

## ABSTRACT

An Alternate Approach: A Communication Centered Proposal for the United States'

Iranian Policy

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This thesis proposes a policy of communication with Iran by digital media networks, the United States encourages Iranians to pursue political ideologies contrary to theocratic authoritarianism. The emergence of the Islamic Republic and consolidation of power under the Ayatollah enabled an ideology that preserved the Supreme Leader's power to decimate throughout Iran. The Islamic revolutionaries forged a new Iranian society that consolidated religious and political authority unto the Ayatollah, enabling the theocratic authoritarian state to endure. However, opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran persisted since the revolution and encountered moments of widespread support within the state, as evidenced by the 1990s reform movement and the 2009 Green Movement. In light of the internal opposition to the Ayatollah's rule, an avenue presents how the United States may decimate counter-regime information in Iran. Introducing outside media to the Iranian people through established digital communication networks enables individuals to form political ideologies contrary to Iran's religious authoritarian rule. Thus, building upon existing oppositional movements in Iran, the United States may encourage individuals in Iran to forge personal beliefs of government that support freedom, antithetical to the oppressive religious-political rule of the Ayatollah.

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An Alternate Approach:  
A Communication Centered Proposal for the United States' Iranian Policy

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: An Analysis of the History of Political Islam in Iran . . . . .	1
Chapter Two: History of American Policy Towards Iran . . . . .	31
Chapter Three: Present Policy Possibilities Concerning Iran . . . . .	46
Chapter Four: An Alternative Approach: Digital Communication with Iran . . . . .	58
Bibliography . . . . .	71

## CHAPTER ONE

### An Analysis of the History of Political Islam in Iran

#### *Introduction*

By appreciating the historical roots of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the present discourse in Iranian politics, the United States can develop a policy that ameliorates Iranian American relations. Through communicating with the Iranian people, the United States can promote a new ideological framework in Iran that encourages better relations with Iran. Specifically, through communication the United States would encourage a more democratic Iran that peacefully addresses the needs of the Iranian people and is at peace with its neighbors.

This chapter examines the changes in the internal structure and ideology of the Islamic State of Iran and the people of Iran since the revolution of 1979. Notable shifts in the political and social climate of Iran are evident in the consolidation of power by Khamenei, the state's increasing interaction with terrorist organizations, and interactions with other Middle Eastern countries, especially Israel, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. The subtle radicalization of Iranian ideology and policy from the fundamentals of Shi'a Islam demonstrates the regime's continual adjustment of the rhetoric surrounding governance presented to the Iranian people. Regionally, Iran is often seen as a potential regional hegemon leading the spread of its brand of revolutionary Shi'ism around the Middle East. However, growing anti-regime sentiments have emerged among the Iranian people,

demonstrating a backlash on the part of Iranians against the radicalized ideology of the regime.

In investigating the Iranian regime and the relations between the United States and Iran, it is essential first to consider the nature of political Islam in Iran, and the fundamentals of Iranian policy domestically, regionally, and internationally. As Tabaar notes in *Religious Statecraft: The Politics of Islam in Iran*:

Actors' strategic interests shape ideas, which become institutionalized to create political opportunities, reduce threats, and facilitate political action. Ideas are not on the periphery or an accidental outcome. They are at the center of the political battlefield. They are at the service of individual, group, institutional, and state actors, who often disaggregate them, turn them upside down, and add elements from other religions or philosophies.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, ideology serves as a foundation for the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. With an enhanced understanding of the Iranian regime and its method of governing, American policy makers can begin to appreciate the role rhetoric has played in shaping the structure of Iran since the revolution of 1979. This section begins with a brief summary of the historic evolution of Islam in Iranian politics to set the context for the formation of political Islam. Upon discussing the role of religion in the state of Iran, I discuss the role of the West in shaping the ideology of Iran which precipitated the call for a return of Islamic ideals in the Iranian Revolution. Throughout

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<sup>1</sup> Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft: The Politics of Islam in Iran*, Columbia Studies in Middle East Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

the discussion of the Islamification of Iranian politics, the language used to communicate ideology serves as central to Iranian's conception of the role of Iran in the world. Thus, I argue in this section that increased discourse between the United States and Iran can serve as a means of improving American relations with Iran and could contribute to peaceful regime change.

### *Religion and the State*

The Islamic ideology of Iran and the political and cultural revolution evolved in unison in response to the changing external social and political climate through the traditional lens of culture in Iran. Like all elements of a culture, religion is susceptible to change and has throughout history been used as a tool to wield power, from the Catholic Church, to Henry VIII and the Anglican Church, to Puritan societies. In Islam, elites have exploited extreme ideas like violent Jihad to undo their opponents and seize control. The radicalization of religion is perpetuated and exacerbated by the rhetoric that expresses a certain interpretation of the Islamic religion.

### *Islam and Politics*

In considering the radicalization of Islam and the concept of an Islamic state in Iran, it is essential to note the central role of governance in Islam's formation by the Prophet Muhammad in the fourteenth century. The Prophet traditionally was head of state, and under Muhammad, Islam became both a religious and a political community.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Random House Trade Paperback, 2003).

The duality between religion and the state so prominent in today's secular nation states is a concept foreign to the traditional Islamic world. Other groups throughout history, such as the Swiss societies founded around Reformed Protestant Christians by Zwingli, the Puritan society of colonial North America, and even modern-day nations like Vatican City, were established with a religious purpose. However, two predominant differences emerge when considering the formation of Islamic societies compared to their Judeo-Christian counterparts. Islam is potentially authoritarian in organizational structure because it is sourced from the revelation of a single individual with authority passed down unto his successors. Additionally, Islam provides a set of regulations for domestic, social, and political life and is most different from the rest of the world's nations when it comes to politics; nowhere else does religion serve such a critical and formative role in politics.

### *Iran and Islam*

Following the westward expansion of Arab Muslims, Persian society adopted Islam out of pragmatism to survive within the Muslim empire. By adopting Islam, the Persians retained political power in the Abbasid Empire.<sup>3</sup> Ideological differences exist between the Arabs and Persians. With the Safavids, a led the "adoption of the Twelver Shi'ism," a form of Islam adhering to the spiritual-political leadership of divinely appointed leaders in Muslim communities.<sup>4</sup> The institutionalization of Twelver Shi'ism

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<sup>3</sup> Roby C. Barrett, *The Gulf and the Struggle for Hegemony: Arabs, Iranians, and the West in Conflict* (Washington D.C.: Middle East Institute, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Barrett, *Gulf and the Struggle for Hegemony*, 360.



instigated the conversion of Persians from Ottoman Sunni Islam to Shi'ism. Thus, the propagation of Twelver Shi'ism under Shah Ishmael I across Iran enabled the integration of political and religious laws which ultimately facilitated the emergence of the *Velayat-e Faqih*, "the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist," in the Iranian Revolution.<sup>5</sup> The notion of *Velayat-e Faqih* is not orthodoxy for most Iranians who were historically Sunni but is of the Shi'a that emerged and became dominant in the sixteenth century. This concept was proliferated within the Shi'a regime to assert the greater authority of the religious elite over the population – ideology imposed to strengthen control, as is seen in the adoption of Islam initially by the Persians.

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<sup>5</sup> The Safavids were theologically radically different from other Muslim communities. Sufi belief was overlaid with orthodox Sunni theology while influenced by Sevener Shi'a practices that took a militant and political direction in 1447 with the central Asia conflict. Thus, the *safaviyya* morphed from its Sunni origins into a form of Sevener Shi'a that spread amongst the Turkish tribes in Persia. With the centralization of the Safavid empire under Ismail I, Twelver Shi'ism became the official religion of Persia, creating an entirely new religious structure of the state with forced conversions and persecution of other beliefs. The suppression of the people and sense of victimization was exploited by the Safavid rulers to establish a religious elite that was directly linked to and bolstered by the imperial leadership. Ideological tensions expanded as the Safavid empire expanded and clashed with the Ottomans where Sunni Ulma had power and detested the Islam of Ismail, and Ismail's defeat led to questions concerning the legitimacy of his theology, for he was not the Iman. Consequently, the Sunni Ulma directed the Twelver Shi'a clergy away from Sufi mysticism and towards a theological focus. After the death of Ismail, the Qizilbash, the Turkish tribesmen that were a form of police, became rulers in Persia. The Ottomans served as a consistent external threat to the Persian Empire, and Qizilbash's challenge of centralized governing authority created internal instability. The clergy became institutionalized with the forced conversion to Shi'a Islam in Persia under the Safavids. Shi'a Islam became the center of politics and institutions with the relationship conceived between the bazaar merchant class and the religious clergy, both of which gained power when the centralized government weakened and receded under a strong government. Change occurred in Persian governmental structure again under Shah Abbas I who restructured the political monarchy, the military, the administrative, and the arts and sciences of Persia and he moved the capital to Isfahan after forging peace with the ottomans and defeating the Uzbeks. Shah Abbas I created a centralized military more loyal to the regime than the Qizilbash following the Ottoman model of military structure and modernizing the military. A patronage system emerged amongst the soldiers in which slave soldiers could be promoted and the placing of *safaviyya* tribal rulers as rural lords undermining the Qizilbash militarily and politically beginning in 1622. Because the empire was centralized upon the ruler rather than a ruling body, the death of Shah Abbas I and then later Abbas II meant the downfall of the Safavid Empire. The ineffectiveness of the shahs and focus on luxuries for the ruling class over protection for the boarder communities led to an increasingly oppressive Safavid regime who continued to force conversion to Shi'a Islam (Barrett, 363).

As Iranian political ideology evolved under the Safavid monarchy, the 1700s marked a decline of a unified concept of “Persia” as European states began to spread and dominate. The plague and crop failure led to the Persian people suffering, enabling the rise of tribal revolts leading to the revolt of Afghans and elimination of Persian influence from Afghanistan, leading ultimately to the shah abdicating the throne. Following the collapse of the Safavid political system, factional leadership, including the Shi’a clergy, became prominent with different regimes attempting to rise but ultimately failing because of the internal fractured political structure of Persia and the squeezing of Persia between Russia in the North and British colonization of India to the East. The outside exploitation of Persia by European powers for land led to resentment against the West among Persians. Arab dynasties began to rise from former Persian control with the first Saudi state in 1744, and Oman rebelled from Nadir Shah who sought to create a pan-Islamic empire that hinged on Oman access to the Indian Ocean. Persian lack of naval prowess enabled the rise of the Arabian Gulf region and the expansion of the Saudi state with Sunni’s being placed over formerly Shi’a ruled Persian regions.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Persian power in the Middle East declined with the rise of Arab and European powers in the region, resulting in western powers strongly influencing the political landscape of Iran throughout its history.

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<sup>6</sup> Barrett, 363-370.

## *Iran and the West*

To understand the proliferation of political Islam in Iran, one must consider the critical role Western governments played in shaping the social and physical landscape of the Middle East throughout history. The anti-American and anti-Western sentiments of Iranians is a manifestation of centuries of perceived exploitation and oppression by outsiders into the Persian region.

### *Western Involvement in Iran*

Foreign involvement in Iranian affairs has pervaded Iranian history, creating space for the revolutionary impetus for an anti-Western revolution in Iran in the twentieth century. As early as the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire wielded significant influence in through peaceful dealings with the Safavid kingdom. However, peace with the Ottomans did not protect Iran from the military and technological power of the Ottoman Empire, resulting in internal factionalism that led to the downfall of Safavid rule in the late seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup> Following the fall of the Safavid rule in Iran, European powers began imperializing the Islamic world beginning with economic interaction and expansion of European commerce. This was followed by the exploitation of the Islamic people by their European conquerors and a European system of mercantilism, extracting raw materials from their conquered lands for European manufacturers and markets. The French Revolution changed the dynamic between the Islamic world and the West because for the first time the center of Islamic world was invaded. The peripheral areas of the Turk and Persian regions bordering Russia and Austria had experienced assaults before.

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<sup>7</sup> Barrett, 365-369.

In those regions a cyclical pattern of losing and regaining territory occurred.<sup>8</sup> However, Napoleon sought to invade the center of the Islamic world, an unheard-of assault. The British responded to the French invasion in Egypt by sending forces to defend the region. Thus, the British response to France's invasion served as even more substantial involvement of Western powers in the previously Islamic controlled world.<sup>9</sup> European powers sought to prevent religion from serving as a means of preserving the population's former national identity. This identity might fuel a popular insurrection in the conquered territory. The mosque served as the hub for the propagation of politically dissenting ideas, as it would later during the Iranian Revolution. However, the Muslims in territory conquered by Europeans in the Middle East saw westernization of the region as a direct violation of their autonomy and right to practice their faith.

Economic involvement was followed by total conquest, particularly over the contested regions of Russia and Central Asia, in addition to India, Malaya, and North Africa, and finally the Middle East, predominantly by the British and French.<sup>10</sup> By the twentieth century and the League of Nations gave France and Britain absolute administration of the Middle East to move the territory towards eventual independence. The intention to transform former Ottoman territory into independent states meant the complete upheaval of the existing culture, from infrastructure, religion, structure of governance, education, and household practices.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*, 74-77.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, 78-82.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, 63-66.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis, 70-73.

## *The United States and Iran*

While the European powers were shaping the Middle East, the United States began its first interactions with the region. While social and governmental life transformed following the European defeat of the Ottomans, the industrial revolution in America caused the proliferation of American goods across the world. These goods made their way into the Middle East, transforming the economic structure of the region. As American products entered the Islamic world, so too did American norms and ideals, further contributing to a shift in Middle Eastern culture towards greater westernization that began under European powers.<sup>12</sup> The West became a divisive entity in the Islamic world where, for progressives, it denoted freedom, while for traditionalists, Western culture denoted consumerism, greed, and power. Some Muslim leaders would take advantage of this longstanding hostility towards the West during the Iranian Revolution.

Iranians perceived a sense of subjugation to Western forces as a consequence of Western invasion in the region. Western forces increasingly concerned Iran following the fall of the Ottoman Empire and fluctuating involvement of the United States in Iranian politics. Thus, Islamist Iranians took a reactionary approach to the changing society. To push against the culture and norms of the Western invaders, Islamists sought an extreme reinstatement of Islamic ideals in Iranian society, transforming the government to reflect the Iranian peoples' socio-economic values and not those of Westerners. Through influential leaders organizing influential masses behind this idea, the Iranian Revolution overthrew the Shah and his American supporters.

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<sup>12</sup> Lewis, 85-90.

Despite the withdraw of Western states and their companies from the Middle East throughout the twentieth century, the seeds of Western hatred were already sown in the Middle East, particularly in the heart of fundamentalists who saw the West, and America especially, as opposed to their core value systems. For Persian communities, Western interference caused more significant problems in the region, as demonstrated by Mosaddeq's government in Iran, the Shah's replacement. The push to nationalize oil by Mosaddeq led to the American backing of the British interests in the region, culminating in the movement to covertly overthrow Mosaddeq. The overthrow of Mosaddeq lead to the return of the Shah, who was regarded now more than ever as an American puppet. The rule of the Shah included the deconstruction of the former Iranian social order in the 1960s and was coupled with modernization, which included economic restructuring. In addition, the Shah's regime conducted ideological indoctrination, surveillance, and the suppression of former cultural practices. However, despite American backing, the United States failed to protect the newly reinstated Shah when his overthrow was imminent.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, Persian hostility to America emerged from two grievances: America's unwanted involvement in affairs of the Middle East, and the West's unreliability in the region. Distrust of the West, and America in particular, emerged due to their active engagement in Iran in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, followed by discontinuity and uncertainty in later American policy concerning Iran. More on this later. The centuries of invasions by Western powers into the Persian world created drastic societal changes that lead many Iranians to feel as though their identity had been seized, coopted, and in some cases destroyed, by outsiders. These grievances of the Iranian

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<sup>13</sup> Lewis, 92.

people would be part of the fuel for the revolutionary fire that would consume the country in 1979.

*The Iranian Revolution and its Aftermath*

The revolution in Iran is distinct from that in other internal political revolutions throughout history. Not only were the people unified on political and ideological grounds, centered on the feeling of oppression by the current system, but also through a sense of religious marginalization when religious officials lost their influence under the Shah. Consequently, as division increased in Iranian politics, between the monarchy of the Shah and religious leaders, Khomeini engendered the support of religious leaders. As Tabaar notes:

The religious doctrines promoted by the Islamists were not merely a reflection of their “moral system” or fixed determinants of their political actions. Rather, these doctrines were developed and deployed in response to the shifting political landscape at a given time.<sup>14</sup>

By proposing a platform of strict governance rooted in Islamic philosophy, Khomeini mobilized the support of the religious elite, while his appeals to Iranian nationalism and the grievances of the Iranian people mobilized the populous.

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<sup>14</sup> Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft*, 300.

*Pre-Revolution Islamic Iranian Response to the West*

In Iran, the 1960s marked the politicization of Islam. Leaders like Jalal Al-e Ahmad used political Islam to shape the social order of the state and politics. By using Islam as a political tool, leaders could regulate practices through the lens of Islam, and instruct society to comply with Shi'a orders and standards. Very importantly, Ali Shariati transformed Shi'a theology into a revolutionary ideology by merging Shi'a Islam with Marxism.<sup>15</sup> These ideas gave form and meaning to the political, social, and religious revolution in Iran. Because of the integration of political ideology into Islam by Shariati, the revolutionary impulse for the formation of an Islamic government in Iran was expressed in religious institutions. Islamists in Iranian mosques and the conventional religious leaders carried the political and religious revolutionary ideas to the Iranian people.

Consequently, the veil of religion enabled the revolutionary ideas to spread and create alliances and cohesion under the nose of the present regime. The Shah also used religion to bolster his power by instating religious individuals in offices and reducing Western culture's influence in the state to address popular grievances against the West among the Iranian people.<sup>16</sup> Both the Shah and those who ousted him saw the way that anti-western policies could boost political legitimacy in Iran. However, individuals like Khomeini went a step further than the Shah by promoting a return to traditional values via a nationalist campaign. Moreover, despite the efforts by Khomeini to unite the state under a singular ideology of political Islam, divisions arose amongst political and

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<sup>15</sup> Tabaar, 74.

<sup>16</sup> Tabaar, 300.



religious leaders. Among religious leaders, factionalism occurred because of competing visions of what religious leaders deemed the proper role of religion in the state. In addition, division arose between the religious and business coalitions Khomeini mobilized to affect the Iranian Revolution. Because the Islamic Republic of Iran succeeded through the uniting religious clerics and bazaar merchants to overthrow the Shah, it was susceptible to division along these lines when the Shah was gone. The Revolution succeeded because it unified factions in the common cause of overthrowing the Shah. divisions reemerge once the unifying goal had been realized.

### *The Rise of Ayatollah Khomeini*

Iranian society considered Ayatollah Khomeini a man of principle guiding the religious state of Iran. Under the Shah, Khomeini engendered support by creating a constitution-centered opposition party governed by the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist. Khomeini's coalition opposed the reign of the Shah as illegitimate. Khomeini promised freedom for individuals through the promotion of an Islam aligned with extreme nationalism. Through the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist Khomeini provided a means by which the clerical class could reassert influence in society and creating mechanisms that consolidated power in clerical hands. Consequently, Khomeini successfully merged religious power with that of the Supreme Leader. Religion appeared most influential while in effect, the Supreme Leader himself retained the highest degree of influence in the theocratic-authoritarian state. Additionally, to garner influence within Iran, Khomeini allied with the army and promised America access to oil without obstruction. Then, once

Khomeini assumed power, he uprooted all of these elements and created his own Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps putting the country under the control of Islam.<sup>17</sup>

Class factions began to take shape under the Shah, leading in part to Khomeini's ascension to power, for he was able to exploit the grievances of the clerics and bazaar class, who felt as though they were losing power due to the Shah's modernization agenda. However, in the early years following the revolution, Khomeini's Islamism was broader and aligning the desires of moderates with the revolutionaries. Thus, the political Islam institutionalized by Khomeini necessarily balanced the concerns of a broad constituency to forge a functioning government in the new Iranian regime.

Khomeini used religion to generate political momentum and gain allies as he fostered nationalism. The revolution shifted significantly from its original roots under Khomeini as it "released powerful and disruptive aspirations."<sup>18</sup> The unveiling of concealed preferences served as the turning point of the Iranian Revolution. As Iranians saw others within the state expressing their dissatisfaction with the Shah, individuals more frequently and pronouncedly endorsed Khomeini's revolution.<sup>19</sup> Because the Iranian Revolution ignited under Khomeini pulled upon the underlying discontentment of the people as their Persian identity became lost in a modernizing Iran, Khomeini was able to craft a political structure that both reflects and shapes the Islamic Persian identity of the Iranian people.

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<sup>17</sup> Tabaar, 92.

<sup>18</sup> Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> Timur Kuran, "Now out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989," *World Politics* 44, no. 1 (October 1991): 7–48, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010422>.

### *Iran after the Revolution*

As governmental organization and state structure became the principal bone of contention following the revolution, factionalism dominated post-revolutionary Iranian politics. The initial factions that emerged were those between the conservative right, who became the Islamists and increasingly extreme in beliefs and anti-Americanism, and the left, who morphed into reformers seeking Islamic freedom through Islamic ideas enabled by a democratic system rather than imposed by the state.<sup>20</sup> Later in his life, Khomeini's political ideology became increasingly authoritarian as he consolidated power in himself, a process which his successor, Supreme Leader Khamenei, continued and intensified. While reformers achieved a degree of power with the presidency of Rafsanjani, the authority of the Supreme Leader ultimately dictated the direction of Iranian politics more than any elected official. The issue of the scope of the Supreme Leader's authority over religion culminated in considering whether the Supreme Leader has the authority of the Prophet Mohamad, as Khomeini claimed he did, or whether the Supreme Leader is merely a figurehead demonstrating the religious piety of the state without having the authority to enact new law. Under the legal system implemented by Khomeini, Supreme Leader had the final say in all things, including interpretation of and additions to the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist itself.

When strict adherence to Islamic law endangered the survival of Iran, Khomeini would work around these strictures to ensure survival. An example of Khomeini confining religion to comply with his political agenda is seen in his management and

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<sup>20</sup> Tabaar, 206.

manipulation of the banking system. For instance, Khomeini allowed profit and interest, though usury was illegal under Sharia. Following strict Sharia law in the financial sector was not viable for a state's economy.<sup>21</sup> Khomeini institutionalized Islam as a mechanism to govern through the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist for the benefit of those in power. However, the law of the Guardianship if the Islamic Jurist was not governing in and of itself because it was not an original text of the Prophet Muhammad. Instead, the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist deviated from the instruction of the prophet for the sake of governing a modern state, seen in the economic system of the Iranian Republic. While traditional Islamic teaching outlaws usury, the Iranian state allowed it to ensure Iran's fiscal survival.

However, in areas of life where Islam was a useful tool for compliance, such as reverence for the clergy, devotion to the Islamic government as God's providential country, Sharia was strictly enforced. The discrepancy in implementing Islamic ideology upon Iranian society demonstrates the state's inability to maintain both principled religiosity and effectual governance.

Consequently, though a substantial section of the clergy ascribed to "realist" adherence to Islamic law, there were those that countered such a seemingly discriminate application of the law such as Rafsanjani, who thought that study of Sharia should guide its application to Islamic law in a systematic way in the present day.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Bijan Rabiee and Shiva Jalalpoor, "Development of Cultural Construction and Constitutional Revolution in Iran," *Journal of History Culture and Art Research* 6, no. 4 (September 30, 2017): 1140, <https://doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v6i4.1136>.

<sup>22</sup> Tabaar, 102.

Mirroring the social, political, and religious transformation of Iranian society following the Western intervention in the region, Khomeini reoriented the state to align with his new Islamic-Persian identity. The regime suppressed those that desired secularism and removed Islam from the government. Consequently, the regime effectively suppressed religious leaders and devotees as the nature of Islam in Iran changes to comply with the desires of the Supreme Leader. The Guardian Council, the body of the Iranian government most concerned with maintaining strict adherence to the law, in contrast to the legislative body of the Majles, had their political authority stripped from them by Khomeini with the increase of the Expediency Council.<sup>23</sup> Through installing new executive authorities, Khomeini transformed the nature of politics and Islam in Iran. While Khomeini once considered the state a means of institutionalizing Islamic law, he began to limit the breadth of Islam in the government by limiting the scope of the Guardian Council, placing politics over devotion to the Islamic law. Khomeini also ascribed increasing power unto himself, claiming that the Supreme Leader had the authority of the Prophet to nullify some Islamic laws and implement new ones.

What Khomeini presented in essence was that not just Islam but his own brand of Islam—inspired by Islamic theology, philosophy, and mysticism coming out of a decade of praxis—was superior to not only orthodox Shi’a theology but also what was once his most challenging ideological rival: Marxism.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Saikal, *Iran Rising: The Survival and Future of the Islamic Republic*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctvc77cbb.3>.

<sup>24</sup> Tabaar, 193.

Khomeini's manipulation of his religious authority to direct more power onto himself by using his platform to consolidate power onto himself serves as an expression of Islam's role in the entire state of Iran. Religious devotion was a tool extorted by those in power to garner power with the Revolution and maintain power by exacerbating internal factions to lead people to look to the established authority in a community, the clergy, as the authority in all aspects of life, including politics. The rhetoric that devotion to Islamic law is devotion to God further solidified the Islamist's power by forcing people into a situation of compromising their religious beliefs and their country if they were to go against the Islamic State. Thus, as Khomeini altered what even was included under Islamic law, he changed the requirements for devotion to God to align with his agenda. Khomeini implemented the prescient that the Supreme Leader, himself, and those to follow, not the Quran, served as an absolute authority. Thus, Khomeini essentially stripped Islam of all legitimacy, for the practice of Islam was determined by a man rather than grounded in holy teaching. This is dangerous not only theologically, but also politically, for the whole government was also placed under the direction of the Supreme Leader, creating an essentially totalitarian state with the veneer of a republic. Consequently, the Islamic ideological values of Iran were manipulated by early Iranian leaders, such as Khomeini, in order to sustain their political power and the survival of the state.

The inherent conflict between state survival and ideological principle quickly came to a head in the area of national security as well, driving ideology to bend to the needs of state security. Consequently, Khomeini promoted an ideological bend to national security, evident through the Iran-Iraq War. As framing the war with Iraq as a

fight for the preservation of true Islam, Khomeini considered war and its collateral damage as necessary for the preservation of the dignity of Iran and Islam against the heresy of Sunni Iraq.<sup>25</sup> Through war with Iraq, Iran underscored the manipulation of religion as a tool for the preservation of the political state. Just as war with Iraq presented an early threat to the survival of the Islamic Republic, that required ideological messaging to back a political response, Iran's enemy of Israel also highlights the mobilization of religion as a tool of the government. The ideological values of Islam were advertised by the Iranian regime to fuel animosity against Israel and the West. As Iran perceived a threat from the United States' backing of Israel, the Iranian regime's messaging shifted from promoting the universal ideals of the Islamic Revolution to protecting the security of the Islamic Republic.<sup>26</sup> Shifting discourse from the promotion of the ideal Islamic state of the Iranian Revolution to the political preservation of the Iranian Republic, religion was used as a tool to promote Iran's political system. Thus, when faced with political threats, ideology was a moldable tool by the Iranian regime to protect the political state.

### *Iran after Khomeini*

As Khomeini claimed to have authority to place all Muslims under subjection to his interpretation and application of the law, Khomeini gave himself authority over what genuine devotion to Islam looked like, especially as it entailed devotion to himself. Thus,

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<sup>25</sup> Tabaar, 158.

<sup>26</sup> Amal Saikal, *Iran Rising: The Survival and Future of the Islamic Republic*, 210.

following Khomeini's death, Iran faced the classic succession problem. A debate arose concerning the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist. The Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, written by Khomeini and clerics, declared what comprises Islamic law. The Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist ultimately served as the source of Khomeini's declaration that as Supreme Leader he possessed absolute theocratic rule over all of the Muslim world. Following Khomeini, Iranian leadership had to determine whether the Iranian government gave political authority to clerics, or if the Koran served the center of Islamic authority. The religious power expressed by the Iranian Supreme Leader demonstrates the central control of religion by the Supreme Leader as well as the influence of religion on the political system of Iran. The Supreme Leader shaped the Islamic Republic to conform with his theological and political agenda through crafting a narrative that presents true Iranian identity as antithetical to Western society.

### *Rhetoric Shaping Iran*

Propaganda through media outlets served as central to the formation and governing of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Aware of the role of rhetoric in shaping the government's influence over the people, the Supreme Leaders of Khomeini and Khamenei disseminated a message that ultimate political and religious authority rested under the Supreme Leader. Khamenei considered, "the most effective international weapon against enemies and the opposition is the weapon of propaganda and the media. Today, this is the most powerful weapon, and it is even worse and more dangerous than



the atomic bomb.”<sup>27</sup> Consequently, religious and political messaging bolstered the perpetuation of the Islamic Republic even amidst opposition.

### *Rhetoric and Pre-Revolutionary Iranian Politics*

Language and rhetoric have been central to Iranian politics since the country’s conception. The structural change within Iran was affected by a rhetorical change concerning Iran’s relation with other states. Beginning with the self-identification, how the Persian people are distinct from Arabs or Westerners, some leaders have used polarizing language to craft an historical narrative about Iran. Through rhetoric charged by nationalism, an image of Iran that was a sharp contrast to Western actors, especially America, emerged. Because the United States’ backed coup of Musaddiq in 1953, the United States was foremost in Iran’s strongly anti-Western sentiments, second only to Israel.<sup>28</sup> Khomeini took advantage of these grievances and promoted a firm nationalism, with a cry for legitimacy and sovereignty, proclaiming: “no one can dictate to us. No one can wave a finger at us, because we will wave a finger back.”<sup>29</sup> This defiant sentiment became fundamental to Iranian political ideology and remains today.

The Iranian Revolution, that created the present Islamic Republic, did not begin only with an angered cry against the Shah regime and its ties to the United States. The Iranian people were also mobilized through the faith-based messages of religious elites.

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<sup>27</sup> Tabaar, 248.

<sup>28</sup> Mattin Biglari, “‘Captive to the Demonology of the Iranian Mobs’: U.S. Foreign Policy and Perceptions of Shi’a Islam During the Iranian Revolution, 1978-79,” *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 4 (September 2016): 579–605, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhv034>.

<sup>29</sup> Barrett, 440.

The perception of the power of the religious authorities that dispersed Khomeini's revolutionary message increased in the wake of the revolution as Khomeini institutionalized his interpretation of Islam through the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist. However, the word of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, and its alteration by Khomeini, and his successor Khamenei, enabled the formation of a powerfully centralized regime in which the Supreme Leader wields near-absolute control over governance and has a monopoly over religion in Iran. The interconnection of religious authority and governing authority of the Supreme Leader in Iran shaped the state's interests and objectives, and consequently their rhetorical.

#### *Rhetoric as a Tool of the Regime*

Furthermore, the religious identity of Iran dictated how the state operated and communicated both internal and international policy. This was apparent during the Iran-Iraq War. The Iranian government utilized media to express the political objectives of the war with Iraq. Preacher Sadegh Ahangaran took a prominent role in the war with Iraq as he composed songs with strong religious sentiments, venerating those who died in combat as martyrs. Ahangaran was able to mobilize the people beyond the factional lines of nationalism or tribalism and quickly became essential to Khomeini. Ahangaran utilized poetry and song to call the people to devotion to the Supreme Leader and to the war effort, and the sacrifices it demanded. His preaching helped increase membership in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corpse exponentially.<sup>30</sup> Khomeini's own rhetoric surrounding the Iran-Iraq War spoke of "saving" Iraq. He used absolutist religious

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<sup>30</sup> Tabaar, 166.

language, preaching that God was on the side of Iran, which shaped Iran's strategic approach in the course of the war.

In the course of the war the clergy was able to seize power over the executive branch and the military. However, the ideology of the Islamic State soon became a core concern as Shari'a became the aim of the state, the end in and of itself, rather than a tool utilized by the state. During the Iran-Iraq War, by claiming divine authority, the militant clergy were able to compel people to fall under their leadership or risk the wrath of God. Absolutist language also presents itself in the state's internal governing of the state to ensure the survival of the Supreme Leader's authority.

### *A Counter to Political Islam*

#### *Internal Opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran*

Not all Iranians subscribed to Khomeini and the Islamists' view of the authority of the Supreme Leader and the state's relationship with religion. Beginning in the 1990s, reformers offered an interpretation of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist that enabled moderation, democracy, and freedom for people to practice Islam faithfully. Iranian Islamists swiftly opposed these reformers. Despite some victories for moderates in the Majles, and even a short stint in the presidency, the Islamists maintained control of the positions of Grand Jurist and Supreme Leader. The Iranian government silenced protestors and pushed moderates out of the political sphere with increasingly radical interpretations and alterations of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist demanding subjection to the regime. Moreover, the manipulation of elections further limited the prospects for countering Islamist influence in Iranian politics.

In contrast to the Islamists, the left reformers of the 1990s highlighted three critical centers of reform. First, the reformers sought an internal political transformation by secularizing the state.<sup>31</sup> According to the reformers, a secular state would provide Islam more significant influence because it would not need to comply with the state's agenda but could act autonomously as an authoritative power. The state could become politically democratic while the people stay religiously Islamic.

Another aspect of reform is related to the central doctrine of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist. Reformers argued that the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist was not the only means of governing an Islamic Iran, for absolute rule was not a requirement of Islam. However, Khomeini's implementation of his form of Islam through the institutionalization of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist highlights the manipulation of religion by Khomeini to secure power. Finally, the 1990s reformers challenged the theological structure of Islamic society, which can be emphasized in a modern movement. The 1990s reformers argued the secularization of society need not be antithetical to religion. Rather a secularized Iranian society would enable a flourishing of religion within the state free from government restrictions and politics. The three points for transforming the Islamic State of Iran purposed by the late twentieth-century revolutionaries reemerged cyclically in more recent protests against the regime.

#### *Political Factions and the Green Revolution*

In 2008 Iran experienced a massive shift to conservatism through the rise of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and an impassioned younger generation who considered themselves "principalists." Thus, the reformers had a difficult battle if they

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<sup>31</sup> Tabaar, 206.

desired to gain political influence. They did this by utilizing the more traditional, moderate conservatives who felt alienated by the extremism of President Ahmadinejad, a confidant of Khamenei. The reformers also used the media to spark a transformational movement of Iran's political landscape.<sup>32</sup> President Ahmadinejad offended and marginalized both the young students who sought democratic openness and the religious clerics who did not consider him a moral candidate. Significant protests emerged the week before the 2009 election, as young Iranians demonstrated the presence of voters opposed to President Ahmadinejad. Despite the pre-election protestors demonstrating the division of Iran's political landscape, President Ahmadinejad claimed a landslide victory. In response, many Iranians called election fraud, leading to millions of protesters taking to the streets following the election. The state responded with oppressive violence, which only fueled the protests. As criticism around the entire institution of the Iranian regime rose, so too did that towards Khamenei and his rise to power, and every measure by Khamenei to secure his status was met with greater backlash. Khamenei's suppression of the Green Movement paralleled that of the Shah two decades prior. The spread of the protests and perceived westernization of its democratic demands led to the reformers being labeled as the new liberals, leading to a decline in their support from moderates and religious circles. "If the reformists stumbled upon people's religious beliefs, the incumbent's blunders occurred mostly over the citizens' fundamental rights."<sup>33</sup> While the reform movement beginning in the 1990s emphasized the plausibility of a secular

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<sup>32</sup> Trita Parsi, *Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), [https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1nnpj0?turn\\_away=true](https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1nnpj0?turn_away=true).

<sup>33</sup> Tabaar, 247.

government over a religiously Islamic Iran, protestors of the Green Movement focused on civil rights. The election fraud of the 2009 presidential election demonstrated to the Iranian people the failure of the government to represent the people as a republic ought. Thus, because the president claimed a landslide victory in an obviously divided election, internal criticism against the government continued, directly related to the persecution of the Iranian people. The fraudulent election highlighted the Iranian regime's religious-political tyranny over the Iranian people.

The Islamic Republic of the twenty-first century was even more radical than the monarchy of the Shah and rhetoric was a vital tool of the state to assert and maintain power. Aware of the power of the media, the Iranian state imposes strict censorship over opposing voices to preserve the authority of the regime. Politics in the contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran has lost its religious core. Instead, Iran under Khamenei in the twenty-first century exploits the legitimacy that comes from a rhetoric steeped in religious tradition. However, religious rhetoric has become one of many tools used by the Iranian elites to preserve their position in the regime and oppress all who challenge the Islamic state.

Rhetoric has remained a critical part of Iranian politics, and propaganda was vastly influential leading up to the 2016 Majles election. In the Majles election, Khamenei and the conservatives sought to push nationalism, and emphasized the security Iranians could find in the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist amidst the turbulence ravaging other Middle Eastern states since the Arab Spring. Election fraud was again in evidence, however. The disqualification of candidates by the Guardian Council led to increased criticism of the conservative elites in the mainstream population, weakening the

conservatives, and endorsements by Khatami swayed the election significantly, leading to the ultraconservatives losing the Majles election.<sup>34</sup> Despite this victory, the union of the pragmatists, moderates, and reformers in the Majles election of 2016 did not mark an advancement of democracy. Many of the elected officials were still corrupt, and the term “moderate” became a tool to push a more subtle authoritarian agenda on the population, preserving the absolute authority of other positions all while making it appear as though those in these positions were now working for the people. “Moderate” is used as a way to bridge the deeply factionalized Iranian political sphere to unite people behind a ruling class that does not elevate the position of the people. However, it merely counters the ultraconservative radicalism that is seen as too threatening to ignore. The moderate regime perpetuates authoritarianism because power is still concentrated amongst the elites, election pools are vetted, and once in power, leaders can act with a great degree of autonomy without being accountable to the people. Aware of the threat the young, active reformists posed to the existing system, Rafsanjani and Rouhani transformed the narrative within Iran to be one of Persian nationalism, not fighting against the “evil” America, but the “illegitimate” Arab states that surround Iran.<sup>35</sup> Religion was less useful as a tool in igniting the fire of the Iranian Republic when compared with nationalism. Events like the Iraq-Iran War still rested painfully in the minds of Iranians and could be used to foment nationalism in the populous. However, it would be a mistake to say that religion plays no part in Iranian politics. Although Iranian politics in recent times has

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<sup>34</sup> Tabbar, 222.

<sup>35</sup> Amineh and Eisenstadt, “The Iranian Revolution: The Multiple Contexts of the Iranian Revolution,” *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 6, no. 1–3 (2007): 129–57, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156914907X207702>.

been driven more by nationalistic fervor, the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist —a religious office—remains the core of Iranian legislation and a principal object of dispute between the reformers who want to weaken its influence and the conservatives that want to bolster it.

In considering the role the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist and the rhetoric surrounding the discussion of politics in Iran, one must note the transformation of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist itself that has occurred since the Iranian Revolution. The first Supreme Leader Khomeini and his successor Supreme Leader Khamenei both altered the language of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist itself. For Khomeini, the institutionalization of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist quelled the threat posed by the clergy, as it implemented a strict religious core in the structure of the government and appeased the leftists by shifting focus to anti-Americanism over pro-communism.<sup>36</sup> Following the death of Khomeini, the Islamists themselves experienced internal strife. They split between conservative and liberal factions as they debated the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist and the fate of Iranian governance. However, with the installation of Khamenei as Supreme Leader, the power of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist to dictate the legislation of Iran, as well as the Supreme Leader’s authority over it, were reasserted.

Khamenei sought to evolve Khomeini’s rule of Islamic law to address the broader issues of state governance. Thus, Khamenei ascribed a divine source of ruling against democratic institutions – changing the historical narrative of both Islam and Iran to conform with his agenda. “Responsibilities were delegated by him to various state

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<sup>36</sup> Tabaar,105.



institutions based on their expertise and then held accountable to him. Accordingly, the political participation of the people was not required to lend legitimacy to the “divine-based” system, although public participation was critical in demonstrating the government’s popularity to its internal and external adversaries.”<sup>37</sup> Because Khamenei argued that because the clergy operated under the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, which was under his absolute control, the clergy’s position became negligible. The result was a governing system in which power and politics took precedence over piety. Any successful American policy must counter the politicization of religion by the Iranian regime.

### *Conclusion*

The unilateral control of politics and religion achieved by Supreme Leader Khamenei has served to exacerbate American Iranian relations. The United States has continued to impose severe sanctions and a firm position against Iran as a member of “the Axis of Evil.”<sup>38</sup> While democratic republics of Western Europe have alleviated sanctions against Iran and opened itself to communication in hopes of achieving cooperation, the United States has remained committed in its resolve to oppose measures that would perpetuate the power of the present Iranian regime. However, though the United States has sought to use sanctions to compel Iranian compliance, sanctions have become a tool of the Iranian regime to increase anti-American sentiments amongst the Iranian populace.

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<sup>37</sup> Tabaar, 259.

<sup>38</sup> David Oualaalou, *Volatile State: Iran in the Nuclear Age* (Indiana University Press, 2018), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt1zxxz9b.7>.

The strained relations between the U.S. and Iran, the Supreme Leader's continue internal repression of dissidents, and Iran's funding of terrorist groups demonstrate the need for a new approach in American/Iranian relations. President Reagan initiated his style of containment against the Soviet Union in National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 75. Trade a key avenue of communication and for the transmission of ideas. Sanctions, as a negative consequence for bad behavior by the Iranian government has shown itself unsuccessful. The United States must provide greater incentives for Iran to respect its people's human rights and open itself to a flow of goods and ideas from the Western world. Change happens gradually, and rhetoric has a significant impact on people's ideas about regime type.

## CHAPTER TWO

### History of American Policy towards Iran

#### *Introduction*

This chapter examines how the evolution of Iran has shaped American Iranian relations since the Iranian Revolution. Following the United States' involvement with the Shah's regime, the United States implemented various policies of containment towards Iran. Beginning with firm restrictions against Iran under the Reagan administration, the United States engaged in containment policies that mirrored those against the Soviet Union. The United States sought to contain the influence of the Ayatollah outside Iran through significant economic sanctions and deterring the nuclearization of Iran. Iran's authoritarian theocratic structure and involvement with terrorist organizations lead the United States to consider it a less than rational actor on the international stage. Thus, the United States engaged in policy attempting to suppress the regime. However, present measures by the United States' towards Iran have been perceived by many within Iran as unnecessarily hostile. This chapter sets out how American policy has failed to bring about major social or political change in Iran. Upon considering the limitations in the United States' past policy approaches towards Iran, this section also notes Iran's relations with other states to consider the efficacy of alternative policy approaches towards Iran. Understanding the politico-theological discourse in American Iranian relations is essential to transforming it, which is the subject of the final chapter.

### *The Transformation of American Foreign Policy towards Iran*

The United States' relationship with Iran transformed dramatically following the Shah's fall with the Iranian Revolution in 1979. No longer was Iran considered a state the United States could manage through diplomacy with the monarch. The reconstruction of Iran's governmental structure to a republic under an authoritative leader with a deeply entrenched Islamic ideological core hostile to the United States and Israel necessitated a transformation in America's dealings with Iran. An outline of the successes and failures of the United States' past approaches to Iran reveals the principles that inform American policy towards Iran today through an analysis of each presidential administration's policy and understanding of Iran's Islamic Republic. The efficacy of American policy towards Iran may be considered in contrast to other state's approaches to the Islamic Republic. The Iranian Revolution forced all states in the international system to reconsider how policy plays out with a theocracy.

### *Former American Policy with Islamic Republic of Iran*

The fall of the Shah dramatically altered how the United States interacted with Iran, for the regime had fundamentally changed and the United States lost its crucial ally in the Middle East. The resulting Islamic Republic of Iran has been largely hostile towards the United States since the hostage crisis that erupted coincident with the 1979 revolution. Relations were further soured by Iran's humanitarian abuses. Consequently, American presidents had to navigate policy formation with an unprecedented Islamic state.

The Iranian Revolution occurred within the Carter administration, forcing Carter to respond to the post-revolutionary chaos in Iran. Central to the revolution was the capture of the American embassy in Tehran because Carter allowed the exiled shah to enter the United States for medical treatment.<sup>39</sup> Though the United States did not bolster the shah against revolutionaries' overthrow of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, Iranians saw the United States as opposing the revolution. Uncertainty of the motives of Khomeini and the revolutionaries with the hostages of the American embassy forced Carter to engage Iran to rescue the Americans in Tehran. Carter authorized a freezing of assets and a rescue mission on April 1, 1980, which failed with the death of eight marines on April 24. Following the failed invasion, Carter offered to unfreeze assets and resume trade with the Iran for the release of the hostages.<sup>40</sup> Carter's failed mission to rescue the hostages carried the crisis into the Reagan administration who saw the release of the American hostages on his inauguration day over a year after the crisis began. The Carter administration inaugurated the new era of Middle Eastern affairs for the United States with the emergence of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In his response to the Iranian Revolution, Carter ineffectively pursued diplomatic and military responses to the radical actions of the Iranian revolutionaries.

Beginning under the Reagan administration, relations between Iran and the United States deteriorated as Reagan branded Iran as a state that sponsored terrorist organizations. Because of the association between the Iranian government and terrorist

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<sup>39</sup> Ardavan Koshnood and Arvin Koshnood, "The West's Role in the Shah's Overthrow," *Middle East Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2018): 1–7.

<sup>40</sup> Ofira Seliktar, *Navigating Iran: From Carter to Obama* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

organizations, the United States withdrew from engagements with Iran.<sup>41</sup> Considering the terror connections of Iran, the United States pursued a policy of strict restrictions towards the Iranian state, mirroring containment policy executed against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. As Hezbollah bombed the Marine Corps barracks in Beirut, Lebanon in 1983 which led Reagan to withdraw its forces in Lebanon, Iranian terror action sparks American withdraw from the region today. Despite containment style policy towards Iran, the United States maintained a presence in the Middle East, enabling hostile encounters between the two states. Naval encounters with Iran reached their Reagan-era peak in 1988 when the U.S. destroyed a fourth of Iranian naval vessels.<sup>42</sup> In continuing the Reagan administration's policy of a firm stance against Iran, the United States claimed to support Iraq in the Iraq-Iran War. However, though United States advanced a foreign policy against Iran, the United States did provide Iran with weapons for the release of American hostages in the notorious Iran-Contra scandal that rocked the Reagan White House. Consequently, in the 1980s, American policy with Iran was one of hostility, though the United States would engage minimally with the Islamic Republic for the protection of American citizens.

Evolving Reagan's firm position against Iran, the President H.W. Bush sought to engage with Iran, were Iran to comply with American's policy objectives. Despite Iran's release of American hostages of Hezbollah, Iran's continued support of terrorist organizations and America's increased tie to Israel ensured American relations with Iran

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<sup>41</sup> Kenneth Katzman, Kathleen J McInnis, and Clayton Thomas, "U.S.-Iran Conflict and Implications for U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Service*, May 8, 2020, 25.

<sup>42</sup> Kenneth Katzman, "Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options" (Congressional Research Service, August 13, 2019), RL32048.

remained tense under the H.W. Bush administration.<sup>43</sup> At the same time H.W. Bush launched a war against Iran's neighbor Saddam Hussein of Iraq and crippled the military force that had fought Iran to a stalemate the previous decade. Saddam was not removed from power, but he was hemmed in by American forces that remained in the region through Operation Desert Storm. Thus, under the H.W. Bush administration, positive relations with Iran were conditional upon good behavior from Iran.

As American policy with Iran continued to develop, unrest in the Middle East increased in the wake of the Iraq-Iran War. Thus, the Clinton administration sought a "dual containment" strategy toward Iran and Iraq, which manifested in American sanctions on trade and investment in Iran as punishment for Iran's backing of terror groups in Palestine.<sup>44</sup> Awareness of Iran's relation with terror organizations necessitated the United States adopt a foreign policy aimed at quelling terror violence in the Middle East.

Following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the United States adopted a new foreign policy with the whole of the Middle East, prioritizing global counter-terrorism to ensure domestic security. The W. Bush administration gave Iran a place among the "Axis of Evil," as a country complicit with terrorist organizations. The declaration by Bush that Iran aided terror groups in conducting an attack against the United States highlighted America's hostile rhetoric towards the Iranian regime. However, despite the administration's disapproval of Iran, the

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<sup>43</sup> Katzman, "Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options," 19.

<sup>44</sup> Katzman, 19.

United States enlisted Iranian aid in stabilizing the Afghan and Iraqi states amidst the War on Terror.<sup>45</sup> Despite America's attempt to limit Iran's weapons proliferation, Iran pushed to increase its nuclear capabilities. Consequently, the United States engaged with Europe in nuclear negotiations with Iran.<sup>46</sup> The Bush administration also indirectly expressed support of a regime change, speaking in favor of Iran becoming a democratic state.

While former administrations took a restrictive policy with Iran, the Obama administration pursued a more open policy with the Islamic Republic. Seeking to change the norm of animosity between Iran and the United States, the Obama administration sought open communication and diplomatic measures with Iran. No longer softly pushing for regime change, Obama affirmed that Iran was an Islamic Republic.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, in a dramatic departure from former administrations, President Obama affirmed Iran's right to possess peaceful nuclear capabilities. Despite initial optimism for Iran-American relations, the 2009 Green Movement and the Iranian government's suppression of its citizens forced the United States to take a firmer approach to Iran. The Obama administration took a carrot-and-stick approach towards Iran, imposing severe sanctions while offering negotiations that could lead to a lifting of Iran's sanctions for compliance.<sup>48</sup> Because of broad international cooperation in imposing sanctions on Iran

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<sup>45</sup> Amal Saikal, 184.

<sup>46</sup> Craig Allen Smith, "President Bush's Enthymeme of Evil: The Amalgamation of 9/11, Iraq, and Moral Values," *American Behavioral Scientist* 49, no. 1 (September 1, 2005): 32–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764205279432>.

<sup>47</sup> Katzman, 19.

<sup>48</sup> Katzman, 20.



between 2010 and 2013, Iran experienced significant economic hardship. Iran was willing to engage in nuclear talks in 2013 because of the crippling economy of Iran following Rouhani's presidential election.

The finalization of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) serves as a critical point in Iranian American relations as the United States officially sought to pursue diplomatic discourse over the previous administrations' aggressive approach to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Though Obama was optimistic about the potential for peaceful relations between the two stated through the JCPOA, the cash payment for undelivered military funds that coincided with the Iranian release of Iranian Americans held hostage gave the appearance that the United States was paying Iran a ransom.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the JCPOA was considered a soft approach to the still-authoritarian regime. Prior to the treaty, Iranian backed terror organizations routinely attacked American personnel in Iraq, and despite the treaty, Iran continued targeting American warships. Thus, the United States increasing sanctions in 2015.<sup>50</sup> Following the implementation of the JCOPA, Iran continued to sponsor terrorist organizations like Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq that target American forces and interests in the Middle East.<sup>51</sup> Consequently, the inability of sanctions to deter Iranian aggression under the JCPOA demonstrates the limits in sanctions efficacy to alter Iran's behavior.

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<sup>49</sup> Katzman, 20.

<sup>50</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack and Bilal Y. Saab, "Countering Iran," *Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (August 2017): 97–108, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1370334>.

<sup>51</sup> Pollack and Saab. "Countering Iran," 99.

*Recent American Policy with Iran*

Countering Obama's communication centered approach, when Trump took office in 2016, the new administration believed it necessary to take a new approach toward Iran, termed "maximum pressure."<sup>52</sup> The pressure on the Iranian economy imposed by the Trump administration had two primary objectives. First, the administration sought to drive Iran to agree to a renegotiated JCPOA that complied more with American demands. Second, the maximum pressure approach sought to prevent Iran from acquiring the revenue necessary to continue to cultivate strategic capabilities that would give the Islamic Republic military dominance in the Middle East.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, the United States hoped that such a hardline approach toward Iran could leave the government susceptible to collapse in the face of an internal opposition movement.

Trump Administration withdrew from JCPOA and reimposed sanctions to apply maximum pressure to the Iranian regime in 2018. The pressure imposed by the United States upon the Iranian state has deepened fissures within the regime as Hassan Rouhani seeks to increase cooperation with the West, against the will of more hardline government officials.<sup>54</sup> Thus, under the Trump administration, foreign policy with Iran transitioned once again from sanctions and negotiations under Obama to coercion.

JCPOA reduces the chance of direct military confrontation between the two states while creating avenues of communication for the United States and Iran. However, the

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<sup>52</sup> Katzman, 21.

<sup>53</sup> Katzman, 21.

<sup>54</sup> Gawdat Bahgat, "US-Iran Relations under the Trump Administration," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (September 1, 2017): 93–111, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10474552-4216432>.

actions against the agreement by President Trump have harmed the legitimacy of the agreement by re-enforcing Khamenei's belief that the United States is a hostile interventionist actor in Iran.<sup>55</sup> JCPOA served to inspire innovation in Iran's hydrocarbon energy development, placing Iran on track for sustainable growth. Consequently, Oil Minister Zanganeh promised that Iran would not stop oil production upon lifting the sanctions imposed by the United States.<sup>56</sup> Continued production serves to keep oil prices low, which benefits consumer states like the United States while not decreasing prices to deter investment from international oil companies. Due to the role of international trade in Iranian oil production, the Iranian economy is intrinsically tied to politics. The role of politics in Iran's economy is further demonstrated by the government's efforts to increase natural gas consumption so that oil might be saved for export rather than being consumed by Iranians. However, Iran has been unable to export natural gas because of the state's inability to build the necessary infrastructure.

Despite the aggressive action proposed by the Trump administration, the Iranian regime continued to engage in hostile actions in the Middle East. In 2017, the Iranian state armed the Houthis forces in Yemen, an organization the United States declared an international terrorist group on January 11, 2021, by the Trump administration.<sup>57</sup> Trump's response to Iranian aggression counters Iran's support of terrorist organizations, including Iran's backing of Hezbollah. Under the Trump administration, Iran's aid of the

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<sup>55</sup> Bahgat, "US-Iran Relations under the Trump Administration," 93.

<sup>56</sup> Bahgat, 98.

<sup>57</sup> "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," *United States Department of State* (blog), accessed April 3, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>.

Houthis and Hezbollah equated to another instance of state-sponsored terrorism by Iran, requiring a reevaluation of American policy.

Upon declaring a reworking of American policy with Iran, the Trump administration moved to align with Arab leaders in the region to enforce harsher sanctions that would leave Iran isolated economically and politically.<sup>58</sup> Trump also worked to isolate Iran diplomatically by helping to negotiate a number of treaties between Israel and Arab states. The 2017 push to isolate Iran culminated in the United States' refusal to find Iran in compliance with the JCPOA. Trump asserted that for the United States to remain in the JCPOA, action would have to be taken concerning Iran's expired nuclear restrictions, which must deter Iran's efforts to attain ballistic missile capabilities.<sup>59</sup> Critically, the Trump administration demanded that both the United States and its allies counter Iranian action in the Middle East. Trump's collective approach towards Iran differed from Obama who compartmentalized the threat from Iran. Though Obama sought to limit Iran's nuclear capacities, Obama refused to intervene to affect Iranian behavior concerning the support of Shi'a militias in Iraq and Iranian support of terror organizations. Thus, Trump's policy towards Iran expressed broad condemnation of the practices of the Iranian state.

While an avenue remained for the United States to continue with the JCPOA, the Trump presidency's maximum pressure approach served as an early signal of the United States' withdraw from the agreement. Despite efforts by the leaders of France and

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<sup>58</sup> Statement by the President on the JCPOA, White House, May 8, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> Statement by the President on the JCPOA, White House, May 8, 2018.

Germany of the United States to continue participation in the JCPOA, November 4, 2018, the United States announced its withdraw from JCPOA, instead imposing American sanctions on Iran to stress the state economically and politically.<sup>60</sup> Proceeding the United States' departure from JCPOA, American officials' rhetoric concerning the Iranian regime was overtly adversarial, markedly demonstrated through President Trump. July 23, 2018, threatening the Iranian regime with retaliation should they take aggressive action.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, the United States entered a new era in dealings with Iran as America shifted from moderate engagement to foster diplomacy to overt hostility.

Grounding the transition in Iranian policy under the Trump administration was an understanding that Iran is not a conventional state and cannot be treated as such. Understanding Iran as a unique, “outlawed regime” marked a delegitimization of the Iranian regime under President Trump.<sup>62</sup> The theocratic and aggressive nature of Iran demanded specific action that differed with dealings with other states in the region. The realist assumptions of states' mannerism did not necessarily apply to the "outlaw state" of Iran. While the term outlaw presents a negative conception of Iran, the Trump administration report presented an evaluation of Iranian support of terrorist organizations and the fiscal, militarily, environmental, and humanitarian consequences both domestic and abroad such action impose.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Katzman, 22.

<sup>61</sup> Katzman, 25.

<sup>62</sup> “Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran’s Destructive Activities,” U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Italy, September 25, 2018, <https://it.usembassy.gov/outlaw-regime-a-chronicle-of-irans-destructive-activities/>.

<sup>63</sup> “Outlaw Regime.”

In light of the marked critique of the Iranian regime presented in the report, the United States annulled the pre-Revolution "Treaty of Amity, Economic Relations, and Consular Rights," which provided commercial freedom and diplomatic trade between the United States and Iran.<sup>64</sup> Though the treaty had been largely abandoned since the Iranian Revolution, the United States' dissolution of the treaty symbolized an end of diplomatic dealings with Iran. Fundamental to American Iranian relations was an understanding of Iran as a substantial threat to the Middle East region, culminating in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' classification as a terrorist organization by the Trump administration on April 8, 2019.<sup>65</sup> Critical to the United States' consideration of Iran as a terrorist organization was Iran's role in sponsoring recognized terror groups and its hostility to the United States.

Underscoring the United States' adversarial understanding of Iran coalition-building efforts against the regime through the Warsaw ministerial meeting. Considering Iran a legitimate threat to international security, the United States sought to mobilize states to limit the Iranian regime. In 2019 Iran attacked commercial shipping vessels in the Persian Gulf, and both states downed the other's surveillance aircraft indicated an escalation of tension between the United States and Iran.<sup>66</sup> However, such aggressions mirrored the prior administration's reactions to Iranian hostility and did not culminate indirect measures to bring down the Iranian regime.

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<sup>64</sup> Katzman, 30.

<sup>65</sup> "Iran's Revolutionary Guard Named a Terrorist Organization," n.d., 2.

<sup>66</sup> Kenneth Katzman, "Coalition-Building Against Iran," *Congressional Research Service*, In Focus, 2 (March 12, 2019): 3.

Contrary to President Trump's early rhetoric, by the end of his presidency Trump expressed a desire to forge more peaceful diplomatic relations with the regime and even reenter the JCPOA.<sup>67</sup> Thus, despite early indications that the Trump administration would inaugurate a new era in American Iranian relations in which the United States directly opposed the Islamic Republic regime. While the Obama administration's Iranian policy was a softer than the hard-liner policy of predecessors, Trump's presidency ended with predominant preservation of the status quo. In considering future American action concerning the Iranian regime, one must consider the efficacy of former administrations' actions towards Iran to craft an alternative manner of dealing with Iran.

### *Iran and Other States*

Since the Revolution, the European Union has remained a significant trading partner with Iran. While the United States has oscillated between cooperation with and opposition against Iran, the E.U.'s relationship with Iran has been broadly stable. President Khatami engaged in dialogue with the European Union that enabled the formation of an economically and politically cooperative relationship between the two parties.<sup>68</sup> The JCPOA served as a significant aid to improving EU-Iranian relations, while the United States remained hesitant to engage in the deal.

The attitude of strategic communication taken by Europe differs starkly from America's approach to Iran. "*Coercion* is the keyword in explaining U.S. policy,

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<sup>67</sup> Peter Baker and Maggie Haberman, "Trump Diverges from Key Adviser on Iran and Kim," New York Times, May 29, 2019.

<sup>68</sup> Bahgat, 100.

and *engagement* underlies the E.U. approach."<sup>69</sup> This policy of engagement was epitomized by the increase of trade between Europe and Iran. The E.U.'s increased trade with Iran by 63 percent and pursued implementation of the JCPOA.<sup>70</sup> Europe's proximity to Iran necessitated swift discussion that improved both the security and economy of the E.U. member states. Consequently, a mutually beneficial relationship exists between Iran and the E.U., for Iran requires investments from European states, and Iran as the most relatively stable nation in the Middle East serves as a significant political ally for the peace efforts of Europe.

Since JCPOA, Pakistan has lifted sanctions against Iran as a means of forging better relations for oil trade and cultivating mutual economic development for the two states. As the first state to recognize Iran's sovereignty, Pakistan has historically sought to forge positive relations with Iran.<sup>71</sup> Iran supports Pakistan in its military disputes, such as the Kashmir issue and the War in Yemen. Pakistan believes that through signing the JCPOA and lifting sanctions, Pakistan will address its energy crisis. However, Pakistan's connections to Iran remain delicate, for Pakistan has a close relationship with China in counter to India's rise.

### *Conclusion*

By considering the United States' past action regarding Iran in contrast to European states and Pakistan's policies, a diverse array of approaches emerges. While the

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<sup>69</sup> Bahgat, 100.

<sup>70</sup> Bahgat, 111.

<sup>71</sup> Bahgat, 105.



United States has historically taken a more hardline approach with Iran through the imposition of harsh sanctions and aggressive rhetoric and actions directed at the Islamic Republic, the European Union has emphasized diplomacy and negotiation. The dichotomy in the United States and the European Union's approaches with Iran takes prominence in the JCPOA, first enacted in 2015. In the six years since the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany and the European Union entered the agreement with Iran to limit Iran's nuclear weapons development, the different parties have taken markedly different approaches in enforcing the action plan. As a result of the United States' more combative approach to Iran than the European Union's cooperation forward approach, the present and future policy approach towards Iran diverges. In the next section, I consider the commonly promoted policy options for the United States moving forward with Iran.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Present Policy Options Concerning Iran

#### *Introduction*

Following the analysis of the political Islam of Iran and historic American policy with Iran, this chapter discusses the conventional policy options concerning Iran. Guided by past Iranian policy, the most recent administration considered the possibilities of diplomatic and military engagement with Iran. While diplomatic approaches provide an avenue for peaceful cooperation to achieve American foreign goals in the Middle East, its efficacy remains limited. Historically, sanctions and diplomatic communication have failed to compel Iran to comply with international policy standards. On the other hand, a military invasion precipitates numerous adverse consequences. Though direct military action could depose the Ayatollah and create space for a new regime, military action in Iran could insight further unrest as well. Thus, invasion of Iran poses the threat of imploding the structure of the state while failing to provide an adequate alternative system of government. Consequently, the limitations of diplomatic engagement and sanctions as well as the unfavorable possibility that arise with military engagement in Iran are essential considerations of my alternative policy proposal in the following chapter.

#### *Diplomacy and Its Limits*

A diplomatic approach towards Iran requires Iran's compliance with treaties and regulations. When American policy considers cooperation with Iran, diplomacy with Iran

is limited by Iran's failure to comply with international regulation. Secretary of State Pompeo outlined twelve specific actions Iran must take to improve relations with the United States, including a newly negotiated JCPOA and a cessation of Iran's support of Hezbollah.<sup>72</sup> Because such demands conflict with the Iranian Revolution's ambition to ignite a movement of Islamic States forming and reclaiming control of the Middle Eastern region, negotiation attempts between the United States and Iran under the Trump administration have failed.

Though the Iranian regime holds responsibility for refusal to meet with the United States and forge peaceful relations, the United States has engaged in manners directly hostile to Iran. By declaring the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps a terrorist organization and preventing sanction exemptions that would make more accessible the purchase of Iranian oil, in practice, the Trump administration was oppositional to cooperation with Iran. However, as tensions continued to escalate between the two states, Trump reemphasized a desire to negotiate with Iran in May 2019 with mediation by the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.<sup>73</sup> However, such attempts for a diplomatic meeting between the two world leaders failed to come to fruition as hostility persisted from both states, evident through the United States' increase of sanctions in July 2019.<sup>74</sup> Given the failure of both the United States and Iran to act in a manner that presents the opportunity for engagement, future arbitration between the two states presently appears unlikely. As

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<sup>72</sup> Katzman, 31.

<sup>73</sup> Justin McCurry, "Donald Trump Welcomes Japan's Offer of Mediation with Iran," *The Guardian*, May 27, 2019.

<sup>74</sup> Katzman, 25-26.

the current policy trajectory presents negotiations with Iran as unlikely, other policy measures must be considered.

### *Military Engagement and Its Consequences*

In light of the perceived limitations of diplomacy with Iran to bring about adequate cooperation between the United States and Iran, the second option of military action against Iran emerges. The threat of military action against Iran should Iran not comply with the United States' international policy objectives has underpinned American policy towards Iran since the Revolution in 1979. While military action against would stunt Iranian nuclear development, a direct ground assault on Iran has never been considered by the United States.<sup>75</sup> Consequently, the primary military option against Iran presents as an airstrike or alternative form of intervention by the United States in Iran.

### *Past Administrations' Perspectives on Military Engagement*

Though military engagement with Iran may appear as a dramatic and escalatory action, one must consider the legitimacy of such an approach resulting in the severity of the threat posed by Iran should they acquire nuclear weapons. While the Obama administration was not opposed to military action against Iran to curtail Iranian weapons development, Obama believed a diplomatic approach would result in a more lasting solution. The Obama administration's hesitancy to engage in military action against Iran partially emerged from a desire to not produce a direct war between Iran and Israel.

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<sup>75</sup> Katzman, 26.

Feeding the Obama administration's desire to avoid military conflict was the pressure placed on America by Israel to engage militarily with Iran, coupled with Iran's established military capabilities and fear of Israel.<sup>76</sup> Were the United States to target Iran militarily, the administration ran the risk of igniting a total war between Iran and Israel, disrupting the stability of the entire region.

Furthermore, despite the Bush administration's distrust of Iran in diplomatic negotiations, even Bush significantly resisted military engagement with Iran.<sup>77</sup> Thus, though military action remained an option of the United States, the ambition to deescalate hostilities between Iran and Israel serves as a significant deterrent of military actions against the Islamic State for even more aggressive administrations.

Considering the adverse consequences of military engagement with Iran, the JCPOA is a viable measure for a diplomatic approach to Iran. The inauguration of the JCPOA under Obama shifted the discussion of military action against Iran. Under the treaty, the United States considered military action against Iran only in response to aggression by Iran or Iran's violation of the JCPOA treaty.<sup>78</sup> Consequently, the Obama administration reoriented the discussion of military action against Iran to be conditional upon the Iranian state's hostile actions.

Following the Obama administration, the Trump administration enhanced the discussion of military options available to the United States. While the Obama

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<sup>76</sup> Parsi, *Single Roll of the Dice*, 16.

<sup>77</sup> Parsi, 5.

<sup>78</sup> Speech by President Obama at American University. August 7, 2015. President Obama Interview with CNN's Fareed Zakaria. Broadcast on August 9, 2015.

administration took an approach underscoring diplomacy, Trump assured Iran of retaliation should Iran engage aggressively, even against an American ally.<sup>79</sup> The Trump administration presented a possibility for American policy with Iran to extend engagement in defense of states' interests in allegiance to the United States. Trump's willingness to engage with Iran further emphasized the necessity of the United States countering Iran's support of terrorist organizations and actively preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. While every administration since the establishment of the Islamic State of Iran has asserted a willingness to reciprocate aggressive military action by Iran, it is essential to note that the United States has not done so. Thus, one must consider why the United States has not engaged militarily against Iran.

In considering policy possibilities with Iran, the Trump administration asserted openness to a diverse array of policy approaches, from open negotiations and minimally sanctioned trade to imposing sanctions to direct action against the Islamic state. However, American policy towards Iran is not unilateral. The United States' approach is also contingent upon Iranian leaders' willingness to comply with the United States' international policy agenda. Notably, Iran's President Rouhani refused eight direct and three direct requests by President Trump for negotiations between the two states, claiming their relations were not in a place to forge an agreement.<sup>80</sup> In light of the Iranian regime's hostility towards the United States, the Trump administration took a more conservative approach to dealings with the Iranian state.

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<sup>79</sup> Steven Simon, 2018. "Iran and President Trump: What Is the Endgame?" *Survival* (00396338) 60 (4): 7–20. doi:10.1080/00396338.2018.1494975.

<sup>80</sup> Reuters Staff, "U.S. Made 11 Attempts to Negotiate with Iran in Last Two Years: Iran President," *Reuters*, December 4, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-idUSKBN1O32JO>.

### *Potential Ramifications of Military Engagement*

Primarily, the United States has not conducted military action against Iran because of the adverse collateral consequences. Were the United States to execute military action against Iran, Iran maintains the capacity to execute weapons of mass destruction in the form of chemical and biological weapons against the United States, America's allies in the Middle East, and its populations.<sup>81</sup> Thus, the potential consequences of direct engagement with Iran leads the United States to cautiously approach proposals for military action against the Islamic Republic. American use of force against Iran has been considered only in response to an aggressive attack by Iran that requires a direct military response by the United States.

Coupled with questions concerning direct military action in Iran is the potential for states' involvement in the Iranian regime's support or non-state actors' influence in Iran. A conflict between the United States and Iran could incite Russia's involvement as Russia seeks to preserve its resources in the Middle East.<sup>82</sup> In addition to involvement from a foreign state, an American policy of military action must consider the potential for non-state actors to engage in an armed conflict with Iran. From previous engagements within the Middle East, the United States has learned critical lessons. While a pronounced air strike on Iran would effectively destroy the Ayatollah's control of the state, the resulting condition of Iran would not differ from a ground invasion. Both an air

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<sup>81</sup> Matthew Beard, "Risking Aggression: Toleration of Threat and Preventive War," *Heythrop Journal* 60, no. 6 (November 2019): 883–94, <https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.12031>.

<sup>82</sup> Judah Grunstein, "Is a Coherent U.S. Strategy Possible in a Strategically Incoherent Middle East?," *World Politics Review (Selective Content)*, April 11, 2018, 1–4.

assault and ground attack can overthrow the Ayatollah's regime, but they will not ensure the establishment of a freer successive government. Thus, past consequences of invading states in the Middle East create a lens to predict possible military involvement in Iran. As General Petraeus stated at the National Council on U.S. Arab Relations, a failed state creates space for the exploitation of terrorist organizations in a region.<sup>83</sup> Consequently, were the United States to topple the Iranian regime through military force without Iran possessing an adequate government to succeed the Islamic Republic, terror organizations will have a foothold to seize control of the state. Additionally, military conflict in Iran would instigate instability in the surrounding states of Iran through the creation of refugees in the region.<sup>84</sup> Without proper avenues to provide humanitarian aid to the states surrounding Iran after instigating conflict with the state, military action could result in a refugee crisis like the one seen in Syrian in 2017.

Furthermore, given the United States' engagement with allied states in the region, the United States would be ill advised engage in conflict against Iran unilaterally.<sup>85</sup> The United States' military assault upon Iran would undermine the Middle Eastern policy of every other state with legitimate interest and assets in the region. Thus, the United States would spark a global reaction and demand Iran becomes the major issue on the international stage. A military engagement by the United States in Iran would have

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<sup>83</sup> Dale Sprusansky, "Gen. David Petraeus on the U.S. Role in the Middle East," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 36, no. 1 (February 1, 2017): 54–55.

<sup>84</sup> Sprusansky, "Gen. David Petraeus on the U.S. Role in the Middle East," 54-55.

<sup>85</sup> Sprusansky, 54-55.



reverberating consequences on the foreign policy and economic markets of the entire world.

### *Limits in the Efficacy of Military Engagement*

Recent conflicts have demonstrated the limited efficacy of direct military intervention alone. As evidenced through the United States' engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, military action requires follow-up measures to ensure security and the rule of law following an invasion.<sup>86</sup> As Petraeus notes, the lack of definite resolution of the war in Afghanistan from 2001 to the present gives significant pause in the efficacy of sending troops to counter Middle Eastern states with terrorist ties. As the war in Afghanistan progressed, the cost of the war increased while the purpose of the conflict increasingly lacked clarity. Additionally, the Trump administration's gradual escalation lacked a precise mechanism by which the United States may withdraw from the state.<sup>87</sup> From America's involvement in Afghanistan, the necessity of a clear objective and obtainable in international conflict emerges as central to American Middle Eastern policy.

In consideration of the Iraq War from 2003-2011, the war cost the United States trillions of dollars, caused thousands of American troops' death, and incited more significant internal conflict in Iraq.<sup>88</sup> Faulty intelligence caused the war in Iraq to cost far

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<sup>86</sup> Sprusansky.

<sup>87</sup> Muhammad Karim, "Parallel Between Vietnam and Afghanistan Wars," *Dialogue (1819-6462)* 13, no. 3 (July 2018): 313–26.

<sup>88</sup> Marc Scarcelli, "The Uneven Application of the 'Civil War' Label to Iraq," *Civil Wars* 19, no. 1 (March 2017): 87–107, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2017.1342441>.

more than officials expected. Because the intelligence lacked sufficient information to provide to policymakers, the United States engaged in a lengthy and costly conflict in Iraq.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, the United States' invasion of Iraq failed to result in the implementation of an effective and cooperative government in Iraq. In the wake of the Iraq War, violence and civil conflict within Iraq escalated through 2014, with the Islamic State (ISIS) invading Iraq's northern territory, exacerbating sectarian conflict.<sup>90</sup> The United States' invasion of Iraq failed to result in an Iraq with viable governance. Considering the severe consequences of America's intervention in Iraq, future policy towards Iran must consider the inability of regime change to produce a viable state. Internal initiatives must be in place before invasion for a successful transformation of the Iranian government. Civic policy to regain the trust of the region's citizens to trust governmental authority is essential for the formation of a viable state following U.S. intervention in Iran.

Without civic initiatives buttressing a military engagement, the United States will repeat Afghanistan's downfall. Like the Taliban's control of Afghanistan, Iran could fall to the control of terrorist organizations instead of forming a proper government after the fall of the Ayatollah. Additionally, a long war in Iran like that of Afghanistan would lack the support of an American populace that is calling for American forces to withdraw from current engagements in the Middle East. Consequently, any military initiative in Iran

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<sup>89</sup> Richard H. Immerman, "Intelligence and the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars," *Political Science Quarterly* (Wiley-Blackwell) 131, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 477–501, <https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12489>.

<sup>90</sup> Scarcelli, "The Uneven Application of the 'Civil War' Label to Iraq," 103.

requires considering the long-term involvement necessary in the state to ensure a proper government emerges in the wake of the military abolishment of the Ayatollah.

Furthermore, in addition to the broad-reaching consequences of historical intervention in the Middle East by the United States, specific aspects of Iran necessitate a unique consideration of American military involvement in the Iranian regime. As a state grounded in Islamic ideology, a war in Iran would manifest as a total war. War with the Iranian state would culminate in a total war because of Iran's self-perception in the international system. In recent history, the United States backing of Saddam Hussein against Iran in the Iran-Iraq War fueled Supreme Leader Khamenei's distrust of the West and belief that Iran must achieve security in isolation from foreign powers. Furthermore, Iran's ability to maintain its territory against the war with Iraq gave Iran the conviction to withstand international disputes in isolation of foreign aid.<sup>91</sup> Thus, in a war, Iran would consider its survival contingent upon fighting with the maximum extent of force Iran can project. The force of Iran could include nuclear weapons being unleashed on an invading state if Iran has preserved secret weapons engineering.

Iran's identity as the ideological enemy of the United States culminates in Iran fighting not only for physical survival but everything the Iranian regime represents philosophically. Were Iran to lose in a war against a Western power, the experiment that is a government rooted in revolutionary Shia Islam's principles with the mission of proliferating similar regimes across the Middle East would fail, a fate unacceptable to

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<sup>91</sup> Sevgi Balkan Şahin, "The Ongoing Iranian Securitization of the United States After the Nuclear Deal: An Actor and Context-Based Analysis," *İRAN'IN NÜKLEER ANLAŞMA SONRASI AMERİKA BİRLEŞİK DEVLETLERİNİ GÜVENLİKLEŞTİRMEYE DEVAM ETMESİ: AKTÖR VE BAĞLAM-MERKEZLİ ANALİZ*. 22, no. 2 (April 2020): 715–37, <https://doi.org/10.16953/deusosbil.53866>.

the Iranian leadership.<sup>92</sup> Because of Iran's ideological and political positions, war with Iran would mean total war for Iranians, resulting in a highly costly conflict for the United States.

### *Conclusion*

In considering action to change the Iranian regime, the United States must honestly assess America's history of coerced regime change and engagement in the Middle East. While the United States has not engaged in an active military engagement to overthrow the Iranian government, the United States has taken indirect action to undermine the Iranian state. In 2009 during the Green Revolution in Iran, the Obama administration endorsed the revolutionaries, but two years after the failed revolution, Obama asserted that regime change of Iran was not America's policy objective.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, Trump, while more critical of Iran than his predecessor, endorsed measures to change the ideological roots of Iran with the ultimate aim of altering the behavior of the Iranian state, a measure that does not require regime change.<sup>94</sup> Despite the rhetoric and actions of American presidents – the “Axis of Evil” of Bush, the support of revolutionaries by Obama, and the retaliation threats by Trump – the United States has not seriously conducted policy aimed at precipitating a regime change. Given the many ramifications of a military assault on Iran set above, it is clear why these administrations have not pursued regime change more aggressively and why subsequent administrations

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<sup>92</sup> Balkan Şahin, “The Ongoing Iranian Securitization of the United States After the Nuclear Deal: An Actor and Context-Based Analysis,” 723.

<sup>93</sup> Katzman, 29.

<sup>94</sup> Pompeo speech at the Reagan Library, July 22, 2018, op. cit.

should also take stock before adopting a military solution to the gridlock in relations. We must seriously ask if military action is the only mechanism by which regime change can be effected in Iran.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### An Alternative Approach: Digital Communication with Iran

#### *Introduction*

Considering the limitations of sanctions and negotiation to compel Iran to comply with American foreign policy objectives and the significant consequences of a military attack, I propose an alternative approach. While negotiations with strict sanctions have failed to endorse a change in the Iranian government's behavior, by increasing digital communication with Iran, democratic media and cultural practices will enter Iran. Thus, an American policy of communication fuels internal pressure for increased freedoms within Iran. By approaching policy towards Iran with an emphasis upon the transfer of ideas into Iran, gradually public ideology will transition to more democratic norms, which will force change in the government. Rooted in an understanding of the religious nature of political Islam coupled with lessons derived from the United States' former involvement in Iran, a communication forward focus emerges as a future policy approach that, pulling from the containment doctrine of National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 75, could bring about gradual transformation in the Iranian government.

Thus, the United States does not overtly pursue a policy of direct action to instigate regime change in Iran. Instead, the United States seeks to improve relations between the United States and the Iranian populace through digital communication. An increased connection between the United States and the Iranian people through an increased flow of ideas from trade normalizing Western ideology in Iran and

undermining the anti-Western propaganda produced by the Iranian government. By fostering a sense of commonalities between the West and Iran, American foreign policy cripples the Supreme Leader's authority. An American policy of communication provided the Iranian people, who are already engaging digitally, mechanisms to spread anti-regime ideas and commune to create a freer society in Iran. Thus, a communication forward policy of the United States in Iran presents the United States a mechanism to improve relations with Iran and gradually cultivate civilian movements to change Iran's regime.

### *Past Policy of Communication*

Beginning with a discussion of the merits of increased communication for the sake of cultural exchanges with Iran, I assert why a policy of open communication with Iran is a positive and plausible course of action for the United States. Previously, a policy rooted in increased communication with Iran would have been unreasonable considering the necessity of infrastructure not yet present in Iran. However, the current digital age has made circumventing the Iranian government to communicate directly with the Iranian populace feasible. Following the plausibility of a forward communication policy towards Iran, I discuss the possibility of integrating Western ideology into Iranian society to increase the mobility and efficacy of a grassroots movement for the transformation of the Iranian government.

### *Previous Policy Focused on Communication*

Efforts to increase communication with Iranian civilians to promote liberty have occurred organically from the United States in the past decade. While official foreign policy with Iran has been characterized by sanctions to compel Iran to reform behavior,

the transformation of technology and communication in recent years has enabled the possibility of connecting with the Iranian people directly to improve relations and increase norms of freedom in Iran. Early policy from the American government to promote democracy in Iran appears in the Iran Freedom Act of 2006 that allocates funds towards policy measures to increase Iran's freedom.<sup>95</sup> The Iran Freedom Act lays the framework for formal policy to emerge endorsing cooperation and communication with the Iranian state, despite current sanctions.

Additionally, since 2010 the United States has emphasized internet freedom that has successfully trained select Iranians to bypass internet censorship by the Iranian regime.<sup>96</sup> Given the established lines of communication between the United States and Iran, compounded with Iranian citizens' ability to evade government censorship, the internet has enabled unprecedented opportunities to work within the Iranian regime to promote freedom. The Obama administration's funding of democratic promotion policy within Iran has enabled innovations to improve the lives of Iranian citizens, such as education and healthcare, as well as enabled cultural exchanges and increased outside media in Iran.<sup>97</sup> Thus, by expanding upon established communication forward policies towards Iran aimed at advancing liberty and improved quality of life for the Iranian people, the United States is in the current position to improve society within Iran to bring about a more democratic Iranian regime.

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<sup>95</sup> Katzman, 31.

<sup>96</sup> Katzman, 31.

<sup>97</sup> Katzman, 31.



### *Advantages of a Policy of Digital Engagement*

In addition to the formal policy measures by the United States to promote freedom in the Iranian state, social media and the internet have forged a new avenue by which persons may communicate, rhetoric may be softened, and norms may spread. As diplomacy is rooted in personal engagements, the increase of interaction between Americans and Iranians since the rise of social media in 2010 fosters cultural exchanges that increase democratic ideologies amongst Iranians.<sup>98</sup> Consequently, the harsh rhetoric against Iran since the Bush administration has softened in perception to the Iranian people because of increased communication through social media presenting an America willing to engage with Iranians. Social media enables the "positive affirmation of identity that maintains an actor's self-esteem" while also allowing America to condemn the Iranian government's human rights violations.<sup>99</sup> The accessibility of inter-personal communication provided by the internet has humanized America to the Iranian public and vice versa, creating space for ideological exchanges superseding the control of the Iranian regime.

In light of the opportunity to connect with the Iranian populace through social media, the State Department's efforts to engage with the Iranian public continue to modernize. At the beginning of the digital age, the United States' State Department released Farsi websites and Twitter feeds to connect with the Iranian people. Presently, the United States' policy towards Iran emphasized the role of allies in the proximity of the

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<sup>98</sup> Constance Duncombe, "Twitter and Transformative Diplomacy: Social Media and Iran-US Relations," *International Affairs* 93, no. 3 (May 2017): 545–62, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix048>.

<sup>99</sup> Duncombe, "Twitter and Transformative Diplomacy," 548.

Islamic state to reach out to the Iranian people.<sup>100</sup> While early uncertainty about the efficacy of American digital involvement with Iran enabled the State Department to engage through American allied states formerly, the proliferation of media and expansion of public access to digital content necessitates more active involvement by the United States in digital information campaigns with the Iranian people.

### *Information and Ideology*

Building upon policy measures to foster liberty in Iran that have existed since the fall of the shah, a communication rooted policy towards Iran is possible due to the increased access to outside news and media brought into the state by technology. Given the achievability of an Iran policy that increases contact between the two states to spread ideas, I assess the potential efficacy of such an approach. To consider the capability of increased trade communication with the Iranian people to bring about a more representative regime, the Iranian government's ideological center takes prominence.

### *Digital Networking in Iran*

Central to the Iranian government's formation and continued power is its identity as Islam's correct political expression. While the Supreme Leader serves as an authoritarian leader with significant control over the political actions of even the publicly elected president, not all people within Iran agree with the current political system. Since the Islamic Republic of Iran's formation, sectarian divides emerged within the political

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<sup>100</sup> Katzman, 34.

system between the Islamicists, religious leaders, and democratic reformers, as discussed in the first chapter.

Factionalism within the state creates space to introduce an ideology contrary to that promoted by the state. Khamenei focused on promoting the narrative that American aggression sparked the civil conflicts that threaten other nations' peace due to its political diversity.<sup>101</sup> However, division within the Iranian government's single party persists.<sup>102</sup> Consequently, the division within the Iranian political system demonstrates the government's inability to wield firm control over the ideological beliefs of all those within the state. Despite the Supreme Leader's critique of the West for its multi-party system, there are similar divisions within Iran, upon which a communication strategy can capitalize. Recall, Khamenei himself said that ideas are more dangerous than the atomic bomb.

From the existing factionalism within the Iranian state, reform movements like that of the Green Movement of 2009 emphasize the populace's displeasure with the state's political structure. The Green Movement got attention and mobilized attention through social media, empowering ordinary citizens to resist governmental oppression, demonstrating the state's limitations to control information in the internet age.<sup>103</sup> Not only

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<sup>101</sup> Sevgi Balkan Şahin, 727.

<sup>102</sup> “Contentious Politics in Iran: Factions, Foreign Policy and the Nuclear Deal...: EBSCOhost,” accessed April 1, 2021, <https://web-b-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.baylor.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=91c67dea-c79c-487f-addf-5d2f534bd086%40pdc-v-sessmgr01>.

<sup>103</sup> Saeid Golkar, “Liberation or Suppression Technologies? The Internet, the Green Movement and the Regime in Iran,” *International Journal of Emerging Technologies & Society* 9, no. 1 (May 2011): 50–70.

did the Green Movement demonstrate the possibility of broad mobilization against the Iranian regime, it also displayed the transformation of Iranian society forged by technology. Internet access enabled ordinary citizens to counter the skewed media presented by the government as "citizen journalists," could record and broadcast the actual conditions and oppression within Iran, "breaking the regime's news monopoly that is an essential pillar supporting the regime's ideology."<sup>104</sup> The ability of ordinary Iranians to present media contrary to that of the state furthers the delegitimization of the regime's control within Iran. While the Green Movement did not ultimately change Iran's political system in 2009, the movement served as a critical example of the internet's ability to mobilize ideas contrary to the regime. Considering the more limited capabilities and mediums of the internet over a decade ago, the possibility of a more drastic proliferation of information contrary to the state's ideology emerges for present American policy with Iran.

### *Benefits and Limitations of Digital Efforts*

As an avenue of presenting a diversity of prospects for a broad-ranging audience, the internet enables the United States to connect with and transmit information to Iran. The user-content-driven nature of social media limits the extent to which the state can censor media and politically empowers ordinary individuals by giving them a platform from which to present ideas.<sup>105</sup> Though the internet presents an avenue through which citizens may proliferate information and ideas, the Iran government engages in media

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<sup>104</sup> Golkar, "Liberation or Suppression Technologies?" 55.

<sup>105</sup> Duncombe, 549.

suppression and social media propaganda. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps encourages the Basij to promote positive messaging concerning the Iranian regime with "cyber fighters" countering external ideologies' infiltering into Iran.<sup>106</sup> While media monitoring by the Iranian regime is a reality for individuals within the state, the ever-developing media disposition combined with individuals' ingenuity to circumvent censorship. Despite the resources accessible to the Iranian regime, the Basij are incapable of censoring all media within Iran, especially considering the increased digital content volume in the past decade. Thus, media platforms in Iran enable the mobilization of ideas conflicting with the Iranian ideology regime despite the regime's efforts for censorship.

Considering the ability of social media and the internet to encourage counter-governmental rhetoric in Iran and the former success of digital platforms mobilizing Iranians to pursue greater freedom in Iran through the Green Revolution, the United States may create an effective Iranian policy that fosters freedom. Expanding upon the existing media networks already present in Iran, the United States may introduce external media into Iran, undermining the Iranian regime's rhetoric claiming the Western world's evils. Iran exists as the most digitally connected state in the Middle East with the world's third-largest blog network, falling behind just the United States and China, both of whose populations more than triple that of Iran.<sup>107</sup> While the Iranian state seeks to limit external media's spread through the Basij's "soft war" on information, Iran's avenues exist for external media to enter and spread. If America adopted a policy focused on

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<sup>106</sup> Golkar, 63.

<sup>107</sup> Ilan Berman, "Iran Devolution: Tehran Fights the Digital Future," *World Affairs* 178, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 51–57.

communication with the Iranian people through the internet and mobilized its extensive virtual resources, it could counter almost all of the regime's efforts to thwart internet traffic. Thus, for the United States to advance democratic norms within the Iranian regime, the United States must increase engagement with Iranian citizens. The internet is the most effective way of spreading these ideas.

### *Communication and Containment*

Primarily, the United States must increase communication with Iran for an influential cultural exchange of Western ideologies within Iran. By increasing communication lines with Iran, the United States undermines the regime's ability to control its people's beliefs. Because of the religious core of the Iranian state's ideology, a policy that seeks to increase Iranian citizens' freedom must demonstrate the disadvantages of an autocratic theocracy. As 1990s reform leaders and some Green Movement leaders within Iran have argued, the consolidation of power under the Supreme Leader has hindered authentic Islamic worship through the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist. By expanding their understanding of religion, people are given mechanisms to create a society that enables personal religious devotion, rather than a politicized religion propagating the regime's agenda.<sup>108</sup>

In fostering discourse that distinguished between religious and civic authority, Iranians achieve greater freedom of worship and political liberty. Thus, an American policy with Iran that engages with established digital networks to emphasizes the benefits of religion not under the authority of a singular government leader. The United States can

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<sup>108</sup> Tabaar, 220.

further the initiatives expressed by Iranian reformers through an increase in external media presence in Iran. That presence presents the possibility of a government that does not dictate religious expression.

Consequently, by engaging in communication to advance internal opposition movements seeking greater freedom in the authoritarian state, the United States mirrors and modernizes its containment policy with the Soviet Union in the Cold War. As Reagan outlined in NSDD 75, increased communication produces a greater flow of information between states that ignite ideological transformation within the state. Cultural, political, and economic frameworks for exchange are fundamental to disseminating alternative ideological information within an oppressive regime, fostering internal trends towards freedom by individuals within the state.<sup>109</sup> While during the Cold War, communication was limited to analog dialogue and limited radio and television connections, the digital age has dramatically enhanced the efficacy of a communication-centered foreign policy. In light of the widespread access to the internet and social media in Iran, illicit cultural exchange between the United States and Iranians for the dissemination of democratic norms presents a plausible policy alternative towards Iran.

Additionally, the United States can further exacerbate internal tensions in Iran to disseminate capitalist and democratic norms. As the clerical class and merchants were frustrated by their lack of influence under the shah, the constricted economy under the Ayatollah can encourage reform movements from Iranians. Media engagement with Iranians spreads not only democratic norms but also capitalism, highlighting the

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<sup>109</sup> Ronald Reagan and William P. Clark, "National Security Decision Directive 75: U.S. Relations with the USSR" (The White House, January 17, 1983).

frustration of entrepreneurs. Through connecting with the Iranian people, the United States can drive a wedge between the Iranian regime and the economic interests of the people.

Thus, American may forge a policy towards Iran that merges the efficacy of digital networks to mobilize Iranian opposition to the government as witnessed in the Green Movement and the transition of information critical to the containment policy that aided in the dismantling of the Soviet Union. A communication centered policy that seeks to disseminate ideological alternatives to the state-sponsored narrative in Iran builds upon the efforts of reform and opposition leaders within Iran. Furthermore, the cultural connection that communication enables presents Iranians with a more understanding depiction of the Western world, undermining the legitimacy of the Iranian regime's messaging.

### *Conclusion*

The first chapter presented a brief survey of Iran's region and the origins and operations of the Islamic State of Iran brought about by the Iranian Revolution in 1979. An explanation of Islam's politicization in Iran through the revolution presented a cause of the present political discourse in Iran under the Ayatollah. The emergence of the Islamic Republic and consolidation of power under the Ayatollah enabled an ideology that preserved the Supreme Leader's power to decimate throughout Iran. Through the Iranian Revolution, Khomeini transformed Shi'a Islam to serve as a political tool. The revolutionary ideas of the Ayatollah spread across Iran through the slow dismantling of the prior Iranian identity under the Shah. The Islamic revolutionaries forged a new Iranian society that consolidated religious and political authority unto the Ayatollah,



enabling the theocratic authoritarian state to endure. However, opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran persisted since the revolution and encountered moments of widespread support within the state, as evidenced by the 1990s reform movement and the 2009 Green Movement. In light of the internal opposition to the Ayatollah's rule, an avenue presents how the United States may disseminate counter-regime information in Iran. Introducing outside media to the Iranian people enables individuals to form political ideologies contrary to Iran's religious authoritarian rule. Thus, building upon existing oppositional movements in Iran, the United States may encourage individuals in Iran to forge personal beliefs about government that support freedom, antithetical to the oppressive religious-political rule of the Ayatollah.

In the final chapter, I set out the argument for a shift in American policy from suppression of the regime to the regime's transformation by promoting an ideological insurgency inside Iran through shifting its political paradigm. Drawing from Reagan's policy towards the Soviet Union outlined in the NSDD 75, the United States can cultivate cooperation and exchanges with Iran while maintaining a strong ideological core. The United States' endorsement of political discourse within Iran can promote an evolutionary change in the Iranian regime. Empowering Iranian citizens to create media that discredits the state's propaganda, American policy can aid in subtly discrediting the present authoritarian political paradigm of Iran. The United States can simultaneously promote political rhetoric that is more conducive to international and regional coexistence and even democratic ideals.

With the help of technology and media in the state, the United States can ensure that the new political discourse originates from the Iranian people rather than emanating

from the United States or the West. Thus, empowering ordinary Iranians to discuss political beliefs freely counters the Iranian regime's authority over Iran's political understanding. By emphasizing Iranian oppositional leaders' ideas, American policy towards Iran circumvents any resistance that might emerge within Iran if such ideas are perceived as an American intrusion into Iran. Additionally, through working within existing media networks, the United States amplifies Iran's present opposition voices. Recognizing the Iranian people's legitimate interests and desires through digital communication, the United States enables Iranians to determine the nature of a freer Iranian government.

Through a policy of communication with Iran, especially via digital networks, the United States encourages Iranians to pursue political ideologies contrary to theocratic authoritarianism and more consonant with democracy. By engaging ordinary Iranians to achieve a freer Iranian state, the United States encourages Iranians to replace the reign of the Ayatollah with a more democratic and diplomatic regime. Consequently, an American policy towards Iran that introduces media contrary to the Iranian regime's propaganda peacefully undermines the Ayatollah's legitimacy. By amplifying Iranians' opposition voices, the United States spurs on collective action by Iranians to replace the Ayatollah with a new political system.

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