IRAN'S FUTURE
Crises, Contingencies, and Continuities

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IRAN'S FUTURE CRISSES, CONTINGENCIES, AND CONTINUITIES

Iran seems a prime candidate for future instability. It has gone through a devastating revolution, a profound transformation of political and economic life, several waves of internal purges, an extended confrontation with its former closest ally, and a full-scale and endless bloody war. Moreover, the Islamic Republic of Iran must yet face the loss of its charismatic but nonetheless mortal leader.

Still, it would be a serious error either to underestimate the staying power of the Islamic regime or to overstate the problems it undoubtedly will face in the years to come. This policy brief will analyze the existing regime, prospects for political continuity, and scenarios for likely future crises.

IRAN UNDER KHOMEINI

Khomeini’s Role

The Iranian government is a dictatorship with strong populist overtones. Its unquestioned leader is Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Khomeini has held several overwhelming personal, theological, and political advantages that permitted his ascendency to power: He piloted the Islamic revolution to success and in so doing accomplished the apparently impossible task of overthrowing the shah. His charisma has brought him the support of the masses. It was the main factor uniting a heterogeneous opposition to the shah in 1979-89, and it has remained a powerful force. Many Iranians also believe that Khomeini led them to victory over the Americans in the 1979-81 hostage crisis and that he has continued to bring them victory over the invading forces of Iraq since 1980.

The special part Khomeini plays in Iranian politics reflects the tendency of Shi'ite Islam to credit its theological leaders with political authority and even semidivine attributes. Most Iranians are Shia Muslims, who believe that the twelve Moslem leaders, or imams, of past centuries had a unique mandate to interpret the Prophet Muhammad’s message and guide the community. Today in Iran Khomeini is commonly referred to as the “Imam.”
Khomeini's status also fits with Iranian political traditions. Historically, Iran has alternated between eras in which the national government was highly centralized under charismatic leadership and eras in which decentralization and leniency contributed to the government's loss of control of outlying provinces. Familiarity with the problem of provincial control has reinforced the deep-seated Iranian belief that a ruler must exercise the maximal degree of dictatorial power throughout the realm. There is little demand or capacity for liberal democracy.

Charismatic dictatorship is an effective way of coping with the two great threats to Iran's political stability: highly factionalized domestic politics and severe vulnerability to foreign powers' influence. Being in general highly individualistic and suspicious of others, Iranians have great difficulty in maintaining unity. Only a figure invested with tremendous legitimacy and authority can mediate disputes and enforce discipline. In this sense, then, despite the outer appearance of his politics and ideology, Khomeini functions very much as a shah.

Khomeini has led today's political elite of Islamic Iran from obscurity to power, and he is superbly effective in maintaining this group as the regime's base of support. Moreover, he functions as a mediator to resolve disputes within the elite, a role that has become increasingly important as the revolution has become consolidated.

Khomeini sets the general political agenda, and no leader can openly dissent from his positions or criticize him. Although he has yielded day-to-day administration of the country and the Iran-Iraq War to his lieutenants, any Iranian politician publicly advocating an end to the war or openly seeking rapprochement with the United States would find it difficult to survive. This tendency to conform reinforces not only Khomeini's own authority but also the nature of competition within the elite, as eager rivals would seize on any deviation from Khomeini's line to accuse the dissenter of being in conflict with the Imam. Khomeini views disunity as objectively treasonous to foreigners trying to overthrow the Islamic revolution, and this demand for solidarity constrains the factional battle.

In addition, if Khomeini decides, or is persuaded, to condemn any political figure, that person's career is finished. The best example of this phenomenon is the way in which president Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr was removed from office and forced to flee after his enemies convinced Khomeini to denounce him. Denied Khomeini's mandate, Bani-Sadr was transformed from the nation's chief executive to a friendless refugee virtually overnight. This reality also implies, however, that secondary leaders and their factions try to manipulate Khomeini, as an individual and symbol, for their own benefit.

Khomeini's Ideology

The main tenets of Khomeini's creed, and hence of the Islamic revolution, include the following:

1. Iran must be governed by an Islamic leadership that puts Khomeini's ideology into practice.
2. The United States is the Great Satan and the chief enemy of Iran and of all those who are properly Islamic. (At most, the secret Iran arms deal indicates that Khomeini found it permissible to purchase arms made in the United States without making any political concessions.)
3. Iran must be nonaligned ("neither East nor West"). Nonalignment is tenable because the country's internal strength—including the support of the masses—neutralizes superpower influence. In fact, against Iranian unity and the appropriate Islamic ideology, the superpowers are paper tigers.
4. Other countries should follow the Iranian lead. There should be a worldwide revolution of the "dispossessed" and of the oppressed countries against great power influence. (Khomeini has never said, however, that Iran must directly liberate other countries. Thus, followers may interpret him as advocating either "Islamic fundamentalism in one country" or the export of the Islamic revolution to other countries.)
5. Anyone who violates revolutionary unity is an extremely dangerous enemy. All enemies, no matter what their political complexion, are linked together in conspiracies against Iran.
6. The Iran-Iraq War is a crusade of right against wrong and must continue until the Saddam Hussein regime in Baghdad is overthrown or even until an Islamic regime is brought to office in Iraq.

There are also significant areas—particularly concerning domestic issues—on which Khomeini has not imposed a consensus. For example, he has left a margin for debate over the domestic economy, between advocates of statism and of free enterprise. Khomeini, however, has tended to favor the latter camp.

Reinterpretations of Iran's National Interest

Khomeini's Islamic revolution has also redefined Iran's national interest. The geopolitical situation remains the same, but the regime has developed a new response to its challenges.

In two key respects Khomeini, his political lieutenants, and military commanders see Iran's interests in a manner similar to that of the former shah: (1) Khomeini and his followers are strong centrists who wish to maintain Iran's unity and sovereignty under a Tehran government in tight control. (2) They believe Iran should be the preeminent regional power. Few in Iran would differ from this goal, which is unlikely to change in the next decade.

In a third area, that of the regime's approach to international alliances, they differ with their predecessor and among themselves. Iran's central national-security issue has traditionally been that of a simultaneous threat from two superior powers. In classical terms, potential invaders stood on the eastern and western borders; during the last 150 years the problem shifted to great powers trying to exercise influence across the north/south frontiers. Iran has had to contend with the Russians from the north (seeking territory and political control) and the British (later the Americans) from the south (primarily interested in the strategic Persian Gulf and oil assets).

Different Iranian governments have advocated various approaches to these external threats. Since Tehran could not hope to compete militarily with these states, appeasement became an acceptable doctrine in Iran's political culture.
Since indigenous military resistance was useless, the army was seen primarily as a force for maintaining internal order. A weak Iran had few foreign ambitions. The regime tried to maintain good relations with both powers by making concessions to them while playing one off against the other.

Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941–79) tried a new departure by developing a strong alliance with one power—the United States—to deter the other—the USSR. A new foreign-policy strategy grew out of this U.S.-alliance, Iran’s increasing oil wealth, instability in the Arab world, and the shah’s own ambition: Iran was to be a regional power in its own right, exercising a local hegemony over the Persian Gulf. Massive amounts of money were spent for arms to build and equip an army that could itself deter the Soviet Union and ensure Iran’s interests in the gulf.

Khomeini jettisoned the shah’s alliance with the United States in favor of nonalignment. He argued that Iran could maintain the balance between the United States and USSR without aligning with either. But Khomeini retained the shah’s objective of making Iran the region’s most powerful state. While Khomeini sees his mission as worldwide and Islamic, rather than nationalistic, as his creed, there is a great deal of continuity between the shah’s and Khomeini’s regional policies.

Nevertheless, Khomeini has a clear sense of what amounts to the national interest. His top priority is to secure the Islamic revolution in Iran. He also puts a high priority on expanding the revolution but has not been willing to endanger the survival of “Islamic revolution in one country” for this purpose. Secondary leaders almost always stress the latter over the former priority to a greater extent than does Khomeini.

In addition, since Khomeini sees the United States as Islamic Iran’s inevitable enemy, he has made it a fundamental Iranian interest to minimize U.S. influence wherever possible. Khomeini views the USSR as a secondary enemy with which Iran can deal on an equal basis but can never trust; Soviet aggression in Afghanistan illustrates the two superpowers’ fundamental similarity. According to Khomeini, only if it remains nonaligned can Iran remain independent and show the great powers’ threats to be illusory. It is his belief that if Third World countries were to reject U.S. and Soviet influence, the superpowers would not be able to do anything about it.

This view is quite different from the considerations of power and influence that characterize realpolitik. But it is not based merely on naïve wishful thinking. After all, Khomeini’s movement did overwhelm the shah, take and hold American hostages without any effective U.S. military response, and repel an Iraqi invasion. But this kind of thinking is also motivated by basic domestic considerations: Khomeini is trying to counter Iranians’ traditional inferiority and appeasement complex by fostering pride and self-confidence.

On regional policy, Khomeini seeks to maximize Iranian influence in the gulf, minimize the U.S. presence, and destroy Iraq’s capacity to threaten Iran. Such objectives underlie the goals of spreading Islamic revolution, undermining Arab supporters of Iraq, prying the gulf monarchies away from the United States, and imposing an OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) policy that best serves Iranian needs.

The main manifestation of Iran’s interest in exporting Islamic revolution has been seen in Lebanon where Iranian-trained and financed terrorists can strike at Israel while carrying relatively few costs and dangers for the regime. Iran has also sponsored terrorist organizations active against Iraq, Kuwait, and other gulf regimes, but it has carefully avoided—and been deterred from—any direct confrontation outside of the war with Iraq.

**Khomeini and the Revolution’s Future**

While Khomeini’s views are often impractical, it would be a great mistake to see him as a fanatic with no grasp of reality. In fact, he has dealt with the traditional failings of Iran’s state and politics in a very shrewd manner. By engineering a cultural revolution, Khomeini has attempted to dissuade Iranian politicians from the traditional practice of trying to come to power by securing foreign money and support. Furthermore, Khomeini has maneuvered to institutionalize his role by writing into the constitution his office of velayat e-faqih, which makes him the chief jurisprudent in determining whether government policy and performance are properly Islamic. Perhaps most important, by designating a committee to choose a successor and by approving their choice of Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, Khomeini has sought to entranch the revolution after his death.

But the prospects for continuity are by no means certain. The modern-day figure who most closely resembled Khomeini was Chinese leader Mao Zedong, who desperately tried to impose his ideology over the views of his own bureaucracy and party. Ultimately, of course, Mao Zedong failed because he could not control his successors. Khomeini faces a similar problem.

Of most significance for the standpoint of U.S. interests in a post-Khomeini Iran is the staying power of Khomeini’s anti-Americanism. Historically, Iranian politicians have sought to overcome the bitter competition of internal politics through the resources of powerful foreign nations. Iranians have a deep belief—from their experience with imperialist paradoxes—that outside states are omnipotent and omnipresent in controlling their country’s political affairs. Fear of the foreigners’ power and a desire to court powerful nations for personal benefit have made Iranian politicians quick to resort to strategies of appeasement.

Although Khomeini is supreme on matters of doctrine and policy, he has been unable to impose his vision of unity on the Iranian leadership. Its factions are eager to destroy each other rather than to cooperate. These factions are basically opportunistic in the sense that gaining power seems to be more important to them than ideological considerations. Ideology is very important but is employed as a tool in these struggles. It constrains rather than defines the factions.

These factions are pragmatic in the sense that they, to a much greater extent than Khomeini, must deal with the strategic and economic constraints of actually running the country. Their leaders already show signs that they do not believe Iran can stand isolated against great powers.

Whether his successors will continue to maintain Khomeini’s positions after his death is open to question. They will be tempted to make many concessions...
in conflict with his ideology in the face of economic difficulties, factional competition, an unending war with Iraq, or a Soviet threat. Their view of national interest may require broadening Iran's alliances beyond those with Syria and South Yemen. Even Khomeini himself has evinced disappointment at the failure of new Islamic revolutions to appear and has justified building good relations with countries as diverse as North Korea, Pakistan, Turkey, and Vietnam.

Concerning regional policy, Iran's secondary leaders are probably in general accord with Khomeini. Some are less enthusiastic about an unending Iran-Iraq War or subversion to further Islamic revolution, but they are all equally willing to promote Iran's nation-state interests in the gulf. These potential successors would, however, seek subregional hegemony through more "normal" means of military and economic pressure on weaker states.

**COMPETING SOURCES OF POWER AND INFLUENCE**

**Iranian Leadership Facations**

There are three main factions in the Iranian leadership. In the past they have cooperated in eliminating other contenders for power. In the future they probably will compete for power in the post-Khomeini era. Until a new, single leader emerges, there will be a period of uncertainty and political conflict that could lead to internal armed conflict. Escalation of this friction might lead to violent confrontation involving the Iranian armed forces. A weakened Iran could encourage a Soviet invasion or, more likely, a covert Soviet role in backing certain groups.

Beginning with the Islamic revolution's triumph over the shah in February 1979, the Islamic politicians who clustered around Khomeini systematically eliminated all alternative political groups and ideologies. The shah's supporters were purged, imprisoned, executed, or forced into exile. Shahpour Bakhtiar's constitutional monarchist cabinet received the same treatment. The relatively moderate group who supported Mehdi Bazargan and Iraj Afshar was removed from office. In 1981 Bani-Sadr was driven from the country. It is interesting to note that his appeal to the army for support—support that was not forthcoming—against his factional rivals was the incident that moved Khomeini to destroy him. Leftist groups that opposed the ruling clique, particularly the Mujahedin-e-Khalq, were smashed. In 1985 the pro-Moscow Communist party, the Tudeh, was also broken up and its leaders imprisoned. Again, it is important to note the regime's sharp reaction to the Tudeh's efforts to establish cells in the armed forces. The party's civilian leaders were merely jailed; its military members were shot.

By 1982, then, the only politicians left with any power were those who gave total support to Khomeini's program. Yet the very destruction of their mutual enemies only highlighted the tensions among the remaining groups. Khomeini's government allows these groups a wide range of freedom to express their differences in the press and in parliament (the Majlis), where they are semi-organized parties in their own right. Elections to the parliament are sharply contested, and the parliament sometimes refuses to pass bills proposed by the prime minister. The opportunity for dissent within the system gives the Islamic republic great resilience. This situation could change drastically, however, without Khomeini's presence to limit the competition.

The three current factions share several characteristics:

- They are clustered around individual leaders—President Khamenei, Majlis Speaker Rafsanjani, and Ayatollah (and future velayet-e-faqih) Montazeri. They are not defined along radical/moderate or ideological lines on foreign, military, or national-security issues.
- There are no clear differences among them on foreign policy or national-security issues. A careful study of nuances hints that the Khamenei group is somewhat more hard-line on continuing the war and spreading revolution. But conclusions based on an analysis of statements must be very tentative, since the factions themselves view these as closely as possible to Khomeini's views and are subject to rapid changes in their composition and positions.
- None of them can count on support from the army or the parallel Islamic military force, the Revolutionary Guard (Pasdaran), although all assiduously court both forces. Both Rafsanjani and Khamenei have visited a Revolutionary Guard camp to declare, "I am a Pasdaran." And when Montazeri becomes velayet-e-faqih, however, he will enjoy a large measure of legitimacy with the guards.
- Despite Khomeini's attempts to impose a cultural revolution negating Iranians' traditional inferiority complex and appeasement policy toward the West, all three groups seek covert foreign help in order to gain and retain power.
- Against any threat from other Iranian groups the three factions have stood firm. The ability to unite when necessary has been a major factor ensuring the regime's survival.

The future leadership of Iran, then, will almost certainly come from forces currently within Khomeini's coalition. The three contending factions are those led by:

President Mohammad Ali Khamenei. He has the backing of the prime minister, cabinet, and large elements in the state bureaucracy. Born in Azerbaijan, Khamenei became a cleric and was an Islamic activist during the shah's regime. Immediately after the revolution, Khamenei made him a member of his Revolutionary Council, Friday prayer leader in Tehran—a post of great importance in consolidating the regime—and his personal representative to the army. He was wounded in a May 1979 assassination attempt. Khamenei was elected secretary-general of the "ruling" Islamic Republic party (1979) and then president in October 1981.

Khamenei has supported a stronger state role in the economy and has backed land reform and nationalization of trade. Khomeini blocked both of these measures though without any prejudice toward Khamenei. Emirgä opposition groups have repeatedly charged that Khamenei's faction is secretly pro-Soviet, but there is no reliable evidence for this accusation. It may prove the weakest of the three factions in the post-Khomeini era.

Parliament Speaker Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. A cleric and a charter member of Khomeini's Revolutionary Council, Rafsanjani was an ally of ayatollah Beheshti (boy architect of the regime's institutions) and president...
Mohammad Ali Rajai, both of whom were assassinated by opposition elements. Rafsanjani resigned his position as interior minister when he became parliamentary speaker. He also played a major role in removing president Bani-Sadr.

The Western view of Rafsanjani as most “moderate” of the factional leaders may be somewhat misplaced. True, he has been an advocate of private enterprise and may be slightly more eager to end the Iran-Iraq War. Furthermore, he has been the power broker and conciliator among competing interests. But it is difficult to predict how he might act if he gained uncontested power.

Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri. He has been designated as Khomeini’s successor in the post of velayet-e-faqih. Many Iranians, however, regard him as unintelligent, and other clerics have questioned his seniority for such a position. Imprisoned and reportedly tortured under the shah’s regime, Montazeri was released only in late 1979. Khomeini made him the chief cleric in Qom and hinted that he would be successor as early as 1981. Along with Rafsanjani, Montazeri was one of the main authors of Iran’s constitution.

Compared with the other factions, Montazeri’s backers are the least well-organized, and Montazeri himself is the least politically sophisticated. Yet when Khomeini dies, Montazeri, as the new velayet-e-faqih, will gain overnight the strongest position of all. Hence, if Montazeri is to be undermined, the Khomeninesi and Rafsanjani groups will have to act quickly to weaken him. The secret Iran-U.S. negotiations of 1986—accompanied by arrests of Montazeri followers, including extremist radicals and moderates—seemed largely an effort of these two factions to undermine Montazeri.

In the West there has been a tendency to portray Montazeri as a hardliner, but this is a debatable proposition. For example, during the hostage crisis he commented, “The United States enslaved Iran for 25 years and the Iranians want to be finally released from this subjugation.” But he then added that it was “impractical to sever relations between us and the United States.” Montazeri also supports, while his rivals ridicule, a program to encourage ex-patriots to return, because the country desperately needs their skills. He has criticized the Hizbollah (Party of God) thugs and has pleaded many bazaar merchants with his call for less state intervention in the economy.

From the standpoint of Iran’s future policy and U.S. interests, however, what is most important is not which of these factions takes control but whether it does so through demagoguery or by practicing its practical skills in improving Iran’s strategic and economic positions.

Opposition Movements

The forces currently in opposition to the Islamic regime—the emigres, the Left, and the ethnic minorities—are unlikely to take power. The emigres are badly divided among themselves and have lost much of their internal base due to flight, execution, purges, and the Islamic regime’s own entrenchment. They have based their strategy on the false hope that the Tehran regime will soon collapse.

The Left is also split into noncooperating groups. Moreover, its constituency is limited to certain urban and student sectors. The Tudeh and Mujahadin have been decimated without making any appreciable progress in shaking the government’s power.

The minority groups could cause problems for the Islamic regime in the future, but the regime has largely subdued them for the time being. The Arabs of the southwest failed to rally to the Iraqi invaders and seem unlikely to emerge as a political force; the Baluchis of the southeast and the nomadic tribes of west central Iran dislike central government interference but have caused relatively little trouble; the Turkish-speaking Azarits of the northwest rallied behind their respected religious leader, the late Ayatollah Kamer Shirinistara, but have never been able to mount an armed insurgency.

Only the Kurds, under the leadership of the Kurdish Democratic party (KDP) and a smaller group of Marxist allies, have caused the central government serious problems. In recent years the demands of the war with Iraq have not prevented the Iranian army from re-occupying most of Kurdistan. In short, the Kurds (and the Azarits as well) would emerge as a major force only within the context of an internal civil war or if they received major Soviet assistance. The fact that Moscow established puppet states in Iran for these groups in the 1941–46 period may be a precedent for the future.

The most important group outside the current ruling circles may well be the one whose members could be called the “traditionalist” clergy. Many senior ayatollahs, including Qenj, Shariati, and Golpaygani, never really accepted Khomeini’s revolutionary policies as appropriate within Shi’ite Islamic practice. They resent their exclusion by the political clerics who might have fewer theological and scholarly qualifications. Anticommunism is another strong factor in this group. Commenting on the arrests of Tudeh leaders, Golpaygani said, “Before these arrests the Moslems of other countries were waiting to see what we were going to do with the Soviets and they have now discovered that the slogan of neither East nor West is true.” One of the clerics, Ayatollah Sedqi Ruhani, openly called the regime “worse than the Communists” at a November 1985 speech in a Qom mosque. Some also criticize the domination of Qom’s clergy, particularly those clerics associated with the holy city of Mashhad. With Montazeri having less authority than Khomeini as velayet-e-faqih, this group could play a role in the post-Khomeini era.

In general, though, and certainly during the opening phases of any succession, Montazeri, Rafsanjani, Khomenesi, and their followers will dominate the scene. If they can find some formula for working together, the regime will survive intact. If their competition turns toward bloodshed, Iran will face serious internal problems.

The Regime’s Institutional Framework

Many observers have underestimated the staying power of the Islamic regime. The main reason for this error is a failure to understand the institutional network.
that the government has constructed. The power of Iran’s leaders is based not merely on slogans and Khomeini’s charisma but on a range of policies and new institutions designed to reward adherents and punish opponents. These measures have allowed Tehran to distribute wealth, monitor dissent, exercise cultural control, manage the media, and manipulate the educational system.

The Islamic regime’s survival has never been left to Khomeini’s personal popularity alone. A remarkable number of groups have been established to protect and further its interests. Although the structure has a strong Islamic flavor, it is also typical of Third World dictatorships. (For example, the neighborhood Komitehs, reminiscent of equivalent groups in Cuba and elsewhere, monitor every household.)

The power of the clergy in Khomeini’s Iran is marked. There are now approximately 100,000 Iranian clergies, and the number is regularly increasing. Many of these men serve as local political agents of the government. The mosques have become centers for military recruitment, administration of the rationing system, and ideological indoctrination. They also give clearances to students wishing to attend a university. Mullahs hold many offices, including about half the seats in parliament.

About 600 of 2,500 judges in the courts are also clergies. By constitutional provision, clergies occupy half the positions on the Council of Guardians (a body that rules on the constitutionality of the parliament’s decisions), and they dominate the Assembly of Experts that chose Montazeri as Khomeini’s successor and they can be expected to supervise the transition. In addition, while there are mass membership Islamic Association groups in villages and factories and an Islamic Republican party to which all the main factional leaders belong, the key group for organizing the regime’s influence are the “imam-jomehhs.” These are the clergies who serve as Khomeini’s personal representatives and deliver the main sermon at massive Friday prayer gatherings.

Apart from the functions of the clergy, a web of agencies, including charitable foundations and welfare programs, assure employment for the politically loyal. The Crusade for Reconstruction employs many urban slum dwellers for building roads, schools, and houses. The Foundation of the Dispossessed controls many industries. The Ministry of Islamic Guidance controls censorship and oversees the media.

For those who do not conform, the forces of repression are as strong as they were under the shah. The old secret police, SAVAK, was renamed and streamlined as SAVAMA. Street gangs of Hizballah strong-arm opponents, break up opposition rallies, and harass women. The prisons are full, torture is still used, and executions are far more frequent than in the prerevolutionary era.

The armed forces were thoroughly and repeatedly purged during the revolution. Senior officers were retired, imprisoned, or shot or they fled the country. The new commanders owe their positions to the revolution and have generally evinced loyalty to the leadership. In addition to reconstituting the armed forces, the government designated Islamic political commissars to supervise regular units.

Finally, the Khomeini regime organized its own parallel army, the Revolutionary Guard,* which is favored with generous infusions of money and increasingly sophisticated weapons. Antiaircraft defenses were also put under their supervision. The guards have their own cabinet-level ministry. They have taken over former army bases near Tehran and other major cities, and they take responsibility for maintaining internal security and combating opposition movements. There are hints that the Ministry of Defense (that is, the regular armed forces) may at some point be subordinated to the Revolutionary Guard.

Thus, the Islamic regime is well-entrenched and likely to continue for years after Khomeini’s death.

Post-Khomeini Politics

The most likely scenario for post-Khomeini Iran is a continuation of the three-faction alliance in the short run. Lacking a universally accepted mediator, the factional and personal differences will gradually increase and lead to conflicts. The most dangerous time for a post-Khomeini government will probably not be immediately after Khomeini’s death—when shared fears and grief may pull the factions together—but in the medium range beyond that event.

A post-Khomeini regime will also probably be cautious at first. All the factions will watch each other closely for any sign of deviation from Khomeini’s ideology and program. Again, only gradually will new policies, such as a willingness to end the war with Iraq, emerge.

If internal dissension leads to intensive conflict, the Soviets will probably seize an opportunity to intervene in some way, though not necessarily in an overt or military fashion. Competition can also breed adventurers among Iranian leaders, which might encourage aggression against gulf Arab states to enhance one faction’s credentials for spreading the revolution and Iranian influence.

Iran, then, is a state with a high propensity for internal instability and a volatile definition of national interest. Yet this is also a regime less adventurous than its rhetoric seems to indicate.

The passing of the current charismatic leader is likely to be followed by a period of internal disorder until a new one emerges. During the course of this struggle, competing factions may well seek foreign assistance. This phase could offer advantages to the Soviet Union in building covert links to factions and possibly in intervening on behalf of a favored candidate. If a stable regime is reestablished, it would then consider a new set of policies that might include a negotiated end to the Iran-Iraq War.

If it were to win the war, or after a postwar period of rebuilding and rearrangement, Iran could develop a policy of systematic military intimidation or, less likely, of aggression against weaker gulf states in order to reduce Western influence and spread Islamic fundamentalism.

*As the Revolutionary Guard became more equivalent to a regular military force, a new militia group, the Basij, was also organized among underaged and overaged Iranians to supplement the war effort.
IRELAND AND THE SUPERPOWERS

The Islamic Regime and the United States

Since the 1979 Islamic revolution the Iranian government has perceived three distinct but collectively overwhelming conflicts with the United States:

1. **Internal interference.** Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini firmly believes that the United States dominated Iranian political and social structures during the rule of the shah. This view is largely a misconception. The shah was a strong ruler at home and was not amenable to U.S. positions unless he believed them to be in accord with his own interests and objectives. Further, the challenge of modernization to Iran's traditional society was not the result of a U.S. conspiracy but the effect of objective forces and of the ruling elite's eagerness to join what it considered to be a cosmopolitan culture.

2. Nevertheless, the myth of U.S. domination of Iran during the decades before the Islamic revolution is a central part of the new regime's belief system and propaganda. This view rests on some material basis. The U.S.-engineered coup restoring the shah to the throne in 1953, the power of an oil consortium (1958-73) dominated by U.S. companies, the sales of U.S. weapons and goods, and the presence of American technicians in Iran (particularly after 1973).

But U.S. influence over Iran is not merely an issue of historical interest for Ayatollah Khomeini and his colleagues. They fear that this hegemony might be reestablished. They firmly believe that the United States is exerting every possible effort to overthrow them and to regain its power. Khomeini has put into effect an offensive-oriented and deliberately arrogant response. We do not need the United States and will not allow it to dominate us. In fact, if we stand up to America—by uniting and mobilizing our people and by demonstrating our willingness to pay any price to retain our independence—the United States will be shown up as a paper tiger.

3. **Regional conflict.** The United States is seen not only as an enemy of Iran's sovereignty and revolution but also as the main factor blocking Tehran's regional objectives. Iran's ultimate goal is the spread of Islamic revolution to form regimes paralleling and friendly toward (or even subservient to) Khomeini's leadership. In this regard, the principal target countries include Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the small Gulf monarchies. Iran's leaders perceive the United States as the key bulwark of these regimes.

Such an analysis is partly dictated by the Islamic revolution's ideological system. All of these regimes are considered illegitimate and un-Islamic. Hence they can have no real claim on their own people's loyalty, and, therefore, it is only U.S. force and propaganda that is holding back new revolutions in these states. Such factors as the regimes' abilities to appeal to Arab nationalism, to historical tradition, to tribal alignments as well as to make material improvements in the quality of life are all systematically discounted by Khomeini and his colleagues. In addition, the Iranian leaders make an analogy between their reading of the U.S. role in Iran under the shah and, vis-a-vis Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates.

The Islamic regime's domestic behavior—repression, anti-Americanism, the holding of U.S. hostages, and so on—has been something of a self-fulfilling prophecy in fostering U.S. enmity. Similarly, Iran's regional activity has also encouraged the United States to come to the aid of its local friends, the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The threat of Iran-sponsored revolution has also pushed together the United States and Iraq, two countries whose relations were previously quite frosty. U.S. policies designed to help the GCC members to defend themselves collectively, to maintain the relatively free flow of oil from the region, and to prevent an Iraqi collapse in the war have been exaggerated by Iran and portrayed as proof of U.S. malfeasance.

U.S. support and friendship for Israel has also been an important and symbolic element in Iranian hostility. But it is important to note that this aspect is often overstated in the West. Far more immediate for Tehran is the idea that the United States is the backer of all the "reactionary" and "traitor" regimes in the area. Iranian leaders contend that if U.S. influence was removed from the region—and revolution was fomented everywhere—the destruction of Israel would be relatively easy to achieve.

It is also worth adding that Iran's leaders attribute the hostility of the GCC states and Iraq's ability to continue the war to U.S. interference and influence. In fact, the GCC's antagonism to Iran is largely the product of Tehran's own aggressive and threatening stance.

**Global confrontation.** Finally, it is important to stress that the Iranian revolution sees itself as a model for worldwide revolution. Khomeini's version of the struggle holds that the majority of humanity—the oppressed—are being subjected by oppressor countries and systems. Further, the United States is the chief oppressor and is, to paraphrase the anthem of the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, the enemy of all mankind. Thus, the United States is the key factor blocking not only Iran's liberation and Islamic liberation but the progress and well-being of the whole human race. At this point, it is proper to draw an analogy between the part played by the United States in Iranian radical Islamic and pan-Islamic Marxist-Leninist ideologies. The two systems remain quite different, but their concept of the United States as prime and ultimate enemy—Great Satan or super-imperialist—is the same.

**Iran and the USSR**

It is important to stress that the Iranian view of the Soviet Union is largely defined by the regime's attitude toward the United States rather than as an independent variable. This situation could change, particularly if the Soviets were to clash directly in some way with Iran. Meanwhile, Iran's two main grievances against the USSR are Moscow's presence in Afghanistan and its aid to Iraq.

There are several important considerations in this comparison of attitudes toward the United States and the Soviet Union. The Iranian view might be seen as a variation on the Chinese Maoist concept. Beijing views both superpowers as evil ("seeking hegemony") but considers the USSR to be far worse. This ranking can be easily understood by China's historical experience and by
Yet the Iranians mistrust the Soviets, although they are careful to avoid antagonizing them. This stance is motivated by a fear of Soviet power, a preoccupation with other issues, and a strategic need to mobilize at least some international support in Iran’s self-styled struggle with the United States. Iran is unlikely to move into the Soviet camp for both ideological and nationalistic reasons, but on most regional and global issues the government believes it has more in common with Moscow than with Washington.

Compared with the perceived U.S. role of Great Satan, the USSR’s role is far less important in the Iranian worldview. Yet it is perhaps equally important that the Iranian Islamic regime has a great deal in common in its structure and foreign-policy views with Moscow’s allies in the Third World. Despite their social and ideological differences, an Iranian leader can look at leaders in such countries as Angola, Cuba, Ethiopia, Libya, Nicaragua, North Korea, South Yemen, Syria, and Vietnam as fellow anti-imperialist strugglers standing up for the “wretched of the earth.” Thus, on most international issues distant from Iran’s immediate concerns, Tehran will take a position similar to that of Moscow because of the two regimes’ parallel, though not necessarily complementary, interests. The Iranian government will also go out of its way to do small favors for Moscow, as shown by Tehran’s help in freeing the Soviet diplomats held hostage by terrorists in Lebanon in 1985.

**Iran and East-West Conflict**

The main effect of the Iranian revolution on the U.S.-Soviet conflict has been the withdrawal of Iran from the ranks of the U.S. allies. Iran has also stirred up a great deal of trouble in the Persian Gulf region, endangering the GCC member states who are generally friendly toward the United States. Ironically, however, from Tehran’s point of view, the Iranian threat pushed these states closer toward Washington in terms of security cooperation.

The belief of many U.S. observers that Iran’s turn from the United States meant a tilt toward the USSR tells more about Western shortsightedness than about regional politics. A central objective of the Iranian revolution was to demonstrate that Iranian sovereignty and security could be protected without subservience to a superpower. So far, the Khomeini regime—despite its many mistakes in other areas—has been able to meet this goal. Similarly, the idea of some American analysts and policymakers that a loss of U.S. support would lead to a Marxist takeover or a Soviet invasion of Iran has proved equally fallacious. Iranian mistrust of the Soviets and general dislike of Marxism have been important factors in the country’s steadfast opposition to Soviet domination.

Moreover, the Iranian leadership is correct, at least under present conditions, in calculating the international superpower balance. During the hostage crisis, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev opportunistically warned the United States against military intervention in Iran. The United States created a Rapid Deployment Force explicitly aimed at deterring any Soviet invasion of Iran. In short, Tehran is able to thump its nose at both Moscow and Washington while still being able to depend on each power to prevent the other from all-out subversion or attack against the Islamic revolution.
The overarching irony of modern Iranian history is that U.S. policy toward Iran fulfilled Washington’s main objective. After 1945 the United States developed a policy of trying to help Iran secure its unity and sovereignty against a Soviet threat. Although the Khomeini regime is hardly likely to acknowledge the fact, U.S. help was indispensable in building the Iranian economy, infrastructure, and military to the point where the country could stand on its own. With the possibility of Soviet aggression so far receded, Iranian nationalism turned directly against a U.S. involvement that seemed far more overbearing. The presence of tens of thousands of American technicians, the influx of U.S. culture, and a close relationship between Washington and the shah provoked more concern and resentment than a long-quiet border far to the north. Widespread anti-American sentiments among large sectors of the population, including both pro- and anti-shah political groups, seemed far more dangerous to Islamic revolutions determined to seize and hold power than the unpopular Russians with their few hundred discreditable supporters.

Two interrelated questions remain to determine the future course of Iran. Has Khomeini’s cultural/psychological revolution taken root? How will attitudes toward the United States and the USSR and the international competition between the superpowers influence the politics of a post-Khomeini Iran, particularly one that faces serious internal conflict?

PROBABLE DEVELOPMENTS

Projections for the Future

The Islamic republic has institutionalized itself to an extent not generally appreciated abroad. The army has been purged, and its current commanders owe their promotions and posts to the revolution. The Revolutionary Guard has been expanded as a politically loyal, parallel army. There are clerical commissioners in the ranks of both. A wide range of economic, juridical, local government, intelligence, politicized religious, welfare, educational, and other agencies have been established and penetrate all levels of Iranian society. Opposition groups of all stripes have been broken up; their leaders have been imprisoned, exiled, or killed. In short, the regime is strongly entrenched and, despite its economic failures, can claim to have fulfilled many of its objectives.

The threat to the revolution’s future, then, comes from division within its ranks rather than from domestic enemies or outside powers. Khomeini’s key role today is as arbiter, settling disputes among his followers and setting down the revolution’s official line. When Khomeini dies, the loss of his charisma will reduce enthusiasm for the regime among rank-and-file Iranians, but this will be far less damaging than the demise of the man who is the revolution’s supreme mediator. In this respect Iran may become what can be called an institutionalized, unstable regime, where leaders battle within a commonly accepted framework.

As differences and competition gradually and inevitably emerge among post-Khomeini leaders, the lack of a mutually acceptable, peaceful means of conflict resolution will produce strife. Competing leaders may well revert to the traditional pattern of seeking support from outside powers. Some forces, the bazaar merchants and politically traditionalist clergy, could be more inclined to treat with the West than to increase cooperation with (or imitation of) the Soviet bloc. Other factions, particularly in the army, may be similarly inclined, though this cannot be assumed. In this situation the United States is more likely to be courted than is the USSR. Concern about a possible U.S. response already constrains Iranian actions against Saudi Arabia or other conservative Arab regimes in the Persian Gulf. The more time that passes after Khomeini’s demise, allowing the memory of the shah era and hostage crisis to fade, the more likely it will be for pro-American feelings to reemerge.

While the domestic political and “military” situation is potentially more favorable for the United States, the bilateral and “micro” levels are more promising for the Soviets. The fact that the United States is viewed as the principal threat to Iran and that the Iranian leadership is determined not to face a “two front” conflict, gives Tehran an incentive to propitiate Moscow on secondary issues. Moreover, while fear of America has been defused by Iran’s “victory” in the revolution and hostage conflict, there has been no parallel declawing of the USSR. The Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan warrants caution—despite speeches about Iranians’ willingness to fight and die as heroic guerrillas—although not surrender.

The Soviets undoubtedly will try to improve their situation in a post-Khomeini Iran, and they have several options for doing so. Moscow can increase economic aid, expand arms sales (through clients if not directly), and subsidize particular contenders in the domestic struggle. This last category might include support for leftist groups and for ethnic groups (particularly Kurds and Azeris). But the Soviets are also aware that backing ideological or communal minorities could alienate the central government and push it back toward the United States. Similarly, the Soviets might like to mediate the Iran-Iraq War but can act only under conditions that will not antagonize Iran, Iraq, or both—an extremely difficult task.

Moscow sees Iran as a great strategic prize in the region because of its size and common border. Yet the Soviets also understand two other factors. First, Iraq’s Arab identity not only would make any dramatic Soviet move toward siding with Iran very costly in terms of an increased Iraqi tilt toward the United States but also would damage Soviet influence elsewhere in the Arab world. Second, Iran’s erratic and aggressively realigned posture would make doubtful the benefits of such a policy. Therefore, while the Iranian revolution in itself was a great anti-U.S. advantage for Moscow, the Soviets are relatively neutral on the Iran-Iraq War and extremely cautious about major initiatives toward Iran.

Indeed, a factor that can be called “Khomeini’s legacy” will surely emerge in Iranian politics to limit the extent to which either great power can exercise influence. Political leaders who advocate concessions in response to U.S. or Soviet power or pressure will be attacked as cowardly traitors to the Imam’s ideology. Anyone seeking political or financial backing from Washington or Moscow—and every factional leader will accuse opponents of such activity—will be branded as violating the Islamic revolution’s most fundamental principle. The association—and exaggeration—of foreign influence with unpopular
domestic results will also inhibit closer relations with either great power. Thus, Iran’s version of “negative,” that is, antagonistic, nonalignment also remains viable as long as the external threat from either superpower is limited.

A state weakened by internal conflict or civil war might ultimately bring the Revolutionary Guard to power. Internal disunity can also encourage a more salient Soviet threat. Only a leadership firmly empowered in Tehran would be likely to seek a negotiated settlement with Baghdad. Yet a strong regime would be more likely to intimidate or attack the Gulf Arab states.

Conclusions

Iran will face a significant but not insoluble leadership conflict after Khomeini dies or is disabled. It seems quite likely that Montazeri and Rafsanjani will agree to a division of power, which will be precarious but workable. Many Iranian leaders will jump on Montazeri’s bandwagon. If he can govern with reasonable competence, Montazeri should be able to forestall any serious internal challenge.

Internal upheaval would likely result if either Montazeri or Rafsanjani launched a serious attack on the other’s power or if Montazeri died and it became necessary to choose a new velayat-e-faqih. Moreover, a transition to the next "generation" of leaders should be very difficult.

After making the post-Khomeini transition, Iran’s leaders will gradually maneuver to resolve the war. If the factions can agree on an acceptable solution (complete with face-saving concessions from Baghdad), it might be possible to end the fighting. If one or more factions (or the Revolutionary Guard) defend the continuation of the war—and brand pro-settlement groups as betrayers of Khomeini’s legacy—it will be impossible to terminate the war. An alternative strategy would be to lower the intensity of the war with less frequent Iranian offensives. In theory, the war would go on but in practice it would dwindle.

The two scenarios that might make for a drastically unsettled future involve Iranian aggression against GCC states or Soviet pressure on Iran. However, Soviet intervention is unlikely except under dramatically altered circumstances—most likely, sufficient internal turmoil that prompts an Iranian Islamic faction, by no means necessarily a more "leftist" one, to ask for Soviet assistance. Soviet intervention might also come in the form of a major covert competition with the United States for influence in Iran, which could lead to a Soviet military presence or direct superpower conflict in Iran. Again, it should be stressed that this is relatively unlikely. The logistic, political, economic, and other factors are against any Soviet invasion.

A more likely problem would be Iran’s decision to prove its primacy in the Gulf by threatening or attacking members of the GCC. Most probably, this could come in the form of an accidental or deliberate “spillover” of the Iran-Iraq War into Kuwait in the aftermath of an Iranian victory or as a result of Tehran’s frustration at not being able to win the war otherwise. In such a situation Iran will be most likely to bully GCC states and pressure them toward various

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