

Background Report on Iran

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What does a nation have to do to make the U.S. State Department rank it the leading state sponsor of terrorism? And why does Iran do whatever that is? Those are the questions that I set out to understand when researching this report.

As with my background report on Afghanistan, I've compiled the following information mostly without commentary and with minimal editing, so you can better understand and more confidently and frequently comment on the September 11 attacks on the U.S. and the American response to them. I've assumed that you know why reason is better than faith, why capitalism is better than communism or socialism, why life is better than death.

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1. BACKGROUND READINGS

Esposito, John L. *Islam: The Straight Path*. 3rd ed., 1998. College text on Islamic religion and the history of the Muslim world, including recent radical trends; on Iran, see especially pp. 43-45, 109-113, 158-169, 179-186.

Noncommittal. Moderately easy to read, but if you only need an overview, each chapter has a useful summary.

Miller, Judith. *God Has Ninety-Nine Names: Reporting from a Militant Middle East*. Publ. 1996. ISBN 0-684-83228-3.

The chapter on Iran (pp. 429-464) is the best brief summary I've seen yet of recent events there, and includes some historical background, especially on the development of Shi'ite Muslims. Miller, a correspondent for the *New York Times*, has written some good articles on terrorism (available on the NYTimes website). NOTE: Miller was one of the journalists who received a packet of anthrax in the mail in early October 2001.

Wright, Robin. *The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran*. Publ. 2000, and again with a new afterword in 2001. ISBN 0-375-80630-5. *I do not recommend this book as basic reading*. Wright looks at the trees so closely that she can't see the forest, and seems to have no principles for evaluating the forest, anyway. Beware of this and any book on Iran (or other terrorist nations) that are praised as "sympathetic," "subtle," etc. in the reviews or in the publisher's blurb. Such phrases usually mean the

author ignores major issues (tyrannical government, sponsorship of terrorism) in favor of stories about "normal guys."

Naipaul, V.S. *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*. Published in 1981 (i.e., 2 years after Iran's revolution); sections on Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia. The man has a lucid prose style and notes many interesting points, but like Wright, he seems to have no principles to use to integrate his points.

The Ayn Rand Institute's America at War site (<http://www.aynrand.org/medialink>) has excellent op-ed pieces on terrorism going back several years, including my essays "Crime or War? The Proper Response to the Terrorist Attacks in New York and Washington" and "What Do We Tell Our Children About September 11th?" (<http://www.aynrand.org/medialink/fortheyoung.html>)

On the Muslim mind, listen to Dr. Edwin Locke's tape "Psycho-Epistemology of the Arab World," available from the Ayn Rand Bookstore: <http://www.aynrandbookstore.com>.

My background report on [Afghanistan](#) includes further discussion of concepts such as *jihad*.

2. GLOSSARY OF SELECTED TERMS

ayatollah: title of a high-ranking Shi'ite religious leader (Esposito p. 253)

Basij: militia of young (mostly teenage) volunteers, originally organized during the 1980-1988 war against Iraq; members are *Basiji*. Currently there are several hundred thousand of them in Iran, operating on orders from the conservative religious leadership.

fatwa: written legal opinion or decision of a specialist on Islamic law on a matter of Islamic law (Esposito pp. 84, 253)

imam: prayer leader; in Shii Islam, a successor of the Prophet Mohammed, descendant of Ali, who governs as a divinely inspired religiopolitical leader of the Islamic community (Esposito p. 254)

jihad: "strive, effort, struggle" to follow Islam; can include defense of the faith, armed struggle, holy war (Esposito p. 254). See the section on *jihad* in my [Afghanistan report](#).

mullah: a local religious leader (Esposito p. 254); according to Wright (p. 293), there are about 180,000 of them in Iran (ca. 2000)

shariah or *Shari'a*: Islamic law

vilayat-i-faqih: guardianship or government by an expert in Islamic law (Esposito p. 255); in Iran, this is the official title of the Supreme Religious Leader (see [Structure of Iran's government](#))

Westoxification or *Westoxication*: indiscriminate borrowing from and dependence on the West; term popularized by the 1970s in the writings of Jalal Al-e Ahmad, leftist son of an Iranian cleric, and much used by Islamic intellectuals (Esposito p. 179, Miller p. 452)

The following are basically synonyms, used according to the personal preference of the journalist or author: Islamic fundamentalists, Islamists,

3. STATISTICS: Geography, population, economy

Geography: 635,932 sq. miles (1.648 million square km.), slightly larger than Alaska and roughly the size of the

United States east of the Mississippi River. Iran borders Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as the former USSR territories of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkmenistan. It also borders the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Climate is arid and semi-arid; only 10% of the land is arable, and only 7% is forested. Topographically, it's a central basin surrounded by a rim of mountains.

Population: 66 million (2001 estimate). Life expectancy 69.95 years, but only 4.65% of the population is currently over 65. Literacy either 72.1% (78.4% among men, 65.8% among women), or about 48%, depending on whose statistics you accept. Religion: 89% Shi'a Muslim, 10% Sunni Muslim, 1% combined Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian and other minorities. Persian (Farsi) is the language of 58% of the population. Persians (who are not the same as Arabs) make up 51% of the population, with 7 other ethnic groups, none of which comprises more than 24% of the population.

Economy: per capita GDP \$6,300 (2000 est.), with a very wide disparity in incomes; perhaps as much as half the population lives below the poverty line. Inflation 16% (2000 est.). Main sources of income: petroleum and natural gas, assorted minerals. The largely state-run economy suffers wild swings with fluctuations in oil prices.

4. HISTORY (Ancient, Medieval and early modern, 20th c.)

SUMMARY: I have included a fair amount of information about what was going on in Iran when the West was passing through the ancient and medieval periods. If you're not interested in this, you need to know three things: (1) that Iran has a very long history (2500 years) as a unified, independent political entity; (2) that at no time during those thousands of years have Iranians been in control of their own government; (3) that there was no significant influence from Western ideas until the second half of the 20th century. It's been suggested that if anything is to replace religion as a unifying factor in Iran, it would be nationalism. I would add that it would be a pretty backward sort of nationalism, closer to tribalism and racism than allegiance to a nation that is based on certain principles.

If you can remember those points and don't feel the need to know Iranian history from ca. 1500 BC, you can jump directly to [Iran in the 20th century](#).

IRAN IN ANCIENT TIMES

Ca. 1500 BC Immigration into Iran from the north of the Aryans, a nomadic Indo-European people. "Iran," the name traditionally used for this area by its inhabitants, is derived from "Aryan."

ca. 1000 BC Zoroaster (Zarathustra) created world's first monotheistic religion, stressing the duality of good vs. evil, man's free choice between the two, a messiah, resurrection, final judgment, heaven and hell. Zoroastrianism worked its way east to Asia Minor (modern Turkey), where it influenced Greek and Roman mystery cults and eventually Judaism, Christianity and Islam. (NOTE: presently there are more Zoroastrians in California than in Iran.)

550-334 BC: The Persian Empire, founded by Cyrus the Great, high point under Darius the Great (522-486). Rulers were known as the *shahanshah* ("king of kings"). At its

greatest extent the Empire reached from the Nile to the Danube to southern Asia. Among its notable ruins is the palace at Persepolis. Attempting to expand their empire to the west, the Persians invaded the Greek mainland and were repulsed (490-479), a turning point for Greek civilization, although not a major setback for the Persians. "Persia" was the name given by the Greeks to Iran, and generally used in the West for the next 2000 years.

334 BC Persia was conquered by Alexander the Great of Macedon (northern Greece). It took 30,000 horses, camels and donkeys to carry the spoils from Persepolis' treasury back to Greece. After Alexander's death, the area was ruled by the Seleucid Dynasty.

247 BC-224 AD Rule by the Parthians, famous for shooting backward over their shoulders as they galloped away, hence a "Parthian shot."

247-642 AD Rule by the Sassanians, one of whom captured the Roman Emperor Valerian in 260. Mani (215/6-274?) founded Manichaeism, combining elements of Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Buddhism. In 528 Mazdak advocated abolition of private property, division of wealth, nonviolence and vegetarianism, bringing about a struggle between peasants and nobility. Under Khosrow I (531-79), many Indian and Greek scientific and medical texts were translated into Persian; he also gave refuge to philosophers fleeing the Byzantine Empire. A long war against the Byzantines (608-622) weakened the Persian Empire. NOTE: The recurring juxtaposition of mysticism and reason, faith and science, is the dominant theme of Persian history.

IRAN IN MEDIEVAL TIMES

642 Ten years after the death of Mohammed, the Muslims conquered the Persian Empire. Islam, originally Arabic, took on a slightly Persian flavor.

661 Shi'ites split from the main branch of Muslims (Sunnis) after a disagreement over who should succeed Mohammed as leader. (See [Shi'ite Muslims](#).) Persia was ruled by the Umayyad Dynasty (Sunnis).

820-1220 Rise of local Persian monarchs. Birth of modern Persian language. Persia a center for art, literature and science. In 850 Al-Khwarazmi wrote the first work on algebra. Arabic numerals were developed. Ferdowsi (940-1020) wrote some of the most esteemed poetry in Persian. Ibn Sina (known in the West as Avicenna, 980-1037) produced an encyclopedic work on medicine that remained a standard text in the West until the 17th c., and was famous for his emphasis on the use of logic and reason. Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), the most prominent Muslim jurist and theologian of his time, argued against "merely" rational and logical interpretations of existence, in favor of mystic and spiritual understanding - a turning point in Islamic civilization. (This is discussed in some detail in Dr. Locke's lecture "Psycho-Epistemology of the Arab World," listed under General Readings.) Omar Khayyam (1048-1122), mathematician and astronomer, eventually became famous in the West for his *Rubaiyat*, a collection of poems on love and life.

1220 Genghis Khan attacked and conquered Persia: massive destruction, millions of deaths. Under Mongol rule, Marco Polo journeyed through Persia on his way to China

(1273). Followers of Rumi, the greatest mystical poet writing in Persian, founded the Whirling Dervishes. The poetry of Sa'di (1213-1292) emphasized mankind's interdependence, regardless of race, nationality or religion. In 1405 Tamerlane (a Turco-Mongol) conquered Persia.

1501-1779 After 9 centuries of foreign rule, Persia was united under the Safavid Dynasty. **Shi'ism** was made the state religion, partly as a way to differentiate Persia from the neighboring Ottoman Empire (Sunnis). Pinnacle of the Safavid Dynasty was under Shah Abbas the Great, 1587-1629.

1795-1925 After brief stints of foreign rule, Persia was reunited under the Qajar Dynasty, who lost the Caucasus (present-day Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) to the Russians by treaties of 1813 and 1828, then lost some central Asian provinces to the Russians, and finally lost Afghanistan to the British.

IRAN IN THE 20TH CENTURY

1901 A Brit was given the concession to investigate and exploit oil reserves in 480,000 square miles of Iran. His concession was transferred soon after to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). Output of crude oil was 83,000 metric tons.

1905-1911 Protests against British and Russian interference led to the Constitutional Revolution by clerics, merchants and intellectuals. The Qajar rulers were forced to accept a Constitution and establishment of Iran's first Parliament (Majlis).

1921 Soon after World War I Reza Khan, an army colonel, gained control of Persia through a military coup. In 1925 he declared himself shah at the urging of the clergy, who feared a diminished role in a republican government. Reza Khan (who adopted the surname "Pahlavi," thus founding the Pahlavi Dynasty) secularized judges, laws, taxes, and education, and created a disciplined standing army to restrain tribal chiefs. He allowed women in schools and in the workplace and abolished the wearing of the veil. He initiated an industrialization program and improved transportation infrastructure. In 1935 he renamed the country "Iran." He also abolished the power of the Majlis (Parliament) and eliminated free speech.

1932 The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's concession to drill for oil was cancelled, but a new 60-year concession was granted in the following year. Output of crude oil was 7,200,000 metric tons, rising to 27,247,933 metric tons by 1949. Thousands of foreign tourists, contractors and military advisors moved to Iran.

1941 The Allies invaded Iran, forcing pro-Nazi Reza Khan Pahlavi to abdicate in favor of his son, 21-year-old Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah (d. 1980).

1951-1953 The Majlis (Parliament) nationalized oil production, transferring the AIOC's concession to the National Iranian Oil Company. All British AIOC employees left Iran. Britain froze Iran's assets, but lost its appeal for justice in a case heard before the International Court of Justice, a United Nations body. A British trade embargo enforced with the British navy led to the collapse of Iran's economy. Oil exports practically ceased until an international consortium

of 8 oil companies began to operate the fields; by the late 1960s, production was up to 130,000,000 metric tons.

1953 The Shah was nearly overthrown, but was restored to power by riots funded by British and American intelligence. (I have not seen details on this.) The involvement of the United States led many Iranian leftists and clerics to hate the U.S. According to Wright (p. 246), who quotes Col. Chuck Scott, one of the 1979 Embassy hostages, "From that day on [1953], the people of Iran believed, basically as an article of faith, that the United States was behind the shah, so therefore the shah was a puppet of the United States and we were responsible for all the shah's failings, shortcomings and excesses." Wright comments, however, that the Iranians routinely make a distinction between the U.S. government and its citizens, and that this is a typical attitude in the Middle East and the Third World (p. 247). (It is a more justifiable distinction in the type of governments that predominate throughout the Middle East, which are authoritarian or totalitarian. Unfortunately many Americans fall for this same error of considering the government something wholly separate from its citizens when they describe the population of terrorist states as "innocents." See the articles on innocents in time of war on the Ayn Rand Institute's website, including "What about the innocents?" in my article "What Do We Tell Our Children about September 11th?")

1961 After 22 years on the throne, the Shah introduced the White Revolution, which included land reform (including some distribution of large tracts of land owned by the clergy), profit sharing for industrial workers, privatization of state-owned factories, women's suffrage, a literacy campaign, and equal legal rights for non-Muslims (Christians, Jews, Baha'is, Zoroastrians). Ayatollah Khomeini denounced these reforms as "a serious threat" to Islam; he was arrested in 1963 and exiled in 1964. "Khomeini combined vigorous nationalism with an impassioned eloquence, an absolutist's sense of righteousness and a mystic's superior airs" (Wright p. 50).

1963-1973 Relative prosperity, with rapid economic growth and political stability. Infrastructure was further developed and the military expanded. The shah became more autocratic, suppressing political parties, silencing critics (partly by the notorious secret police, Savak), and packing Parliament with his favorites. In 1971 he invited world leaders to a party celebrating the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire. Catered by Maxim's in Paris, with waiters in haute-couture uniforms, the party cost \$200-\$300 million. It coincided with a severe famine in parts of Iran, including the province in which the party was held. Not surprisingly, the party led to a great deal of resentment.

1967 Six-Day War: Israel defeated the combined forces of Egypt, Syria and Jordan in 6 days and took control of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Gaza and the Golan Heights. The "liberation of Jerusalem" became not just a regional issue, but a concern for all Muslims. The United States, because it supported Israel, was regarded as turning its back on Muslims.

1973 In the October War against Israel, Anwar Sadat used Islamic symbols and rhetoric - not nationalist or socialist rhetoric - to motivate his men. This was widely regarded as an Islamic war, not simply an Egyptian one, and

those who died in the course of it were considered martyrs as well as patriots.

1973-1979 the Arab Oil Embargo made the West seem dependent on the Muslim world for the first time ever. Saudi Arabia, Libya and the United Arab Emirates used petrodollars to support Islamic organizations and governments. In Iran, the Embargo quadrupled oil revenue to \$20 billion per year. The Shah increased the pace of modernization. When riots broke out in the late 1970s he imposed martial law, killing 3,000 or so protesters. Dissenters met at mosques, which were immune from government regulation and which became centers for political organization and agitation.

1979 The Shah's opponents united behind Khomeini, and the Shah was exiled. Khomeini, returning triumphantly from France, insisted that the revolution was an Islamic, not just a Shi'ite, revolution.

1979-1981 After the shah arrived in the U.S., militant Iranian students took 52 hostages at the American Embassy in Tehran (remember "America Held Hostage" on TV every night?), holding them for 444 days beginning on November 4, 1979. The date was the 15th anniversary of Khomeini's eviction from Iran (see 1964). This was actually the second takeover of the Embassy: the first had been on February 14, 1979, when fundamentalists and leftists had stormed the Embassy compound. Defended by only 13 Marines the Americans surrendered, but a group of students soon "liberated" the Embassy. Khomeini sent apologies for actions "contrary to his wishes" and expressed relief that no one had been hurt. The November 4th takeover was intended by students to be a sit-in protest lasting only a matter of days, according to a statement made 20 years later by the captors' spokesman. Much to their surprise, Khomeini gave the students his blessing, apparently as part of a ploy to break the political stalemate in Iran; see next entry. (On the Embassy takeover, see Wright pp. 254-5.)

1979 In the fall of 1979 controversy raged over proposals for Iran's new constitution. Secular technocrats who ran the first revolutionary government didn't want the clergy to have too much power. Clerics feared that having a strong secular leader might lead to another monarchy. Intellectuals wanted religion to be just one of several elements guiding the state. Fundamentalists wanted rule by Islamic law (Sharia). Ethnic minorities wanted political and economic autonomy. Socialists wanted a centralized economy run for the benefit of the masses. Sixty-two draft constitutions were produced. The idea of a Supreme Religious Leader wasn't introduced until a very late draft, and was strongly opposed by many. These warring factions were cleverly united (or outwitted) by Khomeini's actions following the Embassy seizure. Demonstrations in front of the Embassy whipped Iranians into a religious frenzy. When the Constitution was put to a vote 4 weeks later, just after the most important Shi'ite holiday Ashura (see [Shi'ite Muslims](#)), it passed with a whopping 99% of the vote. Iran officially became a theocratic republic. (Wright pp. 253-6.) See [Iran's Constitution](#).

1980 Universities were closed down for 2 years so the curriculum could be revamped to produce an Iranian "cultural revolution."

1980 The Shah, after having been requested to leave the U.S., died in Egypt.

1980-1988 Iran invaded by Iraq; in the course of the war, hundreds of thousands of Iranians were killed. In 1983-1984 thousands of Basij volunteers died charging across Iraqi minefields with plastic keys to paradise tied around their necks. Many were only 11 or 12 years old. The U.S. eventually supported Iraq. As a result of exhortations to supply warriors, the Iranian population increased from 34 million ca. 1979 to 65 million in 1995 (72% under age 25), putting a severe strain on Iran's welfare system. Meanwhile, price of a barrel of oil dropped from \$35 in 1980 to \$9 in 1986, wreaking havoc on Iran's economy.

1981 Elected government of Abolhassan Bani-Sadr overthrown; purges, political arrests, torture and executions as clerics turned against their liberal and leftist partners. The Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), a socialist Islamic group based in Iraq, carried out bombings and assassinations in Iran. The newly elected president, prime minister, 27 members of Parliament and 10 cabinet officials were killed.

1982 Israel occupied the southern half of Lebanon. Iran deployed [Revolutionary Guards](#) in Lebanon's eastern Bekaa Valley, which gave birth to Hizbollah (the Party of God) - now a prominent terrorist organization, credited with the invention of the suicide car-bombing. Kidnappings of Americans were attributed to Iranian-inspired and - supported Islamic radicals.

1983 Bombing of American Embassy and the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut were blamed on pro-Iranian militias; 241 Marines and 58 French peacekeepers were killed by a bomb shipped through the Iranian Embassy.

1984 Pro-Iranian militias blamed for bombing of second American Embassy in Beirut.

1986 Reagan Administration officials Robert McFarlane and Oliver North manage to have 3 American hostages freed from Lebanon in exchange for arms, but 3 more Americans soon taken hostage.

1988 After a series of resounding defeats, Iran accepted a U.N. resolution ending the war with Iraq. Khomeini, equating his own rule with the survival of Islam, decreed, "Our government has priority over all Islamic tenets, even over prayer, fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca." (Miller p. 453)

1989 Khomeini condemned Salman Rushdie to death for *The Satanic Verses*. Not coincidentally, the condemnation occurred just after the end of the war with Iraq, when people were losing the nationalistic fervor that had propelled Iran through years of death, political repression and economic misery. (The *Satanic Verses* had been out for 10 months by the time Khomeini issued his fatwa.) Khomeini died, and was succeeded as Supreme Religious Leader by Ayatollah Khamenei. (It's confusing. Deal with it.)

1995 The Clinton Administration imposed a total economic embargo on Iran, based on Iran's attempts to buy missiles and other weapons, its support of terrorism, its appalling human-rights record, and its opposition to Israeli-Arab peace treaties. The sanctions were not supported by countries in Europe or Asia.

1997 Relative unknown Mohammad Khatami was elected president by a landslide, and reelected in 2001 for a second 4-year term. In speeches on CNN and to the U.N.,

Khatami urged the U.S. to “crack the wall of mistrust” (Wright p. 304). For events of the past few years in Iran, including the likelihood for another revolution, see [What's next for Iran?](#) at the end of this report.

SOURCES:

Wright, *The Last Great Revolution*, Appendix I: Iran's Twentieth-Century Chronology (pp. 301-5).

Online: <http://www.mage.com/TLbody.html> (“Timeline of Iranian history”). Use with caution, as some of the facts are incorrect.

Miller, *God Has Ninety-Nine Names*, pp. 429-464.

5. SHI'ITE MUSLIMS

SUMMARY: For historical reasons, the Shi'ite Muslims who dominate in Iran (89% of the population) are more likely to embrace martyrdom and to accept a cleric such as Khomeini as both a religious and political leader.

The Shi'ites split from the main branch of Islam (the Sunnis) in the 7th century, when the Umayyad Dynasty gained control of the Muslim world. The Umayyads claimed that the leader of the Muslim world should be chosen from the among all Mohammed's followers. Shi'ites contended that a leader should have been chosen from the family of the Prophet Mohammed, specifically descendants of his son-in-law and first convert, Ali. (A "Shi'ite" is literally a "follower" of Ali.) Hussein, Mohammed's grandson, took it upon himself to fight the Umayyads, and he and his 70 or so followers, including women and children, were massacred in 680 at Karbala (now in southern Iraq). Karbala remains a holy site for Shi'ite Muslims. The Shi'ite holiday Ashura, which includes lamentation, breast beating, weeping and flagellation, is the annual celebration of this disastrous defeat.

Iran's official state religion is "Twelver Shi'ism," so called because this branch of Shi'ites were led by a succession of 12 descendants of Mohammed. The Twelfth Imam (leader) mysteriously disappeared in 874. He is believed to be in "occultation," i.e., in hiding until the end of the world, when he will return as the Mahdi to vindicate the Shi'ites and usher in a perfect Islamic society. Meanwhile, the Shi'ites are to be guided by religious scholars (the *ulama*) who interpret God's will for the community.

Shi'ite Islam was made Persia's official religion by the Safavid Dynasty in 1501, partly to create a separate sense of identity from the predominantly Sunni Ottoman Empire. Shi'ism became a unifying force in a land strongly divided on ethnic and tribal lines.

Today Shi'ites constitute about 15% of Muslims worldwide. Within the Shi'ites there are two other sects besides the Twelvers (a.k.a. Ithna Asharis), who predominate in Iran. The splits occurred because of disputes over who should legitimately succeed as Imam. The Zaydis claimed that Hussein's grandson Zayd ibn Ali was the fifth Imam and split from the other Shi'ites in the 7th or 8th c. In the 8th c., the dispute was over the legitimacy of the 6th Imam; those who favored a man named Ismail became the Ismailis (or the Seveners).

Notable differences of Shi'ites vs. Sunni Muslims:

1. Because of its historical foundation, Shi'ite Islam demands that the faithful fight injustice and tyranny, even if death is certain. Hussein is regarded as having died fighting for justice, and revolt against tyranny is an essential part of the Shi'ite tradition. “For the Shii, history was the theater for the struggle of an oppressed and disinherited minority community to restore God's rule on earth over the entire community under the Imam.” (Esposito p. 44) An example of the practical application of this: in the Iraqi-Iran War, teenage Shi'ites signed up by tens of thousands to act as human mine-sweepers in order to become martyrs.

2. Shi'ite clerics have a mandate not just to advise their flocks, but to lead them in action: hence Ayatollah Khomeini's acceptance as both a political and religious leader. “For the Shii, leadership of the Muslim community is vested in the Imam (leader), who, though not a prophet, is the divinely inspired, sinless, infallible, religiopolitical leader of the community. He must be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and Ali, the first Imam. He is both political leader and religious guide, the final authoritative interpreter of God's will as formulated in Islamic law.” (Esposito p. 43) Khomeini argued that rather than waiting for the return of the Twelfth Imam, Shi'ites should be led by a vice regent, an outstanding religious figure who would rule until the Mahdi's return. In the Iranian Constitution this authority is vested in the Supreme Religious Leader.

6. IRAN'S CONSTITUTION

SUMMARY: You'd perhaps expect Iran's constitution (passed 1979, amended 1989) to sound like something out of the Middle Ages. It's dismaying to find that it also sounds like something out of Harvard: chock full of all the most hideous and heinous ideas promoted by modern Western intellectuals, including socialism, feminism, environmentalism and multiculturalism.

Side note: This is less surprising than it might seem, because until the Shah's overthrow in 1979, a significant portion of Iran's wealthy and influential families sent their children to the United States for higher education. Esposito points out (p. 167) that most Islamic activists aren't peasants, but are university graduates in engineering, law, medicine, science or education from major universities in Cairo, Khartoum, and Tehran, but also MIT, Indiana, Oxford and the Sorbonne. Even after the Revolution, thousands of Iranians were educated in the United States, and the Islamic Association of U.S. and Canadian Graduates boasts that its membership is about 70% academics and 30% government officials. In one of the Islamic Republic's early governments, so many officials had been educated in California that they were nicknamed the “Berkeley Mafia.”

One of the most notable examples of the influence of Western intellectuals is Ali Shariati (1933-77), a French-educated Iranian intellectual whose writings laid much of the intellectual groundwork for the Iranian Revolution. As a young man he belonged to the Movement of God-Worshipping Socialists. Influenced by the revolutions in Algeria and Cuba, by sociologists such as Max Weber, and by Che Guevara, among others, Shariati in his later writings blended Marxism's “suffering and exploitation” with the Shi'ite emphasis on martyrdom to produce the rough equivalent of

Catholic "liberation theology." (Esposito p. 181, Miller p. 452, Wright p. 194)

6.1 The "Right" Rights

When the Iranian Constitution mentions legitimate political rights such as freedom of the press and freedom of assembly, such rights are always immediately followed by a phrase beginning "except," "provided that it doesn't," or "but", which negates them. Examples:

Art. 22: "The dignity, life, property rights, residence and occupation of the individual are inviolate, except in cases sanctioned by law."

Art. 24: "Publications and the press have freedom of expression except when it is detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public."

6.2 Economic principles

The Iranian Constitution is filled with Marxist and socialist rhetoric. On the socialist / communist connection with Islamic fundamentalism, see Esposito ch. 5 (pp. 158-222) and the second paragraph of [Iran's Constitution](#).

According to Wright (p. 283), Islam has an inherent duality. The Sharia rigidly protects the rights of private property and free enterprise, hence property rights are nominally protected in the Iranian Constitution. On the other hand, Islam emphasizes the need for charity. Besides the state tax, devout Muslims are expected to pay two hefty religious taxes, one an annual tax of 20% on forms of wealth such as business profits, precious minerals, treasure, war booty, etc., and another tax paid at the end of Ramadan on gold and silver, agricultural surplus, livestock, etc.

According to the Constitution, the goals of the Islamic Republic of Iran include "the complete elimination of imperialism and the prevention of foreign influence" and "the elimination of all forms of despotism and autocracy" (Art. 3, sections 5, 6). Another aim is "The planning of a correct and just economic system, in accordance with Islamic criteria, in order to create welfare, eliminate poverty, and abolish all forms of deprivation with respect to food, housing, work, health care, and the provision of social insurance for all" (section 12).

Article 43 (Principles of the Economy and Financial Affairs) includes:

Section 1. "the provision of basic necessities for all citizens: housing, food, clothing, hygiene, medical treatment, education, and the necessary facilities for the establishment of a family;"

Section 2. "ensuring conditions and opportunities of employment for everyone, with a view to attaining full employment;"

Section 3. "the plan for the national economy must be structured in such a manner that the form, content, and hours of work of every individual will allow him sufficient leisure and energy to engage, beyond his professional endeavor, in intellectual, political, and social activities leading to all-round development of his self, to take active part in leading the affairs of the country, improve his skills, and to make full use of his creativity;"

Section 4. ". . . preventing the exploitation of another's labor;"

Section 5. "the prohibition of infliction of harm and loss upon others, monopoly, hoarding, usury, and other illegitimate and evil practices;" (NOTE: "usury" means collecting interest on loans)

Section 6. "the prohibition of extravagance and wastefulness in all matters related to the economy, including consumption, investment, production, distribution, and services."

In a similar vein, see Articles 28, 29 and 31.

Article 44 specifies that the state sector will own and administer "all large-scale and mother industries, foreign trade, major minerals, banking, insurance, power generation, dams, and large-scale irrigation networks, radio and television, post, telegraph and telephone services, aviation, shipping, roads, railroads and the like." A "cooperative" sector [15 foundations or *bunyods*] is to control "enterprises concerned with production and distribution, in urban and rural areas, in accordance with Islamic criteria." Managing the confiscated assets of the shah and his supporters, the *bunyods* now control as much as 30-40% of Iran's wealth, and corruption in their administration is rampant. (Miller pp. 438-9, Wright p. 278) For more on the *bunyods*, see [What's next for Iran](#).

What's left is for the private sector? Still in Article 44: "Those activities concerned with agriculture, animal husbandry, industry, trade, and services that supplement the economic activities of the state and cooperative sectors." Ownership (private property rights) is mentioned with the usual exception that negates the whole concept: "in so far as this ownership is in conformity with the other articles of this chapter, does not go beyond the bounds of Islamic law, contributes to the economic growth and progress of the country and does not harm society."

6.3 Status of women

Article 21 of the Constitution (Women's Rights) states, "The government must ensure the rights of women in all respects, in conformity with Islamic criteria." Since the Islamic view of woman stresses her role as wife and mother, it seemed odd to read in the *NYTimes*, "As for Saudi women, unlike their Iranian sisters who are allowed to drive, vote, practice law and hold political office, those rights are denied" ("Who Hates the U.S.? Who Loves It?", 9/23/01).

As usual, further research shows that the *Times* has simply turned a blind eye to fundamentals. The State Department's Human Rights Practices report on Iran, issued in Feb. 2000, notes the following. (Section references in parentheses.)

1. In a court of law, a woman's testimony is worth only half that of a man's. (1e)

2. Women who do not observe dress codes, including covering the hair and all the body except the hands and face, or who wear makeup or nail polish, are subject to harassment by the Ansar-e Hezbollah, a paramilitary movement that acts as vigilantes. (1e) They are also subject to legal action, including flogging (74 lashes) and imprisonment. (3)

3. Private gatherings where men and women socialize and where alcohol and mixed dancing take place are

forbidden. The Ansar-e Hezbollah randomly attacks such gatherings. (1e)

4. The penalty for adultery in Islamic law is death by stoning. It is still occasionally enforced. (1a)

5. Under Islamic law, the "blood money" paid to the family of a murdered woman is half that paid to the family of a murdered man. (2a)

6. Women must obtain the permission of a husband, father or other living male relative in order to get a passport. Married women must have written, notarized permission from their husbands before traveling abroad. (2d)

7. Gender segregation is enforced in most public spaces. (3)

8. The minimum legal age of marriage for women is 9 (nine) years old. (3)

9. A divorced woman is allowed to keep a female child until age 7 and a boy until age 2; after that, full custody reverts to the father, and a mother has virtually no visitation rights unless granted by the ex-husband. This law was somewhat modified in 1998, so that obviously unfit fathers would not get custody. (Wright p. 186)

10. Muslim women may not marry non-Muslim men. (3)

The only woman currently holding a cabinet-level position in Iran is Massoumeh Ebtekar, who became famous as the spokesman for the students who held the hostages at the U.S. Embassy in 1979-81. She is vice-president for the environment.

Many of the freedoms women now enjoy in Iran, including the right to work outside the home, only became legal and acceptable during and after the 1980-88 war with Iraq, in the course of which hundreds of thousands of Iranian men were killed.

6.4 Freedom of religion

Religions specified in the Constitution – Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews – are officially tolerated in the Islamic Republic, and members of those religions have a total of 5 representatives in the 290-member Islamic Consultative Assembly (Art. 64). Religions NOT specified in the Constitution have no rights. The Baha'i faith, an offshoot of the [Shi'ite Muslims](#), is not recognized, and its hundreds of thousands of followers are subject to harassment and imprisonment. See the U.S. Dept. of State's Human Rights Practices report on the Baha'i (sect. 5).

6.5 Freedom of the press

Article 24 of the Constitution provides, "Publications and the press have freedom of expression except when it is detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public." The State Department's Human Rights Practices Report notes:

1. The government lifted the death sentence on Salman Rushdie for his *Satanic Verses* in 1998, but several deputies to the Iranian congress immediately repudiated the action, and one of the foundations (*bunyods*) promptly increased the bounty for his death. (section 1c)

2. Satellite dishes have been illegal since 1995, since they allow unsupervised access to foreign broadcasts. The owners of most of the nearly quarter-million dishes in Tehran pay protection money that often (but not always) prevents confiscation of the equipment. (1e, 2a, Miller p. 450)

3. All radio and TV stations are owned by the Iranian government. (2a) The number of books published has increased since 1979, but all are strictly censored for anti-Islamic thoughts, and 25% are religious texts. (Miller p. 451)

4. Periodicals that disagree with the official government line are routinely closed down. Ansar-e Hezbollah mobs attacking the offices of liberal publications and bookstores are left unpunished by police and the courts. (2a)

6.6 Environmentalism

Article 50 of the Iranian Constitution states, "The preservation of the environment, in which the present as well as the future generations have a right to flourishing social existence, is regarded as a public duty in the Islamic Republic. Economic and other activities that inevitably involve pollution of the environment or cause irreparable damage to it are therefore forbidden." The woman currently in charge of this ministry is M. Ebtekar, who rose to fame as the spokeswoman for the students who held American hostages in the Embassy in Tehran from 1979-1981.

6.7 Structure of Iran's government

SUMMARY: Iran is a theocratic republic. Briefly, that means many positions are filled by election, but the clergy have power over who is allowed to become a member of the executive, legislative and judiciary branches of government. The clergy also have veto power over legislative and executive actions. According to the Constitution, the clergy's power cannot be changed or amended.

Supreme Religious Leader (walayat al-faqih), the top-ranking position in the Islamic Republic, a lifetime position held since the death of the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 by Ayatollah Ali Hoseini Khamenei. The SRL is chosen by the Council of Experts (Art. 107) based on the qualifications of scholarship, justice, piety, and leadership capacity (Art. 109). The SRL's powers and duties include:

1. Veto power over all legislation and over the President's actions.
2. Supreme command of the armed forces and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards
3. Appointment and dismissal of the religious men on the Guardian Council
4. Appointment and dismissal of the head of the judicial branch
5. Approves first-time candidates for President

Guardian Council: 6 religious men selected by the Supreme Religious Leader, plus 6 jurists elected by the Majlis (legislature) from a list nominated by the Head of the Judicial Power. Members of the GC serve 6-year terms. They

must approve all legislation passed by the Majlis, and supervise the elections of the Assembly of Experts which selects the Supreme Religious Leader.

The *Assembly of Experts (Leadership Council)* is responsible for choosing a Supreme Religious Leader. It consists of the President, the head of the judiciary, and the religious men of the Guardian Council.

The *President* (currently Mohammad Khatami, elected in 2001 to his second 4-year term) is head of the executive branch. He is elected by popular vote from a slate of candidates approved by the Guardian Council. His actions are subject to approval by the SRL and the GC (Art. 57). In effect, this means his power is very limited, so while he may make statements that sound almost American, his power to act on them is negligible. Here's a statement he made soon after his election in 1997, which has no connection to the reality of Iranian politics: "A government's authority is not realized by coercion or arbitrariness, but by legal acts, by respect for rights and by encouraging people's participation in decision making. People must believe that they have the right to determine their own destiny and that there are limits to government." (Wright p. 64)

The *Majlis* (a.k.a. *Islamic Consultative Assembly*) is the legislative branch, with 290 members serving 4-year terms. Laws are subject to veto by the Guardian Council (Arts. 72, 94, 96).

Head of the Judicial Power is appointed by the Supreme Religious Leader for a 5-year term (Art. 157). All courts are run in accordance with Islamic law (Art. 61).

The *military and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard*, "organized in the early days of the triumph of the Revolution, is to be maintained so that it may continue in its role of guarding the Revolution and its achievements" (Art. 150). Methods of recruitment and training, as well as specific aims, are not stated in the Constitution.

Provision is made in the Constitution for amendment and revision, but (that ever-recurring "but"!) a few parts of the Constitution are "unalterable": "The contents of the articles of the Constitution related to the Islamic character of the political system; the basis of all the rules and regulations according to Islamic criteria; the religious footing; the objectives of the Islamic Republic of Iran; the democratic character of the government; the holy principle; the Imamate of Ummah; and the administration of the affairs of the country based on national referenda, official religion of Iran and the religious school." (Art. 177, sect. 5)

SOURCES

Iran's constitution is on the web at <http://www.iranonline.com/iran/iran-info/Government/constitution.html>

7. HUMAN RIGHTS

The Iranian government argues that human rights are not universal, but must be viewed in the context of a

country's "culture and beliefs" (sect. 4 of the U.S. State Department's Human Rights Practices Report, 2/00). That's one of the defining characteristics of multiculturalism: the idea that there are no universal standards by which you can judge any other culture's activities. In an interview ca. 1998-99, Ataollah Mohajerani, President Khatami's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, one of the most notable reformers in the President's ministry, said, "The point is that the rapporteurs of human rights must be familiar with our religious instruction and beliefs. Since they're not, they may consider certain things we believe to be in violations of human rights." (Wright p. 102.)

More moral relativism comes from Abdul Karim Soroush, a popular and acclaimed Islamic scholar who is one of the leading figures in the "Islamic Reformation." His attitude is described thus by an admirer: Soroush "says Islam can be interpreted in a way that's compatible with democracy. And he shows how. He proclaims that the understanding of religion is all relative. Put another way, he says no one interpretation is absolute. It's not fixed for all time and place. Who can say what God meant?" (Wright p. 36).

SOURCES

The U.S. Department of State's 1999 Country Report on Human Rights Practices, released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor on 2/25/2000, is on the web at http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1999_hrp_report/iran.html.

8. IRAN AS A SPONSOR OF TERRORISM, a.k.a.

"Spreading Islam abroad"

SUMMARY: The U.S. government considers Iran "the most active state sponsor of terrorism." This section gives Iran's justification for fostering terrorism and cites specific activities that it sponsors.

THEORY

In the early days of the Iranian Revolution Ayatollah Khomeini pronounced, "We shall export our revolution to the whole world. Until the cry 'There is no God but God' resounds over the whole world, there will be struggle." (Wright, p. 66) Khomeini's aims are clearly reflected in the Iranian Constitution, written while he was still alive.

One of the aims of the government of Iran, as set forth explicitly in the Constitution, is to spread Islam throughout the world. The Constitution mandates that Iran support and sponsor activities abroad that would result in the overthrow or collapse of non-Islamic governments.

From the section "The Form of Government in Islam": The government "represents the fulfillment of the political ideal of a people who bear a common faith and common outlook, taking an organized form in order to initiate the process of intellectual and ideological evolution towards the final goal, i.e., movement towards Allah. . . . [T]he Constitution provides the necessary basis for ensuring the continuation of the Revolution at home and abroad. In particular, in the development of international relations, the Constitution will strive with other Islamic and popular

movements to prepare the way for the formation of a single world community (in accordance with the Koranic verse *'This your community is a single community, and I am your Lord, so worship Me'* [21:92]), and to assure the continuation of the struggle for the liberation of all deprived and oppressed peoples in the world."

The idea is reiterated in the section of the Constitution headed "An Ideological Army": "The Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps . . . will be responsible not only for guarding and preserving the frontiers of the country, but also for fulfilling the ideological mission of jihad in God's way; that is, extending the sovereignty of God's law throughout the world (this is in accordance with the Koranic verse *'Prepare against them whatever force you are able to muster, and strings of horses, striking fear into the enemy of God and your enemy, and others besides them'* [8:60])."

See also Article 3, section 16 of the Constitution (Statement of Goals), which mandates "unsparing support to the freedom fighters of the world," as well as Articles 11 and 154.

How much of this sponsorship of terrorism is purely Iranian or Shi'ite, and how much is part of Islam in general? Esposito lists the major points of Islamic revivalism, which even "moderates" would agree on: 1) Islamic religion is integral to politics, law and society; 2) Muslim societies have failed because they emulated Western, secular values, and can only succeed by returning to Islam, including a return to Islamic law (Sharia) rather than Western-inspired civil codes; 3) modernization, science and technology are only acceptable if subordinated to Islamic beliefs; 4) a return to Islam requires dedicated organizations who are willing to struggle against corruption and social injustice. (p. 165)

Esposito then lists the beliefs of the more radical Islamicists, who insist that a violent revolution is required to restore Islam. These beliefs include 1) It's the West vs. the Islamic world, and all Christians and Jews are enemies because of their associations with Israel; 2) establishing an Islamic government is not just an option, it's an imperative, and *all* Muslims must aid in the struggle; 3) Islamic governments that do not follow the Sharia are not legitimate, and should be fought, along with the mosques, mullahs, etc. who are supported by such governments; 4) *jihad* against infidels is a religious duty (p. 166).

PRACTICE

In July 2001, when Congress was debating whether to renew economic sanctions against Iran and Libya, Sen. Charles Schumer (D-NY) called them "two of the world's most dangerous outlaw states." What has Iran done to earn that status? There are three areas, according to the State Department: (1) providing safehaven and support for terrorists; (2) state sponsorship of terrorism within Iran and against Iranian dissidents abroad; and (3) repeated, active attempts to acquire missile-producing technology, nuclear weapons, and chemical and biological weapons, a.k.a. "weapons of mass destruction" (WMD).

1. Iran supports numerous terrorist groups who are determined to undermine Israel and peace in the Middle East. Iran provides the Lebanese Hizbollah, HAMAS, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Ahmad Jibril's Popular

Front Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC) with a safehaven within which they can travel freely, prepare attacks and raise funds without fear of government reprisals. Iran also provides these groups with money, training and weapons. Iranian President Khatami has met with the leaders of HAMAS, the PIJ and Hezbollah, as well as Yasser Arafat. Supreme Religious Leader Ayatollah Khamenei sponsored an anti-Israel rally in Tehran 11/99, at which members of the Hizbollah and the PIJ spoke and the Ayatollah praised a recent terrorist bombing and affirmed the *jihad* against Israel. Iran also provides money and training to the PKK, a separatist group that uses terrorist tactics in Turkey, and to terrorist groups from North Africa and South and Central Asia.

2. The Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security seem to be in charge of terrorist acts within Iran, from harassment of publishers to assassination of dissidents. Members of the Iranian Intelligence network have been proven responsible for assassinations of Iranian dissidents abroad, notably a series of attacks in France, Austria, Germany and Switzerland in the 1990s.

In October 2001 the Revolutionary Guard sponsored the "First Universal Exhibition of Sacred Culture and Defense" in Tehran, an international terrorist get-together. Alongside the booth for the Lebanese terrorist organization Hezbollah (banner: "Death to America. Death to Israel") were exhibitors from HAMAS, the Iranian Foreign Ministry and Bank Melli Iran. In the courtyard was "enough military hardware for an armaments fair." (See *Wall Street Journal* 9/27/01, "Fruits of Terrorism Are the Stock in Trade at a Tehran Exhibition.")

3. Iran is working to expand its missile-building ability. It is already capable of constructing certain types of SCUD missiles, and with assistance from Russia, China and North Korea is expected to soon be able to produce missiles with a range of 1300 to 2000 km., which would put the capitals of Turkey and Egypt, as well as all of Israel, within Iran's range.

Iran is also actively increasing its number of nuclear power plants, probably as a base for a nuclear weapons program. It has been seeking to acquire enrichment facilities, at which it could eventually perform the complex process of refining radioactive material into fuel for nuclear warheads. The State Department estimated in 1998 that Iran could have a nuclear bomb in a few years if given assistance by Russia or China, and in 5-10 years without such assistance. One State Department official described Iran's efforts to acquire a nuclear bomb as a "shop-till-you-drop" effort, and a cleric prominent in the Iranian government said, "Why should the United States have a monopoly on nuclear weapons?" (Miller p. 445)

The Revolutionary Guards are believed to be in charge of Iran's chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programs, as well as the current stock of chemical and biological weapons. Yahya Rahim, commander of the Guards, was quoted in Eisenstadt's 1998 report as asking his officers, rhetorically, "Can we withstand American threats and domineering attitude with a policy of détente? Can we foil dangers coming from America through dialogue between civilizations? Will we be able to protect the Islamic Republic

from international Zionism by signing conventions to ban proliferation of chemical and nuclear weapons?"

SOURCES:

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Sancton, Thomas. "Terrorism: The Tehran Connection. An exclusive look at how Iran hunts down its opponents abroad." TIME domestic, 3/21/94 (v. 143, no. 12).

"Punishing Iran and Libya." CBS News (an AP story), 7/26/01, reporting the debate in Congress over whether to pass a 5-year extension of sanctions on foreign companies investing in Iran and Libya, "countries accused by Republicans and Democrats alike as being deeply involved in world terrorism." The article notes, "The Bush administration sought to limit the extension to two years to give it more flexibility in foreign policy." Original link (no longer working): <http://www.cbsnews.com/now/story/0,1597,303482-412,00.shtml>

9. IRANIAN MOVIES

One of the oddities of Iran is that it's now well known for its films, which have been given prestigious awards at the Cannes Film Festival and by the New York Film Critics. How can this be, in a country where religious conservatives ruthlessly censor all media? There are two questions: 1) why Iranian film-makers prosper at home, and 2) why they are acclaimed abroad.

1. Regarding the popularity of Iranian films within Iran: Most foreign films are banned in Iran's theaters, so Iranian filmmakers have a captive audience.

2. Regarding the popularity of Iranian films abroad: Most Iranian films make little reference to Islam, so in the sense of promoting a religion, they're not Islamic films. The plots seem to be thoroughly naturalistic and rather depressing, i.e., exactly the sort of fare Western film critics favor. *Children of Heaven*, for example, was nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 1999, losing to *Life Is Beautiful*. "The heartrending tale centers on a nine-year-old boy named Ali who accidentally lost his seven-year-old sister Zahra's only shoes, a tattered pair with pink bows. To hide the loss from their poor and occasionally employed father, Ali and Zahra swapped the only pair of shoes between them . . . Sharing a single pair repeatedly got both children in trouble. To solve their problems, Ali entered a long distance race - in which, of course, shoes were a prize. The catch was that it was third prize. The subtle ending did not include Ali's

winning the shoes." (Wright pp. 121-2) Filmmaking was revived in Iran after the Ayatollah Khomeini saw and praised *The Cow*, originally released in 1969: "The plot revolved around a poor village that dissolved into chaos after the loss of its lone cow." (Wright pp. 128, 129) Khomeini's approval opened the way for "other kinds of films that had human feelings" (Wright 129). One filmmaker says Iran is the only country in the world that still has "tremendous enthusiasm for deep, existential, artistic films that are truthful about life." Most likely those who rule Iran realize such films are no threat to their power: *Children of Heaven* won't inspire anyone to overthrow a tyrannical government.

The same sort of naturalistic film appeals even to some Iranians who can watch pirated videos or movies on satellite TV. One young Iranian described the film *Forrest Gump* this way: "It's about faith in God, country, and family - typical Iranian Islamic values!" Miller added, "I suppressed the impulse to tell Ali that the film was also about stupidity" (p. 449).

10. WHAT'S NEXT FOR IRAN

Ever since 1979, scholars and journalists have been predicting radical changes that would result in a more moderate Iran. The 1999 riots, more serious than any since the 1979 Revolution, were between religious conservatives and those who want reform. (See Wright pp. 243-273.) Yet two years later, there's no noticeable difference in how Iran is run. What's the likelihood of a revolution to overthrow the Revolution? Here's a scorecard.

BRANCHES OF GOVERNMENT

Executive: President Khatami was elected by a wide popular margin, with heavy support from voters under 25 years of age. Khatami is a reformer but he's also a cleric, and the clergy (the Supreme Religious Leader and the Guardian Council) has veto power over his actions. Khatami's been in power now for over 4 years, and little appears to have changed in Iran during that time.

Legislative: Many reform-minded deputies have been elected in the last few years, but again, the clergy has veto power over their actions.

Judiciary: This branch is securely in the hands of the conservatives, which is unlikely to change given that the country is ruled by religious law (Sharia).

Religious "branch": the Supreme Religious Leader and Guardian Council are self-perpetuating and very conservative. They are also pragmatic enough to shift position slightly in order to make a coalition with the least reform-minded of their opponents.

Military, Revolutionary Guard Corps, Basij militia and Ansar-e Hezbollah vigilantes: All the men with weapons support the clergy and religious conservatives.

OTHER KEY FACTORS

The foundations (*bunyods*) in Iran control 30-40% of the economy, and virtually all of them are in the hands of the religious conservatives loyal to the Supreme Religious Leader. With corruption rampant in their administration, those who run the *bunyods* know that they would be kicked out of these positions if reforms were put through. Therefore the religious conservatives, who stand for the status quo, have the backing of those who run the *bunyods*, and so long as they do, significant economic change is extremely unlikely.

Many intellectuals have been advocating greater freedom, but the religious conservatives have the power to shut down dissenting publications and to arrest their publishers and writers.

The youth of Iran are a significant factor because there are so many of them, due to the population surge during the 1980-88 War. By 2000 about half Iran's population of 66 million was under 21 years old, and 65% under 25. Only a minority of Iran's population, therefore, can now remember the Shah's Iran and the 1979 Revolution. Officially unemployment in Iran is 10%; diplomats unofficially estimate it at 25%. Of those unemployed, a whopping 70% are ages 15-24. About 850,000 young people are seeking jobs every year, in an economy that has jobs for 300,000. (Remember that most of Iran's income comes not from industrial or agricultural production but from oil, which is not labor intensive.) Literally millions of young Iranians are unemployed, have severely limited social lives due to Islamic prohibitions, are living with parents even as adults, and are so poor that they have no prospect of marriage and no means of supporting a family if they did marry. Not surprisingly, drug use among the young has skyrocketed; neighboring Afghanistan is a major supplier. By 1999 there were an estimated 3 million heroin users in Iran, about 5% of the population. Over half of those were in the 16- to 20-year-old age bracket, and another 40% were in the 21- to 25-year-old bracket. In an attempt to curb drug use the government has enacted draconian measures such as the threat of execution for anyone caught with more than 30 grams (about an ounce) of narcotics. Given the obvious dissatisfaction of the under-25 population, there's an enormous potential for change, and indeed, the vote for Khatami among the young was a decisive factor in his 1997 landslide victory.

On the other hand, there is no rallying point for action against religious conservatives. Young Iranians see American clothes and movies. They log onto the Internet and call friends on cell phones. They watch pirated American videos and listen to American music. None of this gives them any idea of what the founding principles of the United States were, and what makes it free and prosperous.

The only likely choice for a rallying point is nationalism, based on Iran's tremendous pride in its 2,500-year history. However, since Iran has never been united by a philosophy, the rallying point would have to be mere collectivism, an appeal to Iranians as members of a race (Persians) or as residents of a specific geographical area. It's dubious whether that would lead to victory against the conservatives,

and if it did, whether it would result in any better government than the one in place now.