

IRAN: A BRIEF STUDY OF THE THEOCRATIC REGIME

Simoglou Alexandros

**University of Macedonia. Department of
International European Economical & Political Relations**

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Introduction

"In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful."

"We have sent Our apostles with veritable signs and brought down with them scriptures and the scales of justice, so that men might conduct themselves with fairness."¹

The above quotations lie in the preamble of the Iranian Constitution and outline the spirit of the constitution and the religious concentration of those who have inspired it. However, one can argue about the fairness of the theocratic regime and of those who hold tightly the reins of power in the Islamic Republic since 1979, the mighty clerical figures that undertake the role of the apostles.

Questions pop up incessantly to the mind of someone who tries to examine Iran today. What does this country represent? What lies beneath the Islamic veil? To what extent this regime is acting "on behalf" of God? Are democratic values a needless surplus to the Iranian society? Does the theocratic regime pose a serious threat for the stability of the Middle East area? How should we deal with a controversial Iran in the 21st century?

One can point out that Iran is a rather intriguing subject. Since the year of the Revolution, Iran is always on the top issues of international agenda with incidents such as Iran-Contra gate and Iran-Iraq war in the 80s, the Civil Society movement and the reformist activities for a democratic transition in the 90s and the presidential elections of June 2005 along with the nuclear intentions of the theocratic regime today.

This study seeks to examine briefly the history of Iran after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, highlight and explain the function, the institutions and the main aspects of internal, economical and foreign policy of the theocratic regime and answer the above mentioned questions for the future of Iran in the following years.

A. Historical Overlook: From the fall of the Ottoman Empire to the Islamic Revolution – The Iranian & The Islamic factor

Although the examined period refers to the years from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire to the Islamic Revolution, it would be very useful for a profound understanding of the nature of this country to run back to its basic elements that determine its historical course and its behavior throughout the years. Which are these? First of all Iran itself, as a single collective identity, with its own fascinating culture. Secondly, Islam, which seals the future of Iran not only politically, but mentally, both in a level of acting as a state and as a nation.

¹ Quotations from the Koran; English translation by N.J. Dawood.

Iran is unique among the Muslim countries because it had 1500 years of continuous pre-Islamic history as a nation, a country and an advanced civilization. Pre-Islamic Iranian civilization included an elaborate philosophical, religious and ethical system, a sophisticated view of the world and an elaborate theory of cosmos, the creation and the place and destiny of mankind within this cosmic system². The Persian Empire was one of a kind at its rise and the only power able to withstand it and eventually conquer it was the power of Alexander the Great.

After the conquest by Arab-Islamic armies, Iran retained its linguistic and cultural cohesion and a strong sense of "Iranianness" remained intact affecting Iran's post Islamic cultural and political evolution, despite territorial and political fragmentation. This combination of Iran's Islamization with the survival of its pre-Islamic culture has led to a creation of a duality in Iranian culture and collective identity, characterized by two merging poles of identification and loyalty, Iran and Islam. Iran even today seeks to find the balance between these two poles, which have been the main source of friction in Iranian society and political life. The dominance of one pole to another has only created tension in Iran's political scene (a good example is the extend of the reformist movement by the Khatami government, representing the Iranian aspect, which created a backlash by the conservative forces, representing the Islamic aspect.) The key to understand Iran's behavior is this fragile balance between the Iranian and the Islamic element.

Back to our historical period, the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire found two of the great powers fighting for the land of Persia. Russia was pursuing its endless quest for a port at its southern borders, eyeing the warm-water ports of the Persian Gulf. This intention provoked a strong reaction from Britain, which warned Russia that any attempt to establish its influence in the Persian Gulf would find her opposite. The Russo-Japanese war of 1904 revealed the weaknesses of the Russian power. Thus, in 1907 a compromise was reached between Britain and Russia, partitioning the country in three separate zones, one Russian, one British and one neutral.

The treaty of 1907 seemed to give a definite advantage to Russia because the Russian territory included most of the towns and the fertile land. However, the discovery of oilfields in the neutral zone and their development by British capital from the British government, which was the main shareholder, cast the entire neutral area under British influence.

The outbreak of war in 1914 found Iran, albeit its declared neutrality, directly involved in the war, as both Britain & Russia were fighting across its territory. British intervention in Persia increased after the Russian collapse in 1917. The struggle between Britain & Russia reached the stage of active warfare between the British army and the newly formed Bolshevik army.

² Shireen Hunter, *The Future of Islam & the West*, Greenwood with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1998

This friction between the two great powers gave favorable conditions for a revival of the Iranian strength. The revival was fostered by an ex-army officer, Riza Khan, who by means of a coup d'etat in 1921 marched on Tehran and seized power from the hands of the Shah, thus ending the Qajar dynasty, that ruled Iran since 1779. In 1925, Riza Khan assumed the throne and the title of the Shah, establishing the Pahlavi dynasty.

It's useful to examine at this point, the balance between the two basic elements at the Riza Shah era. The rule of Riza Shah was dominated by two basic preoccupations: consolidation of the central government's power through the subduing of various tribal warlords and chieftains and the initiation of Iranian cultural revival and socioeconomic modernization,³ including secularization of Iranian educational and judicial systems and the granting to women of certain rights, all these opposed to the political power of clergy, undermining the role of Islam in the country. In the field of foreign policy, Iran's main goal was to preserve its territorial integrity and balance the presence of the two powers (mostly by cultivating strong ties with Germany, tactic known as Third Force strategy). At this period of time, Iran is showing pragmatism towards its external relations, seeking to attain a sovereign status. The path of modernization caused the widening of the gap between seculars and Islamists. The consequences would be revealed half a century later.

From World War II to the Islamic Revolution

The abrupt start of the World War II found Iran declaring its neutrality once again. Because of its geostrategic situation, the allied powers didn't respect the neutrality and using the pretext of German presence in the country occupied Iran in 1941. Riza Shah was sent to exile in South Africa and his young son assumed the throne. Although the Iranian government seemed willing to collaborate with the occupying forces, the Shah himself started secret negotiations with the American President, Franklin Roosevelt, calling for the protection of the Iranian people by the United States, "the supporter of freedom and independence of small and weak states".⁴ The first American Troops arrived at Iran at 1942.

At the end of World War II, the Soviet influence inside Iran was really limited. Iran focused at its first priority, the safeguarding of its territorial integrity and concentrated on enhancing the alliance with Britain and USA⁵. From 1947 to 1953 Iran tried to create its own economical and political path, showing a great desire to end the presence of the two powers in its internal affairs, not driven by Islamic incentives but by a need to stand on its own feet as a state. By developing a strategy of denying special advantages to any power,

³ Shireen Hunter, *The Future of Islam & the West*, Greenwood with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1998

⁴ *Intervention & Revolution*, R.J. Barnett, New York, World Publishing CO., 1989

⁵ Το Ιράν στο λαβύρινθο της ασύμμετρης απειλής, Σπύρος Λίτσας, Έμφαση 10-11-12/2004

Musadeq's government moved to a radical movement of nationalizing the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, which resulted in a coup d'etat engineered by the two great powers. Some signs of Islamic motives were shown by propositions of some clerical leaders calling for the unity of the Muslim world, in order to become the Third Force between East and West.

From the 50s to the 70s, Iran faced the security threats deriving from the Soviet Union and its regional allies, a threat not only territorial, but by far more dangerous inside the Iranian society and political life. The creation and the enforcement of the Iranian Communist Party (the Tudeh) produced the first ideological aspects of Iranian nationalism, calling for a social reform and a foreign policy detached by the West. Moreover, the rise of nationalism was connected to the rise of the religious sentiments of people, who put their social demands together with religion, in the center of their political beliefs.⁶ The overdependence on the West and the submission to American interests were becoming a liability and a cause for anxiety in Iranian society. On the other hand the Shah was trying to protect the strategic alliance with the United States in order to counterbalance the security threats and with the help of the Iranian ruling elite accelerated the secularization of Iranian society and government resorting to pre-Islamic traditions for the legitimacy of its policies. Meanwhile, Iran formed a coalition with Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, which later became the Organization of Islamic Conference and joined OPEC. The oil revolution between 1973 and 1978 led Iran to acquire a socially responsible, independent, Third-Worldist face, calling for the creation of a New International Economic Order and the fundamental reform of the international system, a rather radical view for a rather realistic Iran so far in its approach towards the international order.

The Islamic Revolution

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 was made possible by a broad coalition of forces, which had rather divergent views and their own theories of what policies should be followed now that the new era dawned. Shaul Bakhash describes very vividly the synthesis of this coalition: clerics and laymen; Islamic and secular political movements; centrist parties and radical left wing guerilla movements; bazaar merchant, shop-keepers and industrial workers; middle-class civil servants and the urban unemployed; organized political groups and the unorganized citizenry.⁷ The inspiration of this coalition and the guidance for the Revolution was given by the dominant figure of Ayatollah Khomeini. The Islamic Revolution resulted in the fall of the Shah regime and the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran, an authoritarian, theocratic regime, distinguished for its constitutional declarations, its structure and its behavior. The Shah himself was accused as an agent of the West and a man who was a servant of American interests and who intended to disorientate the

⁶ As above

⁷ Shaul Bakhash, *Iran: Slouching Towards the 21st Century*, from "The Middle East Enters the Twenty-First Century", University Press of Florida, 2002

Iranian people from Islam, therefore he was exiled for life. From the Islamic Revolution and on, Iran deployed a hard-line strategy, pushed the relations with the United States at the edge of the razor, demonstrated isolationism and introversion and sought its own path in the Middle East.

Having identified the basic elements of Iran as a state and as a nation and having described the motives and the series of events in Iranian history since 1979, this study moves forward to the examination of the theocratic regime, starting with the ideology that dominated the first years (driven from Khomeini's preaching), continuing with the consolidation of the theocratic regime and the Iranian constitution and ending with the politics of the Iranian regime about internal, economical and foreign affairs.

B. The Theocratic Regime

Khomeini's Rhetoric

What did Iran's spiritual leader declared when he pushed Iranian people to disintegrate the Shah regime? Khomeini recognized the world through three filters: power, ideology, spiritualism. Those who have power use it in order to dominate and exploit others; those who don't have power are forced to submission (basic aspect of the realistic world view). In terms of ideology he identified two camps again: Those who followed the West and those who followed the East. Finally, in his rhetoric existed the division between the righteous people, those who follow Islam and the teachings of Koran and the corrupted people who follow the evil, satanic path of disbelief (arrogant powers and their allies).

Is there an explanation for Khomeini's hatred against the West? For 50 years the West have been the dominant power in Iran and directly connected and identified with the Pahlavi regime, which was downgrading the Islamic element in the country damaging the clerical establishment, their power and their interests. The clerical class believed that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire was a result of a chain of conspiracies plotted by the Western powers. Intellectuals spoke of "Westoxication"⁸ or compared the relationship with the United States as one of "The Shark and the Sardines".⁹

Nevertheless, in Khomeini's rhetoric none can trace evidence which would lead to the creation of a single Muslim state in the area of the Middle East. In fact, he demonstrated great respect towards the territorial status and supported strongly the noninterference in their foreign and internal affairs of other states. What Khomeini desired was a Muslim spiritual unity, under the

⁸ Jalal Al-Ahmad in his book entitled *Garb Zadeghi* (meaning Westoxication), mentioned in the above

⁹ Jose Arevalo, Guatemalan leader, in his book *The Sharks and the Sardines* described a similar relationship between United States and weak Latin American states, mentioned in the above.

Islamic religion and the path of the Koran, that would be the fort against the western oppression and the so called cultural onslaught, would secure Muslim rights and would spread Islamic values, leaving the borders intact. His vision about Iran was one of a state that would be the messenger of Islam, the depository of Islamic tradition, the hand that would help other weak (and not only Muslim) states reach a similar status. In a meeting with Nicaraguan Minister of Education during the Sandinista period, Khomeini pointed out that "...we should all try to create unity among the oppressed regardless of their ideology and creed. Otherwise the two oppressors of East and West will infect everyone like a cancerous tumor..." Thus, Iran acquired a missionary role appearing as the supporter of weak states by using again its Third-Worldist profile. This role could be executed perfectly with one condition according to Khomeini: No resort to violence. During his public speeches he mentioned that " ...when we say we want to export our revolution, we mean we want to export the spirituality that dominates Iran... we have no intention to attack anyone with swords or other arms...we shall have exported Islam only when we have helped Islam and Islamic ethics grow in those countries."

Can this activist profile be a result of Islamic impulse? Let's not forget that the Revolution was Islamic because it called for the revival of the religious Islamic life in the country and because the clerics themselves were its spiritual force intending in the revival of their undermined power. But this is only one aspect (the religious one) of the mass movement that resulted in the revolution. Along with the western oppression, the corruption of the Shah regime and the overdependence on the great powers and the widening gaps that were created inside the Iranian society between seculars and clerics, ruling elite and working people, the conditions were ideal for the boosting of a revolutionary movement. A great revolutionary spirit and desire to change Iran inwards and outwards was shown from all the people¹⁰. Therefore, it would be more suitable to talk about a revolution where divergent social groups with divergent views were inspired by the words of a well educated, spiritual and talented leading clerical figure such as Khomeini, rather than a revolution which in the name of Islam ripped apart a country and divided Iranian society.

The Iranian Constitution – Structure of Government of the Theocratic Regime

From the viewpoint of Islam, government does not spring from the dominance of one class over another. It crystallizes the political aspirations of a nation united in faith, so that this nation is heading straightforward to achieving its one and only goal; moving towards God.

As article 1 of the constitution states, the form of government of Iran is that of an Islamic Republic endorsed by the people of Iran, on the basis of the referendum of 29-30 March 1979, through the affirmative vote of a majority

¹⁰ People usually referred to the revolution as the White Revolution

of 98.2% of eligible voters after the Islamic Revolution of 10-11 February 1979.

In order to understand the nature of the theocratic regime, it is really helpful to pay careful attention to articles 2 and 3 of the constitution, which describe the basic principles on which the Islamic Republic is based and its objectives. The form of government of Iran is based on belief in the One God ("There is no god except Allah"), His exclusive sovereignty and the right to legislate and the necessity of submission to his commands, on the divine revelation and its fundamental role in setting forth the laws, on the justice of God in creation and legislation, on the continuous leadership and perpetual guidance of the Imam (the spiritual Leader), on the dignity and value of man and on equity, justice, political, economic, social and cultural independence and national solidarity.

The duty of Islamic Republic of Iran is to direct all of its resources to the following goals; the creation of a favorable environment for the growth of moral values and virtues based on faith and the struggle against all forms of vice and corruption, free education and physical training for everyone at all levels, the complete elimination of foreign imperialism and the prevention of foreign influence, the elimination of all forms of despotism and autocracy and all attempts to monopolize power ensuring political and social freedoms within the framework of the law. Moreover it emphasizes on the abolition of all forms of undesirable discrimination and the provision of equal chances, the strengthening of national defense and the framing of the foreign policy according to Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims and strengthening of the Muslim brotherhood.

The structure of the three powers, legislative, executive and judicial appears to be following the one of modern democracies. However, certain details make the difference and distinguish it from other state structures. **The Islamic Consultative Assembly** (known as the Majlis) is the main legislative force of the country resembling much the democratic parliaments (with one remarkable difference that will be mentioned below). It is constituted by the representatives of the people elected directly and by secret ballot. There are specific settings that determine the representation of religious minorities in the parliament, such as the Zoroastrians, the Jews and the Christians, which are the only constitutionally recognized minorities that can perform freely their religious rights. The authority of the Majlis is extended to the establishment of laws on all matters within the limits of its competence and which are not contrary to the official religion or the constitution. It has also the right to interpret ordinary laws and to investigate and examine all the affairs of the country.

Which is the remarkable difference that limits the legislative power in front the directions of the theocratic regime under the democratic lines of the constitution? The constitution establishes the creation of the **Council of Guardians**. Its purpose is to safeguard the Islamic values and the constitution by examining the compatibility of the legislation passed by the

Islamic Consultative Assembly. It consists of six clerics which are selected by the spiritual Leader and six jurists which are elected by the Majlis from among the Muslim jurists nominated by the Head of the Judicial Power. Members of the Council of Guardians are elected for a period of 6 years. According to the Iranian constitution again, the Islamic Consultative Assembly holds no legal status without the existence of the Council of Guardians. All legislation passed from the Assembly must be sent to the Council for thorough examination and approval according to the Islamic values and the constitution. (If we imagine a similar situation in modern European states, there can be no parliament and therefore parliamentary procedures, without the existence of a conclave of priests and jurists that compare each law to the word of God and approve it!). For the compatibility of proposed laws with the laws of Islam, the decision is taken through majority vote among the six clerics alone, while for the compatibility with the constitution, the decision is taken through a majority vote by all twelve members of the Council. The Council of Guardians, with the power it holds, can ultimately push back any effort for reform or modernization which is accompanied by a legislative framework, using as an excuse the prevalence of religious law upon cosmic laws.

However the one and above all authority of Iran is **the Leader**. As we shall see below, the leader collects all the powers on his face. Similarities with monarchy might be noticed and especially with enlightened monarchy which put the monarch above all at God's will. The Leader in Iran, first of all must be having a religious background in order to guide his people spiritually, following the Shariah (Islamic law). Justice, piety, political and social perspicacity, prudence, courage, administrative talents and adequate capabilities of leadership are among the characteristics that are required for someone to become one. The Leader is responsible for the planning and the setting of the general policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran in all fields. He supervises the proper execution of these policies, issues decrees for national referenda, declares war and peace and mobilizes armed forces, assumes supreme command of the armed forces, appoints, dismisses and resigns the clerics of the Council of Guardians, the supreme judicial authority of the country, the head of the radio and television, the chief of the joint staff, the chief commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, formalizes the elections of the President of the Republic of Iran and dismisses him if he offends the interests of the country or violates his constitutional duties. Finally, he pardons or reduces the sentence of convicts, within the framework of Islamic criteria, after the recommendation of the Head of judicial power. Upon the order and the appointment of the Leader the **National Exigency Council** is formed having a supportive role in the Leader's work, such as carrying out any responsibility forwarded to it by the Leader and assuming his duties whenever he is unable to perform them.

Constitutionally, after the office of Leadership, the **President** is the highest official in the country. His responsibilities include the implementation of the constitution and the acts of the head of the executive except in matters directly linked to the Leader. The President is directly elected by the vote of

the people for a four-year term. The president must be of Iranian origin and nationality, must demonstrate administrative capacity and resourcefulness, a good past-record, trustworthiness and piety and must believe in the fundamental principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the official religion of the country. The president is obliged to sign legislation, treaties, protocols, contracts and agreements concluded by the Iranian government with other governments or international organizations after obtaining the approval of the Islamic Consultative Assembly. He is responsible for the national planning, budget and state employment affairs. He appoints the Ministers and coordinates the government and approves the Ambassadors.

The articles (art. 152-155) that refer to the execution of the foreign policy of Iran are of greatest interest. Iran rejects all forms of domination, seeks to preserve the independence of the country and its territorial integrity, calls for the defense of the rights of all Muslims and declares its non alignment with respect to the superpowers of the world. Any form of agreement resulting on foreign control of natural resources, economy, army or culture and other aspects of Iranian life is forbidden. The Islamic Republic of Iran shall refrain from all forms of interference in internal affairs of other nations.

The judiciary is an independent power, the protector of rights of the individual and society, responsible for the implementation of justice. The Leader appoints the Head of the judiciary power, who shall be the highest judicial authority, for five years. Apart from the regular courts, there is the Supreme Court for the purpose of supervising the correct implementation of laws by the courts and ensuring uniformity of judicial procedure. There are also military courts for military crimes, the Court of Administrative Justice for complaints and objections relating to government officials and the National General Inspectorate, again a supervising organ.

Putting Words Into Action – The Years 1979-1988

The post-revolutionary period is marked by various “battles” inside Iranian society and politics; reformists versus conservatives, moderates versus radicals, seculars versus clerics, Iranians who expected the post-revolution era as a new day for the evolution of the state of Iran and therefore of their lives and Iranians who dreamt of a religious Iran. The first years after the revolution dilemmas about key issues needed an answer; eliminate all the officials of the previous regime or not? Expand or limit the role of revolutionary courts, guards? Holding or releasing the American hostages? Continuing the war against Iraq after expelling its troops from Iranian territory? Limiting or expanding the role of the state in the economy?¹¹

Indeed, the clergy prevailed and set the course of the “new” state of Iran; Establishing the new Islamic order; as mentioned above, all laws and

¹¹ Shaul Bakhash, Iran: Slouching Towards the 21st Century, from “The Middle East Enters the Twenty-First Century”, University Press of Florida, 2002

institutions of the state must abide by the Islamic principles and the Council of Guardians has the right to veto over the laws. As described by the first prime minister of the country Mehdi Bazargan, Iran was "a city with a hundred sheriffs" and his own term "a knife without a blade" (or more clearly by the previous president Khatami, "the president doesn't have more power than the last citizen").

It is the period that ideology dominates. Iran officially withdraws from the Central Treaty Organization and interrupts diplomatic ties with South Africa due to the policy of apartheid. Under the Shah, Iran regarded the United States a strategic ally, maintained strong but discreet ties with Israel and identified with the monarchies of the Persian Gulf and Middle East to preserve the status quo. By dismantling the old order and establishing a new course, the United States was perceived as the archenemy, the U.S. Embassy was seized and American diplomats were taken hostages for 444 days. Khomeini congratulated the protagonists of this act and declared that "those who conspire against our Islamic movement in this place do not deserve international diplomatic respect"¹² The hostage crisis was the triumph against two hundred years of foreign domination of Iran. Although it resulted in diplomatic isolation, it gave Iran a mere psychological advantage that still exists; the ability to defy a superpower.

To return at that era, Iran ended all ties with Israel, named it an illegitimate state, called for its extermination and became the principal patron of Hezbollah, Israel's Lebanese adversary, but continued to buy Israeli weapons clandestinely. How can we explain such a stand? Rather realistically, when a state is in condition of war and its national security is threatened or "crushing down the opponent means much more than driving him away", then every ideological factor is downgraded and the security factors prevail. Iran after expelling Iraq from its territory continued the war against it aiming at the destruction of "the symbol of falsehood and blasphemy" (Iraq and Saddam Hussein). It is the first time in Iranian history that Iran doesn't act as a territorial state, safeguarding its own entity but pushing forward for the elimination of a neighboring enemy. Finally, diplomatic relations ended also with Morocco, Jordan and Egypt.

The year 1984 demonstrates a change. Iran's Open Window policy declared by Khomeini, aimed at good relations with the international community with some important conditions though; friendly relations with other states, without undermining Islam and its influence. No diplomatic relations would be established between Iran and United States, Israel and South Africa. Khomeini's unexpected declarations seemed controversial to many people. We could point out that they were pragmatic taken into consideration the Iran-Iraq war consequences, the period of five years that had passed since the revolution and the realization that for Iran to survive, the acknowledgement

¹² P. Naskou-Perraki / N. Zaikos, Introduction to the law of diplomatic and consular relations. Theory and practice (in greek)

of the existing international environment and the effort to operate inside it was vital, bearing in mind the unwillingness of other Muslim states to follow Iran's example of a revolutionary path. But, within three years Iran was implicated in the arms-for-hostages deal secretly negotiated with the United States (1985-86), known as "Irangate" and in bombings in Kuwait (1987), actions that stigmatized Iran as a controversial and unstable state, ruining the efforts for an opening to the international community which was declared a few years ago.

Just as the new regime was established, a wind blew in the economy that swept anything related to the Shah era. Expropriation and nationalization of nearly every private sector led to the migration of Iran's wealthy families to Europe or other Middle East countries. For sure, there was no chance for foreign investment since Iran's religious/political leaders chose the road of not only political but economical isolation too. The government founded the Foundation for the Disinherited and the Martyrs Foundation (bonyads in the Iranian language) which controlled the mass of the newly nationalized enterprises. Thus, through the bonyads and the various organizations and ministries that took over the management of these enterprises, the government came to control a large and significant portion of the industrial and commercial activity of the country. We have mentioned that these are the years of ideology. Although the consequences of Iran-Iraq war led to a series of measures that enhanced state intervention and the deeper slumber of the economy, the government's commitment to the poor people and to distributive justice remained intact. All these along with overstuffed bureaucracy, population growth, US imposed sanctions on arms sales and entangled laws and regulations led to a huge deficit. The government needed to borrow from the Central Bank to cover expenditures (which were huge due to the war with Iraq and the sanctions) and the only source of income was the oil whose unstable prices could boost or push down the economy unexpectedly.

Putting Words Into Action – The Years 1988-1997

Three major events determine the course of Iran during this period. The August 1988 cease-fire in the Iran-Iraq war, the death of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 and the election to the presidency of Ali – Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. These events led to the creation of a new political environment in Iran. First of all, Iranians realized that winning a war needs much more than commitment and a sacrificial revolutionary spirit. The essentiality of diplomatic activity and support was missing during Iran-Iraq war, something which can be derived from the fact that the international community supported Iraq, although Iraq was the aggressive state. Secondly, the death of the leading figure of the revolution created a gap of power inside Iran. Although Iran could pursue a more conventional approach in politics inside and outside the country, another leading figure had to be found in order to assume the demanding Khomeini's role of resolving crisis situations

and taking decisions of utmost importance for the state. Third, Rafsanjani seemed ready to downplay ideology in favor of practical achievements.¹³

During the Gulf War (1990-1991), Iran restored its diplomatic relations with Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Morocco, used its influence to help release of the American hostages in Lebanon and laid out a development plan for the country which included foreign loans and a much larger role for domestic and foreign private sector investments in the society. In addition to these, censorship of the arts and press eased¹⁴. Rafsanjani remained at the presidency for two consecutive terms (1989-1993, 1993-1997). Despite the signs of a pragmatic approach in foreign policy and the liberal efforts in economic and social policy, Rafsanjani did little to alter the parameters of political activity. Elections were closely monitored and controlled, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, launched a campaign against freedom of press, media and arts and the planned privatization program failed due to the same factors that existed ten years ago; incapability of managing the resources, unemployment, bureaucratic red tape, entangled laws and secret political negotiations, thus giving the chance to the radical clerics to continue untouchably the dominance of the regime. A dominance which was also reinforced by amendments in the constitution at 1989. By expanding the institutional powers of the Leader over the military and the police, the president's authority was even more deteriorated.

During this period a new foreign policy was developed by the government based on five different pillars.¹⁵ This policy was continued also during the Khatami years. First of all territorial integrity and stability in the neighboring area were regarded of utmost importance. Iran was in the heart of a rather unstable area. Relations with Iraq were not calm, the Kurdish was another problem and the relations with Russia were also in tension due to the attempt for a strategic alliance with soviet successor states such as Tajikistan and Azerbaijan, something which disheartened Russia very much. A second and really important pillar was the military reconstruction and reorganization, with medium and long range missiles, enhanced naval power at the Persian Gulf and the pursuit of the nuclear option. Third, Iran put aside for good the ideological obstacles opened its oil and gas sector for foreign investment and traded arms and military technology, thus cultivating relations with China, Russia, Japan, India and EU states as a counterweight to US policies against it. Fourth, Iran openly opposed the Arab-Israeli peace process and raised it to

¹³ Shaul Bakhash, Iran: Slouching Towards the 21st Century, from "The Middle East Enters the Twenty-First Century", University Press of Florida, 2002

¹⁴ Constitutionally, press, radio and television are all controlled by the government and must follow the Islamic principles. Otherwise punitive measures can be taken against them, such as shutting them down and imprisoning the responsible, even imposing the death penalty. The most famous case was that of British-Iranian writer Salman Rushdie who was sentenced to death by Khomeini for passages written in his novel *The Satanic Verses* which were considered insulting to Islam. This case led to strong diplomatic conflict between Iran and the British backed by the majority of EU states.

¹⁵ Shaul Bakhash, Iran: Slouching Towards the 21st Century, from "The Middle East Enters the Twenty-First Century", University Press of Florida, 2002

high security matter, believing that tension between Israel would serve better than peace. Last but not least, the heritage of Khomeini, the activist profile of the supporter of all Islamic countries and the aspiration of a potential leadership of the Islamic world. Again here appears the psychological factor that we have mentioned above. The ability to defy the superpower. Iran's foreign policy as a whole demonstrates the intention to follow a hard line policy and to hide any signs of vulnerability especially towards the United States.

Putting Words Into Action – The Years 1997-2005

Apparently, Rafsanjani lost the political game for numerous reasons. A group of his ministers formed another coalition and managed to win 30% of the Assembly seats. His mind was constantly focused on feeding the wheel of economy and rarely on political liberalization. Lack of fruitful ideas drove away people from political activity. Khatami provided people with a vision from the very start of his campaign. Economic revival could not appear without political reform and more specifically without institutions for civil society and participation in politics by all the citizens. Powerful new ideas overwhelmed the public and "threatened" to set the revolution on a totally different course from where it was pacing the last twenty years. Khatami wanted to unchain the state from the introvert, isolated clerical regime that the clerics were holding it (and he himself being a cleric could find the right way to do so). He provided the public the image of an Islam which was tolerant, democratic and open to reinterpretation¹⁶. He wanted to distinguish between religious ideology and fundamentalism to reason. Among his vocabulary, words such as pluralism, transparency, accountability and political competition were heard for the first time from the Iranian public.¹⁷ Khatami was hugely popular. Many people were inspired by his vision and became avidly engaged in political issues.

But as mentioned at the start of this study, the conservatives didn't allow things to move on and responded quickly. The balance between Iran and Islam was dangerously leaning towards the side of the state and not the religion, for the first time since the revolution. The bells of reform were ringing throughout the country. The reformist press attempted directly to call for the limiting of the Leader's power or of a more precise defining, the new Assembly wanted to attempt to restrict the authority of the Council of Guardians to disqualify candidates for the elections and to pass legislation for freedom of press and participation in politics. Khamenei ordered the closing of daily newspapers and the imprisonment of editors and political commentators with the accusation of insulting the Islamic Republic, plotting to overthrow the state and seeking to destroy the revolution. In addition to the shutting down of the press, the Council of Guardians with the Leader passed new

¹⁶ Shaul Bakhash, *Iran's Unlikely President*, New York Review of Books. 1998

¹⁷ Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini; The Struggle for Reform in Iran*, University of Chicago Press, 2001

interpretations of the constitution that reinforced their power and limited the power of the Assembly. That this strengthening of Khamenei's stand occurred simultaneously with increased efforts for democratization within one wing of the revolutionary family, and that this dynamic was partly abetted by the very same constitution that reinforced the Leader's formal powers is precisely the point; this dissonant arrangement helps to explain the contradictory political contest that unfolded during the three years following Khatami's election.¹⁸ . If the presidential and the parliamentary elections shown the strong popular support in the idea of reform and the creation of the civil society movement, the aftermath shown that the conservative forces remained strong and continued to abuse their power under the authority of the Leader.

What about Iran today??? 47 million people voted at the presidential elections of June 2005 electing the mayor of Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as the successor of Khatami. Despite the fact that every Iranian who is over 15 years old is eligible to vote, the Observatory for Human Rights states that the elections in Iran are not democratic for the mere reason that the Council of Guardians chooses the nominees¹⁹. From 1014 Iranians only 6 were approved to run for the elections. Quite remarkable is the fact that although the new president belongs to the conservative camp, he is not a cleric, thus becoming the first president since 1980 that doesn't belong to the religious camp (Bani Sadr was the last one).

C. Iran in the 21st Century; The New President - The Nuclear Option – Dealing With a Controversial Iran

Observers and political analysts were stunned from the electoral result, reminding themselves that in order to understand the Arab political scene, analysts should adopt theories that include the elements of the Islamic world, without relying solely on political theories that apply on western democracies²⁰. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was tipped as an outsider when nearly everyone was betting on Iran's former president Rafsanjani who was re-running for the presidency after his loss in 1997 by Mohammad Khatami. The former mayor of Tehran doesn't start his term with the best credentials as far as the rest of the world is concerned. He is characterized a deeply conservative person although he doesn't belong to the clerical side. Donald Rumsfeld referring to Ahmadinejad called him an enemy of democracy, because Ahmadinejad was on of the leaders of the students during the seizure of the US embassy during the outbreak of the revolution²¹. From the United States' point of view, Iran remains part of the axis of evil, a country which threatens the American dominance and the stability in Middle East if it moves on with its nuclear program, as it remains part of a network which is

¹⁸ Daniel Brumberg, Contradictions in Iranian and Indonesian Politics, September 11, Terrorist Attacks and U.S. Foreign Policy, Academy of Political Science

¹⁹ Εφημερίδα Τα Νέα, 17 Ιουνίου 2005

²⁰ Εφημερίδα Ελευθεροτυπία, 3 Ιουλίου 2005

²¹ Εφημερίδα Ισοτιμία, 2-3 Ιουλίου 2005

under suspicion for helping terrorists. From Iran's point of view, United States will always symbolize the two hundred years of foreign dominance and the corrupt Shah regime. Additionally, the theocratic regime needs the "great enemy" to strengthen its position and to enhance the Islamic-religious rhetoric.

As Iran's new president is preparing to assume office, contradiction comes in the front again concerning the political route that Ahmadinejad is willing to follow. On the one hand, Iran's hard-line position on the matter of resuming the process of uranium's enrichment that will enable it to produce nuclear power for peaceful purposes as Iranian officers declare, but for the development of a nuclear armory as the rest of the world fears, on the other hand the current corrupt economic system which is sustained by the conservative establishment and the need for reform. The new president is not willing to negotiate much about the nuclear program of his country declaring that "it is Iran's right to use the nuclear option for its own purposes". However, in order to combat the economic corruption which is deeply rooted inside Iranian society and controlled by the clerical camp, he is going to need foreign financial support (intending firstly on Iranians that live abroad and are willing to invest in their home country). It is astounding the fact that the bonyads, the religious missionary foundations, have transformed into huge holding companies that dominate the trade and manufacturing sectors while evading competition, taxes and state regulations²².

Ahmadinejad sent the message that Iranians shouldn't hope much about creating a democratic regime with excessive freedoms as in modern western democracies and open participation in the political life of the country. In exchange, he offered the battle against economic corruption and the incentives for economic equality, thus attracting the young voters of the country ,who have become tired by the corruption of their elders and who seek an exit from the economic strain they are experiencing. Will Ahmadinejad oppose those who accepted and promoted his candidacy? It doesn't seem very likely but yet, there seems to be a hope. The conservatives responded with a heavy backlash on Khatami's reform movements depriving Iranian people from their democratic rights. If the economic reform that the new president is planning doesn't succeed people may start protesting and defying the authoritarian theocratic regime that apart from denying to grant them democratic privileges, the regime drives the country into economic collapse and the lives of its people towards starvation. The conservatives may face then a very important dilemma; Either they accept the reform of their economy preferably without foreign aid, which will be given in exchange for the withdrawal of the nuclear program or they might find themselves some steps before their doom. It's true that tensions inside Iranian society have been excessive due to the awful economic situation of the country. Authoritarian states are better usually at dominating than transforming, controlling than changing and surviving than innovating as Daniel Brumberg

²² International Herald Tribune newspaper, 3 August 2005

mentions using John Migdal's analysis for "strong societies and weak states".²³ It seems that the theocratic regime must find innovative solutions in order to consolidate its power and survive if it aims to avoid the economic reform and to continue holding the reins of the country.

The world's attention is drawn to Iran for its nuclear intentions. Iran continues the defiance of the superpower. In the 80s, the defiance was shown with the seizure of the US embassy and the labeling of America as the great Satan. After the death of Khomeini, Iran following a more pragmatic approach turned towards Russia, China, Japan, India and other countries, except the United States of course, for military assistance and knowledge. Washington fears that Iran will upgrade its position to a leading role in the Middle East Area. Iran will not only believe in the defiance of the superpower but it will have the means to achieve it, since it will be able to deter any threat of attack, if attempted against its territory. And this upgrading is also dangerous, because it could create a pole in the greater area of Eurasia, where the small soviet successor countries along with other controversial Middle East countries, which were until now under the American influence, could force a coalition with Iran. Already for example, Uzbekistan has called for the departure of American troops and the shutting down of the American bases. Uzbekistan, which has a majority of Islamists, could very well stand near Iran and try to persuade more countries like Tajikistan or Turkmenistan in the coalition, countries that Iran has attempted to cooperate with before. And if such coalition existed, it would control a large majority of natural and valuable resources such as oil and gas (Iran controls a large portion of the world's oil production already).

Another fear is the flow of nuclear material to extremists or terrorist groups. We are living in the peak of terrorist activities, we are experiencing the terrible consequences and none could imagine what might happen if terrorists decide to use nuclear materials against a country. Definitely, if Iran proceeds to the enrichment of uranium even for peaceful purposes, it will possess the know-how to use this material for military reasons. Thus, Iran will gain a very important advantage because in any case it feels threatened or insecure, it could use its nuclear potential for preventive reasons. The United States along with the European states that negotiate with Iran for the uranium enrichment process (Britain, France and Germany), are expected to ask the International Atomic Energy Agency to refer Iran to the U.N. Security Council, if it resumes the sensitive nuclear activities it agreed to suspend last November. However, Iran doesn't seem to worry very much since there is no certainty that the Security Council would back the requests for punishment. As U.N. Secretary General stated such an act may set a precedent for future cases and may have a great impact on U.N. efforts to promote nuclear proliferation²⁴.

²³ Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World*, Cambridge University Press, 1994

²⁴ Reuters, 16 May 2005

Nevertheless, the question on how to deal with a controversial Iran cannot be answered so easily. The calls for provoking a regime change or the democratization of the country are frequent but the obstacles are many. For us that we dwell in the western democracies, far away from religious fanaticism and who are used to parliamentary procedures rather than religious declarations, it is difficult to perceive the key to understand the Middle East turmoil which is Islam itself; Islam is considered a template for all aspects of life, including politics.²⁵ In countries such as Iran, Egypt, Iraq and more, where there aren't real political parties, no free press, the religious shrines became the place for discussing politics. The political parties resemble diverse factions inside the religious field.

The United States chose the path of regime change in Iraq. The quest for freedom of Iraqi people was concluded and a new democratic Iraqi government was established. Indeed, democratization is a matter of security for the United States in the Middle East area. But is it possible for the United States to proceed without consent? Practically yes, but any move for a second attempt, in Iran for example, would demonstrate arrogance and lack of wisdom, without again U.N. Security Council's consent, absence of evidence and much more difficulty in persuading other states to help. USA must be very careful in the way it uses its preventive dogma. Prevention means military action against a state that might at some future point pose the risk of launching an attack and it's completely different from pre-emption which refers to military action against a state that is about to launch an attack.²⁶

Regime change in Iran is a far more difficult attempt than in Iraq. Iran is a country with a consolidated regime supported and based on a huge clerical mass which knows how to manipulate the public opinion. Iran has also a far less accessible terrain which cancels any plans for ground military operations. The attempt for regime change will be perceived by the population as a hostile act and a threatening uprising is possible waking up demons of the past.

Instead of demonstrating an approach towards regime change, the key lies on a combination of parameters that could draw Iran towards the West and offer incentives that will make it suspend its nuclear intentions. Empowering the reformers economically is the first step that should be taken towards Iran. The United States and its European allies lost a significant chance during the Khatami years to back up the Civil Society movement and the reformist attempts of Khatami and his fellows. Iranian society is calling for economic reform, the new president has pledged to deal with corruption and offer chances for foreign investments. Economy for Iran is the first step for social reform. If the United States push here, Iran will have to deal with a crucial

²⁵ Fareed Zakaria, Islam, Democracy and Constitutional Liberalism, Political Science Quarterly, Spring 2004

²⁶ John Lewis Gaddis, Grand Strategy in the Second Term, Foreign Affairs, January/February 2005

dilemma; security, which means insisting on the nuclear program, or economy which means reform. The United States has many cards to play in order to seduce Iran. One of them is the negotiations for the World Trade Organization. Another and maybe the most important (moreover in terms of security for Iran) but also the most challenging and dangerous, is proving to Iran that a potential collaboration in the greater area of Middle East is vital for the interests of both countries. Iran for the United States is a strategic partner in the Middle East. The elections of January in Iraq would have never been held without the Iranian help, which influences the large Shia minority at the south. It's true though that the steps should be very carefully planned. If the United States offer the strategic partnership and the economic incentives, then it should make sure that Iran's nuclear program is locked and buried deeply. Otherwise, it should make clear that severe measures would be taken against it. Using "the carrot and the stick" the United States face a serious challenge²⁷; If it decides to settle its differences with Iran, it may offer Iran a significant regional role which could be even much more important than the role Iran played during the Shah era. If we take a closer look at the neighborhood, Russia is still searching for its lost identity, Turkey is destabilized due to the Iraqi incidents, Iraq is not anymore the favorable child of the Middle East, is still picking up its pieces from the war and cannot play a regional role anymore, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are corrupted and linked with terrorist organizations.

Iran seems the only country that under certain circumstances and conditions could become the new ally of the United States in the Middle East area. It's also obvious that Iran is the factor that will help the stabilization of the area or will reinforce the crisis in the Middle East region. Apart from the various negotiations, secret or not, it is required for the success of this attempt to play down the pompous rhetoric such as "those who are not with us are against us" or from the other side "the great Satan" because they worsen the situation and they create a negative diplomatic approach. Iran needs the west and the west needs Iran at the moment. Such a geopolitical and natural state cannot be dissected or disintegrated. What western countries should do is try to find the appropriate methods of attracting the religious establishment and of applying to the popular sentiment, without insulting the Islamic basis of the country. As we mentioned above, Islam is the pole around of which everything is circling in the Middle East. Disrespecting and undermining it will only cause frustration and miscalculations. Approaching it and understanding it may not result in cordial friendship, but it will be the first step for a valuable policy towards Iran.

²⁷ Ray Takeyh & Kenneth Pollack, Taking on Tehran, March/April 2005 Foreign Affairs