

# Guardians of the Revolution

*Iran and the World in the Age  
of the Ayatollahs*

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# Contents

Introduction, 1

## PART I. THE REVOLUTIONARY YEARS

1. Khomeini's Ideology and Iran's Grand Strategy, 11
  2. Relations with the "Great Satan," 35
3. Turmoil in the Levant: Iran, Israel, and the Politics of the Arab East, 61
  4. Iran-Iraq War, 81

## PART II. THE RISE OF PRAGMATISM AND THE NEW PRIORITIES

5. Pragmatic Restraint: Iranian Politics during the Rafsanjani Era, 111
  6. Reconciliation Diplomacy and Its Limits, 129
  7. The Satans, 161

PART III. THE AGE OF REFORM

8. The Odyssey of the Reform Movement, 181
9. September 11 and the Politics of Fear, Hope, and Necessity, 205

PART IV. HEGEMONY AT LAST?

10. The Rise of the New Right, 223
11. The Ahmadinejad Era, 237

Conclusion, 261

Notes, 267

Index, 297

# Introduction

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“THE LATE IMAM WAS THE GREATEST POLITICAL AND MILITARY analyst and a great politician. Imam Khomeini was the best possible pattern for all people in all ages and eras,” declared President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2008.<sup>1</sup> It is rare for a revolutionary leader to exercise such influence over the imagination of his successors two decades after his passing. However, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was no ordinary leader, as his vision and words continue to resonate with generations of Iranian politicians. All of this raises the following questions: What kind of a state is the Islamic Republic of Iran? Is it still a revolutionary regime bent on upending the prevailing order, or is it prepared to accommodate the mandates of the international community? The truth lies somewhere in between. More than any other Middle Eastern country, Iran defies easy characterization. The best way of understanding the Islamic Republic’s priorities is to expand the canvass and assess its foreign policy over the entire duration of its existence. Only through such an exercise can we come to terms with the complexities and contradictions that have shaped Iran’s approach to the world.

Iran is an intact, ancient nation that has sought for centuries to define its place in the Middle East. Successive dynasties perceived that by virtue of its advanced civilization, location, and demography Iran had the right to dominate the region. The notion that Iran’s hegemonic claims began with the revolution is a misreading of history. The shahs were just as adamant about pursuing Iran’s national aspirations as the mullahs who displaced the monarchy. To the hubris of preeminence one must add the insecurity of isolation. As a Persian, Shiite nation struggling in an Arab, Sunni Middle

East, Iran has always lived with the fear of being surrounded by foes. A country that has been the subject of numerous invasions and whose boundaries have shrunk over the centuries is legitimately suspicious of both its neighbors and the Western empires that have coveted its land and resources. Paradoxically, Iran's international orientation has historically been shaped by a presumption of greatness, an undiminished sense of superiority over its neighbors, and an acute concern about foreigners' intentions.

It is this national character that the clerical rulers inherited. To this sense of nationalism and historical grievances, the mullahs added an Islamist dimension. Ayatollah Khomeini bequeathed his country an ideology that divided the world between the oppressed and the oppressors. The Islamic Republic was to be a vanguard state leading the subjugated masses toward freedom and justice. Such views stemmed from Shiite political traditions that enshrined the principle of resisting tyranny. In clerical cosmology, Iran was no ordinary state seeking to maximize its advantages through a subtle projection of its power. The Islamic Republic had a transnational mission of redeeming the Middle East for the forces of righteousness. Despite its costs and burdens, Iran would have to struggle against a range of iniquitous forces, particularly the United States and its proxies.

No country can persist on ideology alone. Iran had to operate its economy, deal with regional exigencies, and meet the demand of its growing constituency. The task of governance saps revolutionary energies as it requires routine concessions to an often unpalatable reality. Pragmatism and a careful calibration of national interests would thus enter Iran's foreign policy calculus. The clerical rulers would transact agreements with their rivals, compromise with their enemies, and occasionally seek to diminish the hard edges of their creed. However, the Islamic Republic would not follow the model of a typical revolutionary state and gradually discard its ideological legacy. The genius of Khomeini was his ability to weave his dogma into the theocracy's governing fabric. Through the constitutional arrangements that he crafted and a dedicated cadre that he molded, Khomeini ensured the survival of his vision. In this sense, Khomeini remains one of the most successful revolutionary leaders of the twentieth century. The uneasy balance between ideological compunctions and pragmatic designs would come to define Iran's international perspective. This would often yield a contradictory policy as Iran sought to realize its objectives in a regional order that it pledged to overthrow.

The 1980s would be the apogee of revolutionary activism. Khomeini had assumed power not to focus on the mundane tasks of economic

development and diplomatic outreach but to assert his dogmatic philosophy. This was to be a “revolution without borders,” as Iran flailed around the Middle East seeking to impose its Islamist template on an unwilling Arab world. The Gulf princely class with its ostentatious lifestyle, false piety, and close ties to the United States greatly offended the clerical rulers. Iran would plot their ouster through assassination campaigns, thereby provoking Shiite secessionism and subsidizing opposition forces and terrorists with little or no political agenda. Nor did Iran’s ideological crusade stop at the edges of the Persian Gulf, because the incumbent Sunni regimes of the Arab east and North Africa proved as unacceptable to the mullahs as their Gulf counterparts. Islamist militants in places as varied as Algeria and Lebanon would now become beneficiaries of Iranian largesse. Perhaps no country felt the ire of the theocracy more than Israel. The Islamic Republic not only embraced the Palestinian cause but openly called for the annihilation of the Jewish state. This was a time when Iran’s internal convulsions defined its international relations.

Despite Iran’s revolutionary excesses, it was Saddam Husayn’s opportunism that launched one of the most devastating conflicts in the modern Middle East. Far from dislodging the theocracy or diminishing its zeal, the war that began a year after the revolution only reinforced Iran’s radical tendencies. For Khomeini, the war was not a mere interstate conflict but an epic battle between infidels and the forces of virtue. Iran seldom defined its war aims in conventional terms of regaining lost territory or securing reparations. In its propaganda and proclamations, the theocratic regime stressed that the war was an opportunity for Iran to demonstrate its religious devotion. Long after a crestfallen Saddam was prepared to acquiesce to an armistice, Khomeini prolonged the conflict that was to reclaim the Middle East for the path of God.

The pragmatic impulses of Iranian foreign policy were seldom in evidence during the turbulent first decade of the revolution. By the end of his tenure, Khomeini had created a beleaguered state at odds with much of the international community. The goal of exporting the revolution eluded Khomeini inasmuch as the region rejected his theocratic model of governance. Despite his determination to dominate the Middle East, Khomeini left Iran an isolated pariah.

It would not be until the end of the war and the passing of Khomeini in 1989 that his successors took stock of the revolution. Importantly, the clerical leaders did not revisit the assumption that Iran had a right to dominate the region. The critical debate was whether Iran should export the revolution or try to realize its objectives within the existing state system.

Would the Islamic Republic remain a revolutionary state or become just another imperial power?

It was at that juncture that factionalism emerged as a real source of division within the theocracy. On the one side, a more pragmatic bloc led by President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani appreciated the fact that, in the absence of Khomeini's charismatic authority and the unifying symbol of the war, the Islamic Republic had to offer a practical justification for the continuation of its rule. Moreover, the requirements of economic reconstruction and national rehabilitation demanded a more normal relationship with the international community. The new supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, would lead the hard-line elements who maintained their devotion to the essential pillars of Khomeini's vision. The tensions and compromises between these two factions eventually produced a contradictory foreign policy that, while recognizing the importance of moderation, could not entirely divest itself of the revolutionary imperatives of its founder.

The divided clerical regime had to chart its foreign policy at a time of sweeping global changes. The collapse of the Soviet Union and Saddam's invasion of Kuwait perplexed Tehran. America now entered Iran's neighborhood largely unencumbered by the restraints of the cold war. The issue of how to deal with the United States would provoke the greatest disagreement within Iran. While Rafsanjani and his allies appreciated the need for a more constructive approach to the world's sole superpower, for the conservatives, America remained not just a strategic threat but also a cultural challenge that could erode the foundations of theocratic rule. Given their institutional power, the hard-liners easily thwarted any opening to the United States that Rafsanjani may have contemplated.

All of this is not to suggest that Iran's policy remained static; indeed, the theocracy's contending factions were capable of coming to an agreement on certain critical issues. Iran did behave responsibly during the Gulf War, and Tehran did seek to mend fences with both the European Community and the emirates. Despite such rational calculations, the pull of ideology continued to obstruct Tehran's path toward realism. Iran continued to challenge the legitimacy of the Gulf sheikdoms and yielded too easily to terrorism as an expression of its policy. The assassination of dissidents in Europe and continued support for radical forces throughout the Middle East undercut Iran's promise of moderation.

In the end, Rafsanjani's term proved to be an era of uncertain pragmatism. Beyond the obstructionism of the Right, it was Rafsanjani's own tentativeness that precluded a fundamental departure from the past. Despite his promises, Rafsanjani recoiled from challenging the hard-liners and

pressing ahead with his program of change. Confronted with a conservative backlash, he quickly retreated and abandoned both his principles and his allies along the way. Rafsanjani may have pledged a new dawn, but by the time he left office his country was isolated in its neighborhood, estranged from its European commercial partners, and at loggerheads with the United States.

No aspect of the Islamic Republic's history is in need of a greater revision than the presidency of Muhammad Khatami, which lasted from 1997 to 2005. Although it is customary to deride Khatami as lacking any successes, in the realm of international relations his achievements proved momentous. The essence of the reform movement was that democratic accountability at home mandated a foreign policy that respected prevailing conventions. The "Dialogue among Civilizations" was not a mere slogan but a sincere belief that détente and cooperation were the best means of advancing Iran's practical interests. Khatami would also launch his "Good Neighbor" policy, which sought to repair relations with the Gulf states by acknowledging the legitimacy of their rule. Furthermore, during this time Iran finally achieved a rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and reclaimed its ties with the European Union. For a brief moment, it appeared that Iran was finally willing to relinquish its revolutionary past and join the community of nations.

The impressive aspect of Khatami's presidency was that his accomplishments came despite conservative resistance and American hostility. The hard-liners, devoted to their ideological verities and in command of key agencies of the state, did much to subvert Khatami's moderation. In the meantime, unaccustomed to real change in Iran, a flat-footed Washington failed to comprehend the scope of Khatami's promise and sustained its policy of sanctions and isolation long after it proved counterproductive. A more imaginative U.S. policy might have tipped the internal balance of power in favor of the reformers.

The 9/11 tragedies and the nuclear crisis did much to resurrect the fortunes of the hard-liners. The Bush administration's unrelenting hostility toward Iran allowed the conservatives to denigrate the reformers for allegedly enabling U.S. plots. In the meantime, once the international community chose to deal with Iran's nuclear infractions through sanctions and pressure, it further empowered the conservatives, who thrived on confrontation. An exhausted reform movement, besieged by its domestic detractors and American animus, would cede to a hard-line government.

As the face of Iran changed and the elders of the revolution receded from the scene, a new international orientation gradually surfaced. A



combustible mixture of Islamist ideology, strident nationalism, and a deep suspicion of the West compose the global perspective of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the younger conservatives. As uncompromising nationalists, they are unusually sensitive to Iran's prerogatives and sovereign rights. As committed Islamists, they continued to see the Middle East as a battleground between forces of secularism and Islamic authenticity. As suspicious rulers, they perceive Western conspiracies where none may in fact exist.

The rise of the New Right in Iran coincided with important changes in the Middle East. As the Iraq war drains America's power and confidence, and as Islamist parties in Lebanon and Palestinian territories claim the mantle of leadership, Iran has emerged as a pivotal power within the region. The goal of dominance and hegemony that eluded previous Persian rulers seems fortuitously within grasp. Tehran's determination to sustain its nuclear program, its quest to evict U.S. forces from Iraq, and its holding aloft the banner of resistance against Israel are all means of asserting its regional influence. The old balance between ideology and pragmatism has yielded to one defined by power politics and religious fervor. In the early twenty-first century, Iran finally has a government that Khomeini could be proud of.

Although the primary focus of this book is on Iran's foreign policy, no such study can exempt itself from an assessment of its domestic politics and rivalries. This book is divided into four broad sections that conform to a timeline. The first segment assesses the tumultuous 1980s and the imprint that early debates made on Iran's international orientation. The rise of a theocratic state, its momentous war with Iraq, and its enduring enmity toward the United States and Israel are dealt with in detail. The 1980s remain the Islamic Republic's most important decade, as the ideology that was molded during this period and the experiences of the war continue to have an immeasurable impact on Iran's global perspective.

The second section of this book explores the reasons Rafsanjani failed to usher in a pragmatic international policy. The theocratic regime understood that the demands of postwar reconstruction and the mandates of its restive citizenry required a different approach to the world. Yet such recognition did not translate into constructive policies across the board. The irony is that a cagey president who sensed the need for change ended up overseeing an isolated country.

The reform movement remains one of the most intellectually ambitious forces for social and political change in modern Iran. The unnecessarily maligned President Khatami and his allies sought to achieve a new

form of government—an Islamic democracy. A state that balanced pluralistic demands with its religious ideals may have eluded the reformers, but the discourse and deliberations of that period are bound to condition similar efforts in both Iran and the greater Middle East in the future. In this segment of the book, the notion that the reformist government was without accomplishments is challenged, and its foreign policy achievements are more carefully assessed.

The task of the next section of the book is to move beyond rhetoric and examine the ways in which Iran's foreign policy has actually changed during the tenure of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Iran has been offered unprecedented opportunities as its principal American nemesis finds itself unsure how to proceed in the Middle East, while its oil wealth has provided it with sufficient revenues to offset Western financial pressures. Iran's Shiite allies are poised to assume political power in the key states of Iraq and Lebanon, while much of the region is seeking to accommodate rather than confront Iranian power. The question then becomes, how have Ahmadinejad and the hard-liners used these advantages to enhance Iran's national interests?

In the concluding chapter, we look ahead. Iran has entered the twenty-first century with a strong, centralized state, ample natural resources, and capable armed forces. Given the changes that the region has undergone since 9/11, it is poised to assume a commanding role in the Middle East. The key challenge for the United States is to ascertain how to deal with a state that is too powerful to ignore and whose influence cannot be easily contained. The strategies and decisions that Washington makes will determine whether this dangerous neighborhood can find a modicum of stability.

This book conforms to the prevailing standards of transliteration. However, at times, popular usage of names and places has been retained given their familiarity to the general reader.

# 1

## Khomeini's Ideology and Iran's Grand Strategy

---



ON JUNE 6, 1989, THE FOUNDER OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, passed away. The announcement of his death was greeted with mass demonstrations and a remarkable display of grief and passion throughout the country. However, nearly two decades after his death, Khomeini remains one of the central figures in Iran's political narrative. By creating a web of institutions and nurturing a dedicated corps of disciples, the enterprising cleric has managed to implant his vision in Iran's social fabric. The remarkable aspect of Khomeini's tenure was not just his novel reinterpretation of Shiite political theory or his ushering in of a populist revolution but also conceiving an organizational structure that would perpetuate his ideas long after his death. In essence, of all the twentieth-century revolutionaries, Khomeini would emerge as the most successful, as the Islamic Republic sustains its allegiance to his core principles and all of its contending factions continue to justify their conduct by appealing to his message and legacy.

An assessment of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy cannot be done without an appreciation of Khomeini's ideological improvisations and the changes that he induced in Iran's international orientation. The most suitable way to begin the study of Iran's foreign policy is to examine Khomeini's ideals, aspirations, and perceptions of the world beyond the seminary.

Khomeini the Avenger

Ruhollah Khomeini was born in 1902, and during his lifetime he achieved momentous changes in the history of Iran and the greater Middle East. The

rebellious cleric would displace a powerful monarchy, challenge the prevailing regional order, and confront the United States with one of its most acute strategic quandaries. Khomeini's success stemmed not just from his determination but also from his clever attempt to weave his revolutionary message into Iran's national identity. The notion that religion and traditional values should play a greater role in Iran's political and social order was a proposition acceptable to a vast majority of Iranians. This does not mean tolerating a theocratic regime with stringent Islamic strictures, but Khomeini nonetheless managed to craft his message as consistent with popular claims. The idea that Iran should emerge as the preeminent power of the Middle East was a priority of successive monarchs and empires that reigned over Persia for centuries. Once more, Khomeini succeeded in presenting his quest to export his Islamist revolution as in line with the nationalistic aspirations of both his predecessors and his subjects. To be sure, the Iranian masses would not be willing to pay the price of the revolution's excesses, yet in the initial stages, they found Khomeini's message of defiance and independence attractive.<sup>1</sup>

Although the common perception of Khomeini is of a stern, forbidding cleric whose imagination was frozen in time, he was a man of remarkable intellect and tactical dexterity.<sup>2</sup> He borrowed ideas from leftist ideologues, employed modern technologies to spread his message, and remained vague about his objectives when such ambiguity served his purpose.<sup>3</sup> In pursuit of his ideas, Khomeini was capable of extraordinary cruelty inasmuch as he remained largely indifferent to the sufferings of his people when it came to imposing his ideological template on an unwilling Middle East. The process of his political maturity, his uncanny ability to develop a revolutionary coalition, and his consolidation of power are critical if one is to understand the essence of the Islamic Republic and its perception of the international system.

Khomeini arrived in Qum in 1921 to find a clerical community so preoccupied with its rarified theological disquisitions that it paid scant attention to public affairs.<sup>4</sup> The insular nature of the clerical estate belied a country in political ferment. The rise of Reza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, and the continued interference of the great powers in Iran's internal affairs had provoked a nationalistic backlash. From early on Khomeini was intent on fusing religion and politics and quickly sought out the one seminary teacher, Mirza Muhammad Ali Shahabadi, who had spoken out against the misdeeds of Reza Shah. To further distinguish himself from his cohort, Khomeini undertook the study of philosophy and even mysticism, topics long abjured by a clerical class devoted to religious jurisprudence and Quranic commentary.<sup>5</sup>

Upon assuming his own lectureship, Khomeini turned his classes on ethics into a commentary on public affairs and criticisms of the regime's misbehaviors. The lectures given at the prestigious Madrasah-i Fayziyah-i Qum proved popular beyond the seminarians and attracted a wide-ranging audience. It was at this juncture that Khomeini developed a core of devoted disciples such as Murtaza Mutahhari and Ali Husayn Muntaziri, who would prove his loyal collaborators during his long political struggle.<sup>6</sup> However, even more significant was Khomeini's attempt to reach beyond the class of mullahs and appeal to a larger audience agitating against monarchical absolutism.

Despite his interest in politics, throughout the 1930s Khomeini found that his junior standing within the hierarchical clerical community and the overarching authority of Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Burujirdi, who objected to mingling in temporal affairs, precluded sustained political engagement.<sup>7</sup> Only in the 1940s would Khomeini take a more assertive stance, demonstrating his lifelong focus on monarchical tyranny and foreign exploitation of Iran. In his first major publication, *Kashf-i Asrar*, he sought to refute various secular intellectuals who were claiming that Shiism had to reform and discard some of its rituals. However, in a subtle turn, Khomeini claimed that such an assault on tradition was made possible by Reza Shah's own attacks on religion as a source of backwardness. Nonetheless, at this stage Khomeini was not calling for the elimination of the monarchy but was merely claiming that the leading ayatollahs should choose a "monarch who will not violate God's laws and shun oppression and wrongdoing."<sup>8</sup> Still, the young Khomeini emphasized the primacy of Islamic jurisprudence and was dismissive of alternative forms of government. He was quick to stress that "other than their deceiving appearances, there is no fundamental distinction among constitutional, despotic, dictatorial, democratic and Communistic regimes."<sup>9</sup> Although far from his later call for direct assumption of power by clerics, he did imply that the monarchy should behave as an agent of the religious sector and that Islam should condition the political order and cultural norms.<sup>10</sup>

Khomeini's political commitment came more fully to the surface in the 1960s, as the passing of Grand Ayatollah Burujirdi and his own elevation as one of the leading figures of the religious establishment freed him from his previous constraints. Khomeini's turn to political affairs coincided with the emergence of anticolonial and nationalist movements that were sweeping the developing world. The traditional institutions' neglect of progressive causes and their frequent association with established authorities was alienating them from the younger generation of activists.

Khomeini lamented that “the irrational person has taken it for granted that religious people have trampled upon the rule of reason and have no regard for it. Is it not the religious people who have written all the books on philosophy and the principles of jurisprudence?”<sup>11</sup> He seemed anguished about the possibility that Islam might be displaced by fashionable ideologies of the West and the frequent irrelevance of the mosque in the emerging nationalist struggle.

The 1963–1964 crises offered Khomeini the perfect opportunity to claim the leadership of the anti-shah forces.<sup>12</sup> During the 1960s, the shah sought the concomitant secular modernization of Iran and a close alliance with the United States—two tendencies that Khomeini condemned. The measure that finally sparked the crisis was the shah’s proposed legislation exempting the burgeoning U.S. military presence from Iranian law. Unlike his clerical brethren, Khomeini sensed that the vast majority of Iranians abhorred the legislation as a reenactment of the infamous “capitulation laws” frequently imposed by the Western powers on Iran. He appealed to the masses by claiming that the document attested that “the nation of Muslims is barbarous.”<sup>13</sup> However, Khomeini quickly moved beyond Muslim sensibilities and stressed the notions of foreign exploitation at the hands of a pliant shah and a greedy capitalist class. The resulting massive demonstrations in 1964 were to presage the 1979 revolution as seminarians, the urban middle class, the bazaar, and leftist students agitated under the banner of Islam held aloft by an uncompromising Khomeini. The themes of religious grievance, nationalistic affront, and even class struggle now laced Khomeini’s pronouncements as he attempted to reach a larger audience in a changing Iran.

The crisis of “capitulation laws” not only propelled Khomeini to the forefront of oppositional politics but also marked his departure from clerical norms and their propensity to compromise with the ruling monarchy. In an unmistakable rebuke to his fellow clerics, Khomeini declared, “I am not one of those who put on their turbans and are satisfied through worship only.”<sup>14</sup> His evolving ideology with its denunciation of clerical passivity, the illegitimacy of imported ideologies, and the exploitive nature of the West had a limited audience within the clerical community. Ironically, it would be among a radical cadre of intellectuals such as Jalal Al Ahmad and Ali Shari’ati that Khomeini would find kindred spirits.<sup>15</sup> Many Western-trained Iranian intellectuals had grown weary of Marxism and socialism and were seeing Islam as an authentic, indigenous ideology of dissent. However, their Islam had a distinct political content. In their view, Prophet Muhammad was not just a spiritual leader but also a revolutionary who

challenged vested interests, a reformer who rearranged the existing socio-economic order, and a man of faith who constructed a progressive society based on religion and reason. While greatly disparaged by elder clerics, the new intellectuals were reconceptualizing Islam as an ideology focused on class cleavages and division of the international system between capitalist powers and the larger developing bloc. To such thinkers, the traditional clergy with their indifference to social change were ossified agents of reaction.<sup>16</sup>

More than any of his counterparts, Khomeini sensed the popularity of these intellectuals among the youth and the modern middle class and realized that for the clerical estate to remain relevant it had to appropriate the discourse and ideas of the radicals.<sup>17</sup> Khomeini's speeches eschewed the predictable themes of sermons with their arcane religious imagery. The notions of Western exploitation of the Third World and the shah's tyranny, which was at the service of the predatory capitalist class, became the mainstay of his language. For both ideological and practical reasons, Khomeini was drawn to the musings of the new generation of political activists and their call for Islam as a symbol of resistance.

In invoking such leftist concepts, Khomeini incorporated new ideas into his ideological lexicon, adopting a critique of the prevailing order common among Marxists. The notion of *Mustaz'afin* (the downtrodden) as an oppressed economic class became one of his typical references. Yet despite his appreciation of the popularity of such intellectuals and the inclusion of their language in his presentations, Khomeini did not alter the essence of his vision. Islam as Khomeini interpreted it would have to remain the basis of any governing order. And although he was often at odds with many senior ayatollahs, he still perceived that clerics were the only ones capable of ushering in a new political system. By this time, Khomeini had developed a dedicated and growing number of young clerical followers who not only shared his views but would also remain his most intimate allies throughout the remainder of his career.

All of this did not save Khomeini. In fact, his role in the 1963–1964 uprisings led to his expulsion from Iran and his prolonged exile, which would take him to Turkey, Iraq, and France. Khomeini may have lost the initial battle with his monarchical nemesis, but he had established his message of defiance with its marriage of Islam and nationalism and conceived a nascent coalition of opposition that cut across class boundaries.

During his exile Khomeini finally completed his blueprint for Islamic governance. In Iraq, Khomeini's radicalism was further honed by the influences of the powerful and dynamic Shiite religious community. Under the

charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir Sadr, the clerical order had become the epicenter of Shiite revivalism, with its quest to merge religious ardor with political militancy.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Sadr's message of faith and his model of practical activism were gaining adherents in Shiite strongholds from Lebanon to the Persian Gulf. Khomeini stepped into this contested terrain with his own contribution and delivered a series of lectures that were published as a book, titled *Hukumat-i Islami* (Islamic Government). In this seminal work, Khomeini outlined his concept of *vilayat-i faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), which called for direct assumption of power by the clergy.

Since Islamic government is a government of law, those acquainted with the law (or more precisely, with religion)—the clergy—must oversee its functioning inasmuch as they supervise all of the country's executive and administrative affairs, as well as all of the planning.<sup>19</sup> The normative Shiite doctrine had stressed that power lies with the imams, the descendants of the Prophet. However, once the twelfth Imam went into occultation in 941, all temporal power was deemed illegitimate until his return, which would usher in the end of time. Although the need for order during the period of occultation made government a necessity, the clergy's proper role was nevertheless to divest themselves of political power with its temptations and corruption. This is not to suggest that national affairs should not be informed by religion but that the clergy must maintain a suitable distance from the ruling elite.<sup>20</sup> In a pronounced revision of Shiite canons and customs, Khomeini stressed that, given their superior knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence, the clergy were the only suitable rulers during the period of occultation. In a sense, the lectures were the predictable trajectory of his evolving thought process since the 1940s, which had come to see the clerics as natural leaders in a society undergoing continuous change.<sup>21</sup>

The publication of *Hukumat-i Islami*, with its call for direct rule by the clerics, was not only a revision of Shiite thought but also a denunciation of alternative political organizations, whether monarchical or republican forms of government. For all his flirtations with radical philosophies and appropriation of modern discourse, Khomeini firmly believed that Islam was the proper ideology and the clergy, appropriately radicalized, the only viable rulers. There would be limited room in Khomeini's conception of government for democratic accountability, checks and balances, and individual sovereignty. Islamic law and traditions may have required interpretation by an informed priestly class, but they did not need the mediation of representative bodies. The purpose of government would be the realization



of God's will on earth, and any deviation from that constituted not just dissent but sin as well.

In one of the paradoxes of Khomeini's ideological revisions, his concept of rule by a jurist actually presented an attack on the prevailing clerical estate. Historically, the Shi'ite clerical class was marked by pluralism and diversity of views.<sup>22</sup> The grand ayatollahs sustained their own seminaries and pupils and preserved their autonomy in a decentralized order. Khomeini's idea of *vilayat-i faqih* vested political authority in a narrow circle of clerics, thereby mandating compliance by the entire community of mullahs.<sup>23</sup> Such compulsion would be enforced with discipline as the prosecution of disobedient clerics, even the unprecedented defrocking of grand ayatollahs, became an acceptable practice. It ultimately proved a futile struggle, however, as the ancient Shi'ite clerical establishment did not acquiesce easily to the dictates of a revolutionary mullah. In due time, Iran's religious sector would be divided between learned clerics who isolated themselves in shrine cities and activist mullahs who commanded bureaucracies and ministries. Nonetheless, the irony of Khomeini's Islamic Republic, which routinely criticized its monarchical predecessors for transgressing the sanctuary of the mosque, is that it is responsible for its own share of clerical persecutions.

During his exile, Khomeini not only undertook a radical reinterpretation of Shi'ite doctrines but also managed to forge a national opposition movement to the shah.<sup>24</sup> The oil wealth, massive corruption, close association with the United States, and his own megalomania caused the shah to behave in an erratic and dictatorial manner that gradually alienated much of his constituency. Although distant from Iran, Khomeini refused to remain a forgotten mullah preaching his sermons and contemplating theological tracts. He forged ties with student groups in Europe and America, maintained close connections to Iran through his clerical supporters, who disseminated his messages, and reached out to opposition figures from a wide variety of backgrounds. A stream of speeches denouncing the shah's excesses, protesting the inequalities of his economic modernization plans, and deprecating Iran's alliance with the United States made the imam, as his followers increasingly called him, the central figure in his country's political drama. Through his undisputed charisma, incorruptible nature, and adroit use of leftist and religious slogans, he appealed to the Iranian people's Islamic and nationalistic identities. As the revolution unfolded, all eyes were fixed on Khomeini as he became the acknowledged leader of a vast coalition of disaffected Iranians.

Given Khomeini's overarching ambition, it would be too facile to suggest that he ushered in the revolution only to displace the monarchy.

His Islamist musings had a distinct internationalist claim, as the aging mullah sought to change not just Iran but the entire Muslim world as well.

### The Imam's Foreign Devils

Iran's Islamic Revolution and its inscrutable philosopher-king offered a unique challenge to the concept of nation-state and the prevailing norms of the international system. The essence of Khomeini's message was that the vitality of his Islamist mission was contingent on its relentless export. Moreover, because God's vision was not to be confined to a single nation, Iran's foreign policy would be an extension of its domestic revolutionary turmoil. "We have no choice but to destroy those systems that are corrupt and to overthrow all oppressive and criminal regimes," declared Khomeini.<sup>25</sup> For the grand ayatollah, the global order was divided between states whose priorities were defined by Western conventions and Iran, whose ostensible purpose was to redeem a divine mandate. All local regimes had a choice—they could sustain their allegiance to the West or conform to the new Islamic epoch launched by Iran.

For Khomeini the notion of nationalism and territorial demarcation were relics of a discredited past. Iran would now be the epicenter of a new Islamic order, seeking allies wherever Muslims existed, irrespective of sectarian division or ethnic differences. "We don't recognize Iran as ours, as all Muslim countries are a part of us," declared Khomeini.<sup>26</sup> This was to be a "revolution without borders," whose appeal would not be limited by boundaries, cultural differences, and national sensibilities. The common religious bonds would unit a diverse people under the leadership of a newly empowered theocratic state.<sup>27</sup>

In a perverse manner, Khomeini's universalism and his denunciations of nationalism as a Western conceit were initially embraced by a highly nationalistic population that favored the projection of Iran's influence. Persian monarchs had historically aspired to emerge as the leading regional actors, and the Iranian masses were long accustomed to seeing their nation as a model for the benighted Arabs. Khomeini's call for Iran to emerge as the nucleus of a new Middle East resonated with a populace imbued with images of Persian greatness. Instead of military conquest and claims of civilizational greatness, Khomeini employed religion to justify Iran's expansionist designs. However, the Muslim rage that Khomeini typified was different from monarchical assertions. For the shahs, what mattered was how the local states behaved toward Iran, while for the Islamic Republic

the central issue was who ruled these countries. Given Khomeini's Islamist ambitions, the best means of ensuring that the Middle Eastern regimes pursued a righteous foreign policy was to make certain that they were ruled by like-minded ideologues.

Khomeini's internationalist vision had to have an antagonist, a foil to define itself against. A caricatured concept of the West soon became the central pillar of his Islamist imagination. The Western powers were rapacious imperialists determined to exploit Iran's wealth for their self-aggrandizement. The Islamic themes were not far behind, as the West was also seeking to subjugate Muslims and impose its cultural template in the name of modernity. In a sense, for Khomeini the shah was a mere tool of a larger Western conspiracy to plunder and abuse the Muslim world. One of the principal purposes of the Islamic Revolution was to expose the manner in which the West sustained its exploitive presence through local proxies. Khomeini stressed this point when claiming, "The sacred Islamic movement leads to the cutting off [of] the hands of instruments of foreigners, those who advocated colonialism and Westernization."<sup>28</sup> Disunity among Muslims, the autocracies populating the region, the failure of the clerical class to assume the mantle of opposition, and the young people's attraction to alien ideologies were all somehow byproducts of a Western plot to sustain its dominance over Islam's realm.

To some extent, Khomeini's animus toward the West was validated by his own experiences. During the course of his life, the ayatollah witnessed the occupation of Iran by allied forces, an American-sponsored coup that ended Iran's quest to reclaim its national oil wealth, the crushing of the religious uprisings of 1963–1964, and finally his own expulsion from Iran. All along, the United States sustained and assisted an unaccountable monarch who served its strategic purposes. As such, his well-honed animosities toward the West were reinforced by personal knowledge that often saw the United States and Britain plotting against Iran's independence.

Given Khomeini's delineation of the temporal order as a continuous struggle between the oppressed and the oppressors, it was easy for him to view the relations between America and the Middle East as a battle between good and evil. In this context, the oppressed were victims of Western imperial aggression, which was sustained by local proxies like the Pahlavi dynasty. In such a conception, there were no independent states inasmuch as all nations were in some way an adjunct of the superpowers. The international order with its norms and standards had no real value because it was merely designed to sustain Western hegemony. Nonetheless, the oppressed had an obligation to resist and should not merely acquiesce in

their predicament. The path for their awakening and mobilization was Iran's revolution and leadership. Its revolt was never a national event but an occasion to usher in a larger transformation of the Middle East. Iran's purpose was "to liberate the discontented masses of Muslims, whether they live in the independent states of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco or under non-Islamic government," declared Khomeini.<sup>29</sup>

On the surface, a degree of commonality existed between Khomeini's vision and the previous Iranian opposition leaders, who advocated a policy of nonalignment. Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq, who nationalized Iran's oil industry and was toppled by a CIA-sponsored coup in 1953, had, after all, enunciated the concept of "negative equilibrium," claiming that Iran could best protect its interests by exempting itself from the superpower conflict.<sup>30</sup> Suspicion of the West and the cold war rivalry was a hallmark of the Iranian intelligentsia, who saw no reason why its country should expend its wealth and act as a subsidiary of America's containment network in the Middle East. However, once more Khomeini and his slogan of "neither East nor West" must be differentiated from the typical Iranian reaction against the superpower struggle. His ideal governing order, his third way, called for a militant strategy of exporting the revolution. Thus, Iran's Islamist message would contest both American capitalism and Soviet communism. On the surface, such grandiose pretensions for a leader of a medium-sized country may seem absurd if not delusional, but Khomeini genuinely perceived himself as deputized by God to achieve his divine will. A pristine Islamic order blessed by God would now challenge the colonial exploitation of the West and the senseless materialism of the East.

Khomeini's postulations necessarily identified Israel as an enemy of Islam. Indeed, among the crimes of the West none was greater than its creation of the Zionist state, which transgressed on Islam's sacred domain. Khomeini's hostility to Israel was not a cynical strategy of appealing to the larger Arab society but an essential and enduring pillar of his ideology. During his years in seminary and exile, Khomeini persistently called for an embargo of Israel and stressed that "Any connection with Israel and its agents whether commercial or political is forbidden."<sup>31</sup> Decades before the Islamic Republic's subsidization of Hezbollah and Palestinian terrorist organizations, Khomeini implored his followers to donate a portion of their religious taxes to the Palestinian cause. "It is absolutely worthy that some portions of such religious alms be allocated to Palestinian fighters in the path of God," he insisted.<sup>32</sup> Financial boycotts and in due course violence would be the hallmarks of his immutable hostility toward the Jewish state.

In a sense, Khomeini's ideology was similar to that of Islamic reformers who stressed that the Muslim realm could reclaim its genuine independence only through greater unity. Important figures such as Jamal al-Din Afghani and Muhammad Abduh had already emphasized the themes of pan-Islamism as a means of escaping the tentacles of Western colonialism.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, one of the most important organizations pioneering Islamic activism was Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, which developed branches throughout the Middle East.<sup>34</sup> Such movements may have been the mainstay of Arab activists battling against incumbent regimes throughout the twentieth century, but their embrace by a Persian, Shiite cleric was unusual. By the 1970s, Khomeini was seeking to transcend two propositions that had historically denied Iran a leading role in the Middle East: Persian ethnicity and the Sunni-Shiite divide. The Arabs' suspicion of Persians and the sectarian cleavages had prevented successive Iranian monarchs from escaping their insularity and dominating the region. For Khomeini, however, the revolution was "for an Islamic goal, not for Iran alone. Iran has only been the starting point."<sup>35</sup> Given all the talk of a "Shiite crescent," which is so fashionable today, it is important to appreciate that, for Khomeini, his revolt was always an Islamic one free of confessional restraint. It would be Saddam's Iraq and the House of Saud who would denounce the Islamic Republic as a Shiite, Persian enclave as a means of limiting its appeal.

Khomeini's meanderings may not have been relevant except that they came at a time when the region was searching for an alternative path. By the 1970s, it had become evident that the vanguards of modernity in the form of the military officers who had assumed power in the aftermath of decolonization had failed to usher in the pledged era of economic justice and autonomy from the West.<sup>36</sup> To compound the problems of the incumbent regimes, their continual defeat at the hands of the Israeli army had further eroded their legitimacy, and the Palestinian plight was a glaring reminder of the region's failures. Islamism was initially offering a sanctuary for a disillusioned population searching for guidance and solace. Throughout the Middle East, the intellectual class was abandoning the secular ideologies of pan-Arabism, socialism, and Marxism, which had once held great promise. Religious resurgence was proving to be alluring to a populace that had grown weary of economic dislocation, political autocracy, foreign policy humiliation, and institutional decay. A fiery mullah who was defying the West and its monarchical surrogate and offering a path to salvation appealed to a large cross-section of the public despite his Shiite faith and Persian ancestry.

In the path of his revolutionary exertion, the grand ayatollah was prepared to offer up his nation's blood and treasure. Martyrdom has always been a central symbolic tenet of Shiite Islam; indeed, the murder of Imam Husayn at the hands of the iniquitous Yazid bin Muawiyah offered a paradigm of suffering in the service of faith. For Khomeini, that historic event was not a mere ritual displayed at the annual commemoration ceremonies but an act of continuous defiance. In his reinterpretation of that event, Iran was to displace Husayn, and the great evil was to be the United States and its proxies. The Iranian populace had to bear the unimaginable burden of a permanent revolution. The nation that Khomeini commanded would suffer much through a devastating war, international ostracism, and economic sanctions. Yet despite the Islamic Republic's ritualistic celebrations of its martyrs, the founder of the world's first modern theocracy was largely unconcerned about the calamitous loss of life that his policies had caused. Like all ideologues, Khomeini was prepared to sacrifice a nation in the service of his ideals.

On the eve of Iran's triumphant revolution, none of this was obvious to a nation enthralled by the return of its clerical redeemer. The intriguing aspect of Iran's revolutionary coalition was that all of its contending blocs perceived that Khomeini would retreat to scholastic preoccupation and leave the task of governance to the modern elements.<sup>37</sup> In this sense, like many before them, Iran's revolutionaries underestimated the determination and skill of Khomeini and his clerical cohort. The imam had finally returned to fulfill his mission of realizing God's mandate. By exploiting factional divisions, the ruthless employment of terror, and the adroit use of foreign crises, Khomeini not only displaced his rivals but also created an Islamic Republic that could not easily escape the burden of his legacy.

### God's Way

On a crisp morning in February 1979 Khomeini made his triumphant return to Iran. Approximately three million people were on hand to greet the imam and celebrate his momentous achievement. However, Khomeini and his clerical disciples understood that the success of their mission was by no means inevitable since the revolution had featured a powerful and diverse coalition of forces with their own claims and constituents. The liberal elements of the middle class, led by parties such as the National Front and the Liberation Movement of Iran, pressed for a parliamentary system of government and even a return to secularism and the rule of law. The

radical Left, led by organizations such as the Mujahidin-i Khalq (MEK), with its discursive mixture of Marxism and Islam, commanded substantial support among the students.<sup>38</sup> Its call for nationalization, redistribution of wealth, and an anti-American foreign policy found a receptive audience among many progressive circles. The Chirik'ha-yi Fada'i-i Khalq-i Iran, another guerrilla organization that had evolved during the shah's reign, could still mobilize vast demonstrations, and its publications enjoyed a wide readership.<sup>39</sup> Despite ample repression at the shah's hands, the Communist Party—Tudah—had not just survived but also established an important base in the universities and within the labor force. Even the clerical class had its divisions, as senior ayatollahs such as Kazim Shari'atmadari, Muhammad Reza Gulpaygani, and Hasan Tabatabai Qummi were prepared to relinquish power and return to the quiet ways of the seminary.<sup>40</sup>

During its three decades of rule, the Islamic Republic has undergone remarkable changes. The revolutionary regime has endured one of the most prolonged interstate wars in the annals of modern history, witnessed the rise of an extraordinary reform movement that sought to reconcile religion and democracy, and experienced its share of domestic turmoil and international crises. Yet the period between 1979 and 1981 stands as one of the most significant in this tumultuous history. At this juncture a new order, one that ensured clerical hegemony, came into existence. On the eve of the revolution, it was still unclear whether Iran would become the theocratic regime that Khomeini envisioned or a state commanded by moderate forces. Subsequent to the events of this period, it would have been difficult for any Iranian government to fully transcend its ideological inheritance.

The vast and varied nature of the revolutionary coalition that overthrew the monarchy meant that the calculating Khomeini had to proceed with caution and eliminate his rivals by exploiting their differences and generating external crises to galvanize the population.<sup>41</sup> In the maelstrom of the revolution stood the seventy-three-year-old Mahdi Bazargan, the provisional government's first prime minister. Born into a prominent religious family, Bazargan was a nationalist with impeccable credentials as an opposition leader often jailed by the shah. An engineer by training, he had spent decades trying to reconcile his scientific background with his sincere devotion to Islam. Given his fears that many of Iran's youth were being drawn to Marxist ideas, in the 1960s he joined forces with the progressive cleric Ayatollah Mahmud Taliqani in organizing the Liberation Movement of Iran. The purpose of the party would be to bridge the gap between modern intellectuals and the religious society. Finding himself suddenly in the

midst of revolutionary chaos, Bazargan sought to create a government of competence, institute a rule of law, and establish international responsibility. In accepting his office, Bazargan noted, "All of you know that I am a man of democracy, consultation, tolerance of other viewpoints, thus avoiding radicalism and haste, looking for prudence and gradualism."<sup>42</sup> Such sentiments were on display when his spokesman, Abbas Amir-Intizam, declared in July 1979 that "the revolution is over. The era of reconstruction has begun."<sup>43</sup> Along the way, Bazargan's judicious path was subverted by both Khomeini, who was determined to impose his model of governance, and the Left, which felt confident that its ideological appeal and organizational strength would ensure its power once Bazargan was out of the way.

While the contending revolutionary factions were battling each other, Khomeini quickly created a parallel government whose purpose was not just to destroy the vestiges of the old order but also to consolidate his vision. The shadowy Revolutionary Council was manned by Khomeini loyalists such as Muhammad Bihishti, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Ali Khamenei, and Ali Husayn Muntaziri. Although Bazargan was ostensibly a member, the council's essential decision-making powers rested with the clerics. The Revolutionary Council continued to exist alongside the provisional government; the Revolutionary Guards coexisted with the military; the local committees, with the police; and a network of Friday prayer leaders, with the municipal governments. The parallel government not only had more authority and resources but was also adept at manipulating popular passions to undermine its rivals.<sup>44</sup> As Bazargan complained, "In theory, the government is in charge; but in reality, it is Khomeini who is in charge—he with his Revolutionary Council, his revolutionary Komitehs, and his relationship with the masses."<sup>45</sup> Given Khomeini's stature, all of the factions sought to appeal to his authority for the advancement of their agenda. Thus, Khomeini was in a position to arbitrate all of the disputes and manipulate the situation by turning one faction against another.<sup>46</sup>

The institutional power of the clergy unfolded gradually through the political arrangements they created and the governing documents they largely crafted. The original 1979 referendum calling for an Islamic Republic and the debates on what constituted Islamic rule reflected the eclectic nature of the revolutionary coalition. The draft of the constitution had all of the relevant democratic trappings, with separation of power, an independent judiciary, a strong presidency, and an elected parliament.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, a series of institutions was also conceived that would exercise power beyond the scope of public scrutiny. The office of the supreme leader, with its authority over the entire system, was secured for Khomeini



while a council would serve as a watchdog during elections and have veto power over parliamentary legislation.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the essential religious identity of the state would assume predominance over social and economic considerations.

The early constitutional debates demonstrated an important difference between Khomeini and some of his disciples. Given the absolutist nature of Khomeini's ideology and his insistence that sovereignty rest with his clerical designates, the role of the parliament and the presidency became a source of controversy. Throughout the revolution, the leftist and secular forces that needed Khomeini's charismatic appeal chose to ignore his contempt for democratic rule. However, for those who were attentive, Khomeini was open about his ideas. The imam often deprecated democratic norms by stressing that the elected institutions were to address "matters beneath the dignity of Islam to concern itself with."<sup>49</sup> Throughout his writings and speeches, Khomeini rarely made references to a republic, as he firmly believed that laws should be derived from scriptural sources as interpreted by the clerical elite. Thus, traditional democratic institutions and practices such as assemblies, the right to vote, and referendums were not to infringe on the prerogatives of an unaccountable clerical class. To placate the progressive elements, the façade of republicanism was sustained while in practice the collective will was effectively obstructed by religious fiat. Throughout the 1980s, the Islamic Republic may have been an Islamic state, but it certainly was not a republican one.

In contrast to Khomeini, some of his younger followers such as Rafsanjani and Mutahhari did not oppose the creation of representative institutions. For this cohort there was no contradiction between a narrowly defined clerical cadre assuming power and the expansion of the democratic infrastructure. Elections were seen as a means of mobilizing poor people and the lower classes for political purposes. Thus, both the legitimacy of the system and the street power of the clerical forces would be enhanced by the democratic process. Khomeini's callow followers did not seek to undermine the elected bodies but perceived that, through suitable mobilization, they could use the ballot box to further consolidate their rule. Paradoxically, in the initial postrevolutionary phase, the elections and plebiscites worked against the liberals, who had far more concern for representative rule than the reactionary mullahs. However, history has vindicated Khomeini's suspicion that clerical absolutism could not coexist with representative order. In due course, the constitution's democratic provisions and its inclusion of the citizenry in the process of governance would do much to bedevil the theocratic order. The birth of the reform movement

in the 1990s and the persistence of popular agitation for change would present Khomeini's successors with an explosive political challenge.

Beyond the struggle to define the parameters of the Islamic Republic, the other debate gripping Tehran was the question of exporting the revolution. The Bazargan government sought to pursue a conventional non-aligned policy within the existing order.<sup>50</sup> To be sure, it quickly renounced Iran's membership in America's containment network and cancelled a series of mutual defense treaties with the United States. However, Bazargan sought to improve ties with the regional states and seemed open to a new relationship with Washington. Iran would not serve as an agent of American power in the Persian Gulf but would pursue ties based on respect and equality. In essence, Bazargan acknowledged the legitimacy of the international system and viewed the United States not as a source of imperial transgression but as a superpower that had to be dealt with cautiously.

Bazargan's position was buttressed by the support of the most esteemed ayatollahs. The senior clerics, led by Shari'atmadari, eschewed a forceful export of the revolution and stressed that the development of an ideal religious state in Iran would serve as a model for all Muslims. An Islamic city on the hill would inspire Muslims around the world and lead them to reclaim their societies. The more temperate mullahs seemed to comprehend the daunting task of managing a large country in a complicated regional environment and were reluctant to alienate Iran's neighbors and the larger international community.

In the heady days of the revolution, the proponents of aggressive expansion proved more vociferous, better organized, and more in tune with Khomeini's ideals. As we have seen, for the aging cleric, the entire international system, with its territorial divisions and ideas of nationalism, was inauthentic.<sup>51</sup> Khomeini always perceived that Iran's revolution was merely a first step in a larger struggle against the forces of inequity and oppression. "We should set aside the thought that we do not export the revolution because Islam does not regard various countries as different," declared Khomeini.<sup>52</sup> Muntaziri similarly noted the universalistic character of the revolution: "Our revolution is an Islamic Revolution and not an Iranian one."<sup>53</sup> In an equally grandiose claim, Bihishti stressed that "Islam recognizes no borders."<sup>54</sup> Soon associations such as the Revolutionary Organization of the Masses began to dispatch men and supplies to places as varied as Lebanon, the Gulf states, and Palestinian territories.<sup>55</sup> Terrorism, subversion, and the use of local surrogates became part of the exalted mission of exporting the revolution.

By fall of 1979 the ongoing disputes with Bazargan and the need to ratify the constitution had made a confrontation between the mullahs and the engineer inevitable.<sup>56</sup> The Khomeini loyalists in the provisional government had already been busy appropriating power, negating the determinations of the official government, and amassing the wealth of the defunct regime in the new religious foundations—the *bunyads*—that subsidized their foot soldiers.<sup>57</sup> However, in order to displace Bazargan, a crisis was needed that could further radicalize the populace and discredit the moderate center.

On November 4, 1979, a group of Iranian students breached the walls of the U.S. embassy and took sixty-six American diplomats hostage for 444 days. Although the next chapter addresses this episode in more detail, at this point suffice it to say that it provided Khomeini with the crisis he needed to inflame popular sentiment and claim that external enemies with the aid of domestic accomplices were plotting against the revolution. The fact that the shah had recently been admitted to the United States for medical treatment offered Iran's rash revolutionaries sufficient evidence to buttress their case. To a frenzied populace, the notion that the United States, which had used its embassy to restore the Pahlavi dynasty to power in 1953, was up to similar mischief seemed plausible. As the Iranian public rushed to the defense of the revolution, the demise of Bazargan's premiership and the passage of the constitution along the lines envisioned by Khomeini seemed inevitable.<sup>58</sup>

Given his inability to obtain the release of the hostages and facing an erosion of his domestic standing, Bazargan tendered his resignation. In the end, Mahdi Bazargan was a man of moderation in the midst of revolutionary disorder; he was an advocate of gradualism at a time of radical change; and he was a tolerant liberal during a clerical power grab. The insidious aspect of his downfall was not so much the result of clerical plotting but that the leftist forces, such as the MEK and the Tudah Party, chose to side with the clerics in the misguided hope that, once the provisional government was removed, they could easily reclaim the revolution from the mullahs.

On December 2, 1979, the Iranian constitution, which granted essential power to the unelected branches of government, was duly submitted to the public.<sup>59</sup> The imam warned the nation that failure to support the constitution at such a critical juncture would demonstrate signs of disunity and provoke an attack by the United States. The regime's propaganda machine insisted that only secular intellectuals tied to U.S. imperialism were averse to the governing document. The plot worked: A full 99 percent of the population voted for the constitution.

In the aftermath of their triumph, the clerical rulers had no compunction about defending their governing arrangement. Khomeini acclaimed the nondemocratic nature of the new constitution by claiming that “It is right that the supreme religious authority should oversee the work of the president and other state officials, to make sure that they don’t make mistakes or go against the law and the Quran.”<sup>60</sup> As for the export of the revolution, the new constitution pledged that Iran would “exert continuous effort until political, economic and cultural unity is realized in the Islamic world.”<sup>61</sup> In order to achieve this goal, the Islamic Republic’s founding document pledged to “strive in concert with other Islamic and popular movements to prepare the way for the formation of a single world community.”<sup>62</sup> In the atmosphere of conflict with the United States and domestic political tensions, the Iranian masses turned to the father of the revolution for guidance and direction. Iran’s national narrative was unfolding as Khomeini had intended. As Muhammad Musavi-Khu’ini’ha, the students’ spiritual leader and confidant of Khomeini recalled, “We reaped all the fruit of our undertaking—we defeated attempts by liberals to take control of the machinery of state. We forced Bazargan’s government to resign. The tree of the revolution has grown and garnered strength.”<sup>63</sup> However, the revolution had not yet been fully consolidated: The leftist parties and the traditional clergy still had to be dealt with.

At this point, Iran still had an elected president, Abu al Hasan Bani-Sadr, whose ideas diverged from those of the clerical powerbrokers. As was typical of the new Iranian elite, Bani-Sadr was born into a prominent religious family from the provincial city of Hamadan. After completing his education at Tehran University, he obtained advanced degrees from the University of Paris. From the outset the relations between the modernist president and the clerical oligarchs was tenuous. In his quest to achieve supreme power, Khomeini had initially focused on capturing the parliament, the Assembly of Experts, and the judiciary. As Khomeini informed his close aid, Ayatollah Muhammad Reza Mahdavi-Kani, these institutions were the most critical for the establishment of the Islamic Republic.<sup>64</sup> However, in the midst of this power grab, it was important to be cautious and at least offer the appearance of pluralism and diversity of views within the state. Having just disposed of the Bazargan government, the office of the presidency had to be occupied by a noncleric. Nonetheless, Khomeini assured his clerical disciples that “I am not afraid. And if I must, I will remove him with one finger.”<sup>65</sup> In due time, Bani-Sadr’s preference for a more tolerant Islamist regime with a limited clerical representation would cause irreparable damage between the president and the mullahs.

The latent disagreements between Bani-Sadr and the clerical leaders were coming to the surface at a time of a deepening crisis in the revolutionary coalition. The MEK, student organizations, and elements of the middle class that had far more affinity for Bani-Sadr's vision than the mullahs were still capable of mobilizing support against theocratic rule. The path of clerical consolidation of power needed another crisis. On September 22, 1980, in yet another one of his miscalculations, Saddam Husayn invaded Iran. Iraq's invasion, which was designed to destroy the nascent Islamic revolution, further assisted the clerical firebrands in their consolidation of power. Once more, a bewildered populace looked to Khomeini to lead the nation out of its latest predicament.

Saddam's invasion completely transformed Iran's internal political landscape, as the debates were no longer between despotism and freedom but loyalty to the revolution and resistance to external invaders. The cynicism of the clerical elite was on full display, as Rafsanjani quickly exploited the national emergency by defaming the critics of the Islamic Republic. "I am certain that there exists a relationship between Saddam, America, and the internal opposition," stressed the newly elected speaker of the Majlis.<sup>66</sup> In a convenient manner, the documents from the captured U.S. embassy were selectively used to discredit political opponents. Suddenly, records were unveiled to demonstrate that Bani-Sadr had met with an American businessman who was actually a CIA agent. Such evidence further fueled the mullahs' sense of paranoia, as the main clerical political organization, the Islamic Republican Party, now agitated for the displacement of Bani-Sadr on the grounds that he was proving a poor commander of the armed forces while the mullah-dominated parliament pressed for his impeachment. Finally relenting, Khomeini withdrew his support from the beleaguered president, warning him to "go back to Europe, to the United States or wherever else you want."<sup>67</sup> Quickly escaping to exile in France, Bani-Sadr had become the latest victim of the clerical consolidation of power.

At this juncture the dormant animosities between Khomeini and the senior clerics surfaced. As we have seen, Khomeini's theological innovations had long been deprecated by the esteemed men of religion. The notion of *vilayat-i faqih* was seen by many traditionalists as a superficial religious warrant for the establishment of a dictatorship. Ayatollah Fazl-Allah Zanjani now warned against "despotic rule," while Ayatollah Abu al-Hasan Khan Shirazi stressed that "circumstances have slowly become worse than before."<sup>68</sup> The most strenuous challenge to Khomeini's rule, however, came from Grand Ayatollah Shari'atmadari, who commanded strong support in the restive Azerbaijan area. Shari'atmadari favored a greater degree

of freedom and consistently invoked terms such as “nationalism” and “democratic sovereignty,” which were anathema to Khomeini. For Shari’atmadari, the existence of the presidency, the parliament, and local assemblies negated the need for institutions that were unaccountable to the popular will.

In an unmistakable rebuke to his clerical detractors, Khomeini warned that they should “understand that the country has been aware of your conduct. Your writings are doing more damage to Islam than the democrats.”<sup>69</sup> The imam’s disciples soon came to his defense, with Bihishti insisting that “Khomeini has been accepted and recognized by the majority of the people and therefore his leadership is not an imposition on the people.”<sup>70</sup> Khomeini also dismissed the claims of the new institutions’ arbitrariness: “One who acts on God’s behalf is not a dictator.”<sup>71</sup> Nonetheless, the Islamic Republic soon established special tribunals for the prosecution of the clergy, and hundreds of the most accomplished and learned men of religion would be harassed and even imprisoned. In an unprecedented move in the history of Shiism, the regime defrocked a grand ayatollah and confined Shari’atmadari to house arrest for the remainder of his life. Khomeini and his allies would never gain the allegiance of the traditional clerical establishment, but through intimidation and pressure they managed to silence their most important critics.

At this point the Republic of Virtue unleashed its reign of terror against the remaining leftist opposition. On June 28, 1981, a massive bomb destroyed the headquarters of the Islamic Republican Party, killing more than 100 individuals, including Bihishti, four cabinet members, six deputy ministers, and twenty-seven members of the parliament. The episode sparked an internal war that destroyed the last remnants of the left-wing opposition. Pitched battles in the streets, the summary execution of MEK guerrillas, and the closure of all critical press became the order of the day. Longstanding nationalist politicians, secular intellectuals, writers, journalists, and artists all became targets of suspicion and persecution. Before the year was over, the regime had executed approximately six thousand of its opponents. In one of its most gruesome displays, the pictures of those executed were exhibited on the front pages of the newspapers. The brutality of this period was best noted by then minister of interior, Ali Akbar Natiq-Nuri, who pledged that “I am not like the cancer-ridden shah; I will not retreat.”<sup>72</sup> In the end, the Islamic Republic’s superior firepower and sheer brutality allowed it to triumph and effectively end popular dissent.

The violence of this period gave rise to a Second Republic, a regime that was manned by Khomeini’s clerical loyalists in the name of Islamic

militancy. As with most revolutionary governments seeking to usher in a utopian epoch, a cultural revolution was soon unleashed. Through purges of university personnel and curriculum revisions, the new educational system was to inculcate revolutionary and Islamic values. As Khomeini noted, "We are not afraid of military attacks, we are afraid of colonial universities."<sup>73</sup> The purpose of the new educational structure was to produce students who were devoted to Islam's sacred values and the pan-Islamic mission of the state.

Beyond the universities, mass communications, newspapers, and the arts came under a similar degree of scrutiny and censorship. Various agencies such as the Ministry of Islamic Guidance and the Islamic Propaganda Organization were to ensure that revolutionary images, defiance of the West, and Islamic mores became the prevailing social messages. A spirit of oppression had descended on Iran, where students were advised to inform on their teachers, children on their parents, and employees on employers. The terror and repression of this period produced a government that not only displaced its monarchical foe and secular rivals but also sought a thorough ideological and political transformation of Iran. An entirely new structure of government and a new, dedicated, religious cadre came into existence with a determination to ensure the perpetuation of Khomeini's vision.

In a perverse manner, Khomeini's totalitarian aspirations would be undermined by the structure and norms of the very religion in whose name he professed to rule. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, with its strict hierarchy and notions of papal infallibility, Shiite ulema—Muslim scholars—were always loosely organized. The fact that most of the traditional clergy were dismissive of Khomeini's theological improvisations ensured that a body of ayatollahs remained in a state of perpetual dissent. Even within Khomeini's circle of adherents, contrasting ideas and disagreements would prevent the Islamic Republic from becoming a pure totalitarian state or even developing consistent policies on important issues.<sup>74</sup>

Unlike many of its regional counterparts, the theocracy developed institutions with their own mindset and sense of autonomy. The factionalism of the state would find an organizational expression as the ministries, Revolutionary Guards, seminaries, and elected bodies spoke in diverse voices—and often at cross-purposes with each other. Hovering over the system was Khomeini, who sought to provide a balance among his revolutionary followers. In due course, various mediating bodies were created to settle disputes whose irresolution threatened the government's functionality. In the end, Khomeini may have succeeded in creating an Islamic Republic, but one with distinct fault lines and ample divisions.

Such diversity of views within the elite structure was acceptable to Khomeini. The imam's management style now became much more aloof as he worked to establish broad national guidelines and serve as the authority of last resort but rarely intervene in the daily conduct of the state. The one area where Khomeini was more directly involved was the Ministry of Intelligence. Its first minister, Muhammad Muhammadi Ray'shahri, even compiled a "bulletin of differences" for the imam, which chronicled the disagreements and tensions within the regime.<sup>75</sup> Given his portfolio, it is not unreasonable to assume that clandestine methods such as eavesdropping and espionage were used to garner that information. Although Ray'shahri was prepared to use that knowledge against state officials, Khomeini admonished him that "differences are necessary."<sup>76</sup> The grand ayatollah may have been wary of his disciples, but he still preferred their inclusion in the system. This would be a stark contrast to his successor, Ali Khamenei.

Once in power, all revolutionary regimes deviate from their declared precepts, moderate their objectives, and even adjust to the prevailing order. In many ways, Iran's theocratic state was no different, as it could not sustain its hostility to both superpowers and its commitment to the overthrow of its neighbors. Khomeini's ideological contentions still had to exist in an international arena dominated by the United States and a political economy that made Iran vulnerable to economic pressure. The Islamic Republic's enforced pragmatism would come partly through a prolonged and devastating war with Iraq that compelled the regime toward certain adjustments of its core objectives. However, even in the absence of war with Iraq, it is unlikely that the aging ayatollah would have realized his Islamist dreams. In due course, internal dissent, economic hardship, and divisions among the governing elite would crystallize the impracticalities of his vision.<sup>77</sup>

From the outset, the notion that Iran's revolution could have been exported seemed far-fetched. Iran's rhetoric was certainly ferocious, and its commitment to impose its model was indeed sincere. However, the limits of its power and its place in the region militated against a significant projection of its influence. In terms of possessing a strong military or reliable alliances, Iran was after all not the Soviet Union or even China. The under-reported story of Iran as a menace or hegemon is its isolation. A Shiite power struggling in a Middle East dominated by Sunnis and a Persian nation seeking to lead the Arab realm would always encounter natural barriers. Moreover, Khomeini was certainly a trendsetter and made important adjustments to normative Shiite political philosophy with its historical emphasis on clerical disengagement from daily politics. However, the



notion of pan-Islamic unity and the resistance of the West were not particularly novel. Such ideological assertions had permeated the Middle East since the demise of the Ottoman Empire, yielding important thinkers and transnational associations such as the Muslim Brotherhood. In the end, the region's revolutionaries and activists have always had to contend with the durability of state power and the inability of their Islamic claims to alter the regional order.

However, it is too facile to suggest that Iran has gone the way of a typical revolutionary state, namely, relinquishing its ideological patrimony for more mundane considerations. Khomeini was too much of an innovator in terms of the institutions he created and the elite that he molded to see the passing of his vision. On a range of issues from its antagonism to the United States and Israel to its attempts to undermine the Gulf states' princely class, Iran sustained its animus long after such hostilities proved disadvantageous and self-defeating. The theocratic regime would remain a state perennially divided against itself—with pragmatists and radicals battling one another; with a foreign policy struggling to define coherent objectives; and with revolutionary pretensions pitted against national-interest imperatives. The Islamic Republic would alter its course, limit its horizons, and make unsavory compromises but would not completely temper its raging fires. In the end, Khomeini may not have been able to impose the totality of his views on Iran, much less the Islamic world, but neither would he become another faded revolutionary commemorated on occasion and disregarded most of the time.