Reconceptualizing Khomeini
The Islamic Republic of Iran and U.S. Democratization Policies in the Middle East

Adam Lewis
Political Science Senior Thesis
Haverford College
May 2010

Adviser: Susanna Wing
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements
iv

Introduction
1

CHAPTER I
The Shift to Democracy Support and the Importance of Engaging Islamists
U.S. Democratization Policies in the Middle East
6

CHAPTER II
Imagining a Role for Islam in the Public Sphere
The Political Thought of Ayatollah Khomeini
29

CHAPTER III
The Unexpected Underpinnings of a Theocratic Vision
The Mystical Thought of Ayatollah Khomeini
51

CHAPTER IV
The Standard Bearers of a Progressive Islamic Project
Iranian Discourses on Islam and Democracy
64

Conclusion
Reimagining the Role of Iran in the Democratization of the Middle East
87

Appendix I:
Timeline: Khomeini and the Iranian Revolution
90

Bibliography
99
Acknowledgements

For my family who has given me unending educational opportunities and the unconditional support that has allowed me to take advantage of them to the fullest.

For Lauren, for patiently listening to my “inspired” epiphanies about Ayatollah Khomeini and my desperate rants about the thesis I thought I would never finish.

For the baseball team who has made sure I haven’t made it through a single day of the semester without having at least a little fun.

And lastly, for the Haverford Professors who have challenged and inspired me over the past four years. I hope that this project serves as a testament to your labors as well as mine.
Introduction

In January of 1980, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Supreme Leader of the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran, sat down in his house in Qom for an interview with the Middle East Bureau Chief of Time Magazine, Bruce van Voorst. Although the interview began with reasonable queries regarding anti-American sentiment and the crimes of the Shah, van Voorst's line of questioning quickly took on a bias that was at times patronizing and at others seemingly loaded with sarcasm. Despite the deteriorating quality of the questions, the Ayatollah attempted to answer each in a relatively thoughtful manner. Above all, his answers conveyed a great sense of Iranian frustration with the U.S. government, and other world powers, which, beyond ignoring the human rights abuses perpetrated by the deposed Shah's regime, were at the time preventing the return of the Shah to Iran to be tried for his crimes.

Regardless of his frustration with the U.S. government, Khomeini very deliberately noted that whatever enmity he, and other Iranians, felt towards America was not directed at the American people.

By the time the two men were halfway through the interview, it became clear that van Voorst was determined to paint a very specific picture of Khomeini, one he had in mind well before he arrived at the Ayatollah's house. The picture was in fact a caricature; it was of a backward, close-minded, fundamentalist Mullah disconnected from the modern world and overflowing with implacable hatred for the United States. Van Voorst was not the only member of the western media determined to caricature Khomeini in this way. For citizens of the western world who had long since concluded that secular democracy was the only type of desirable government, the fiery Iranian cleric committed to the establishment of an Islamic state at all costs represented everything that stood in opposition to their conception of human progress.

1 The following question and response is one example that illustrates van Voorst's fundamental misunderstanding of Khomeini's position as well as his desire to cast Khomeini as reactionary and unreasonable. "Q: You have objected to the West's efforts to impose its values on Iran. Why are you trying to impose Islamic values and Islamic justice on representatives of the West? A: We definitely do not want to impose Islamic values on the West. Islam will never be imposed—neither on the West, nor on the East, nor on any particular individual or region. Islam is opposed to coercion. Islam stands for freedom in all its dimensions. It is up to the people themselves to accept or reject it." Ayatollah Khomeini, "Man of the Year: An Interview with Khomeini (January 7, 1980)," by Bruce van Voorst, Time (January 7, 1980).

2 Ibid.
The aforementioned western caricature of Khomeini is not entirely devoid of truth. It is, however, a gross oversimplification of one of the twentieth century's most capable and influential politicians and world leaders. Furthermore, it is a caricature that I believe has clouded U.S. perceptions of the Middle East and Muslim World more broadly. Most notably, Khomeini and the Iranian state that he helped found have come to embody the ultimate fear of U.S. policy makers as they attempt to formulate U.S. democratization policies in the region. These policy makers fear that any attempt to open the semi-authoritarian political systems in the Middle East could lead to an Islamist takeover—the seizure of power by an Islamist party who creates a theocratic and absolutist state (in other words, another Iran). Based on this fear, the U.S. has been reluctant to engage with Islamist parties even when such parties espouse democratic commitments.

In this thesis, I argue that in order to craft effective democratization policies in the greater Middle East, the U.S. must be willing to engage, even if only conditionally, with Islamist opposition groups. I assert that U.S. refusal to engage with such groups is rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of what Iran and the Iranian revolution has come to mean to Islamist movements throughout the Muslim World. Rather than representing an attempt to reclaim a fundamentalist and idyllic vision of Islamic community that stands in opposition to the modern world, I argue that the Iranian state (and Khomeini's political project) instead represents a progressive attempt to reconcile the perceived conflict between traditional Islamic values and forces of modernity.

I argue that the spirit of progressive inquiry that spawned Khomeini's political philosophy, and in turn the Iranian state, as well as the unintentional secularization of Islam that resulted from the formation of the Iranian state, are the most enduring legacies of the Iranian revolution—this, as opposed to the legacy of repressive theocratic government. I posit that it is the legacy of progressive inquiry that has in fact fuelled the emergence of robust debates in Iran on Islam and democracy. Theses debates have in turn come to represent the cutting edge of democratic discourse in the Muslim World. Based on this understanding of Iran, I argue that it is time for the U.S. to stop letting its fear of Islamic revolution
undermine its capacity to engage with democratically inclined Islamist groups in the Middle East. This does not mean that the U.S. should throw all caution to the wind. It does mean, however, that the U.S. should be wary of continuing to imagine Islamist movements in extreme terms that foreclose on the possibility of engagement.

I will make this argument in four chapters. Chapter 1 addresses the need for engagement with Islamist groups in order to formulate effective democratization policies. In this chapter, I argue that a consensus of U.S. strategic thinkers has embraced a shift from “democracy promotion” to “democracy support” and that this shift, on principle, recognizes the importance of engaging with Islamists. Furthermore, I highlight that those who disagree with the necessity of engagement root their disagreements in their fear of Islamic fundamentalism and the emergence of theocratic government.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I offer an exploration of Khomeini's political and religious thought, as well as his highly contested legacy, in order to problematize the caricature that has clouded western perceptions of the late Iranian leader and the Islamic Republic of Iran for over thirty years. Most notably, I endeavor to dispel the misperception of Khomeini as fundamentalist and backward and in its place to craft a more nuanced understanding of his political and religious vision that exposes it for what it really is: a progressive modernist project aimed at reconciling conflicts that emerge between traditional Islam and the forces of modernity.

Towards this end, these two middle chapters offer an examination of what I see as the two most important aspects of Khomeini's political and religious legacy. In Chapter 2, I analyze Khomeini's political philosophy, namely the doctrine of velayat-e faqih (guardianship of the jurist), and discuss the evolution of Khomeini's philosophy as it became the founding principle of governance for the Islamic Republic of Iran. At the crux of this doctrine is Khomeini's assertion that the Islamic concept of velayat (guardianship)—traditionally dictating that clergy are obligated to serve as the guardians of orphans and those mentally incapable of caring for themselves—must be expansively understood to hold that clergy have the right and obligation to serve as guardians of society as a whole. This move, as will be highlighted
by the work of Mohsen Kadivar discussed in Chapter 4, constitutes a radical departure from traditional strains of Shi'i jurisprudential thought. I assert that Khomeini's greatest legacy, in this regard, is his introduction of Islam into the public sphere as the official ideology of the Iranian state. This resulted in the intended consequence of making Islam a powerful force that wields undeniable influence over Iranian society. It also resulted, however, in the unintended consequence of "secularizing" Islam—making it a publicly contestable discourse open to debate by all members of the Iranian population.

In Chapter 3, I offer an examination of Khomeini's mystical thought, highlighting specifically the frustration Khomeini expressed over the way in which his mystical beliefs were criticized by what he saw as "backward" and "reactionary" clerics. I assert that Khomeini's legacy in this regard is multi-layered. On one level it suggests that, towards the end of his life, Khomeini may have been disappointed in his own political accomplishments to the extent that they had not created a society tolerant of his views (or of "other views" more broadly). On another level, Khomeini's mystical legacy underscores the fact that his political vision stemmed from beliefs outside of traditional streams of Islamic thought.

In Chapter 4, I discuss three alternative Iranian visions for Islamic government offered by the late Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, Ayatollah Mohsen Kadivar, and Abdulkarim Soroush. I emphasize that while all three thinkers are critical of Khomeini's political project to varying degrees, all three still draw on his legacy in some capacity to further their own vision. What Montazeri, Kadivar, and Soroush have in common in terms of how they conceive of Khomeini, I assert, is a shared recognition of Khomeini's political project as inherently modernist and progressive. In this respect, regardless of the critiques they level at the Iranian state, all three thinkers reclaim at least Khomeini's intentions, arguing that his desire to create an Islamic state able to grapple successfully with issues of modernity remains an admirable goal.

The discussion of modern discourses on Islam and democracy in Chapter 4 reaffirms the understanding of Khomeini's multi-faceted legacy developed in Chapters 2 and 3. The robust debates that have emerged in Iran on Islam and democracy are thus a testament to the importance of Khomeini's
introduction of Islam into the public sphere. And, the fact that reformist thinkers invoke Khomeini’s political project as an impetus for their own visions is a testament to the way Khomeini has been understood by many Iranians as a progressive thinker whose philosophical endeavors, regardless of their practical outcomes, highlight the importance of reconciling Islam and modernity. In this way, I conclude that Khomeini’s life and work can holistically be understood to have both provided space in which new debates on Islam and democracy have emerged, and inspiration to the thinkers who have filled that space.

Given this understanding, I assert that it is long over due that U.S. policy makers move past the fear they have long had of Islamist takeovers that is based on the false caricature of Khomeini as a leader attempting to guide Iran back to an anti-modern, Islamic golden age. Beneath that caricature they will find cause to reconsider not only the assumptions they have made about Khomeini and Iran, but also larger assumptions that have shaped U.S. understandings of the relationship between Islam and democracy. Most importantly, it will allow the U.S. to craft better informed and more nuanced democratization policies in the region that are more likely to be effective.
CHAPTER I

The Shift to Democracy Support and the Importance of Engaging Islamists

U.S. Democratization Policies in the Middle East
Rethinking Democratization

Democracy promotion has been a subject of discussion for many years in the United States. Debates on the topic have been particularly lively in the past eight years, however, during which the United States' involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan and other parts of the greater Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has raised questions about how best to encourage democratic practices abroad. While the policies of President George W. Bush had mixed results, they raised many key issues that must be addressed, and have highlighted the continued relevance of the question: how can the U.S. most effectively pursue democratic reform in the MENA region?

In this chapter, I assert that a notable consensus is emerging among scholars, politicians, and policy analysts on a new set of principles that should form the basis for the United States' continued pursuit of democracy abroad. This new set of principles is in many ways defined by a rhetorical shift from "democracy promotion" to "democracy support." It is an approach that embraces the notion, as suggested by the above linguistic adjustment, that the United States should be working to "make the world safe for democracy" rather than to "make the world democratic." In translating these principles into actual foreign policy, I have found that most members of the strategic community agree on the adoption of a "freedom's first" agenda aimed at securing the basic human rights of opposition groups in the MENA region as well as the need for more frequent and consistent attempts to engage with and apply pressure to authoritarian MENA regimes in pursuit of this agenda.

Despite their agreement on the need for the U.S. to use its influence to open political space for opposition groups in the region, however, strategic thinkers disagree over what opposition groups the U.S. should actually be helping to fill that space. More specifically, these scholars disagree over whether an effective shift to democracy support requires that the U.S. engage directly with Islamist parties that have chosen to participate in electoral politics and who have expressed varying levels of commitment to democratic values. On one side of this debate are a group of thinkers who remain wary of the possibility of Islamist takeovers and thus advocate that democracy support efforts should be geared solely towards
bolstering secular opposition parties. On the other side of the debate are a second group of thinkers who believe that Islamist groups are simply too popular, wield too much influence within opposition movements, and are already too entangled with calls for democratic reform to be ignored.

In this chapter I hope to demonstrate why I find the arguments of this latter group to be more persuasive. In order to do this, I feel it is first necessary to discuss the principles that serve as the foundation for the aforementioned shift from democracy promotion to support. Towards this end, I will begin by addressing the commonly held belief that the pursuit of global democratization remains a worthwhile goal for United States foreign policy. Second, I will examine the dualistic policy approach entailed by the shift to democracy support that attempts to identify the interaction between U.S. security interests and democratic interests while recognizing that these two sets of interests can be pursued independently of one another in how the U.S. deals with specific MENA states. Following this discussion of broader principles, I will highlight the key aspects of the “freedom’s first” agenda on which strategic thinkers agree. I will then examine the debate regarding engagement with Islamists, and argue that a refusal to engage Islamist parties not only makes a genuine shift from promotion to support impossible but also inevitably cripples U.S. efforts designed to support democratization in the MENA region.

Keeping Democracy on the Agenda

Many events in recent years have called into question the merit of U.S. attempts to promote democracy in the MENA region. The widely perceived-to-be deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, the ongoing conflict in Iraq, and the continued resistance of Arab regimes to calls for substantive political reform, have led many to question whether promoting democracy is something the United States can or should be doing at all. Despite these concerns, however, a majority of thinkers appear to agree that democratization abroad is still something worth pursuing. Those who hold this position base their view on the assessment that the continued growth of democracies abroad is of high strategic value to the

---

United States. In this vein, there are two major strains of thought that offer strategic justifications for the continued pursuit of democracy in the MENA region.

The first line of thinking is more abstract and is based essentially on the idea that the more democracies there are in the world, and the larger the role the United States can play in bringing them into being, the better. More specifically, it embraces three theoretical principles about democracies that are outlined by Alexander T.J. Lennon in the edited volume, *Democracy in U.S. Security Strategy: From Promotion to Support*. Drawing on interviews conducted with more than forty experts on United States security strategy and democracy, Lennon asserts that the United States strategic community supports the continued pursuit of democracy abroad based on enduring beliefs in: (1) the "democratic peace theory"—the notion that "democracies do not fight each other or that 'if there was genuine democracy around the world, it [the world] would be a more peaceful and prosperous place;'"4 (2) the idea that democracies make better potential allies for the United States because they are "perceived to be better governed" and "to make better decisions;"5 and (3) the notion that democracy promotion has a positive effect on the United States' image. As one policy maker states, "for the United States, our credibility as a world leader depends to some extent on the values that we bring to our world leadership. And being identified as on the side of those people that share those [values] is central to our basic engagement in the international system and who we are as a people."6

The second strain of thought used to justify democracy promotion in the MENA region is based on a strategic assessment of the stability of MENA regimes. In this regard, there seems to be a growing consensus around the idea that there is political turmoil ahead in the MENA region and that if we do not act to pursue democracy we will have no role in shaping the outcome of that turmoil. The most compelling argument offered in support of this assessment is that of Tamara Cofman Wittes. Wittes

---

5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 12.
argues that the authoritarian regimes that are pervasive throughout MENA are becoming subject to what she calls a “vanishing status quo.” Essentially, she proposes that a combination of factors are undermining the key supporting pillars on which these regimes are built and which have allowed them to remain resistant to calls for political change.

Wittes identifies these three deteriorating pillars as the three “Rs” behind the durability of Arab regimes: (1) Rents; (2) state Repression; and (3) effective nationalist Rhetoric. She asserts that external rents from superpowers “have dried up significantly since the end of the cold war, and oil rents, even in an era of high crude prices, cannot keep pace with the astonishing population growth the region has experienced and the pressures a young population places on social services and labor markets.” State repression has generated increasing attention from the outside community and too often is “incurring unacceptable political costs.” And lastly, globalization is changing the expectations that “citizens, especially young citizens, have of their government” meaning that regimes can no longer legitimate their authoritarian rule with the defunct rhetoric of Arab nationalism. Based on this assessment of slowly crumbling Arab autocrats, and out of concern for what will fill the power vacuum that inevitably ensues, Wittes, and others, maintain that “Democratic reform in the Arab Middle East is neither a luxury nor a pipe dream. It is a necessity.”

1 Tamara Cofman Wittes, Freedom’s Unsteady March: America’s Role in Building Arab Democracy (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 37. Other members of the strategic community echo Wittes’ assessment of the stability of Arab regimes. In their book, Myths, Illusions, and Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East, Dennis Ross and David Makovsky write, “We believe the days of authoritarian regimes in the region are numbered... As the Arab Human Development Reports have repeatedly made clear, Arabs are suffering from an educational, economic, and democratic deficit. Problems include corruption, cronyism—which limits wealth to a privileged few—and a lack of private sector employment prospects at a time of an Arab youth bulge.” Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, Myths, Illusions, and Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 293.

8 Wittes, 41.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 146. See also, Ross and Makovsky, 290. Despite my assertion in this literature review that there is general agreement on the necessity of democracy promotion, it is worth noting that there are still some voices that question both the power the United States can actually wield in promoting democracy in the region and also the logic behind some of the strategic justifications for democracy promotion. For instance, F. Gregory Gause III questions the justification that democracy promotion reduces terrorism. He argues that there is “no solid empirical evidence for a strong link between democracy, or any other regime type, and terrorism, in either a positive or a negative direction.” (F. Gregory Gause III, “Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?” Foreign Affairs 84, no. 5 (2005), 67) Arthur A. Goldsmith is more broadly skeptical of the democracy promotion project and questions not only whether democracy promotion is an endeavor worth pursuing
Transitioning from Promotion to Support

As established in the previous section, despite the events and policy failures of recent years, a general consensus exists in the strategic community on the need for democracy promotion abroad. In crafting a new approach to democracy promotion, however, thinkers within this consensus are not attempting to entirely discard the efforts of the past eight years. Rather, they maintain that some of the messages to the MENA region at the core of the Bush policies were based on the right ideas but were simply not delivered in an effective manner or (towards the end of the administration’s term) by a credible messenger. As Thomas Carothers, one of the most prominent voices in the field of democracy promotion, explains,

Bush’s declarations on the subject, and the associated proreform aid initiatives, did help stimulate an already existing debate within the Arab world over democracy. Due to his extremely low credibility in the Arab world, though, Bush was not an effective messenger. Nevertheless, his basic message—that Arab states should and can overcome their political stagnation and decay and that their doing so would be good both for them and for the United States—is a valuable one.¹¹

With this in mind, these thinkers argue that new approaches are not meant to be broad correctives. Instead, they are intended to effect subtle shifts in policy and rhetoric thus allowing the new administration to craft more modest but meaningful goals that can be presented in a new light and pursued successfully.

The subtle shifts that thinkers within this consensus propose are two-fold: (1) a shift in perspective (i.e. how democracy promotion efforts are conceived of and the spirit with which they are carried out); and (2) a shift in how efforts are focused (i.e. towards what areas/groups democracy promotion efforts are targeted). The change in perspective proposed is the aforementioned shift from “making the world democratic” to “making the world safe for democracy.” This shift is embodied by the linguistic transition that many thinkers have embraced from democracy “promotion” to democracy “support.”

The transition in language from promotion to support is most explicitly advocated for by Lennon and the other contributors to his previously discussed volume *Democracy in U.S. Security Strategy: From Promotion to Support*. Lennon asserts that the United States strategic community feels there are significant gains to be had by both shedding the baggage and negative associations attached to "democracy promotion" and also embracing a new terminology that reflects a change in the United States' perspective. The key motivation here is to reframe the United States' efforts as helping internal actors "toward their own aspirations" rather than "imposing" a sense of the United States' democratic aspirations or values on them. Larry Diamond offers the most explicit and coherent summary of what this new democracy support perspective should entail for the new administration. Diamond argues,

> The policy of the new administration will be to support democracy around the world. It is not the purpose of the United States to force our own system of government on other societies. Democracy can only be sustainable where it has local ownership and indigenous foundations. The principal drivers of democratic change must come from within each society and political system. But where countries try to make democracy work, we will vigorously support those efforts with economic development assistance and political assistance to both governmental institutions and a host of nongovernmental actors. And where broad demands for peaceful democracy are voiced, we will support them.14

As evidenced by this passage, there exists a new emphasis on supporting internally driven democratic movements. This is endorsed by a broad swatch of thinkers. As Congressional Representative David Price, a member of the House Democracy Assistance Commission (HDAC), notes, the failures of the Bush Administration can in large part be attributed to its inability to demonstrate that its democracy promotion efforts were in fact supporting homegrown movements rather than attempting to impose American democratic values that were foreign and unwanted. Price asserts that "the failure of the [Bush] administration to make this distinction has sparked a growing global backlash against efforts to 'export' democracy," thus prompting the need for an explicit effort to jettison the now tainted rhetoric of that administration.15

---

13 Lennon, 26.
Beyond simply adopting rhetoric that avoids the negative baggage of the Bush administration, many thinkers argue that the perspective of shifting to a support framework must be accompanied by a reconceptualization of how the United States pursues democracy abroad. At the core of this reconceptualization is a recognition of the duality of the United States democratic and strategic interests in the MENA region. To be clear, the majority of strategic thinkers agree that democracy is a strategic imperative, but they also highlight the fact that democracy does not need to be promoted in direct coordination with our other strategic interests (i.e. combating terrorism, maintaining a stable supply of oil, etc.). In other words, the United States can pressure an allied authoritarian regime to enact political reforms while continuing to cooperate with that same regime in combating terrorism. To be successful this dual approach requires greater coherence and clarity in the United States' rhetoric, as well as greater consistency and persistency in the United States' diplomatic efforts.

Scholars characterize this general policy approach in different ways but they all strike at the same core ideas. Dennis Ross and David Makovsky describe a “new realism” in which the “United States must not give up its ideals, but must pursue them in a way that reflects the realities of the region and not wishful thinking.” They further elaborate that such an approach must be “sustainable and flexible” to be effective. Michelle Dunne argues that it behooves the new administration to show “greater persistence in goals and flexibility in means.” And Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers speak to the need for “sustained and subtle measures that reflect the realities of the problems and challenges on the ground rather than the fears and hopes that drive the West to engage.”

As previously mentioned, the transition to a support agenda requires both a shift in perspective and a shift in focus. With regard to focus, the shift required by the democracy support framework most
The Shift to Democracy Support and the Importance of Engaging Islamists  

notably entails a move away from, or at least a revaluation of, some of the traditional areas of focus in democracy promotion. Before addressing these areas, it is important to reiterate that they are not being abandoned entirely as goals worthy of support but rather that their role in democratization is being reconsidered.

The most important shift in focus dictated by the shift from promotion to support is away from building civil society, a longstanding target of democracy promotion efforts. On the most basic level, a majority of strategic thinkers argue that civil society in MENA does not have the power to promote democratization in the way it was once believed to. As Ottaway and Amr Hamzawy matter-of-factly conclude, “civil society organizations are not major political players in the Arab world.” The reason for the impotency of civil society, they assert, is that the repression of authoritarian regimes is simply too much to overcome without the emergence of “mass movements rather than of the small, professional NGOs” that have been historically promoted by democracy advocates. In this vein, Amy Hawthorne asserts that what civil society needs most before it can be an effective democratizing force is “autonomy from the regime.” Therefore, the most productive thing that democracy advocates can do for civil society organizations in the Arab world is to secure the space they need to exist and operate.

In addition to questioning support for civil society, many scholars reevaluate other ineffective aspects of democracy promotion such as, empowering women as a key to democratization, focusing on

---

22 Ibid.
24 Benjamin MacQueen pushes the argument against civil society even further, asserting that support efforts directed at civil society can be counterproductive. He asserts that disempowered civil society organizations in the region are so highly regulated and manipulated by the regimes under which they operate that “there is a tendency... for civil society organizations... to simply reproduce prevailing conditions.” Benjamin MacQueen, “Democracy promotion and Arab autocracies,” Global Change, Peace & Security 21, no. 2 (June 2009), 173.
economic development as a precondition of democratic reform, and emphasizing elections as an end goal of democracy. These scholars do not advocate that these previous focuses should be jettisoned entirely from future democracy support efforts. They do assert, however, that no one of these values should continue to be viewed as an essential precursor to democracy.

It is worth noting that there are voices both within and outside the movement towards democracy support that take issue with some of these revaluations, particularly with regard to economic development. For instance, Francis Fukuyama continues to advocate for a privileged role for economic development in efforts to promote democracy. Michael Mandelbaum is even more adamant, insisting that the best way to foster democracy remains the promotion of market values abroad. Despite these objections, there is still far more noteworthy agreement on the new values prescribed to these different focuses. Namely, that they can almost uniformly be classified as Ottaway classifies the focus on women’s rights, as more politically palatable but indirect ways of fostering democracy.

With this in mind, Carothers highlights how the choice presented to the Obama Administration is whether to continue with these more indirect (and non-confrontational) efforts or to embrace the type of direct democracy promotion suggested by the transition to support.

For the U.S. government to genuinely commit itself to a direct method of promoting democracy would mean a significant change of course—away from decades of support for political stasis and from deep attachments to particular rulers. It would mean taking significant political risks and expending real political capital that up to now has been used in the service of economic and security interests.

27 Lennon’s volume offers the best explanation for how past efforts by the United States have operated under the mistaken conception that elections represent the end goal and primary indicator of democratization. See Lennon, 17.
Based on this principle of direct democracy promotion, the consensus agenda that emerges is one directly geared towards the idea presented earlier of “making the world safe for democracy.” It is what Tamara Wittes calls a “freedoms first” agenda because its primary focus is on protecting the basic political freedoms of Arab citizens and thus providing them with the political space in which they can push for democracy on their own.

Making the World Safe for Democracy: Promoting Basic Human Freedoms

As suggested in the previous section, there are two key goals that influence thinking about how to implement a democracy support agenda: (1) opening political space in which reform efforts can emerge; and (2) responding to calls for help from Arab reformers who hope to utilize that space. With regard to the first objective, the agenda that best embodies the ideals of democracy support, as explained by Wittes, dictates that “the highest priority goal toward which American diplomatic, financial, and other policy tools should be deployed is the expansion of basic political freedoms: freedom of expression (including media freedom), freedom of assembly, and freedom of association.”

This approach is what Wittes labels a “freedoms first approach” and she asserts that it entails three major benefits. First, it is the best way to push for steady progress because it empowers the citizenry to hold the government accountable and thus prevents backsliding into authoritarianism. Second, it levels the playing field for secular and Islamist opposition parties. As Wittes and others have explained, under most MENA regimes, Islamist movements enjoy a key organizational advantage over secular movements because they have a built-in network of mosques in which they can organize (and which remain somewhat impervious to state interference). Opening the political sphere will offer secular parties greater opportunities to compete with Islamists parties for support and will thus potentially bring greater diversity and balance to opposition

---

31 Wittes, 104.
32 Ibid., 74.
movements. Lastly, it empowers the citizenry to place constraints on regimes and thus ensures that external pressure “never outstrips internal demands for change.”

With these benefits in mind, the dynamic envisioned by the democracy support agenda is that the focus on freedoms positions the domestic oppositions groups as drivers of change and the United States simply as providing the resources to fuel that drive. As Wittes explains,

The power of basic political freedoms is that they make other forms of democratic progress possible by creating space for Arab citizens and reform-minded officials to do what they already want to do, giving them greater opportunities to act on their own and to build coalitions on behalf of change. In such an environment, local activists can raise their own demands, and external actors such as the United States can more easily line up behind them.

Embracing such an agenda allows the new administration to focus on giving opposition parties the space they need to operate without dictating what they should do with that space. Successfully implementing such an agenda in the MENA region requires two things; (1) effectively engaging authoritarian regimes in order to encourage/pressure them to respect the political and human rights of their citizens; and (2) effectively engaging opposition groups in order to help them utilize available political space in an effective and democratic manner. While the requirement of engaging with regimes is generally agreed upon, the latter goal of engaging opposition groups is complicated by the fact that the primary opposition groups in

---

33 While other consensus scholars do not explicitly embrace the “freedoms first” terminology, they do craft agenda proposals that are strikingly similar to Wittes’ in their focus on basic human rights. Bellin, for instance, outlines an approach that asserts that the United States “must commit itself to the defense of basic freedoms and human rights in the region but leave the battle for full-fledged democracy to local forces on the ground.” Eva Bellin, “Advice to President Obama: Realistic Idealism and Democracy Promotion in the Middle East,” Middle East Policy XV, no. 4 (Winter 2008), 139.

34 Wittes, 105.

35 Wittes, 106. This sentiment is also echoed by Larry Diamond who writes, “Assistance efforts must be grounded in the interests and needs of societal stakeholders, most of all the general public.” He further asserts, “for democracy assistance to be legitimate, effective, and sustainable, it must respond to local priorities and initiatives rather than impose preconceived formulas from the outside.” Larry Diamond, The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World (New York: Times Book, 2008), 316.

36 Exactly how the U.S. should engage with regimes is more complicated than one might expect based on the attention I give this question here. In brief, the key ideas behind how and why the U.S. should engage authoritarian regimes are (1) political and coercive power in most MENA countries is so consolidated in the hands of regimes that, at present, the power disadvantage is too much for internal advocates of democracy to overcome on their own; (2) a lack of engagement benefits neither the regime nor the U.S.; (3) the U.S. must be consistent in how it deals with both its enemies and friends; (4) the U.S. has more leverage in its relationships with friendly autocratic regimes than it has previously utilized to push such regimes towards reform; (5) the U.S. should focus on incentive-based approaches that lure regimes into pursuing reform rather than force them into reform or lead them to believe that the U.S. is interested in regime change.
almost every MENA country are Islamist. It is on this issue that thinkers who up until this point agree on the democracy support agenda begin to embrace diverging opinions.

**The Islamist Dilemma: To Engage or Not to Engage**

Before entering into a discussion of whether or not the U.S. should engage Islamists, it is worth briefly discussing the term Islamist and what it means within the broader debate. The term Islamist is used to describe any movement that advocates for the influence of Islamic principles in the creation of laws that govern society. Within this broader category, Tamara Cofman Wittes identifies three relevant subcategories based on the ends that Islamist groups seek and the means they are willing to employ to achieve those ends. The first subcategory encompasses international jihadist groups that condone and employ violence to achieve their ends such as Al-Qaeda. The second subcategory consists of national and local groups that similarly embrace violent struggle. And the third and largest subcategory includes nonviolent Islamist groups that “aspire to participate in the politics of the state within which they live, without any overtly revolutionary goals.”

This last subcategory is the type of Islamists that strategic thinkers discuss when they talk about engagement. There is tremendous diversity amongst the groups in this last subcategory and developing ways to differentiate between the commitments of different groups is a key goal of this section.

Islamists in the MENA region have for many years represented the most powerful opposition to authoritarian regimes, emerging in the last three to four decades as major players on the Arab political stage. Despite their burgeoning influence, the U.S. has chosen, nearly uniformly, to avoid engagement with these groups, primarily out of concern for what Islamist parties really want out of democratic participation. In effect, the U.S. has been wary of what Jillian Schwedler calls the paradox of

---

37 Wittes, 133. Strategic thinkers refer to this last set of groups by many names, some of the most common being “moderate Islamists,” “mainstream Islamists,” and “participating Islamists.” From here onward, I will use the last of these three terms because I think it avoids some of the connotations that come with the terms “moderate” and “mainstream.” Amr Hamzawy and Marina Ottaway, “Islamists in Politics: The Dynamics of Participation,” in *Getting to Pluralism: Political Actors in the Arab World* edited by Marina Ottaway and Amr Hamzawy, 69-96, (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009), 69.

38 To reiterate, the vast majority of those who advocate for engagement, including myself, are not advocating for engagement with Islamist groups who have refused to renounce violence.
democracy—that "democratic processes might empower non-democratic actors to reverse those openings—perhaps permanently"—and what that could mean in the Middle East. In other words, the United States has worried that Islamist parties that have espoused democratic ideals have done so disingenuously and in truth are looking only for systems to be opened to them so that they can create theocratic states. As Shadi Hamid explains, the U.S. fear is that while Islamists outwardly proclaim "one person, one vote" they are silently thinking "one person, one vote, one time."

While the fear of Islamist takeover is not entirely unfounded, the U.S. must overcome this fear if it is to effectively implement a democracy support agenda in the MENA region. First, Islamist groups are simply too popular, too influential, and already too entangled with movements for democratic reform for the U.S. to continue to ignore them. Second, engagement offers the U.S. a chance to have a positive role in shaping the outcome of reform in MENA states whereas refusal to engage offers no such opportunity. Third, engagement with Islamists would at last bring U.S. policies in the MENA region into line with its espoused democratic values by allowing it to successfully make a transition from democracy promotion to democracy support and thus to restore its credibility as an advocate for democracy.

The bottom line is that Islamists are the difference makers in the MENA region. They are the factors that make democratization efforts in the region different from efforts initiated by the United States in other parts of the world or during other time periods. For instance, Carothers and Ottaway assert that whereas in Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union there were no significant ideological movements for democracy to contend with (i.e. socialism and anti-democratic nationalism were on the decline), "In the Arab world... democracy has had to contend with (i.e. socialism and anti-democratic nationalism were on the decline), "In the Arab world... democracy has had to contend with political Islam, or Islamism, a mixture

---

38 Shadi Hamid, "Parting the Veil: Now is no time to give up supporting democracy in the Muslim world. But to do so, the United States must embrace Islamist moderates," Democracy Journal (Summer 2007): 38-47.
39 Before making this argument it is worth noting that in arguing for engagement with participating Islamists I am not asserting that such groups should receive any type of special treatment from the United States. In fact, I am arguing quite the opposite, simply that Islamist groups should receive treatment equal to that of other non-Islamist opposition groups. They should not be unconditionally excluded from the possibility of receiving U.S. support and instead should be included beneath the umbrella of opposition groups whose basic political and human rights the U.S. seeks to protect.
of politico-religious ideas that attract a mass following, have been growing in popularity, and relate uneasily to the ideals of liberal democracy."42

The potency of Islamist ideologies has meant that Islamists have simply become too popular (and too entangled with the idea of democratic reform) to be ignored. Amaney A. Jamal, who offers an examination of public opinion polls in the Middle East, asserts, "Where mass attitudes are located, it is difficult to foresee the advancement of a democratic agenda at the expense of an Islamic agenda."43 Graham Fuller reaffirms this sentiment and the necessity of engagement with Islamists, stating that there is a high "likelihood that most of the grand debates of Arab politics in the next decade will be within the framework of Islamist politics more broadly." He continues, "Political debate must encompass Islam if the debate is to be meaningful. Excluding the Islamic factor in Arab politics will simply be one-sided and unrealistic given the critical importance of Islamists in many Arab societies."44

Based on this understanding of the importance of Islamists, a few key principles emerge about why and how they should be engaged. First and foremost, refusal to engage Islamist parties inevitably undermines U.S. efforts at reform because such efforts fail to take into account one of the key political actors in the region. Furthermore, refusal to engage denies the possibility of the United States having any role in the evolution of Islamist parties or any cooperative relationship to build on should they gain power. With this in mind, the new administration should quickly let it be known "as a matter of policy that the United States is not opposed to dealing with non-violent Islamist parties and has no problem with Islamists coming to power through free elections, under the condition that they have explicitly committed themselves to democracy and peaceful political participation."45 Once the United States has established its conditional willingness to engage with Islamists it can enter into productive dialogue with these groups.

45 Hamid, 44.
and begin to work on resolving some of the tensions that have historically existed between these groups and the U.S.

**The Benefits of Engagement**

Beyond simply recognizing the importance of Islamists and accepting the necessity of engaging with them, the U.S. should also recognize the benefits that it can reap through engagement. In overcoming its fear of Islamist takeovers, the U.S. must recognize that through engagement it could positively work to reduce the possibility of an Islamist takeover. Engaging Islamists could offer the United States not only the opportunity to further assess Islamist positions on democracy in order to determine whether our fears of Islamist takeovers are well-founded but also to perhaps influence these parties towards greater moderation and embrace of democratic values.\(^{46}\) To elaborate, U.S. engagement with Islamists can play a positive role in the evolution of such parties by: (1) encouraging trends toward reform already present within these parties; and (2) affording the U.S. some leverage in encouraging Islamist parties to be more explicit in defining their democratic commitments.

The primary way in which engagement strengthens reformist trends within Islamist parties is by beginning to solve the issue of poor payback for political participation. Poor payback refers to the notion that Islamists in recent years have suffered from their inability to demonstrate to their constituents that participation in politics is bringing them concrete gains. In other words, Islamist groups perform a dual function as both religious groups and political parties. Their base is primarily drawn from their religious supporters and in order to participate in electoral politics they have had to convince their religious constituents that compromise on certain ideological beliefs\(^{47}\)—compromises that would never need to be made by a solely religious group—are worth the gains to be had through participation. While participating

---


\(^{47}\) The primary compromise made by these groups is accepting the legitimacy of laws that are made independently of Islamic jurisprudence. In other words, Islamist groups that enter the political sphere must at times be forced to concede that their conception of Islamic law in how it relates to individual rights, gender equality, social justice, etc. must be subject to the approval of non-Islamic legislative bodies.
Islamists have historically been able to convince their constituents of this point, in recent years, regime repression and the implementation of superficial reforms that have done nothing to grant Islamists greater power has begun to suggest to Islamist constituents that their compromises are all for naught. As Hamzawy and Ottaway note,

The poor payback for their efforts has presented Islamists with new challenges. The first is devising new arguments to convince their constituencies that participation in the political system remains an indispensable long-term strategy despite poor returns in the short term. The second challenge is striking a sustainable balance between the pragmatic requirements of political participation and the demands of ideological commitment.66

The phenomenon of poor payback has most notably undermined the reformist strains within these Islamist parties. The reformist leaders who initially advocated for participation and moderation are now facing harsh criticisms from constituents who feel they have been duped, and conservative hardliners who thought that participation was a bad idea to begin with (and that either violence or renunciation of politics are more prudent options). Facing this reversal of reformist gains, the U.S. can and should work, through engagement, to reward the decision to peacefully participate in politics. As Ottaway and Hamzawy note, the bottom line is that “Islamists do not need to participate in legal politics to survive. They can concentrate on da’wa (proselytizing) and fostering a society that lives by the tenets of Islam, even if the state remains unreformed. They can choose jihad, or holy war, as some have done.”67 If the United States does not want to see these groups pursuing these other options (particularly the latter) it must find ways to increase the returns for Islamists on political participation and thus strengthen the voices of reformers in these parties. The combination of regime pressure to further open political systems and the inclusion of Islamists under the banner of U.S. human rights protection would help accomplish this goal by giving credence to the claims of reformers within these participating Islamist parties. It would demonstrate that they are right to pursue political participation and it would legitimate their claims to their constituents that it is worthwhile to moderate their ideological stances in order to enter the public sphere.

67 Ottaway and Hamzawy, “Pluralist Politics in Undemocratic Political Systems,” 34.
Furthermore, protecting the right of Islamists to participate could in itself induce greater moderation among Islamist parties as the responsibilities of power require them to make pragmatic compromises with former non-Islamist opponents and to adapt their platforms to cater to larger constituencies. Currently, scholars are attempting to see in what ways participation induces or fails to induce moderation. A common sentiment expressed by these researchers is that the pragmatic demands of political participation do in fact lead Islamist groups to moderate. As Nathan J. Brown, Amr Hamzawy and Marina Ottaway note, currently Islamists enjoy the luxury of crafting uncompromising platforms that allow them to cater to their base constituency by taking radical stances on say, Israel. Inclusion and equal participation in democratic political systems would deny them that luxury because were they really at the head of government, or playing a significant role within it, they would have to deal directly with the consequences of taking such a radical stance. With this in mind, Diamond asserts that the goal of engagement should naturally be to include and encourage Islamist participation. He writes,

The goal must be to draw these parties into a process of democratic elections, democratic governance, opposition responsibilities, and pluralistic coexistence so that they are forced to respond to demands from their constituencies for real achievements in governance as opposed to mere ideology and rhetoric.

Beyond simply strengthening existing reformist trends in Islamist parties, U.S. engagement with these groups offers the opportunity for the U.S. to push these groups to define their democratic commitments more explicitly. This issue is best addressed by Brown, Hamzawy, and Ottaway who, while recognizing the necessity of engaging Islamist parties in the MENA region, assert that there are still areas in which Islamists need to be more explicit about their commitments before the U.S. can engage them with full confidence. Brown, Hamzawy, and Ottaway term these areas in which Islamist commitments are questionable as “gray zones.” These gray zones, they assert, emerge because of the tensions that Islamist groups must negotiate due to their dual character as “religious organizations committed to spreading a body of beliefs and practices” and “political organizations” that must be “flexible and pragmatic” to

---


52 Brown, Hamzawy, and Ottaway, 4.
succeed in electoral politics. As Islamists try to negotiate this tension between their ideological religious foundations and their "new goal of becoming influential players in a pluralistic, democratic system," ambiguities inevitably emerge.

Brown, Hamzawy and Ottaway identify six key "gray zones" on which Islamist thought must be probed and which can only be probed in full through engagement and inclusion: "Islamic law, violence, pluralism, civil and political rights, women's rights, and religious minorities." These zones are points of major concern for assessing how committed Islamists are to democratic values and so, in engaging Islamists, it is essential that the U.S. be able to assess the depth of these commitments. As I have suggested previously, the U.S. can most effectively accomplish such an assessment by agreeing to advocate for the basic political rights of Islamist groups, on the condition that they better define their positions in these gray zone areas in ways that are compatible with the values of democracy and pluralism. In this way, the U.S. can condition its support of Islamist groups in much the same way it should condition its support of regimes, attempting to lure them into democratic reform with enticing incentives. By adopting this approach the U.S. can both assess the democratic commitments of Islamist groups while simultaneously encouraging them to move away from extremism.

Restoring U.S. Credibility

Perhaps the most important indirect benefit that can be reaped by the United States by adopting the approach outlined above is that through engagement with and inclusion of Islamists in its democratic rhetoric and policies, the U.S. can begin to close the gap between its rhetoric and policies and to restore its credibility as an advocate of democratization. The U.S.'s behavior up until now has left much to be

---

53 Ibid., 6.
54 Ibid., 4.
55 As I mentioned earlier, the issue of engaging regimes will be explored in greater depth later on (in my thesis).
56 See also Diamond, The Spirit of Democracy, 284. As suggested above, the incentive offered Islamists here is the U.S. throwing its political weight behind their claims for greater rights to oppose regimes.
57 Price offers an eloquent summary of the benefits of engagement. He writes, "Engagement with these parties offers the United States an opportunity to encourage their commitment democracy as well as the expression of their views and grievances through democratic means. In the long run, integrating such parties into open political systems may be the best way to dissociate Islamism from the impulse toward political extremism." Price, 163.
desired in how it has lived up, or rather failed to live up, to its espoused democratic commitments. These past failings, particularly in the last eight years, have had lingering repercussions and will continue to affect the U.S.’s capacity to engage with Islamist parties. I have until now presented my argument in this chapter as if the only choice that needs to be made is whether or not the U.S. will engage with Islamists. In reality, however, there are many Islamists who, based on the United States’ past behavior, want nothing to do with the U.S. As Sala Ad-Din Al-Jourchi highlights, the position of Arab elites advocating for reform “has been greatly undermined by the double standard of President Bush’s rhetoric and policies” and many are thus justifiably skeptical of attempts by the U.S. to “help them.” In this regard, even if the U.S. commits to a policy of engagement it will have some winning over to do.

Despite the baggage of the Bush administration, the election of Barack Obama, a figure vastly more popular (at least at the time of his election) in the MENA region than his predecessor, does offer the opportunity for a new beginning in U.S.-Islamist relations. The possibility of such a beginning is spoken to by Gamal Al-Ghitany, who asserts that even the election of Obama itself sends a positive message to the Arab world about the possibilities of democracy. Attempting to speak on behalf of the Arab world, Al-Ghitany writes, “The recent U.S. election opened our eyes to the merits of American democracy in particular and those of Western democracy in general.” While one certainly cannot ascribe Al-Ghitany’s positive outlook with regard to the U.S. to the entire Arab world, or even reformist-minded Arab elite, his sentiment does offer some hope that Obama’s election represents an opportunity for the U.S. to head in a new direction with support from the Arab world.

Overall, however, the deciding factor in whether the U.S. is able to develop more fruitful relationships with Islamist groups will not be the identity or background of President Obama. It will rather be the ability of President Obama, and his administration, to craft a democracy support approach that can achieve the U.S.’s dual security and democratic interests. As Price notes, the United States must

---


recognize the need "to reconcile its realism with its commitment to democracy. While the latter does not mean that the United States must always condemn non-democratic leaders with whom realism may argue for friendship, it does mean that the United States cannot be seen as taking sides against legitimate, popularly backed democracy movements."  

The Case Against Engagement

Despite the arguments for engagement that I presented in this chapter, there are still a noteworthy number of scholars who are hesitant to underestimate what they see as the critical danger of Islamist takeovers. Some of these critics emerge from within the larger group of those advocating for the shift to democracy support and are simply less comfortable with the idea of Islamist engagement. Ross and Makovsky, for instance, fully endorse the principles of democracy support outlined in the first section and yet appear more wary of Islamist takeovers than many of their peers. In this vein, they prefer to emphasize building up secular opposition and even refer to Islamists at one point as regimes' "theocratic rivals." This is strong language for scholars who seemingly embrace the other principles of the support agenda.

F. Gregory Gause III is another scholar who seems to identify with the support agenda and yet who is critical of Islamist engagement. A member of the Council on Foreign Relations Independent Task Force, Gause writes in a concluding critique of the Task Force's work that "the report does not adequately address the risks to American interests posed by possible electoral victories by Islamist parties and groups in the Arab world." He continues to state his preference for bolstering secular opposition asserting,

I believe that American policy should be concentrated on encouraging an evening of the playing field for non-Islamist political tendencies in the Arab world, supporting more liberal movements and individuals, before real elections. Our policy should be self-consciously and openly biased toward those groups in Arab society which are more accepting of our foreign policy views and come closer to our own political values.

---

60 Price, 162.
61 Ross and Makovsky, 308.
62 Ibid., 312.
Gause’s implication is that the ambiguities that plague Islamist platforms make them uniformly not of this latter group.\textsuperscript{63}

While Ross, Makovsky, and Gause primarily choose to emphasize the necessity of engaging secular parties rather than the “undemocratic” nature of Islamists, others rule out all possibility of Islamists ever being worthwhile partners in working for democracy. Martin Kramer, for instance, is a particularly influential voice who is extremely vocal about his belief that no good can come to the U.S. from supporting Islamists. Embracing Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” framework, Kramer sees the democratic United States as on an inevitable path to conflict with the Muslim World. He argues that the U.S. is foolish to continue to assume that the majority of Muslims are moderate lovers of peace and that Muslim terrorists are only a fringe minority. He writes that,

faith in the pragmatic Muslim majority has underpinned every Western policy, from the Israeli-Palestinian 'peace process' to the Bush administration’s democracy promotion. The Muslim masses, the assumption goes, will choose peace and freedom, if given the chance. But they haven’t. 9/11 could be attributed to a fanatic minority. Not so the Danish cartoon protests: Millions have taken part.\textsuperscript{64}

In this way, Kramer outright questions the presence of a moderate Muslim majority and reaffirms his belief that the Muslim World and the West are “bound to collide.”\textsuperscript{65} Correspondingly, he dismisses scholarly efforts, such as this one, that attempt to deconstruct notions of the West and Muslim world as monolithically opposed.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Kramer’s position flies in the face of what popular opinion polling in the MENA region (such as the aforementioned data analyzed by Jamal) indicates about the feelings of the general populace towards democracy and Islamism. Furthermore, his assertion that somehow Islam is inherently incompatible with democracy because of its emphasis on the need to live under God’s law runs contrary to commonly


\textsuperscript{64} Martin Kramer, “Islam’s Coming Crusade,” \textit{The Jerusalem Report} (March 20, 2006).

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
accepted scholarly positions on the topic. Fuller best highlights the absurdity of Kramer’s claim. He writes that the question with regard to Islam’s compatibility with democracy,

is really not only about Islam but about whether any revealed religion is compatible with democracy. All [major] religions have authoritarian bases, are patriarchal, have no democratic foundation, are dogmatic about what constitutes the truth, and do not emphasize reason as a path to God. But the theory of incompatibility is belied by reality. Both Protestant and Catholic states in the West, by different paths, have evolved forms of democratic practice that defy any theoretical considerations.66

Despite the obvious flaws in Kramer’s critique, the concerns of thinkers such as Gause, Ross, and Makovsky are less easily dismissed. These thinkers speak to what is a very real concern about the possibility of empowering Islamist groups that in the end turn out to be undemocratic. What I have attempted to show in this chapter, however, is that the risks posed by engagement with Islamist parties are outweighed by the benefits to be gained. To be sure, engagement entails a certain level of uncertainty. I, and the scholars I have drawn on to support my argument, nonetheless assert that at this juncture the U.S. must engage Islamists if it is to continue pursuing democratization abroad. The justifications for this position, which I have explored in depth in this chapter, are best summarized by Brown, Hamzawy and Ottaway, who write,

[Evidence] suggests that the reformist currents in the Islamist movement are real, that they are becoming much more sophisticated and flexible in their thinking and that recent political success in some countries is increasing their influence within their respective organizations... Finally, the evidence suggests that in most Arab countries there is no possibility of encouraging a process of democratization or at least of liberalization, without seeing at the same time the increased influence of Islamist movements. We can only conclude that a policy of engagement with Islamist organizations particularly with their reformist wings, is the only constructive option open to organizations and governments that believe democratic development in the Middle East is in everybody’s interest.67

Given the centrality of Islamists to debates on democracy and pushes for democratic reform, the U.S. can no longer be paralyzed by fear of Islamists as it attempts to pursue democratic reform in the region. As evidenced by the arguments cited above, there is greater danger in continuing to ignore participating Islamists than there is in allowing the possibility of an Islamist takeover. As Hamid argues, a continued refusal to engage Islamists will continue to doom U.S. democratization efforts to ineffectiveness. This was one of the failures of the Bush Administration. Hamid asserts that despite

66 Fuller, "Islamists and Democracy," 39.
67 Brown, Hamzawy, and Ottaway, 19.
President Bush's sweeping rhetorical commitment to democracy and his most determined efforts to promote reform in the region, "when Islamist groups throughout the region began making impressive gains at the ballot box, particularly in Egypt and in the Palestinian territories, the Bush Administration stumbled." Accepting the fact that early democratic reforms will likely bring Islamists into power is thus something the U.S. must be prepared to do.

The bottom line is that the question of how committed Islamists are to democratic practice, in the end, can only be determined in one way; Islamists must be allowed to participate in democratic elections and to actually win power. Only then, will the U.S. and the rest of the world be able to see what they choose to do with the power that democracy has given them. The U.S. is unlikely, however, to allow or encourage this type of Islamist participation, as long as it continues to base its policies on the flawed conception of Iran as a prototype for Islamist takeover that other Islamist parties will inevitably emulate if given the opportunity to seize power. Exactly why this conception of Iran is flawed will be explored in the ensuing chapters.

---

68 Hamid, 39.
69 As Hamzawy and Ottaway write, "The pluralism issue is usually not resolved once and for all in theory. Rather, it is resolved in practice by the balance of political forces." Hamzawy and Ottaway, "Islamists in Politics," 77.
CHAPTER II

Imagining a Role for Islam in the Public Sphere

The Political Thought of Ayatollah Khomeini
The Makings of A Revolutionary

By the time that Reza Shah Pahlavi was deposed in 1941 and replaced by his son Crown Prince Muhammad Reza, Ayatollah Khomeini was a rising young star in the Iranian clerical establishment. Having completed his seminary education in 1936, the thirty-four-year-old Khomeini received the title of Hojjat al-Islam and was officially deemed capable of "deriving his own rulings," conducting his own classes, and beginning to develop a following. From very early on, Khomeini was inclined towards political engagement and admired those clergy who had historically been brave enough to stand up to unjust rulers. As a young seminarian and cleric, however, he for the most part avoided expressing opinions on political topics. Beyond his first noteworthy political publication in 1942, Kashf al-Asrar (The Discovery of Secrets), Khomeini remained relatively removed from the public sphere until the Shah's proposed "White Revolution" in 1963. His reasons for maintaining a quietist stance can be attributed to two primary factors: (1) his junior position in the clerical hierarchy made it difficult for Khomeini to adopt a politically activist stance out of step with those above him, both because it would marginalize him within the clerical establishment but also because he had great respect for those senior to him, particularly the sole marja-e taqlid at the time, Ayatollah Borujerdi; (2) Khomeini was still developing as a political thinker and, although confident that his voice and the voice of other clergy should be heard in the public sphere, he was not yet sure exactly what he wanted to say.

Despite the fact that Khomeini's political statements prior to 1963 were few and far between, a close analysis of Khomeini's aforementioned first entry into the public sphere in 1942 as well as his more noteworthy statements from 1963-1970 reveal a number of important aspects of his political

70 For those unfamiliar with Iranian politics, it may be helpful while reading the next two chapters to examine the timeline provided in Appendix I, which offers an overview of major events during the revolutionary period.

71 Hojjat al-Islam roughly translates as "proof of Islam" and is a title given to those who have become licensed mujaheds (someone deemed competent to conduct ijtihad, interpret divine law, by higher level clerics in the Shi'i establishment) through completion of seminary education.

72 Moin, 63.

73 The "White Revolution" was Muhammad Reza Shah's six-point reform bill intended to solve all of Iran's social, political, and economic problems. Its passage in 1963 sparked a wave of clerical protest that eventually resulted in Khomeini's arrest and later exile in 1964. Ibid., 83.

74 See footnote 15.
vision that serve as a foundation for his future development. First and foremost, Khomeini’s political statements during this period reveal his distaste for clerical quietism. Particularly following the beginning of Muhammad Reza Shah’s push for reform in 1963, Khomeini came out strongly not only in his condemnation of the regime, but also in his condemnation of those clerics willing to sit idly by while the regime implemented its “anti-Islamic” reforms. Second, Khomeini’s statements hint at his developing vision for an ideal form of Islamic government, particularly what that government entails in terms of the role of the clergy. Lastly, Khomeini’s vision of Islamic government, at this early point in his development, was almost exclusively rooted in the 1906 Constitutional vision of a supervisory rather than executive role for the clergy. In this way, Khomeini’s political expression during this period reflects more commonly accepted critiques of the Shah’s rule. As the following analysis illustrates, while Khomeini began to stand out among the clergy for his activism during this period, he did not yet distinguish himself as a truly radical thinker.

Khomeini wrote and anonymously published his first significant political statement, Kashf al-Asrar, in 1942. Written at the behest of Ayatollah Borujerdi, as a response to the anti-clerical sentiments expressed by the recently defunct regime of Reza Shah, the central claim of Kashf was that religion and politics cannot and should not remain separate. In attempting to prove this claim, Khomeini employed a combination of appeals to Shi’i religious tradition, to reason, and to principles of government that had been accepted in the Iranian Constitution since 1906.

As the foundation for his critique, Khomeini sought to establish that no government can be just unless it is somehow based on a conception of divine justice and is thus “acceptable to reason.” He proclaimed, “The only government that reason accepts as legitimate and welcomes freely and

75 In 1906, a revolution in Iran led to the establishment of constitutional government. While largely embracing French Enlightenment principles—most notably a strong belief in secularity—the 1906 Constitution also outlined the creation of a council of Islamic clerics who could oversee the legislative process to ensure it was in accordance with Islamic values. This Constitutional provision was referenced frequently by religious critics of the Iranian regime who were opposed to the Shah’s emphasis on secularity. Ibid., 119.

happily is the government of God, Whose every act is just and Whose right it is to rule over the whole world and all the particles of existence.”\(^7\) The blueprint for implementing the “government of God,” he maintained, is the Islamic *shari’a*.\(^8\) It contains a comprehensive set of laws that can be implemented to govern all aspects of society. Based on this understanding, Khomeini quite logically argued that if government is to be in line with divine law it must be run under the guidance of those most knowledgeable in divine law, the *faqih*.\(^7\) He was careful, however, to clarify that the role he envisioned for the *faqih* was supervisory rather than executive. He asserted, “We do not say that government must be in the hands of the *faqih*; rather we say that government must be run in accordance with God’s law, for the welfare of the country and the people demands this, and it is not feasible except with the supervision of the religious leaders.”\(^8\) Furthermore, Khomeini deliberately noted that his vision for clerical involvement in government was enshrined, and unimplemented in the Iranian Constitution. “This principle [of clerical consultation],” he asserts, “has been approved and ratified in the Constitution and in no way conflicts with the public order, the stability of the government, or the interests of the country.”\(^8\) By appealing to constitutional values, Khomeini situated himself in a discourse of more commonly accepted critiques of the Shah’s rule.

At the time that *Kashf* was published it is unclear whether Khomeini already had a more radical vision of Islamic government that he did not yet feel comfortable expressing. In 1943, however, it is quite likely that he, like the other clergy, felt relatively optimistic about the possibility that Muhammad Reza Shah would be more favorably inclined towards the clergy than his father. His

---

\(^7\) Ibid.

\(^8\) *Shari’a* more broadly refers to the “divine path” laid out for Muslims that is derived from the Qur’an and the *hadith* (the traditions of the Prophet). Exactly what makes up *shari’a* is the subject of constant debate among Islamic scholars. How much emphasis is placed on the historical context in which certain Qur’anic precepts were revealed as well as whether or not legal principles derived from Islamic tradition can/should be considered eternally valid are two driving factors that make concrete definitions of *shari’a* challenging. Some of these issues will be addressed in greater depth in Chapter 3.

\(^7\) *Faqih* is a title given to an expert in *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). It can thus roughly be translated as “jurist.” The plural form of *faqih* is *fuqaha*, a term that will occur on occasion in this thesis.

\(^8\) Khomeini, “A Warning to the Nation,” 170.

\(^8\) Ibid., 170.
calls for implementation of the Constitution should thus be understood as based on a sincere belief that the Iranian government could be fixed—without drastic changes in structure—if only the Constitution could be implemented in full. Khomeini expressed as much in *Kashf* when he posited,

> If just one article of the Constitution were to be implemented, that specifying that all laws contrary to the shari'a are invalid, everyone in the country would join together in harmony, and the country would move forward with the speed of lightning. All the deplorable institutions mentioned above would be transformed into new and rational institutions, and through the joint efforts of all the people, the educated and the masses alike, the country would attain a state unparalleled in the world.\(^\text{82}\)

The belief in the transformative power of *shari'a* that Khomeini expressed in the passage above reappeared in many of his later arguments for Islamic government.

When Khomeini made his second major appearance on the political scene in 1963, it is quite possible that his perspective had changed. Twenty years of quietism\(^\text{83}\) had failed to see the creation of a consultative clerical council or the implementation of *shari'a*, and in the end had resulted in the Shah initiating secular reforms not unlike those of his father. Whether or not Khomeini had already embraced a more radical position at the time of his first vitriolic critique of the Shah in 1963, the events of the period undoubtedly pushed him towards the belief that much more was needed to reform the Iranian government than superficial changes.

While Khomeini's statements during this period offer some subtle hints at his changing perspective, to the casual observer they continue to primarily remain focused on more commonly accepted critiques of the regime—the regime's hostility towards Islam, its interference in popular elections for the Majles, and its refusal to implement the constitutional ordinances dictating clerical supervision of the government. Through these critiques, Khomeini's primary intention appears to be to galvanize the clergy into taking political action. Towards this end, he began to depict the clerical disagreements with the

---

\(^{82}\) *Ibid.*, 171.  
\(^{83}\) The clerical quietism that defined the forties and fifties resulted from the emergence of Ayatollah Seyyed Hassan Borujerdi as the sole *marja'-e taqlid* (see definition below) of the Shi'a. Borujerdi was an immensely competent administrator who strengthened the organizational structures of the Qom seminaries and religious community. He was very much opposed to the mixture of religion and politics, however, and strongly discouraged clergy from entering the political sphere. *Marja'-e taqlid* roughly translates as "source of emulation." It is the highest honorific title given to members of the Shi'i clergy and denotes that their decisions on Islamic law are respected by a large number of followers and lower ranking clerics.
regime in terms of a zero-sum conflict, asserting that the regime was “fundamentally opposed to Islam” and that to refuse to oppose it was essentially to accept the inevitable destruction of the clerical establishment and the decay of Iranian society.\(^{33}\)

This sentiment surfaced powerfully in a statement made by Khomeini in April of 1963 commemorating those killed following the SAVAK assault on the Feiziyeh Mosque.\(^{35}\) Khomeini wrote, “As long as this usurpatory and rebellious government is in power, the Muslims can have no hope for any good.”\(^{36}\) A year later, in a statement made following his release from prison in October of 1964 and in response to a new U.S.-Iranian military agreement, Khomeini stated his condemnation of quietist clergy in even harsher terms.

Those gentlemen who say we must hold our tongues and not utter a sound—do they still say the same thing on this occasion?... By God, whoever does not cry out in protest is a sinner! By God, whoever does not express his outrage commits a major sin! Leaders of Islam, come to the aid of Islam! 'Ulama of Najaf, come to the aid of Islam! 'Ulama of Qum, come to the aid of Islam! Islam is destroyed!\(^{37}\)

Later on in the same statement, Khomeini pushed his critique of the regime one step further. Beyond simply critiquing the failures of the Shah, he suggested that things would be much improved if religious leaders ran the government by presenting a list of positive hypothetical statements prefaced by “If the religious leaders have influence...”

If the religious leaders have influence, they will not permit this nation to be the slaves of Britain one day, and America the next... If the religious leaders have influence, they will not permit such misuse to be made of the public treasury. If the religious leaders have influence, they will not permit the Majlis to come to a miserable state like this; they will not permit the Majlis to be formed at bayonet-point, with the scandalous results that we see.\(^{38}\)


\(^{35}\) On March 22nd, 1963, a service being led by Ayatollah Golpayegani—one of the highest-ranking Ayatollah’s in Qom—to commemorate Ja’far al-Sadeq, the sixth Shi’i Imam, was infiltrated by the Shah’s secret police (SAVAK) who disrupted the ceremony and ransacked the Feiziyeh Mosque. It was the first instance in which the Shah demonstrated his willingness to use force to harass and silence the clerical opposition.

\(^{36}\) Khomeini, "In Commemoration of Martyrs at Qum," 185.


\(^{38}\) Ibid.
Most noteworthy in this passage, is that while Khomeini's conception of clerical "influence" hints at his later call for full clerical rule, in this instance the benefits he listed of clerical rule all speak to issues on which the religious and non-religious opposition in Iran agreed—foreign interference in Iranian affairs; corruption; lack of representation, etc.

Even in 1967, after he had already been exiled for three years, Khomeini continued to root his critique of the Shah's regime in his understanding of the values of the Constitution, and to emphasize the importance of representative elections. Through the end of the decade, this approach remained largely unchanged, as did Khomeini's most readily apparent goal of galvanizing the clergy and breaking down the barriers between the religious and political spheres.

**A Vision of Islamic Governance**

In 1970, while in his sixth year of exile and his fifth year living in the Iraqi Shi'i holy city of Najaf, Khomeini delivered a series of twelve lectures that together became his defining treatise on Islamic government. In these lectures, he laid out his vision of *velayat-e faqih*—translated roughly as 'guardianship of the jurist'—a doctrine that outlined clerical rule and would become a guiding influence in the formation of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran following the revolution. Within months, the *Velayat-e Faqih* lectures were published clandestinely and distributed throughout Iran. Their radical message of clerical rule, which clearly departed from the constitutionally-based critiques that Khomeini had espoused up until that point, received praise from many in the religious community but also received significant criticism from senior figures in the clerical establishment.

Why Khomeini chose this specific moment to deliver these sermons is difficult to determine. His decision can most likely be attributed to some combination of the following factors: (1) it was at this point that he had at last fully developed his political philosophy to the point that he felt ready to expose it to and defend it in front of a larger audience; (2) Khomeini was beginning to feel marginalized as a voice.

---

in Iranian politics—his exile had largely been successful in convincing the Iranian clergy to reembrace their quietist position and the political sphere had been correspondingly calm—and he wanted to recapture the attention of at least the clerical community; and 3) Khomeini wanted to test the waters, so to speak, and see who among the religious community was willing to accept and advocate for his vision. In some ways, the vision Khomeini laid out in Velayate Faqih was not dissimilar from some of the ideas he had expressed previously (the inseparability of religion and politics, the problematic nature of clerical quietism, the need for government independent of foreign influence, etc.), in his lectures he simply addressed them in greater depth. The greatest leap made by Khomeini, however, is his move from envisioning the clergy in a supervisory role to envisioning them as the executive. This leap is based on Khomeini's concept of guardianship in the Shi'i tradition and is the idea that I will discuss in greatest depth in this section.

In his translated volume, Hamid Algar divides Khomeini's Velayate Faqih lectures into four parts: Introduction; The Necessity for Islamic Government; The Form of Islamic Government; and Program for the Establishment of An Islamic Government. The first two sections address many of the issues that Khomeini had already touched on in his pre-1970 writings. In essence they provide the contemporary political context and evidence from Muslim tradition that suggests why Islamic government is preferable to all other forms of government. In the first regard, Khomeini's primary claim is that the Shah's regime, through its denial of Islam, has become beholden to and perverted by foreign powers with treacherous designs for Iran. Khomeini asserted that the ruling class's plan

is to keep us backward, to keep us in our present miserable state so they can exploit our riches, our underground wealth, our lands, and our human resources. They want us to remain afflicted and wretched, and our poor to be trapped in their misery. Instead of surrendering to the injunctions of Islam, which provide a solution for the problem of poverty, they and their agents wish to go on living in huge palaces and enjoying lives of abominable luxury.80

In this way, Khomeini envisioned Islamic government as a means of solving Iran's social problems through ridding the country of corrupting foreign influences.

For evidence of the desirability of Islamic government in the Muslim tradition, Khomeini pointed in particular at the Prophet Muhammad who not only established a government but also, according to Shi’i tradition, designated a “ruler to succeed him.” If Muhammad believed the best way to achieve the ends of Islam was through the establishment of an Islamic government, Khomeini asked, why then should we not also seek Islamic government now? As further evidence in support of this claim, Khomeini reiterated some of his more familiar claims regarding the shari’a. He argued that the very existence of shari’a as a comprehensive set of laws that embodies a “complete social system” in which “all the needs of man are met,” is “proof of the necessity for establishing government.” Lastly, Khomeini asserted that the need for Islamic government stems from the tendency of average men to stray from the path of righteousness. To keep men from corrupting vices there must be a guardian (or trustee) who ensures that they obey certain divine constraints.

Paraphrasing the eighth Shi’i Imam, Ali Reza, Khomeini proclaimed,

Men are commanded to observe certain limits and not to transgress them in order to avoid the corruption that would result. This cannot be attained or established without there being appointed over them a [guardian] who will ensure that they remain within the limits of the licit and prevent them from casting themselves into the danger of transgression.

On its own this passage reveals little about the nature of the guardian that Khomeini envisioned. It became clear in the later lectures, however, exactly what Khomeini had in mind.

The third segment of Khomeini’s lectures, The Form of Islamic Government, is the most controversial by far. In it he laid out in clear terms exactly how he envisioned Islamic government, for the first time making the leap from advocating a consultative role for the clergy to one in which the clergy serve as the executors of the government. The reason Khomeini made this leap stems from his

---

92 Ibid., 43. Khomeini also highlights that the system of taxes mandated by the shari’a generates far more revenue than is needed just for the upkeep of the clergy and the relatives of the prophet. He naturally concludes that this surplus in funds must be intended for use in administering a government. Khomeini’s presentation of shari’a as being comprehensive and uniformly agreed upon belies the contested nature of Islamic law and tradition that will be addressed in later chapters.
93 Khomeini’s argument, in this regard, is closely linked to the way in which he mystically and philosophically conceives of man’s capacity to comprehend divine will. These ideas will be discussed more fully later on in the chapter.
94 Ibid., 51.
fundamental conception of Islamic government as representing "the rule of divine law over men." In other words, Khomeini’s vision of Islamic government is based on the sole sovereignty of God—"the legislative power and competence to establish laws belongs exclusively to God Almighty." Khomeini understood shari’a as a comprehensive set of laws designed to create a society in line with divine will. Thus, the highest goal of Islamic government in his mind was to effectively implement shari’a.

Up until this point, Khomeini had not strayed too far from traditional Islamic conceptions of government. He then acknowledged, however, that Islamic tradition dictates simply that the qualification for ruling within an Islamic system is that a ruler be willing to follow the guidance of those most knowledgeable in Islamic law (the fuqaha), and then pushed these qualifications one step further. He argued that such a system, where the ruler is not himself knowledgeable of Islamic law, is doomed to at best be inefficient and more likely ineffective in implementing divine law. The alternative he proposed is that the middleman simply be eliminated and that the qualifications for rule be raised so that "in addition to general qualifications like intelligence and administrative ability" a ruler must also "surpass all others in knowledge [of the law and justice]." Because the clergy are naturally the most learned and knowledgeable of divine law, he argued, it is only logical that the right to rule belongs to them.

If the ruler adheres to Islam, he must necessarily submit to the fuqih, asking him about the laws and ordinances of Islam in order to implement them. This being the case, the true rulers are the fuqaha themselves, and rulership ought officially to be theirs, to apply to them, not to those who are obliged to follow the guidance of the fuqaha on account of their own ignorance of law.

The fourth segment of Khomeini’s lectures on velayat-e faqih, Program for Establishment of an Islamic Government, is primarily aimed at his fellow clergy and, like his early speeches prior to 1970, is a call for the clerical establishment to renounce quietism and assume its rightful position of political leadership in the Muslim community. Drawing on primarily Shi’i traditions he both critiqued those

---

95 Ibid., 55.
96 Ibid., 51.
97 Ibid., 60.
98 Ibid., 59. Khomeini later goes against these qualifications when he designates Ali Khamene’i, a lesser ranking cleric, as his successor.
99 Ibid., 60.
clergy who claimed to be practicing *taqiyya* as being more worried about their own well being than that of Islam and also asserted that without clerical leadership any movement for Islamic government is doomed to fail. “The people must be instructed in these matters and helped to mature, intellectually and politically,” he claimed. “We must tell them what kind of government we want, what kinds of people would assume responsibility for affairs in the government we propose, and what policies and programs they would follow.”

The government that Khomeini envisioned in his lectures in 1970, nine years before the success of the revolution, was strikingly similar to the Islamic Republic that emerged as the product of the revolution. Sharing in their acceptance of the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, both visions privilege divine sovereignty over popular sovereignty and rule out the possibility of elected representatives wielding significant power with no strings attached. Despite the similarities in these visions, Khomeini did not become the leader of the diverse revolutionary coalition because his vision of *velayat-e faqih* had unanimous support among all the members of the revolutionary movement. In fact, part of the reason Khomeini was able to rise to such a position of prominence was because many groups within the coalition were unaware of the exact details of his governmental vision.

This ignorance among other revolutionaries about Khomeini’s vision can be attributed to two primary factors. First, in 1970 Khomeini was not yet of the stature where his lectures would have been widely read by average Iranians. Despite the fame he had gained because of his opposition to the Shah prior to his exile, Khomeini had largely faded from the public eye during his exile. The community who would have had most ready access to and interest in Khomeini’s published lectures would have been the young seminarians in Qom who were either part of or were at least exposed to Khomeini’s network of supporters. This group, however, would have been generally less concerned about the more theocratic aspects of Khomeini’s vision. The second explanation is that immediately following the publication of his

---

100 *Taqiyya* refers to a Shi'i doctrine that permits believers to conceal their faith when revealing it places them at risk of persecution.

101 Ibid., 144.

102 Ibid., 129.
1970 lectures Khomeini pragmatically retreated from his more radical rhetoric in order to make his revolutionary vision more palatable to larger audiences. It is this process of reformulating his rhetoric that I explore in the next section.

Catering to a Wider Movement

Following his publication of Velayat-e Faqih, Khomeini again temporarily drifted into the background of the Iranian political consciousness. This was in part due to the fact that in the relative political calm of the early seventies, Khomeini’s critiques of the regime held less appeal. It can perhaps also be understood as a side effect of some of the critical backlash Khomeini received following the publication of Velayat-e Faqih. After all, while Khomeini’s comprehensive political manifesto received rave reviews from many of his supporters, it was also the subject of major criticism by senior Shi’i clerics. The most noteworthy critic was Grand Ayatollah Abolqassem Kho’i, the most influential Shi’i cleric in Iraq. As Baqer Moin explains, Kho’i’s critique was two pronged:

First, Kho’i believed that the authority of the faqih – which in mainstream Shi’i theory was limited to the guardianship of widows and orphans – could not be extended by human beings to the political sphere. Secondly, Kho’i argued that in the absence of the Hidden Imam, the authority of jurisprudents was not the preserve of one or a few faqih’s.\(^{103}\)

The critiques offered by Khoi were shared by other clerics at the time and, as will be shown in Chapter 4, remain among the most prominent contemporary critiques of Khomeini’s vision and the current Iranian Constitution.

In the face of the criticism leveled at him by Kho’i and others, Khomeini did not fully retreat into silence. He did, however, appear to take a step back from the more radical vision for which he advocated in Velayat-e Faqih. In one of his earliest writings during this period, “The Incompatibility of Monarchy With Islam,” Khomeini returned to some of his previously aired and more popularly accepted critiques of clerical quietism and regime hostility towards Islam. With regard to the regime, he fiercely condemned

\(^{103}\) Moin, 158.
the Shah's lavish plans in 1971 to celebrate 2,500 years of Iranian monarchy. He wrote, “Ought the people of Iran to celebrate the rule of a traitor to Islam and the interests of the Muslims who gives oil to Israel?” He continued to assert that the Kings of Iran provide a perfect example of why “Islam is fundamentally opposed to the whole notion of monarchy.” Khomeini’s words for the clergy were no less critical. Given that at the time he was living in exile in Iraq, he directed his critique primarily at the Iraqi Shi’i clergy for being unwilling to stand up in support of their repressed Iranian peers. “Why is Najaf so sound asleep?” Khomeini lamented. “Why is it not trying to help the wretched and oppressed people of Iran! Is our only duty to sit here studying the principles and details of religious law?”

In addition to revisiting previously aired grievances, Khomeini also during this period began to place greater emphasis on critiquing aspects of the Shah’s regime on which all members of the Iranian opposition could agree. Key among these points of agreement were the Shah’s human rights violations as well as the regime’s problematic relationships with certain foreign powers that were perceived to be anti-Islamic, namely the U.S. and Israel. In the former regard, Khomeini repeatedly attacked the regime’s human rights record, placing the responsibility for the oppressive state directly on the shoulders of the Shah. In a statement he made in February of 1978, he proclaimed, “Do you think it is the police chief of Qom who [orders the police to attack religious students]? Don’t say it is the police who do these things; it is the Shah! The Shah personally gives the orders and tells them to kill.”

104 The festivities were a precursor to ill-advised efforts by the Shah to elevate the Persian Imperial identity in Iranian culture over that of Islam. These efforts included the establishment of a one party system that required Iranians to become state party members as a demonstration of their loyalty to the monarchical regime, as well as the discontinuation of using the Islamic calendar in favor of a calendar based on the establishment of the Persian Empire of Cyrus the Great. Ibid., 175.


106 Ibid., 203. The cross-national appeal reflected in this quote is something Khomeini echoes in other works during this period but which he begins to advocate for most vociferously only after the Iranian revolution. See also Imam Khomeini, “Message to the Muslim Students in North America/July 10, 1972” in Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini (1941-1980), translated and annotated by Hamid Algar (London: Mizan Press, 1981)


108 Ibid., 218.
With regard to foreign involvement in Iran, Khomeini was immensely critical of foreign powers who had signed the Declaration of Human Rights and yet who continued to violate the Declaration in how they involved themselves around the world. He stated in 1978, “We have suffered, and continue to suffer, all these misfortunes at the hands of governments who have signed the Declaration of Human Rights and who loudly proclaim men’s right to freedom.” Khomeini’s claims in this regard possessed wide appeal as they drew on the frustrations felt by many Iranians with the Carter Administration’s aforementioned unwillingness to back up its human rights rhetoric with a condemnation of the Shah’s oppression of opposition voices.

The notion that Khomeini was attempting to appeal to a larger audience is in fact at the core of how his writings during this period should be understood. His appeals to human rights, his critiques of foreign interference with Iranian affairs, and, above all, the conspicuous absence of his advocacy for a government based on velayat-e faqih, suggest that he was attempting to make his revolutionary platform more palatable to a wider swath of the population. His motivation for doing this was most likely his recognition that popular discontent, particularly in the mid to late seventies, was growing increasingly widespread in Iranian society and thus afforded him the opportunity to position himself as the leader of a diverse Iranian revolutionary movement that extended well beyond his religious support base. In this regard, Khomeini was largely successful and his assumption of leadership of the movement was reflected in his calls for the movement’s unity. In one of his last major statements in this period, “In Commemoration of the Martyrs of Tehran,” Khomeini beseeched all members of the movement to remain unified if nothing else.

My dear ones! Avoid all disagreement, for disagreement is the work of the devil. Continue your sacred movement in unison for the sake of the ultimate goal, which is the overthrow of the corrupt Pahlavi regime and the liberation of the destiny and resources of our country from foreign control. Fear nothing in your pursuit of these Islamic goals.¹⁰

His emphasis on unity and his willingness to downplay the goal of Islamic governance, which he outlined so clearly in Velayate Faqih, is truly indicative of the fact that towards the end of this period, Khomeini's greatest concern was the success of the revolution. With this in mind, he was willing to set aside or at least deemphasize aspects of his political philosophy in order to maintain the unity of the revolutionary movement. Khomeini's tendency to preserve the revolution at all costs foreshadowed his later privileging of the survival of the Islamic state over strict adherence to traditional Islamic dictates. Both cases illustrate Khomeini's appreciation for the fact that the challenges of political modernity, in some cases trump a rigid adherence to traditional Islam. This progressive aspect of Khomeini's political project will be returned to later on.

On the Eve of Revolution

As the revolutionary crisis peaked in the final months of 1978, two competing interests were shaping Khomeini's political statements. First, in order to secure his position of leadership in the aftermath of revolution, Khomeini needed to continue to cater to a diverse set of elements within the revolutionary movement without alienating any in particular. Second, while maintaining the unity of the movement, Khomeini also had to prime Iranian society to accept his vision for an Islamic state so that when it was introduced in the aftermath of the revolution it would not be met with widespread shock and opposition among the populace.

One of the main points of tension between these two competing factors was that Khomeini's vision for an Islamic state was lacking in some of the key democratic characteristics desired by many of the revolutionaries. To negotiate this tension and assuage the concerns of more fiercely democratic revolutionaries, Khomeini chose to couch his visions for Islamic governance in vague terminology that seemed at least implicitly to suggest a commitment to democratic values and popular sovereignty. The most notable example of this was Khomeini's adoption of the term "Islamic republic" to describe his vision of ideal Islamic governance as opposed to his former terminology of velayate faqih. In a speech given in late November 1978 he beseeched revolutionaries, "Advance together, with a single voice and a
single purpose, to the sacred aim of Islam—the abolition of the cruel Pahlavi dynasty, the destruction of the abominable monarchical regime, and the establishment of an Islamic republic based on the progressive dictates of Islam.\textsuperscript{111}

When pressed on exactly what he meant by “republic,” Khomeini’s answers were vague and deliberately cryptic, allowing the listener to hear what they hoped or wanted to hear. For instance, in an interview conducted at Neuphle-le Chateau on December 29\textsuperscript{th}, 1978, the interviewer, Hamid Algar, asked Khomeini to explain the nature of the “free elections” that would be held to establish an Islamic government in Iran. Khomeini responded, “All parties will be free to exist in Iran, except those that clearly oppose the interests of the people, and the elections will also be free. Of course we will make our recommendations to the people, which they may or may not follow.\textsuperscript{112}” On one hand, this statement could be read to reassure democratic advocates that free popular elections would be an essential part of the new state. On the other hand, Khomeini’s qualification regarding parties that “clearly oppose the interests of the people” raised a set of problematic questions. Who would be deciding whether parties oppose the interests of the people? And, would those who are deciding be freely elected?

In other instances, Khomeini’s responses to questions about the nature of his vision for Islamic government cross the line from being vague to being potentially duplicitous. In one interview, he outlined all the institutions of government without a single mention of a role for the clergy or that the power of elected representatives will somehow be subject to unelected authorities. He commented,

In so far as the establishments are concerned, the people will elect their representatives to the parliament and these representatives will elect the government council (the ministers) and the president of the republic. The president of the republic will be accountable to the people (parliament). The new constitution will define the powers and jurisdiction of each of these people.\textsuperscript{113}


The nature of the Islamic government that emerged only months later under Khomeini’s guidance showed the above statements to be incomplete at best and at worst patently false.\textsuperscript{114}

In negotiating the second interest influencing his decision-making process during this period—his need to prime Iranian society to accept and support Islamic government—Khomeini proactively began to depict the revolutionary movement as uniformly Islam-driven and clergy-led. In an interview in January of 1979, only weeks before he returned to Iran, Khomeini highlighted the fact that Islam was the only thing that could have unified the Iranian population in its pursuit of revolution and that could continue to unify it under a new government. "The Islamic values are what creates the people’s conscience. So, can the people be united in isolation from their conscience? If they miss the path they... will cause the society to be divided and disintegrated and, consequently, destroyed rapidly."\textsuperscript{115} He further asserted that Iranians had struggled for the freedom to choose their own state for the sole purpose of choosing Islamic government. “All groups of people in small and big villages and in small and big cities are struggling in quest of one thing,” he writes, “namely freedom and independence. Considering that they are all Moslems, they are demanding an Islamic rule.”\textsuperscript{116}

With regard to the clergy, Khomeini repeatedly highlighted how, because the movement was Islamic, the clergy had played and should continue to play a key role in the leadership of society.\textsuperscript{117} He was also careful to note, however, that clerical leadership and influence in society did not necessarily mean clerical political rule. For the most part, he appeared to envision the clergy as removed from formal

\textsuperscript{114} Some of those more sympathetic to Khomeini explain the inconsistencies between his pre-revolutionary statements and post-revolutionary actions as being caused by various strains that were placed on the regime immediately following the revolution (i.e. the war with Iraq, the subversive efforts of the Mojahedin-e Khalq). They argue that had these strains not been present, Khomeini would have implemented a more representative government such as the one he describes in the passage above. One prominent figure that makes exactly this argument is Ayatollah Montazeri whose ideas will be addressed in Chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{115} Khomeyni, “Interview With Khomeyni at Moment of Shah’s Downfall,” 14.

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 24.

\textsuperscript{117} In the same interview discussed above, Khomeini asserts, “because the struggle is Islamic and because the overwhelming majority of the Iranian people are Moslems, it is natural that their leadership will be in the hands of the clergyman.” Ibid., 8-9.
government in order to avoid the critiques of secularists. When he does reference a governmental role for the clergy, he suggests that it will be a supervisory role such as that outlined in the 1906 Constitution.\footnote{Khomeini discusses this in greater depth in his interview with Salman. “A council of ulema will be set up to supervise the laws and to make sure that they are not in conflict with the dictates of the orthodox religion. On the occasion, the constitution approved in 1906 contained an article stipulating the establishment of such a council (of 6 members). But the rule of the shahanshas obstructed its implementation to strike Islam and the Koran and to set up the rule of the false gods and of the infidel adherents of Mazdaism, Baha’is and other non-Moslems.” Ibid., 20.}

Khomeini’s motivations for crafting an understanding of the movement as monolithically Islamic both in terms of its goals and its leadership was two-fold: 1) it helped him to marginalize non-Islamic opposition voices and thus neutralize their capacity to pose a threat to the regime; 2) it gave Khomeini more evidence of the power of Islam as he began to adapt his vision for the global stage.

\textit{From Vision to Reality}

On January 16\textsuperscript{th}, 1979 the Shah conceded defeat to the Iranian revolutionary movement. Entrusting his monarchy to a regency council that quickly became no more than a shadow government, he left the country never to return. Shortly following the Shah’s departure and after 15 years in exile, Khomeini returned triumphantly to Iran. He was greeted by millions who saw him as the country’s savior and who believed that he would lead them to a better future. Largely in affirmation of Khomeini’s leadership, on April 1\textsuperscript{st}, 1979, 98.2\% of Iranians voted by popular referendum for the establishment of an “Islamic Republic.”

Following the April referendum, Khomeini could at last be confident that he was in the driver’s seat of the movement to establish a new Iranian state. The realization of his vision of a government based on velayat-e faqih, however, was not yet complete. Before that vision could become a reality, Khomeini had to successfully respond to critiques and concerns about his government offered by various segments of the population. His public statements during this period are dominated by this endeavor. In some cases they were direct responses to comments publicly made by other revolutionary figures.\footnote{Ghamari-Tabrizi, Islam and Dissent, 59-62.} In others, he appeared to be responding to critiques that he gauged as being prominent among dissident groups in Iranian society. In this vein, prior to the approval of the Constitution in December of 1979, Khomeini’s
statements focused primarily on convincing the populace that government of the velayat-e faqih was indeed preferable to other forms of governance. Following the enactment of the new constitution, while continuing to offer arguments to convince opposition voices of the legitimacy of the regime, Khomeini’s goals in his political statements evolved once again as he attempted to export the ideology and governmental vision he has created in Iran to the rest of the global Muslim community.

The first major critique leveled at Khomeini during this period was that the Constitution enshrined clerical rule in such a way that it rendered elected officials in the government potentially irrelevant. In response to this critique, Khomeini remained adamant both before and after the enactment of the Constitution that the role of the clergy in government was largely supervisory, much like the clerical role that was outlined but never implemented in the 1906 Constitution. Following the enactment of the Constitution, which very clearly drew all of the strings of power back to the clergy, this case became harder to make. Khomeini, however, based the claim on two key points. First, he argued that the clergy was not interested in serving in the executive branch of the government, particularly in the office of the presidency, but rather sought to allow the majority of governing to be done by elected non-clerical officials.

The logic of this statement was of course proven false when Khomeini endorsed then Hojjat al-Islam Ali Khamene’i’s ascent to the Presidency in 1981.¹²¹

Second, beyond asserting that clerics should avoid competing for elected positions, Khomeini also attempted to constantly present himself, as the Supreme Leader, as removed from the administration of the everyday government. In public announcements throughout his rule, he often spoke about the

¹²¹ Future supreme leader, Hojjat al-Islam Ali Khamene’i, became the third president of the Islamic republic in 1981, succeeding Ali Rajai (the IRP replacement for Bani Sadr who was assassinated by the Mojahedin). Khamene’i was the first member of the clergy to serve as president.
government as though it was not under his control. For instance, at one point he declared to the populace, “I do not know why the government has failed to proceed with its suspended plans for promoting the welfare of the people. It must immediately implement existing plans and adopt new ones in order to remedy the economic situation in our country.”

There is certainly some truth to the fact that Khomeini was not involved in every decision being made in Iran and thus at times may have been uninformed as to the motivations of elected officials with regard to certain government policies. As the above passage illustrates, however, Khomeini certainly played up the fact that the unique system of \textit{velayat-e faqih} did not fit the familiar popular conception of authoritarian rule—where one ruler is micromanaging decisions made throughout the state—and preferred to present himself as a hands-off supervisor who only intervened in government in moments of severe crisis. This image belied the fact that all the strings of power in Iran could, in the end, be traced to the office of the Supreme Leader.

The second major critique of Khomeini’s proposed government was that the system of \textit{velayat-e faqih} would lead to authoritarianism. Rather than focusing on the presence of clergy in government more generally, however, this second critique was more geared towards the fact that the system of \textit{velayat-e faqih} provided no effective mechanisms of accountability by which the populace would be protected from tyrannical rule. This critique was voiced loudly by both religious and non-religious figures who, while perhaps not taking issue with Khomeini (at least at the outset of his rule), were worried about what could occur in the absence of Khomeini’s unique leadership. Khomeini’s response to these critics was three-pronged. First, he attempted to belittle the influence of secular voices by highlighting the essential Islamic identity of the revolutionary movement and thus ridiculing the idea that secular voices had any

---


123 Ghamari-Tabrizi identifies Naser Makarem Shirazi, “a long-time ally and disciple of Ayatollah Khomeini” as one of the key proponents of this critique. According to Ghamari-Tabrizi, “[Shirazi] argued that the present revolutionary atmosphere influenced the advocates of \textit{velayate faqih}. Their vision of the future political system in Iran was conditioned by the extraordinary charisma of Ayatollah Khomeini. [Khomeini’s] leadership, he asserted, is an exception in history. We should not author a constitution that institutionalizes an exception, we must write it for all times and all place.” Somewhat ironically, one of the chief rebuttals to this claim was offered by Montazeri who, as will be shown in Chapter 3, would later become a forceful advocate of Shirazi’s position. Ghamari-Tabrizi, \textit{Islam and Dissent}, 59-60.
worthwhile contributions to make to the formation of the new state. One such critique that Khomeini leveled at non-Muslims trying to claim a role in the movement stated,

You who imagine that something can be achieved in Iran by some means other than Islam, you who suppose that something other than Islam overthrew the Shah's regime, you who believe non-Islamic elements played a role—study the matter carefully. Look at the tombstones of those who gave their lives in the movement of Khurdad 15\(^\text{124}\) ... You will not find a single tombstone belonging to either a non-Muslim or a member of the upper echelons of society.\(^\text{125}\)

Second, beyond attempting to marginalize opposition voices, Khomeini also co-opted some of their rhetoric thus undermining their ability to criticize the regime in clear language. He partly accomplished this through his use of the term Islamic Republic. He also, however, addressed the issue of whether or not the new Islamic state was democratic by claiming that calling an Islamic republic democratic is redundant because democratic values are already inherent in Islam.

To juxtapose 'democratic' and 'Islamic' is an insult to Islam. Because when you place the word 'democratic' in front of 'Islamic,' it means that Islam is lacking in the alleged virtues of democracy, although, Islam is, in fact, superior to all forms of democracy. To speak of a 'democratic Islamic republic' is like speaking of a 'justice-orientated Islamic republic.' That is an insult to Islam because it suggests that justice is something extrinsic to Islam, whereas it is the very substance of Islam.\(^\text{126}\)

What exactly Khomeini meant by democratic values in this statement is, as in his use of “republic,” ambiguous. Based on an understanding of his work, it can be assumed that he is referring to the ideas of equality and social justice that are often referred to as “democratic.” He fails to address, however, how his conception of Islamic government can be reconciled with the ideals of representative government that are also generally associated with democracy.

Khomeini's third response to this critique—specifically the claim that the velayate faqih could lead to tyranny—was to assert that the qualifications for becoming the supreme leader preclude that one who rises to the post could rule tyrannically. He offers a lengthy explanation for this position in an interview conducted in 1980. In his explanation he maintained that the constitutional provision for the velayate faqih is structured in such a way that it could not lead to tyranny or to a lesser extreme “harm anyone.”

---

\(^\text{124}\) "Khurdad 15" refers to the protests that occurred on June 5, 1963 (Khurdad 15 in the Iranian calendar) in response to Khomeini's arrest by the Shah.


He asserted, "Particular attributes have been set down as necessary for the 'holder of authority' (vāli amr) and the faqih, and they are attributes that prevent him from going astray."\(^{127}\) Exactly how he is prevented from going astray, however, is unclear. Khomeini held that, "If he utters a single lie, or takes a single wrong step, [the vāli] forfeits his claim to governance,"\(^{128}\) but he offered little explanation for who, or what government body, would identify when the wrong deed had been done and in turn remove the supreme leader from office.\(^{129}\) Despite the seeming lack of accountability mechanisms, Khomeini remained adamant that what is in the Constitutional ordinance is enough to keep the government from backsliding into tyranny. If the vāli meets the qualifications for rule, he maintained, he must by nature be a just executor of divine law.

The last major critique leveled against the new Khomeini-inspired Iranian Constitution was that it created a state that was doomed to be deemed "backward" by the rest of the world. As mentioned previously, by the time of the Iranian revolution, secularity was considered by many in the Western world to be one of the pillars of good governance, and the new Iranian state was anything but secular. For that reason, beyond being fundamentally critical of the regime for the reasons outlined above, many critics also feared that by creating a state based on Islamic rule, Iran would be ostracized and marginalized in the global political and economic community.

Khomeini was certainly not an ardent admirer of the West. Much of his revolutionary and post-revolutionary rhetoric in fact utilized anti-Western, and particularly anti-American, themes to mobilize his supporters.\(^{130}\) Khomeini was very careful, however, to note that he was not fundamentally opposed to the West so much as he was opposed to the political meddling and cultural degradation that had come with

\(^{127}\) Ibid., 342.
\(^{128}\) Ibid.
\(^{129}\) Remarkably, despite the seeming lack of mechanisms able to hold the vāli faqih accountable, Khomeini asserts in the very same interview that the constitution does not go far enough in granting power to the faqih. He states, "Now the Constitution makes some provision for the governance of the faqih. In my opinion, it is deficient in this regard. The religious scholars have more prerogatives in Islam than are specified in the Constitution, and the gentleman in the Assembly of Experts stopped short of the ideal in their desire not to antagonize the intellectuals!" Khomeini's concern in this regard was likely assuaged by the 1989 amendments to the Constitution that explicitly made the velayat e faqih's authority absolute. Ibid.
Western influence in Iranian society. He clearly drew this distinction in his final testament in which he very deliberately rejected the characterization of himself, and of the ‘ulama\textsuperscript{131} more broadly, as opposed to progress and civilization.

If by ‘the manifestations of civilization and innovations’ they mean inventions and new products and advanced technology which contribute to the progress of man and his civilization, the idea has never been, nor will it ever be opposed by Islam or any other divine religion... But if ‘civilization and modernity’ is to be interpreted... as liberty to engage in religiously prohibited acts, including prostitution and even homosexual relations and the like, then I can only say that the idea is invariably opposed by all divine religions and people.\textsuperscript{132}

Based on this understanding of the clergy as open to aspects of the West that could contribute to human flourishing, Khomeini asserted that Islamic government based on clerical rule should not be characterized as backward but instead should be given equal treatment as a viable political philosophy. Khomeini himself identified Islamic government as a “moderate system of government that is located in the middle of the political spectrum between Marxism/Communism on one end and Capitalism on the other.”\textsuperscript{133}

Overall, Khomeini’s responses to critiques of his political and religious philosophy were relatively effective. While certainly there were periods during his reign when he had to couple his intellectual responses with fierce coercive repression of opposition voices, generally his charisma and the respect he commanded as a religious and political thinker among both the clergy and the populace allowed him to counter intellectual, theological, and philosophical challenges to the Iranian state. Khomeini’s successor, Khamene’i, however, did not command the same respect nor possess comparable charisma to his predecessor. His ability to counter challenges to regime authority were thus less effective and allowed, during the late eighties and early nineties, for emerging critiques of \textit{velayat e faqih} to begin to take hold. The nature of these critiques will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{131} ‘Ulama roughly translates as those learned in Islam. In other words, religious scholars.

\textsuperscript{132} Ruhollah Khomeini, Imam’s Final Discourse: The text of the political and religious testament of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution and the Founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Imam Khomeini (Tehran: Ministry of Guidance and Islamic Culture, 1990), 20.

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 58.
CHAPTER III
The Unexpected Underpinnings of a Theocratic Vision

The Mystical Thought of Ayatollah Khomeini
In January of 1989, the year of his death, Khomeini wrote a letter to Mikhail Gorbachev, praising the Soviet leader for his role in dismantling the “repressive Communist regime,” and suggesting, in the words of Alexander Knysh, that “the ideological and cultural vacuum created by the fall of Marxism should be filled with immortal philosophical teachings and moral values worked out by the medieval Muslim thinkers.” In his invitation to Gorbachev to embrace Islam, instead of directing his Soviet counterpart to the Qur’an, Khomeini recommended a series of mystical and philosophical thinkers that have historically been viewed with suspicion by more traditionalist members of the Shi‘i clergy. The letter to Gorbachev thus exposed a mystical side of Khomeini that is often overlooked in his western caricature.

This chapter offers an exploration of the key aspects of Khomeini’s mystical beliefs that influenced the formation of his political vision. More importantly, however, it highlights the way in which Khomeini’s long and often criticized relationship with various currents of Islamic mystical philosophy raises questions about whether the state he created lived up to his complex set of beliefs. In the latter regard, I suggest in this chapter that the confusion surrounding the nature of Khomeini’s mystical beliefs is one of the primary reasons that Khomeini remains a contested figure in modern Iranian discourses on Islam and democracy.

The most comprehensive study of Khomeini’s involvement with Islamic mystical philosophy (or Islamic esotericism) is provided by Alexander Knysh in his article, “‘Irfan’ Revisited: Khomeini and the Legacy of Islamic Philosophy.” According to Knysh, Khomeini’s exposure to Islamic mystical philosophy can be concretely traced back as early as 1921, when, at age 19, Khomeini followed his teacher and mentor Abd al-Karim Ha’iri (d.1937) to Qom. Upon his arrival at Qom, Khomeini became acquainted with Mirza Muhammad Ali Shahabadi (d.1950), “a master of both religious and rational sciences,” who, along with the “somewhat controversial thinker” Mirza Ali Akbar Hakim (d.1925), became Khomeini’s

primary mentors in his study of ‘irfan. 'Irfan is a process of Islamic mysticism that literally translates as “knowledge” but can perhaps better be understood to mean gnosis, “the mystical knowledge of the inner world of Man seeking intimacy with God.” Exactly how Khomeini conceived of ‘irfan will be discussed later.

Unlike its better known (at least in the western world) counterpart Sufism, the study and practice of ‘irfan is not built around a system of brotherhoods. It does, however, strongly value the relationship and transmission of knowledge between master and pupil. Thus, through his study of ‘irfan, Khomeini became part of a chain of transmitted knowledge that stretched back over eight hundred years. As Knysh explains, the mentorship of Shahabadi, Hakim, and other scholars, linked the future ayatollah to a long tradition of learning in Iranian Islam that combined mystical and metaphysical trends dating back to the teachings of such seminal figures in Shi'i intellectual history as Mir Damad (d.1630) and Mulla Sadra (d.1640), who had drawn their inspiration from eminent predecessors, such as Haydar Amuli (d.1385), Ibn Arabi (d.1240), and Yahya al-Suhrawardi, also known as al-Suhrawardi al-Maqul (executed in 1191).

Under Shahabadi’s guidance, the first work on ‘irfan that Khomeini studied was Mulla Sadra’s Kitab al-asfar (Book of journeys). In this work, Sadra offers an account of how the “mystical wayfarer” attains knowledge of the divine while also emphasizing the obligation that the mystic has to impart the knowledge he has gained to the community of believers. Towards this end, he divides the mystic’s spiritual journey into four stages “corresponding to the wayfarer’s degree of spiritual attainment, on the one hand, and, on the other, to his function as a divine messenger.” The journey begins with the

---

135 Knysh, 633.
136 Moin, 39. The Encyclopedia Iranica elaborates, “Like theosophical trends in other religions, ‘erfan emphasizes mystical experience, esoteric doctrine, and monist philosophy. Yet owing to its strong inner bonds with Islamic law and religious practice, it deemphasizes the occult and magical phenomena, which are often associated with theosophy. Because of its strong philosophical underpinnings of Islamic theosophy it appears less fortuitous to translate ‘erfan with esotericism or gnosis, terms which express a wide variety of esoteric and gnostic trends in Islam.” (Encyclopedia Iranica, http://www.iranica.com) Despite the latter portion of this definition, I continue to equate ‘irfan with gnosis for the sole reason that Khomeini himself draws that connection. In this regard, he uses ‘irfan and gnosis synonymously to describe “a spiritual journey in the right direction.” Khomeini, Light of the Path, 164.
137 Knysh, 634. Knysh explains in greater depth, “In the first stage, man travels from his self and the world to God; the second journey takes him from God to God, as he oscillates between considerations of divine attributes and divine essence; in the third stage, man sets out on the road from God back to the world and his self; finally he begins to wander from man to man, bestowing on his community a new dispensation of spiritual order.”
wayfarer's departure from himself and the world towards the Divine, and ends with his conveyance of
divine knowledge to the earthly community to which he returns.

In many ways, Knysh asserts, Sadra's conception of the spiritual journey is reminiscent of Ibn
Arabi's "concept of the perfect man (al-insan al-akamil) in its particular emphasis on his functions as a
religious leader of the community of believers." Thus, it is fitting that the next works on 'irfan which
Khomeini studied as a young seminarian were Sharaf al-Din Mahmud al-Qaysari's (d.1350) commentary
on Ibn Arabi's Fusus al-hikam (The Bezels of wisdom), as well as commentaries on Arabi's work by his direct
disciple Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi (d.1273-74). The mystical writing done by Khomeini later in life reveals
that he was heavily influenced by all of these works. In his own writings on 'irfan, he essentially adopted
Sadra's four stage breakdown of an individual's spiritual journey and also frequently referenced Qaysari
and Qunawi's commentaries on Arabi as support for his claims. In fact, as evidence of the influence these
works had on Khomeini, Knysh recounts that in 1983, a book that had been written by Khomeini, and
believed to be lost in earlier raids of his home by SAVAK, was rediscovered by a religious student. The
book turned out to be a super commentary written by Khomeini on Qaysari's commentary on Fusus al-
hikam.139

After more than six years of guidance, Shahabadi left Qom for Tehran leaving Khomeini
essentially without a mentor. His teacher's departure, however, did little to halt Khomeini's continued
study of 'irfan. Not only did Khomeini continue to read mystical and philosophical texts on his own, but
he also began to embrace the guidance of these texts in how he lived his own life. As Knysh explains,
Khomeini appears during this period to have adopted a number of "ascetic practices associated with the
early stages of the Sufi path: renunciation of worldly delights and desires, self-imposed poverty, scrupulous
discernment of the 'lawful' and 'forbidden,' and so forth."140 Khomeini continued these practices for the
rest of his life. At this time, Khomeini also attempted his first pieces of scholarship on 'irfan. In 1928, he

138 Ibid., 635.
139 Ibid., 631.
140 Ibid., 635.
published *Shakh "Du'a' alsahar"* (Commentary on "Du'a' alsahar [the morning prayer]") in which he offered a summary of his “philosophical studies and spiritual labors in Qom.” One year later he published his first independent treatise on *irfan*, *Misbak al-itidiya ila al-khila wa al-wilaya* (Lamp [showing] the right way to vicegerency and sainthood). Following these two publications, Khomeini’s works on *irfan* became few and far between. Beyond the aforementioned super commentary discovered in 1983, his discussion of the topic was limited to shorter lectures and pieces of writing, as well as bits of mystical poetry that he produced at various points in his life, many of which only surfaced following his death. Nevertheless, from the compilation of Khomeini’s work, certain themes can be drawn out that in turn can be seen as fundamental pieces in the foundation of Khomeini’s political philosophy.

**Khomeini’s *Irfan***

*Irfan*, both traditionally and according to Khomeini, can be understood as a spiritual journey through which one gains knowledge of the Divine. As Vanessa Martin explains in her book, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran*, “*irfan* within Khomeini’s philosophy is the attainment of “true inner knowledge acquired by direct experience of the intelligible order which lies behind the visible world, and enlightened awareness of the transcendent.”[^141] As hinted at here by Martin, the “inner knowledge” that one must acquire is found by looking within oneself. Thus, through the practice of *irfan* one must complete a process of self-reflection and meditation.[^142] One who is able to reach the point of ultimate self-reflection achieves *ma'rifat* or “knowledge of the essential reality of things.”[^143]

In simpler terms, the idea behind *irfan* is that through a process of self-reflection a Muslim prepares him or herself to witness the Divine or gain a piece of divine knowledge. As Khomeini explained in his own philosophical works, there are three worlds: the “corporeal world” in which we live and interact and where we find the empirical knowledge that we can accumulate using science; the “in-between world” in which we find the heart and knowledge of morality; and the “hidden world” which holds all

[^142]: Ibid., 34.
[^143]: Ibid., 36.
things spiritual and intellectual and in which we find knowledge of “the essence of God.” The purpose of self-reflection for Khomeini was gaining entry into this “hidden world.” It is by this means only that one achieves perfection through unity with the divine.

Self-reflection, within Khomeini’s mystical approach, entails a reordering of one’s soul. He argued that the human soul is where good and evil face off; where freedom, happiness, and salvation compete with damnation, slavery, and misery. It is the battleground of Godly and satanic forces. Khomeini largely described the satanic forces present within the soul as the desires for individual pleasure and aggrandizement that are entangled in an individual’s ego and thus are an obstacle to one truly loving God. In this vein, he classified the contents of the human soul as divided between “that ‘which is with you’ [your lower self] as well as that ‘which is with Allah’.” Based on this conception of the soul, he spoke of the ultimate end goal of self-purification as annihilating one’s lower self (ridding oneself of ego) in order to become god-like.

It is our selfishness and egoism that are responsible for our present condition. The following maxim expresses the same truth: ‘Your worst enemy is your lower self that is within you.’ It is this idol which man worships most and to which he is attached most. Man cannot become godly unless he smashes this idol, because an idol and God cannot go together. An egoist can never be a devout person.

In support of this understanding, Khomeini quoted the Qur’anic verse 16:96 which proclaims, “What is with you will come to an end, what is with Allah will remain.” He acknowledged, however, that the process of self-annihilation is not easily completed. The struggle against one’s lower self is of such a caliber that Khomeini identified it as the “major jihad” to which all other jihads (such as physical holy war) are “subservient.”

145 Moin, 49.
146 Siavoshi, 32.
147 Khomeini, Light Within Me, 143.
148 Ibid., 139.
149 Ibid., 143.
150 Khomeini went so far as to say that “Any other jihad performed by us will be worth the name only if we succeed in the major jihad.” Ibid., 141.
Whereas, for Khomeini, that which is Satanic in an individual’s soul is his or her personal interests, that which is Divine is an individual’s understanding and appreciation of the needs and wants of the community of believers—“the desires of every body.”\textsuperscript{151} In this way, Khomeini proposed that when you rid yourself of your own ego you become truly selfless. Those who accomplish this move forward “without caring for their lives or their personal interests.”\textsuperscript{152} By doing so they gain the capacity to see the divine connections that are between all things—connections that normally elude the human senses—and in turn can truly love the “Transcendent.”\textsuperscript{153}

Khomeini, like his mystical predecessors Arabi and Sadra, referred to an individual who has achieved this type of enlightenment as the “perfect man.” As Martin explains, the “perfect man embodies the precepts of the divine law in his very soul” and is thus able to act in accordance with God’s law without need for the reinforcement of shari’a.\textsuperscript{154} Through his intimacy with the divine, the perfect man gains the status of God’s representative, or vicegerent, on earth. Within Khomeini’s understanding, he is effectively a “copy of God.”\textsuperscript{155} As Khomeini wrote in his commentary on Du’\textsuperscript{a}, “The Perfect Man, being the all-encompassing entity, the perfect mirror, which reflects all Divine names and Attributes, constitutes God’s most perfect Word.”\textsuperscript{156} He elaborated further on this idea in his glosses of Qaysari’s commentary on Fusus al-Hikam,

\begin{quote}
[The Perfect Man’s] relationship to the world... is that of the spirit to the body; he has attained the true existence, and, having abandoned the creaturely one, his body has become identical with the universal Body, his soul—with the universal Soul, and his spirit—with the universal Spirit.\textsuperscript{157}
\end{quote}

At this point, the only spiritual journey—or rather obligation—left to such an individual is to use the Godly attributes and knowledge that he has acquired to “guide and help others to reach God.”\textsuperscript{158} In

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{153} Siavoshi, 33.
\textsuperscript{154} Martin, 36.
\textsuperscript{155} Moin explains further that to Khomeini and other Islamic mystics who share his perspective, the perfect man is “the centre and animating principle of the whole created universe, the spirit and the life of things”, and, more importantly, “a channel through which God imparts knowledge of himself to his worshippers and endows them with every spiritual gift.” Ibid., 47.
\textsuperscript{156} Khomeini as quoted in Knysh, 645.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 649.
constructing this understanding of the perfect man, Khomeini drew heavily on the work of Arabi and Sadra and, in particular, on the four-stage conception of an individual’s spiritual journey advanced by the latter.

While Khomeini argued that all human beings are equally capable of achieving enlightenment, he maintained that they are not all equally successful in that pursuit. He described the process as an attempt to escape the “idol-temple” of ego that each individual has within them. It is not easy to smash this idol-temple, he argued, and to do so man often needs the help of the Prophets. This is, in fact, the reason that Prophets come to the world, he wrote, to aid man on his divine journey.

All the Prophets and the revealed Books have come only to smash this idol-temple and to take man out of it. The Prophets have come to set up a divine order in this fiendish world ruled by the Devil whom we all obey. Our base desires are the Devil’s manifestation. The greatest devil being our own appetitive soul, wherever we do becomes devilish... We can get out of this labyrinth only if we emigrate from our present state, act according to the teachings of the Prophets and other holy men and cease to be selfish and egoistic.

As is evident in this passage, Khomeini envisioned the help provided by the Prophets as being on a grand scale. It is not aimed simply at supporting an individual but rather seeks to create a “divine order” that enables all members of the community to strive towards the Divine. In this regard, he attributed a certain prophetic character to the perfect man—or more broadly to those who attain some level of spiritual enlightenment—who he believed is obligated to help set up a social order that realizes the ideals of divine guidance. Without such a an order, he maintained, the community of believers will inevitably stray from the Divine path and “fall into the deep pit of hell.”

Khomeini’s emphasis on both the need for a divine order that can help guide the community of believers and on the role of those who attain enlightenment in bringing that order into being under gird his political philosophy of ve/âyate faqih. Khomeini believed that, given the large portion of society who needed assistance on the road to enlightenment, the institution best positioned to offer that assistance was the government. The government, he argued, could help its citizens by imposing the moral guidelines

---

158 Moin, 49.
159 “It is not easy for [man] to get out of [his idol-temple],” Khomeini writes. “He needs Divine help, a hidden hand which may take him out of this dungeon. The Prophets have come for this very purpose.” Khomeini, Light Within Me, 143.
160 Ibid., 140.
161 Ibid., 143.
that would keep them on the divine path. In justifying this proposal, he pointed to the traditions of the Prophets who "set up a government as a means of leading man to that position which is the real aim of the Prophets' coming, [Allah's justice]." Given the lengthy discussion of Khomeini's vision of velayate faqih offered earlier, it is not necessary to rehash the key tenets of this doctrine. Referencing back to that earlier discussion, however, may be helpful for the reader in identifying the ways in which the doctrine can be linked to Khomeini's esoteric beliefs.

While, as mentioned earlier, Khomeini's statements about his esoteric beliefs from 1930 onward were few and far between, evidence of these beliefs does surface in his political statements. For instance, in his lectures on the velayate faqih, some of Khomeini's passages reflect the aforementioned mystical practices and the process of spiritual endeavor that he had himself embraced. In the final section of Velayat Faqih, he explained to his followers that a successful movement to create Islamic government must begin with each individual's internal struggle for spiritual improvement.

We too have difficult tasks facing us. We must improve ourselves spiritually and improve our way of life. We must become more ascetic than before and completely shun the goods of this world. All of you must equip yourselves to protect the divine trust that has been vested in you... turn away from the desire for worldly gain, purify your souls, turn toward God almighty, cultivate piety.

Despite Khomeini's occasional references to mystical practices such as the one above, however, he largely chose throughout his career to downplay the mystical foundation of his beliefs.

Khomeini's Hidden Mysticism

When Khomeini began his study of 'irfan as a seminary student in 1921, it was by no means a subject that was unheard of in Qom or the larger Shi'i community. At the same time, however, 'irfan was not an "obligatory part of a talabeh's studies." The reason for 'irfan's exclusion from the standard curriculum was that it was frowned on by many of the senior clerics in the Shi'i religious community. These clerics viewed the esoteric discipline with suspicion because, as Moin explains, "despite ['irfan's]
distinctly Shi'i character, many of the leading contributors to its development - intellectuals, poets and mystics - have not been Shi'a.\textsuperscript{167} Given the unfavorable disposition that many of the clerical elite had towards 'irfan, the young Khomeini, while fascinated by 'irfan, was not overzealous in publicizing his interest in the discipline or the ways in which it influenced him. Moin writes,

Khomeini's public posture from his early days as a mojtahal was always to conform to the general trend of the clergy and shun what they regarded as suspicious topics like philosophy and mysticism in favour of mainstream disciplines of law, jurisprudence, the sciences of the Qor'an and the sunna... He wrote in a simple and clear language both on these subjects and mysticism. But he kept his mystical writings under wraps. This was clearly sensitive territory in which it was all too easy to be accused of heresy or isolationism.\textsuperscript{168}

Despite his wariness of being ostracized within the clerical elite, Khomeini's interest in Islamic esoteric philosophy and mysticism “did not wane” over the course of his life.\textsuperscript{169} Prior to his exile in 1964, he taught private classes in mystical philosophy to a “close circle of friends and students, among whom were the future ayatollahs and Muslim leaders Morteza Motahhari and Hossein Ali Montazeri.”\textsuperscript{170} He also was not entirely willing to sweep his esoteric interests under the rug whenever they attracted the displeasure of more senior clerics. Ayatollah Borujerdi, for instance, remained critical of Khomeini’s engagement with mystical philosophy throughout his period as sole marja. Notwithstanding Borujerdi’s objections, Khomeini refused to “suspend his classes.” Ironically, he ended up doing so shortly following Borujerdi’s death, but this was likely due to his increased political activity rather than a concession to the critiques of senior clerics.\textsuperscript{171}

Following the revolution, Khomeini at last appeared poised to bring his mystical interests to light. Apparently feeling more secure with his position in the clerical establishment, he delivered a series of televised sermons on mysticism. The sermons, however, elicited outrage among certain members of the clergy who “protested that he was restating old views that they had condemned as heretical.”\textsuperscript{172} Perhaps wary of provoking a crisis in the clerical establishment, when Khomeini fell ill in the midst of the lectures

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{169} Knysh, 650.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{172} Moin, 274.
he elected not to continue with them. From then onward, he avoided publicly speaking of mysticism, until the letter he wrote to Gorbachev in 1989.

Khomeini’s letter to Gorbachev is by no means in itself a mystical manifesto that illuminates Khomeini’s perspective as a mystic. It is most significant rather for the criticism it elicited and Khomeini’s response to that criticism. As mentioned previously, in the letter to Gorbachev, Khomeini recommended that the Soviet leader familiarize himself with the work of a number of major mystical thinkers including, Ibn Arabi, Avicenna, Sohravardi, and Mulla Sadra. Khomeini’s reading recommendations did not sit well with some more traditional members of the Shi’i clergy. One group, which called itself “The Protectors of Jerusalem,” published an open letter to Khomeini condemning his reading suggestions as heretical. The letter proclaimed,

Your Holiness... you have not referred Mr. Gorbachev to the truth of the holy Qur’an, but have asked him to read [the works of] the condemned heretic Avicenna, the Sunni pantheist and arch-mystic Ibn al-Arabi, the works of Sohravardi who was executed by the Muslims for his ideological deviations, and the writing of Mollah Sadra, who was exiled to the village of Kahak near Qom because of his intellectual deviations... We fail to understand why you refer the gentleman to deviant philosophers and mystics for the study of Islam. Are there not sufficient reasons in the Qur’an to prove the existence of God and to explain the principles and precepts of religion? Does it mean that leaders of Islam are unable to explain the truth of the Qur’an without resorting to philosophy and mysticism?

Although the group that published the letter was operating on the fringe of the clerical establishment, it still managed to incite a ferocious response from Khomeini. After years of concealing his mystical beliefs, Khomeini unleashed years of frustration and anger in a public letter in which he decried those in the clerical establishment whose close-mindedness he believed had been at the root of the stagnation of pre-revolutionary Iran.

This old father of yours has suffered more from stupid reactionary mullahs than anyone else. When theology meant no interference in politics, stupidity became a virtue. If a clergyman was able, and aware of what was going on [in the world around him], they searched for a plot behind it. You were considered more pious if you walked in a clumsy way. Learning foreign languages was blasphemy, philosophy and mysticism were considered to be sin and infidelity. In the Feiziyeh my young son Mostafa drank water from a jar. Since I was teaching philosophy, my son was considered to be religiously impure, so they washed the jar to purify it afterwards. Had this trend continued, I have no doubt the clergy and seminaries would have trodden the same path as the Christian Church did in the Middle Ages.

174 Moin, 275.
The above passage poses a direct challenge to the western caricature of Khomeini as a reactionary, fundamentalist mullah. It instead shows Khomeini to be a victim of reactionary tendencies in the Shi'î clergy whose own interests in progressive strains of Muslim thought were stifled by his more close minded contemporaries.

Khomeini's feeling of being trapped by the traditionalist clergy is further echoed in some of the mystical poetry he produced later in life. Much of this poetry was produced as a form of correspondence between Khomeini and his daughter-in-law, Fatemeh, as he mentored her in her own study of mystical philosophy. Very little of this poetry has been translated into English. One theme that does emerge in what little has been translated, however, is Khomeini's tendency to draw a comparison between himself and Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, a Sufi mystic who was executed in 922 by the political and clerical elite for declaring, while in the midst of mystical union, "I am the Truth." In one poem that Khomeini's son Ahmad presented to the people of Iran after his father's death as a memorial tribute, Khomeini wrote, "Freed from my self, I beat the drum/ [with the refrain] 'I am the Truth'/ Like Mansur I thus bought myself the gallows." In a second poem, he expressed a similar refrain. "Even while I have shunned love of myself/ Now truth is none but me/ I will see the gallows also/ As did Mansur see." Khomeini's self-comparison to Hallaj suggests that he also viewed himself as a victim of a close-minded clerical establishment that had been unwilling to accept his ideas as divine truth.

Taken in tandem, Khomeini's response to the critiques of his letter of Gorbachev, as well his self-representation in his mystical poetry, present him, at the time of his death, as locked in an upstream struggle against streams of Shi'î thought that were resistant to modernity. According to this understanding, it is Khomeini who had been pushing the clergy all along towards a more pragmatic embrace of modernization and towards an appreciation of diverse ideas and schools of thought. In this

172 Ibid., 270.
177 Ibid., 452.
178 Moin, 273.
endeavor he had been opposed rather than enabled by the reactionary and fundamentalist clergy who were determined to retain the traditional practices and beliefs that had led to their classification as backward.

Whether or not this is a valid characterization of Khomeini's position within the clergy is contested. Many claim that in fact Khomeini's later references to mysticism are poorly conceived pieces of propaganda designed to salvage what was otherwise a legacy of brutal repression of those who opposed his conception of Islam. 179 While there is certainly some validity to such an argument, it seems to ignore the long and influential engagement Khomeini had with Islamic mystical philosophy that has been outlined in this chapter.

Furthermore, it runs contrary to statements made by Khomeini both before and after the revolution in which he exhibits a vision for Islam that is unexpectedly open and inclusive. As Knysh notes, in his early mystical writings, Khomeini downplayed the differences between Sunni and Shi'i, which "appear to him as matters of minor significance." 180 And, in his later writings, Khomeini expressed a similar desire to craft a unifying and inclusive vision of Islam rather than one based on a strict understanding of orthodoxy. In this regard, he called for a reconciliation between philosophers, gnostics, and jurists. He asserted that "in all these groups there are people who are pious" and that in the end the differences between their viewpoints are insignificant. 181

These seemingly inclusive spiritual proclamations by Khomeini are in obvious tension with the state that he helped create and the state's ideology, which for all intensive purposes has come to embody its own type of Iranian Shi'i orthodoxy. In negotiating this tension, some less sympathetic to Khomeini adopt the perspective that actions speak louder than words and thus hold that Khomeini's primary legacy

---

179 In Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition, Michael M.J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi highlight this perspective, presenting a counter poem alongside Khomeini's poetry that rejects Khomeini's appropriation of Hallaj's legacy and compares him rather to the caliphs Ma'mun and Harun al-Rashid, who were responsible for killing the seventh and eight Shi'i Imams. The counter poet's work exhibits disgust for the idea that Khomeini could be a truth speaking dissident while at the same time executing huge numbers of his political opponents. Fischer and Abedi, 451.

180 Knysh, 644.

181 Khomeini, Light Within Me, 175.
is the absolutist Islamic Iranian state that was his brain child. Others, however, are willing to consider that perhaps Khomeini was genuinely frustrated towards the end of his life with the fact that the state he had created had failed to open up discussions of Islam to a diverse range of viewpoints. Whatever may be the case, the ambiguities present in Khomeini’s thoughts and actions has led to his continued importance as a contested figure in contemporary Iranian debates about Islam and government. The way in which his legacy is invoked by three leading reformist thinkers is discussed in the ensuing chapter.
CHAPTER IV
The Standard Bearers of a Progressive Islamic Project

*Iranian Discourses on Islam and Democracy*
A Fertile Environment for Discourse

In the preceding chapters I highlighted some of the complexities in the political and mystical thought of Ayatollah Khomeini that are often lost in the western caricature of the late Iranian leader. The assumptions made about Khomeini, however—that he is fundamentalist, anti-American, anti-modern, etc.—are not self-contained in the sense that they only skew western perceptions of Khomeini. They rather extend beyond Khomeini to the revolutionary movement that he headed, to the state that he founded, and to the society that seemingly continues to venerate him as a political and spiritual leader. In other words, western scholars commonly assume that the state that emerged from Khomeini’s perceived “fundamentalist” philosophy created such a hostile environment for modern discourses on human rights and democracy that Iranian society has remained inevitably stagnant in its development with regard to either area. Given these assumptions, western scholars choose to focus on what they identify as the “radical,” “fundamentalist,” and “reactionary” aspects of Iranian political discourse as its defining characteristics.¹⁸²

In this vein, post-revolutionary Iran has come to be perceived in the western consciousness as an ongoing “interruption” of global progress toward the realization of “modern values.”¹⁸³ It is a prototype for all that modern society should not be; a repository for all values perceived to be in opposition to western conceptions of civilization and progress—religious fundamentalism, political totalitarianism, intellectual stagnation, etc. This, western scholars believe, is the legacy of Ayatollah Khomeini.

In this chapter, I hope to demonstrate that this western conception of Iran is fundamentally flawed. Rather than being trapped in a period of stagnation, I posit instead that post-revolutionary Iran


¹⁸³ In Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran, Ghamari-Tabrizi highlights the way in which the western perception of the Iranian revolution and Islamist movements more broadly is rooted in a recognition of such movements as fundamentalist and diametrically opposed to modern conceptions of “progress.” He writes, “For [Bernard Lewis and other scholars], the Iranian revolution and its ensuing Islamist social movements amounted to a reactionary retreat from a rapid modernization that threatened the unchanging ‘essence’ of Islam. They located the ideological basis of contemporary Islamist movements in the despotic and anti-modern core of the Islamic dogma. They warned about the perils of Islamic fundamentalism, locally as well as globally, and its devastating interruption of the general progressive project of modernity.” Ghamari-Tabrizi, Islam and Dissent, 13.
has proven to be a fertile environment for the growth of robust and innovative discourses on Islam and democracy. In this regard, Iranian society does not represent a holdout against modernity but rather has embodied the cutting edge in discussions of how to reconcile traditional religious discourses—in Iran’s case Shi’i Islam—with modern discourses on democracy and human rights. I argue that this is in large part due to the two key aspects of Ayatollah Khomeini’s legacy that I have highlighted in the previous chapters: 1) his introduction into the public sphere and largely unintentional secularization of Islam; and 2) the ambiguities surrounding his own contentedness with the results of his political accomplishments.

With the end goal of justifying this more nuanced understanding of Iranian political and religious discourse, in this chapter I will offer a brief examination of the work of three particularly influential Iranian thinkers: Grand Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, Ayatollah Mohsen Kadivar, and Abdulkarim Soroush. Prior to addressing these scholars, however, I will first speak briefly to the major factors that have made post-revolutionary Iran so conducive to innovative discussion of Islam and democracy. These factors include aspects of Khomeini’s legacy that have been mentioned previously. They also, however, include other non-related factors that have somehow contributed to debate. Through a discussion of these factors, I hope to ground the three scholars within larger trends in Iranian political thought. Overall, this chapter is intended to affirm that post-revolutionary Iranian political discourses are in no way similar to the intellectual stagnancy that would be expected based on the common western understanding of the Iranian revolution as an “Islamist takeover”. In this way, the ensuing discussion of the robustness of Iranian discourse further highlights the flaws in the U.S.’s conception of Iran that have distorted its democratization policies in the Muslim World.

The Emergence of Discourse

The Iranian Revolution marked a watershed moment for discussions of Islam and democracy both in Iran and across the Muslim World. As has been discussed, this was primarily due to the fact that the revolution and the Islamic state it created opened up new space for debate by forcing Islam into the public sphere. In other words, the recasting of Islam as a political ideology turned it from an unassailable
religious dogma into a publicly contestable political discourse. This phenomenon is what Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi refers to as the "secularization" of Islam. He notes that "by locating Islam in the public sphere, not only did the new constitution alter the political apparatus, legal system, education, and gender relations in Iran, it also transformed Islam from an *a priori* source of legitimacy into a contested body of discourses." Ghamari-Tabrizi further suggests that bringing Islam into the public sphere highlighted exactly how contested Islam is even within the religious community. While many could agree that the government should be founded on Islamic criteria, exactly what those criteria should be was harder to determine.

The most notable change caused by the forceful introduction of Islam into the public sphere has been that of the role of the Shi'i clergy. Prior to the Revolution, the clergy—with a few notable exceptions such as Ayatollah Khomeini—were non-political actors whose religious rulings and decrees were almost exclusively related to spiritual matters. While the clergy certainly were not oblivious to the happenings of the non-religious world—as spiritual leaders they had to respond to the spiritual needs of their followers that were at times created by the non-religious world—their opinions were not required or even expected on non-religious matters. Thus, they had a certain freedom to express themselves publicly on topics and at times of their choosing. The revolution changed this. As the political ideology of the new regime, Islam was forced to become a comprehensive ideology that had an answer, or at least a position, on every issue that the ruling regime had to grapple with. As the representatives of Islam, the clergy were expected to know or at least discern these positions.

Farzin Vahdat notes that the immediate entry of Islam into the public sphere caused a number of issues for the clergy in areas in which Shi'i jurisprudence was not adequately developed to meet the

---

185 Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent*, 83.
186 On this topic, Ghamari-Tabrizi writes, "Not only did the new constitution create multiple sources of legitimation, it also engendered unintended socio-political and ideological consequences through its ambiguous references to 'Islamic criteria.' It intended to legitimate the 'Islamisation' of society, its laws and institutions, but the shari'ah remained more as a point of contestation rather than a point of reference." Ibid.
demands of governance. The state and thus the clergy, Vahdat writes, have been confronted with "difficulties and shortcomings of various types, primarily those rooted in the economic, social, and cultural aspects of Iran’s encounter with forces of modernity."^187 He elaborates, "These problems and shortcomings have forced the Shia hierocracy, which has attempted to penetrate every facet of social and political life after the revolution of 1979, to engage with practical problems and dilemmas that it rarely had faced before in its relative isolation of the madresah (seminary) settings."^188 Naturally, these gaps in discourse have had to be filled as rapidly as possible by the new regime; a difficult task considering the wide range of clerical opinions that exist on almost every topic. The regime has accomplished this task through the use of what Charles Kurzman calls "interpretive closure"—the constitutional right granted the valiye faqih to "end debate on a subject."^189

The regime’s use of interpretive closure has resulted over the past thirty years in the establishment of a type of Islamic "party line" on a wide range of political, economic, and social issues. While this tactic has been effective in providing the regime with the concrete ideological positions needed to govern, it has not been without drawbacks. As regime positions have been established as the sole positions sanctioned by Islam, many inside and outside of the clerical establishment, whose opinions or understandings of Shi‘i tradition are in conflict with the regime, have voiced their disagreement. Beyond taking issue with specific regime positions, however, many of these dissident voices share a larger critique of the Islamic Republic; namely, that a governmental system which affords absolute privilege to a certain interpretation of Islamic tradition over all others is inherently undemocratic and, perhaps more importantly, denies the tremendous diversity and vibrancy of Shi‘i jurisprudential thought. Based on this critique, dissident

voices have argued that without systemic reform the Iranian state will never be able to live up to its claims of being either “Islamic” or republican.  

While opposition voices have been present since the regime’s inception, the reform movement has only truly emerged as an intellectually robust and politically relevant movement since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. The reasons for the emergence of the movement in 1989 are three fold. First, the death of Ayatollah Khomeini drastically changed the dynamics of the Iranian ruling establishment. Whereas Khomeini was largely revered and respected by the clergy for his unquestionable religious expertise and political acumen, his successor Hojjat al-Islam (now Grand Ayatollah) Ali Hosein Khamene’i is less so. Having ascended to the position of valiye faqih through an eleventh hour constitutional amendment removing the requirement that the vali-elect be of the status of Grand Ayatollah, Khamene’i is perceived by some members of the clergy as an imposter who leapfrogged the traditional channels of earning religious authority through his political appointment. Without Khomeini’s charisma and prestige, Khamene’i has thus been less effective at silencing opposition voices within the clerical establishment.  

Second, the end of the Iran-Iraq war marked a change in the focus of Iranian political discourse from external threats to the internal dynamics of the regime. Although the war represented a failure in terms of Iranian efforts to export the Islamic Revolution, the end of the threat from Iraq meant that the external borders of the regime were secure. The main concern of politicians and intellectuals thus became how to refine and perfect the internal workings of the Islamic state.  

The final factor that sparked the emergence of the reform movement was a series of constitutional amendments pushed through shortly before Khomeini’s death. These amendments, for the first time, explicitly granted absolute authority to the valiye faqih and in turn drew heavy criticism from clerics and

190 In a public letter written in August of 2009, Ayatollah Montazeri declared, “I hope [the leaders who have strayed] have the bravery to announce that this government is not a Republic and is not Islamic and that no one has the right to protest or criticize.” Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, “Grand Ayatollah Montazeri in response to the letter written by 293 of enlightened thinkers and intellectuals,” Ayatollah Montazeri Official Website (August 26, 2009)


192 Ghamari-Tabrizi, Islam and Dissent, 185.
lay persons alike. Many of these critics, such as Ayatollah Montazeri, saw the move as a frightening indication of the even more absolutist direction in which the regime was headed after Khomeini's death. In the face of this consolidation of the regime's authority, many critics felt an increasing sense of urgency to make their voices heard.

The combination of these three factors facilitated the emergence of robust discussions on the ideal form of the Iranian state and more broadly on the interaction between Islam and democracy. The discussions have included both lay intellectuals and religious clerics and have been enriched by the rigorous tradition of critical discourse that has driven Iranian Shi'i seminary education for over a thousand years. Despite the diversity of voices in the movement, the debates surrounding reform of the Iranian state and more broadly surrounding Islam and democracy can be said to have crystallized around one question: how can traditional understandings of Islam and more particularly shari'a be reconciled with modern understandings of democracy and human rights? The work of the three scholars discussed in this chapter can on the most basic level be understood as a response to this question. All three offer different visions for reform of the Iranian political system that imagine the establishment of democratic government in accordance with Islamic principles. All three craft these visions in slightly different ways drawing in varying amounts on traditions of Shi'i jurisprudence and rational political thought. Interestingly, in their attempts to craft visions that are politically palatable among large swaths of the Iranian populace, all three have engaged the work of Ayatollah Khomeini, invoking his progressive and modernist philosophical legacy while simultaneously critiquing the state that his philosophy created.

In fact, it is through their engagement with Khomeini that I link these scholars. I argue that Montazeri's work embodies a total reclamation of Khomeini's vision as inherently democratic. In essence,

---

193 Kurzman, "Critics within," 343. Beyond the tradition of critical discourse that has defined Iranian seminary education, even the current Iranian state was proactive at the outset of the Republic in engaging with intellectual critiques of the regime. Ghamari-Tabrizi notes that in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, the regime in fact organized televised debates that included both supporters and critics in the hopes of strengthening the regime's religious, intellectual, and philosophical legitimacy. He further notes that towards the end of his life, Khomeini reaffirmed the commitment to welcoming a "plurality of ideas and competing political agendas as a sign of vibrant society and of the strength of the revolution. He declared: 'A society that does not have differences of opinion is imperfect." Ghamari-Tabrizi, Islam and Dissent, 36, 139.
he holds that Khomeini's political vision was distorted by political circumstances and by those who
succeeded him and thus, were he alive today, he would fully support Montazeri's proposal to restructure
the institution of veleayate faqih in line with principles of popular sovereignty. Kadivar, I argue, attempts to
reclaim only Khomeini's intentions. His work is based on a belief that while Khomeini's attempt to
resolve the conflict between Islam and modernity is laudable, his means of doing so through the absolute
institution of veleayate faqih is dissonant with both Islamic and secular understandings of justice.
Soroush's work marks the furthest departure from Khomeini's vision and from the tradition of Islamic
jurisprudence in which Khomeini bases his philosophy. Whereas Montazeri and Kadivar locate their
democratic visions firmly in traditions of Shi'i jurisprudence and employ secular rational discourses only
to affirm the principles they draw from their interpretations of Islam, Soroush takes the opposite tack. He
roots his vision of an ideal state in secular conceptions of democracy and, while not an advocate for social
laicite, argues that the only religious values worth bringing into the public sphere are those that enhance
non-religiously agreed upon democratic values.

What is most important about the way in which these three thinkers connect through their
understandings of Khomeini, is that all three highlight the inherent progressivity of Khomeini's political
legacy. Regardless of how Khomeini's philosophy influences their own conceptions of ideal government,
all three understand Khomeini's political vision as responding to the aforementioned challenge that they
themselves are responding to, how to craft a vision of Islamic government that is able to meet the
challenges of modern society. In this vein, I have two goals in the ensuing discussion of Montazeri,
Kadivar, and Soroush. First, I hope to illustrate how Khomeini has been reclaimed by reformers as a
progressive, even if flawed, political thinker and to thus further undermine the faulty western caricature of
Khomeini addressed in the previous chapters. Second, I hope to establish the vibrancy and progressivity
of modern Iranian debates on Islam and democracy. In this way, I intend to dispel western assumptions
about the stagnancy of post-revolutionary Iranian political discourse.
For much of the 1980s Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri was one of the most prominent ideologues of the Islamic Republic. A long time student of Khomeini and one of his most devoted followers, he was a key figure in the revolutionary movement and one of the most eloquent advocates for institutionalizing the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* during the period of constitutional ratification.\(^{194}\) Montazeri was, in fact, the designated successor to Khomeini until only months before Khomeini's death. His right to succession was retracted when the two had a falling out over Montazeri's criticism of a particularly bloody purge of political dissidents in Iranian prisons carried out by the regime in the aftermath of the war with Iraq.

Following his fall from grace, Montazeri emerged over the next twenty years as perhaps the most prominent religious figure in the reform movement. Until his death in December of 2009, he was widely considered to be "the spiritual leader of the [Iranian] opposition."\(^{195}\) Montazeri's critiques of the regime focused primarily on the dangers of absolutism and the need for popular sovereignty as justified by his own interpretation of Shi'i tradition. Even in his critiques, he affirmed that he had "always stood on the side of the late Imam Khomeini" and that the issues he had with the regime had resulted from distortions of the system that occurred shortly before and in the aftermath of Khomeini's death.\(^{196}\) Montazeri's favor, however, did not extend to Khomeini's successor, Khamene'i, whose legitimacy he directly challenged and whose oppressive policies he deplored.\(^{197}\)

Despite his dislike of Khamene'i, Montazeri remained committed throughout his life to the reform of the Islamic state rather than its overthrow. During his final months, however, during which popular discontent in Iran was rampant and regime repression particularly brutal, he seemed increasingly

\(^{194}\) Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent*, 46.


\(^{197}\) Urs Sartowicz, "Grand Ayatollah Montazeri: The System Has No Religious Merit," *Qantara* (July 24, 2009), 3.
pessimistic about the possibility of reform occurring that could salvage the revolutionary state. In one of his final letters to the public in August of 2009, he wrote, “I still hope that more than this fraction of the system that has languished and endured will survive and that before it is too late, the Islamic Republic can be salvaged.” Sadly, he seemed at the end of his life to have felt that the revolution had been all in vain. The regime that had emerged from his revolutionary efforts had in many ways become no better than the Shah’s regime he had worked so hard to overthrow.

Montazeri’s primary critique of the current Iranian state was that it represents only a warped distortion of the Islamic government that Khomeini imagined. The three causes of this betrayal of Khomeini’s vision, he argued are: 1) that the Assembly of Experts who formulated the constitution had no legislative experience and was ineffective in turning the ideals of the revolution into laws; 2) in addition to their inexperience, the framers were afraid of executive abuses (such as those that had occurred under the Shah) and so weakened the executive branch of the government substantially; and 3) the entire government system, including the previous distortions, was built around the presence of Ayatollah Khomeini. With regard to this latter point, Montazeri wrote,

Due to too much devotion to Imam Khomeini, a divine and eternal image of him had been ingrained in the minds of the Experts... hence, the Experts, by and large, tried to weaken the executive branch and to make an innocuous entity out of it, and instead to invest all the power in the position of leadership, then occupied by Ayatollah Khomeini.

While this system was able to function relatively effectively under the charismatic leadership of Khomeini, Montazeri maintained that in Khomeini’s absence its deficiencies had been exacerbated.

What is most important to note about Montazeri’s vision for reform is that he did not reject the doctrine of velayat-e faqih outright as do many of his clerical peers. Like Khomeini, he believed that the concept of velayat (guardianship) in Shi’i jurisprudential tradition—which is commonly held to outlines processes by which members of the clergy become guardians for orphans or the mentally disabled—can and should be extended to apply to society more broadly. He wrote,

---
196 Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, “Grand Ayatollah Montazeri in response to the letter.”
it is obvious that such fundamental issues as defending the Islamic country and security of the society, as well as establishing an Islamic government are much more important than the mentioned instances. Nobody can claim that Islam, which has paid attention to small details, has no opinion on such vital questions. Accordingly, Montazeri fully supported Khomeini's vision for *velayate faqih*. He was adamant, however, that guardianship in terms of Islamic government, even as Khomeini imagined it, does not require absolute authority. It is rather a supervisory role in which the *valiye faqih* is intended to ensure that the government is acting in the best interests of the people.

In this vein, Montazeri believed that the correct role for the *valiye faqih* is to ensure that the executive does not wield power absolutely, rather than to wield power absolutely himself. He drew on Khomeini's own work to affirm that this was an understanding that he and the late Supreme Leader shared. "You don't need to be afraid of *velayate faqih,*" Montazeri quoted Khomeini as saying. "The *faqih* does not seek to oppress people. If a *faqih* sought to oppress people, he would not be fit for *velayat... Velayate faqih* means having power over all affairs to prevent them from going astray... we want to curb dictatorship not to be dictators ourselves." This passage from Khomeini gives credence to Montazeri's claim that Khomeini would not have supported the absolute rule of the *valiye faqih*. It also supports the possibility that a frustrated Khomeini may have recognized the flaws in his own vision towards the end of his life. The primary difference between the theories of the two Grand Ayatollah's, however, is the mechanisms by which the *valiye faqih* is held accountable. In fact, it is in this regard that Montazeri offered his major "fix" of Khomeini's theory. Whereas the checks that Khomeini laid out on the power of the *valiye faqih* are somewhat nebulous—he essentially argued that anyone who meets the qualifications for serving as the *vali* is incapable of becoming a dictator—Montazeri was adamant that the ultimate check on the authority of the *vali* must be popular consent. Without democratic elections, he maintains, there is no system by which the *vali* can productively be held accountable.

---

201 Ibid., 7.
202 Ibid., 9.
In justifying his argument for the importance of some form of popular accountability in
government, Montazeri drew on three major epistemic resources. First, he offered an examination of Shi'i
tradition in which he highlighted the ways that the Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali were themselves
unwilling to accept absolute rule without the consent of their subjects.

The Prophet of Islam (May God’s Peace be upon Him) did not claim to be a ruler after claiming Prophecy. Only
after seventy-two of the great men of Medina pledged allegiance (bay’a) to him at Mina during the hajj ritual, was
the ground broken for the popular rule of the Prophet in Medina. Even then, the Prophet asked them (the great
men of Medina) to elect twelve people from among themselves to mediate between them and the Prophet and to
oversee the conduct of the Prophetic State.203

In addition to highlighting the Prophet’s acceptance of political accountability, Montazeri also drew on
the Shi’i tradition to illustrate the differences between traditional and modern Islamic government. He
argued that even if Muhammad and Ali had wielded absolute authority in all aspects of government it
would not justify the appointment of an absolute ruler in a modern Islamic government. The reason for
this, he argued, is that government now is vastly more complex than it was in the time of the Prophet and
the expertise required to rule effectively is correspondingly much greater. With this in mind, it is only
logical, Montazeri asserts, that the vali, whose expertise is Islam, should “pay attention to the Islamic
nature of the system and supervise the way the country is run for conformity to the Islamic tenets... while
leaving other affairs to specialists in the field.”204 Furthermore, giving absolute power to a fallible figure
when the Prophet and Imam Ali, both of whom are infallible, rejected absolute power themselves goes
against Shi’i tradition. Montazeri wrote, “How can we accept that the vali-e faqih, who is not even
infallible, and hence is open to error, be considered to get treatment even higher than the Prophet and
Commander of the Faithful? How can we accept that he is needless of consultation and immune to any
criticism?”205

Montazeri’s second epistemic resource in making the claim for popular sovereignty was the
Constitution itself. He argued specifically that articles 6 and 56 outlined the need for popular sovereignty

203 Abdo and Montazeri, 13.
205 Abdo and Montazeri, 23.
and that these two articles have essentially gone unenforced. Montazeri’s final epistemic resource is again Khomeini who he argued always envisioned Islamic government being founded on democratic elections. To support this claim he pointed at pre-revolutionary statements made by Khomeini while exiled in Najaf and Paris in which Khomeini proclaimed the importance of popular will. Montazeri also highlighted that Khomeini was prepared to accept drafts of the constitution in which velayat-e faqih was not even mentioned. The only reason velayat-e faqih ended up part of the constitution, he admitted, was because he himself and others advocated for it.

Certainly, [Imam Khomeini] was satisfied with the notion of healthy, free elections that would lead to establishment of a democratic government with him overseeing its performance as va'i fi q (religious jurist). However, during discussions in the Assembly of Experts of the Constitution a group of deputies including the late Ayatollah Beheshti and myself insisted that velayat-e faqih should be explicit in the Constitution.

Lastly, Montazeri cited Khomeini’s oft mentioned sentiment that each generation should have the right to choose its own government.

To bring the Iranian system back into line with Khomeini’s vision, Shi’i principles of justice, and common wisdom, Montazeri proposed that the Constitution be modified so that the va'i fi q is elected by the marje (plural form of marj'a taqlid). More importantly, he argued, that the Constitution must specify that the faqih’s authority is not absolute but instead has jurisdiction limited only to overseeing government “compliance with Islamic criteria.” Within this modified system, Montazeri envisioned the clergy as removed from institutional politics with their primary task being “providing the people with intellectual and spiritual leadership, explicating Islamic rulings, making an effort to push society toward spiritual excellence, and actualizing justice.” He maintained that, ideally, if the government ran smoothly there would be no need for clerical involvement whatsoever. Removing the clergy from institutional politics in this way, he argued, would not only allow the state to begin to live up to the

---

206 Article 6 states, “In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the affairs of the country must be conducted with reliance on the votes of the public and through elections.” Article 56 states, “Absolute governance of the world belongs to God, and He, in turn, has put human beings in charge of their social destiny. Nobody can take away this divine right from the people or subject it to the interests of a specific individual or group.” Abdo and Montazeri, 14-15.


208 Abdo and Montazeri, 18.

209 Ibid., 19.

210 Ibid.
democratic ideals it has espoused for thirty years, but it would also restore the independence and vitality of the religious establishment which has been restricted by its ties to the state.

Montazeri paired his more specific calls for reform with a broader call for greater compassion and appreciation for diversity to be shown by the Islamic regime. In the spirit of that call, he attempted to deconstruct the regime’s monolithic depiction of the revolution as solely driven by Islam. He posited that

The Islamic Republic of Iran was not the result of endeavors made by a specific social class. Although the late Imam assumed the religious and ideological leadership of the revolution because of his valor and special understanding, registering the revolution in the name of the clergy would be an injustice to other groups. The absolute majority of the nation from clerics to academicians and from workers to businesspeople, intellectuals, political groups and other social strata and even religious minorities took part in it and made the revolution victorious through their faith, unity and obedience to leadership.

The passage above manifests Montazeri’s desire to reinstill all Iranians with a sense of ownership over the identity of the Iranian state. It is this sense of individual ownership that he believed had been undermined by the regime's repression of opposition voices; repression driven by a mistaken conception of what unity really means. “When [regime loyalists] talk of unity,” Montazeri wrote, “they mean unconditional obedience of other people to their viewpoints not a brotherly unity that would mean tolerating each other’s views.”

Towards the end of his life, Montazeri worried that this “monopolistic tendency” would be the regime’s undoing. The true test of a just ideology, he believed, was whether you could win over your opponents rather than silencing them. By pursuing the latter tactic in its violent repression of opposition, Montazeri feared the regime was sullying the image of Islam on the global stage. “You suppose your goal is to defend Islam,” he warned in an open letter to the regime in the early 1990s, “whereas your conducts represent the pure visage of Islam as violent and the Moslems as anarchist and endangers the society’s security.”

Montazeri’s esteemed religious and political credentials lent great force to his critiques of the regime and as a result placed him high on the list of the regime’s most feared opponents. Although his
religious credentials afforded him some protection from regime attacks, he remained subject to house
arrest, harassment of his followers, slander attempts by the state owned media, and even an attempt to
strip him of his title of Grand Ayatollah.\textsuperscript{215} Throughout the regime’s efforts to silence him, Montazeri
remained resolute and in fact grew more vocal in his criticisms. He spoke out of a religious duty that he
claimed compelled him to raise his voice against injustice. Even more so, he spoke because he knew
others could not. He repeatedly expressed his concern that, given the state harassment he was subject to
even as a founding father of the Iranian state, he was loathe to think how others without his credentials
and visibility were forced into silence. While under house arrest in 2001, he lamented,

\begin{quote}
I have spent a lifetime fighting for the independence and honor of this country and defending the legitimate
rights and freedoms of the people, and I have taught most of the incumbent rulers as my pupils. In a condition
where I am being treated like this, what can others expect? As I have said repeatedly, I have no desire to be the
Leader; nor am I interested in the position of marji‘yyat. Yet, I consider telling the truth my religious duty.\textsuperscript{216}
\end{quote}

Montazeri’s loss to the Iranian reform movement is difficult to measure. His funeral in itself
proved to be an impetus for protest, but as that event has faded into memory his absence has been
noteworthy. At the current point in time, there is simply no one who can fill his shoes with the same
revolutionary credentials, religious expertise, and indisputable record as an uncompromising advocate for
justice. That being said, Montazeri’s presence continues to be felt in the Iranian reform movement
through the work of his students who have taken up the spirit of his democratic message. One of
Montazeri’s most noteworthy students is Ayatollah Mohsen Kadivar.

\textit{Ayatollah Mohsen Kadivar}

Mohsen Kadivar was twenty years old at the time of the Iranian Revolution. Caught up in the
revolutionary fervor he joined the many thousands of politically active students who were at the core of
the revolutionary movement and like many of his peers ended up being arrested and detained for
extended periods of time by the Shah’s secret police. In the aftermath of the Revolution, seemingly
inspired by the formation of the new Islamic state, Kadivar left his studies in electronic engineering to

\textsuperscript{215} “Profile: Iran’s dissident ayatollah,” BBC News Online (January 30, 2003).
\textsuperscript{216} Abdo and Montazeri, 23.
pursue a religious education in Qom. While in Qom he became a student and protégé of Grand Ayatollah Montazeri. The two remained close until Montazeri’s death in 2009.

Kadivar’s trajectory as a religious and political thinker has in some ways mirrored that of his mentor Montazeri. Like Montazeri, Kadivar also transitioned from his initial excitement about the Islamic regime to disillusionment with the seeming inability of the Islamic state to live up to its espoused commitments to democracy and social justice.\(^\text{217}\) Under Montazeri’s tutelage, Kadivar matured into a calm, meticulous, and formidable critic of the Islamic regime. His poignant and unwavering attacks on the regime that are grounded in rigorous adherence to traditional standards of Shi’i jurisprudence have earned him the respect of his fellow clerics and a loyal following among religious and non-religious Iranian college students.\(^\text{218}\) Like Montazeri, his status as a licensed mojtahed has made his critiques of the regime particularly difficult to dismiss and has also made it more difficult for the regime to openly repress him. In the turmoil of recent years, however, the regime’s repressive tactics have become increasingly brazen and even Kadivar has been forced to reside outside of Iran in order to preserve his safety and his right to speak. His exile has not prevented him from remaining a leading voice in the Iranian reform movement.

Like Montazeri, Kadivar’s primary issue with the regime is the absolute authority granted the valiye faqih. Unlike Montazeri, Kadivar does not attempt to salvage the ideology of the state by claiming it embodies a distorted version of Khomeini’s philosophy that was intended to be democratic. Rather, Kadivar takes the state for the absolute government that it is. He correspondingly holds Khomeini accountable for his absolute vision of velayate faqih as opposed to the democratic statements made by the former leader that were never realized in the actual ideology of the Iranian state.

Kadivar’s attack on Khomeini’s philosophy and in turn the ideology of the Iranian state is two-pronged and exclusively rooted in his examination of Khomeini’s philosophy in light of larger traditions of Shi’i jurisprudence. First, by methodically combing through the traditions of Shi’i political thought,

\[^{217}\text{Granted, the transition from support for the regime to disillusionment and critique is not an uncommon narrative in the Iranian reform movement.}\]

Kadivar demonstrates that there are in fact nine typologies of Islamic government supported by noteworthy Shi’i thinkers, of which Khomeini’s is the most absolute. In this way, he highlights the tremendous diversity in Shi’i thought and thus undermines the regime’s attempt to present the doctrine of velayate faqih as an ideal of Islamic government that is agreed upon by the entirety of the Shi’i clergy. Second, beyond simply showing that Khomeini’s philosophy is one of many, Kadivar asserts that velayate faqih is in fact a fringe doctrine supported by suspect evidence in the Shi’i jurisprudential tradition at best.

Interestingly, one of the most notable flaws in the doctrine, Kadivar argues, is the leap it takes in extending the concept of velayat to society at large—a leap supported by Montazeri. He writes that, based on Shi’i tradition, “No one has the right to oversee and set priorities for others [guardianship or vilayat], unless having credible religious appointment by the divine.” Elaborating on this fundamental flaw in the doctrine, Kadivar asserts that there is no evidence for velayat as Khomeini defines it in any major sources of Shi’i tradition. He concludes,

The principle of Velayat e Faghih is neither intuitively obvious, nor rationally necessary. It is neither a requirement of religion (Din) nor a necessity for denomination (Mazhab). It is neither a part of Shiite general principles (Osoul), nor a component of detailed observances (Forou’). It is, by near consensus of Shiite Ulama, nothing more than a jurisprudential minor hypothesis.

Although Kadivar thoroughly debunks Khomeini’s vision of Islamic government as jurisprudentially unjustifiable, he does not reject Khomeini’s project in its entirety. He understands the doctrine of velayate faqih as an attempt by Khomeini to provide a jurisprudential mechanism by which conflicts between traditional Islamic precepts and forces of modernity can be reconciled. For Kadivar,

---

219 Mahmoud Sadri, “Attack from within: Dissident political theology in contemporary Iran,” The Iranian (February 13, 2002), 5.
220 Ibid., 5.
221 Mohsen Kadivar, “An Introduction to the Public and Private Debate in Islam,” Social Research, vol. 70, no. 3 (Fall 2003), 669. Interestingly, in making this assertion about velaya Kadivar references the work of Montazeri to seemingly support his claim for lack of velaya. This runs contrary to other works of Montazeri read by the author that demonstrate support for Khomeini’s extension of guardianship to society at large. Unfortunately, the author’s inadequacies in the Persian language prevent him from examining all of the relevant sources.
222 Mahmoud Sadri, “Attack from within,” 5.
this reconciliation is the ultimate challenge facing modern Shi'i jurisprudence. Khomeini, he argues, recognized this, and believed that the answer was making *fiqh* subject to the absolute guardianship of the state, thus granting the state the ability to modify or ignore precepts deemed to be unhelpful in the administration of government. "Based on [Khomeini's] view," Kadivar writes, "an Islamic state can prevent anything – whether worship-related or otherwise – that contravenes the interests of Islam, for as long as it does."^225^ 

In theory, Kadivar posits, Khomeini's philosophy offered the potential to ameliorate some of the conflicts between traditional Islamic precepts and modernity. The problem of course was the aforementioned way in which Khomeini's theory departs from "the framework of traditional Islam and the accepted methods of formulating opinions."^226^ All the same, Kadivar concludes that Khomeini's attempt to tackle the conflict between Islam and modernity is worthy of emulation.

Although Ayatollah Khomeini's idea is open to serious criticism, his courage in criticizing traditional *fiqh*, whilst remaining appreciative of it, is laudable, as is his acknowledgement of the fact that the accepted methods of formulating opinions in *fiqh* were ineffective when it came to dealing with the problems of the modern world.^227^ Based on this understanding of Khomeini, Kadivar situates himself as continuing Khomeini's legacy of inquiry.

In contrast to Khomeini's absolutist solution, Kadivar proposes that the correct way to reconcile traditional strains of Islamic thought with modernity is not through the elevation of one strain over all others, but rather through an appreciation for the plurality of Islamic viewpoints on a given topic and a rational weighing of the merits of each viewpoint in a modern context. This process under girds the school of thought that Kadivar refers to as "intellectual Islam" or "Islamic modernism."^228^ Kadivar argues that the founding idea of Islamic modernism is that, in historical Islam, the sacred message has been mixed with the customs and conventions of the age when revelation was made, that all of traditional Islam's problems in the modern age emanate from the customary part of traditional Islam, and that the sacred message can still be defended with great pride.

---

^224^ *Fiqh* roughly translates as jurisprudence (the science of religious law).
^225^ Ibid., 58-59.
^226^ Ibid., 59.
^227^ Ibid.
^228^ Ibid., 65.
The goal of Islamic modernism, he argues, is to access the principles behind Islamic precepts by shedding the "sediment of time-bound customs." This goal is achieved through the use of dynamic *ijtihad*, which empowers *faqaha* to formulate opinions based on "primary religious principles (usul)" by allowing the use of reason to evaluate the relevance of social circumstances in which a precept was revealed.

Through his own use of dynamic *ijtihad*, Kadivar attempts to determine the absolute rights afforded each individual based on an understanding of Islamic tradition mediated by reason. Determining these rights and ensuring that the Islamic government protects them, he maintains, is the most effective safeguard against authoritarianism. This contrasts with the opinions of his mentor, Montazeri, who instead emphasizes popular consent as a check on authoritarianism. For Kadivar, respect for the absolute rights of the individual is a prerequisite for any semblance of democratic government.

One of the most important of these absolute rights that he feels the Iranian regime violates, is freedom of religion. The regime's imposition of a specific religious ideology, Kadivar argues, undermines rather than strengthens religious belief in Iranian society. "If force and threats are used to keep people in a religion," he writes, "then that religion is at best superficially observed rather than deeply internalized." The current regime's repression of opposition voices, he argues, only highlights the weakness of their ideology and displays a lack of confidence in Islam as a compelling belief system. "It is only weak value systems and religions," he maintains, that fear intellectual challenges whereas "religions and beliefs that rest on solid foundations do not fear competing in the marketplace of ideas."

*Abdulkarim Soroush*

Soroush, like Montazeri and Kadivar, was an ardent supporter of the Iranian Revolution. Unlike the two preceding scholars, he is not a member of the clerical establishment. His lack of clerical

---


231 Kadivar writes, "To safeguard against the unbridled corruption that necessarily stems from absolute authority, strict legal limitations must be imposed—namely absolute rights should be the prerogative of all citizens, with the understanding that the state cannot undermine this right under any circumstance." Kadivar, "An Introduction to the Public," 677.


233 *Ibid.*, 131)
credentials, however, did not prevent him from becoming a prominent figure in the Iranian state in the years following its inception. Just as Montazeri was a leading clerical ideologue for the regime and advocate for the doctrine of veleayate faqih, Soroush was the leading non-clerical ideologue responsible for affirming the regime’s legitimacy from a non-clerical perspective. As a founding member of the Iranian Cultural Revolution Council (CRC), “Soroush exemplified the new regime’s attempt to construct a hegemonic legitimacy for the Islamic Republic outside its traditional social base.”

As a passionate and idealistic young intellectual, Soroush initially remained committed to the regime even as its repressive tactics grew more brutal. In a public speech at the time, he proclaimed,

I need to emphasize... that God has consecrated the emergence and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. This divine blessing has descended upon us like the coming of a springtime to an arid land and it is the duty of all peoples of this country to be content and grateful for the blooming of this spring. Like a tree, they ought to submit themselves to this breeze and wear the green garment of appreciation. Otherwise, God forbid, they will suffer retributions if they show no gratitude towards God’s benevolence.

Soroush’s unapologetic perspective for the suffering inflicted on opposition voices for the regime, is a far cry from his current role as perhaps the regime’s most well known critic.

Soroush’s transformation from regime ideologue to regime critic, however, did not occur overnight. Despite his comment above, as the regime’s tactics grew increasingly repressive, Soroush began to question whether or not the state was truly living up to the Islamic and democratic values that it had claimed to embrace in the Iranian constitution. For this reason, he quickly became a voice of moderation on the CRC who counterbalanced those in favor of even fiercer repression of opposition voices.

Eventually, Soroush’s disagreements with the regime led to his resignation from the CRC. Since his disassociation from the regime he has become a driving force in “lay intellectual reform movements” and a respected critic of the regime in both religious and non-religious circles.

As a lay theologian, Soroush represents a very different kind of threat to the established regime than did Montazeri or does Kadivar. While the two clerical critics are dangerous to the regime because

---

234 Ghamari-Tabrizi, Islam and Dissent, 37.
235 Ibid., 127.
236 Ibid., 189.
237 Abdo and Lyons, 148.
they challenge the religious legitimacy of the state ideology, Soroush is dangerous because he challenges the clergy's exclusive right to offer authoritative interpretations of Islam. In other words, Soroush's work identifies "scientific knowledge as the point of reference for the plausibility of religious knowledge." By making religion subject to human reason, he thus makes lay scholars, with no official religious expertise, equally capable of evaluating the merits of religious knowledge. In this way, Soroush has expanded and continues to expand the realm of debate and *ijtihad* regarding Islamic precepts to include voices from outside of the clerical establishment. Soroush, on the most basic level, is contesting who has the "authority to produce religious knowledge" and it is thus no surprise that he has met with repeated attacks on his ideas and person by regime loyalists who wish to preserve the Islamic state's monopoly on religious interpretation.  

At the core of Soroush's political and religious project is the assertion that "Islam is nothing but a series of interpretations of Islam." What Soroush means by this is that the concept of *fiqh* is built around distinguishing between the "essential" or unchangeable (*daruri*) and "non-essential" or changeable (non-*daruri*) aspects of Islamic tradition. While there are certain standards by which one goes about establishing such distinctions, the process of *ijtihad* still produces varying results depending on the person initiating the interpretive act. Given the tremendous diversity of possible interpretations of Islamic precepts, Soroush argues that while we may be perfectly justified in holding some interpretations to be more correct than others, we should not be "dogmatic about their application."

Rather than dogmatic attachment to or imposition of one interpretation or ideology, Soroush proposes that any society sincerely pursuing truth must recognize the essentiality of affording its citizens the freedom to recognize and embrace religious truth on their own. "Freedom," he argues, "is itself a truth (*haq*) but more importantly the condition of freedom allows the emergence and affirmation of

---

239 Ibid., 219.
241 Ibid., 14-15.
Conversely, Soroush holds, absolute power “subdues truth.” The current regime’s mistake, he argues, is that it believes it can wield absolute power justly when others have not. Regime loyalists, he maintains, “do not seem to realize that ‘absolute power has only one logic; to subdue truth; to turn it into its handmaidens’... power controls the man, not the other way around.” Essentially, Soroush reveals himself as a believer in the adage, “absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Furthermore, he argues that the benefits resulting from the exercise of absolute authority are superficial at best. With regard to the Iranian regime’s imposition of a particular Islamic ideology, he declares that Islam is only truly enhanced by the voluntary submission of believers not their forced adherence.

As an alternative to the absolute governmental ideology offered by the regime, Soroush proposes a vision for “religious democratic government” designed to meet the spiritual and non-spiritual needs of Muslim citizens. The aim and challenge of establishing a religious democratic government, he writes, “is threefold: to reconcile people’s satisfaction with God’s approval; to strike a balance between the religious and the nonreligious; and to do right by both the people and by God, acknowledging at once the integrity of human beings and of religion.” Recognizing the imperfections of fiqh in establishing principles of government. Soroush instead turns to principles derived from rational thought. He argues that whatever influence religion wields in government must be “in accordance with the dictates of collective ‘reason.’”

In this regard, Soroush differs distinctly from Montazeri and Kadivar who derive the importance of democratic values from their understandings of Islam. Soroush, by contrast, explicitly identifies democratic values as deducible through non-religious means and in turn regards them as a standard to which public religion must be held. “It is the religious understanding that will have to adjust itself to democracy not the other way around,” he writes. “Justice as a value, can not be religious. It is religion

---

243 Ibid.
244 Ibid., 101-102.
245 Ibid., 103.
247 Ibid., 128.
that has to be just."²⁴⁸ In this vein, he suggests that there is no need to place the burden of elucidating core democratic principles on religion itself. "Rather, the discourse on religious government should commence with a discussion of human rights, justice, and restriction of power (all extrareligious issues). Only then should one try to harmonize one’s religious understanding with them."²⁴⁹ In this way, religion can be understood to affirm and bolster democratic values without being judged to be an essential precursor or progenitor of those values.

While Soroush is unapologetic about privileging democratic values that he has identified independently of Islam, he is careful to demonstrate that his vision of government is by no means anti-religious. He asserts that he is advocating for “political secularism” rather than “philosophical secularism.” In other words, his vision entails an institutional separation of religion and state but poses no threat to individual religiosity, a common fear that he hears expressed by Iranians regarding his philosophical project.²⁵⁰ “Democratic religious regimes,” Soroush argues, “need not wash their hands of religiosity nor turn their backs on God’s approval.”²⁵¹ Democracy does not require anyone to renounce their beliefs, it requires only tolerance of “different points of view and their advocates.” Towards this end, he asks, “Who says the precondition for tolerance of ideas and their bearers is the renouncing of one’s own beliefs? One may consider an idea absolutely false while judging its bearer blameless, respectable, and even commendable."²⁵²

Within Soroush’s vision, religion becomes a characteristic of democratic government only to the extent that it is desired by the populace. Democracy by nature, Sorouhz holds, dictates that,

The government of the people is a government fit for the people, not for the Gods. It is established and demolished through the will of the people. This will is, in a religious society, nurtured and inspired by religion |

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 132.
and religious reason, but the religious edification and inspiration does not diminish the democratic nature of the religious government in the least.\footnote{Ibid., 152.}

In this regard, he draws a distinction between “religious government” and “jurisprudential government.” Based on the democratic principles he has outlined, he argues that “religious government is inconceivable except over religious people”\footnote{Ibid., 146.} who thus allow their religious beliefs to inform their democratic participation in society. By contrast, jurisprudential government, such as that imposed by the Iranian Islamic state, “is feasible over both the religious and nonreligious” as it rejects individual freedom to pursue religious truth and instead compels its subjects to embrace a certain religious ideology.\footnote{Ibid.}
Conclusion
Reimagining the Role of Iran in the Democratization of the Middle East

The reformist visions discussed in Chapter 4 are fiercely disputed by Iranian regime loyalists. Correspondingly, the proponents and supporters of these visions are subject to frequent harassment and repression. As hinted at in the discussion of Montazeri, the esteemed Grand Ayatollah spent much of his last decade living under house arrest so that the regime could closely regulate his capacity to air public critiques of the Islamic state. The two younger critics discussed in the chapter, Kadivar and Soroush, have also been subject to harassment by the regime and are now both living abroad; forced into exile out of fear for their physical safety and out of a desire to maintain some level of freedom so that they can continue to advocate for reform.

In the face of this fierce repression, the values and ideals of the reform movement still increasingly appear to be gaining traction in Iranian society. The recent Iranian Nobel Prize Winner, Shirin Ebadi, for instance, notes that democratic culture in Iran is growing stronger. She posits that while the realization of democratic government may still be far off, a social commitment to democratic values is something increasingly embraced by much of the populace. “Democracy is a culture, and it’s the democratic people that can build democracy,” she notes. “Fortunately, this is a culture that we do have in Iran.”

Other scholars also highlight ways in which the supporting pillars of the absolutist regime are being undermined. Ahmad Sadri asserts that the decreasing lack of support for the regime ideology among the clergy poses an ongoing threat to the regime’s ability to religiously affirm its own legitimacy. Furthermore, Said Arjomand highlights that popular support for the regime ideology is also waning as

256 Kurzman, “Critics from within.”
evidenced by the increasingly young population's lessening commitment to the idea of "politically following religious leaders."\(^{259}\)

Exactly how events in Iran will unfold in the near future is difficult to predict. What remains certain, however, is that the reform movement continues to exhibit a strong attachment to the idea of maintaining the Islamic character of the Iranian state. Islam is seen by many Iranians as the key pillar in the unique Iranian identity that has developed over the past thirty years somewhat independently of cultural forces from the East and West. The persistence of Iranian popular attachment to Islamic government, paired with burgeoning discussions surrounding the possibilities of democratic reform, ensures that discourses on Islam and democracy in the country will remain robust and compelling.

Furthermore, the unique set of circumstances in Iran that have allowed for the proliferation of such sophisticated and vibrant discussions of religion and democracy has lent developments in the nation an ever increasing global significance. As Soroursh notes, religious democracy is something the contemporary world finds "unattainable or undesirable."\(^{260}\) And yet, visions of religious democracy (in the general sense rather than the Soroushian sense) are exactly what Iranian intellectuals, both inside and outside of the clerical establishment, continue to pursue. Their success or failure in this endeavor will undoubtedly have immediate implications in the surrounding Muslim countries of the Middle East.

Despite the efforts of Iranian intellectuals in this regard, the U.S. continues to fit nicely in Soroursh's discussion of the "contemporary world" that remains skeptical of the possibilities of religious democracy. One of the reasons the U.S. continues to fall in this category is that up until now it has chosen to view Islam in extremes. For U.S. policy makers, advocates for Islamic government are either fundamentalist extremists like Khomeini, or non-religious pushovers who have little actual sway over the Muslim communities to which they belong. In this way, the U.S. refuses to acknowledge the complexities


and nuances of Islamic visions of representative government and thus it has ignored or refused to engage with movements that struggle to find a balance between religion and democracy.261

My goal in this thesis is not to assert that the U.S. could have more effectively engaged with reform movements in Iran (although that argument could potentially be made). My claim is rather based on the idea that the U.S.'s understanding of Iran as a prototype for Islamist takeovers has informed the broader way in which the U.S. conceives of Islamist movements. In other words, the U.S. has remained attached to the initial conception of the Iranian revolution, common in its immediate aftermath, that it represents a realization of Qutbian Islamist philosophy, in which a vanguard Islamist group is able to take control of society and transform it from the top down.262 What this thesis has attempted to show, is that what we in fact may be witnessing in Iran is exactly the opposite. What initially appeared as a top down reform effort has elicited a strong bottom up reaction that is not only rejecting absolute theocracy but is also paving the way for the emergence of a state that is genuinely democratic and Islamic.

In this vein, I argue that it is time for the U.S. to overcome its fear that political openings in the Muslim World made accessible to Islamists will inevitably result in the emergence of theocratic states. An unceasing attachment to this fear manifested in a continued refusal to engage with Islamist parties, as I argued in Chapter 1, will critically inhibit the U.S.'s ability to effectively pursue democratization in the Muslim world. The U.S. must recognize that for whatever ways Iranian Islamism is unique, it is not unique in being an Islamic ideology that the U.S. has either mischaracterized, knows far too little about, or both. The U.S. must resist the urge to superficially categorize these movements and instead recognize the complexity of debates that have arisen and are ongoing surrounding modern Islamist movements. It is only when the U.S. truly attempts to understand Islamist movements in this way that it will be able to productively engage with them in its own efforts to pursue democracy in the Muslim World.

261 Ironically, Soroush points to the U.S. as a "religious democracy" that has negotiated a relatively productive balance between religion and democracy. Soroush, "Tolerance and Governance", 131.
262 Ghamari-Tabrizi, Islam and Dissent, 34.
Appendix I:
Timeline: Khomeini and the Iranian Revolution

September 24, 1902 - Ruhollah Khomeini is born in Khomein, a village of about 2,000 people in central Iran about 200 kilometers north-west of Isfahan.

March, 1903 - Ruhollah's father, Mostafa Khomeini is shot and killed at age 47 by two local warlords who want to prevent Mostafa from seeking the help of the provincial governor in Arak in preventing the warlords harassment of the populace.

1906 - Revolution in Iran leads to the establishment of constitutional government.

1907 - A counter-revolution overthrows the constitutional government and abolishes the Majles (parliament). One of Khomeini's later heroes, Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri, is a prominent figure in the counterrevolution. Although initially in favor of the constitutional revolution as a means to curb tyranny, Nuri is loathe to discover that the Majles is intended to make laws rather than simply to ratify and enforce laws based on the shari'a.

1909 - The counterrevolution is suppressed by constitutionalist forces. Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri is executed, among other dissidents, and the second Majles is convened. The constitutional government, which is organized based on French Enlightenment principles—most notably a strong belief in secularity—promotes the marginalization of the clergy as figures of authority in society.

1909 - At age seven, young Ruhollah is sent to a local maktab to begin his religious education. He learns how to read and write Arabic through study of the Qur'an and other religious stories. He shortly thereafter moves to a new school built by the constitutional government as part of its modernization program. There he receives elementary education in arithmetic, history, geography, and basic science. Khomeini also works with private tutors, an opportunity available to him because of his family's affluence.

1918 - Khomeini's mother and aunt are killed by cholera leaving Khomeini an orphan at age 16.

1919 - At age 17, Khomeini begins his formal seminary education in Sultanabad-Arak in a theological college run by Sheikh Abdolkarim Ha'eri. Ha'eri's firm piety and disinterest in the material world become a model for Khomeini. However, Ha'eri's disinterest in political matters—he unequivocally believed that the clergy should remain aloof from politics—was something Khomeini would not inherit.

1921 - Coup by Reza Khan begins the process of even stricter secularization for the Iranian state.

1922 - Khomeini follows Sheikh Ha'eri from Arak to Qom. For the previous hundred years Qom had been in decline as a center of religious learning. In 1920, however, British authorities expelled Shi'i leadership from Najaf, leading to a migration of many clergy to Qom, and the city's corresponding revival as a center of Shi'i religious learning and authority. As he begins his formal seminary education, Khomeini also seeks out masters with whom he can study irfan and hekmat. One of his later masters would be Mirza Mohammad Ali Shahabadi, "an ascetic who, perhaps more than any of his other mentors, captured Khomeini's imagination as a model of a good teacher, disciplined, thoughtful, unpretentious and introverted." Shahabadi was also politically active and forcefully}

263 Moin, 43.
opposed Reza Shah’s policies, an attribute that Khomeini was likely attracted to and in turn influenced by.

1925 - After adroitly negotiating a political rapprochement with Iranian clergy (initially opposed to his seeming anti-clericalism), Reza Khan, as prime minister, introduces a bill that deposes the Qajars and convenes a new Constituent Assembly that proclaims him the new monarch. Only one prominent religious leader, Seyyed Hassan Modarres, opposes the new government. Besides this one ‘progressive mojtahed’ the rest of Qom lets its silence be interpreted as an implicit endorsement of the new regime.

March 21, 1928 - Reza Khan is enraged when his wife is reprimanded by the clergy for unveiling herself while attending a service at the shrine of Fatemeh at Qom. He punishes the clergyman who issued the reprimand, Ayatollah Baqfi, by publicly horsewhipping him and arresting him. Baqfi is later internally exiled to Rey, and the relationship between the religious establishment and Reza Khan begins to rapidly deteriorate.

1929 - Khomeini requests the hand of Qods-e Iran, the daughter of a wealthy Tehrani cleric. Initially ‘Qodsi’ refuses but eventually changes her mind after being persuaded in a dream by the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter Fatemeh. Khomeini and Qodsi remain married for sixty years. By all accounts, Khomeini is an attentive husband who, although a strict enforcer of Islamic law in his household, shares a larger burden of the household duties than was expected of men at the time.

1929 - Khomeini publishes a commentary on “The Dawn Supplication” (Do’a al-Sahar) in which he demonstrates his mastery of mysticism and mystical terminology.

1934 - Reza Shah, inspired by a trip to Turkey, begins a fiercely secular modernization plan. This includes a ban on religious garb (except for those qualified as mojcaheds), requiring men to wear European hats and women to be unveiled in public, that enrages the clerical establishment. Reza Khan refuses to give ground and the clergy back down out of fear of violent repercussions (arrest, exile, and death). Khomeini is still too junior to take a lead in protests and so goes along with the other clergy in the practice of taqiyya.

1936 - Khomeini receives his permission to “derive his own rulings,” giving him the status of Hojjat al-Islam and allowing him to officially conduct his own classes and develop his own following (which he has been doing unofficially as a recognized rising star in the religious community). Khomeini is well respected and well liked in the Qom seminary system and his following continues to grow.

1941 - Needing to secure the supply route from the Persian Gulf to Russia, and wary of Reza Shah’s pro-German sentiments, the Allies invade Iran. On September 17, Reza Shah is forced to abdicate the thrown and is replaced by his twenty-one-year-old son Crown Prince Mohammed Reza. Mohammed Reza is less overbearing in his commitment to secularization and initially enjoys a more amicable relationship with Qom.

1942 - Khomeini anonymously publishes The Discovery of Secrets (Kashf al-Asrar), an explicit attack on secularism and the decay it was causing in Iranian society. Beyond attacking Reza Shah, however, Khomeini also reprimands the clergy who have not only not opposed the Shah but have actively collaborated with him.

1946 - Ayatollah Borujerdi rises to the position of sole marja’e taqlid of the Shi’a. Borujerdi is an immensely competent administrator who strengthens the organizational structures of the Qom seminaries and religious community. He, however, is very much opposed to mixing religion and
politics and pursues an amicable relationship with the state in which the clergy largely remain
removed from the political sphere. Despite Borujerdi's political stance, Khomeini is one of his
fervent supporters.

1949 - Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq founds the National Front to represent a growing segment of the
Iranian population unhappy with what it sees as British colonial influence over Iranian oil.

1951 - Mosaddeq becomes prime minister. There is some cooperation between him and the clergy,
particularly in his effort to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Within the next couple
years, however, relations deteriorate as the clergy become concerned about Mossadeq's emphasis on
secularity and the perceived anti-clerical stance of many of his supporters.

August, 1953 - Mosaddeq is overthrown in a coup d'état organized by the CIA and the British. The coup
actually enjoys the support of much of the clerical establishment, which more strongly comes out in
favor of the Shah. General amiety between the Shah and the religious establishment continue until
the late 1960s as the Shah is willing to grant concessions to Qom (such as freedom to fight the spread
of Bahá'ísm) in return for clerical support. During this period, Khomeini continues to build his
reputation and following as a teacher in Qom. His network of supporters gradually expands
throughout the country.

1960 - The Shah puts forth a land reform bill to the Majles that many feel violates the principles of Islam
(as well as threatens the land endowments on which members of the religious establishment depend).
For the first time, Borujerdi enters the political sphere to announce his opposition to the bill. The
Shah strips the bill to the point of it being virtually useless to assuage the concerns of the clergy. He
is growing impatient with the clerical establishment, however, and increasingly confident of his own
position to march ahead with reform plans with or without them. He puts far less effort into
maintaining a cordial relationship with Borujerdi.

March 30, 1961 - Ayatollah Borujerdi dies and the Shi'i community is unable to agree on a successor as
sole marja-e taqlid. Khomeini at this point is too young to be a serious candidate for the position but
is considered the fourth ranking theologian in Qom.

January 7, 1962 - The Shah replaces the prime minister, Ali Amini, an independent-minded and
competent politician who enjoyed amicable relationships with the clergy, with Asadollah Alam, a
personal friend of the Shah's "unashamedly servile to him." Confident in the loyalty of the new PM
and in his own political strength, the Shah is determined to march forward with reform regardless of
clerical support. Khomeini, now free from Borujerdi's prohibition of clerical involvement in politics,
is prepared to actively enter the political fray.

October 8, 1962 - The Shah announces a bill to extend the right to vote to women. Khomeini sees it as a
perfect issue (important to much of Iranian society) on which to enter the political scene. He begins
to mobilize the clergy in opposition to the Shah. The new activity among the clergy also gains the
attention of more liberal reformers, such as Mehdi Bazargan and Ayatollah Taleqani, who see a
chance to create a larger coalition of opposition to the Shah's authoritarianism. Khomeini, seeking
to gain the support of these more liberal opposition leaders, begins to incorporate rhetoric of the
1906 constitution and emphasizes the past constitution's Islamic nature. Khomeini also begins to
utilize a tactic he would employ frequently in the years to come, shaming other members of the clergy
into acting in defense of Islam.
January 1963 - The Shah announces a six-point reform bill intended to solve the social, political and economic problems of Iran. He calls it the ‘White Revolution.’ It is to be put to referendum on January 26, 1963. Khomeini successfully galvanizes the clergy into boycotting the referendum. On January 23, many Iranians, organized by Khomeini and other activist clergy, take to the streets. Confrontations with police occur in which two senior clerics that were formerly quietist and had collaborated with the Shah in the past are disrespected. The demonstrations do not bring about a counter referendum as ideally hoped, but the now increasingly radicalized clergy look to Khomeini for leadership. The secular opposition also boycotts the referendum but it is deemed to pass despite low turnout. In response, President Kennedy sends the Shah a telegram of congratulations.

March 22nd, 1963 - A service being led by Ayatollah Golpayegani, one of the three highest-ranking Ayatollah’s in Qom, to commemorate Ja’far al-Sadeq, the sixth Shi’i Imam, is interrupted by the Shah’s secret policemen who disrupt the ceremony and ransack the Feiziyeh mosque. It is the first instance of the Shah demonstrating his willingness to use force to harass and silence clerical opposition.

April, 1963 - The Shah orders the forced conscription of seminarians overriding the past exemptions that had been granted religious students.

June 3rd, 1963 - In a sermon given to commemorate Ashura, Khomeini unleashes the most powerful and insulting attack yet leveled against the Shah. The Shah is helpless to react for fear of igniting a large-scale protest and for being compared to the hated Yazid. The following day there are pro-Khomeini marches in Tehran that attract around 100,000 people. Towards the end of the day, the police crackdown arresting more than one hundred and twenty people.

June 5th, 1963 - Khomeini is arrested along with 320 others deemed to be his key supporters. To the regime’s surprise, thousands take to the streets in Qom, Tehran, and other Iranian cities. The protests continue the following day despite martial law being instituted in Tehran. Some of the protests turn bloody and more than 300 protesters are killed or wounded. Society is further radicalized and the regime begins to do damage control implementing a massive propaganda effort to discredit Khomeini and dismiss the protest movement as incited by foreign agents. A period of relative calm ensues as the clergy wait anxiously to see what is done with Khomeini. After a month he is moved to a house where he is allowed to meet with visitors to reassure the religious community of his safety.

July, 1963 - A stay at home strike to mourn protesters killed on June 5th, marks the first use of “fortieth-day mourning” as a political act.

April 7th, 1964 - Khomeini is released and allowed to return to Qom. Despite efforts by the regime to mollify Khomeini, he picks up exactly where he left off loudly criticizing the reforms of the Shah he deems to be anti-Islamic. The rest of the clerical regime, however, is reticent to reignite the conflict.

Autumn, 1964 - On the heels of a new military cooperation agreement with the U.S., the regime pushes through a bill allowing the United States to have jurisdiction over all civil disputes and/or criminal transgressions of American government personnel on Iranian soil. Khomeini delivers a fiery condemnation of the bill, which he sees as a violation of Iranian sovereignty. His attempt to tackle an issue of sovereignty marks his official emergence as a political rather than purely religious leader.

November 4, 1964 - Khomeini is arrested for a second time and exiled to Turkey.
October, 1965 - Fearful that Khomeini is being exploited by his Turkish handlers and turned even further against the Iranian regime, SAVAK moves Khomeini to the holy Shi'i city of Najaf in Iraq. They hope that in this foreign Shi'i center Khomeini will drift into obscurity.

January 1st - February 8th, 1970 - Khomeini delivers a series of twelve lectures that will become his defining treatise on Islamic government. In these lectures he clearly lays out the doctrine of the veelayate faqih, which is the foundation for his conception of an Islamic state. Published clandestinely these lectures are distributed throughout Iran. Khomeini's doctrine of the veelayate faqih draws praise but also criticism from leading figures in the clerical establishment such as Ayatollah Kho'i of Najaf.

June 2nd, 1970 - Grand Ayatollah Mohsen Hakim, the most senior Shi'i cleric in Iraq, dies leaving a power vacuum at the top of the Shi'i religious community in both Iraq and Iran. Leading candidates to succeed him are Ayatollah Kho'i of Najaf and Ayatollah Shari'atmadari of Qom.

1972 - Khomeini delivers another series of lectures entitled Jehadet Akbar, “The Struggle against the Appetitive Soul or the Supreme Jehad.”

1974 - The oil boom quadruples Iran's oil income and allows the Shah to press ahead with reform at a breakneck speed. It is too much too fast, however, and the economy busts shortly thereafter. Throughout this period the Shah maintains stability through fierce repression of all opposition.

March, 1975 - The Shah establishes a one-party system in Iran in which all citizens must be compulsory members. The new party is called the Rastakhiz or Resurgence Party. This move by the Shah is a complete failure. His desire to mobilize a political base for the regime in reality is understood by the people as a violation of their last form of political independence, that being that as long as they do not challenge the status quo they at least do not have their personal or professional lives interrupted by being forced to demonstrate loyalty to the regime. As part of this initiative the Shah chooses to abolish the Islamic calendar in favor of a calendar based on the establishment of the Persian Empire of Cyrus the Great, further alarming the populace, particularly the religious community, that the Shah is pursuing a new type of cultural fascism. Khomeini responds in 1975 and 1976 with a series of fatwas, first prohibiting his followers to join the Shah’s party and second prohibiting the use of the Imperial calendar. These fatwas mark the beginning of Khomeini attempting to reassert himself on the Iranian political scene after a period of relative obscurity. During the next two years signs of opposition surface in the form of smaller scale protests. Domestic conditions slowly begin to deteriorate.

January 1977 - Jimmy Carter takes office and his administration’s emphasis on human rights applies some pressure on the Shah to begin speaking of liberalization.

October 23rd, 1977 - Ayatollah Khomeini's oldest son, Mostafa, dies suddenly while in exile. Many Khomeini supporters believe he was assassinated by the SAVAK. Mourning events for Mostafa provide inspiration for organization and mobilization while the press coverage again returns Khomeini to the center of public attention. Khomeini himself refers to the death of his son as 'God's hidden providence.'

December 31st, 1977 - President Carter visits the Shah in Tehran on New Year's Eve. Seemingly ignoring a letter sent to him by twenty-nine Iranian opposition leaders only a month earlier requesting UN and U.S. support in the pursuit of freedom and democracy in Iran, Carter toasts the Shah with

---

204 Moin, 185.
champagne. On live Iranian television he expresses his gratitude for the Shah's "close personal friendship" and describes Iran as "an island of stability... a great tribute to the respect, admiration and love of your people for you." 265

January 7th, 1978 – An insulting profile of Khomeini is published with regime approval in a Tehran afternoon newspaper. It immediately elicits protests among seminary students in Qom. This is considered by many to be the final fatal mistake of the Shah that would trigger the series of events ending in his ouster.

January 9th, 1978 – Protests in Qom lead to clashes with police in which multiple protesters are killed. This event becomes known as "The Massacre at Qom" and is immediately adopted as a symbol of revolutionary heroism.

February 18th, 1978 – The 40th day of mourning for the martyrs of Qom generates protests leading to more protesters killed and martyred in Tabriz.

March 28-31, 1978 – The 40th day of mourning for the martyrs of Tabriz generates further martyrs in Qom and elsewhere. This cycle of mobilization becomes known among some activists as "doing the forty-forty." 266

May 6-11, 1978 – The 40th day of mourning for March martyrs generates protests and ceremonies leading to further martyrs again.

June 17th, 1978 – The "forty-forty" cycle ends in part, because of the increased presence of armed forces and the desire of protesters not to push the police/army to violence.

August 1978 – Hundreds are burned to death in a movie theater in Abadan sparking huge protests among those who believe the Shah's agents to be responsible (the doors were locked from the outside and the fire department slow to respond). "Protests mushroomed from several thousand to hundreds of thousands." 267

August 26th, 1978 – The Shah appoints Ja'far Sharif Emami, a moderate with a clerical background, as the new prime minister. While Emami seeks a rapprochement with more moderate revolutionary forces, at this point moderates within the movement (particularly among the clergy) are too afraid of Khomeini and his supporters to leave the revolutionary fold.

September 4th, 1978 – On 'Eid-e Fetr, the festival ending the Ramadan fast, a scheduled and regime-permitted demonstration supposed to be outside of Tehran, turns into a 200,000+ march to the center of the city.

September 7th, 1978 – A second major protest is held despite severe warnings from the regime and considerable reservations among the more moderate members of the opposition. During this demonstration a new slogan emerges "calling for the establishment of an 'Islamic Republic.'" (Kurzman, 65) Unbeknownst to protest organizers, the most militant protesters disperse a message for gathering the next morning. For the first time there is no symbolic impetus for the protest (i.e. festival, mourning ceremony, etc.). It is protest for the sake of protest.

265 Moin, 186.
266 Kurzman, The Unthinkable Revolution, 50.
267 Ibid., 117.
September 8th, 1978 - Early in the morning the regime declares martial law in Tehran and other cities. Military crackdowns on protests leave many dead. Casualty estimates range from fewer than one hundred to many thousands with the most reliable sources suggesting about 70-90. The day becomes known as "Black Friday." It sparks countrywide strikes among workers and for many signals the point of no return from which there will be no compromise between the Shah and revolutionaries.

October 12th, 1978 - Facing pressure from Iranian authorities to help silence Khomeini, Iraqi security forces send Khomeini on a plane to France. He settles in Neuphle-le-Chateau, a small village outside of Paris, and, utilizing the technology and freedom available in France to communicate freely, he turns his French home into a hub of revolutionary activity.

November 4th-5th, 1978 - Students at the University of Tehran clash with security forces leaving some students dead. The following day more students ramp off campus destroying buildings. Shah responds with crackdown and with the appointment of a military government. Kurzman dates the "victory" of the movement to this point. He asserts that the Shah's military government did not 'dislodge' the popular perception that the revolution would inevitably succeed and thus sealed his own fate.268

December 10th, 1978 - Large protest/processions to commemorate Ashura bring 500,000-1,000,000 demonstrators onto the streets of Tehran.

December 11th, 1978 - A second Ashura procession again brings an estimated 500,000-1,000,000+ in Tehran and 6 to 9 million nationwide. It is quite possibly the largest protest event in human history. The marches are almost uniformly peaceful.

January, 1979 - As the revolutionary crisis peaks, some moderate voices within the revolutionary movement begin to express their concerns about the emergence of a clerical regime. Their voices are few and far between, however, and are easily drowned out.

January 16th, 1979 - The shah leaves Iran. He entrusts his monarchy to a regency council under the leadership of Dr. Shapour Bakhtiar.

February 1st, 1979 - Khomeini returns to Iran. He is greeted by millions who see him as the country's savior and who believe that he will offer them a better future.

February 5, 1979 - Khomeini announces the appointment of Mehdi Bazargan as Prime Minister of an interim government. Bazargan is "an Islamic modernist" with "widely accepted" democratic credentials. After a series of small conflicts between revolutionaries and military personnel loyal to the Shah, the Bakhtiar government concedes defeat. Against the protests of Bazargan and other moderates within the movement, Khomeini moves ruthlessly to punish those seen as key players in the Shah's now defunct regime. Within months, hundreds of Pahlavi officials are executed following summary trials, primarily out of vengeance for the martyrs of the revolution whose deaths they are deemed responsible for. As Khomeini's supporters organize and exercise increasing control over Iranian society, Bazargan's "official" government becomes much like Bakhtiar's as it competes with a more powerful "unofficial" government. By late spring, a disillusioned Bazargan declares that he has become a "knife without a blade."269

---

268 Ibid., 137.
269 Moin, 215.
April 1st, 1979 – The new Iranian Constitution is ratified by referendum with its defining characteristic being the doctrine of velayate faqih.

October 22nd, 1979 – The Shah is allowed to enter the United States in order to receive medical treatment for the cancer that will soon claim his life. When the U.S. refuses to hand the Shah over to the new Iranian regime or to force him to return the wealth he has stolen from the Iranian people, Khomeini and others are outraged. Up until this point, U.S. relations with the new Iranian regime have been relatively amicable. Despite Khomeini’s prior anti-American rhetoric, when the U.S. embassy was initially invaded in the days immediately following the revolution, he responded swiftly to expel the intruders. Following the Shah’s admittance to the U.S., however, Khomeini’s suspicions of American evil intentions are confirmed and when the second Embassy takeover occurs he is less interested in intervening.

November 4th, 1979 – The U.S. Embassy is taken over by radical Iranian students who take more than fifty diplomats hostage. Bazargan attempts to remove the students but receives no support from Khomeini or the Revolutionary Council. He resigns two days later. The ‘hostage crisis’ lasts for 444 days.

October 24th, 1979 – The Iranian constitution founded on the idea of the velayat-e faqih is approved by popular referendum. Khomeini becomes the first supreme leader of Iran.

February 4, 1980 – Abolhassan Bani Sadr is confirmed as the first president of the Iranian Republic. Bani Sadr is highly regarded by large portions of the population for his democratic commitments and his credentials as a former member of the secular front. He is, however, undermined at every turn by Khomeini and the Islamic Republican Party (IRP). Though his position is temporarily bolstered by the outbreak of war, Bani Sadr and the IRP’s disagreements come to a head in June of 1981. Khomeini strips him of his role as commander-in-chief of the armed forces and shortly thereafter he is impeached by the IRP controlled Majles.

September, 1980 – Iraq invades Iran beginning the nine-year Iran-Iraq War.

June 28, 1981 – A bomb believed to be planted by the Mojahedin-e Khalq (who supported Bani Sadr) explodes at the IRP headquarters killing seventy party members and some important leaders including Ayatollah Beheshti. The regime responds with the execution of political prisoners and the Mojahedin in turn respond with assassinations of more IRP party leaders. The executions increase and by the end of 1981 there are more than 2,500 who have been executed as political dissidents. In his determined quest to stop dissident attacks, Khomeini initiates huge propaganda campaigns to encourage Iranians to turn over dissidents to the government. In 1982, the leader of the Mojahedin, Musa Khiabani, is killed significantly crippling the organization’s ability to continue its attacks on the regime.

October 20, 1981 – Future supreme leader, Hojjat al-Islam Ali Khamene’i, becomes the third president of the Islamic republic, succeeding Ali Rajai (the IRP replacement for Bani Sadr who was assassinated by the Mojahedin). Khamene’i is the first member of the clergy to serve as president.

July 3, 1988 – An Iran Air flight is shot down by an American warship that claims to have mistaken the airliner for an attacking jet fighter. The 290 civilians killed raise Iranian anger towards the U.S., but above all, prove to be the last straw for the Iranian population which is fed up with the endless death toll being inflicted by the ongoing war with Iraq.
July 18, 1988 - Iran accepts UN Security Council resolutions dictating a cease-fire with Iraq. After explaining the decision as being in the best interests of Muslims and Islam, Khomeini retreats from the public sphere. Two days after the cease-fire, the People's Mojahedin (having rebuilt their strength in Iraq) invade Iran. The invasion triggers new patriotic zeal and it is crushed within a matter of days. Fearing more insurrection, however, and given a political justification, Khomeini initiates a purge of political activists in Iranian prisons. Several thousands, deemed to still adhere to their dissident beliefs, are executed in under three months. Khomeini's designated successor, Ayatollah Montazeri, is highly critical of the purge. Khomeini refuses to change his policies, and as Montazeri's critiques escalate to more general criticisms of the regime and Khomeini's political record, the two have a falling out.

January 1989 - Khomeini writes a letter to Gorbachev in which he recommends to the Soviet leader a number of prominent mystical thinkers including Ibn Arabi, Avicenna, Sohravardi, and Mullah Sadra. He receives sharp criticism from orthodox clerics who believe his mystical interests to be heretical.


March 1989 - After a prolonged war of words, Khomeini reconvenes the Assembly of Experts and sends a letter to Montazeri dismissing him as his successor.

April 24, 1989 - At Khomeini's behest, the constitution is modified so that the supreme leader does not need to be a marja'-e taqlid, paving the way for the nomination of Khamene'i, Khomeini's preferred successor. This goes against the philosophy that Khomeini has espoused until now which holds that only the most knowledgeable legal experts should be valid candidates to lead the government. In addition, the role of prime minister is removed.

June 3rd, 1989 - Shortly before midnight, Khomeini dies in the hospital at the age of 86. Technically he dies of a heart attack but it is a symptom of heart problems and cancer that have been causing the deterioration of his health for sometime. His death is announced the following morning leading thousands of mourners to pour into the streets in cities throughout Iran.

June 4th, 1989 - An emergency meeting of the Assembly of Experts selects Khamene'i, at age 50, as the new supreme leader of Iran. He is instantaneously elevated from the rank of hojjat al-Islam to ayatollah.

June 5th, 1989 - Millions of people attend the funeral procession of Ayatollah Khomeini in a "completely spontaneous and unorchestrated outpouring of grief."
Bibliography


99


Diamond, Larry. “How to Save Democracy; Bush gave democracy promotion a bad name. The next administration has to get it right.” *Newsweek*, December 31, 2008 (International edition).


Hamid, Shadi. “Parting the Veil: Now is no time to give up supporting democracy in the Muslim world. But to do so, the United States must embrace Islamist moderates.” Democracy Journal (Summer 2007): 38-47.


Kadivar, Mohsen. "This Iranian Form of Theocracy Has Failed." Interview by Erich Follath and Gabor Steingart. Spiegel Online, July 1, 2009.


I reference a number of Khomeini's works in this volume including:
- "In Commemoration of Martyrs at Qum/April 3, 1963" - p. 174-176.
- "The Incompatibility of Monarchy With Islam/October 13, 1971" - p. 200-208
- "The Anniversary of the Uprising of Khurudad 15/June 5, 1979" - 268-274.


