
Iran's "Moderates" Are No Reformers

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"If we abide by the Koran, we must mobilize to kill."

- Mohammad Khatami on Iran's state television, 24 October 2000

Iranian students, in massive protests unlike anything the country has seen since July 1999, gathered in universities in Tehran and in other major cities across the country in November 2002 to protest the death sentence handed down against a popular history professor, Hashem Aghajari. They shouted, "Death to tyranny! Death to the Taliban in Kabul and in Tehran!"

The numbers of the protesters and the sheer audacity of the students, who refused to be cowed when the regime called out its paramilitary shock troops, clearly threw the Islamic Republic leaders for a loop. Former President Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani and other hard-liners called for a harsh military crackdown. Instead, on 17 November, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini blinked, ordering the court to "review" the death sentence against Aghajari.

Something has happened in Iran since the first massive student protests in July 1999: the protestors have lost their fear. This is a monumental development; it ought to be on the front pages of every newspaper. And yet, it has been missed by just about every "mainstream" news organization in the United States. It has also been missed, until recently, by the U.S. State Department, which had "no message" for demonstrators who rocked the country last July in an earlier wave of anti-regime protests.¹ President Bush set this to rights, with dramatic

impact. In a statement issued from the White House on 12 July, the President recognized the sounds he was hearing:

We have seen throughout history the power of one simple idea: when given a choice, people will choose freedom. As we have witnessed over the past few days, the people of Iran want the same freedoms, human rights, and opportunities as people around the world. Their government should listen to their hopes...As Iran's people move towards a future defined by greater freedom, greater tolerance, they will have no better friend than the United States of America.²

The president's words "nearly panicked the government," says Middle East scholar Daniel Pipes.³ Coming in the midst of unprecedented demonstrations against the regime, the official White House statement gave the appearance that the United States had thrown its weight behind the demonstrators and welcomed an end to the Islamic regime.

Twenty-three years after the revolution that ended the reign of the Shah, once again Iran has entered what the CIA once called a "pre-revolutionary" situation. And yet, for the past five years academics and pundits have been arguing instead whether "reformers" would succeed in ousting "hard-liners" from power. The battle currently being waged in Iran today has nothing to do with the factions of the clerical regime. Indeed, as I will argue in this paper, all the factions are united when it comes to preserving the clerical regime and share a common agenda in virtually every area of concern to the United States. Today's battle is all about revolution. It is about freedom and opening to the West, and an end to clerical rule.

Dr. Aghajari's "offense" provides a clear illustration. He was sentenced to death after he gave a speech last June in which he called for a Protestant-style "reformation" of Islam. According to published reports, he said that Iranians "should not follow a religious leader blindly," directly challenging the theology of the regime that holds that the Supreme Leader, or *velayat-e faqih*, is God's representative on earth. This is the one unpardonable offense in today's Iran. As one pro-regime speaker told a cheering throng of baton-wielding *basiji* militiamen in Tehran, "our red line is the leader and our Islamic values. If they cross them, they will pay dearly."⁴ That "red line" is shared by every faction of the clerical elite, from President Mohammad Khatami to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Farideh Tehrani, a 27-year old doctoral student in Tehran, calls President Khatami "the smiling face of an ugly regime." Her brazen condemnation of the regime, written from inside Iran, shows a new level of fearlessness: "To us, the Islamic revolution has failed. The system, in its entirety, is the problem; no Band-Aid reform will fix it. Iran's 23-year-old theocracy is as incapable of granting freedom and human rights as was the Soviet Union. No politician associated with the Islamic Republic is acceptable to us. There are no reformers in the

clerical government. Our real reformers are among the 600,000 languishing in prison, or the hundreds of candidates who are disqualified in each election for believing in human rights or secularism.”⁵

Until the dramatic change announced by President Bush last July, U.S. policy toward Iran has been driven by two underlying assumptions. The first assumption was that there were “moderates” within the ruling elite who sincerely wanted to cooperate with us, and who had serious differences with hard-liners in areas of critical U.S. interest.⁶ The second was that the United States could offer them sufficient incentives (or inflict enough pain on their enemies) to convince the clerics to change those policies the United States found objectionable: its development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), its violent opposition to the Middle East peace process, and its support for international terrorism. Sometimes, but not always during this debate, a fourth item was added: the regime’s abominable record of human rights abuses, starting with its treatment of women, the murder of dissidents inside Iran and overseas, and the violent repression of ethnic and religious minorities.

And yet, these assumptions underlying U.S. policy were rarely debated. Instead, journalists and academics who became regular guests of the Tehran regime began singing the praises of President Khatami from the day of his election in 1997. Los Angeles reporter Robin Wright, who continues to call Khatami the “leading reformer” in Iran, is held in scorn by many in the Iranian-American community for her willingness to ignore the darker side of the regime. “We must never forget that Iranians deserve the same human rights in Tehran that Robin Wright enjoys in Los Angeles,” American Enterprise Institute scholar Michael Rubin told an Iranian-American group in Los Angeles on 29 September 2002. “The media must be held accountable.”⁷

Another leading pro-Khatami cheerleader is Christian Amanpour of CNN, who led the smiling president in an hour-long interview broadcast in the United States on 7 January 1998 in which he called for a “dialogue of civilizations.”⁸ This phrase became the touchstone of Iran’s new “moderation.” If the West accused Iran of human rights violations or a lack of democracy, it was because our cultural blinders wouldn’t let us see how Iran had evolved according to other values. Women weren’t persecuted; they were being “protected” under Islam. To demonstrate its good faith, Khatami pointed out that Iran had even set up its own “human rights commission,” which regularly denounced alleged U.S. human rights abuses. Iran didn’t support terrorism, he insisted, but the “legitimate rights” of people under occupation.

“While Khatami talks about a Dialogue of Civilizations, many in the Islamic Republic talk about a clash of civilizations,” says Michael Rubin. “They are wrong, and they are facile. There is no clash of civilizations between Iranians

and Americans...There is, however, a clash between those in favor of human rights, and those in favor of the Islamic Republic.”⁹

Hardliners in Tehran heaped scorn on the U.S. administration as their friends and lobbyists in the West were received by the State Department and taken seriously by the media. It was a bad joke, and the joke was on us. Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic continued to build weapons of mass destruction, to export terror, and to murder those at home and abroad who refused to accept its vision of salvation.

The Historical Context

When the Clinton administration came to Washington in January 1993, the State Department was already preparing a major opening to Khatami's predecessor, that other great Iranian “moderate,” Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani. This is the President who ordered the kidnapping of U.S. and French hostages in Lebanon, and the murder of U.S. Marine Lt. Colonel William R. Higgins by the Iranian-spawned Hezbollah militia. To convince him to release those hostages, President George H.W. Bush promised in his inaugural address of 1989, “good will begets good will.” This was a code-worded phrase taken by the Iranians to mean that if they got Hezbollah to release the hostages, which they eventually did, the U.S. would respond with trade and aid and recognition.¹⁰ Cooler heads eventually prevailed.

Nevertheless, as General Brent Scowcroft explained to an audience in Dallas in May 1996, the Bush administration was considering two significant gestures toward the Tehran regime in late 1992, but decided to leave a final decision to its successor.¹¹ The first was the sale of short-take-off-and land (STOL) aircraft, ostensibly for use as crop dusters, which the intelligence agencies pointed out could be used to disperse biological weapons. The second was the sale of \$1 billion in Boeing civilian airliners. The crop dusters were eventually rejected, without a stir. But on 4 April 1993 the Clinton White House announced it was considering the Boeing proposal, and notified Senate Foreign Relations chairman Jesse Helms of the pending sale in a letter dated 2 June 1993. Helms angrily questioned the wisdom of allowing a huge transfer of aircraft to a country on the State Department's terrorism list and succeeded in killing the deal. According to a subsequent Select House Committee investigation, that experience convinced the President and National Security advisor Tony Lake to carefully balance any secret overture to Tehran that would open trade, with a public policy of sanctions and containment. It was Lake and his top Middle East advisor Martin Indyk, who crafted the new theoretical approach toward rogue states that became known as “dual containment.”¹²

In late 1994 and early 1995, Houston-based CONOCO entered negotiations with the Iranian government over a major project to invest \$600 million to develop the oil field off of Sirri Island. If successful, it would have been the first major foreign investment by any Western company in Iran since the 1979 revolution. In testimony before Congress, CONOCO officials argued that the Iranian government saw the contract as a test case that could be used by then-President Hashemi-Rafsanjani to convince his political adversaries to resume diplomatic and trade relations with the United States. CONOCO Vice President J. Michael Stinson was visibly taken aback at the opposition his views aroused at a 16 March 1995 hearing before the Senate Banking committee, and was stunned by the White House announcement the day before that it was banning U.S. companies from investing in the Iranian petroleum sector. "At no point" did the State Department warn the company to break off negotiations or back off from a deal with Iran, he told committee chairman Senator Alfonse D'Amato. "We were told typically that the U.S. government did not favor this deal...but that it was legal."¹³

The implication of the Tehran government in a series of particularly murderous terrorist attacks, including the July 1994 car-bombing of the AMIA Jewish Center in Buenos Aires, Argentina that killed 86 people and wounded 300 others, dampened whatever support CONOCO's arguments might have generated. Senator D'Amato had the votes to pass legislation, which, as initially crafted, would have imposed a total trade embargo on Iran. Seeing the writing on the wall, President Clinton issued a second Executive Order on 6 May 1995 that banned trade with Iran, to stave off a Congress-imposed embargo.

Iran's suspected involvement in the bombing of the Al-Khobar barracks in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia in June 1996, in which 19 U.S. servicemen were killed, prompted D'Amato to revive his legislation. His new bill, which ultimately passed and was signed into law by President Clinton in August 1996, imposed a secondary boycott on foreign companies who invested \$40 million or more in the oil and gas industries of Iran and Libya. Known as the Iran Libya Sanctions Act, ILSA became the backbone of U.S. policy toward Iran, and the object of repeated attacks by pro-Tehran lobbyists and journalists.

Among the most vocal pro-Tehran lobbyists was a former Iranian Communist Party militant, Hoosang Amirahmadi. Using his base as a teacher of urban studies at Rutgers University, Amirahmadi convinced CONOCO and other U.S. oil companies to fund a series of organizations that lobbied unsuccessfully against ILSA. Along with Gary Sick at Columbia University, he invited Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, who responded to the sanctions by claiming the United States had "gone insane,"¹⁴ to a forum at Columbia on 26 September 1996. In Tehran, hard-liners were issuing open threats against the United States in the hope of scaring the Clinton administration away

from retaliating against Iran for its involvement in the Dhahran bombing.¹⁵ Revolutionary Guards Commander Mohsen Rezaei warned on 24 September 1996 that if the United States “continues its plots against the Islamic Republic, we will strike against the U.S. in the region with all conventional and unconventional means. We will not observe any type of law or moderation in our operations against the Americans in the region.”¹⁶

It was in this context, and the worsening of U.S.-Iran relations, that Khatami was elected president by a huge margin in May 1997. Predictably, the pro-Tehran reporters and lobbyists got it wrong from the start. They were helped by President Clinton, who inexplicably called Khatami’s victory “a reaffirmation of the democratic process there. And it’s interesting and it’s hopeful.”¹⁷ Dissident Iranian cleric Ayatollah Mehdi Rouhani, speaking from Paris, called it instead “an outright rejection of the regime” since Iranians “massively voted against the regime’s hand-picked candidate,” Majlis speaker Nateq-Nouri.¹⁸

Khatami’s Record

Unknown outside Iran, Khatami was no outsider to the regime; nor could he be called a “moderate.” In 1984, as the regime’s Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, he presided over meetings that discussed the operations of an Iran-

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backed “international terrorist brigade,” as documents originally published in the *Times of London* on 16 January 1985 revealed.¹⁹ The brigade came under the operational control of Hussein Mussavi, the head of the Lebanese Islamic Jihad organization, whose group

was trained and supported by Iranian Revolutionary Guards troops stationed in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley. Terrorists linked to Mussavi have been accused in Lebanese courts of planting the car-bombs that blew up the U.S. embassy in Beirut in April 1983 and of attacking U.S. Marines and French peacekeepers in October 1983, which claimed more than 260 lives. Mussavi’s Iranian-backed group also took Western hostages in Lebanon in the 1980s.

Given the rise of popular discontent inside Iran, Khatami eagerly presented himself as a “reformer,” a term immediately welcomed in the West. And yet, Khatami’s record since assuming the presidency in August 1997 shows few attempts at reform, and no achievements. Under his presidency, a thousand new publications flourished. Some, critical of the regime, were banned outright. Others had their offices ransacked by regime-backed thugs known as the Ansar-e Hezbollah. Publishers were fined, thrown in jail, and attacked. Journalists were jailed, and some were murdered. Five years later, the reformist press has

been virtually shut down and its supporters unmasked to the regime's intelligence services.

The most prominent secular opponent of clerical rule—Darioush Forouhar—was brutally hacked to death in late November 1998 along with his wife, Parvaneh, a prominent women's leader. It turned out that the murderers were active-duty intelligence officers, acting on orders from a top deputy of a key minister in Khatami's government. Khatami did not even threaten to fire the minister.

In July 1999, students at Tehran University revolted against domestic repression and called for greater freedom. In response, the Tehran police stormed student dormitories, killing five students, including at least one person who was thrown to his death from a three-story window. Instead of backing the students and their calls for reform, the "reformer" Khatami called on the students to end their demonstrations.

Khatami's record on terrorism is no better. Only days after assuming power, Khatami welcomed the families of "martyred" Lebanese guerrilla fighters in Tehran, and called Israel "the greatest manifestation of international terrorism."²⁰ Three days later, five people were killed and 181 wounded in three suicide bombings on the Ben-Yehuda pedestrian mall in Jerusalem. Since then, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah leaders regularly visit Tehran. Khatami has never distanced himself from these terrorists, who have murdered hundreds of civilians around the globe. Under his leadership, the Islamic Republic subsidizes these groups at the rate of around \$100 million per year. This money is appropriated as a line item of the budget sent by Mr. Khatami to the Majlis.²¹

In October 2000, after one such meeting with Hamas leaders in Tehran, Mr. Khatami proclaimed that only the annihilation of the state of Israel would bring peace to the Middle East. "They are basically an occupying entity," he said of the Israeli government. "Naturally, any government that is based on oppression and injustice may stay in power for a while, but ultimately it is doomed to failure...Real peace can only be achieved through an end to occupation."²² The Israelis have extensively documented Iran's support for suicide bombers, starting with the 12 April 1996 arrest of Hussein Mohammed Mikdad, a Lebanese Shiite who admitted he had been trained in Iran and sent to Israel with instructions to carry a bomb onto an El Al flight originating in Tel Aviv.²³ In Mr. Khatami's view, terrorists such as Mikdad are "freedom fighters."

Make no mistake: Khatami is no moderate, as we understand the term. He is a radical Islamist, who believes in world Islamic domination and, by the way, in a command economy. What he would like is to reform Iran's system to make it more efficient and durable, without changing its underlying ideology, just as Gorbachev sought to do in the Soviet Union. The last thing he wants is to abandon clerical rule.

Core Values

There is keen political debate inside Iran on many issues. Factional disputes have made it impossible, for instance, for the Parliament to pass a foreign investment law, despite numerous attempts since 1989. One faction argues that allowing foreign companies to own assets in Iran amounts to inviting a neo-colonial invasion, while others contend that without foreign capital Iran will be incapable of development. Similar disputes have erupted over many social and cultural issues, such as sexual segregation at Iran's universities.

But these disputes occur solely among select members of Iran's body politic, who have demonstrated their loyalty to the regime. On issues of national security and regime survival, no significant divergence separates the different ruling factions. A social and political "moderate" such as Khatami has been closely allied in the past with foreign terrorist organizations. An economic "liberal" such as Hashemi-Rafsanjani has been the greatest supporter of Iran's nuclear weapons program. There has never been parliamentary debate on the wisdom of pursuing ballistic missile programs, or nuclear weapons research, or even of pursuing a civilian nuclear power program. On such issues, the regime speaks as one. Nor have candidates who reject the system of absolute clerical rule (*velayat-e faqih*) ever been approved to run for public office.


Five goals unite the ruling clerical elite, as I have argued in presentations to various U.S. government agencies.²⁴

- Maintenance of the Islamic Republic at all costs, starting with the system of *velayat-e faqih*. The harsh treatment meted out to intellectuals such as Hashem Aghajari or writers such as Faraj Sarkuhi who dared challenge absolute clerical rule, shows that regime survival is an existential concern and far outweighs any factional differences. Indeed, all other goals are subservient to this;
- Aggressive expansion of Iran's influence in the Persian Gulf region to become the predominant power, militarily, politically, and eventually economically. While any nationalist government will also seek to enhance Iran's regional standing (as did the former Shah), the Islamic Republic has used much more aggressive means, including terrorism and the subversion of neighboring regimes to achieve its goals;
- An end to the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf, which the Islamic Republic views as a direct challenge to its predominance;
- Active subversion of the Middle East peace process. The Islamic Republic views Israel as a competitor, and fears that if the peace process succeeds, Israel will become the predominant economic power in the region and the partner of choice for the Arab world, Turkey, and Central Asia, instead of Iran. This is one reason why the regime has stepped up

anti-Semitic propaganda in recent years. At the same time it has increased aid to terrorist groups;

- Determination to develop a broad spectrum of WMD, including nuclear and biological weapons, as relatively low cost force multipliers.

Only the last of these goals is likely to be shared by a future nationalist or democratic regime. However, such a regime is also far more likely to respond to traditional non-proliferation tools and regional confidence-building measures, making the threat that a democratic or nationalist Iran would actually use WMD far less likely than it is today.

In other words, in all five of these areas, which dovetail U.S. concerns over Iran's behavior, the objectionable behavior is specific to the regime, not to Iran's national interests. Furthermore, it stems from core values shared by all factions of the regime. Despite this, the United States continued to offer bribes to Iran's leaders on the mistaken assumption that "moderate" members of the clerical elite would be willing to act against their own interests, until President Bush wisely set a new course on 12 July 2002.²⁵ Bush realized, as his predecessors had not, that it was all about the regime, and that no amount of incentives could get the clerics to change their behavior. Instead, it's time to help Iranians to realize their dreams of bringing freedom and secular government to their country. 

Notes

1. Michael Ledeen, "The State Department Goes Mute," *National Review*, 11 July 2002.
2. "Statement by the President," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 12 July 2002.
3. Daniel Pipes, "Iran in Crisis," *New York Post*, 23 July 2002.
4. "Basij Prepared to Defend Revolution," *The Tebran Times*, 20 November 2002.
5. Farideh Tehrani, "The Truth Inside: A plea from Tehran," *National Review On-line*, 15 October 2002.
6. Many journalists and academics continue to the terms "moderate" and "conservative" to describe the two main camps. I will discuss Khatami's "moderation" in this paper. As for the "conservatism" of clerics such as Ayatollah Khamenei, who was educated at Patrice Lumumba University and has long supporter state control of the economy, he is about as "conservative" as Joseph Stalin. For a more detailed discussion, see "Change in Iran and challenges for U.S. policy-makers," a paper delivered at a Congressional Research Service forum on Iran, 8 January 1999, available at http://www.iran.org/tib/krt/krt_index.htm.
7. Michael Rubin, "Iranians Deserve Freedom," address to the Mission for Establishing Human Rights in Iran (MEHR), Los Angeles, 29 September 2002. <http://www.marzeporgohar.org/cgi-bin/viewnews.cgi?id=1033349947>. One month after he made these comments, Rubin was named to a senior Pentagon post in charge of policy toward Iran and Iraq.
8. For a skeptical commentary on the speech, see "Khatami's 'dialogue' with the American people," *The Iran Brief*, 12 January 1998.
9. Iran argued for years that all it wanted was the release of assets and military spare parts frozen

by the United States since the 1979 hostage crisis. While Rafsanjani inflated their value, claiming the U.S. held \$17 billion in Iranian assets, the Clinton administration tried to minimize them, claiming they totalled less than \$250 million. A subsequent review toward the end of the Clinton administration evaluated the total, including 20 years of interest on Iran's \$400 million Foreign Military Sales account, at \$1.6 billion. See Kenneth R. Timmerman, "Iran's hidden U.S. cash stash," *WorldNetDaily*, 4 October 2000 (part 6 of an 8-part series).

10. Rubin, *supra* note 6.

11. Author's notes of Scowcroft's presentation to a luncheon hosted by Petro Hunt, Dallas, Texas, 2 May 1996. See also, Kenneth R. Timmerman, "Clinton sought dirt on W's Dad," *WorldNetDaily*, 27 September 2000, part 3 of an 8 part series that provides a detailed account of the factors driving U.S.-Iran policy during the Clinton administration, and the almost continuous, quasi-secret dialogue between the U.S. and Iran.

12. Kenneth R. Timmerman, "Secret overture to Iran," *The Iran Brief*, 3 March 1997. See also, Timmerman, "Iran-Bosnia: Green Light," *The American Spectator*, August 1996.

13. "State Department knew of CONOCO deal," *Iran Brief*, 3 April 1995; see also, Kenneth R. Timmerman, "Conoco Deal would fuel nuclear weapons and terrorism," testimony before the Senate Banking Committee on S.277, the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions Act, 16 March 1995. Available on-line at www.iran.org

14. "Iran's Response to the Sanctions," *The Iran Brief*, 7 September 1996.

15. The Iranian involvement, alleged already in 1996, was ultimately asserted in a federal indictment handed down in June 2001 against the Iranian-trained Saudi terrorists who carried out the Dhahran bombing. See *United States of America v. Ahmed al-Mughasil et al*, Eastern District of Virginia, Alexandria division.

16. Kenneth R. Timmerman, "Tehran Turns up the Heat," *The Iran Brief*, 1 October 1996.

17. For both quotes, an excerpts from Khatami's initial press conference with CNN, see "Khatami's victory unlikely to bring change," 2 June 1997.

18. "Khatami tied to mid-80s terror," *The Iran Brief*, 3 July 1997

19. Timmerman, *supra* note 15.

20. Khatami supports Hezbollah, *The Iran Brief*, 8 September 1997. Khatami's comments were broadcast on Tehran radio on 1 September, the day of the meeting.

21. Sworn testimony of Patrick Clawson, Director, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, at hearings in several terrorism cases, including *Stephen Flatow v. Islamic Republic of Iran* (District Court of the District of Columbia), and *Elahi v. Islamic Republic of Iran* (District Court of the District of Columbia).

22. "Iran's Khatami says end of Israel needed for peace," Reuters, 2 October 2000.

23. The only reason the Israelis caught up with Mikdad was his own incompetence. While preparing the bomb in his East Jerusalem hotel room, he had the misfortune of setting it off in his own lap. Mikdad entered Israel on a forged British passport provided him by Iranian intelligence. Cf., "Evidence of Terrorism mounts," *The Iran Brief*, 3 June 1996.

24. See in particular, "Fighting Proliferation Through Democracy: A Competitive Strategies Approach Toward Iran," in Henry Sokolski (ed.), *Prevailing in a Well-Armed World: Devising Competitive Strategies Against Weapons Proliferation*, (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College - Strategic Studies Institute, 2000). Versions of this thesis were presented in seminar format at the U.S. Army War College, the U.S. Department of Energy, and elsewhere.

25. I have described the incentives offered by the Clinton administration in the *WorldNetDaily* series, especially Part 8: "Iran deal collapses: Support for Mideast terror jeopardizes Clinton legacy," *WorldNetDaily.com*, 16 October 2000.