring about a revolution.” The World System in general and Bush policies in particular contributed to the ascendancy of Ahmadinejad. This demonstrated that there is an undeniable relationship between foreign events and domestic political patterns, which inform each other in a reciprocal manner.

In the aftermath of the 2001 American invasion of Afghanistan and 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Middle Eastern states sought to reassert their political and strategic roles in the region. These events made Iran particularly insecure, as it was geographically surrounded by American troops and pro-American Arab states in the Persian Gulf. It was shown that although Iran had relatively friendly relationships with the Arab states during the Rafsanjani and Khatami eras, these states continued to remain suspicious of Iran. As a result, they favored the continual presence of the US in the region to counter Iran's quest for regional supremacy and its desire to control the “destiny of the Persian Gulf sub-region,” which had been continuous “feature[s] of Iranian foreign policy” since the Revolution. The relationship between Ahmadinejad’s Iran and the Arab states manifests another dimension of the way domestic developments inform foreign policy strategies and vice versa.

The concept of “exporting the revolution” acquired new dimensions during Ahmadinejad’s first term in office and became more focused on regional dominance and counterbalancing US hegemony. Syria played a crucial role in the achievement of this ambition, as it was one of the few regional states which had maintained a relatively stable and friendly relationship with Iran since the Revolution. Syria’s position was thus a blessing for Iran, as the region was filled with governments that saw post-1979 Iran and its ideals of revolution as a threat to their national or regime security. Hence, in the current crisis, Iran continues to defend the Assad regime, even at the cost of losing its popularity among the masses in the Arab world, undermining its previously amicable relations with Turkey and missing opportunities for a rapprochement with Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia and expanding its sphere of influence into North Africa.

The “tug of war” between Iran and the US has not ceased since the Revolution. Iran’s approach to the US at times has been both confrontational (e.g. under Khomeini and Ahmadinejad) and non-confrontational (e.g. under Khatami and Rafsanjani). The foreign policy of each country in relation to the other has resembled a strategic chess game in that “wherever Iran goes, it faces the United States [and vice versa].” In sum, post-revolutionary Iran has redefined and reasserted its foreign policy in response to geopolitical considerations, international developments, and the realities of pre-Cold War, post-Cold War, and post-9/11 orders. This is a testament to the complex and multidimensional aspects of Iran’s post-1979 foreign policies, which have been ideologically driven, contextually contingent both on religious ideologies and on pragmatic political developments, and geopolitical motivated.

Notes
I would like to thank Navid Pourmokhtari for his help with this chapter.


4 Ibid.


6 Ibid., p. 304.

7 Ibid.


9 Halliday, The Middle East in International Relations, p. 319.

10 Ibid., p. 322.

11 Ibid.

12 See H. Chehabi, “The Political Regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Comparative Perspective,” Government and Opposition, 2000, vol. 36, 48–70. It is worth noting that Mehdi Bazargan’s short-lived interim government and Abol-Hassan Banisadr’s short-lived presidency were not included in this category.


15 R. Khomeini, as cited in Ramazani, “Reflection on Iran’s foreign policy,” 56.


19 Hunter, Iran’s Foreign Policy, p. 207.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
25 A. Adib-Moghaddam, “Islamic utopian romanticism and the foreign policy culture of Iran,” in Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies, 2005, vol. 14, 280. It is worth noting that the concept of immunity for diplomats is indeed one of the oldest and one of the least violated parts of international law. However, we should keep in mind that aggression and genocide, inter alia, are more severe violations of contemporary international law. Ironically, it is only recently that international law tried to ban aggression and genocide.
26 Ibid.
27 M. Ebtekar, as cited in Adib-Moghaddam, “Islamic utopian romanticism,” 281.
28 Ramazani, “Reflection on Iran’s foreign policy,” 58.
30 Ramazani, “Reflection on Iran’s foreign policy,” 59.
33 Ibid.
34 Hunter, Iran’s Foreign Policy, p. 192.
38 Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, Syria and Iran, p. 135.
39 Ibid.
47 K. Pollar and, as cited in Hunter, Iran’s Foreign Policy, p. 192.
48 Rakel, “Iranian foreign policy since the Islamic revolution.”
106 Ibid. p. 191.
110 See Ehteshami and Zweiri, Iran's Foreign Policy, p. 28.
111 Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, Syria and Iran, p. 55.
113 S. Chubin as cited in Rakel, "Iranian foreign policy since the Islamic revolution," 178.
115 Ibid., p. 94.
116 Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, Syria and Iran, p. 28.
117 H. Rowhani, as cited in Chubin, Iran's nuclear ambitions, p. 117.