A Mousavi supporter donned green, the color of Mousavi’s campaign, at a 2009 election rally. The rigged election brought massive protests, especially by young Iranians.
Why Iran Matters

The study of Iran helps us understand the seething resentment of a Middle East caught between Islam and modernization. Although Iran differs from its Arab neighbors in language (Persian) and religion (the Shia branch of Islam), they share the problem of sudden oil wealth destabilizing traditional political arrangements. There was no way the Middle East could have moved smoothly from monarchy to democracy. Can it now? Iran, having gone through one major revolution in 1979, could experience another. Iran’s rigged 2009 elections revealed how much Iranians resent rule by clerics. Even Iran’s clerical establishment began to split. Is Iran’s Islamic Republic, one of the world’s few theocracies, a stable and durable answer to the problem of modernizing Muslim lands? If not, what is?

Much of Iran is an arid plateau around 4,000 feet above sea level. Some areas are rainless desert; some get sufficient rain only for sparse sheep pasture. In this part of the world, irrigation made civilization possible, and whatever disrupted waterworks had devastating consequences. Persia’s location made it an important trade route between East and West, one of the links between the Middle East and Asia. Persia thus became a crossroads of civilizations and one of the earliest of the great civilizations.

The Impact of the Past

The trouble with being a crossroads is that your country becomes a target for conquest. Indo-European-speaking invaders took over Persia about the fifteenth century B.C. and laid the basis for subsequent Persian culture. Their most famous kings: Cyrus and Darius in the sixth century B.C. The invasions never ceased, though: the Greeks under Alexander in the third and fourth centuries B.C., the Arab Islamic conquest in the seventh century A.D., Turkish tribes in the eleventh century, Mongols in the thirteenth century, and many others. The repeated pattern was one of conquest, the founding of a new dynasty, and its falling apart as quarrelsome heirs broke it into petty kingdoms. This fragmentation set up the country for easy conquest again.

Questions to Consider

1. What has geography contributed to Iran’s development?
2. How does Iran differ from Arab countries?
3. What is a modernizing tyrant? Why do they fail?
4. What factors brought Iran’s Islamic Revolution?
5. How would you explain Iran’s dual executive? Who is more powerful?
6. Does modernization always bring secularization?
7. How would you explain the power struggle in Iran?
8. How have America and Iran misunderstood each other?
9. Why is the Persian Gulf region strategic?
Iran, known for most of history as Persia (it was officially renamed only in 1935), resembles China. Both are heirs to ancient and magnificent civilizations that, partly at the hands of outsiders, fell into “the sleep of nations.” When Iran awoke, it was far behind the West, which, like China, Iran views as an adversary. If and how Iran will move into modernity is one of our major questions.

Although it does not look or sound like it, Persian (Farsi) is a member of the broad Indo-European family of languages; the neighboring Arabic and Turkic are not. Today, Farsi is the mother tongue of about half of Iranians. Another fifth speak Persian-related languages (such as Kurdish). A quarter speak a Turkic language, and some areas speak Arabic and other tongues. The non-Farsi speakers occupy the Iranian periphery and have at times been discontent with rule by Persians. In Iranian politics today, to be descended from one of the non-Persian minorities is sometimes held against politicians.

The Arab Conquest

Allah’s prophet Muhammad died in Arabia in 632, but his new faith spread like wildfire. Islam means “submission” (to God’s will), and this was to be hastened by the sword. Islam arrived soon in Iran by military conquest. The remnant of the Sassanid Empire, already exhausted by centuries of warfare with Byzantium, was easily beaten by the Arabs at Qadisiya in 637 and within two centuries Persia was mostly Muslim. Adherents of the old religion, Zoroastrianism, fled to India where today they are a small, prosperous minority known as Parsis (see page 454).

The Arab conquest was a major break with the past. In contrast to the sharp social stratification of Persian tradition, Islam taught that all Muslims were, at least in a spiritual sense, equal. Persia adopted the Arabic script, and many Arab words enriched Persian. Persian culture flowed the other way, too, as the Arabs copied Persian architecture and civil administration. For six centuries, Persia was swallowed up by the Arab empires, but in 1055 the Seljuk Turks invaded from Central Asia and conquered most of the Middle East. As usual, their rule soon fell apart into many small states, easy prey for Genghis Khan, the Mongol “World Conqueror” whose horde thundered in from the east in 1219. One of his descendants who ruled Persia embraced Islam at the end of that century. This is part of a pattern Iranians are proud of: “We may be conquered,” they say, “but the conqueror ends up adopting our superior culture and becomes one of us.”

The coming of the Safavid dynasty in 1501 boosted development of a distinctly Iranian identity. The Safavids practiced a minority version of Islam called Shia (see box on page 539) and decreed it Persia’s state religion. Most of their subjects switched from Sunni Islam and are Shias to this day. Neighboring Sunni powers immediately attacked Safavid Persia, but this enabled the new regime to consolidate its control and develop an Islam with Persian characteristics.

Western Penetration

It is too simple to say Western cultural, economic, and colonial penetration brought down the great Persian empire. Safavid Persia was attacked from several directions, mostly by neighboring Muslim powers: the Ottoman Turks from the west, Uzbeks from the north, and Afghans from the
Geography

Bound Iran

Iran is bounded on the north by Armenia, Azerbaijan, the Caspian Sea, and Turkmenistan; on the south by the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf; and on the west by Iraq and Turkey.
northeast. In fighting the Ottomans, Safavid rulers made common cause with the early Portuguese, Dutch, and English sea traders in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. As previously in the region’s history, the outsiders were able to invade because the local kingdoms had weakened themselves in wars, a pattern that continues in our day.

In 1722, Afghan invaders ended the Safavid dynasty, but no one was able to govern the whole country. After much chaos, in 1795 the Qajar clan emerged victorious and founded a dynasty. Owing to Persian weakness, Britain and Russia became dominant in Persia, the Russians pushing in from the north, the British from India. Although never a colony, Persia, like China, slid into semicolonial status, with much of its political and economic life dependent on imperial designs, something Persians strongly resented. A particularly vexatious example was an 1890 treaty giving British traders a monopoly on tobacco sales in Persia. Muslim clerics led mass hatred of the British tobacco concession, and the treaty was repealed.

At this same time, liberal, Western ideas of government seeped into Persia, some brought, as in China, by Christian missionaries (who made very few Persian converts). The Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1907 (in which an American supporter of the uprising was killed) brought Persia’s first constitution and first elected parliament, the Majlis. The struggles over the tobacco concession and constitution were led by a combination of two forces: liberals who hated the monarchy and wanted Western-type institutions, and Muslim clerics who also disliked the monarchy but wanted a stronger role for Islam. This same combination brought down the Shah in 1979; now these two strands have turned against each other over the future of Iran.

Notice how at almost exactly the same time—1905 in Russia, 1906 in Persia—corrupt and weak monarchies promised somewhat democratic constitutions in the face of popular uprisings. Both monarchies, dedicated to autocratic power and hating democracy, only pretended to deliver, a prescription for increasing mass discontent. A new shah inherited the throne in 1907 and shut down the Majlis with his Russian-trained Cossack bodyguard unit. Mass protest forced the last Qajar shah to flee to Russia in 1909; he tried to return in 1911 but was forced back even though Russian troops occupied Tehran. The 1907 Anglo-Russian treaty had already cut Persia in two, with a Russian sphere of influence in the north and a British one in the south. During World War I, Persia was nominally neutral, but its strategic location turned into a zone of contention and chaos. Neighboring Turkey allied with Germany, and Russia and Britain allied with each other. Russian, British, and German agents tried to tilt Persia their way.

The First Pahlavi

As is often the case when a country degenerates into chaos, military officers see themselves as saviors of the nation, the praetorianism that we saw in Nigeria. In 1921 an illiterate cavalry officer, Reza Khan, commander of the Cossack brigade, seized power and in 1925 had himself crowned shah, the founder of the short lived (1925–1979) Pahlavi dynasty. The nationalistic Reza took the pre-Islamic surname Pahlavi and told the world to call the country by its true name, Iran, from the word aryan, indicating the country’s Indo-European roots. (Nazi ideologists also loved the word aryan, which they claimed indicated genetic superiority. Indeed, the ancient Persian Zoroastrians preached racial purity.)
Like Atatürk, Reza Shah was determined to modernize his country (see box on page 540). His achievements were impressive. He molded an effective Iranian army and used it to suppress tribal revolts and unify Iran. He created a modern, European-type civil service and a national bank. He replaced traditional and Islamic courts with civil courts operating under Western codes of justice. In 1935 he founded Iran's first Western-style university. Under state supervision and fueled by oil revenues, Iran's economy grew. Also like Atatürk, Reza Shah ordered his countrymen to adopt Western dress and women to stop wearing the veil. But Reza also kept the press and Majlis closely obedient. Critics and dissidents often died in jail. Reza Shah was a classic modernizing tyrant.

World War II put Iran in the same situation as World War I had. It was just too strategic to leave alone. Iran was a major oil producer and conduit for U.S. supplies to the desperate Soviet Union. As before, the Russians took over in the north and the British (later the Americans) in the south. Both agreed to clear out six months after the war ended. Reza Shah, who tilted toward Germany, in September 1941 was exiled by the British to South Africa, where he died in 1944. Before he left, he abdicated in favor of his son, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi.

The Americans and British left Iran in 1945; the Soviets did not, and some think this incident marked the start of the Cold War. Stalin claimed that Azerbaijan, a Soviet republic in the Caucasus, was entitled by ethnic right to merge with the Azeris of northern Iran and refused to withdraw Soviet forces. Stalin set up puppet Communist Azeri and Kurdish governments there. In 1946 U.S. President Truman delivered some harsh words, Iran's prime minister promised Stalin an oil deal, and Stalin pulled out. Then the Majlis canceled the oil deal.

**Geography**

**SUNNI AND SHIA**

More than 80 percent of the world’s Muslims practice the mainstream branch of Islam, called Sunni (from *sunna*, the word of the Prophet). A minority branch (of 100 million) called Shia is scattered unevenly throughout the Muslim world. The two split early over who was the true successor (*caliph*) of Muhammad. Shias claim the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, Ali, has the title, but he was assassinated in 661. Shia means followers or partisans; hence, Shias are the followers of Ali. When Ali’s son, Hussein, attempted to claim the title, his forces were beaten at Karbala in present-day Iraq (now a Shia shrine) in 680, and Hussein was betrayed and tortured to death. This gave Shia a fixation on martyrdom; some of their holidays feature self-flagellation.

Shia also developed a messianic concept that was lacking in Sunni. Shias in Iran hold that the line of succession passed through a series of 12 *imams* (religious leaders) of whom Ali was the first. The twelfth imam disappeared in 873 but is to return one day to “fill the world with justice.” He is referred to as the Hidden Imam and the Expected One.

Shias are no more “fundamentalist” than other Muslims, who also interpret the Koran strictly. Although the origin and basic tenets of the two branches are identical, Sunnis regard Shias as extremist, mystical, and crazy. Some 60 percent of Iraqis are Shia, but only in Iran is Shia the state religion. With their underdog status elsewhere, some Shias rebel (with Iranian money and guidance), as in Lebanon, southern Iraq, and eastern Arabia. Shia imparts a peculiar twist to Iranians, giving them the feeling of being isolated but right, beset by enemies on all sides, and willing to martyr themselves for their cause.
The Last Pahlavi

Oil determined much of Iran's twentieth-century history. Oil was the great prize for the British, Hitler, Stalin, and the United States. Who should own and profit from Iran's oil—foreigners, the Iranian government, or Iranians as a whole? Major oil deposits were first discovered in Iran in 1908 and developed under a British concession, the Anglo-Persian (later Anglo-Iranian) Oil Company. Persia got little from the oil deal, and Persians came to hate this rich foreign company in their midst, one that wrote its own rules. Reza Shah ended the lopsided concession in 1932 and forced the AIOC to pay higher royalties.

The AIOC still rankled Iranians, who rallied to the radical nationalist Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq in the early 1950s. With support from Iranian nationalists, liberals, and leftists, Mossadeq nationalized AIOC holdings. Amidst growing turmoil and what some feared was a tilt to the Soviet Union, young Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi fled the country in 1953. The British urged Washington to do something, and President Eisenhower, as part of the U.S. containment policy, had the CIA destabilize the Tehran government. It was easy: The CIA's Kermit Roosevelt arrived with $1 million in a suitcase and rented a pro-Shah mob. Mossadeq was out, the Shah flew back and was restored, and the United States won a battle in the Cold War. We thought we were very clever.

Like his father, the Shah became a modernizing tyrant, promoting what he called his “White Revolution” from above (as opposed to a red revolution from below). Under the Shah, Iran had excellent relations with the United States. President Nixon touted the Shah as our pillar of stability in the Persian Gulf. We were his source of technology and military hardware. Some 100,000 Iranian students came to U.S. universities, and 45,000 American businesspeople and consultants surged into Iran for lucrative contracts. (This point demonstrates that person-to-person contacts do not always lead to good relations between countries.)

Comparison

**ATATÜRK AND REZA SHAH**

During the 1920s, two strong personalities in adjacent Middle Eastern lands attempted to modernize their countries from above in the face of much traditional and Islamic reluctance. Kemal Atatürk in Turkey and Reza Shah in Iran were only partly successful. Both were nationalist military officers and Muslims but secular in outlook; both wished to separate mosque and state.

In economics, both were statists (see page 122) and made the government the number-one investor and owner of major industries. Both pushed education, the improved status of women, and Western clothing. As such, both aroused traditionalist opposition led by Muslim clerics. Both ordered “You will be modern!” but religious forces opposed their reforms and continue to do so to this day.

Their big difference: Atatürk ended the Ottoman monarchy and firmly supported a republican form of government in Turkey. He pushed his reforms piecemeal through parliament, which often opposed him. Reza Shah rejected republicanism and parliaments as too messy; he insisted on an authoritarian monarchy as the only way to modernize his unruly country, as did his son. Although Turkey has had plenty of troubles since Atatürk, it has not been ripped apart by revolution. Atatürk built some political institutions; the Pahlavi shahs built none.
The United States was much too close to the Shah, supporting him unstintingly and unquestioningly. The Shah was Western-educated and anti-Communist and was rapidly modernizing Iran; he was our kind of guy. Iranian unrest and opposition went unnoticed by the U.S. embassy. Elaborate Iranian public relations portrayed Iran in a rosy light in the U.S. media. Under Nixon, U.S. arms makers sold Iran “anything that goes bang.” We failed to see that Iran and the Shah were two different things and that our unqualified backing of the Shah was alienating many Iranians. We ignored how the Shah governed by means of a dreaded secret police, the SAVAK. We failed to call a tyrant a tyrant. Only when the Islamic Revolution broke out did we learn what Iranians really thought about the Shah. We were so obsessed by communism penetrating from the north that we could not imagine a bitter, hostile Islamic revolution coming from within Iran.

What finally did in the Shah? Too much oil money went to his head. With the 1973 Arab–Israeli war, oil producers worldwide got the chance to do what they had long wished: boost the price of oil and take over oil extraction from foreign companies. The Shah, one of the prime movers of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), gleefully did both. What Mossadeq attempted, the Shah accomplished. World oil prices quadrupled. Awash with cash, the Shah went mad with vast, expensive schemes. The state administered oil revenues for the greater glory of Iran and its army, not for the Iranian people, creating resentment that hastened the Islamic Revolution. Oil led to turmoil.

The sudden new wealth caused great disruption. The Shah promoted education, but as people became more educated they could see the Shah was a tyrant. Some people got rich fast while most stayed poor. Corruption grew worse than ever. Millions flocked from the countryside to the cities where, rootless and confused, they turned to the only institution they understood, the mosque. In their rush to modernize, the Pahlavis alienated the Muslim clergy. Not only did the Shah undermine the traditional cultural values of Islam, he seized land owned by religious foundations and distributed it to peasants as part of his White Revolution. The mullahs also hated the influx of American culture, with its alcohol and sex. Many Iranians saw the Shah’s huge military expenditures—at the end, an incredible 17 percent of Iran’s GDP—as a waste of money. As Alexis de Tocqueville noted in his study of the French Revolution, economic growth hastens revolution.

One of Iran’s religious authorities, Ayatollah Khomeini, criticized the Shah and incurred his wrath. He had Khomeini exiled to Iraq in 1964 and then forced him to leave Iraq in 1978. France allowed Khomeini to live in a Paris suburb, from which his recorded messages were telephoned to

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**Geography**

**Cruising the Persian Gulf**

The countries bordering the Persian Gulf contain two-thirds of the world’s proven petroleum reserves. Some of you may do military service in the Gulf, so start learning the geography now. Imagine you are on an aircraft carrier making a clockwise circle around the Gulf. Upon entering the Strait of Hormuz, which countries do you pass to port? Oman, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain (an island), Kuwait, Iraq, and Iran.
cassette recorders in Iran to be duplicated and distributed through mosques nationwide. Cheap cassettes bypassed the Shah’s control of Iran’s media and helped bring him down.

In the late 1970s, matters came to a head. The Shah’s overambitious plans had made Iran a debtor nation. Discontent from both secular intellectuals and Islamic clerics bubbled up. And, most dangerous, U.S. President Jimmy Carter made human rights a foreign policy goal. As part of this, the Shah’s dictatorship came under U.S. criticism. Shaken, the Shah began to relax his grip, and that is precisely when all hell broke loose. As de Tocqueville observed, the worst time in the life of a bad government is when it begins to mend its ways.

Compounding his error, Carter showed his support for the Shah by exchanging visits, proof to Iranians that we were supporting a hated tyrant. In 1977, Carter and the Shah had to retreat into the White House from the lawn to escape the tear gas that drifted over from the anti-Shah protest (mostly by Iranian students) in Lafayette Park.

By late 1978, the Shah, facing huge demonstrations and (unknown to Washington) dying of cancer, was finished. Shooting into the crowds of protesters just made them angrier. The ancient Persian game of chess ends with a checkmate, a corruption of the Farsi shah mat (“the king is trapped”). On January 16, 1979, the last Pahlavi left Iran. Shah mat.

THE KEY INSTITUTIONS

A Theocracy

Two-and-a-half millennia of monarchy ended in Iran with a 1979 referendum, carefully supervised by the Khomeini forces, that introduced the Islamic Republic of Iran and a new constitution. As in most countries, the offices of head of state and head of government are split. But instead of a figurehead monarch (as in Britain) or weak president (as in Germany), Iran now has two heads of state: one its leading religious figure, the other a more standard president. The religious chief is the real power. That makes Iran a theocracy and a dysfunctional political system.

Theocracy is rare and tends not to last. Even in ancient times, priests filled supporting rather than executive roles. Russia’s tsar, officially head of both church and state, was far over on the state side; he wore military garb, not priestly. Iran (plus Afghanistan and Sudan) attempted a theocratic system. For centuries Persia’s Shia clerics, reasoning that only God can ultimately govern, avoided and ignored politics, an attitude called quietism. They did not like any shah but practiced a kind of separation of mosque and state. Khomeini’s radical design overturned all this; now clerics must rule an “Islamic republic.” Murmurings of returning to quietism can now be heard from some Iranian theologians unhappy with the corruption and power-seeking of the clerical establishment.

Khomeini developed the principle of the velayat-e faqih, rule of the Islamic jurist. In the Khomeini constitution, the leading Islamic jurist, the faqih, serves for life. “Jurist” means a legal scholar steeped in Islamic, specifically Shia, religious law. (The closest Western equivalent is canon law. In medieval Europe, canon lawyers were among the leading intellectual and political figures.) Allegedly, the faqih, also known as the “Spiritual Guide” and “Supreme Leader,” can use the Koran and Islamic commentaries to decide all issues, even those having nothing to do with religion. (An Islamist would likely say everything is connected with religion.)
Khomeini, the first and founding faqih who died in 1989, was nearly all-powerful. Successors are chosen by an Assembly of Experts of 86 Muslim clerics elected every eight years, who are supposed to choose from among the purest and most learned Islamic jurists. The man they elect (Islam permits no women religious leaders) is not necessarily an ayatollah, the wisest of Shia jurists. In 1989 the Experts chose Ali Khamenei, a hojatollah, the rank just below, but he was immediately promoted to ayatollah. Khamenei, expected to serve for life, lacks Khomeini’s (do not confuse the two names) charisma and Islamic authority but is still the real power. Normally aloof from day-to-day politics, from behind the scenes Khamenei names the heads of all major state and religious organizations and may declare war. He controls the judiciary, armed forces, security police, intelligence agencies, radio, and television. He is much more powerful than Iran’s president and holds a veto over presidential appointments. Seeing the 2009 street protests as a threat to his rule, Khamenei abandoned neutrality and made a rare public appearance to declare the blatantly rigged election fair and finished and threaten punishment for protesters.

Below the Supreme Leader is an ordinary president, who is in charge of most day-to-day administration. He is elected, but from a very short list of only those approved by the strange Council of Guardians (see below), and may serve two 4-year terms. Should the president ever get any ideas different from those of the faqih, the latter easily overrides and controls the president. In 1997, almost by accident, a relatively liberal cleric, Muhammad Khatami, was elected president, but every move he made to reform the system was blocked by the Supreme Leader. Khatami filled two terms but accomplished essentially nothing. The current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was elected (but not fairly) in 2005 and reelected in a fake landslide in 2009.

**Iran’s Legislature**

Iran has a unicameral (one-house) legislature, the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majlis), consisting of 290 deputies elected for four-year terms. Iran uses single-member districts, like Britain and the U.S. Congress. Iran is divided into 265 constituencies, and Iranians who are 18 and older can vote. Additional seats are reserved for non-Muslim deputies: five each for Assyrian Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians; two for Armenian Christians; none for Bahá’ís. The Speaker of parliament is a major position. The constitution guarantees MPs immunity from arrest, but the conservative judiciary still jails MPs who call too loudly for reforms.

Electoral balloting prior to 2009 had been free and fair, but permission to run is stringently controlled. The Council of Guardians (see next paragraphs) must approve all candidates, and they disqualify thousands who might be critical. Open liberals are thus discouraged from even trying to run. The low-turnout 2008 parliamentary elections gave the Majlis to Ahmadinejad’s radicals because no openly liberal candidates were allowed, so not many Iranians bothered to vote.

More powerful than the Majlis is the Council of Guardians, a strange institution combining features of an upper house, a supreme court, an electoral commission, and a religious inquisition. Its 12 members serve six years each, half of them changed every three years. The faqih chooses six Islamic clerics; Iran’s supreme court (the High Council of Justice) names another six, all Islamic lawyers, who are approved by the Majlis.

The Council examines each Majlis bill to make sure it does not violate Islamic principles. If a majority decides it does, the bill is returned to the Majlis to be corrected. Without Council approval, a bill is in effect vetoed. All bills aiming at reform are blocked in this way. To settle conflicts between the Majlis and the Council, an “Expediency Council” appointed by the Leader has become like another legislature. In 2005 the Expediency Council—chaired by Rafsanjani,
The 2005 election was not democratic, but 2009 was much worse. The Council of Guardians in both elections screened out hundreds of candidates deemed liberal or insufficiently Islamic. Only a few were allowed to run. Many charged the balloting in both elections was rigged; they were silenced. Critical newspapers were closed. Iran’s religious hard-liners backed Ahmadinejad in both elections. Iran elects presidents in a French-style two rounds. If no one gets a majority in the first round, a runoff between the two biggest winners is held two weeks later. In 2005 Ahmadinejad won the second round 62–36 percent with a low turnout, as many Iranians knew the fix was in.

Just before the 2009 election, Mousavi was ahead of Ahmadinejad in polls, and observers said the election was too close to call. The regime did not allow a close election. Within four hours of the polls’ closing, officials announced that the ballots had been counted—with amazing speed, considering the record 85 percent turnout—and that Ahmadinejad won on the first round with an improbable 63 percent of the vote to Mousavi’s 33 percent, so no runoff was necessary. Mexico’s PRI could not have done it better.

Mousavi supporters were not fooled and turned out massively, connected by the Internet, Facebook, and Twitter and wearing his signature bright-green color to protest the electoral fraud. “Where is my vote?” their placards asked. Police and the fanatic Basij militia ruthlessly broke up their rallies, killing more than 30 and jailing thousands. There were reports of torture and rape (both male and female) in prison. A woman student, Neda Agha Soltan, shot by a sniper on a Tehran street, instantly became a martyr. Shias are fixated with martyrdom. Ayatollah Khamenei went public—an unusual step—to declare Ahmadinejad the winner and charge that protesters were duped by British and U.S. agents. Hundreds of critics were given Stalin-type show trials in which some “confessed” their crimes on television. Most Iranians knew better, and the regime lost legitimacy. Even conservatives said the crackdown was unfair and brutal.

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the very man Ahmadinejad had beaten in elections—was given additional powers to oversee the president. Iran’s conservative religious establishment does not completely trust the rambunctious Ahmadinejad.

More important, the Council of Guardians scrutinizes all candidates and has the power to disqualify them without explanation. The Council scratches a large fraction of Majlis and presidential candidates. In 2002 President Khatami and the Majlis tried to take this power away from the Council of Guardians, but the Council vetoed the bills. The Council of Guardians thus makes the Iranian system unrefromable. If there is ever to be serious change in Iran, the Council of Guardians will have to go.

**Emerging Parties?**

Parties are legal under Iran’s constitution, but the government does not allow them; only individual candidates run. Even Khomeini dissolved his own Islamic Republic Party in 1984. Lack of party labels makes Iranian elections less than free, for without them voters cannot clearly discern who stands for what. Because voters have no party IDs, Iranian elections are often decided by late swings (see page 64) that come from out of nowhere. It is difficult to count how many seats each of the several “tendencies” control; they have to be estimated. In practice, candidates are linked with informal parties and political tendencies called “fronts” or “coalitions.” Eventually, these may turn into legal parties. Observers see four main political groupings plus many factions and individual viewpoints.

Radicals, the most extreme supporters of the Islamic Revolution—such as President Ahmadinejad (see box on page 546)—adhere to Khomeini’s original design for an Islamic republic. They preach a populist line of help for the poor and hatred of the United States. In the 2008 Majlis elections—held French style in two rounds—they ran as the Unified Principlist Front and won 117 out of 290 seats.

Conservatives, calmer and generally older than the radicals, want a nonfanatic Islamic Republic with more economic growth than Ahmadinejad delivered. In 2008 they ran as the Broad Principlists Coalition and won 53 seats. Iran’s politics is now largely the struggle between conservatives and radicals, as reformists and liberals are not allowed to play.

Reformists tend to cluster in the educated middle class. They favor privatization of state enterprises, less Islamic supervision of society, elections open to most candidates, fewer powers for the Council of Guardians, and dialogue with the United States. In the late 1990s, they held a majority in the Majlis, but the Council of Guardians now disqualifies most of their candidates. In 2008 they ran as Reformists and won 46 seats. Opposition candidate Mir Hussein Mousavi won reformist support in the crudely squelched 2009 presidential election.

Liberals would go further. Popular among Iranian students, they emphasize democracy and civil rights and want totally free elections. They want to end all social controls imposed by the Islamists. In economics, however, they are a mixed bag, ranging from free marketers to socialists. Knowing the Council of Guardians would reject them, no liberals run for office. Both reformists and liberals keep their mouths shut and do nothing stupid, like having contact with Americans. They joined forces in 2009 to vote for Mousavi.

Some of the regime’s sharpest critics were leaders of the 1979 revolution who now do not like its authoritarianism and seek separation of mosque and state. They include hundreds of clerics like Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, one of the most senior figures of Shia Islam, denounced repression and demanded reform. “Either officials change their methods and give freedom to the people, and stop
interfering in elections, or the people will rise up with another revolution,” he warned. His death and funeral in late 2009 turned into a massive rally by regime opponents. Some clerics called Supreme Leader Khamenei a dictator and urged him to resign. Iran’s clerical establishment was beginning to splinter.

Iran could be described as a political system waiting to be free. The potential is there, but institutional changes would have to be made. First, the power of the Leader would have to be reduced to that of a purely spiritual guide with few or no temporal powers. Next, the Council of Guardians would have to be abolished. With these two changes, Iran’s institutions could

**Personaliaies**

**MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD**

The surprise winner of Iran’s 2005 presidential election was the populist mayor of Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then age 49. (Actually, his name is hyphenated, Ahmadi-Nejad, and pronounced that way.) The radical Ahmadinejad seeks to restore the original Islamist and socialist goals of the 1979 revolution, in which he was a student leader. He was “reelected” in 2009 by rigged ballot counting and backed by the Supreme Leader but lost popularity and legitimacy among Iranians.

Ahmadinejad portrayed himself as a man of the people who lived modestly and redistributed money to uplift Iran’s poor. Ahmadinejad was the first Iranian president to hold no religious rank. Born in a provincial city in 1956, the son of a blacksmith, he studied civil engineering in Tehran and enthusiastically supported the Islamic Revolution. Some ex-hostages charge he was among the organizers and interrogators of the takeover of the U.S. embassy in 1979. He joined the Basij militia and Revolutionary Guards during the war with Iraq, although it is not known if he was in combat.

Ahmadinejad was appointed governor of Ardabil province in northwest Iran while studying for a doctorate in civil engineering in Tehran, where he subsequently became a professor. He became Tehran’s mayor in 2003 after an election with a 12 percent turnout and served two years before running for president in 2005. Some Iranians may have voted for him just to protest against Iran’s corrupt establishment.

Ahmadinejad, fanatic in religion and populist (see page 486) in economics, redistributed oil revenues to low-income Iranians, but his policies led to economic stagnation and mass complaints. He initially replaced “corrupt” officials with some 10,000 of his supporters, many of them Revolutionary Guards (see page 556), thus militarizing Iran’s power structure. Establishment conservatives, however, dislike him and blocked some of his policies and ministerial nominations. Ahmadinejad played the nationalist card by defying the West on Iran’s “peaceful” nuclear program, which could be used to build nuclear weapons. He thundered that “Israel must be wiped off the map” and that the Holocaust was a “myth,” comments that further isolated Iran from the rest of the world. The mystical Ahmadinejad, who says that the hidden imam will soon appear, made Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran’s Leader, seem moderate and stable in comparison.
quickly turn it into a democracy, with a real executive president, a critical Majlis, multiparty elections, and a free press. Iran has the greatest democratic potential of any Persian Gulf country.

**Iranian Political Culture**

As in much of the Third World, many Iranians do not want their traditional culture replaced by Western culture. “We want to be modern,” say many citizens of the Third World, “but not like you. We’ll do it our way, based on our values and our religion.” Whether you can be a modern, high-tech society while preserving your old culture is a key question for much of the globe today. Will efforts to combine old and new cultures work or lead to chaos? In some cases, like Japan, it has worked. For Islamic nations, so far it has not. The key factor may be the flexibility and adaptability of the traditional culture, which is very high in the case of Japan. Japan learned to be modern but still distinctly Japanese. Can Muslim countries do the equivalent?

Beneath all the comings and goings of conquerors and kingdoms, Persian society kept its traditions for centuries. As in China, dynastic changes little disturbed the broad majority of the population, poor farmers and shepherds, many of them still tribal in organization. As in much of the Third World, traditional society was actually quite stable and conservative. Islam, the mosque, the mullah, and the *Koran* gave solace and meaning to the lives of most Persians. People were poor but passive.

Then came modernization—mostly under foreign pressure—starting late in the nineteenth century, expanding with the development of petroleum, and accelerating under the two Pahlavi shahs. According to what political scientists call modernization theory, a number of things happen more or less simultaneously. First, the economy changes, from simple farming to natural-resource extraction to manufacturing and services. Along with this comes urbanization, the movement of people from the country to the cities. Education levels rise; most people become literate, and some go to college. People consume more mass media—at first newspapers, then radio, and finally television—until many are aware of what is going on in their country and in the world. A large middle class emerges and with them interest groups. People now want to participate in politics; they resent being treated like children. Modernization, in this optimistic theory, leads gradually to democracy. As we saw in China, this process is not smooth, automatic, or guaranteed.

It was long supposed that secularization comes with modernization, and both Atatürk and the Pahlavis had tough showdowns with the mullahs. But Iran’s Islamic Revolution and other religious revivals now make us question the inevitability of secularization. Under certain conditions—when things change too fast, when the economy declines and unemployment grows, and when modernization repudiates traditional values—people may return to religion with renewed fervor. If their world seems to be falling apart, church or mosque give stability and meaning to life. This is as true of the present-day United States as it is of Egypt. In the Muslim world, many intellectuals first passionately embraced modernizing creeds of socialism and nationalism only to despair and return to Islam. (Some intellectuals are now interested in free-market capitalism, which had been unpopular because it was associated with the West.)

The time of modernization is a risky one in the life of a nation. If the old elite understand the changes that are bubbling through their society, they will gradually allow democratization in a way that does not destabilize the system. A corrupt and rigid elite, on the other hand, that is convinced the masses are not ready for democracy (and never will be), block political reforms until there is a tremendous head of steam. Then, no longer able to withstand the pressure, they suddenly give way, chaos breaks out, and it ends in tyranny. If the old elite had reformed sooner and gradually, they might have
Political Culture

Is Islam Anti-Modern?

Most Middle East experts deny there is anything inherent in Islamic doctrine that keeps Muslim societies from modernizing. Looking at cases, though, one finds no Islamic countries that have fully modernized. Under Atatürk, Turkey made great strides between the two wars, but Islamic militants still try to undo his reforms. In Huntington’s terms (see page 520), Turkey is a torn country, pulled between Western and Islamic cultures. Recently Malaysia, half of whose people are Muslim, has scored rapid economic progress. Generally, though, Islam coincides with backwardness, at least as we define it. Some Muslim countries are rich but only because oil has brought them outside revenues.

By itself Islam probably does not cause backwardness. The Koran prohibits loaning money at interest, but there are ways to work around that. Islamic civilization was for centuries far ahead of Christian Europe in science, philosophy, medicine, sanitation, architecture, steelmaking, and much more. Translations from the Arabic taught Europe classic Greek thought, especially Aristotle, which helped trigger the Renaissance and Europe’s modernization. A millennium ago, you would hear Muslims concluding that Christianity was keeping Europe backward.

But Islamic civilization faltered, and European civilization modernized. By the sixteenth century, when European merchant ships arrived in the Persian Gulf, the West was ahead of Islam. Why? According to some scholars, early Islam permitted independent interpretations of the Koran (ijtihad), but between the ninth and eleventh centuries this was replaced by a single, orthodox interpretation (taqlid), and as a result intellectual life atrophied. Islam has never had a reformation.

The Mongol invaders of the thirteenth century massacred the inhabitants of Baghdad and destroyed the region’s irrigation systems, something that the Arab empire never recovered from. (The Mongols’ impact on Russia was also devastating.) Possibly because of this, Islam turned to mysticism. Instead of an open, flexible, and tolerant faith that was fascinated by learning and science, Islam turned sullen and rigid. When the Portuguese opened up a direct trade route between Europe and Asia, bypassing Islamic middlemen, trade through the Middle East declined sharply, and with it the region’s economy declined.

Islam has a structural problem in its combination of religion and government, which makes it difficult to split mosque and state. Those who try to do so (such as Atatürk) are resisted. Even today, many Muslims want sharia (see page 515) to be the law of the land. This creates hostility between secular modernizers and religious traditionalists, who compete for political power, a destructive tug of war that blocks progress.

A major factor was the domination of European (chiefly British) imperialists starting in the nineteenth century. This created the same resentment we saw in China, the resentment of a proud civilization brought low by unwelcome foreigners: “You push in here with your guns, your railroads, and your commerce and act superior to us. Well, culturally and morally we are superior to you, and eventually we’ll kick you out and show you.” With this comes hatred of anything Western and therefore opposition to modernity, because accepting modernity means admitting the West is superior. Islam teaches it is superior to all other civilizations and will eventually triumph worldwide. Devout Muslims do not like evidence to the contrary.

If Islamic countries do not discard their cultural antipathy to modernity—which need not be a total imitation of the West—their progress will be slow and often reversed. Millions of Muslims living in the West are modern and still Islamic. Ideas for religious modernization are already afoot in Islam, with, ironically, Iranian intellectuals in the lead. Eventually, we could see societies that are both modern and Muslim. One of the best ways to promote this: Educate women, which is precisely what is happening in Iran.
lowered the pressure and eased the transition to democracy. South Korea and Taiwan are examples of a favorable transition from dictatorship to democracy. Iran under the Shah is a negative example.

The Shah was arrogant: He alone would uplift Iran. He foresaw no democratic future for Iran and cultivated few sectors of the population to support him. When the end came, few Iranians did support him. Indeed, the Shah scorned democracy in general, viewing it as a chaotic system that got in its own way, a view as old as the ancient Persian attack on Greece. The mighty Persian empire, under one ruler, could surely beat a quarrelsome collection of Greek city states. (Wrong!) The Shah supposed that Iran, under his enlightened despotism, would soon surpass the decadent West. A journalist once asked the Shah why he did not relinquish some of his personal power and become a symbolic monarch, like the king of Sweden. He replied: “I will become like the king of Sweden when Iranians become like Swedes.”

The answer to this overly simple view is that, yes, when your people are poor and ignorant, absolute rule is one of your few alternatives. Such a country is far from ready for democracy. But after considerable modernization—which the Shah himself had implemented—Iran became a different country, one characterized by the changes discussed earlier. An educated middle class resents one-man rule; the bigger this class, the more resentment builds. By modernizing, the Shah sawed off the tree limb on which he was sitting. He modernized Iran until it no longer tolerated him.

**Islam as a Political Ideology**

Ayatollah Khomeini developed an interesting ideology that resonated with many Iranians. Traditionally, Shia Islam disdained politics, waiting for the return of the Twelfth Imam to rule (see box on page 539). Khomeini and his followers, departing from this old tradition, decided that, while they wait, the top Shia religious leaders should also assume political power. Called by some Islamism, it was not only religious but also social, economic, and nationalistic. The Shah and his regime, said Khomeini, had both abandoned Islam and turned away from economic and social justice. They allowed

**Key Concepts**

**Is “Islamic Fundamentalism” the Right Name?**

Some object to the term “Islamic fundamentalism.” Fundamentalism was coined in the early twentieth century to describe U.S. Bible-belt Protestants. It stands for inerrancy of Scripture: The Bible means what it says and is not open to interpretation. But that is the way virtually all Muslims view the Koran, so Muslims are automatically fundamentalists. Some thinkers propose we call it Islamic integralism instead, indicating a move to integrate the Koran and sharia with government. Integralism, too, is borrowed, from a Catholic movement early in the twentieth century whose adherents sought to live a Christ-like existence. The Sunni movement for returning to the pure Islam of the founders is salafyya, which has been around for centuries in several forms. It is not part of Shia Islam; salafis in fact despise Shia. The Wahhabi Islam of Saudi Arabia and al Qaeda are salafi.

Some political scientists use the term political Islam, indicating it is the political use of religion to gain power. The term Islamism, a religion turned into a political ideology, won favor for the simple reason that it is short (not a bad reason).
the rich and corrupt to live in Westernized luxury while most struggled in poverty. They sold out Iran to
the Americans, exchanging the people’s oil for U.S. weapons. Tens of thousands of Americans lived in
Iran, corrupting Iran’s youth with their “unclean” morals. By returning to the Koran, as interpreted by
the mullahs, Iranians would not only cleanse themselves spiritually but also build a just society of
equals. The mighty would be brought low and the poor raised up by welfare benefits administered by
mosques and Islamic associations. Like communism, Islamism preaches leveling of class differences but
through the mosque and mullahs rather than through the Party and apparatchiks.

Islamism is thus a catchall ideology, offering an answer to most things that made Iranians discontent.
It is a potent mix, but can it work? Probably not. Over time, its several strands fall apart, and its
factions quarrel. Islamism’s chief problem is economics (as we shall consider in greater detail later).
As Islamism recedes as a viable ideology, look for the reemergence of other ideologies in Iran.

**Democracy and Authority**

Observers, both Iranian and Western, estimate that only a minority of Iranians support the current
regime and that rule by the mullahs could be overturned. Even if reformists someday overcome the
regime’s guns, could Iranians establish a stable democracy, or was the Shah right—do Iranians
need a strong hand to govern them? There were two impulses behind the 1979 revolution:
secularist intellectuals seeking democracy and Islamists seeking theocracy. The secular democrats,
always a small minority, threw in with the more numerous Islamists, figuring that they would oust
the Shah, and then the secularists, being better educated, would lead. But the Islamists, better
organized and knowing exactly what they wanted, used the secular democrats and then dumped
them (and in some cases shot them). Many secular democrats fled to other countries. Learning too
late what was happening to them, some democratic supporters of the Revolution put out the
slogan: “In the dawn of freedom, there is no freedom.”

But these secular democrats did not disappear; they laid low and went along outwardly with
the Islamic Revolution. To have opposed it openly could have earned them the firing squad.

**Political Culture**

**Are Iranians Religious Fanatics?**

Only a minority of Iranians are Muslim fanatics. Not
even the supposed Islamic fundamentalists are nec-
esarily fanatic. Many Iranians are perfectly aware
that religion is a political tool (more on this in the
next section) and are fed up with it. Massive regime
propaganda depicts the United States as the “Great
Satan,” but most Iranians are very friendly to the
few Americans who visit. Some have been in the
United States or have relatives there; many remem-
ber that when Iran was allied with America, Iraq did
not dare invade. Iran was the only Muslim country
where tens of thousands spontaneously showed sym-
pathy with Americans after 9/11. Do not confuse
regime propaganda with the attitudes of ordinary
citizens.

Ironically, Iranians pointed to the Taliban govern-
ment of neighboring Afghanistan as *salafi* extremists.
The Taliban were overthrown in 2001 but are now at-
temptsing a comeback. Far stricter than Iranian
Islamists, the Taliban confine women to the home and
require all men to grow beards. Why the conflict with
Iran? Like most Afghans, the Taliban are Sunni and at-
tack the Shia minority, some 1.5 million of whom fled
to Iran. The Taliban killed Iranian intelligence agents
who were aiding Afghan Shias. Dangerous stuff, this
religious extremism.
Among them are the smartest and best-educated people in Iran, the very people needed to make the economy grow. With Iran’s economic decline, many lost their jobs and became private consultants and specialists, working out of their apartments. More than 2 million Iranians have left since 1979, many to the United States and Canada. Many Iranians speak scathingly in private of the oppression and economic foolishness of the regime. “I believe in Islam, but not in the regime of the mullahs,” said one Iranian. In 2009 such people came out enthusiastically for Mousavi.

People like these—who voted for Khatami in 1997 and 2001 and Mousavi in 2009—believe Iranians are capable of democracy. They argue that the anti-Shah revolution was hijacked by the Islamists but that its original impulse was for democracy, not theocracy, and this impulse still remains. Especially now that people have tasted the economic decline, corruption, and general ineptitude of the mullahs, they are ready for democracy. If the regime ever opens up, the secular democrats will go public to demand open elections with all parties eligible. For now, they stay quiet and aim their TV satellite dishes to pick up critical views from the large (800,000) Iranian community in the United States.

**Iranian Nationalism**

Nationalism, always strong in Iran, is coming back. Some analysts hold that Iran today is more motivated by nationalism than by any religious fervor. Iran, like China, strives to increase its power and prestige. Islam was imposed on Persia by Arab swords, and Iranians to this day harbor folk memories of seventh-century massacres by crude, barbaric invaders. Iranians do not like Arabs and look down on them as culturally inferior and lacking staying power. By adopting Shia, Iranians were and are proud to distinguish themselves from their mostly Sunni neighbors. The Iranian message: “We are actually the best Muslims and should lead the Islamic world.” Accordingly, not far under the surface of Iranian thought is Persian nationalism, affirming the greatness of their ancient civilization, which antedates Islam by a millennium.

**Democracy**

In the late 1970s, Iranian students, most of them leftists, battled to overturn the old regime. Now Iran’s students—whose numbers have exploded to 2 million—again demonstrate for civil rights. Many students are outspoken liberals and push for pluralism, a free press, and free elections. They also worry about the serious lack of jobs for graduates. Most students backed Mousavi in 2009, and police raided campuses to arrest student protesters after the election.

Every year hard-line courts—especially the Revolutionary Court—close liberal newspapers and block Web sites. Between 2,000 and 4,000 Iranian editors, writers, professors, public opinion pollsters, student leaders, and politicians are in jail. Some of them fought in the 1979 Revolution and in the long war against Iraq. At least a hundred dissidents were mysteriously killed. Iran per capita is the world’s death-penalty leader. When Ahmadinejad spoke at a Tehran university, students chanted “death to the dictator,” which led to an angry regime crackdown on students and professors on many campuses.

Could students and intellectuals one day lead the way to democracy? By themselves, probably not. They are not allowed to organize and lack ties to the broad masses of Iranians, who are just beginning to show open discontent. But in the 2009 election students began to organize and join with other groups to throw out the clericalist regime. It did not work this time. In many countries, students have been the spark plugs of revolution.
The Shah especially stressed Persian nationalism in his drive to modernize Iran. The Shah was Muslim and had himself photographed during religious devotion, as during his hajj, a pilgrimage required of all Muslims who can afford it once in their lifetime. But the Shah’s true spirit was secular and nationalistic: to rebuild the glory of ancient Persia in a modern Iran. If Islam got in the way, it was to be pushed aside. The Shah was relatively tolerant of non-Muslim faiths; Baha’is (a universalistic and liberal offshoot of Islam), Jews, and Christians were unharmed. Since the Islamic Revolution, non-Muslims have been treated harshly, especially the 300,000 Baha’is, Iran’s largest minority religion, who are regarded as dangerous heretics. For centuries, Iran’s sense of its unique Persianness coexisted uneasily with its Islam. The Shah’s modernization program brought the two strands into open conflict.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 did not totally repudiate the nationalist strand of Iranian thought. It put the stress on the religious side of Persianness, but the long and horrible war with Iraq from 1980 to 1988 brought out the regime’s Persian nationalism. They were fighting not only for their faith but for their country and against Iraq, a savage, upstart Arab country that did not even exist until the British invented it in the 1920s. Iran celebrates two types of holidays, Persian and Muslim. The Persian holidays are all happy, such as New Year (Noruz). The Islamic holidays are mostly mournful, such as the day of remembrance of the martyrdom of Hussein at Karbala, during which young Shia men beat themselves until they bleed.

**Political Culture**

**Does Islam Discriminate Against Women?**

Iran is one of the better Muslim countries in the treatment of women. Unlike the Arab kingdoms on the southern shore of the Gulf, Iranian women drive cars, go to school, work outside the home, and participate in politics. Iranian women are now more than 60 percent of Iran’s university students. (Notice a similar pattern in the United States. Any ideas why?) But even in Iran there are tough restrictions on dress, contact with males, and travel. An Iranian girl can be forced into marriage at age 13 and divorced whenever the husband wishes.

Devout Muslims swear women are deeply honored in their societies, but their place is in the home and nowhere else. Women are kept at a subservient status in most Islamic countries; often they get little education, cannot drive a car, and their testimony is worth half of men’s in courts of law. But such discrimination does not always come from the Koran. In some Muslim countries (not Iran), such customs as the seclusion of women, the veil, and female genital mutilation are pre-Islamic and were absorbed by Islam (much as Europeans adopted for Christmas the pagan worship of trees). These non-Koranic imports can therefore be discarded with no harm to the faith, maintain Muslim feminists. Yes, there are such people, and increasingly they are speaking out and organizing. If they succeed, they will greatly modernize their societies. The widespread education of Iranian women predicts social and legal change.

One feminist voice is that of 2003 Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, a lawyer and regime opponent who defends women’s rights and cites the Koran to show Islam should not discriminate against women. Many Iranian women share this view and protest for their rights; some are arrested, tried, and imprisoned. Iran is becoming the birthplace of Islamic feminism.
Religion as a Political Tool

Manipulate, use, discard. This is how Khomeini’s forces treated those who helped them win the Revolution. Like turbaned Bolsheviks, the Islamists in the late 1970s hijacked the Iranian Revolution as it unfolded. First, they captured the growing discontent with the Shah and his regime. By offering themselves as a plausible and effective front organization, they enlisted all manner of anti-Shah groups under their banner—the democratically inclined parties of the National Front, the Iran Freedom Movement, the Marxist (and Soviet-connected) Tudeh Party, and Islamic guerrilla movements. They had these groups do their dirty work for them and then got rid of them, sometimes by firing squad. The flowering of democratic, Islamic, secular, and socialist parties that accompanied the Shah’s overthrow was crushed within three years. As an example of revolutionary technique, Lenin would have admired their skill and ruthlessness.

In doing all this, the Islamists used their religion much as the Bolsheviks used Marxism, as a tool, a recruiting and mobilizing device, a means of gaining authority and obedience, and a way to seize and consolidate power. This is not to say they were not serious about Islam, but rather that in a revolutionary situation the instrumental uses of their faith predominated over the devotional. If you want to seize state power, you cannot be otherworldly; you must be very shrewd and practical. There is nothing “crazy” about the Islamists who run Iran; they are perfectly capable of calm and rational decisions calculated to benefit themselves. In our eyes, to be sure, some look crazy.

After some time immersed in politics, the power side takes over and the original religious (or ideological) side takes a back seat. As with the Bolsheviks, this soon leads to opportunism and cynicism among the politically involved and ultimately to regime decay. The ruling group turns into a self-serving new class. This is why regimes that base themselves on ideology or religion (Islamism combines both) have finite life spans. After a while, everyone notices the power and greed of the ruling class, and mass disillusion sets in; the regime loses legitimacy. This is happening in Iran. Iran’s Islamic revolution is burning out.

An example of this was the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran by student militants in November 1979, which brought American cries of outrage and a complete break in relations. The embassy takeover and holding of 52 American officials for 444 days indeed broke every rule in the diplomatic book and seemed to prove that mad fanatics governed Iran.

Looked at more closely, though, the incident turned into a domestic Iranian power play, cynically manipulated by the Khomeini forces. The ayatollah wished to complete the Islamic Revolution and get rid of the moderate prime minister he had appointed early in 1979, Mehdi Bazargan. The admission of the ailing Shah to the United States for cancer treatment brought forth mass rage in Iran. Revolutionaries claimed that medical help for the Shah proved the United States still supported the ousted regime. Student militants invaded and took over the U.S. embassy, probably not intending to stay. The embassy had already been reduced to a skeleton staff. No shots were fired; the U.S. Marine guards were ordered not to shoot. The American hostages were treated harshly, but none was killed. The militants published classified embassy documents (pieced together from the shredder) purporting to show how dastardly the Americans were. Khomeini took advantage of the chaotic situation. He let the students occupy the embassy, got rid of all moderates in the government, prevented U.S. interference (as there had been in 1953), and carried the revolution to a frenzied high point.

The Islamic activists whipped up anti-American hysteria (“Death to USA!”) to consolidate their hold on the country. Humiliated and powerless, Bazargan resigned. Anyone opposed to the
embassy takeover was fired or worse. One foreign-ministry official (who had dropped out of Georgetown University to promote revolution) helped some Americans escape via the Canadian embassy. He was tried and shot. Khomeini's followers seemed to enjoy watching President Carter squirm, especially after the aborted U.S. rescue mission in April 1980. Carter's apparent weakness on Iran hurt him in the 1980 election, which he lost to Reagan.

At that point, the holding of U.S. diplomats had exhausted its utility for Khomeini. Knowing Reagan was not averse to military measures, Tehran released the diplomats just as he was inaugurated. The militants who had seized and held the Americans had also served their purpose. Considered unreliable, some were arrested and executed. Others were sent to the front in the war with Iraq, where they died in the fighting. As a historian of the French Revolution observed, the revolution devours its children.

**Moderates and Islamists in Iran**

Much of Iranian politics takes place in the largely unseen clash between conservative moderates and radical Islamists. You have to look closely for nuances to see the differences between the two. Both are conservative, but in different ways, the former calm and pragmatic, the latter pugnacious and revolutionary. Both are strongly Muslim and support the Islamic Revolution, but the conservatives are not interested in spreading it beyond Iran. The conservatives are more open to a free market; the radicals want state controls. Regime change may come from the struggle between Iran's militants and moderates, not from any outside—including U.S.—pressures.

After the 1986 Iran-Contra fiasco, in which White House aides attempted to secretly sell U.S. missiles to Iranian “moderates,” the term “Iranian moderate” disappeared from Washington's vocabulary. The U.S. officials fell for a sucker play by Iranian revolutionaries, who set up the deal and then leaked word that the United States was trading with Iran, illegal under U.S. law. The incident embarrassed the United States.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moderates</th>
<th>Islamists</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>calm the Islamic Revolution</td>
<td>maintain it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shift power to Majlis</td>
<td>preserve power of faqih</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>permit some parties</td>
<td>ban non-Islamic parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>free press</td>
<td>censored press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>permit Western women’s attire</td>
<td>Islamic attire only (veil)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improve relations with West</td>
<td>keep distant from West</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dialogue with America</td>
<td>hate America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>open nuclear programs to inspection</td>
<td>continue nuclear programs without inspection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>liberalize economy</td>
<td>keep economy statist</td>
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</tbody>
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Conservative moderates favor the Islamic Republic but think the radicals are reckless and dangerous. They are typified by pragmatists like former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, who lost to Ahmadinejad in 2005, and former Prime Minister Mousavi, who ran against Ahmadinejad in 2009. Iranian conservatives used to quietly exercise their influence in the religious hierarchy but after the 2009 rigged election publicly denounced Ahmadinejad, especially as he relied more and...
Comparison

**IS SAUDI ARABIA NEXT?**

The 9/11 attacks suggested that the Kingdom, as Saudis call their country, is lurching into instability. Fifteen of the 19 hijackers were Saudis. Al Qaeda terrorists set off bombs in the Kingdom. Islamists such as Osama bin Laden, son of a Saudi billionaire, represent the same kind of forces that overthrew the Shah in Iran. The Saudi regime fears this and tries to buy off threats and deflect discontent by funding extremist religious schools (many in Pakistan) and minimizing Islamist recruitment.

The House of Saud conquered the country in the 1920s based on the austere Wahhabi creed of salafi Islam and is highly vulnerable for the same reasons as the Shah of Iran. Saudi Arabia is less democratic than Iran is now, and the legitimacy of the royal family has eroded amidst charges of abandoning Wahhabism in favor of Western pleasures. Of the 5,000 Saudi princes, more than 500 are eligible to become king, an invitation for a succession struggle.

Oil created some very rich Saudis, including the princes, but left many poor Saudis far behind. Earlier, the oil revenues allowed the regime to buy loyalty with subsidies for thousands of Saudis. But oil prices fluctuate, and the population exploded from 7 million in 1980 to 29 million in 2009, cutting per capita Saudi income in half. Forty percent of the population is under 14. Cushy jobs no longer await young Saudis; many are unemployed and discontent. Shia Saudis from the oil-producing Eastern Province carry out bombings (with Iranian backing), including American targets.

News from the Kingdom is rigorously censored—nothing negative is allowed—and until 9/11 Washington never criticized “our good friends,” the House of Saud. It was the same way we treated the Shah. After 9/11 some Americans called Saudi Arabia a false friend and supplier of money and personnel for Islamist terrorism. Hundreds of young Saudis crossed into Iraq for jihad against the Americans and Shia. A succession struggle over the new king could destabilize the Kingdom. It may be too late to do anything to prevent a Saudi revolution. Reforms can hasten revolution, as we saw in Iran. Controlled moves to democracy, such as these, might stabilize the Kingdom.

- Allow some opposition parties. Make sure they are moderate, and let them criticize the regime in a constructive way. Make sure there are several parties (some conservative, some liberal, none radical) to divide public discontent.
- Permit a semifree press along the same lines as parties: limited criticism only.
- Crush and suppress Islamists. Do not ease up on them. These people are out to destroy you, and if they take over they will not be moderate or democratic.
- Become a constitutional monarchy by separating the offices of king and prime minister, gradually giving more power to the prime minister and letting the king assume symbolic duties.
- Hold legislative elections but among parties ranging from conservative to moderate. Gradually, you can let other parties participate.
- Have the new legislature redistribute wealth in the form of heavy taxes on the rich, especially on members of the royal family, who must be seen taking a financial hit. This is to defuse mass anger over the royals’ great and unfair wealth.
- Do not automatically follow U.S. policy in the region, as that delegitimizes your regime. Limit any American presence; it is a cultural irritant and natural fodder for Islamic extremists. (Saudi leaders did not support our 2003 invasion of Iraq and had U.S. troops leave. They are not stupid.)
- Crack down on corruption, especially among the highest officials and princes. Show that you mean business here and that the crackdown will be permanent.

Have we learned anything from Iran? Would any of this work to head off a revolution? Maybe, but it would require the willingness of the House of Saud to cut its own wealth and power, and that is something ruling classes rarely do. But if Saudi Arabia cannot transition to some kind of democracy, revolution and then U.S. military involvement is likely. The Persian Gulf and its oil is one place we do not walk away from.
more on the Revolutionary Guards and less and less on the clergy. The alienation of Iran’s conservatives from Ahmadinejad’s government spells serious trouble for the regime.

The militant Islamists want a truly Islamic republic, one based on religious law and presided over by the faqih. Anything else means giving in to Iran’s enemies—the West in general, the United States in particular—with eventual loss of Iran’s independence, culture, and religion. They block any liberalizing reforms, close newspapers, fire ministers who stray, and put political critics on trial. The arrest of visiting Iranian-American academics and journalists for alleged espionage seems to be a radical move to scuttle U.S.-Iranian talks on Iraq or nuclear programs.

The great pillar of the radical Islamists is the Islamic Revolutionary Guards (Pasdaran). Originally formed in 1979 to support Khomeini, they took many casualties in the war with Iraq and now, with 125,000 members, are separate from and higher than the regular armed forces, rather like the Nazi SS. They have their own army, navy, and air force, get the best weapons, run industries, dominate the defense and intelligence ministries, and supervise Iran’s nuclear program. Former Pasdaran hold about a third of Majlis seats and set the agenda. President Ahmadinejad, a Pasdaran in the war with Iraq, placed many in high positions and relies on them. Conservative critics oppose Ahmadinejad’s militarization of Iranian politics. If it keeps going, the Pasdaran could become Iran’s true rulers, pushing aside the clerical hierarchy.

Another pillar of the radicals is the Basij, an Islamist militia subordinate to the Pasdaran with branches in most mosques. Estimated Basij membership ranges from several hundred thousand to 3 million. Ahmadinejad was a basiji, and they support him. Decreed by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 to enforce the revolution and supervise morals and women’s attire, Basij toughs helped crush protests after the rigged 2009 election. If the Revolutionary Guard is the SS, the Basij are the SA (Storm Troopers).

Recent Iranian opinion has trended against the radicals. Reformists and conservatives beat Ahmadinejad supporters for seats on municipal councils and in the Majlis in 2008. Pragmatic conservative Hashemi Rafsanjani and his supporters easily won control over the Assembly of Experts, which chooses the next supreme leader. Populist Ahmadinejad, who promised to uplift poor Iranians and failed to deliver, would likely have lost a fair election in 2009.

On the fringe, both inside and outside the country, are Iranians who want to get rid of the whole Islamic Revolution. They stand no chance. A few monarchists wish to restore the son of the last Pahlavi, a young man now living in the West, to the throne, a quixotic venture. The times are against monarchy; every decade there are fewer and fewer ruling (as opposed to figurehead) monarchs.

On the other side, some Marxist-type revolutionaries, the Mujahedin-e Khalq (Fighters for the People), who earlier worked with the Islamists to overthrow the Shah now try to overthrow the Islamists. Among them were some of the young militants who seized the U.S. embassy. Subsequently, it is estimated that more than 10,000 Mujahedin were executed by the Khomeini forces. Their survivors were sheltered in and sponsored by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, which invaded and massacred Iranians (sometimes with poison gas), during the 1980s, so these Mujahedin have little resonance among Iranians. Even Washington now considers them a crazy cult.

The Revolution Burns Out

Iran illustrates Crane Brinton’s classic theory of revolution (see page 96). To review: The Shah’s regime loses its legitimacy. Antiregime groups form, rioting breaks out, and the Shah leaves. Initially moderates take power, but the ruthless Khomeini forces soon dump them and
drive the revolution to a frenzied high point. But this burns itself out; eventually a Thermidor, or calming down, arrives. It was almost as if Iranians had read Brinton and gone through his stages, that is, except the last, and even that may have happened without a clear-cut Thermidor. Instead, there may have been a low key, rolling Thermidor marked by Khatami's election in 1997.

No revolution lasts forever. In Iran we can see an effort to become stable and normal, which is opposed by Islamic radicals. But time is probably on the side of the normalizers. Many mullahs have corrupted themselves; some do not go onto the street in clerical garb. Mullahs run the bonyads, foundations originally set up to redistribute the wealth of the Shah and his supporters. These bonyads now control billions of dollars and much of Iran's industry. They are supposed to be run for the good of all, a sort of Islamic socialism, but in practice they have made their mullahs rich, powerful, and corrupt while their industries are run poorly. As Lord Acton observed (see page 28), power corrupts.

Aware of power's tendency to corrupt, many Iranians want the mullahs to return to the mosque and get out of government and the economy. Even some mullahs wish it, as now they see that running a country ruins their reputation and their spiritual mission. Chant Iranian demonstrators: "The mullahs live like kings, while the people are reduced to poverty." Another factor is that now most Iranians were born after the Shah and have no personal commitment to the Islamic Revolution. They want jobs and more freedom, and they can vote at age 18 (recently raised from 16).

Will there be a point at which we can say that the Iranian Revolution is finally over? The reestablishment of diplomatic ties between the United States and Iran—something many Iranians want to happen soon—would indicate that point had passed some time earlier. There were hopes of this reestablishment of diplomatic ties during the office of former President Khatami, who mentioned "dialogue" with Americans (but not with Washington) but pulled back when hard-liners objected. Current President Ahmadinejad is bitterly hostile, but candidate Mousavi mentioned improved relations in 2009. Iranians liked that. Other indications would be the mullahs giving up control of the bonyads and the faqih becoming a figurehead or dignified office.

**What Iranians Quarrel About**

**Which Way for Iran's Economy?**

Iran has changed rapidly, partly under the Shah and partly under the Islamic Revolution. The countryside has received schools, electricity, health care, and tractors. Infant mortality, a key measure of health care, fell from 169 per 1,000 births in 1960 to 36 in 2009. Average life expectancy jumped more than 20 years, from 50 to 71. Literacy has climbed from less than half to more than three-fourths.

The Iranian economy was hurt by revolution, war, isolation, and mismanagement. Although total oil income has increased, only recently has per capita GDP recovered to pre-1979 levels. Iran depends almost totally on oil; pistachios and carpets are trivial exports. When oil prices fall, Iran is in trouble (as are Russia and Nigeria). There is now growth, but inflation, unemployment, and poverty are considerable. Iran needs some 1.5 million new jobs a year. Pay is low, so people hold two and three jobs to make ends meet. Many jobs and business dealings,
as in Russia, are off the books. The oil industry, still the pride and basis of the Iranian economy, needs replacement parts and up-to-date technology. Its productivity is miserable. U.S. pressure has kept most oil companies from cooperating with Iran. The bonyads are run badly and corruptly, and Iranians have known this for many years.

By giving all Iranians an expensive welfare floor (including subsidized food and gasoline) while simultaneously damaging Iran’s great source of revenue (its petroleum connection with the West), Iran has given itself budget deficits and inflation. Iran has to import 40 percent of its gasoline at $2 a gallon to sell at 34 cents a gallon because it lacks refining capacity. Motorists, used to cheap gas, rioted in 2007 when the regime started rationing it. Subsidies create costly and dangerous distortions but are very hard to end.

The Islamic Revolution did not dismantle the Shah’s statist economy. The state still controls 60 percent of Iran’s economy (biggest part: the oil industry). The bonyads control another 10 to 20 percent. Only about 20 percent of Iran’s economy is in private hands. Theoretically, foreigners can invest in Iran, but most are scared off by the many and tangled limits and regulations. Investors must pay numerous bribes. Iran’s is not a free-market economy. The big question: Should it become one?

Opposing arguments show up in Majlis debates over economic policy, which have become thinly disguised battles over the future of strict Islamic rule. As we have considered, Islamism is a surrogate socialism; that is, it blends Islamic correctness with collectivist economics. In the minds of many Islamists, socialism is the logical extension of Islam, for Islam preaches equality and leveling of class differences. Thus, they claim, Islam is the true and only path to a just society of equal citizens, where no one is either rich or poor. What the Marxists, Socialists, and Communists talked about, they say, we can deliver.

Most moderates respond that socialism and/or statism is not the way to go, that they just keep Iran poor and backward. The collapse of the Soviet system demonstrates socialism does not work, and the decline of Iran’s economy demonstrates statism does not work. Besides, they

**Geography**

**How Many Iranians?**

Islam traditionally frowns on family planning: The more babies, the better. After the revolution, Iran’s mullahs urged women to produce a generation of Muslim militants; subsidized food helped feed them. Iran’s rate of population growth averaged 3.5 percent a year during the 1980s, one of the world’s highest. Despite the murderous war with Iraq, since the 1979 Revolution Iran’s population has doubled.

By the early 1990s, though, the government, realizing it could not subsidize or employ the vast numbers of young Iranians—two-thirds were born after the Revolution—reversed the high-births policy. Amid economic decline, families now can afford fewer children. Clinics offer all manner of contraception free of charge (but not abortions). Women agents go door to door to promote family planning. Food and other family aid decreases after a family has three children. One Muslim cleric even issued a fatwa in favor of smaller families. From an average 7 births per woman over her life in 1986, the fertility rate plunged to 1.7 in 2009, lower than in the United States. By 2009, the rate of population growth was a modest 0.88 percent. The turnaround on births is an indication the revolution is over.
note, there is no Koranic basis for government control of the economy. It is perfectly feasible to combine free-market capitalism with the alms-giving required of Muslims and achieve social justice. If we keep declining economically, moderates also worry, we will never be able to build a first-class army and so will be vulnerable to hostile outside forces. And if our towering unemployment problem is not solved soon, the Islamic republic could end. The best and quickest way to solve these problems is the free market. State ownership of major industries, especially petroleum, is what the Shah tried, and we certainly do not want to follow in his footsteps. Such are the arguments of Iranian moderates. Notice that outright rejection of the Islamic Revolution is not one of their points.

The Veiled Debate on Islam

Iran will always be a Muslim country, but what kind of Islam will it have? A moderate kind that keeps out of most direct political involvement or a militant kind that seeks to guide society by political means? Judging by the votes of 1997, 2001, and 2009, most Iranians prefer the moderate path.

Because the Council of Guardians bars openly liberal candidates, public debate on the religion question is muted. No one risks being branded “anti-Islamic.” Still, one can infer that such a debate is taking place. One of the stand-ins for a discussion of Islam in public life is the debate on what kind of clothing is admissible, especially for women. Even for men, though, blue jeans were frowned upon, partly because they represent American culture. Liberals say they do not; jeans are simply a comfortable and international garment with no political connotations.

Before the Islamic Revolution, urban and educated Iranian women dressed as fashionably as European women. Then suddenly they could not use makeup and had to wear the veil and chador, the single-piece head-to-toe garment designed to cover feminine attractiveness. Devout Muslims, including many women, say this attire is better than Western clothing as it eliminates lust, vanity, and distinctions of wealth. (Notice how some U.S. schools are coming to similar conclusions about school uniforms.) Western clothes and makeup are the first steps toward debauchery and prostitution, they argue.

But in subtle ways urban Iranian women dress in a manner that pushes to the limit of the permissible in public (and in private dress as they wish). The veil and chador are no longer mandatory on the street, so long as a woman is dressed very modestly without makeup and with hair and forehead covered by a kerchief. Women still risk Islamic morals police stopping them on the street and sending them home or to jail. Young people suspected of having a good time may be beaten by Basij. Such restrictions are some of the most obnoxious features of the Islamic regime and have alienated young urban and educated Iranians.

Iran as a Regional Power

Iran makes no secret of its drive to become the Persian Gulf’s dominant power. Much of what Iran does internationally is aimed at increasing its power and prestige. “We are rapidly becoming a superpower,” claimed Ahmadinejad, a bit of an exaggeration, although Iran is already the top regional power. Tehran sees itself as the leader of the entire Islamic world and tries to spread its
revolutionary influence. Sunnis resent Iran and fear its growing power; they despise Shias. This is the limiting factor in Iran’s dream of regional dominance. Indeed, Al Qaeda urges that Shias be killed as heretics.

Iran is the most influential power in Iraq, where Shias have long been a suppressed 60 percent of the population. The Sunni Arabs of central Iraq are only about 20 percent, but they long

Political Culture

THE UNITED STATES AND IRAN

A culture gap hinders Americans and Iranians from understanding each other. We have not been clever in dealing with the Iranian Revolution. Part religious, part nationalistic, part cultural, and part antityranny, it defied our predictions and efforts to tame it. When we tried to deal with “Iranian moderates” in 1986, we got humiliated. When we tilted toward Iraq in its war against Iran, we supported a bloody dictator (Saddam Hussein) whom we twice fought ourselves. In 1988 a U.S. destroyer mistook an Iranian jetliner for an attacking fighter, shot it down with a missile, and killed all 290 aboard. Iran, and indeed the whole Persian Gulf, is a tar baby: Once you punch it, you get stuck worse and worse.

But if we are calm and clever, things may work out. Ahmadinejad and the radicals are unpopular and could eventually be voted out, leading to improved relations. Many Iranians want contact and dialogue with the United States. In the long term, Iran needs us. We can provide the petroleum technology and other means to modernize the country. U.S. attempts to encourage “regime change” in Iran, however, are counterproductive. American broadcasts, funds, and contacts in support of Iranian critics are the kiss of death, allowing the regime to portray them as traitors and U.S. stooges, exactly what the regime did following the 2009 elections.

Anthropologists point out that when two Iranian bazaaris quarrel, by long tradition they simply shun and ignore each other for some years. Gradually, the quarrel fades, and they cautiously reestablish relations with each other. After a while, the quarrel is forgotten. It is a civilized way to handle a quarrel. We might take a leaf from Persian folkway in dealing with Iran.

Iranians do not understand American culture. Americans like guns and military solutions, even though most see America as good and trying to do good in the world. We are poorly informed about the Gulf region. Few Americans know as much about Iran as the student who has just read this chapter. To win mass support, some presidents use simplified rhetoric—“axis of evil”—and notice only later that it sets back quiet efforts to improve U.S.-Iranian relations (desired by two-thirds of Iranians). Loose talk about knocking out Iran’s nuclear facilities makes matters worse, leading to Iranian counterthreats and popular support for the regime.

Iranians must watch their rhetoric, too. Your mass chanting of Marg bar Amrika! (“Death to America!”) sounds like a direct threat. Do you really want to kill us? Then you’d better stop saying so. After 9/11, we take these things very seriously. The U.S. commitment to making sure the oil of the Persian Gulf flows without hindrance is one point Americans agree on in foreign policy. No amount of bombings can persuade us to abandon this policy. And we can “make your economy scream.” Those were Kissinger’s words describing what we did to Chile when it came under Marxist rule. (We are probably doing it to you now.)

So stop sponsoring or encouraging terrorism. When a bomb goes off in Beirut, we smell Iranian money funneled through Syria. Do not develop nuclear weapons, which are more likely to provoke than deter the United States. Turn to your own tradition and simply shun America, doing nothing against us. And when you are ready to resume contact and economic growth, let us know in a public way. We understand that you are in a long struggle against an odious theocracy and cannot move prematurely. Eventually, the rule of the mullahs will pass and relations will thaw. We were friends once and can be again. Foolish moves on either side could lead to a war neither wants.
monopolized political power. Many of the main Shia shrines are in southern Iraq, where Khomeini was exiled in 1964. Upon taking power in Tehran, Khomeini’s agents propagated Iraqi Shias and urged them to join the Islamic Revolution. This was one of the irritants—but hardly a sufficient excuse—for Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein to invade Iran in 1980. Now Iranian arms, agents, and money move freely into Iraq, and Tehran encourages the formation of a second Islamic republic. Many Iraqi Shia leaders are closely connected to Iran and heed Tehran’s guidance. Iran is the only winner of the Iraq War.

Iran works through its Shia brethren in Iraq, Lebanon, Kuwait, Bahrain, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia. Iran can supply funds, instructions, and explosive devices. Iran is on the U.S. State Department’s list of countries sponsoring terrorism. Iran proclaims its leading role in destroying Israel, which it depicts as a polluter of Islamic holy ground (Jerusalem is also sacred to Muslims) and outpost of Western imperialism. Under the Shah, Tehran had good (but informal) relations with Israel and quietly sold it most of its oil. Iran’s Islamic Revolution totally changed that, and Iran funds Lebanon’s Hezbollah (Party of God), which provoked a nasty one-month war with Israel the summer of 2006. In this way, Iran claims leadership in the struggle against Israel.

Iran isolated itself, creating not only U.S. hostility but angering the Sunni-ruled lands of the Persian Gulf. Iran’s stonewalling on its nuclear program alienated Britain, France, and Germany, which had sought a diplomatic solution to ensure that Iran does not build nuclear weapons. Tehran says it seeks only nuclear power generation—in a country with massive oil and natural gas reserves—but no one trusts it. In 2006 the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) referred the matter to the UN, where the Security Council solidly supported nuclear inspections of Iran. Iran’s isolation harms its economic growth and requires it to maintain armed forces it cannot afford.

**Geography**

**Strategic Waterways**

These are mostly narrow choke points connecting two bodies of water. Hostile control of them causes one or more countries discomfort or fear. Notice that several of these main ones are in the Middle East:

- **Turkish Straits** (Dardanelles and Bosporus), connecting the Black and Mediterranean seas
- **Suez Canal**, connecting the Mediterranean and Red seas
- **Bab al Mandab**, connecting the Red Sea and Indian Ocean
- ** Strait of Hormuz**, connecting the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean
- ** Strait of Gibraltar**, connecting the Atlantic and the Mediterranean
- **English Channel**, connecting the Atlantic Ocean and North Sea
- **Skagerrak**, connecting the Baltic and North seas

**North Cape**, dividing the Atlantic from the Barents Sea

**Cape of Good Hope**, where the Atlantic and Indian oceans meet off the southern tip of Africa

** Strait of Malacca**, connecting the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, East Asia’s oil lifeline

**Korea (Tsushima) Strait**, connecting the East China Sea and Sea of Japan

**Panama Canal**, connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans

You are the captain of a small tanker that has just loaded oil in Kuwait for delivery in Umea, Sweden. Which bodies of water—including seas, oceans, straits, and canals—do you pass through? (Note: Supertankers are too big for Suez; they have to go around Africa. But small tankers still pass through Suez.)
Many Iranians dislike being isolated. They want to avoid conflict and improve relations with the West, even with America, but few dare say so publicly. Meddling in other countries, they argue, brings nothing but trouble and could even lead to war. The radicals, now led by Ahmadinejad, want to keep up the militant foreign policies, no matter what they cost the country. Iran has been both the victim and practitioner of terrorism. Antiregime forces,
particularly the nutty Mujahedin-e Khalq, assassinated several Iranian leaders, including one prime minister. Iranian hit squads in Europe took out several regime opponents. Iran’s great foreign-policy problem is that by expanding its power and influence it creates enemies.

**Do Revolutions End Badly?**

Edmund Burke (see box on page 29) was right: Revolution brings in its wake tyranny far worse than that of the regime it toppled. Iran is a good example: The Shah was a dictator, but rule of the mullahs is worse. Only in America did revolution lead to the establishment of a just, stable democracy—and the American Revolution was a very special, limited one, aimed more at independence than at revolution. The twentieth century is littered with failed revolutions: fascist, communist, and now Islamist. The few remaining Communist countries that still celebrate and base their legitimacy on an alleged revolution, Cuba and North Korea, are hungry and isolated. Communist China and Vietnam, by joining in world trade, have prospered.

Why do revolutions end badly? Several writers have attempted to answer this question. Burke argued that the destruction of all institutional and political structures leaves people confused and ripe for dictatorial rule. François Furet wrote along similar lines that the French Revolution unleashed such chaotic forces that it had to “skid out of control.” Crane Brinton wrote that revolutions fall into the hands of their most ruthless element, who then proceed to wreck everything until they are replaced in a Thermidor. And Hannah Arendt wrote that revolution goes astray when revolutionists try to solve the “Social Question” (how to bring down the rich and lift up the poor); to do this they must institute a tyranny. It is interesting to note that all of these writers were, to some extent, conservatives. Radicals and leftists often refuse to admit revolutions end badly; if something goes wrong, they tend to blame individuals for “betraying” the revolution.

The unhappy revolution is something that Iranians ponder. Although few want a return of the Pahlavis, many Iranians know that the Islamic Revolution has turned out wrong. At least under the Shah there was economic growth, however unfairly distributed, and modernization. Now there is economic decline and unemployment. Some Iranians live in greater poverty than before. Certain mullahs and their friends, those in charge of the bonyads, do well, however. Given a chance, most Iranians would throw these rascals out. The mullahs and their security and judicial forces make sure this never happens. They have some bases of support—more than the Shah had—among the religious and the poor who have benefited from Islamic handouts.

Iran is now caught in a stalemate between moderate and militant forces. Eventually, reform will come to Iran; the status quo is unsustainable. The longer the fanatic Islamists stonewall, the greater the danger of political violence, fueled by millions of angry, unemployed young Iranian males. What can the United States do? U.S. threats just play into the hands of hard-liners, but the right combination of firmness (over Iran’s uranium-enrichment efforts) and carrots (trade) could start a dialogue. Time and economic difficulties will calm the Iranian revolution. I am convinced that Iran will one day be free and Iran and the United States will be friends again.
Chapter 32 Iran

**Exercises for Iran**

Apply what you learned in this chapter by using the online resources on MyPoliSciKit (www.mypoliscikit.com).

- **Practice Tests**
- **Flashcards**
- **Videos:**
  - “Youth in Iran”
  - “Iran’s Nuclear Ambitions”
- **Comparative Exercise:** “Comparing Social Welfare Systems”

**Key Terms**

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