Pragmatic Theocracy:

A Contradiction in Terms?

by Ray Takeyh **(/experts/ray-takeyh)**

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Articles & Testimony

For two decades now, the Islamic Republic of Iran has confounded the American foreign policy community, whose members have oscillated wildly between urgent appeals to normalize relations with Tehran and equally determined bids to contain its influence. In the latest swing of the pendelum, a chorus of voices--including those of former National Security Advisers Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft, former Representative Lee Hamilton, and a parade of retired diplomats--has been calling for a rapprochement.

The basis of their petition was the outcome of Iran's 1997 presidential election, which brought to power Ayatollah Muhammad Khatemi. The replacement of the implacable Koranic figures who formerly ruled Iran with a smiling cleric who reads John Locke and professes a commitment to democratizing his nation's Islamic polity has led to a certain euphoria amongst Iran watchers in the West and, specifically, to widespread anticipation of a more moderate Iranian foreign policy. But far from confining themselves to recommendations for normalized relations, the most ardent of the Iran "engagers" have been touting the "New Iran" as an agent of regional stability. One of the most vocal enthusiasts, Thomas Friedman of the New York Times, has emphasized that the key to unraveling Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq is to be found in a strategy "that can be summed up in one word-Iran." Echoing that appraisal, Robin Wright and Shaul Bakhash have recommended in the pages of Foreign Policy that "the Islamic Republic could underwrite Persian Gulf security, as it did during the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi."

This optimism has proved contagious and, not surprisingly, has eroded the resolve of the Clinton administration. Since his election in 1992, President Clinton has repeatedly maintained that improved U.S.-Iranian relations depend on Iran halting its attacks on the Arab-Israeli peace process, its support for terrorism, and its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. Lately, however, the administration has perceptibly softened its stance. "We have to find a way to get dialogue," President Clinton now argues. "Going into denial when you're in conversation with somebody who has been your adversary, in a country like Iran that has often worried about its independence and its integrity, is not exactly the way to begin." Then, too, the administration's chief Middle East strategist, Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk, has stressed that "it is time for the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran to engage each other as two great nations face to face, and on the basis of equality and mutual respect."

Alas, the latest shift in American attitudes seems to be driven less by actual developments in Tehran than by uniquely Western assumptions about President Khatemi and, more generally, about the putative link between

political liberalization and foreign policy moderation. Iran, though, is not playing by Western rules. To begin with, the center of power in the Republic is not the institution of the presidency but its religious establishment, particularly the office of the Supreme Spiritual Leader. Its edict affects every aspect of Iranian national life, from decisions concerning war and peace, to legislation, to the appointment of key figures, to the judiciary and the validation of election returns. Until his death, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini occupied the post. In 1989 he was succeeded by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was appointed on an interim basis but has managed to prolong his tenure. But Khamenei lacks theological credentials and the assured backing of Iran's religious elite. Accordingly, he has sought to prove his bona fides by feeding its members a steady diet of anti-American proclamations. Yet even the influence of the Supreme Leader is not absolute. For the clerical Republic is governed by a system of collective leadership in which no individual can unilaterally alter national policy. If either Khamenei or Khatemi were inclined to a dramatic reorientation of Iran's foreign policy--and there is no evidence to suggest such an inclination--the intricate web of institutions and personalities beneath them would obstruct their efforts at every turn.

Rather than glean Iran's intentions from the nuances of its domestic political discourse, then, we might do better simply to examine its behavior abroad. Whereas Iran's political terrain is highly factionalized, in matters of foreign affairs a relative consensus persists. Upon his election to the presidency, Khatemi declared that "the Iranian people have paid a heavy price for the revolution and are not going to give it up so easily." Iran's new foreign minister, Kemal Kharrazi, likewise stressed that "Iran's foreign policy before and after the election of President Khatemi remains the same and continuity prevails." Indeed, the Islamic Republic's international aims rest on certain geopolitical constants, ones to which mullahs of whatever political temper steadfastly adhere. Ideology may no longer be the driving force behind Iran's international conduct, and Iran may indeed be evolving into a "normal country," but its foreign policy objectives--particularly as they concern the United States--remain basically unchanged.

In the aftermath of Khomeini's death in 1989, Iran's clerical estate was plunged into an intense debate about the direction of the revolution. Iran's domestic political scene soon became polarized, as competing factions of pragmatists and hardliners waged a turf war over the nature and scope of domestic political and economic reforms, an argument that continues to this day.

On policy toward the United States, however, the two wings of Iran's body politic converge. Both factions agree that the extension of Iran's regional influence, an aim shared by moderates and hardliners alike, requires a corresponding retraction of American power in the Middle East--the difference being that, whereas the hardliners continue to depict America as a socio-cultural threat, the pragmatists view the United States mainly as a strategic challenger. Accordingly, Khamenei still castigates America as the "Great Satan," while the more moderate Khatemi sees it merely as a "neocolonialist menace." Yet, whether the United States is seen as a morally debilitating agent of cultural imperialism or a domineering superpower, the prescription--that Iran's regional influence must eclipse that of its American adversary--has stayed the same.

Iran's pragmatists certainly perceive the need to redefine Khomeini's problematic legacy. Khomeini's Iran thrashed about the Middle East seeking to undermine established authorities in the name of Islamic revolution. But in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War, there developed a growing conviction within the clerical estate that Khomeini's divisive conduct had not only isolated Iran in the region, but had paved the way for a more robust American presence. Hence, the Grand Ayatollah's successors soon abandoned the mission of exporting revolution, supplanting it with an approach based on more conventional measures of national interest. Tehran's path would now be more gradual, seeking to further its regional aspirations less through confrontation than accommodation with its neighbors. The shift, however, has been one of means rather than ends.

As with his predecessors, President Khatemi routinely proclaims that Iran, by virtue of its location, demography and

resources, has earned the role of dominant regional power, particularly in the Persian Gulf. Unlike them, he is driven more by considerations of realpolitik than religious fervor. That, however, does not mean that Iran's foreign policy objectives will soon coincide with those of the United States. For Iran's regional ambitions remain frustrated, first and foremost, by the absorption of the Middle East into the American imperium. Hence, Khatemi emphasized to his Gulf neighbors that "the security of the area will only be preserved through the evacuation of the alien forces from the region." And he routinely affirms that "the most important foreign policy will be to distance the enemy [the United States] from" the Persian Gulf.

As a scholar with a keen sense of history, Khatemi appreciates that there is nothing inevitable or necessarily permanent about America's alliances in the Middle East. In the twentieth century, Islamic states have only entered into military compacts with occidental powers under compulsion or when confronted with a significant territorial threat, as during the Gulf War. Accordingly, Khatemi has sought to construct an alternative network of alliances, with Iran at its core. The focus of this effort has been the Persian Gulf. Iran rightly views the Gulf as its link to the international petroleum market, and as such has legitimate security concerns in the waterway. Given the effective collapse of Iraq as a contender for supremacy in the Gulf, the United States remains Iran's primary geopolitical rival there. Khatemi's genteel pledges of solidarity with the Gulf's sheikdoms are meant to persuade them that the most effective method of containing Iraq and ensuring the stability of the region lies not in closer ties to the United States, but rather in a collective defense network organized by Iran.

In a reversal of Khomeini's policy, Iran no longer plots the overthrow of the princes but appeals to their accommodationist instincts and traditional aversion to reliance on Western powers. Such realism has already reaped dividends. Iran and Saudi Arabia have harmonized their oil policies and dramatically expanded diplomatic, trade and cultural relations. Since Khatemi's historic visit to Riyadh in May 1999, the two Gulf giants have also initiated a variety of coordinated defense measures.

Khatemi's deft employment of realpolitik in the Persian Gulf finds its complement in the eastern Mediterranean. From Tehran's perspective, the most ominous development there has been the emergence of close relations between two of America's staunchest allies--Israel and Turkey. This is commonly interpreted in Tehran as proof of an American-Israeli stratagem to encircle Iran with a network of hostile powers. As Khatemi has put it, the Turkish-Israeli alliance is yet another indication that the United States and Israel have "taken hostage nations whose governments believe that they are big powers while their resources are put at the disposal" of their sponsors. The transformation of Iran into a major regional power, Tehran's leaders complain, is imperiled by the potential incorporation of the Levant into a Washington-Jerusalem-Ankara framework.

Accordingly, Iran has sought to construct a counter alliance encompassing the militant Arab states and Islamist movements of the region, all of whom share its anxieties about American power. As Iran's defense minister, Ali Shamkhani, has put it, "Iran is trying to create an Iran-Arab common front with regards to the dangerous threat" posed by the encroachment of Israeli and American influence in the Arab East. The contours of this policy became manifest during Khatemi's recent trip to Syria, where the two states pledged to design common foreign and defense policies. Tehran has consolidated its presence in Lebanon, too, by increasing assistance to Hizballah and other Islamist groups operating in that benighted country.

And in his boldest strategic move yet, Khatemi has been actively seeking to link Iran's alliances in the eastern Mediterranean with its fledgling Gulf network-promoting Saudi-Syrian reconciliation, for instance, and mediating disputes between the Gulf sheikdoms and Islamist opposition movements. Khatemi, of course, is not the first Middle Eastern leader to aspire to such dreams of unity, nor is he the first Iranian politician to contend for the prize of regional leadership. Leaders as varied as Gamal Abdul Nasser and Ayatollah Khomeini, armed with ideologies as distinct as Arab nationalism and Pan-Islamism, have sought the same end. To be sure, Khatemi's vision is more

circumscribed and his methods decidedly more nuanced. But he too is likely to fail at this task, as inter-regional rivalries and divisions are probably too intense and deeply rooted to be dispelled.

Although Khatemi is unlikely to realize his vision of regional unity, Iran under his stewardship will continue to challenge the United States in other ways. There is, to begin with, Iran's response to the U.S. sponsored Arab-Israeli peace process. Washington, of course, hopes that Iran will tacitly acquiesce to an eventual settlement. Gary Sick, a former National Security Council official and a leading Khatemi enthusiast, assures us that "if the parties come to an agreement, Tehran will accept it." And should Iran persist in its rejectionist stance, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft stress that "opposition to [the Oslo] process by another country should not be grounds for international excommunication." The proponents of normalization, however, overlook how Iran's opposition to the peace process is rooted in strategic calculations that preclude friendly relations with the United States.

For Iran's clerical oligarchs, Israel is not merely an adversary or strategic competitor, but an American aircraft carrier. It is both the agent of a pernicious ideology (Zionism) and the client of a strategic rival (the United States). Typically, the election of the moderate Ehud Barak was greeted in Tehran with a terse statement by the Foreign Ministry declaring that, "Iran's stance vis-a-vis the Zionist regime of Israel is the same as before and has not undergone any changes." Khatemi understands well that the resolution of the Arab-Israeli dispute could significantly enhance America's influence in the region and alter the prevailing balance of power--the Turkish-Israeli alliance offering a possible preview of worse things to come. For Tehran, then, obstructing the peace process has the twin purpose of diminishing both Israeli and American influence. Moreover, through active support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad, Iran can present itself as a pillar of Muslim resistance to "Zionist and American encroachment" at a time when the secular states of Turkey and Jordan appear to be accommodating Jerusalem and Washington. By contrast, a powerful Israel at peace with its neighbors and closely aligned with the United States is sure to isolate Iran and its radical allies.

Going Nuclear

In the post-Cold War period, one of the principal concerns of the United States has been to halt the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Among the greatest obstacles to this end is Iran, which sees in the chaos of the former Soviet Union an unprecedented opportunity to acquire nuclear technology and expeditiously revise the balance of power in the Middle East.

Iran's pursuit of the nuclear option stems from a number of interlocking motives. As a state that is determined to project regional influence, it requires a credible military establishment capable of defending its interests and advancing its objectives. Since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Tehran has embarked on an extensive program of expanding and modernizing its military forces. The imperative of reviving a moribund economy, however, has diminished enthusiasm within the clerical establishment for bearing the heavy cost of maintaining a large conventional army. To bridge the gap between its aspirations and capabilities, Iran has therefore shifted its resources to the acquisition of missile technology and weapons of mass destruction. As with the New Look strategy in America during the 1950s, nuclear weapons satisfy Iran's defense posture at an acceptable cost to its fiscal health.

Beyond its regional pretensions, Iran's motive for acquiring nuclear weapons also derives from the need for a credible deterrent capability. Although in the 1990s the United States has reduced its overall force levels in the Middle East, it still maintains a sizable forward presence in the Persian Gulf and has enshrined in official policy a doctrine of containing Iran. Understandably, then, Tehran's clerical elite is obsessed with the imperative of deterring a potential U.S. attack, a task which the Gulf War proved even a massive conventional force cannot accomplish. The former Iranian defense minister, Akbar Torkan, declared, "Can our air force take on the Americans, or our navy take on the American navy? The way to go about dealing with such threats requires a different solution entirely." Nor would Iranian defense planners be misguided if they sought that solution in a nuclear arsenal. The Clinton

administration, after all, has proved quite gentle in its dealings with a nuclear-armed North Korea, while pummeling a militarily weak Serbia and Iraq-a distinction surely not lost on Tehran.

Weapons of mass destruction also offer the best means by which to negate Israel's military advantage. Khatemi has stressed that "the Zionist regime which has acquired nuclear arms with the assistance of the Westerners has not been exposed to any pressure; instead it enjoys the support and encouragement from certain states." Or as the head of Iran's judiciary, Ayatollah Muhammad Yazdi, said recently, "We are living at a time when the United States supports Israel, which has the biggest arsenals of mass destruction and nuclear weapons; an atomic power is needed in the world of Islam to create a balance in the region." This aim recently acquired an additional sense of urgency with Israel's procurement of long-range Jericho missiles and cruise missile-capable submarines. Israel's alliance with Turkey and recent reports of Israeli strike aircraft stationed at the Turkish-Iranian border have also raised alarms in Tehran.

Khatemi promptly signaled his commitment to Iran's ongoing nuclear research program when he appointed one of the Islamic Republic's more competent officials, the former oil minister Gholarmreza Aghazadeh, to head its Atomic Energy Organization. The newly revitalized atomic agency has intensified its cooperation with Russia, and Moscow has pledged to assist in the construction of uranium-producing reactors. Already, hundreds of Russian scientists are involved in the construction of Iran's Bushehr nuclear complex, while an increasing number of Iranian scientists are being trained at Russian academies. Beyond Russia, Iranian agents have been pursuing plutonium and weapons-grade uranium in the former Soviet republics, North Korea and South Asia, while also attempting to recruit unemployed South African nuclear physicists. The pattern of Iran's procurement efforts has led Hans Blix, the former chief of the International Atomic Energy Agency, to conclude that, "One cannot avoid suspecting that there are organizations in Iran that are preparing a nuclear weapons program."

The Utility of Terror

Last, but not trivial, there is the matter of Iran's sponsorship of international terrorism. Since the 1979 revolution, the Islamic Republic has conducted two types of terrorist campaigns: the assassination of Iranian dissidents abroad and support for radical Islamist groups who target Western citizens. As to the first of these, Khatemi has purged the hit squads that until recently hunted down Iranian émigrés The new president quickly recognized that the habit of dispatching assassination teams to European capitals had exacted a steep price in terms of Iran's public relations and commercial ties. Unlike his predecessors, Khatemi is not obsessed with the enervated opposition groups abroad, and, in any case, assassinating their spokesmen hardly furthered Iran's national security aims.

However, to the extent that terrorism does advance Iran's regional objectives, there has been no break with past practice. Tehran's support for Hizballah, for example, provides it with a means by which to influence the direction of Lebanese politics, while in Hamas Iran has found a proxy club with which to strike Israel. Far from renouncing such groups, Khatemi has averred that "supporting peoples who fight for their land is not, in my opinion, terrorism." The nature of Iran's conduct has led the Clinton administration's point man on terrorism, Michael Sheehan, to stipulate:

"Iran continues to be involved in a range of terrorist activities. These include providing material support and safe-haven to some of the most lethal terrorist groups in the Addle East, notably Hizballah, Hamas and PIJ [Palestinian Islamic Jihad]."

In his recent trip to Washington, King Abdullah of Jordan similarly conveyed to the White House his concern that Iran had intensified its support for rejectionist Palestinian factions.

Then there is the unresolved Khobar Towers bombing that claimed the lives of nineteen American servicemen. Circumstantial evidence points to the involvement of Iran working through its surrogates in Saudi Arabia. State Department Spokesman James Rubin recently confirmed that, "We do have specific information with respect to the

involvement of Iranian Government officials." It is important to note, however, that the Khobar bombing preceded Khatemi's election, and the president has since severed ties with the radical Saudi groups, which no longer serve Iran's interests in the Gulf league.

As elsewhere, Iran's approach to terrorism suggests that it is motivated by carefully considered policy objectives as opposed to irrational temptations. But that still does not make it a friend of the United States. True, Iran is no longer a revolutionary power. But for Tehran, the intensely coveted aim of regional mastery requires as its precondition the retraction of U.S. power in the Middle East and the marginalization. of America's leading ally, Israel. Iran and the United States are, in short, two states competing over the same territory. And this is where a strategy of accommodation falters. For no degree of internal liberalization is likely to alter this fundamental clash of interests. Khatemi may have discarded the Khomeini regime's intemperate rhetoric and inflammatory strategy, but he has remained loyal to its hegemonic aspirations. A more pragmatic Iran, then, is likely to offer the United States only slightly less of a challenge than its revolutionary predecessor.

National Interest

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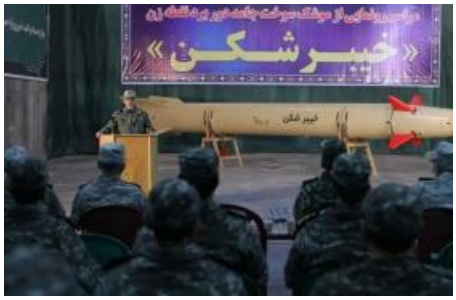

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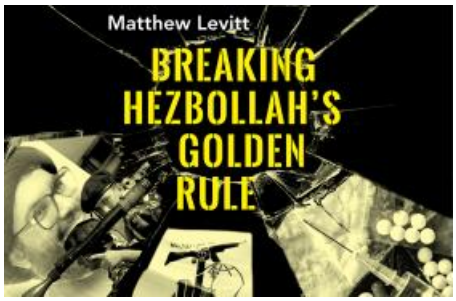

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