

NEW FOREWORD



READING
KHAMENEI:
THE WORLD VIEW
OF IRAN'S MOST
POWERFUL LEADER

BY KARIM SADJADPOUR

Reading Khamenei:
The World View of
Iran's Most Powerful Leader

Karim Sadjadpour

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
1779 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 202-483-7600
Fax: 202-483-1840
www.CarnegieEndowment.org

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Foreword

Among the numerous casualties of Iran's tainted 2009 presidential elections was the legitimacy of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. While for two decades Khamenei had attempted to cultivate an image of an impartial and magnanimous guide staying above the political fray, his defiant public support for hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—amid massive popular uprisings and unprecedented fissures among the country's political elites—exposed him as a petty, partisan autocrat.

At a popular level, previously sacred taboos were shattered as hundreds of thousands of Iranians defied Khamenei's unveiled threats against protesters by taking to the streets chanting "death to the dictator" and even "death to Khamenei." Widely seen images of government-sanctioned brutality against civilians—such as the horrific murder of 27-year-old Neda agha Soltan—as well as persistent allegations of torture, rape, and forced confessions in prison have undermined Khamenei's image as a "just" spiritual leader among Iran's pious classes. Widespread allegations of the growing role of his son Mojtaba—considered a key Ahmadinejad ally—in Iran's repressive security apparatus have further tarnished Khamenei's public image.

At a political level, once respectful subordinates—including reformist leaders Mohammed Khatami, Mehdi Karroubi, and Mir Hossein Mousavi—now openly defy Khamenei, refusing to renounce claims of electoral fraud and brutality. Previously restrained critics have turned vociferous. Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, Iran's most senior cleric (currently under house arrest) and once the heir apparent to Ayatollah Khomeini, denounced Khamenei as an "unqualified and illegitimate" leader. Abdul Karim Soroush, Iran's most prominent religious intellectual (currently in exile), lambasted Khamenei as a "cheating, treacherous murderer ... cursed with doom." Unprecedented dissent even came from within the Assembly of Experts, the 86-cleric body—headed by Khamenei rival Hashemi Rafsanjani—that has the constitutional authority to anoint and remove the Supreme Leader.

Despite the damage to his reputation, Khamenei's vast and potent network remains for the moment intact. The country's most powerful institutions—the Revolutionary Guards, presidency, Parliament, Guardian Council, and judiciary—continue to be led by individuals either directly appointed by Khamenei or deeply loyal to him. Khamenei also retains enormous influence over the Iranian economy. He has more say than anyone over how the country's vast oil revenue (nearly \$300 billion during Ahmadinejad's first term) is spent and has jurisdiction over the country's bonyads—state-controlled religious foundations with billions of dollars in assets—in addition to the millions more his office receives in charitable donations offered to Iran's holy shrines.

Given his deep mistrust of both foreign powers and his own population, Khamenei, despite his clerical garb, has grown to rely on the support of the intelligence, security, and military apparatus far more than the clergy. As commander in chief of the Revolutionary Guards, he handpicks the organization's senior command and shuffles them regularly; he also oversaw the Guards' rapid rise to become Iran's most powerful political and economic institution.

With the seemingly firm support of the country's security apparatus, Khamenei has refused to cede any political ground since the election, long believing that compromise projects weakness and invites further pressure. His defiance is not cost free, however. For the last two decades, his *modus operandi* had been to wield power without accountability. Despite having the lion's share of Iran's constitutional authority, because of the high profile of the Iranian president both at home and abroad, Khamenei has never borne proper responsibility for Iran's economic malaise, political repression, and social restrictions. After the June elections, however, Khamenei no longer enjoys this immunity.

In addition to his domestic travails, Khamenei is facing unprecedented international scrutiny. In the conclusion of this paper, I suggested that after three decades of immersion in the "death to America" culture of 1979, it may not be possible for Khamenei to reinvent himself at age 70. Even one former Iranian president once confided that Khamenei had told him that Iran "needs enmity with the United States." Nonetheless, if engagement is to have any chance of success, I argued, Washington must take into account Khamenei's central role in Iran's decision-making process and his deeply held suspicions.

Beginning with his inauguration speech on January 21, 2009, Barack Obama has followed this path more than any previous American president. In addition to numerous rhetorical overtures to the "Islamic Republic of Iran"—the first U.S. president to acknowledge Iran's post-revolutionary name—Obama sent two private letters to Khamenei reiterating Washington's desire to overcome past mistrust and build confidence with Tehran. Obama also trod carefully during Iran's post-election uprising, resisting calls to support the opposition.

Yet Khamenei's responses to U.S. overtures have been at best noncommittal, if not downright cynical. In his public messages he has mocked Obama's mantra of change as merely a tactical shift, saying Washington must first change its actions—by lifting sanctions, unfreezing Iranian assets, diluting support for Israel, and ceasing criticism of Iran—to show its seriousness. In his private communications U.S. officials claim that Khamenei's delayed response to President Obama's letter—received in Washington one month later—offered "nothing concrete to act upon."

Behind closed doors, senior Iranian officials concede that Obama's overtures have been unsettling for Khamenei, putting pressure on him to justify Tehran's continued animosity toward the United States. "If we can't make nice with Barack Hussein Obama," said one Iranian official, "who is preaching mutual respect on a weekly basis and sending us Nowruz greetings, it's going to be pretty obvious that the problem lies in Tehran, not Washington."

While before the presidential elections it appeared that Khamenei would remain Supreme Leader for life, his fate is far less certain today. Aside from nagging questions about his allegedly poor health, Khamenei has never commanded the same loyalty and respect of his peers afforded to his predecessor, Ayatollah Khomeini. His chief rival, Rafsanjani, publicly humiliated as a corrupt traitor by Ahmadinejad, waits in the wings for an opportunity to pounce. In a nation whose largest political affiliation is jokingly referred to as the *hezb-i baad*—i.e., the wind party—Khamenei's current supporters could quickly abandon ranks if they felt stronger political winds blowing elsewhere.

Still, no matter the depth of popular discontent and outrage, it is difficult to imagine a scenario whereby Khamenei would one day peacefully abdicate power or go into exile, as the Shah did 30 years ago. Indeed, one important lesson that Khamenei learned while revolting against the Shah is never to compromise under pressure. For when the Shah attempted to mollify demonstrators by admitting to past transgressions on state television in late 1978—famously declaring that he’d “heard the voice” of the revolution—he unwittingly emboldened them.

What’s more, whereas much of the Shah’s political, military, and intelligence elite—including the Shah himself—were educated in the United States and Europe and had other options when the Pahlavi monarchy began to crumble, the Islamic Republic’s elite—including Khamenei himself—spent their formative years in the seminaries of Qom and on the battlefield against Iraq. Since they lack options abroad, it has always been assumed that they will not relinquish power without a bloody fight.

Khamenei’s Iran is no longer an Islamic Republic, but a tight-knit cartel of hardline clergymen and nouveau riche Revolutionary Guardsmen. Indeed, despite his pretensions as a religious leader, today Khamenei’s future rests largely in the hands of the Revolutionary Guards. While growing fissures and dissent among top ayatollahs in Qom are certainly worrisome for Khamenei, fissures and dissent among top Revolutionary Guard commanders would be fatal for him. Though at the moment they seemingly remain loyal to him, as the economic situation continues to deteriorate and popular outrage persists, Khamenei himself must know that his position as Supreme Leader looks less supreme than ever before.

The Importance of Khamenei

There is perhaps no leader in the world more important to current world affairs but less known and understood than Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran. Neither a dictator nor a democrat—but with traits of both—Khamenei is the single most powerful individual in a highly factionalized, autocratic regime. Though he does not make national decisions on his own, neither can any major decisions be taken without his consent. He has ruled the country by consensus rather than decree, with his own survival and that of the theocratic system as his top priorities.

Despite his three decades in public life, Iranian political insiders continue to offer differing narratives of Khamenei. Lacking the popular support, charisma, and theological qualifications of the father of the 1979 revolution, his mentor Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini, Khamenei is sometimes dismissed as a weak and indecisive individual in a powerful post. Others see him as an insecure despot who micromanages the country. Still others describe him as an ailing cleric insulated from reality and manipulated by a small team who act as advisers and gatekeepers.

Those who knew Khamenei before he became Supreme Leader insist he is a “closet moderate,” forced to project a stern public persona to keep the radical clergy at bay. They cite the fact that he was once a music and poetry aficionado and wears a wristwatch, avant-garde behavior for a traditional cleric. Others who know him take him at face value: a deeply religious, ideologically rigid, anti-American cleric whose politics are stuck in the anti-imperialist euphoria of the 1979 revolution.

For the majority of Iran’s youthful population—two-thirds of the country is under 33—Khamenei is a political fixture, having been either president (1981–89) or Supreme Leader (1989–present) most of their lives. His likeness—black turban, oversized glasses, Palestinian *kaffiyeh*, and unkempt gray beard—is as ubiquitous in shops and billboards in Iran as images of autocrats and monarchs in the Arab world. Yet despite his constant presence on television and in public space, he does not inspire strong feelings among Iranians, whether of support or derision. While Iranians outside of government rarely sing his praises, he does not inspire the same resentment many feel toward political clerics like Hashemi Rafsanjani. Whatever his shortcomings and lack of charm, Khamenei is not considered financially corrupt.

Although the constitutional authority of the Supreme Leader dwarfs that of the president, Khamenei’s profile outside of Iran, whether unintentional or by design, has always been overshadowed by Iran’s president. When the wily Rafsanjani was president (1989–97), foreign governments and the international media perceived him as Iran’s most powerful official, not Khamenei. The reform-minded Mohammed Khatami (1997–2005) upstaged Khamenei from the left with his hopeful calls for a “dialogue of civilizations,” while former Tehran mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–present) has outflanked him from the right with his diatribes against Israel and Holocaust revisionism. A Google search for “Ahmadinejad” yields ten times as many hits as one for “Khamenei.”

Khamenei's penchant for staying out of the limelight and avoiding notoriety at home has contributed to his resilience, undoubtedly his most effective political asset. Expectations of him were low when he succeeded Khomeini as Supreme Leader in 1989. After the landslide 1997 election of the inspiring and congenial Khatami appeared to mark the beginnings of a more liberal Iran, the acerbic Khamenei's political future appeared dim. Today, however, a confluence of factors, both domestic and international, has made him more powerful than he has ever been.

Externally, soaring oil prices together with U.S. difficulties and Iranian leverage in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine have given the Islamic Republic unprecedented power vis-à-vis the United States, offering Khamenei and Iran's hardliners a newfound confidence. At the same time, the Bush administration's efforts to promote democracy and threats of military action against Iran—made more vivid by the presence of tens of thousands of American troops in neighboring countries—have given Tehran's hardliners a pretext to silence dissent and reverse political and social freedoms secured during the Khatami era.

Domestically, several factors have helped Khamenei consolidate power: (1) A vast network of commissars stationed in strategic posts throughout government bureaucracies, dedicated to enforcing his authority; (2) the weak, conservative-dominated parliament, headed by Khamenei loyalist Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel (whose daughter is married to the Leader's son); (3) the rapidly rising political and economic influence of the Revolutionary Guards, whose top leaders are directly appointed by Khamenei and have always been publicly deferential to him; (4) the political disengagement of Iran's young population, prompted by the unfulfilled expectations of the reformist era; and (5) most significant, the 2005 presidential election, which saw hardliner Ahmadinejad trounce Khamenei's chief rival Hashemi Rafsanjani in a second round run-off.

While these factors are dynamic—oil prices may drop, the state of Iraq may improve, and pragmatists may replace hardliners in the Iranian parliamentary and presidential elections—for the foreseeable future Iran will remain a vital influence on major U.S. interests, and Khamenei will continue to be the most critical figure in Iran. For this reason, it behooves us to take a closer look at Khamenei, his track record as Leader, and his vision for Iran.

Iran scholars and first-hand observers who look retrospectively at the 1979 revolution often remark that the austere Islamic route that the revolution took should not have surprised anyone: Khomeini had long made plain his vision for Islamic governance in his writings and lectures. The problem was that few people had bothered to read them.

Since Khomeini's death, Iran watchers have turned their attention to various individuals, groups, and trends in trying to determine the country's future trajectory: From 1989 to 1997 the individual focus was on President Rafsanjani, the group focus was Islamic technocrats, and the theme was post Iran–Iraq war reconstruction. From 1997 to 2005 the individual focus was on reformist President Mohammed Khatami, the group focus was the student movement, and the theme was democracy and civil society. From 2005 to present, the individual focus has been on hardline President Ahmadinejad, the group focus has been on the Revolutionary Guards, and the theme a return to revolutionary radicalism.

Yet if there has been one anchor throughout these periods and today, it is Khamenei. Both his domestic vision for Iran (more Islamic than republican) and his foreign policy views (neither confrontation nor accommodation) have prevailed. He has resisted Rafsanjani's desire to reach a *modus vivendi* with Washington, Khatami's aspiration for a more democratic state, and Ahmadinejad's penchant for outright confrontation. Though known as a great balancer, he has consistently favored conservatives over reformists.

Like Khomeini's, Khamenei's writings and speeches present arguably the most accurate reflection of Iranian domestic and foreign policy aims and actions. They depict a resolute Leader with a remarkably consistent and coherent—though highly cynical and conspiratorial—world view. Whether his audience is Iranian students or foreign dignitaries, or the topic of his speech is foreign policy or agriculture, he rarely misses an opportunity to invoke the professed virtues of the 1979 revolution—justice, independence, self-sufficiency, and Islam—and to express his deep disdain for Israel (“the Zionist entity”) and opposition to the ambitions of the United States (“global arrogance”).

Based on this premise—that Khamenei means what he says and his words broadly reflect the Islamic Republic's policies—this study is a portrait of Ayatollah Khamenei in his own words, based on a careful reading of three decades of speeches and writings. To devise a more effective approach toward Iran, a better understanding of Khamenei is essential.

Humble Beginnings to Great Power

Khamenei's humble, religious roots are typical of the Islamic Republic's clerical and political elite. The second of eight children, he was born in 1939 in the northeastern shrine town of Mashad to a clerical father of Azeri origin. He has often romanticized his "poor but pious" childhood, saying he frequently ate "bread and raisins" for dinner. From the age of five he was enrolled in religious education in Mashad's seminary, and it is there that he spent his formative years, with brief interludes in the more prestigious Shi'i centers of higher learning, Najaf and Qom. He has noted he was an accomplished student but had to truncate his seminary training in Qom to return to Mashad to care for his ailing father; a disclaimer for the fact that he never attained the religious credentials of his predecessor, Ayatollah Khomeini.

Khamenei had two major political role models. He recalls becoming politicized and entering the "arena of jihad" at a young age, inspired by a radical cleric called Navab Safavi, a fierce critic of both the shah's government and imperial powers. Safavi was an early advocate of Islamic revolution and Islamic government, and he was either directly or indirectly linked to the killings of several prominent secular intellectuals and government officials. The shah's government executed him in 1955.

Several years later, while studying in Qom in his early twenties, Khamenei came under the tutelage of Khomeini, who became his lifelong political mentor. At the time Khomeini was largely unknown in Iran, but his stoicism and defiance of the shah made him popular with young seminarians. Khamenei was transfixed by the experience. When the shah exiled Khomeini to Iraq in 1963, Khamenei remained one of several loyal disciples in Iran who disseminated his mentor's unorthodox teachings about Islamic government.

During this period Khamenei also formed tight bonds with like-minded revolutionary clerics who, like him, went on to senior posts in the Islamic Republic's government, among them Rafsanjani and the powerful rightwing cleric Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi. Like many of the Islamic Republic's current political elite, Khamenei was arrested on six occasions by the shah's secret police (SAVAK) during the 1960s and 1970s as a result of his political activities. He spent several years in prison, endured torture and solitary confinement, and eventually was exiled to a remote area of the country (Sistan-Baluchistan) until the 1979 revolution. Those who know Khamenei have speculated that the roots of his enmity toward Israel and the United States go back to this period, since he was tortured by SAVAK, which was widely believed to have been trained by the CIA and the Mossad.

Reaping the Rewards of the Revolution

Khamenei's dogged opposition to the shah and longtime loyalty to Khomeini eventually paid great dividends. When the Pahlavi regime crumbled and Khomeini's vision for Iran emerged

victorious, the Ayatollah tasked Khamenei to serve in various important positions in the newly formed revolutionary government. He served briefly as minister of defense in 1980 and later as the supervisor of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards after the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq war. Known for his oratorical skills, he eventually secured the influential post of Tehran’s Friday prayer leader.

The year 1981 would prove to be momentous for Khamenei. In June, he narrowly escaped an assassination attempt by the radical opposition group Mojahaedin-e Khalq (MKO) when a bomb—concealed in a tape recorder at a press conference—exploded beside him. He lost the use of his right arm and to this day suffers pain from the injuries sustained. Several months later the MKO struck again, carrying out a massive bombing attack that killed more than 100 high-ranking Iranian officials, including President Mohammed Ali Rajaii.

The tumult provided an opportunity for the 42-year-old Khamenei. Shortly after Rajaii’s death, he was asked by the revolutionary elites to run for president. Though at the time the constitutional authority of the Iranian president was minimal, Khamenei declined, explaining that his health was poor and he would not be able to spend a great deal of energy as president. “That’s why we are offering you the post,” they supposedly told him.¹ With Khomeini’s backing he won two non-competitive presidential elections overwhelmingly, serving as Iran’s first clerical president from 1981 until Khomeini’s death in 1989.

Khamenei’s inaugural address—in which he vowed to stamp out “deviation, liberalism, and American-influenced leftists”—set the general rhetorical tone of his presidency. He was content to play the role of Khomeini’s trusted lieutenant, articulating his mentor’s world view both at home and in his visits abroad. He also played a secondary role in shaping Iranian domestic policies and war strategies to then-Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi (the office was abolished in 1989), Speaker of the Parliament Rafsanjani, and Revolutionary Guards Chief Commander Mohsen Rezai. Though they are all his reluctant subordinates now, there was little indication then that he would one day emerge as the country’s most powerful official.

Becoming Supreme Leader

I am an individual with many faults and shortcomings and truly a minor seminarian.

—Khomeini's inaugural address as Supreme Leader, June 1989

How and why Khomeini became Supreme Leader (*Vali-e Faqih*) is instructive in understanding his leadership style. While the Islamic Republic's constitution called for the Leader to be a Grand Ayatollah (*Ayatollah al-Ozma*), Khomeini's falling out with his only designated heir—Ayatollah Montazeri—created a quandary for revolutionary elites: could they find someone who was an experienced bureaucratic manager and a well-respected, politicized Ayatollah who shared Khomeini's vision of Islamic government?

Dissatisfied with the pool of senior clergy, in April 1989—three months before his death—Khomeini had the constitution revised so that the Leader needed only be an expert on Islamic jurisprudence and possess “the appropriate political and managerial skills.” Khomeini, who did not know at that time that he would soon become Leader, argued that Khomeini's legitimacy derived not from the fact that he was an Ayatollah, but rather from his reputation as a courageous political leader and an expert on Islamic jurisprudence.² Rafsanjani—then speaker of the parliament—concurred, saying that by the time someone had become a Grand Ayatollah he was too old and too lacking in energy to manage the country.³

Indeed, Rafsanjani is widely credited for being Khomeini's kingmaker, working behind the scenes to have his old friend and ally anointed Leader, which Rafsanjani claimed to be Khomeini's dying wish. Shortly after Khomeini's death in June 1989, the Assembly of Experts—the clerical body which has the constitutional authority to anoint and remove the Supreme Leader—approved of Khomeini's succession by a vote of 60 to 14.

While there was no hiding the fact that Khomeini's religious credentials were inferior, and the decision raised the ire of the country's clerical elites in Qom, the Islamic Republic's political elites rallied behind Khomeini. The head of the Assembly of Experts, Ayatollah Meshkini, declared that Khomeini's selection was based on the fact that he was close to Khomeini, had played an important role in both the revolution and the Iraq war, and was highly knowledgeable of “the contemporary problems facing the Muslim world.”⁴ Khomeini's son Ahmad, once considered a potential successor to his father, wrote to Khomeini that “the Imam [Khomeini] regarded you as the most qualified leader for the Islamic Republic.” Khomeini's status was elevated overnight from *Hojjat ol-Islam*—a title indicating middle rank—to the prestigious rank of *Ayatollah* (i.e., “sign of God”).

Khomeini's inaugural address as Supreme Leader is revealing. He spends the vast majority of his speech praising Khomeini and reassuring his audience that he has every intention of following “the Imam's path,” even declaring that he used to pray to God that he would die before his mentor. The only time he refers to himself as the new Leader, he is strikingly self-effacing:

I am an individual with many faults and shortcomings and truly a minor seminarian. However, a responsibility has been placed on my shoulders and I will use all my capabilities and all my faith in the almighty in order to be able to bear this heavy responsibility.⁵

Fully aware that he lacked both the respect of the country's senior clergy and Khomeini's popularity, Khamenei initially moved slowly and cautiously to strengthen his position. He assured the regime's political and clerical elites that he did not intend to disrupt the status quo, but shrewdly set out to create what he lacked as president: an independent base of support and a personal network working as his "eyes and ears."

He quietly began cultivating this network of "clerical commissars"—estimated at several thousand—stationed in strategic posts in every important state ministry and institution, including the clerical establishment and military. Today these representatives form a diverse, countrywide, and international network dedicated to enforcing Khamenei's authority and are more powerful than other government functionaries, for they have the authority to intervene in any matter of state.⁶

Meanwhile, after Khomeini's death, the Islamic Republic entered a thermidor phase of sorts. While consolidating, institutionalizing, and exporting the revolution remained important, reconstructing the war-ravaged country and its moribund economy became imperative. President Rafsanjani took the lead in these initiatives, which also entailed Iran's emergence from diplomatic isolation. Khamenei's rhetoric remained stern and revolutionary, but he was largely supportive of Rafsanjani's efforts to improve Iran's relations with its Arab neighbors and Europe. He remained rigid when it came to relations with the United States, however.

The Power of the Leader

As Supreme Leader, Khamenei's constitutional authority is unparalleled. He controls the main levers of state—the courts, military, and media—by appointing the heads of the judiciary, state radio and television, the regular armed forces, and the elite Revolutionary Guards. He also has effective control over Iran's second most powerful institution, the Guardian Council, a twelve-member body (all of whom are directly or indirectly appointed by Khamenei) that has the authority to vet electoral candidates and veto parliamentary decisions.

His power also derives to a great extent from the opaque but vast state-controlled economic resources at his disposal. The Iranian economy is largely state controlled, and Khamenei has more say than anyone in how the country's oil revenue is spent. He has jurisdiction over the country's *boniyads*—charitable foundations with billions of dollars in assets—in addition to the millions more his office receives in charitable donations offered to Iran's holy shrines.

Khamenei likes to project the image of a magnanimous grandfather, selflessly staying above the fray to guide the country in a virtuous direction:

The main task of the Leader is to safeguard the Islamic system and revolution. Administering the affairs of the country has been entrusted to government executives, but it is the responsibility of the Leader to supervise the performance of different government organs and make sure that they function in line with Islamic tenets and principles of the revolution.⁷

In reality he is notoriously thin-skinned. Criticism of the Leader is one of the few remaining redlines in Iranian politics, almost a guarantee of a prison sentence. Not even his own family is above reproach. Bassij militia loyal to him brutally beat his younger brother, the reformist cleric Hadi Khamenei, after a sermon in which he criticized the powers of the Supreme Leader.

Recently questions have arisen regarding the dynamic between Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards. The relationship is increasingly symbiotic, politically expedient for the Leader and economically expedient for the guards. He is their commander in chief and appoints their senior commanders, who, in turn, are publicly deferential to him and increasingly reap benefits by playing a more active role in political decision making and economic activity.

The Virtues of the Revolution

For Khamenei, the 1979 revolution was about ridding the Iranian body politic of two evils—the shah and the United States—and creating a theocratic government imbued with four core values: *justice, independence, self-sufficiency, and Islamic piety*. While these revolutionary ideals were formulated as a reaction to political circumstances during the time of the shah in the 1960s and 1970s, they continue to dominate Khamenei’s political discourse, and he interweaves them seamlessly: Islam embodies justice, independence requires self-sufficiency, and foreign powers are hostile to an independent, Islamic Iran.

Islam and Justice

For Khamenei, Islam and justice are two sides of the same coin, and the two most important ingredients of Iranian society, government, and foreign policy. He cites justice as “the main slogan and noble objective of the Islamic Revolution and our Islamic Republic,” and like Khomeini before him, he sees Islam as an all-encompassing social and political foundation.⁸ His vision for a “just” Iran is one whose legal and social code reflects Islamic mores together with an egalitarian economy with minimal class disparity.

As opposed to former presidents Khatami and Rafsanjani, who advocated a less rigid approach to Islamic governance, Khamenei sees Iran’s Islamic ideology as a source of its strength and staying power, rather than a weakness that should be downplayed. The presidential victory of Ahmadinejad in 2005, whose personal piety and platform of economic justice trumped those talking about political and social liberalization, only reinforced this perception.

Khamenei’s vision for a just, Islamic society translates to a kind of religious socialism. He argues that Islamic governance in Iran has been successful because individuals are treated equally and without discrimination, while liberal Western governments fail because the whims of capitalism and self-interest deny justice to millions, both within Western states themselves and in states under Western hegemony:

Islam disapproves of the Western model of economic development, which brings about economic growth and increases the wealth of certain levels of society at the cost of impoverishing and lowering the living standards of other social strata. What Islam pursues is economic development and prosperity for all social strata based on social justice.⁹

Though Khamenei has championed economic reforms, such as privatization, Iran’s chief method of providing economic development and social justice remain heavy state subsidies (over \$20 billion annually) for basic food items and everyday needs, such as petrol and cooking oil. Nonetheless, Khamenei draws a distinction between Iranian Islamic social jus-

tice and “godless” Eastern European and Soviet socialism. He dismisses any comparisons made between ideological fatigue in today’s Iran and the bankrupt ideologies of the Soviet bloc nations in the late 1980s. Contrasting Iran to the Soviet Union, Khamenei says,

Islam is not Marxism. Communism or Marxism was not the belief of the general public in the Soviet Union, but it was only the ideology of the Communist Party, which had nearly 10 or 15 million members, while the country’s population was around 300 million. Even for the party members, the privileges that they enjoyed were more important than their ideology. Islam is the religion of people, it is loved by people. It was for the sake of this religion that the devoted people of Iran sent their beloved children to the war fronts and did not mourn when their children achieved martyrdom, but instead praised the Almighty!¹⁰

While Islam provides the foundation for justice, Khamenei believes that religiosity can best be promoted by correlating it with justice. In a telling lecture to a group of Christian priests visiting Iran from Europe, he offered insight into how the Islamic Republic recruits young supporters:

Youngsters have a natural inclination for religion and spirituality, but we should also try to create more attractions for them. I, as a clergyman, have learned by experience that there are ways to make religion more attractive to the youth, and I will share this experience with you. I believe that if religion defends the oppressed and advocates justice, it will become more attractive to youngsters, since youth everywhere in the world support movements that are aimed at administering justice. In fact, justice is part of all religions, and the most prominent heroes in the history of mankind who made strenuous efforts to administer justice were religious personalities. Your Prophet [Jesus] struggled for justice during his entire life, and our Prophet also spent his whole life trying to administer justice.... If Christian and Muslim clergymen raise the issue of justice today, this will certainly create attraction.¹¹

Interestingly, although Khamenei evokes the power and popularity of Islam as a social and political force, he appears at the same time cognizant of the clergy’s diminished reputation in contemporary Iran. He once told a group of filmmakers:

Your influence is many times as much as the influence of that clergyman or preacher or writer. If I say that your influence is ten times as much, it is surely more. Therefore, you can see that there is a great difference between the influence of a well-produced motion picture and the influence of the pulpit!¹²

For Khamenei, Iran’s Islamic Republic is the standard bearer of a just government, given the fact that it pursues “justice-driven policies,” such as opposition to the United States and

Israel, despite potential political and economic costs (sanctions and isolation). Iran, Khamenei once said, “prefers defeat to the victory that could be achieved through injustice or oppression.”¹³

Independence and Self-sufficiency

From Khamenei’s perspective, the 1979 revolution was as much about eliminating foreign influence in Iran as it was about spreading Islamic justice, given that the latter cannot be achieved without the former. Although three decades later Iran’s closed economy has floundered while neighbors such as Dubai and Turkey have flourished economically as a result of their embrace of globalization, free trade, foreign investment, and open markets, Khamenei continues to articulate his vision of an Iran that is self-sufficient enough to be economically independent, and economically independent enough to be politically independent.

A recurring theme in Khamenei’s speeches is the causal relationship linking scientific advancement, self-sufficiency, and political independence. His ideal vision is of an Iran that is scientifically and technologically advanced enough to be self-sufficient, self-sufficient enough to be economically independent, and economically independent enough to be politically independent. One of his chief critiques of the shah’s regime was its reliance on the West—particularly the United States—for human capital and technical expertise. In his words, “Colonial countries are quite aware of the fact that in order to keep a country under their political and economic dominance, they should bar its scientific progress.”¹⁴

In this context Khamenei has asserted that American and European sanctions against Iran are not only ineffective in changing Iranian behavior, but they are actually constructive in that they force Iran to become more self-reliant:

When those countries imposed sanctions on the Islamic Republic, the late Imam Khomeini expressed happiness in this regard and welcomed their action. The late Imam’s reaction was quite meaningful, since because of those sanctions the Iranian people turned to their own resources and stood on their own feet.... Today also those countries are threatening to impose sanctions on the Islamic Republic. The situation is still the same, and sanctions are not going to have any adverse effect on our country and nation.¹⁵

Other times Khamenei is more forthright about the costs of Iran’s political choices, but he argues the price of Iran’s perceived independence is worth paying:

In order to attain independence and achieve national sovereignty and honor, any nation will have to pay a certain price. But nations should incur such expenses and make every effort to achieve the above objectives. They should be hopeful of the valuable results

of their endeavors, despite all the attempts that are being made by the enemies to undermine their hopes and aspirations.¹⁶

The Election of Ahmadinejad

Khamenei tries to project an air of neutrality when it comes to factional politics in Iran, once declaring that conservatives and reformists are as essential to the success of the Islamic Republic as a bird's two wings. But a careful reading of his speeches in the months preceding the 2005 presidential election make it clear that Ahmadinejad was his choice. While the hardline Tehran mayor's victory came as a shock to even the most seasoned observers of Iranian politics, in retrospect, there were telltale signs that Khamenei (abetted by his son Mojtaba) was subtly campaigning for him.

A devoutly religious engineer running on a campaign platform of Islamic piety and economic justice, Ahmadinejad embodied the revolutionary ideals that Khamenei sought in a candidate. In a major address just weeks before the election, Khamenei described his model candidate in words that appear to be at once an endorsement of Ahmadinejad and a denunciation of his chief rival, Rafsanjani:

I personally would like someone to be elected whose main goal is to serve the public ... who is faithful to the ideals of our revolution and Islamic system and who really aims to administer justice and combat corruption. I pray to Almighty Allah to guide our people so that they may vote for a presidential candidate characterized by these features ... I assure you that if a dynamic and competent candidate who is devoted to the people and whose priorities are to administer social justice and to remove discrimination and corruption from society is elected president, many of the problems currently facing our nation both on the domestic and international fronts will be resolved.¹⁷

Of the eight candidates in the presidential race only Ahmadinejad had an engineering background (a Ph.D. in traffic engineering), and in one pre-election speech Khamenei declared:

Our most talented students have always studied at our technical colleges.... As far back as I remember, the most intelligent and most dynamic students were always admitted to various engineering colleges and similar centers of higher education.¹⁸

Until recently, Khamenei had been outspoken in his support for Ahmadinejad, despite the international notoriety and political and economic pressure that his actions since his election have brought about. Khamenei defended him publicly in ways which he never did Khatami, saying:

The slogans and plans of the new government and the cordial relations between President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the people have raised public morale and imbued Iranians with hopes and optimism. Today, the Iranian people have fewer complaints about the performance of various government bureaus, not because all the problems have been solved, but because the people now feel more hopeful, since they are witnessing that things are proceeding well in various areas.¹⁹

Though more recently Khamenei has refrained from publicly endorsing Ahmadinejad's performance, in many ways Ahmadinejad continues to be the ideal president for Khamenei. He is reverential to Khamenei and to his political right, making the Leader appear a moderate voice of reason. What's more, the growing political and popular disaffection surrounding Ahmadinejad allows Khamenei even more authority.

Revolutionary Virtues and Foreign Policy

Great discrepancies exist between the revolutionary ideals articulated by Khamenei and Iranian foreign policy practices, leading many Iran observers to debate whether the Islamic Republic's foreign policy is driven primarily by ideology or calculated national interests. Arguments can be made for each. Though justice, Islamic solidarity, and independence are invoked to defend the Palestinian cause, the Chechen cause is studiously ignored for fear of antagonizing Russia. Muslim unity is invoked to support Hamas and Hizbollah, yet Iran supported Christian Armenia in its war against Shi'i Muslim Azerbaijan. Iran denounces the United States for its "godlessness" and lax social values, yet forms close alliances with socialist governments in Venezuela and Cuba.

As Supreme Leader, Khamenei has tended to inherit and administer Khomeini's foreign policy positions rather than break with the past and initiate his own approaches. Though in some cases he has allowed others leeway to initiate alternative policies—such as Rafsanjani's rapprochement with Saudi Arabia (a government which Khomeini denounced as "evil") and Khatami's warming of relations with Europe—he has refused to reverse course on the two chief foreign policy pillars of the revolution, enmity and opposition toward the United States and Israel.

While Iranian foreign policy has evolved considerably since the early days of the revolution, the ideological edifice of the Islamic Republic remains built upon three important pillars: the mandatory veil (*hejab*) for women and opposition to the United States and Israel. Changing these policies would call into serious question the *raison d'être* of the Islamic system, blurring the lines between regime ideology and regime interests.

Fear and Loathing of America

What the United States, which has been spearheading the aggression against our Islamic revolution, expects from our nation and government is submission and surrender to its hegemony, and this is the real motive for U.S. claims regarding weapons of mass destruction, human rights or democracy.

—Address to students at Shahid Beheshti University, May 2003

Khamenei's contempt for the United States has been remarkably consistent and enduring. In over three decades of speeches—first as president and later as Supreme Leader—he has very rarely spoken favorably, in public at least, about the United States or the prospect of restoring relations with the U.S. government. On the contrary, whether the topic of discussion is foreign policy, agriculture, or education, he seamlessly relates the subject matter to the cruelty, greed, and sinister plots of the "Global Arrogance."

U.S.–Iranian relations have undoubtedly grown more adversarial during the Bush administration; in exchange for Iran’s “axis of evil” label, Khamenei has begun referring to the United States as “the devil incarnate.” Nonetheless, Khamenei’s ill-will toward the United States was palpable from the earliest days of the revolution. It was rooted in several factors, both historic and contemporary; namely, Washington’s support of the shah’s government, Israel, and Saddam Hussein during the Iran–Iraq war; its refusal to recognize the Islamic Republic and its meddling in internal Iranian affairs; and the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf and supposed desire for global hegemony.

While Khamenei confidantes universally acknowledge his deep-seated mistrust of U.S. intentions, they offer differing opinions as to whether he is open to rapprochement with Washington. Some assert he is simply ideologically opposed, a subscriber to Khomeini’s maxim that the relationship between the United States and Iran can only be like that between a “wolf and a sheep.” Indeed, Khamenei’s diagnosis of U.S.–Iranian relations appears at times strikingly similar to hardliners in Washington, who believe the two countries represent diametrically opposed ideologies destined for an inevitable confrontation. His address to Iranian government officials in May of 2003—shortly after U.S. forces captured Baghdad—portends an intractable conflict:

It is natural that our Islamic system should be viewed as an enemy and an intolerable rival by such an oppressive power as the United States, which is trying to establish a global dictatorship and further its own interests by dominating other nations and trampling on their rights. It is also clear that the conflict and confrontation between the two is something natural and unavoidable.²⁰

Others familiar with Khamenei argue that, to the contrary, he seeks recognition and normalized relations with the United States but is convinced that it is *Washington* that is ideologically opposed to them, not vice versa. He frequently makes the argument that U.S. opposition to Iran is not because of Tehran’s external behavior—its nuclear ambitions, opposition toward Israel, or support for Hizbollah—but because Iran’s strategic location and energy resources are too valuable to be controlled by an independent-minded Islamic government:

[Iran] is attracting the attention of this arrogant and aggressor power for several reasons. First of all, Iran is a country rich in natural resources like oil and gas. Second, Iran’s geographical location is of considerable importance, since it has long coasts in the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman and is the West’s major gateway to the Central Asia.... Nevertheless, the primary reason for U.S. hostility toward our country is the Islamic identity of our system and the fact that our Islamic system is opposed to oppression, domination, dictatorship and political, economic or cultural dependence on others.²¹

Washington’s ideological aim, he believes, is to go back to the patron-client relationship with Iran which it enjoyed during the time of the shah:

The U.S. government has not yet lost its insatiable greed for domination of our country. They are still thinking of restoring their evil domination of Iran, which intensified with the coup [of former Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh] on August 19, 1953, and continued until the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. They are still dreaming of the days when the head of state in this country, namely the corrupt and treacherous Mohammad Reza [Pahlavi], made no decisions until he consulted with U.S. officials.”²²

Khamenei’s perception of U.S. intentions has influenced Iranian foreign and domestic policy in two important ways. First, given that he believes that U.S. policy is still regime change, not behavior change, he holds strongly that Tehran must not compromise in the face of U.S. pressure or intimidation, for it would project weakness and encourage even greater pressure:

If the officials of a country get daunted by the bullying of the arrogant powers and, as a result, begin to retreat from their own principles and make concessions to those powers, these concessions will never come to an end! First, they will pressure you into recognizing such and such an illegitimate regime, then they will force you not to call your constitution Islamic! They will never stop obtaining concessions from you through pressure and intimidation, and you will be forced to retreat from your values and principles step by step! Indeed, the end to U.S. pressure and intimidation will only come when Iranian officials announce they are ready to compromise Islam and their popular government of the Islamic Republic, and the United States may bring to power in this country whoever it wants!²³

In this context, despite referral to the UN Security Council, heightened sanctions, and military threats from the United States, Iran’s approach to the nuclear issue has been more defiant than ever before. According to Khamenei, this is a concerted strategy: “Rights cannot be achieved by entreating. If you supplicate, withdraw and show flexibility, arrogant powers will make their threat more serious.”²⁴

Second, given that Khamenei perceives Washington to be hostile to the Islamic Republic’s very existence, opposition to the United States has arguably become a more important foreign policy priority for the Iranian government than Iran’s immediate national interests. This has motivated Tehran to seek out curious alliances with faraway countries, such as Venezuela and Belarus, and to offer support to groups with whom it has little in common apart from enmity toward the United States, such as the Sunni fundamentalist Taliban in Afghanistan (against whom Iran nearly went to war a decade ago).²⁵

Despite Khamenei’s deep mistrust of the United States and the cynicism of the Bush administration, those who are looking for signals of pragmatism can find them. In May 2007 he publicly advocated dialogue with the United States regarding Iraq, just the second time he had ever done so (the first time, in February 2006, he was rebuffed by Washington). In order to keep Iranian hardliners at bay, Khamenei couches even conciliatory gestures as diatribes:

The talks will only be about the responsibilities of the occupiers in Iraq.... They think the Islamic Republic has changed its firm, logical and defensible policy in rejecting negotiation with the U.S. They are wrong. How is it possible to negotiate with the arrogant, bullying, expansionist and colonialist government of the U.S.?²⁶

More recently, Khamenei made perhaps his furthest-reaching comments regarding the potential for U.S.–Iranian diplomatic relations, closing the door on any relations with the Bush administration, but leaving the door open in the future:

Cutting ties with America is among our basic policies. However, we have never said that the relations will remain severed forever ... the conditions of the American government are such that any relations would prove harmful to the nation and thereby we are not pursuing them ... any relations would provide the possibility to the Americans to infiltrate Iran and would pave the way for their intelligence and spy agents ... relations with America has no benefit for the Iranian nation for now. Undoubtedly, the day the relations with America prove beneficial for the Iranian nation I will be the first one to approve of that.²⁷

While Khamenei’s mistrust of the Bush administration and personal animosity towards President Bush are too deep to be overcome, his speeches reflect a growing Iranian confidence that U.S. foreign policy elites are coming to terms with America’s difficulties in Iraq, Iran’s indispensable role in the Middle East, its mastery of the nuclear fuel cycle, and the legitimacy of the Islamic Republican government. Khamenei’s message is that he is amenable to a relationship with an America that has accepted these realities.

Washington’s Plots

More than Iran’s enemies need artillery, guns and so forth, they need to spread cultural values that lead to moral corruption. They have said this many times. I recently read in the news that a senior official in an important American political center, said: “Instead of bombs, send them miniskirts.” He is right. If they arouse sexual desires in any given country, if they spread unrestrained mixing of men and women, and if they lead youth to behavior to which they are naturally inclined by instincts, there will no longer be any need for artillery and guns against that nation.

—Address on Iranian State TV, 2003

In his speeches, Khamenei pays as much attention to addressing the enemy’s plots to subvert the Islamic Republic as to Iran’s own national agenda. He believes the U.S. government’s agenda is to see the Islamic Republic either decay and dissolve like the Soviet Union or go

the way of the “velvet revolutions” of Eastern Europe, i.e., abrupt change spurred by “pro-Western” intellectuals.

Based on his understanding of Washington’s Cold War policies, Khamenei’s concern is not a U.S. military attack but a political and cultural onslaught intent on creating cleavages among the country’s political elites. This onslaught would spread “Western vice” and cultural influence to undermine the roots of Iran’s traditional society, create popular disillusionment with the Islamic system, and foment ethnic and sectarian unrest. While the tactics may vary, from Khamenei’s perspective Washington retains hegemonic ambitions over Iran:

For many years, the colonial countries oppressed other nations, brought dictators and military regimes to power and prevented national participation through whatever means possible. Today, they see that this method is no longer effective. Thus, they have found a new way of dominating other countries, i.e. dominating them by influencing their nations. This new method is what I recently referred to as postmodern colonialism.... In the present postmodern colonial era, the arrogant powers are trying to influence other nations with the help of their agents, by spending money and through propaganda tactics and colorful enticements.²⁸

According to Khamenei’s confidantes, the Leader has spent a great deal of time analyzing the domestic conditions that led the Soviet and Eastern bloc governments to fall as well as the tactics employed by the U.S. government to facilitate their demise. In a remarkably candid address in 2000—a time when many observers were likening President Khatami to Mikhail Gorbachev—Khamenei expounded on what he deemed the U.S. government’s plan to see Iran follow in the footsteps of the Soviet Union:

As someone who has dealt with various issues and political currents ever since the beginning of the revolution, I am quite familiar with politicians and their words as well as the motives behind the propaganda of the international media. Considering this experience, I have now reached the conclusion that the United States has devised a comprehensive plan to subvert the Islamic system. This plan is an imitation of the plan that led to the collapse of the former Soviet Union. The U.S. officials intend to carry out the same plan in Iran, and there are enough clues in their selfish and often hasty remarks made during the past few years indicating that they aim to do so.

However, the enemy has made certain mistakes in its calculations. I am going to elaborate on these mistakes, but this will not help the enemy to rectify those mistakes, since their main problem is their wrong knowledge about realities in Iran, which has resulted in their wrong planning. This is why all their plans about Iran always end in failure.

Regarding the mistakes that they have made, their first mistake is that Mr. Khatami is not Gorbachev. Their second mistake is that Islam is not communism. Their next mistake is that the popular system of Islamic Republic is not the dictatorial regime of the

proletariat. The fourth mistake is that the integrated Iran is not like the former Soviet Union, which was made up of different republics. And their next mistake is that they have underrated the pivotal role of the religious and spiritual leadership in Iran.²⁹

Like the pressure the Soviet Union faced from its alienated republics, Khamenei also believes that the United States is stirring up ethnic and sectarian unrest within Iran by supporting ethnic separatist groups in Iranian Baluchistan, Khuzestan, and Kurdistan. “In order to undermine our national unity, Washington is seeking to create political, religious and ethnic walls between different groups and levels of the Iranian society.”³⁰

Interestingly, many of the tactics which Khamenei accuses the United States of employing to further its interests in Iran—propaganda, soft power, cultural influence—are quite similar to the strategies which Arab nations accuse Iran of employing in the Middle East.

The Ultimate Injustice: The Creation of Israel

We hold a fair and logical stance on the issue of Palestine. Several decades ago, Egyptian statesman Gamal Abdel Nasser stated in his slogans that the Egyptians would throw the Jewish usurpers of Palestine into the sea. Some years later, Saddam Hussein, the most hated Arab figure, said that he would set half of the Palestinian land on fire. We believe, according to our Islamic principles, that neither throwing the Jews into the sea nor setting the Palestinian land on fire is logical and reasonable. Our position is that the Palestinian people should regain their rights. Palestine belongs to Palestinians, and the fate of Palestine should also be determined by the Palestinian people.

—Speech given to clerics in Qom, June 2006

Remarkably, the issue that has featured most prominently in Khamenei’s political discourse over the last two decades has virtually no impact on the daily lives of Iranians: the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In contrast to Arab leaders who are accused of paying lip service to the Palestinian cause in order to appease their own populations, Iran’s political leadership does precisely the opposite. Despite the fact that the Palestinian issue does not resonate strongly on the Iranian street—Iran is not Arab, has no land or border disputes with Israel, has no Palestinian refugee problem, and possesses the largest Jewish community in the Middle East outside of Israel—Iranian leaders, particularly Khamenei, express an unrelenting and obsessive contempt for the Jewish state.

Some Iran observers see the Islamic Republic’s militancy toward the Jewish state as less an ideological struggle and more a tactical ploy for Shi’i Persian Iran to be the dominant power in the largely Sunni Arab Middle East. While for some Iranian leaders (perhaps including former president Rafsanjani), the importance of the Palestinian issue has waned since the early days of the revolution, Khamenei’s deep-seated contempt for the “Zionist entity” has shown no signs of weakening. Whereas regarding possible normalized relations with the United

States he has allowed room for ambiguity, albeit rarely, his rejection of Israel has been unequivocal. For many close observers of U.S.–Iranian relations the Islamic Republic’s uncompromising stance on Israel represents the greatest impediment to U.S.–Iranian relations. Not only is Khamenei cognizant of this argument, he also agrees with it. Yet it is a bargain he appears unwilling to make:

The ridiculous accusations such as human rights violations or seeking weapons of mass destruction are only empty claims aimed at exerting pressure on the Islamic Republic, and if Iran stops its support of the Lebanese and Palestinian people, the United States will also change its hostile attitude toward the Islamic Republic.... We consider supporting the Palestinian and Lebanese people one of our major Islamic duties. This is why Washington is applying every pressure lever against the Islamic Republic in order to stop this support.³¹

Khamenei focuses less on the prospects of Palestinian statehood than on the “criminal” behavior of the “wicked Zionists,” not just in the Holy Land but throughout the world. He has been outspoken in his opposition to peace talks—including the recent Annapolis meetings—arguing that it is armed struggle, not negotiations, that ultimately brings concessions from Israel:

Over the past seventy years of their occupation of Palestine, the Zionists have not pulled out of even a single square meter of occupied territories as a result of negotiations ... negotiations have never resulted in the liberation of occupied territories and will never do so in the future either.³²

At the same time, however, Khamenei has made a concerted effort to put into context the statements of President Ahmadinejad that Israel should be “wiped off the map.” He has stated consistently that Iran’s goal is not the military destruction of the Jewish state or the Jewish people, but the defeat of Zionist ideology and dissolution of Israel through a “popular referendum”:

There is only one solution to the issue of Palestine, the solution which we suggested a few years ago. This solution is to hold a referendum with the participation of all native Palestinians, including Muslims, Jews and Christians, the Palestinians who live both inside and outside the occupied territories. Any government that takes power as a result of this referendum and based on the Palestinian people’s vote, whether it is a Muslim, Christian or Jewish government or a coalition government, will be an acceptable government, and it will resolve the issue of Palestine. Without this, the Palestinian issue would not be settled.³³

Arguably, the only way that Khamenei would accept a less strident position toward Israel is when and if the Palestinians themselves accept a peace treaty with Israel. But given that the

recent push for Palestinian–Israeli peace negotiations is meant in part as a way to isolate Iran, Tehran has an incentive to try and sabotage it. In the lead-up to the Annapolis conference in November 2007, Khamenei strongly backed Hamas and called on Arab countries to boycott the conference, declaring “the entire purpose of this peace summit is to save the Zionist regime.”

Vanguard for the Islamic World

From the inception of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini envisioned that his revolutionary vision of Islamic justice would spread beyond Iran’s borders throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds. While Tehran’s foreign policy approach has become more pragmatic and less revolutionary since Khomeini’s death, under Khamenei’s stewardship Iran continues to aspire to be the vanguard of the Middle East.

Khamenei’s strategy for furthering Iran’s regional influence has three important components. The first is to project the narrative that Iran and the Muslim world share the same interests and enemies. For example, to allay Arab concerns about Iran’s nuclear ambitions he frequently notes that Iran’s nuclear achievements belong to the entire Muslim world. At the same time he subtly warns the Arabs against conspiring with the United States against Iran: “Any success that is achieved by the Iranian nation will reflect honor and credit on the whole Muslim ummah [community]. Likewise, any harm that is inflicted by the enemies on our Islamic system will harm the interests of the whole Islamic world.”³⁴

Second is the belief that Iran’s best vehicle to spread its power and influence throughout the region is, ironically, democratic elections. The strong electoral showings of Hamas in Palestine, Hizbollah in Lebanon, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and Shi’i co-religionists in Iraq has made Tehran confident that their Islamist friends have won the battle for the region’s hearts and minds, while Western-oriented liberals are in retreat. Khamenei frequently declares, “If a referendum is held in any Islamic country, the people will vote for individuals supporting Islam and their national identity and opposing the United States.”³⁵

Like many other observers of the Middle East, Khamenei credits Iran for being the catalyst of the “Islamist awakening,” confident that Iran’s “soft power”—its ideology and vision for the Middle East—is shared by the vast majority of the Arab and Muslim street. Defiance of Israel and the United States is certainly useful in this regard:

A wave of Islamic revival has swept through the Islamic world, and Muslim nations are expressing a strong desire to return to Islam and practice this lofty religion. This awakening has stemmed from the great Islamic revolution of the Iranian people under the leadership of our late magnanimous Imam.... The enemies told us not to export our Islamic revolution! We said that revolution could not be exported, since it is not a commodity! However, our Islamic revolution, like the scent of spring flowers that is carried

by the breeze, reached every corner of the Islamic world and brought about an Islamic revival in Muslim nations.³⁶

The third strategy Khamenei has employed to assert regional hegemony is a combination of political and cultural influence with unconventional military means (i.e., militias) in order to give Iran considerable sway over the region's most pressing political and security concerns. From Khamenei's perspective none of the critical issues facing the Middle East and Muslim world—Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Persian Gulf security, and Arab–Israeli peace—can be properly addressed or resolved without Iran's input, even though the military might of the United States and its allies dwarfs that of Iran in each of these places:

The Iranian nation ... has now attained such a high status that its role in regional equations is quite decisive. This is something admitted by the world's arrogant powers themselves, who are acknowledging that the important issues of the Middle East region cannot be solved without Iran's cooperation and contribution, and that the Iranian nation's views on those issues should be heard and taken into consideration.³⁷

In line with Iran's ambitions as a nation, it is notable that on Khamenei's official website he is referred to not as the "Supreme Leader of Iran" but as the "Supreme Leader of Muslims." While several years ago such a declaration appeared fanciful, the U.S. invasion of Iraq not only unintentionally bolstered Iran's regional authority, but also Khamenei's. Though traditionally quiescent Iraqi clerics like Iranian-born Ayatollah Sistani are more learned and have a larger spiritual following than Khamenei, owing to the vast sums of money that Iran is injecting into religious charities and institutions in Iraq and its financial patronage of the religious establishment in Najaf and other Shi'i areas, Khamenei's influence is now unparalleled in the Shi'i world.³⁸ Moreover, Iranian defiance of the United States and Israel has made Khamenei more confident than ever that Iran's leadership and his personal leadership are equally admired on the streets of the Sunni Arab world.

The Revolutionary Symbolism of the Nuclear Program

For Khamenei, the nuclear program has come to embody the core themes of the revolution: the struggle for independence, the injustice of foreign powers, the necessity of self-sufficiency, and Islam's high esteem for the sciences. Years before Iran's nuclear ambitions were fully revealed to the public in 2002, Khamenei consistently stressed the importance of scientific and technological progress for Iran's future, declaring on many occasions that overcoming Iran's "scientific retardation" is the country's top priority.³⁹

Khamenei sees a clear link between scientific advancement, self-sufficiency, and political independence. His ideal vision is of an Iran that is scientifically and technologically advanced enough to be self-sufficient, self-sufficient enough to be economically independent, and eco-

nomically independent enough to be politically independent. He believes strongly that the United States is not opposed to Iran's nuclear ambitions because of the proliferation threat, but because of the potential independence and economic leverage that Iran would derive from it:

They are opposed to the progress and development of the Iranian nation. They do not want an Islamic and independent country to achieve scientific progress and possess advanced technology in the Middle East region, a region which possesses most of the world's oil and which is one of the most sensitive regions in the world.

They are worried about anything that can help the regional nations to achieve independence, self-reliance and self-sufficiency. They want this populous region, which is rich in mineral resources, to be in need of them forever. This is why they are opposed to our possessing modern technology and to our youngsters making progress in scientific areas.

It is hard for the global arrogance to accept that the talented Iranian nation has been able to take great strides in the field of science and technology, especially in the field of nuclear technology. They want Iran's energy to be always dependent on oil, since oil is vulnerable to the policies of world powers. They aim to control other nations with invisible ropes.⁴⁰

Khamenei has a long track record of speaking with conviction; while his statements may not always reflect reality, he believes in what he says. In view of this, when it comes to the economic efficacy and historical origins of Iran's nuclear program, Iran's Leader is either intentionally deceitful toward the Iranian public—to maintain appearances of independence and self-sufficiency—or troublingly misinformed.

For example, while respected nuclear physicists estimate that Iran would save billions of dollars by importing enriched uranium from abroad rather than relying on domestically enriched uranium, Khamenei consistently invokes the economic benefits of retaining enrichment and the full fuel cycle. And though the IAEA confirmed that Iran relied heavily on the A. Q. Khan network, Russia, and China to import and build key nuclear infrastructure and components, Khamenei remarkably states that:

We are different from those countries that received the technology from the former Soviet Union because they were in the Communist camp. Even China received considerable technological assistance from the former Soviet Union over the first 10 years after its revolution, when the two countries were not at odds yet. However, no country has ever extended any technological assistance to us. We have developed whatever we have ourselves.... We want to produce fuel for our nuclear power plant rather than import it from other countries. What Western countries are saying is that we should not produce nuclear fuel for our Bushehr power plant. They are saying that more nuclear

power plants can be built in Iran, provided that we buy the needed nuclear fuel from those countries!⁴¹

It is impossible to know whether Khamenei is intentionally misinforming the public or whether his advisors are intentionally misinforming him. Intelligence reports circulated after Russian President Vladimir Putin's October 2007 visit to Tehran claimed that Putin was shocked to hear from Khamenei that he was hearing the details of the Russian nuclear compromise proposal for the first time, despite the fact that the proposal had been widely discussed in public for over a year. Given Khamenei's reputation for micromanagement, it seems implausible that he could be so ill informed about such a key issue.

The Iraq War and Sectarianism

Khamenei could have seen the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 from two distinctly different vantage points: from that of a Leader whose country had suffered half a million casualties as a result of Saddam Hussein's aggression, or from that of a Leader whose regime's very existence was threatened by the United States. Consistent with revolutionary tradition, he focused his ire and concern on Washington, interpreting even U.S. difficulties in Iraq as part and parcel of a broader American strategy to dominate the Middle East.

In Khamenei's eyes the United States invaded Iraq with the intent of installing a pro-American puppet regime sympathetic to Israel and hostile to Iran. When Iraq's "Islamist awakening" thwarted the U.S. goal of a secular, liberal, pro-American Iraq, Washington began fomenting sectarian unrest between Sunna and Shi'a. The violence also serves to justify America's continued presence in Iraq, ostensibly to keep the peace.

Though the prevailing status quo in Iraq has been optimal for Iran—their main allies (the Shi'a) hold power, while their main adversary has endured enormous costs in blood and treasure—Khamenei was strident in his early opposition to the war. His ominous prewar predictions of America's fate in Iraq were remarkably prescient:

Undoubtedly, any U.S. military operation in this region will cause a great disaster, since many homes will be destroyed and many innocent people will be killed. But it is also certain that the aggressor will get stuck and entangled in this quagmire, and this will accelerate its downfall.⁴²

In numerous speeches in the run-up to the invasion, Khamenei warned that, "by attacking Iraq under the pretext of fighting terrorism, the United States actually intends to take control of the Iraqi oilfields, dominate the Middle East and protect the Zionist entity."⁴³ Given a choice between two evils, he preferred a Saddam-led regime to the potential alternative of a pro-American puppet regime sympathetic to Israel and hostile to Iran.

Given Khamenei's analysis of American ambitions, it was a matter of regime survival for Iran to actively assert its own interests in Iraq while undermining those of the United States. Like U.S. officials, Khamenei saw, and continues to see, Iraq as a key battleground between the United States and Iran for Arab and Muslim hearts and minds. Though he recognizes that Iran cannot compete with the sheer military prowess of the United States, he continuously expresses confidence that Islam is Iran's greatest weapon against U.S. imperialism: "in the confrontation between the Islamic identity and the identity characterizing the arrogant powers, the winning side has been the Islamic identity."⁴⁴

Given the U.S. inability to offer a narrative as compelling to people as Islam, Khamenei believes Washington has resorted to fomenting sectarian violence, which also serves to justify America's military presence. "The present assassinations in Iraq are carried out by U.S. and Zionist intelligence services, since insecurity provides a pretext for the continued occupation of Iraq."⁴⁵

Khamenei's belief in a cynical American plot to "divide and conquer" the Islamic world has made Muslim unity an important, recurring theme in his political discourse. There is a mistaken belief in some quarters of the West and Arab world that Iran is intent on fomenting sectarian unrest between Sunna and Shi'a in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf. This is a patent misreading of Iranian goals. Given Iran's ambitions to be the vanguard of the Middle East and the fact that Shi'a constitute less than ten percent of the region's Muslims, sectarian unrest is clearly inimical to Iran's interests to be a pan-Islamic, not just Shi'i, power, as well as to Khamenei's ambitions to be the Leader of all Muslims:

Ever since the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the arrogant powers have been trying to portray our revolution as a Shi'i revolution ... [but] if our revolution had been a Shi'i revolution, we would have become separated from the Islamic world and had nothing to do with it. They would have had nothing to do with us either. They would have expressed no hostility to our revolution. But they have noticed that our revolution is an Islamic revolution.

Khamenei argues that it is not Iran which is seeking war with Sunni Islam, but the United States that is seeking a war with the entire Islamic world. He consistently warns both Iranians and Arab nations that the only two parties that stand to gain from sectarian strife are the United States and Israel:

[The United States] aims to portray the Islamic Republic of Iran as a Shi'i republic and try to set it against the great Sunni community. This is a very dangerous plot which their politicians are currently trying to carry out.... We should do our utmost to thwart the arrogant powers in their goal. All Muslims should be aware and vigilant. Our nation, our elite and scholars and our dedicated and diligent clergymen should all be careful not to say or do anything that would be conducive to the enemies' plot.⁴⁶

He carefully addresses Arab leaders allied with the United States who have warned about the dangers of an ascendant “Shi’i crescent” (King Abdullah of Jordan) or declared that Arab Shi’a are more loyal to Iran than to their own country (President Mubarak of Egypt). He argues that Iran is well known for supporting Sunni Islamist movements, such as Hamas, as robustly as Shi’i organizations, such as Hizbollah. Moreover, he aims to assure Arab leaders that Iran has no territorial or hegemonic ambitions in the Arab world and should be perceived as a big brother rather than an adversary:

Ever since the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the enemies have been disseminating negative political propaganda against Iran with the intention of making the nations in the region and Arab governments afraid of the Islamic Republic. However, they have seen for more than the past two decades that the Islamic Republic of Iran has waged no aggression against any neighboring or non-neighboring countries. If there was aggression, it was waged by an Arab country against Iran. It was the ill-fated Saddam Hussein that attacked our country first and then invaded Kuwait. He would have attacked other Arab countries as well if he had found an opportunity to do so.

They should know that the grandeur and dignity of Islam and the power of the Islamic Republic of Iran are to their benefit as well. The United States is taking advantage of the weakness of Islamic countries and is bullying and intimidating their governments. The United States, while being submissive to the usurper Zionist regime at all times, is bullying and blackmailing certain Arab governments. But if those governments rely on a great power, they will never be forced to submit to the United States.⁴⁷

Challenges to His Leadership and Iran's Post-Khamenei Future

Though senior clergy in Qom may privately scorn Khamenei's contrived religious credentials, none represents a challenge to his leadership. Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, once Khomeini's heir apparent, continues to issue subtle critiques of Khamenei's leadership, but at age 85 he is too frail to be considered a potential leader of the opposition. Since Ahmadinejad's election a great deal has been made of the ambitions of hardline cleric Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi—Ahmadinejad's religious adviser—to succeed or even overtake Khamenei as Leader, but his defeat in the December 2006 Experts Assembly elections to Rafsanjani all but eliminated this possibility (the Experts Assembly has the constitutional authority to anoint the Supreme Leader).

The only individual in the Islamic Republic who can be considered a potential political rival to Khamenei is Rafsanjani, often referred to as Iran's "second most powerful man." Their relationship goes back to the 1960s, when both were students of Khomeini in Qom and political activists against the shah's government. They each spent years in prison under the shah and were catapulted into positions of power after the revolution, owing to their closeness with Khomeini. As speaker of the parliament in the 1980s, the more powerful Rafsanjani and President Khamenei were considered "pragmatic" allies against more radical elements in the nascent revolutionary government.

Over the last decade, however, both their power and their domestic and foreign policy differences have become increasingly pronounced. Rafsanjani has been forthcoming about his desire to mend U.S.–Iranian relations, open the economy, and ease the Islamic Republic's social restrictions, while Khamenei has been rigid on all fronts. Having been instrumental in winning Khamenei the position of Supreme Leader, Rafsanjani's resentment of Khamenei's superiority is palpable.

When told that Khamenei discouraged his candidacy in the 2005 presidential election, his chief adviser Mohammed Atrianfar retorted, "Rafsanjani is a pillar of this revolution, he doesn't need permission from anyone."⁴⁸ Most remarkably, Rafsanjani's son told a visiting American reporter before the June 2005 presidential elections that, if elected, his father would change Iran's constitution to reduce Khamenei's power by making the position of Supreme Leader a ceremonial role akin to "the king of England."⁴⁹ But Rafsanjani's humiliating defeat by Ahmadinejad made Khamenei's preeminence undeniable.

In reality, the greatest challenge to Khamenei's continuation as Leader is his (reportedly ill) health. Khamenei appears older than his 68 years and has been dogged about reports of poor health ever since the 1981 assassination attempt in which he lost use of his right arm. A widely circulated rumor in Tehran has it that he smokes opium for medicinal purposes; namely, to ease the pain of his limp arm. His physicians and advisers have privately admitted

that he has long suffered from bouts of depression, which some believe explains his inability to make difficult decisions and his seeming preference to muddle along with the status quo.

More recently, there has been chatter among Islamic Republic insiders that Khamenei has been undergoing treatment for prostate cancer. These rumors heightened last year, when after a public absence of several weeks, he reappeared on Iranian television looking pale, cloaked in a blanket, and his voice hoarse. For the first time state media publicly addressed questions about the Leader's health, claiming he was suffering nothing more than a "severe bout of the flu." Yet for all the persistent rumors to the contrary, in recent months Khamenei's public appearances give little indication that he's ailing.

Iran After Khamenei

Whatever Khamenei's health, the questions of who will replace him and whether the institution of Supreme Leader will continue after him have become the subject of intense speculation in Tehran. Based on the criteria used to justify Khamenei's selection as Leader—a mid-ranking cleric who possesses "the appropriate political and managerial skills"—there are few obvious candidates.

Assuming he were to outlive Khamenei—a big assumption, given he's five years older—Rafsanjani is the most obviously qualified contender. But apart from old age and seemingly superficial considerations—the fact he does not have a beard and is not a descendant of the prophet (hence he wears the white turban instead of the black)—Rafsanjani's reputation as Iran's richest man makes him a source of popular resentment. More importantly, he is unacceptable to Iran's hardline conservative political establishment, which attacks him on almost a daily basis in their media for being corrupt, socially lax, and secretly plotting a deal with the United States.

A less contentious choice often mentioned is Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, a moderate conservative and current head of Iran's judiciary. Shahroudi has high-level political experience, the religious credentials which Khamenei lacked, and is generally well thought-of by both his hardline and moderate peers. His biggest detriment—which may well be insurmountable—is the fact that he was born and raised in Iraq and speaks Persian with an Arabic accent, a difficult sell to Iran's highly nationalistic population.

Precisely because there are no obvious successors to Khamenei, the prospect of the supreme leadership being replaced by a shura (consultative) council is discussed with increased frequency. The idea is not new and was considered after Khomeini's death, since many believed the supreme leadership was "a robe designed only for Khomeini." As president, Khamenei himself once told a Western reporter that no one individual could ever replace Khomeini as Supreme Leader, predicting instead a council of three or five religious leaders would have to rule.⁵⁰

Who would be selected to compose the shura council is the key question. Constitutionally the selection process falls under the jurisdiction of the Assembly of Experts, an 86-cleric

body headed by Rafsanjani and composed largely of septuagenarian, conservative clerics. Reformists talk about a triumvirate composed of Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Mehdi Karroubi, a moderate cleric who served as speaker of the parliament and narrowly lost to Ahmadinejad in the first round of the June 2005 elections. This would be unacceptable to hardliners, who would prefer conservatives like Ayatollahs Mesbah Yazdi, Shahroudi, and Jannati, a member of the Guardian Council, who are equally unacceptable to moderates.

Aside from the difficulties of reaching a consensus regarding the makeup of the shura council, the replacement of the Supreme Leader with a shura council is currently impeded by the Islamic Republic's constitution, which states specifically that the Leader be an individual. But political expediency trumps the constitution in the Islamic Republic; a constitutional amendment adjusting the requirements for Supreme Leader is precisely what enabled Khamenei to become Leader.

While the fight for succession is highly unpredictable and could get fierce, in some ways Khamenei's weakness has ironically been the Islamic Republic's strength; if his reign has proven one thing, it's that the Islamic Republic's stability is not contingent upon having a popular, charismatic Leader. The predictions frequently made during the Khomeini era—that the Leader's death would bring about the regime's demise—are no longer made with regards to Khamenei.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

When criticized for not engaging Iran in dialogue, U.S. officials sometimes retort, “whom in Iran should we talk to?” While the answer may be Ayatollah Khamenei, the reality is as long as Khamenei remains Supreme Leader, a fundamental shift in Iranian domestic and foreign policy is unlikely. Given that his selection as Leader was based on his fealty to revolutionary ideals and the vision of Ayatollah Khomeini—whose political views crystallized in the 1970s during the time of the shah—the chances of Khamenei being willing, or able, to reinvent himself at the age of 68 do not appear strong.

Though Khamenei has been amenable to an evolution in Iranian foreign policy toward its Arab neighbors and Europe, adopting a conciliatory approach toward the United States and a nonbelligerent approach toward Israel would be parting ways with two of the three ideological pillars of the Islamic Republic (the other being the mandatory *hejab* for women). For Khamenei, if the Islamic revolution was all about momentous change, the years since have been about maintaining the revolutionary status quo. Nor is his rationale purely ideological; his writings and speeches suggest he agrees with Western advocates who argue that were Iran to open up to the United States, it would spur major cultural, political, and economic reform.

But Iran’s centrality to urgent U.S. and European foreign policy challenges—namely Iraq, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, energy security, Arab–Israeli peace, and Afghanistan—makes it unwise simply to refrain from talking to Tehran until Khamenei’s death and the arrival of a more accessible Iranian Leader. This could be a long time in coming. To truly gauge Khamenei’s intentions and the rigidity of his views, a concerted attempt must be made to test them up close. A private approach is preferable to a public one, in order to avoid the negative intervention of Iranian hardliners opposed to reconciliation with the United States.

“Engagement” with Iran, however, is an approach that is easy to advocate but very difficult to carry out. Not since the early days of the revolution has Iran’s domestic and international behavior been less agreeable, yet never before has its regional influence been greater. Any successful approach to engaging Iran must be tailored to take into account Khamenei’s central role in Iran’s decision-making process and his deeply held suspicions:

- Khamenei must be convinced that the United States is prepared to recognize and respect the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic and must be disabused of his conviction that U.S. policy is to bring about regime change, not negotiate behavior change.
- Khamenei will never agree to any arrangement in which Iran is expected to publicly retreat or admit defeat, nor can he be forced to compromise through pressure alone. Besides the issue of saving face, he believes deeply that compromising in the face of pressure is counterproductive, as it projects weakness and only encourages greater pressure.

- Successful engagement will require a direct channel of communication with the Supreme Leader's office, preferably with Khamenei himself. He is wary of domestic rivals and will not take any foreign policy decision that may benefit Iran but risk hurting his own political interests. The Clinton administration's unsuccessful attempts to downplay and bypass Khamenei and engage Khatami and the reformists in 2000 are a case in point.

Engaging Iran by no means simply implies placating Khamenei or acquiescing to troubling Iran behavior. Indeed, a policy that simultaneously presents two distinct paths to Tehran is the best hope for a constructive way forward. It must be made clear to Tehran that its present hardline approach will only increase the country's isolation and economic malaise. UN Security Council resolutions and international political and financial pressure on their own will not bring about a diplomatic accommodation with Iran; nonetheless, in the short-term they are necessary tools to show Iran that a belligerent approach will not reap rewards.

At the same time, more pragmatic elements in Tehran need to be able to make a plausible argument to Khamenei that a moderate Iranian approach will trigger a conciliatory Western response. They feel they cannot do so today. Given recent history and in the present policy context—namely the Bush administration's frequent evocations of the military option—calls for moderation are easily dismissed by Khamenei as naïve and irresponsible.

While any dialogue must eventually be comprehensive—i.e., not limited to Iraq or the nuclear file only—given that there is no common ground on the nuclear issue but there are overlapping interests in Iraq, Baghdad is a good place to continue discussions and build confidence, with the hope of eventually expanding the dialogue to other issues.

Again, it may not be possible for the United States and Iran to reach a diplomatic accommodation as long as Khamenei is Leader. After three decades of being immersed in a “death to America” culture, it may be asking too much for Khamenei to reinvent himself. Trying to engage an Iran with Khamenei at the helm will no doubt be trying, require a great deal of nuance and patience, and offer no guaranteed chance of success. But if there's one thing that is tried and true, it's that an engagement approach toward Iran that aims to ignore, bypass, or undermine Khamenei is guaranteed to fail.

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About the Author

Karim Sadjadpour is an associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Sadjadpour joined Carnegie after four years as the chief Iran analyst at the International Crisis Group based in Tehran and Washington, D.C. A leading researcher on Iran, Sadjadpour has conducted dozens of interviews with senior Iranian officials, and hundreds with Iranian intellectuals, clerics, dissidents, paramilitaries, businessmen, students, activists, and youth, among others. He is a regular contributor to BBC World TV and radio, CNN, National Public Radio, and PBS NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, and has also written in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, and *New Republic*.

Frequently called upon to brief U.S. and EU officials about Middle Eastern affairs, he has testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, given lectures at Harvard, Princeton, and Stanford Universities, and spoken before the Council on Foreign Relations and Asia Society. Sadjadpour was named a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland and has been the recipient of numerous academic awards, including a Fulbright scholarship. He has lived in Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East.

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CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

1779 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20036-2103
Phone: 202.483.7600
Fax: 202.483.1840
www.CarnegieEndowment.org
info@CarnegieEndowment.org

CARNEGIE MOSCOW CENTER

125009, Moscow
Tverskaya, 16/2
Russia
Phone: 495.935.8904
Fax: 495.935.8906
www.Carnegie.ru
info@carnegie.ru

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Room 513, Chang Xin Building
39 Anding Road, Chaoyang District
Beijing, 100029
China
Phone: 86.10.6443.6667 ext. 627
Fax: 86.10.6894.6780

CARNEGIE MIDDLE EAST CENTER

Parliament St. 88
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