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## CHAPTER 4

# THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN: BEYOND THE DEMOCRATIC PEACE THEORY

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Does democracy at home bring peace abroad? Conventional wisdom suggests that democracy and peace go hand in hand, with the democratic peace theory sparking the idea that *democracies do not fight one another*. Using the example of post-revolutionary Iran, this chapter problematizes the democratic peace theory, examining the challenges of democratization and offering an alternative vision on peace and democracy to demonstrate how a country can live at peace both at home and internationally.

The first section problematizes the narrow conceptualization of war and peace in democratic peace theory as the theory conventionally discounts proxy wars, neo-colonial interventions, and policies that exacerbate conflict. This section also proposes that neither cultural nor institutional (dis)similarity among states captures the complex causes of war and peace. Rather, *geopolitics* and *national security concerns* – real or perceived – better illuminate origins of war and peace in global politics.

Next, I examine the complex nature of the state in post-revolutionary Iran, the effects of global structure on state behaviour, and the way Iran's foreign policy is shaped in relation to domestic and global politics. In other words, it is not just domestic politics that shape an individual state's regional and global policy-making; rather state behaviours are informed and constrained by the combination of state structures, civil society forces, and global politics. The global factor is for the most part overlooked by democratic peace theory.

This section sheds light on Iran's regional policy – Iran's policies regarding Syria and Iraq, and its relations with Hezbollah and with conservative Arab states – Iran's relations with the West including with the US and the European Union, and Iran's nuclear policy and the current nuclear talks between Iran and the P5 + 1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council – the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China, and Russia – plus Germany). I argue that the Islamic Republic of Iran is one regime with five distinct and interrelated republics; that Iranian politics is a mishmash of ideology and pragmatism; that ideology is frequently in the service of politics; and that geopolitics most often defines Iran's regional policies and its relations with the West. More importantly, there has been a pattern of continuity and change, and a reciprocal relationship between domestic developments and foreign policy strategies.

The last portion offers an alternative approach to the conventional wisdom about peace and democracy in Iran. It explores the internal dynamics of civil society in post-revolutionary Iran, its genuine quest for democracy, and how Iran might live at peace both at home and in the world. The conclusion suggests that peace and democracy in Iran are contingent on diplomacy, dialogue and détente with the world and proposes that Iran's regional and global politics need to be examined in light of its geopolitical concerns and constraints.

### The Limits of Democratic Peace Theory

Immanuel Kant's 'Toward Perpetual Peace' sparked the idea that democracies do not fight each other,<sup>2</sup> making democratic peace theory a conventional wisdom among many Western policy-makers. Several explanations have been proposed stemming from Kant's *cosmopolitan* democratic peace theory. They include normative-liberal,<sup>3</sup> institutional,<sup>4</sup>

and ideational or normative approaches.<sup>5</sup> The democratic peace theory, however, has been criticized from numerous perspectives with scholars such as Peceny, Beer, and Sanchez-Terry exploring the concept of 'dictatorial peace'. Werner and Bennett both explain peace and war based on 'political system similarity', and Souva refers to 'institutional similarity'.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Robert Kelly argues that cultural similarity in a non-democratic 'pre-Western East Asia' created a zone of peace. According to Kelly, from 1644 to 1839, there was no war between China and its Confucian neighbours due to the peaceful Confucian ethic and Confucian common identity and cultural similarity generating 'Confucian Long Peace'.<sup>7</sup> Koschut echoes that cultural similarities among autocracies/oligarchies might cause peace and stability.<sup>8</sup>

However, the culturalist argument has its own limits: there are numerous cases of war and conflict among countries with a similar culture. The Iran–Iraq war (1980–8) is a case in point. Both countries share an Islamic and Shi'i culture and yet post-revolutionary Iran under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini and Iraq under Saddam Hussein fought one of the longest and bloodiest wars in the Middle East. Although the ruling elite under Saddam Hussein was mainly comprised of Sunni Muslims, Shi'i Muslims constitute the majority of the Iraqi population.

Iran's policy of exporting the revolution to neighbouring Islamic countries provoked paranoia among the Arab regimes and was one of the many factors that led to the Iran–Iraq war. This real or perceived security threat mobilized Western democracies, Israel and most of the Arab regimes against revolutionary Iran. A coalition of the conservative Arab regimes, the US and Israel encouraged Saddam Hussein to invade Iran in order to prevent Iran from exporting its revolutionary discourse into the region. Remarkably, the Iran–Contra scandal revealed a secret arms sale among the US under the Reagan administration, Israel and Iran in the mid-1980s. It can thus be argued that the Iran–Contra Affair, or Irangate, was a clear manifestation of the triumph of *realpolitik* over norms and ideology in international politics. US officials facilitated the sale of Israeli arms to Iran during the Iran–Iraq war in return for Iran's assistance in the release of Americans held hostage in Lebanon. Iran agreed to purchase Israeli arms and used them in a war between two Muslim countries. The funds from arms sales to Iran was then diverted to Contra militants based in Honduras who waged a guerrilla war to topple

the Socialist Sandinista and revolutionary government of Nicaragua.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that the new revolutionary elites in both Nicaragua and Iran came to power in 1979 and shared a discourse of anti-imperialism.

With such insights, it is clear that cultural and/or institutional similarity cannot alone explain war and peace in global politics. Instead, *geopolitics*, *realpolitik*, and real or perceived *security* threats better explain international conflict and cooperation.

More importantly, international relations scholar Thomas Risse-Kappen argues, 'the "democratic peace" only forms one part of the empirical findings [as] democracies are *Janus-faced*. While they do not fight each other, they are frequently involved in militarized disputes and wars with authoritarian regimes. Democratic peace despite *warlike democracies*?<sup>10</sup> He challenges the proposition that 'the war involvement of democracies mostly results from the need to defend themselves against aggressive dictatorship.' Instead, he claims 'democracies to a large degree create their enemies and their friends – "them" and "us"'.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in contrast to the 'democratic peace' argument, there is not much 'empirical data' that conflicts between democracies and autocracies are 'caused and initiated' by autocracies.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, liberal democracies are not inherently peaceful, as peacefulness and enmity are socially constructed. In fact, democracies are frequently involved in war and also make alliances with autocracies; something which would appear to drastically counter what the democratic peace theory would predict. Two examples of such a partnership include 'the US–UK alliance with the Soviet Union in 1941 or the American–Chinese relationship after 1972'.<sup>13</sup> One could also mention the US alliance with autocratic states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Tunisia before the Arab Spring, and pre-revolutionary Iran under the Shah regime.

Furthermore, liberal democracies are occasionally involved in *proxy wars*. They create and construct phantom enemies, exaggerate perceived threats, demonize their opponents, and use fear tactics to pursue imperial and/or political agendas. The American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 can be seen as an example of this, where liberal democracies do not necessarily hold transparency in their military/war politics; and are in fact warlike democracies.

The idea of democratic peace is ontologically rooted in Immanuel Kant's concept of 'perpetual peace';<sup>14</sup> however, the *Kantian cosmopolitanism*

in practice implies the Western superior right and 'universal' moral responsibility to save and civilize the *other*. This view implies that the civilized, liberal and peace-loving world is obliged to introduce peace and democracy to the 'uncivilized' and non-liberal world plagued by wars and conflicts. In other words, 'liberal and neoliberal institutionalist discourses often appears as rationalization of hegemony disguised as universal humanism'.<sup>15</sup> Due to being deeply embedded in the current hegemonic power relations, the democratic peace theory is therefore unable to unmask the neo-colonial intension of leading neoliberal democracies: a critical flaw.<sup>16</sup>

Democratic peace theory thus offers a very narrow, mechanical, and static definition of war and peace. It tends to not denounce proxy wars, neo-colonial interventions, and policies that exacerbate conflict and war, overlooks the effects of *realpolitik* and geostrategic concerns in foreign policy-making, and ignores that democracies work with autocrats, assist extremists, and facilitate civil and sectarian wars if these actions serve their immediate interests. During the Cold War, the US policy of supporting 'friendly tyrants' – such as Saudi kings, Egyptian presidents, the Shah of Iran and even Saddam Hussein of Iraq – and assisting anti-Communist extremist forces such as the Afghan Mujahedin often contributed to regional and global conflicts. As Chalmers Johnson argues, 'it should by now be generally accepted that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on Christmas Eve 1979 was deliberately provoked by the United States'. Former CIA Director Robert Gates, and President Carter's national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski revealed:

'CIA aid to the Mujahidin began during 1980, that's to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan.' Asked whether he regret[ted] this decision, Brzezinski replied: 'Regret what? The secret operation was an excellent idea. It drew the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? On the day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter, saying, in essence: "We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War."' Asked whether he regret[ted] having supported extremist Islamists, he replied: 'What is more important in world history? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some agitated Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?'<sup>17</sup>

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton likewise told Congress that the Taliban and Al-Qaeda are in part the result of policy during the Cold War: 'The people we are fighting today we funded 20 years ago. And we did it because we were locked in this struggle with the Soviet Union.'<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in the post-Cold War and post-9/11 era, the US policy of a 'Global War on Terror' and foreign interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, the funding of fundamentalists, and assisting Syrian extremist rebels, introduced the region to a new phase of civil/sectarian/proxy war.

For decades, President Roosevelt's well-known statement about Somoza, dictator of Nicaragua, set the agenda for the US foreign policy towards Third World dictators during the Cold War: 'they may be sons of bitches but at least they are *our* sons of bitches'. When neo-conservatives came to the White House, then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, argued in 2005 that 'now, we are taking a different course; we are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people'.<sup>19</sup> But under the sanctions in Iraq, the country's infant mortality rate exceeded 5,000 children a month and yet the response from the world's leading advocate of democratic and liberal cosmopolitan peace was hardly a resounding one: in 1996, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright responded: 'we think the price is worth it'.<sup>20</sup> Thus, we can see in this instance that the (neo) liberal discourse of democratic peace served 'as pretext for widening the global democratic deficit and, in the case of the Middle East, re-inscribing the term of past imperial relations under new guises'.<sup>21</sup>

The foreign policies of democracies are, for the most part, derived from geopolitics and perceived security interests, not from the *inherently* peaceful democratic nature of these regimes. Democracies and autocracies work together if they share security concerns and common adversaries. The concerns of *realpolitik*, geopolitics and security might even push a democracy to act against another democracy if the former is a world hegemon and the latter, a subaltern state. Iran under Mohammad Mosaddeq is a case in point. In 1953, two leading liberal democracies – the UK and the US – overthrew Iran's liberal democratic government. Mosaddeq sought to nationalize Iran's oil industry; however, the MI6/CIA joint military coup put an end to this policy and to his term in government. The CIA, MI6, and Mossad furthermore all helped the post-coup regime to eradicate democratic opposition. The US immediately offered a \$45 million loan to strengthen the coup

government, and in 1956 the new regime created a new national security organization known by its acronym SAVAK, which was involved in the brutal suppression of any opposition to the regime. According to Abrahamian, the 1953 coup produced 'four substantial legacies: (1) the denationalization of the oil industry; (2) the destruction of the secular opposition; (3) the fatal delegitimization of the monarchy; and (4) the further intensification of the already intense paranoid style prevalent throughout Iranian politics'.<sup>22</sup>

The legacy of the 1953 coup is still very much alive. The spectre of US involvement in internal Iranian politics was prevalent in November 1979, when the 444-day American hostage crisis was created 'on the pretext that the CIA was plotting a repeat performance of 1953 from the same ground'.<sup>23</sup> This argument is also used frequently as part of the rhetoric surrounding the current negotiations over nuclear power. The post-revolutionary regime drew:

parallels between a country's sovereign right to enrich uranium and to nationalize its own natural resources. It also drew parallels between earlier Western claims that Iranians lacked the technical knowledge to run the oil industry and now the moral credibility to be entrusted with nuclear know-how. It equated the U.S.-led sanctions with the economic embargo organized by the British. It also equated the two sets of drawn-out negotiations, arguing that in both cases the Western powers in public presented to be willing to accept a 'fair compromise' but in reality and in private persistently insisted on tough demands unacceptable to Iran. In 1951–53, the real intention had been the overthrow of Mossaddeq. The intension now, claimed the regime, was the overthrow of the Islamic Republic.<sup>24</sup>

More importantly, argues Abrahamian,

the paranoid style reached a new peak in 2009. When more than two million took to the streets to protest the rigging of the presidential election, the regime's automatic reaction was to hold show trials and accuse opposition leaders of plotting a 'velvet revolution' in the style of the 'colored' ones that had recently swept through Eastern Europe. They were accused of working in cahoots

not only with the CIA and MI6 but also with an elaborate international web. . . . They were also accused of being led astray from Islam by the pernicious ideas Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, Richard Rorty, and, most dangerous of all, Jürgen Habermas. *Regimes that tremble before Weber and Habermas have much to fear.*<sup>25</sup>

Policies of the world's leading democracies thus have massively impacted, even jeopardized, Iran's quest for democracy. After six decades Iran still faces immense challenges as a result of the 1953 coup that marginalized moderate secular and progressive Muslim democrats and, instead, energized radical religious extremism. Moreover, the West's policies towards Iran have further limited the scope of democratic trends in post-revolutionary Iran. The policies of hardliners in the United States and Israel towards Iran have done much to undermine democratic reform and facilitate the rise and consolidation of the Iranian hardliners. As will be shown, global politics contributed to the crisis of Iran's third republic under the reformist president Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005). It remains to be seen whether international politics help or hinder peace and democratization in Iran's fifth republic under the moderate president Hassan Rouhani (2013–).

### Iran's Foreign Policy-Making: Ideology, Geopolitics and Pragmatism

Who rules post-revolutionary Iran? What are the guiding principles of Iran's domestic and foreign policies? To what extent do religion and ideology play a role in Iran's policy-making? Are Iran's ruling elites 'mad mullahs'? Are they apocalyptic fanatics? Or, are they pragmatists? Do geopolitics, *realpolitik* and national security shape Iran's foreign policy-making? There is no quick and simple answer to these questions as there is no uniform, cohesive or stagnant ruling elite in post-revolutionary Iran.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the post-revolutionary Iranian state is not a traditional theocratic/Islamic state. In fact, this particular Islamic state, as it is claimed to be, is a modern phenomenon invented by contemporary Islamists, and not congruent with historical Islam. Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of the Islamic state proved to be 'Islamic in its personnel' at best since the institutional forms of the Iranian state have no 'particularly Islamic features'.<sup>26</sup> This is perhaps best exemplified

in the fact that the survival of the state and its interests and those of its statesmen have always held more importance than the rulings of the Islamic shari'a. In 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini explicitly argued that the state ruled by the *vali-ye faqih* (the Guardian Jurist), could if necessary stop the implementation of the shari'a and dismiss the founding pillars of Islam in order to protect the general interests of the state. As such, the state founded by Ayatollah Khomeini is by no means a revival of Islamic tradition.

Rather, the Islamic Republic combines Ayatollah's Khomeini's theory of the *velayat-e faqih* (the Guardianship of the Jurist) with the republican institutions, which drew inspiration from European constitutions. Given its republican institutions, the Islamic Republic ostensibly shares more features with contemporary modern Western states than with an Islamic theocracy. In substance, however, the republican institutions are subordinated to the rule of the *vali-ye faqih*. Unlike parliamentary democracies, the Iranian parliament (the Majlis) must share its legislative authority with the Guardian Council whose jurist members are appointed by the *vali-ye faqih*. Constitutionally, in the absence of the Guardian Council, the Majlis is devoid of authority. The Majlis must also share its legislative authority with the Expediency Council whose chair and the majority of its members are appointed by the *vali-ye faqih*. Unlike in presidential democracies, the president in the Islamic Republic is subordinate to the *vali-ye faqih*, with Article 113 of the constitution indicating, 'after the leader, the president is the highest official in the country'.<sup>27</sup>

In spite of its initial attempts, the Iranian state failed to establish a totalitarian state because it failed to maintain a single, official ideology and a single, modern, mass-centralized political party. Pragmatic politics, the decentralization of Islamic faith, and the relative diversity of opinion together with elite factional politics contributed to the development of limited pluralism in the Iranian state and stymied the success of totalitarian tendencies.<sup>28</sup> A strict totalitarian outcome was 'prevented by the organizational and ideological peculiarities' of the post-revolutionary state,<sup>29</sup> making Iran's totalitarianism 'stillborn'.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, while the Islamic Republic of Iran is not a democracy, it is also not an absolute totalitarian state either. Rather, it is a complicated amalgam of authoritarian and semi-democratic trends. Such a complex composition of the state has produced a regime with what I call five

consecutive 'republics'. These republics are an amalgamation of the theory of the *velayat-e faqih* with republican/democratic institutions, with some room for the public to cast its vote and for the elected presidents to pursue their policies. Elections, as deficient as they are, and elite factional politics have provided some space for limited pluralism and for multiple voices to pronounce on domestic and foreign policies. What I call the 'first republic' (which lasted roughly from 1979 until 1989), was mainly a 'one-man show' dictated by Khomeini's populist and semi-totalitarian politics. The post-Khomeini era can be divided into four 'republics' under the leadership of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (who assumed this position upon the death of Khomeini in June 1989); however, each republic has been under a distinct president and presented a different aspect of the post revolutionary regime. With the charismatic figure of Khomeini absent during the second 'republic', Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–97) undermined the semi-totalitarian character of the state, and was able to push the regime towards a limited degree of pluralism. Reformist Khatami (1997–2005) aimed at refreshing the spirit of Iran's quest for democracy in the third republic, with the fourth one under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–13) being a product of the state-security apparatus and the extremist faction of Iran's conservatives. This republic was also a direct backlash against the democratic reform movement seen under the third republic. The fifth republic under the moderate Rouhani (2013–) can be seen to be another attempt to revive and refresh Iran's quest for democracy.<sup>31</sup>

In sum, Iran's post-revolutionary state is a combination of authoritarian and democratic trends which has taken both ideological and pragmatic approaches towards domestic and foreign policy-making during all of the five republics. An unchanging aspect that unites the republics, however, is that in the Islamic Republic of Iran, neither the president nor the Majlis has ultimate power. What *does* matter is who the president is, and what political faction holds the office. Post-revolutionary Iran is thus not a totalitarian state and the Supreme Leader, despite many efforts, does not hold absolute power. Presidents are in fact capable of changing some policies and perceptions, and of pursuing distinct strategies in domestic and foreign policies. In addition to this, the state is constrained by the dynamics and changes in its domestic and international situation. As will be shown below Iran's policy towards the West and its nuclear policy and regional policies, all illuminate the

complex process of policy-making and implementation in the five republics of the post-revolutionary regime.

### *Iran and the West*

The ideological discourse that informed Iran's foreign policy under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini was represented by popular slogans of the time, such as the desire to 'export the revolution' and 'Neither East, Nor West.' In a 1989 letter to the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, Khomeini denounced the bankruptcy of Western and Eastern ideologies and called upon the Communist leader to adhere to Islamic principles for 'the well-being and salvation' of his nation.<sup>32</sup>

During the first republic, Iran's radical policy was evident during the American hostage crisis. Khomeini openly supported the occupation of the American embassy and used it to solidify his internal position as the undisputed leader of post-revolutionary Iran. In so doing, he encouraged 'a period of radicalization', in which he opposed the leftist and liberal factions of the revolution, specifically the liberal prime minister Mehdi Bazargan.<sup>33</sup> Khomeini died in June 1989, but not before he had left a lasting legacy on the country and wider region, with the most renowned example being the fatwa he issued against Salman Rushdie for his controversial novel *The Satanic Verses*. The fatwa created tension between Iran and the West which lasted well into the post-Khomeini era.

In the second republic, Iran condemned the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990; Iran's policy of neutrality during the war signalled pragmatism and signified its willingness to forge closer ties with the West and Arab states. The EU in general welcomed President Rafsanjani's pragmatist policy, and in 1992, initiated a 'critical dialogue' with Iran over a host of issues, such as Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie, Iran's human rights record, and its policy vis-à-vis Israel, terrorism and nuclear proliferation. In 1997, EU–Iran relations deteriorated when a German court issued a verdict against Iranian officials for their involvement in the assassination of Iranian opposition leaders in Germany. This was a turning point in EU–Iran relations: the verdict put an end to the policy of 'critical dialogue', and all European countries withdrew their ambassadors from Tehran. In the last year of President Rafsanjani's tenure, Iran's foreign relations were in a deep crisis, one striking indication being that no European ambassador remained in Iran. The Islamic Republic needed a new face and a new policy towards détente.<sup>34</sup>

In the aftermath of his landslide victory, the president of the third republic Khatami maintained Rafsanjani's pragmatic approach but shifted its emphasis to what came to be called a 'reformist agenda'. This approach was based on two central pillars: political reforms in domestic politics, and dialogue and détente in foreign policy. To this end, Khatami put forth two key initiatives to normalize Iran's relations with the world and enhance Iran's stance in global politics: the principle of a 'Reduction of Tensions' and a 'Dialogue of Civilizations'.<sup>35</sup>

The Europeans reopened their embassies in Tehran when Khatami's foreign minister assured the EU that Iran would not uphold the 1989 fatwa regarding Salman Rushdie. The EU continued its policy of 'critical dialogue' with Iran, demanding greater respect for human rights and for the most part, Iran's response was positive. As a result, for the first time since 1979 the UN Human Rights Commission – in opposition to the United States – declined to put Iran among the countries that violated human rights.<sup>36</sup>

In an interview with CNN shortly after his election, Khatami expressed his appreciation for American democracy, condemned all forms of terrorism, and even expressed his regret for the 1979 American hostage crisis.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, Khatami criticized American foreign policy for the 'mode of relationship' it pursues with nations such as Iran and also condemned American foreign policy for its dependence on Israel and vice versa. 'A bulky wall of mistrust', Khatami argued, exists 'between us and the American administration, a mistrust rooted in improper behavior by the American governments', using the US's suspected involvement in the 1953 coup against Iran's prime minister as an example.

Khatami's idea of 'Dialogue between Civilizations' gained recognition by the United Nations, with the year 2001 being declared the official year of this policy. Khatami's UN speech 'raised hopes for a détente' with the US and<sup>38</sup> a series of exchange activities in sports, academe, and the arts became possible. For the first time in a half century, US representative and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright admitted that the United States had 'orchestrated the overthrow of Iran's popular prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq'<sup>39</sup> in the 1953 coup. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Brent Scowcroft, and Richard Murphy then followed with a call for an end to the 'dual containment' of Iraq and Iran.<sup>40</sup> With the support of the US, Iran received over \$500 million in

loans from the World Bank. The US met with Iranian officials at the UN to discuss the Afghanistan issue, added the Iranian opposition group People's Mojahedin Organization (MKO) to the list of terrorist organizations, and removed Iran's name from the list of major drug-producing states.<sup>41</sup> In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Iran was instrumental in removing the Taliban government and establishing a pro-American regime in Afghanistan. Not only did Iran continue its support for the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, but, as Americans admitted, it was 'extremely helpful in getting Karzai in as the president'.<sup>42</sup>

But President George W. Bush's 'axis of evil' speech in 2002, which placed Iran amongst other 'rogue states' of Iraq and North Korea, raised much speculation about a US plan for regime change in Iran. The speech shocked the reformists and 'created a mood of the past, especially of the 1953 coup', forced the Iranian hardliners to raise the flag of national security, and persuaded some reformers 'to put their hopes on the back burner waiting for better days'.<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, the Bush administration rejected Khatami's proposal in May 2003 for a comprehensive compromise with the US, with the State Department even reprimanding the Swiss ambassador for delivering the Iranian proposal. Nonetheless, Iran under Khatami continued to talk to the UK, France, and Germany (the EU-3) and suspended its nuclear enrichment for two years from 2003 to 2005. But the effort never met Iran's expectation that the US would abandon its regime-change policy and lift economic sanctions. Only in December 2007 did the US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) suggest that Iran suspended its nuclear weapons programme in 2003, but Iran's conservative hardliners had already seized the moment to radicalize nuclear policy and a new president, Ahmadinejad, came to power in 2005.<sup>44</sup>

It was thus not surprising that Khatami's 'Dialogue among Civilizations' progressively lost its momentum. It became obvious that, contrary to the hopes raised by the reformists, Khatami's discourse and foreign policies could not provide the Islamic Republic with security and stability. The strategy of regime change implemented in neighbouring Afghanistan and Iraq, together with escalating tensions over Iran's nuclear programme, created a renewed concern with national security, and helped Iran's hardliners exploit Bush's aggressive foreign policy and consolidate their power by dividing the reformists and curtailing movements towards democratization. In 2004, Iran was

geographically surrounded by American troops occupying Afghanistan and Iraq, with a US military presence in the Arab monarchies to the south and the former Soviet republics to the north. What followed then in Iran was the rise of a security state with a strong anti-American stance at the expense of undermining people's freedom and civil rights.<sup>45</sup> The foreign policy of the US severely challenged peace and democracy in Iran, and contributed to the triumph of extremism in the fourth republic.

Iran's fifth republic under President Rouhani is a return to moderation and pragmatism. The West once lost an opportunity to make a deal with the moderate and reformist President Khatami as the foreign policy of the leading democracies in the West undermined Khatami's democratic reforms and contributed to the ascendancy of Ahmadinejad. The combination of pressure from civil society (Iran's pro-democracy Green Movement in 2009) and the failure of domestic and foreign policies under Ahmadinejad led Hassan Rouhani to win the presidential election in 2013. Rouhani's commitment to implement pragmatic policies that address Iran's domestic turbulence and contentious foreign relations is not a matter of debate. However, it is unclear whether he can fulfil his vision, especially in light of Iran's complex power structure and tremendous pressures from the hardliners in Iran, the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia and other conservative Arab regimes.<sup>46</sup> The West should welcome the opportunity to make a comprehensive deal with Iran, which would resolve Iran's nuclear issue and set the stage for regional cooperation in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and beyond.

#### *A Nuclear Dilemma?*

US foreign policy in the Middle East rests on three pillars: *containment* – the priority of stability over democracy; security, survival and the superiority of *Israel* in the region; and the free flow of *oil*. Iran is not an exception to this policy. These pillars have been repeatedly prioritized over democracy in Iran. The current policy of the West including the US towards nuclear issues is a case in point.<sup>47</sup>

A nuclear Iran would change the nuclear status quo and shift the balance of power in the region. It would challenge Israel's singular and superior position as the only nuclear state in the Middle East and could even initiate a nuclear arms race and/or an international nuclear regime set by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Despite

all the virulent rhetoric such as Ahmadinejad's statement of wiping Israel out of the map, the Islamic Republic knows that a nuclear attack against Israel or the US would be suicidal. The ruling elites are not 'mad mullahs'; they do cost-benefit analysis and calculate their survival. Mossad chief Tamir Pardo reportedly argued that a nuclear-armed Iran would not necessarily constitute an existential threat to Israel<sup>48</sup> or to the West. Instead, it could be a counterbalance against the dominant nuclear powers. Hence, putting aside the rhetoric, it seems that stability/status quo remains the driving force for US and Israel policies towards Iran.

The rationale for Iran's nuclear policy is threefold: first, Iran is a major regional power and seeks to be on the cutting edge of science, which crucially includes nuclear technology. For Iran, nuclear energy/technology is about *national prestige*. Secondly, Iran is home to the world's third largest oil reserve and the second largest gas reserve. Yet, thanks to the targeted economic sanctions by the West, the oil and gas industry has not developed and Iran is currently importing a great deal of refined oil. Iran sees nuclear power as an alternative source of energy. Thirdly, according to Abrahamian, like Japan, Iran is interested in a 'full nuclear cycle', not for making bombs but for the 'option of having it'. Iran is not the only country to pursue this right; there are about 30 countries in the world that hold to the 'Japanese option'. The goal is to protect *national security* with the rationale being *deterrence*.<sup>49</sup> Three major factors contribute to Iran's national-security concern: first, there is the eight-year Iran-Iraq war (1980–8) started by Iraq and orchestrated by a number of Western and neighbouring countries. Since war and peace were imposed on the Iranian state, the authorities planned to ensure the very survival of the state by pushing for the revival of the nuclear programme. Secondly, Iran is surrounded by a number of nuclear powers including Russia, Pakistan, India, China, and Israel, not to mention the United States itself, given the existence of American bases in many neighbouring countries. Third, Bush's 'axis of evil' speech in 2002, the American-led invasion of non-nuclear Iraq, the hesitancy to invade a nuclear North Korea, and the continued policy and/or discourse of regime change have contributed to the radicalization of Iran's nuclear position.<sup>50</sup>

An ideal security solution would be a nuclear-free zone for the Middle East, but only a complete optimist would think of that as a real



alternative at the moment. According to Kenneth Waltz, a renowned scholar of neorealism, a nuclear Iran would challenge Israel's nuclear monopoly in the Middle East, bringing a nuclear balance of power that would stabilize the region.<sup>51</sup> For Waltz, 'nuclear balancing means stability'.<sup>52</sup> Waltz argues that 'despite a widespread belief to the contrary, Iranian policy is made not by "mad mullahs" but by perfectly sane ayatollahs who want to survive just like any other leaders'.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, Waltz adds,

The United States and its allies need not take such pains to prevent the Iranians from developing a nuclear weapon. Diplomacy between Iran and the major powers should continue, because open lines of communication will make the Western countries feel better able to live with a nuclear Iran. But the current sanctions on Iran can be dropped: they primarily harm ordinary Iranians, with little purpose.<sup>54</sup>

The nuclear talks between Iran and the 5 + 1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany) aim to reach a solution in the interest of peace and security in the region *and must continue*.

### *Regional Policy*

Iran's regional policy in the first few years of the first republic was focused on altering the 'balance of power in favor of Islamist and radical forces'.<sup>55</sup> For Khomeini, the conservative Arab countries, Zionism and Western imperialism constituted 'a triangle of evil'.<sup>56</sup> The Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf reacted to Iran's perceived threat by financially supporting Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war and in 1981, created the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as 'a protective mechanism' against the spread of Iran's influence in the region.<sup>57</sup> Iran, on the other hand, enjoyed Syria's blessing. Syria – with its secular Arab nationalist Ba'athist ideology and a leadership dominated by members of a heterodox Shi'i sect, the Alawites – was 'the first state in the region' to support Iran during its war with Iraq.<sup>58</sup> Syria calculated that Iraq's defeat and the replacement of its government with a pro-Syrian Ba'athist regime would boost Syria's strategic advantage in the region and thereby assisted Iran.<sup>59</sup>

Both ideology and geostrategic calculation informed Iran's regional policy on the Israeli borders in Syria and Lebanon. This reaffirmed the Islamic Republic's initial promise to give the Shi'i-Alawite Syrians and the Lebanese Shi'a political, military, and economic support. Iran and its Revolutionary Guard were thus influential forces in the creation of Hezbollah in 1985. As the former Iranian minister of the interior, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi remarks, 'the ties between Iran and Hezbollah are far greater than those between a revolutionary regime with a revolutionary party outside its borders'.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, Iran's involvement with Hezbollah did not make it 'merely an instrument of the Iranian leadership's desire to spread the revolution'.<sup>61</sup> The argument that Hezbollah was simply an extension of Iran's power in Lebanon 'would be just as absurd as to conclude that the Maronite militias, which received \$150 million from Israel during Yitzhak Rabin's government in 1974–7, were nothing other than instruments of Israeli policy'.<sup>62</sup> Hezbollah enjoyed a deep social base in the Shi'i community in Lebanon and welcomed support from, and strategic alliance with, post-revolutionary Iran.<sup>63</sup>

In the summer of 1988, a year before his death, Khomeini made a difficult decision to save the Islamic Republic. He reluctantly accepted the ceasefire in the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, as it no longer served the interests of the state. Despite his fiery talk against imperialism and the disbelieving enemy, as the founding father of the regime Khomeini had no choice but, to use his own phrase, to drink from 'the poisonous chalice'. 'The poisonous chalice' of the peace with Saddam Hussein with no clear victory, however, enabled the regime to survive, although his death brought some shifts in Iran's regional policies.<sup>64</sup>

Rafsanjani's presidency coincided with the end of the Iran-Iraq war. This exhaustive eight-year war forced the regime to acknowledge the limits of its power and pursue a pragmatic approach to foreign policy. Rafsanjani's statement that 'we cannot build dams with slogans' expressed his intent to preserve and maximize the country's national interests.<sup>65</sup> This involved softening the once cherished slogan of 'neither East nor West' and adopting a regional 'good neighbour policy' with 'respect for territorial integrity as well as social and religious values of other peoples'.<sup>66</sup> As he wanted the Persian Gulf to 'become like an area around a home, like a common farmland', his regional policies were non-confrontational and invited the cooperation of Arab countries.<sup>67</sup>

Rafsanjani was particularly concerned about mending Iran's relationship with Saudi Arabia, which had been characterized by hostility during Khomeini's era, with Iranian pilgrims staging frequent political demonstrations on Saudi soil during the annual pilgrimage or hajj. The Iranian regime under Khomeini had utilized the hajj as a vehicle to export the Islamic revolution, to wage an attack against 'so-called American Islam, and to propagate its anti-US and anti-Israeli views by staging political rallies and protests'.<sup>68</sup> When Rafsanjani ascended to the presidency, he put an end to these demonstrations.<sup>69</sup>

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August of 1990 further presented Iran with an opportunity to improve its relationship with Persian Gulf states since Iraq replaced Iran as the 'threat to the security and integrity' of the region.<sup>70</sup> Both Iran's decision to condemn the Iraqi invasion and its subsequent policy of neutrality during the war signified its willingness to forge closer ties with moderate Arab states and the West.

During this period, Iran's relationship with Shi'i groups in the region, especially Hezbollah, was influenced by Rafsanjani's pragmatic foreign policy. The political landscape of post-Khomeini Iran, the new thinking in its foreign policy, and Rafsanjani's pragmatism led, in turn, to a shift in Hezbollah's political outlook. Shaykh Subhi al-Tufayli, Sayyid Abbas al-Musawi, and Sayyid Husayn al-Musawi were at the centre of a major debate on the future of the party in Lebanon. They asserted that it was not in Hezbollah's interest to wage jihad against the West, given that Iran was calling for a truce. Instead, they advocated rapprochement and favoured integration into mainstream Lebanese politics; a position Rafsanjani supported.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, 'Hezbollah did not abandon the ideal of an Islamic state, [but] it was now argued that, given Lebanon's demographics, the establishment of an Iranian-style system of government was unfeasible'.<sup>72</sup>

Like its relations with the West, Iran's regional policy in the third republic was moderate. Khatami's policy towards Lebanon and Hezbollah was consistent with his policy of détente and dialogue. 'As Hezbollah became a major player in Lebanese politics and achieved electoral successes, politics in Iran also became more animated' under President Khatami.<sup>73</sup> In 1996, he visited Lebanon and met with representatives of all communities, including political rivals of Hezbollah among the Maronite Christians and the Sunni Muslims, as well as the Shi'i Amal Party.<sup>74</sup>

Further, the Iranian–Syrian relationship was strengthened during this period due to the Turkish–Israeli strategic partnership in the mid-1990s and the 1991 Madrid Conference and the 1993 Oslo Accords. As these developments had undermined Syria's position in the region and added to its insecurity, Damascus saw Iran as a strategic partner that could reinforce its position in the Middle East. Hafez al-Assad's visit to Tehran in 1997 and Khatami's visit to Syria in 1999 signified the heightened level of cooperation between the two states.<sup>75</sup>

Khatami believed that good relations with the Persian Gulf States would lead the US to leave the region because this would remove the threat to its interests. Khatami's policy in the Persian Gulf therefore aimed 'to consolidate a system of regional security through bilateral confidence-building measures that might, eventually, lead to institutionalize regional security arrangement and make the presence of US forces superfluous'.<sup>76</sup> He realized, however, that Iran could not normalize relations with the Persian Gulf sheikdoms as long as it did not harmonize its relations with Saudi Arabia. As a result, Khatami successfully established amicable relations with Saudi Arabia, nullifying the quarrel between Iran and the United Arab Emirates over Abu Musa and the disputed Greater and Lesser Tunb islands. Only a few months after the 1997 election, in December of that year, the eighth Summit of the Islamic Conference Organization convened in Tehran, a success for Khatami's policy of ending an era of Iran's isolation. However, as discussed before, by the early years of the twenty-first century, the US occupation of Iraq and Bush's 2002 speech against Iran once again changed Iran's regional policy.<sup>77</sup>

Therefore, as a result of the policies which became central to Iran's foreign policy under the fourth republic and in the aftermath of the US occupation of Iraq, the Shi'i groups in Iraq received Iran's moral, military, and economic aid. Iran's regional influence reached the point that 'the entire fate of the U.S. efforts to stabilize Iraq and a peaceful transition of power rested on Iranian intentions'.<sup>78</sup> Consequently, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf grew increasingly concerned. As Hunter points out, the relationship between Iran and the Arab states has 'historically been characterized by competition, deep-rooted mutual suspicions and misgivings'.<sup>79</sup> The Arab states interpreted Iran's involvement in regional developments and its sympathy with liberation movements and/or Shi'i groups as part of its persistent drive to achieve supremacy in the region.

Iran also sought to reinforce its partnership with Syria in order to advance their shared effort to undermine the US presence in Iraq. Iran gave its full support to Syria in the aftermath of US political pressure on Syria to assume accountability for its alleged involvement in the assassination of Lebanese prime minister Rafic Hariri. The result was a joint effort by Iran and Hezbollah 'to rebuff pressure against the Syrian regime'.<sup>80</sup> Iran supported Syria, and in return, Syria gave Hezbollah arms and economic support, demonstrating the existence of a triangular alliance to resist the activities of the US and its Arab allies. As a result of this, Iran's partnership with Syria and Hezbollah grew stronger. For example, *Al Abram Weekly* reports that Iran's investment in Syria reached an estimated \$3 billion by the end of 2008.<sup>81</sup>

Iran's generous financial and military support of Hezbollah also increased significantly in the aftermath of 9/11 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. This helped Hezbollah to successfully resist the Israelis in the 2006 war, and also made it apparent that Ahmadinejad's government had the backing of the supreme leader Khamenei.<sup>82</sup>

Iraq and Syria constitute two major cases of Iran's regional policy in the fifth republic. It should be noted that like other Middle East regional powers, Iran competes for greater regional influence akin to how 'Egypt worked to spread Arab nationalism and socialism, as Iraq did with Baathism, and Saudi Arabia with its particular version of Wahhabi Islam'.<sup>83</sup> In a similar manner, Israel and Turkey work hard to enhance their regional influence. In the post-Khomeini era and after a devastating eight-year war with Iraq, Iran's Iraq policy was informed by one principle: the desire for 'non-hostile governments' in the latter state. Iraq's stability became Iran's national security concern. Contrary to conventional wisdom, as Hunter argues, neither the 1991 Gulf War, nor Saddam's fall in 2003 immediately improved Iran's regional security. After 1991, both Iran and Iraq were contained by the US policy of 'dual containment' and the American invasion of Iraq of 2003 brought the US troops on Iran's borders. In 'What Iran Wants in Iraq and Why', Shireen T. Hunter argues, 'a weakened Saddam would have been much better for Iran than living with US troops' on its western and eastern borders (Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively).<sup>84</sup>

Many in policy-making circles in Iran would like to see a united and non-hostile Iraq on its western borders. Likewise, although Iraqi Shi'a view Iran as a counter balance to the Sunni Arab world, they do not

'accept subservience to Iran; they are Arab and Iraqi and nationalistic'.<sup>85</sup> Like Iraqi Shi'a, Iran is concerned about the Shi'i holy shrines in Iraq. Notwithstanding these concerns, Iran-Iraq relations are primarily shaped by geopolitics. 'Any independent and united Iraqi state w[ould] be in competition with Iran' as they currently compete over oil markets. However, it is critical to note that 'hostility and competition' are not the same.<sup>86</sup> One should not forget that post-Saddam governments in Iraq have not yet abandoned their Iraqi nationalist policies. Reparations in compensation for the Iran-Iraq war have also not been contemplated, nor did they accept the 1975 Algeria Accord – an accord that acknowledges Iran's sovereignty over the Shatt al-Arab/Arvand River.

Iraqi Shi'a cannot therefore be described as proxies of the Iranian regime. Furthermore, neither Shi'i nor Sunni Iraqis are homogeneous; there are divisions among each community. The former Shi'i prime minister – Nouri al-Maleki – and the Shi'i cleric Muqtada al-Sadr have very little in common either politically or socially. The former President Jalal Talibani, a Kurdish Sunni Muslim, is a friend of Iran, while Ayad Allawi, one of the opposition leaders and the opponent of Iran's role in Iraq, is a Shi'i Muslim who has the backing of Saudi Arabia. Besides, despite Iran's advice, Muqtada al-Sadr joined a supra-sectarian coalition with Ayad Allawi to defend Iraq's national interests.<sup>87</sup>

As Hunter argues, 'Iran has not played a purely Shia card in Iraq. Iranian statements always pin blame on the "Takfiris" (Muslims who accuse other Muslims not agreeing with them of being unbelievers) and not the Sunnis for sectarian problems'.<sup>88</sup> Iran's leadership was for a while split over whether to continue its support for then prime minister Nouri al-Maliki. While Iran's hardliners support for Maliki contributed to the current crisis in Iraq, the reformist/pragmatist faction was willing to neutralize Iran's support for him. When a group then known as 'The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Levant' (ISIS/ISIL), or now 'The Islamic State' (IS) – in coalition with other opposition forces such as the former members of the Iraqi Ba'ath party, Sunni tribal leaders, etc. – began conquering parts of Iraq and Syria, moderate forces in Iran such as President Rouhani and the former president and current chair of the Expediency Council Rafsanjani hinted at a possible cooperation with the US in Iraq to defeat ISIS.<sup>89</sup> Likewise, US Secretary of State John Kerry declared 'the US is willing to consider forms of cooperation with Iran in Iraq, though not joint military action' to accomplish this desired goal.<sup>90</sup>

Nonetheless, hardliners in the US, Iran, Israel, and the Arab conservative regimes oppose any cooperation between Iran and the US to secure regional security. Ayatollah Khamenei has not welcomed the US–Iran cooperation in Iraq, given his scepticism and distrust due to the fact that he sees Iran's cooperation with the US after the 9/11 attacks to have yielded very little.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, however, holds the belief that the West should not cooperate with Iran to defeat ISIS in an attempt to secure peace and stability in Iraq. 'When your enemies are fighting each other', Netanyahu argued, 'don't strengthen either one of them. Weaken both.'<sup>91</sup> Any regional cooperation between the West and Iran in Iraq, argued Netanyahu, would be a 'terrible mistake' as it would ease political and economic pressures on Iran's nuclear programme. For the Israeli hardliners, ISIS has diminished Iran's capability to resupply Hezbollah in Lebanon and blocked Iran's logistic support to the Assad regime in Syria. Containing Iran's regional hegemony, it is argued, is far more important than stopping a bloody sectarian war in Iraq. The American neoconservatives and, more surprisingly, Saudi Arabia and other conservative Arab regimes echo the Likud Party of Israel. However, as Juan Cole argues, 'ISIS is a more potent threat both to Israel and to Iran than the latter two are to each other. If these two obstructionists have their way, an effective international response to ISIS will be forestalled, with grave implications for the Middle East and the world.'<sup>92</sup> The West and other regional powers should accept and acknowledge Iran's security concern and welcome Iran's potential role for improving regional security. Demonizing Iran and delegitimizing its role will not improve peace and security in the region.

While the conservative Arab regimes 'portray Iran as a non-Arab, Shia threat to the Sunni Arab world', Iran's foreign policy enjoyed relative support in the Arab streets of Palestine, Lebanon, and Egypt because it openly opposes Zionism and client conservative Arab regimes.<sup>93</sup> However, Iran's popularity has declined due to its role in Iraq and more importantly in Syria. Iraq under its Shi'i leadership is seen as a 'battleground for the US and Iran to settle their differences'.<sup>94</sup> Iran's unconditional support to the Assad regime has also tremendously damaged its popularity in the Arab street.<sup>95</sup>

Iran's policy in Syria has contributed to sectarianism in the region. The conservative Arab regimes of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, together with

Turkey, financed and armed extremist Salafis to fight the perceived threat of 'Shi'i domination'. They have utilized the scepter of Iranian involvement to construct a discourse of intractable Shi'a–Sunni conflict. However, the fact is that Iran's policy in Syria is mainly guided by *realpolitik* and geopolitics rather than ideological concerns. Iran's backing of the Assad regime and its support of Hezbollah can be seen to be mainly derived from Iran's security concern and its regional competition with Israel.

This is not to say that ideas and norms do not contribute to policy-making in post-revolutionary Iran; however, Iranian politics has always been a combination of the Khomeinist ideology and pragmatism. Over the past three decades, politics have most often triumphed over ideology. The Iranian authorities share common concerns on national security, yet differ in approaches. Traditional conservatives, radical/neo-conservatives, pragmatists, and reformists are divided on how to deal with the world in order to maximize the security of the state. The radical conservatives on the other hand, and the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to some degree, are advocates of tougher regional and global policies. Such a radical approach is informed by certain ideological assumptions but is *mainly* shaped by political calculation and national security concerns. For reformists and, to some degree, pragmatists, security and democracy are interconnected, and democratization at home will ensure the security and survival of the state. They argue that American policy towards Iran can only be challenged with moves towards democracy at home and diplomacy abroad. They have worked with Europe, Russia and Japan to undermine US efforts to isolate Iran, and slowed down military programmes in return for good relations with Europe, allowing more inspections and signing an additional protocol to assure the United Nations that Iran's nuclear programme is peaceful. Further, they support regional détente and welcome better relations and more cooperation with Saudi Arabia in Iraq and Syria.

Syria has become a battleground for the multiple forces in the region. On the one hand, the West, the conservative Arab states (particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar), Turkey under the AKP, Hamas, and Egypt under former president Morsi side with the Syrian opposition. On the other, Russia, China, Iraq under Nuri al-Maliki, Hezbollah and Iran support the Assad regime.<sup>96</sup> Needless to say that the Syrian opposition is divided and each group has received support from a different country.

For example, Saudi Arabia supports the Salafis while Qatar provides more assistance to other Islamist groups.

In spite of the fact that Iran remains a significant player in the Syrian crisis, Vali Nasr argues, 'Washington has seen the developments in Syria as a humiliating strategic defeat for Iran.' The US fears that Iran's involvement 'would throw Tehran a lifeline and set back talks on Iran's nuclear program'. However, Iranian leaders are divided on whether to terminate their 'unwavering support' for the Assad regime. President Rouhani would certainly like to participate in diplomatic discussions in order to look after the interests of Syrian Alawites, especially in order to rebuild its 'damaged prestige in the Arab world' for the post-Assad era.<sup>97</sup>

As discussed before, political calculations and geopolitics, rather than *merely* a cultural/religious affinity, drive Iran's support for the Assad regime. Iranian politics is a mixture of ideology and pragmatism, and in most of the cases analysed here, ideology is most often used in the service of politics/geopolitics. Iranian authorities share the same security concern on the very survival of the state and of the revolution; however, they are divided on how to pursue this goal. Several factors make the 'religious/sectarian' explanation of the Iranian–Syrian relationship problematic: the Ba'athist ideology of the Syrian regime represents an authoritarian secular and pan-Arabist ideology. What can loosely be denoted as 'Assadism' is not a religious ideology. The Assad regime relies on the support of a network of Alawite families – and some members of the Christian community, among others – that fear a future radical Sunni regime that might be motivated by both religious intolerance and retribution against them for supporting the current rulers. Further, the Alawites represent such an unorthodox form of Shi'i Islam that it only recently has been accepted by mainline Shi'i scholars as a part of their own branch of Islam. Finally, there is much reason to believe that Damascus would have dropped its alliance with Tehran and attempted to come to an understanding with Israel long ago had it been able to recover the Golan Heights peacefully.<sup>98</sup>

The current Syria–Iran alliance is mostly political and is *not* based on the contested, constructed and fabricated idea of the 'Shi'i Crescent' as some may believe.<sup>99</sup> The idea of a 'Shi'i Crescent' and surrounding narratives implies that the religious motivations of politicians and policy-makers alike provide a satisfactory explanation for events in the Middle East. It overemphasizes sectarianism and religious fault lines (the

Sunni–Shi'a divide), undermines the complex network of economic and political factors in international relations, reduces the political into some constructed religious fault lines, and reinforces Orientalist discourses concerning the region. In fact, religious and cultural values are often politicized to serve the interests of global and regional powers. In many cases, geopolitical interests overshadow religious values. *Realpolitik* often bypasses and trumps cultural fault lines. The concept of a 'Shi'i Crescent' serves as an ideological tool to suppress the Shi'i communities under the rule of Arab conservative regimes and to mask the *political* rivalry among regional powers.<sup>100</sup>

Regional and global politics, in sum, continue to play a significant role in the future success or failure of Iran's democratization processes. Peace and democracy will not be achieved by waging war through foreign interventions in the name of 'democracy promotion', by imposing crippling economic sanctions against a nation, or by supporting proxy wars. The main casualty in the American and/or Israeli collision with Iran would be Iran's democratic movement and it would ironically be only the United States and Israel, that would shore up the regime's popular support inside Iran. Iranian youth are disenchanted with socio-cultural policies and dissatisfied with the economic situation, yet they are looking for an *Iranian solution* to such Iranian problems. The reform movement in the 1990s and the pro-democracy Green Movement (2009–present) exemplify the most recent waves of Iran's quest for democracy.<sup>101</sup> A sustainable peace and genuine democracy can only be achieved from *within*.

### Beyond Democratic Peace Theory: Democracy and Peace from Within

An alternative vision on peace and democracy in the Muslim world in general, and Iran in particular, emphasizes the role of civil society and social movements. The reform movement of 1990s and the current Green Movement in Iran is a strong case for democracy and peace from within. This movement is an epistemic shift towards the formation of a civic nonviolent political culture, transcending constructed dichotomies – such as tradition and modernity, faith and freedom, revelation and reason, particular and universal, and sacred and secular – in Iran's politico-intellectual discourse. Today's Iran is on the brink of a 'post-Islamist' shift underneath the Islamic Republic.<sup>102</sup>

Post-Islamism in post-revolutionary Iran is more than just an intellectual discourse; it is deeply rooted in civil society. The reform movement in the late 1990s and the pro-democracy Green Movement symbolize the socio-political features of Iran's post-Islamist movement. Post-Islamism in Iran is not monolithic; it can be divided into three main intellectual trends with each trend subdivided into various views: quasi/semi-post-Islamism;<sup>103</sup> liberal post-Islamism;<sup>104</sup> and neo-Shariati post-Islamist discourse.<sup>105</sup>

Post-Islamism in post-revolutionary Iran resulted, in part, from the paradox of the Islamic/Islamist state. The *unintended consequences* of the Islamist state empowered and enlightened the public, transformed the people from subjects to citizens, and eventually undermined the intellectual, political and social foundations of the Islamic Republic. The 1979 revolution, the mobilization of people for a greater participation in the Islamic Republic, and the Iraq–Iran war – the first modern war fought by the Iranian state in 150 years – were instrumental in such a social transformation. The end of the Iraq–Iran war with no clear victory on either side, the decline of revolutionary fever, and Ayatollah Khomeini's death brought a new chapter to the life and legacy of ruling Islamists in Iran. The main challenge after Khomeini was to institutionalize, or using Max Weber's phrase, 'routinize' Khomeini's charisma. But Khomeini's charisma was not transferable to a successor and the state ideology was no longer able to reach the youth, even though they had been raised and educated under the Islamic Republic. They were socio-culturally disenchanted, politically disappointed, and economically dissatisfied. The state had failed to create the individual and the society Khomeini had envisioned. Instead, Iran in the 1990s was experiencing a growing social and ideological disenchantment.

By the early 1990s, Iran was grappling with the consequences of demographic changes which resulted in 70% of the population being under the age of 30. Two other structural factors pushing for greater social change were rapid urbanization and the expansion of higher education. Civil society managed to challenge the repressive intentions of the state. Youth and women brought the public sphere into their private lives by watching forbidden shows and foreign satellites, by meeting and communicating with each other, and by openly discussing socio-political taboos. They even managed to create a relatively open space in the public

sphere by successfully resisting the clerical cultural code and insisting on their *social*, if not political, rights. Women continued to challenge the state's gender politics by consistently resisting the clerical indoctrination and re-socialization. By the mid-1980s, female employment was at 30%, exceeding the pre-revolutionary level. Women constituted 40% of all graduates. The regime's Cultural Revolution was far from successful.<sup>106</sup> The '*bejab*' or veil soon became 'a haunting concern for the Islamic Republic' and thus 'the symbol of women's defiance and resistance'.<sup>107</sup>

The independent intellectuals managed to continue publishing journals such as *Iran-e Farda*, *Goftego*, and *Kiyan*. Moreover, in spite of all the censorship, the film industry and the arts in general managed to implicitly expose ideas fundamentally opposed to the clerical cultural codes. The social institutions were far from mere instruments of the state, given the existence of a limited and restricted public space, creating a relatively active and energetic civil society.<sup>108</sup>

At the same time, Iran's growing middle class remained economically dissatisfied. Middle-class families were using their savings, selling off their assets, and engaging in an underground economy. A sharp decline in oil prices, a rapid rise in population, ineffective economic plans, and systemic corruption 'generated a host of economic problems: unemployment, inflation, foreign-exchange crises, lack of investments, shortages of schools and housing, flight of capital and professionals, and continued influx of peasants into urban slums'.<sup>109</sup>

Unlike his conservative counterpart, reformist presidential candidate Mohammad Khatami addressed and acknowledged the crisis. With some two-thirds of the population under the age of 25, 50% below the age of 20 and 70% below the age of 30, and no personal memory of monarchy or revolution, youth and students voted for Khatami and for greater socio-cultural opening and economic opportunities. Interestingly, another group that casted their vote for Khatami was made up of independent religious people because the clerical oligarchy had equally disappointed them. For the first time in modern Iran, the *ulama* (religious/learned scholars) had lost their independence as a result of the rule of the Islamic Republic. Contrary to conventional arguments, under this form of government, politics has triumphed over religion; religion as served politics and not the other way around. Thus, Ayatollah Khomeini's theory and practice of the absolute *velayat-e faqih* and Islamization from above disappointed both independent religious and

secular forces. Khatami's discourse of the rule of law, civil society promotion, pluralism and democracy appealed to various sections of society, making him what some have called an 'accidental president'<sup>110</sup> of the Islamic Republic. Khatami's reformist republic provided a relatively free space for the development of civil society that included women, students and intellectuals. They 'inspired a mass reform movement linking three generations; prominent "fathers of the revolution", most critically Ayatollah Montazeri; "children of the revolution", many of whom came from the Islamic Left as well as from liberal-nationalist circles; and finally "grandchildren of the revolution", the new generation of high school and university students who constituted the movement's mass base.'<sup>111</sup> The same fathers, children and grandchildren of the revolution currently participated in the 2009 post-Islamist and pro-democratic Green Movement in Iran. In fact, much of the active civil society organizations involved in the Green Movement were developed during Khatami's presidency.<sup>112</sup>

We will now turn to the tenets of three post-Islamist trends in Iran. The first trend of post-Islamism in post-revolutionary Iran can be called 'quasi-' or 'semi post-Islamism'. Some of these followers remain committed to the doctrine of the *velayat-e faqih*; however, they are disenchanted with the absolutist interpretation of Khomeini's doctrine. The rule of the *vali-ye faqih*, it is argued, is not divine and must be subject to democratic procedures. Others, such as Mohsen Kadivar, Ayatollah Montazeri's prominent disciple, reject Khomeini's theory but remain committed to the concept of an Islamic Republic. For Mohsen Kadivar, Khomeini's political version of the *velayat-e faqih* existed neither in the Qur'an, nor in the Prophet's nor the Shi'i Imams' traditions.<sup>113</sup> His mentor, Ayatollah Montazeri, challenged Khamenei's religious and political credentials and remained a fearless voice of the reformist opposition in the Green Movement until he passed away in December 2009. In his last public speech in support of the Green Movement, Ayatollah Montazeri boldly argued that one is not obliged to defend the Islamic Republic at any cost; the survival of the Islamic state in itself is not religiously sanctioned. The Islamic state exists to implement and materialize Islamic values. If it violates such values, it has lost its legitimacy. He argued that the current regime is *neither Islamic nor a republic*; instead, that it is a mere dictatorship.<sup>114</sup> Mehdi Karoubi, a symbolic figure of the Green Movement, similarly, questioned the authority of the *vali-ye faqih*

Khamenei: 'The extent and power of the *velayat-e faqih* has expanded so much that I doubt in some cases, such great power was even given to the prophets and the infallibles by God and even I do not think that God Himself has bestowed upon Himself the right to have such conduct toward His creations.'<sup>115</sup> Likewise, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the leading public figure of Iran's Green Movement (and presidential candidate in the 2009 elections), clearly advocated the separation of 'religious institutions and clergymen from the state', although he acknowledged the 'presence' of religion in the future of Iran. He 'opposes the use of religion as an instrument and coercing people into an ideology, set or clique', realizing that people want nothing short of 'popular sovereignty'.<sup>116</sup>

Liberal post-Islamists – such as Abdolkarim Soroush, an influential religious reformist, Mohammad Mojtahed-Shabestari, a leading liberal cleric, and Mustapha Malekian, among others – argue that religious knowledge is a branch of human knowledge; it is culturally and historically contingent; and it corresponds to other secular human knowledge. According to these arguments, religion and the shari'a are silent; it is specific social agents and social contexts that give voice to religious texts. One's commitment to religion should be measured by their commitment to the intrinsic, core, and transcendent of religion, not to the contingent and historical aspects of religion. Therefore, Islam cannot be an ideology, and neither does it promote a particular form of political system. Religion is a spiritual experience and mostly, if not fully, belongs to the private sphere.<sup>117</sup> Liberal post-Islamists have successfully challenged Khomeini's theory of an Islamic state and criticized the epistemological foundations of the clerical Islam.

A new reading of Ali Shariati's revolutionary ideology, neo-Shariati discourse, has immensely contributed to the depth of lively and rich intellectual debates in post-revolutionary Iran. Neo-Shariatists make a clear distinction between different periods of Shariati's intellectual life, seeing a difference between the young and revolutionary Shariati and the more mature Shariati in his post-prison period. Moreover, a clear distinction is made between Shariati core and more relevant ideas, with the more marginal and slightly outdated ones.<sup>118</sup> In their post-revolutionary and post-Islamist readings of Shariati's thought, the trinity of emancipation, namely 'freedom, equality and spirituality', remains the most relevant and intrinsic. The trinity challenges structures of domination, which rest on a triangle of economic power/material injustice, political oppression,

and inner ideological justification/religious alienation. More importantly, while Shariati never clearly supported a secular democracy, neo-Shariatists explicitly reject the concept of an Islamic state and instead advocate a secular or *urfi* democracy. For Ehsan Shariati, the state is a neutral secular entity and must remain so with respect to all religions and ideologies. Thus, the state's legitimacy derives from public reason and the free collective will of the people. As such, Shariati and neo-Shariati discourse stress the importance of *political* secularism. Hasan Yusefi-Eshkevari, another important figure within neo-Shariati discourse, argues that from a purely Islamic perspective it may be claimed that political power is an *urfi* and worldly question. He explicitly challenges the two pillars of the Islamic state, namely 'divine legitimacy of power' and the 'full implementation of *Shari'a*'. It is believed that 'Mohammad's political rule in Median was not divine; it was the result of a social contract between him and people'. And that if the state is not divine 'then *Shari'a*, too, cannot be divine'. According to this strain of thought, the laws implemented by the Prophet were not eternal but rather reflected the particular time and space. Hence, the full implementation of *shari'a* has no religious or rational relevance.<sup>119</sup> It can thus be argued that the Islamic state is an Islamist *human* construction.

The critical stance of the neo-Shariatists towards tradition and modernity, clericalism and neo-liberalism, shallow reformism and militant revolutionary approach, together with the admiration of 'radical reform' both in religious thought and socio-political structure, appeal to the new generation in Iran. The discourse is particularly appealing to its supporters due to its *social*, not theological, approach to democratization, and its *egalitarian* leanings towards socio-political change. Neo-Shariatists' emphasis on societal empowerment, self and social awareness, and the people's political agency aims to bring sustainable change from *within*. Therefore, they have organized and worked with civil society including women, youth, students and labour organizations.<sup>120</sup>

In this approach, modernity, secularity, and democracy are 'neither a universal faith doing violence to outmoded traditions, nor limited to an inherently Eurocentric project'.<sup>121</sup> One needs to move beyond a teleological understanding of modernity, democracy, peace, and Islam; instead, there should be a critical 'emergent cosmopolitanism' and a need for 'space for localisms'.<sup>122</sup> In other words, we must put abstract concepts into their socio-political settings, move away from cultural

essentialism, and create space for dialogue, grassroots democracy at home, and sustainable peace in the world.

Iran's quest for peace and democracy dates back to the late nineteenth century, with the first protests against the 1890 tobacco concession granted by the then Shah to Great Britain. Iran's Constitutional Revolution (1906) and the anti-despotic Islamic Revolution (1979) were first and foremost grassroots democratic movements. Between these two revolutions, Iran's experience of democracy under Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq was short-lived. A joint military coup orchestrated by two leading world democracies changed the course of history for Iran – and possibly for the whole Middle East. But Iran's desire for democracy continued after the 1979 Revolution. The reform movement in the 1990s, the 2009 pro-democracy movement, numerous civil rights movements – youth, student, and women movements – and a discursive turn towards post-Islamism hint at the depth and richness of Iran's quest for democracy. Iran's civil society is ready for democracy but it is caught between authoritarianism from within and economic sanctions and a threat of war from without. Peace and democracy in Iran are at risk because the hardliners in Iran, the US, Israel and the Arab countries are determined to stymie compromise and confidence building between Iran and the world. Peace and diplomacy with the international community will have a profound impact on democratization from within. Détente and dialogue with regional and global powers will empower the Iranian reformists to push back the hardliners and speed up the process of democratization.

### Conclusion

The challenges of democratization in post-revolutionary Iran can be detected from both within and without the country. The ascendancy of the Islamist hardliners is the first domestic challenge for peace and democracy in Iran, though equally problematic is the hegemony of the regional and global hardliners. The hardliners in Iran, the US, Israel, and the Arab conservative countries have reinforced their positions and continue to diminish the process and possibility of peace and democracy at home and abroad.

At the same time, both domestic and international forces/factors could foster and facilitate peace and democracy in Iran. The elite factional politics, pragmatism and the reformist trends within the political



establishment have created opportunities for peace and democracy in Iran. Likewise, the engagement of the international community with Iran, and diplomacy, détente and dialogue contribute to Iran's democratization.

Democracy and peace in Iran and abroad are contingent upon the cooperation of moderate forces inside Iran, in the region and in the US. Mutual understanding and pragmatism are critical for such cooperation and confidence building. More specifically, one should acknowledge the three following points in the study of peace and democracy at home and abroad.

First, state policies are constrained, informed and enforced by the complex dynamics of domestic political structure, pressures from civil society, and the structure of global politics. They are formed by interactions from within and without, or domestic and global factors.<sup>123</sup> State policies are mostly shaped by an amalgamation of ideology and pragmatism, continuity and change. But at the same time, geopolitics most often triumphs ideology and cultural/religious traditions/norms. Middle Eastern countries including post-revolutionary Iran are not exceptions to this rule. We need to challenge the myth of 'Middle East exceptionalism', or 'regional narcissism',<sup>124</sup> meaning the exaggeration of the unique *Islamic essence* of Middle East politics.

Secondly, democracy at home may or may not bring peace abroad. Democracies are not inherently/culturally peaceful. Geopolitics and real or perceived security concerns most often shape state behaviours. Democracies might get involved in war – proxy war, foreign intervention, military coup and security concerns might drive democracies to cooperate with dictators and even overthrew democratic governments. Likewise, geopolitics could introduce a zone of peace for autocracies – an autocratic peace. The lesson is that neither cultural nor institutional (dis)similarity among states captures the complex causes of war and peace in global politics. Hence, we need to examine Iran's foreign policy in light of its geopolitical concerns/constraints, and in relation to the regional rivalry and global politics. More specifically, much of 'Iran's so-called regional gains, which are highly exaggerated', Hunter argues, 'have not been the result of its own actions but of the policies of other states and their mistakes'. Putting the rhetoric aside, post-revolutionary Iran, especially in the post-Khomeini era, has been 'a status quo regional power', given 'its own vulnerabilities, fault lines and enormous domestic needs'.<sup>125</sup> Thirdly, the alternative approach to the conventional wisdom about peace and

democracy stresses a gradual, indigenous, and authentic process of democratization from within. War, economic sanctions, and regional conflicts jeopardise such a grassroots process of democratization. Iran's quest for a post-Islamist democracy is a genuine and bottom-up socio-intellectual movement. A grassroots process of democratization at home will likely contribute to sustainable and enduring peace in the region. But a genuine process of democratization at home desperately needs peace and stability in the region. As a result, there will only be meaningful peace and democracy fostered if there is a careful balancing of diplomacy, dialogue and détente; ideas that may not be as foreign to Iran as one might have otherwise assumed.

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- of Middle East states.' In other words, 'echoes of Orientalism' can be detected from such discourses as they 'reiterate today yesterdays images of "Oriental despotism" (Mill 1806–73) and of the everyday of Bedouins and others as cave-dwelling (Montesquieu 1689–1755).' See Siba N. Grovogui, 'Post-colonialism', pp. 254–5.
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99. The 'Shi'a Crescent' is a politically motivated concept coined by King Abdullah II of Jordan in December 2004. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia reinforced this notion, and then-president Mubarak of Egypt even claimed that Shi'ite communities in the Arab world are more loyal to Iran than to their own countries. The alleged Shi'a Crescent comprises Iran, Iraq, Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in the Gaza Strip – all of whom challenged the interest of the status quo axis made up of the US, Israel, and conservative Arab regimes. This implies that Iran plays a central role in the Shi'ite Crescent mobilizing Shi'a communities and exploiting their sociopolitical grievances along sectarian fault lines to secure its own regional dominance. See Mojtaba Mahdavi, 'Postrevolutionary Iran: Resisting global and regional hegemony', p. 161.
100. See Mojtaba Mahdavi, 'Postrevolutionary Iran: Resisting global and regional hegemony', pp. 161–4.
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103. Reformists such as Mir-Hosseini Mousavi, Mehdi Karrubi, Mohammad Khatami, Ayatollah Montazeri, Ayatollah Saanei, Ahmad Qabel, and Mohsen Kadivar represent this trend.
104. Abdolkarim Soroush, Mojtahed-Shabestari, Mostafa Malekian, Mohsen Saidzadeh, Saeed Hajarian, Akbar Ganji, and Alireza Alavitarbar are major scholars and activists of the second trend.
105. Major intellectual figures of this trend include Ehsan Shariati, Susan Shariati, Sara Shariati, Reza Alijani, Hassan Yusefi-Eshkevari, Taqi Rahmani, Ahmad Zeidabadi, and members of Research Bureau of Ali Shariati in Tehran. See Mojtaba Mahdavi, 'Post-Islamist Trends in Post-Revolutionary Iran', p. 95.
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