Expect the Unexpected: A Religious Democracy in Iran

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"Truths everywhere are compatible; no truth clashes with any other truth. They are all the inhabitants of the same mansion and the stars of the same constellation. One truth in one corner of the world has to be harmonious and compatible with all truths elsewhere, or else it is not a truth."

— Abdolrakim Soroush [1]

The twenty-first century opened with a criminal act of great proportions given the relatively "terrorism free" history of the United States.[2] Shock and dismay prompted many questions. This paper attempts to answer three. What is Islam? Is a democratic Islamic state possible, specifically in Iran? What, if anything, can the United States do about it? A three-pronged thesis is developed. First, in part because Islam is compatible with both secularism and democracy, a religious democracy is in Iran's future. Second, the United States should pursue a modest and humble policy toward Iran by lifting economic sanctions, replacing U.S.-led political isolation with "passive promotion" of reform, and initiating some military disengagement in the region. Third, it is a mistake to assume a more democratic Iran will immediately translate into better United States-Iran relations.

Islam

Islam, like Christianity, is neither monolithic nor homogenous. It is made up of four groups that are each on one side of two fault lines, one separating Sunni and Shiite and one separating reformers and legalists. Some background is warranted before exploring these divisions. The Arabic word "Islam" means "to surrender," and in a theological context it means "to surrender to the will and law of God."[3] Islam is the last of the three great "revealed religions" to develop along with Judaism and Christianity.[4] It originated in the seventh century with Muhammad who, according to Islamic tradition, received revelations from Angel Jibrail, later collected in the Koran.[5] Muslims believe that Muhammad was the last of many prophets including Moses, Jesus, and Adam.[6] In this respect, a Muslim views Christianity as incomplete until it adds Muhammad's message. For years, the Islamic civilization was "the beacon of scientific and human genius and the cradle of freedom and liberty" and "Muslims, Christians, and Jews coexisted relatively peacefully in the Middle East, North Africa, and southern Spain."[7] This changed with the crusading armies of 1095. The result was a footprint of an "imperialist power out to destroy Muslim countries and Muslim identity."[8]

Sunni-Shiite schism

The first of two divisions is the Sunni-Shiite split. It occurs less than thirty years after the death of Muhammad.[9] Sunni Islam contends that Muhammad did not appoint a successor while Shiite Islam counters that Muhammad did appoint a successor.[10] This political squabble continues to have consequence. Today, the idea of an "infallible authority" remains a defining Shiite feature with Shiite theologians empowered to interpret religious laws.[11] On the other hand, Sunni Islam, at least in theory, allows a more personal relationship with God and less dependence on theologians.[12] Although Iran has a Shiite majority, Sunni Islam represents the vast majority of the world Islamic community.[13] In theory, Sunni Islam, which lacks the Shiite concept of infallible authority here on earth, is more amiable to the belief that earthly rulers should be elected and held accountable.[14]

Reformer-legalist schism

Subsequent to Muhammad's death, several divisions developed "traditions" to define the meaning of Islam: Mutazilites, Murjites, legalists, Kharijites, and Sufism.[15] Traditions flowing from the Mutazilites and legalists are the two viewpoints most relevant to modern Islam. The Mutazilites are represented by many of today's Islamic reformers based on their contention that *reason* is useful in achieving nearness to God.[16] The legalists, the dominant Sunni voice, devel-

oped the sacred law of Islam, the Shariah.[17] Today, the legalists are represented by the "modern fundamentalists" and are characterized by the belief that the Shariah is "the life and the constitution" or jurisprudence of Islam.[18] There exists a rough, but relevant, split in modern Islam between reformers and legalists.[19] A primary difference between these two groups is their view of the Shariah. There are two classical sources of Shariah: the Koran, revealed text, and Sunna, a compilation of authenticated and unauthenticated material that represents the sayings and beliefs of Muhammad.[20] Since both sources of Shariah go well beyond purely religious issues, the legalists are able to present a wide range of rules and codes of conduct that encompass the full spectrum of political, economic, and social issues.[21] The application of Shariah is central to the legalists' political agenda.[22] A legalist is Shariah-centric and relatively rigid. Ultimate authority under Shariah lies with religious, not political, leaders. On the other hand, reformers are willing to evaluate alternatives and discuss interpretations using reason. The Shariah is important for them, but all parts of it are not necessarily omnipotent.

Secularism

Although secularism means different things to different people, it is divisible into two generic categories. For some, it is a doctrine that rejects the significance and value of religious faith. For others, it merely represents a belief that ecclesiastical matters should remain distinct from state functions. Since there is considerable cleavage between these two views, a more detailed explanation of the history of secularism follows.

Prior to the appearance of Christianity, the world did not have a "secular-sacred" conflict.[23] With Christianity came the proposition that man could not find complete security and happiness in the state.[24] This started the debate regarding the proper relationship between religion and the state. Saint Augustine's *City of God* introduced the concept of "dualism" to the West by separating, rather than opposing, church and the state.[25] At the same time, Augustine viewed the two cities, church and state, as intermingled; a citizen of one could live in the city of the other.[26] Augustine's views represented a very benign secularism.

Over the years, a competitor to Augustine's benign secularism developed. Numerous philosophers, including Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche, started to question the usefulness and accuracy of religious thought and "condemned religion as a negative social force responsible for preserving the meek and the weak, and hence weakening the human race."[27] A relatively aggressive secularism arose out of these philosophical underpinnings. The goal was to remove religion from society and government.

Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* introduces the "[c]are with which the Americans have separated church and state."[28] Tocqueville offers the American

experiment as welcome proof that eighteenth century philosophers were wrong when they predicted that religious zeal would evaporate as enlightenment's reason and freedom spread.[29] Tocqueville's thesis represents a successful relationship involving secularism, religion, and democracy. Today, many still believe that this trinity contributed to the success of democracy in the United States and the rest of the Christian West.[30]

For the purposes of this paper, Saint Augustine's benign secularism is called "shield secularism," an attempt to shield religion and state from each other, and Marx and Nietzsche's aggressive secularism is called "sword secularism," an attempt to make religion irrelevant. Although Tocqueville's America represents a shield secularism success story, the conflict between these two beliefs is ongoing with proponents of both represented throughout the world. Most important to the issues at hand, the brand of secularism matters when one is evaluating the compatibility of secularism and Islam. Whether or not a similar success can occur when you exchange Christianity for Islam is a hotly debated question.[31]

Islam, Secularism, and Democracy

What are the prospects of an Islamic democracy in general, and particularly one in Iran? Although the current consensus in the West seems to have low expectations for such a development, there is reason to expect the unexpected. This section examines the disagreement between reformers and legalists and provides possible outcomes of this conflict.

The reformer v. legalist argument

As with secularism, two opposing views exist in modern Islam, one represented by reformers and the other by legalists. Reformers contend that "[w]e share the ideals of a democratic society, and a secular state that does not endorse any religion, religious institution, or any religious dogma…We therefore favor the firm separation of religion and state: without such a separation there can be no freedom from tyranny, and such separation is the *sine qua non* for a secular state."[32] Legalists contend that "[s]ecularism may be accepted in a Christian society but it can never enjoy a general acceptance in an Islamic society. Christianity is devoid of a Shariah or a comprehensive system of life to which its adherents should be committed."[33]

The proposition that Christianity is "devoid of a Shariah or a comprehensive system of life" is worth additional discussion. Many Christians would object to the suggestion that Christianity lacks a comprehensive system of life. The popular slogan in Christian circles, "What Would Jesus Do?" suggests that at least some Christians believe that Christianity contains a comprehensive

roadmap to judge and make decisions. In a larger sense, the role of natural law contradicts the statement that Christianity lacks a comprehensive system of life. Natural law recognizes the inviolability of the human person and specific moral principles applicable to everyone.[34] Even non-Christians and pagans live according to this moral code.[35] It is true that clergy do not write the laws in a "Christian society" and that individuals in such a society are not governed by theocratic law. Nonetheless, the absence of theocratic law does not mean law is wholly secular.[36] In the Christian West, many would argue that natural law, as interpreted by Christianity, is the basis of all justice.[37] Therefore, legalists overstate the case when they suggest that Christianity, unlike Islam, lacks a comprehensive system of life. This misfire weakens the legalist position that Islam, unlike Christianity, is not compatible with secularism.

Nonetheless, reformers and legalists differ dramatically in their views regarding the ideals of democracy including free inquiry, tolerance, equal protection, and individual rights. The legalist rejects anything outside of their rigid, but pervasive, interpretation of the Shariah. For the reformer, the sovereignty of the people dominates; it is not only possible, but also preferred. For the legalist, the sovereignty of God prevails; there is no role for the sovereignty of people. This is where the ideology of a legalist hits a dead end when confronted with principles of democracy. Since the will of a good Muslim will always do what the Shariah demands, any concept of the sovereignty of the people is engulfed by the sovereignty of God. There is no need to concern oneself with the will or sovereignty of the people because the legalists do not recognize the concept of free will.[38] Thinking or behaving outside of the "Shariah box" is neither allowed, nor encouraged. This debate between the sovereignty of people versus the sovereignty of God is the key difference between the politics of the reformers and the legalists.[39] It comes down to interpretation of the breadth and political consequence of the Shariah. Like other religious documents and doctrine, the Shariah is malleable. The truth is not always self-evident and mere mortals can walk away with different understandings. Both the legalists and reformers quote from the Shariah and use portions that support their political ends. Given this conflict between reformers and legalists, what is the range of possible outcomes? There are at least four alternatives: discarding Islam completely, long-term resistance to reform, adoption of the American model praised by Tocqueville, and the development of a unique Islam model.

The least likely scenario is the "discarding of Islam" option. This alternative presupposes the adoption of sword secularism discussed in the previous section. Legalists would fervently object to such a development. Even for the reformers, sword secularism goes too far since they support the separation of religion and state rather than elimination of religion. It is probable that both the legalists and reformers would equate any internal or external attempt to ex-

punge Islam from their society as harkening back to the days of western colonization. With this in mind it is worth noting that any attempts to thrust sword secularism upon a state like Iran would surely have the effect of alienating a large portion of citizens.

Although continued short-term resistance is probable, successful long-term resistance is the second least likely alternative. The legalist doctrine does not represent a fleeting dogma destined to quickly and quietly leave center stage. Emphasis on the Shariah and tradition has deep roots. Nonetheless, while estimates of the percentage of Muslims that follow the legalist approach lack precision, ten percent is a "reasonable estimate."[40] It is almost certain that legalists do not represent the majority of Muslims.[41] Even if the legalists are currently in the majority, the well-documented Arab "youth bulge" finds half of all Arabs under the age of fourteen.[42] The paradigm for Muslim legalists is shifting before their eyes and change appears imminent. The endgame and timing is far from certain, but greater demands for freedom are on the horizon.[43] This demand will conflict with the relative rigidity of the Shariah centric legalist modus operandi.

One could argue that the West's model is the best way to jump-start Iran's reform. Given Iran's long and proud history, Iranians may wonder what happened and consider what has worked in the West. A wholesale adoption of the West's model would have to contend with the legalists since it not only conflicts with their ideology, but also represents another example of unwanted western influence. Even if the impetus was internal, the specter of its Western origins would make it easier for legalists to first deflect, and then defeat, its adoption. Whether it is based on a fear of democracy, a fear of the unknown, a reminder of colonial rule, more recent meddling in Iran's affairs, or simply a distrust of the West, anything that carries a western label will most likely result in not only a more vigorous fight with the legalists, but also suspicion from reformers.[44] This brings us to the fourth alternative, a unique Islamic model that is the topic of the next section.

The Prospects of a Religious Democracy in Iran

Although developments in Iran since 1997 gained some attention in the West, they did not prompt a major policy change in the United States.[45] Nonetheless, there is hope for those inside and outside of Iran who yearn for the development of a secular and democratic government. Robin Wright has noted that "[j]ust as the Reformation was critical to the Age of Enlightenment and the birth of modern democracy in the West, so too have Iranian philosophers advanced a reformation within Islam that is critical to lasting political change."[46] Wright provides five reasons why Iran is a logical source for such sweeping political change: (1) Shiite Islam demands a faithful fight against injustice, (2)

relative political experience compared to other Muslim states, (3) 2,500 years of civilization and a sense of historical importance, (4) absorbed and adopted "numerous outside ideas while situated at the crossroads between East and West," and (5) a history of revolutionary change.[47]

Islam's Martin Luther

Abdolkarim Soroush is a leading Iranian philosopher and the personification of this reformation. Some have referred to him as the Martin Luther of Islam.[48] Key tenets of Soroush's philosophy are that Iranian spiritual leaders are not above criticism[49] and a proposition that secularism fosters religious understanding.[50] For Soroush, secularism is not an enemy; rather secularism is a necessary link to a rich and thriving democracy. According to Soroush, "[h]uman beings can remain spiritual and religious while enjoying the benefits of rational administration of their affairs."[51] Soroush has a response to the proposition that a "democratic religious government" is preposterous.[52] He highlights three "dark and dangerous errors" that "dim the horizon of judgment" of those that discount the possibility of a religious democracy: their belief that democracy and extreme liberalism are the same, their severing of Shariah from its foundations, and their position that a religious government, by definition, cannot coexist with a democratic government.[53] Soroush provides a response to each of these "errors:" (1) relativistic liberalism and democracy are not identical since democracy is not violated when a faith is embraced, it is violated when a particular belief is imposed or disbelief is punished, (2) legalists broaden and use the Shariah to advance a political rather than religious agenda, and (3) appreciating that democracy is engaged in a never ending process of making choices and that a religious society has already made a "crucial" choice, Soroush finds common ground between the two in the "constant examination" of religious understanding.[54]

Soroush's theory of "Contraction and Expansion of Religious Interpretation" explores this continuous examination of religious understanding and develops the belief that Islam, secularism, and democracy are complementary. This theory makes a crucial distinction between religion and religious understanding by emphasizing that religious understanding is merely a variety of human understanding.[55] The everyday growth and discernment of religious understanding, a slice of human understanding, is contrasted with a constant religion. Religion remains constant, while religious understanding changes.[56] For Soroush, God reveals religion, but it is "up to us to understand and realize it."[57] Therefore, secularism and democracy do not threaten religion; they merely help to increase the understanding of religion. In short, a constant religion coupled with greater religious knowledge allows one to enhance the understanding of religion.

Contrary to the legalist contention that the application of the Shariah is readily apparent, conclusive and all encompassing, Soroush recognizes that human understanding of Islam does not necessarily have all the answers. He drives home the point that there is always room for improvement. Viewed in isolation, this emphasis on an evolving human understanding of religion contradicts the views of the legalistic spiritual leaders of Iran. To the legalists, Soroush is at best misguided, and at worst a heretic. Nonetheless, Soroush's theory of contraction and expansion articulates a response to this legalistic reaction since the theory recognizes that religion is constant. When viewed objectively, this emphasis on the constant nature of religion deflects an attack from the legalists that Soroush is merely promoting a misguided form of Islamic relativism, or worse yet, Western relativistic theory. For Soroush, although Islam is the truth, mere mortals—including spiritual leaders—need to continue critical evaluation and efforts to obtain a better human understanding of Islam. Discernment is allowed and encouraged.

The philosophy of Soroush allows democracy to flourish since both secularism and democracy increase human understanding. If Soroush's philosophy eventually carries the day in Iran, however, it is a mistake to suggest that uncertainty will not follow. The arrival of a stable democracy does not necessarily follow demands for more freedom.[58] Additionally, one could argue that it is a mistake to compare Soroush with Luther given the great political, economic, and cultural differences between Luther's Germany and Soroush's Iran.[59] Nonetheless, the Luther reference helps to compare the differences between reformers and legalists. At the same time, it is worth noting that Luther's Reformation was followed by a protracted and bloody war. One should not assume that an Iranian Reformation would result in immediate peace and prosperity.

Change in Iran

The current balance of power between the secular and spiritual leaders must change for Soroush's vision of a religious democracy to move forward.[60] Currently, divine sovereignty trumps popular will more often than not.[61] A change in personalities may represent one way to alter the current balance of power. A more dynamic and resourceful secular leader could have enough influence to change the balance. Alternatively, a steady strain of 'baby steps" over time may tend to bring more balance between secular and divine leadership. Another alternative is the arrival of a third government entity with sufficient independence, authority and power to counter the spiritual leaders. This other entity could be an expanded and more powerful legislative body or a unique, yet unknown, entity particular to Iranian culture and history.

Even with an alteration of the current balance of power between secular and spiritual leaders, the pace of subsequent progress toward a religious

democracy is uncertain. Some sort of religious democracy, however, appears inevitable. This progression may occur slowly or overnight based on some yet undetermined chain of events or single event. The change may be peaceful, violent, or a combination of both. The change could be characterized by a relatively chaotic two steps forward and one step back or continuous steady steps forward. A sea change, however, is on the horizon. Although the division of duties in a religious democracy is yet uncertain, Iran's spiritual leaders will need to start learning about democracy with an introduction to one of its most important attributes: compromise. In summary, religious democracy in Iran is foreseeable.

U. S. Policy Alternatives[62]

There are at least three alternatives for U.S. policy toward Iran: (1) continuing the one adopted by President Clinton after Iran began showing signs of moderation, principally lifting some economic sanctions,[63] (2) maintaining political and economic isolation of Iran, or (3) lifting all economic sanctions, replacing U.S.-led political isolation of Iran with "passive promotion" of reform, and some military disengagement in the region.

Incremental approach

Of the three alternatives, the first is the weakest. The small olive branch offered by the Clinton administration was insignificant and afforded little economic benefit for the Iranian people and even less incentive for Iran's leaders. Iran is not a one-dimensional state like many underdeveloped states the United States has attempted to manipulate. Iran is a relatively diverse and historically rich state that warrants a more complex and definitive policy. Iran's leaders probably viewed these minimal steps as insulting and irrelevant.

Continued political and economic isolation of Iran

The second alternative has some appeal. Iran's ongoing attempts to obtain nuclear weapons, its funding of groups opposed to Israel, and the CIA's characterization of Iran as the "most active state sponsor of terror"[64] are used to support this adversarial relationship.[65] One could argue that the seeds of reform now present in Iran are at least in part due to economic sanctions and U. S. led attempts to isolate Iran politically since 1979. Despite recent Iranian public support for reform, President Bush included Iran in his "Axis of Evil." This is an example of maintaining an isolation strategy, if not moving beyond it toward a more combative relationship.[66] Nonetheless, it is concerning that this policy of isolation has lasted for nearly 25 years and Iran's support of terrorism in general, and against Israel in particular, has seemingly accelerated rather than

diminished. It is true that the reform movement has gained strength during this period, but this is probably more of a coincidence than a cause and effect relationship. The ideas of Iranian reformers like Soroush are not inspired by the economic sanctions and political isolation of Iran practiced by the last five U.S. administrations. As far as the security of Israel, any chance of a moderation in Iran that includes religious tolerance may represent the only way to end the current cycle of violence. It is also worth asking whether the facts that prompted the sanctions and isolation strategy are still relevant. Ayatollah Khomeini, the subject of much hatred in the United States, died almost 15 years ago in 1989. The hostages were released more than 20 years ago. It is true that Americans have a long memory, especially policy makers, but the Iran hostage crisis is a relatively insignificant incident when compared to other events that sparked American rage like Pearl Harbor and 11 September. No one should deny the significance of the hostage crisis at the time, the resultant fixation on the part of many Americans, and chaotic effect it had on American politics, but it is time for the American public and leaders to move forward.[67]

Iran needs time to develop its unique process. Any real or perceived U.S. influence will make the reformers' job more difficult.

Humble and modest new policy

Alternative three, the recommended policy, has three pillars:

- lifting all economic sanctions;
- replacing U.S.-led political isolation of Iran with passive promotion; and
- some military disengagement in the region.

Although the lifting of sanctions is by definition a proactive event that would result in increased interaction between American industry and Iran, only incremental economic engagement is warranted. Although one could argue that robust economic engagement will help produce political reform, the delicate nature of the Iranian political situation including the fledgling nature of its reform movement and underlying suspicion of "the West," suggest that too much economic entanglement may backfire and damage hopes of reform.

The United States should refrain from active political engagement. The types of active political engagement that were practiced during the Cold War—including covert and overt support for "friendly" regimes—may have helped win the Cold War, but this meddling alienated a large segment of the world's

population. Islamic states were not immune from the resultant distrust. Although the U.S. led political isolation of Iran should end, the new policy toward Iran should only include a "passive promotion" of reform. Passive promotion envisions a wait and see, hands-off policy. It welcomes inquiries and requests for assistance from Iran's leaders, but refrains from initiating such efforts. Initially, only low level cultural events, athletic competitions, and financial support for natural disasters are envisioned. Passive promotion does not include any form of support for a particular Iranian party, movement, or policy. This policy requires patience and humility that avoids the appearance or reality that Iran's reform movement is in any way tied to the United States or modeled on the western experience. Iran needs time and space to develop its unique process. Under passive promotion, the norm is the absence of U.S. action. No U.S. fingerprint or footprint is warranted. Any inconsistent perception or reality will only make the reformers' job more difficult and potentially impossible.

From a military standpoint, efforts to decrease presence in the region are warranted. The United States should only have a military presence in the region if two requirements are met: (1) the presence is genuinely desired by the country's leaders *and* people and (2) the presence supports U. S. national security interests. It is inaccurate to assume that U.S. military presence is always stabilizing. Especially in this volatile region, American military presence may have a destabilizing effect.[68] In the particular case of Iran, a less visible presence in the region would lend credence to the argument that we are not interested in extending our influence in post-reform Iran.

Soroush's vision of religious democracy in Iran is inconsistent with sword secularism. Many in Iran, perhaps irrationally, equate sword secularism with the United States. U.S. influence and effort should not promote this type of secularism as the next step for Iran. One author has predicted that the "greatest weapon" to merge Islam and the West "lies in a powerfully seductive cultural engine, fueled by Hollywood and the entertainment industry..."[69] A discerning and hopeful policy toward Iran, however, should not emphasize this "cultural engine." Although, at least arguably, a very powerful tool, U.S. culture is offensive to many Iranians (especially legalists but probably many reformers as well) and not the type of "democratic fruit" that Soroush emphasizes in his writings.[70]

Reliance on Hollywood, sword secularism, robust economic involvement, active political engagement, and excessive military presence in the region are bad ideas. On the other hand, lifting economic sanctions, replacing political isolation with passive promotion of democracy, and some military disengagement in the region are the only appropriate choices. What the United States needs to do most of all is avoid harming an ongoing and unique process. Discernment and patience, rather than forcing the pace of change, is required.

The Future of the U.S.-Iran Relationship

If this paper's thesis survives the test of time with the development of a religious democracy in Iran, a positive relationship between the United States and Iran is, especially in the short-term, not inevitable. A religious democracy in Iran could result in a more positive U.S.-Iran relationship; however, the relationship could also stay the same or even get worse. A corollary point is that democracy does not guarantee more stability. On the contrary, democracy by definition means division and it is not unimaginable that a fledgling democratic Iran could become less stable than Iran under the Shah or Iran since 1979. U.S.-Iran relations during the Shah of Iran's regime were close. After the Shah was removed from office, and since 1997, U.S.-Iran relations have experienced continuous estrangement. These two less-than-democratic governments represent both ends of the spectrum when it comes to relations with the United States. A religious democracy, by definition more democratic, could also fall at either end of the spectrum. U.S. policy makers should not act surprised or disheartened if U.S.-Iran relations are not immediately positive. Patience, rather than the immediate vilification similar to the denouncement subsequent to the emergence of Fidel Castro in Cuba, is recommended. In the long-term, a democratic Iran will most likely become a positive member of the world community, if not a U.S. partner.[71]

Premortem

Not every thesis survives the test of time. It is possible that 2052 will find an Iran less democratic than the 2002 version. By 2052, the youth bulge, then between fifty and sixty-four years old, may have given up the quest for more freedom. Maybe Soroush's fate, far less consequential than Luther, is punctuated by an untimely and tragic demise and/or attempts at real and dramatic reform fail due to force, neglect, or intervening world events.

The following factors represent some arguments why the reformers may fail. First, the reported love affair between the Iranian youth and the West is really an infatuation based on anecdotal evidence rather than a long-term matter of consequence. American culture, not democratic ideals, motivates this emerging generation. The youth bulge simply moves onto something else. Second, the resolve of the Iranian spiritual leaders results in the "roll in the tanks" model adopted by Chinese leaders in Tiananmen Square. This quickly takes the starch out of the reformers. Third, the "War on Terrorism" lasts forty-five years. This protracted, violent, and chaotic struggle coupled with the forever escalating Palestinian-Israeli conflict not only ensures that any notion of a détente with Iran remains impossible, but also results in minor military skirmishes be-

tween Iran and the United States and several nearly full-scale military encounters. Fourth, the above legalist/reformer distinction is an over simplification that misses crucial traditions and philosophies that matter in internal Iranian politics. These ignored and/or yet unknown interest groups pull Iran in other directions and away from democracy. Finally, the above synopsis of Islam is simplistic and shortsighted. The legalists correctly proclaim that Islam and democracy cannot coexist. The differences between Islam and Christianity make a successful "marriage" of democracy and Islam beyond reach. Christian-like choices afforded by the doctrine of free will never materialize within Islamic doctrine. Demands for obedience to the Shariah overwhelm attempts to enhance religious understanding. Secularism and democracy represent unique western ideas that will never fit into the Islamic way of life. The failed reform movement represents an attempt to inculcate Islam with diametrically opposed western experiences. Purported truths are not only relative, but also destined to clash. The mosques of Islam and halls of democracy are not only distinct, but also filled with irreconcilable beliefs rather than compatible and harmonious truths.

Conclusion

Let us expect the unexpected. Soroush is right: harmonious and compatible "truths" exist and can help moderate Iran and others in the Islamic world. This represents a significant challenge for U.S. policymakers that will require patience and humility. Nonetheless, furthering freedom, especially where its absence is perhaps most dangerous, is a noble and worthwhile goal.

Notes

1. Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 21.

2. United States has remained relatively immune from terrorist attacks compared to the level of terrorism present in many other nations like India, Israel, France, and Italy.

3. David F. Forte, *Understanding Islam and the Radicals*, 12 October 2001, http//www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/HL718.cfm [18 September 2002]: 2. The following quote provides additional theological background:

According to Islam, Allah (the Arabic word for God) has many attributes: Allah is merciful, just, all-powerful, and totally immanent in the world. The unity of one, sovereign, eternal God that creates everything and has priority over all creation is an extraordinary powerful religious focus to the Muslim believer. Though they regard him as a great prophet, Muslims do not believe that Jesus was the son of God, and hold that the Christian Trinity is a form of degradation of the one God into a kind of polytheism. God cannot be, in any sense, anthropomorphic so Muslims also object to references to God as "Father."

Likewise, the universality of Allah is an important aspect of the Islamic concept of God, so Muslims object to the Jewish notion of being a "chosen" people. Where the Judeo-Christian tradition regards God in a more intimate relational sense and regards God as a personal God, Muslims believe that this denigrates from the purity, the oneness, and the utter spirituality of God.

4. Forte, supra note 3, 2. Forte adds that Islam includes five pillars: the declaration of belief (Shahada), that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet; ritualized prayer (Salat) offered five times a day; fasting (Sawm) during the Islamic month of Ramadan; almsgiving, or the purification of wealth (Zakat), traditionally 2.5 percent of one's wealth must be given to the poor every year; and a Pilgrimage (Hajj) that one must make, at least once, to Mecca.

5. Ibid.: 1.

6. Ibid.

7. Radwan A. Masmoudi, "Struggles behind Words: Shariah, Sunnism, and Jihad," *SAIS Review* (Summer/Fall 2001): 19.

8. Ibid.: 20.

9. Ibid.: 22.

10. Ibid.

11. Robin Wright, *The Last Great Revolution*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2001):51-52. Wright compares the hierarchy of Shiite clergy to the Catholic Church. She believes that the Shiite sect accounts for up to 15 percent of the world's one billion Muslims.

12. Ibid. Wright compares Sunni clergy to Protestant peers.

13. Forte, supra note 3: 3. Forte estimates that the Sunni Islam community represents approximately 90 percent of all Muslims.

14. Masmoudi, supra note 7: 22. Masmoudi adds an interesting irony. Sunni Islam has failed to practice democracy except for a brief period after the death of Muhammad while the Islamic Republic of Iran, the only state where Shiites represent a majority, is "one of the most democratic states."

15. Forte, supra note 3: 3-4.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. For the purposes of this paper, modern fundamentalists are referred to as legalists.

20. Timothy D. Sisk, *Islam and Democracy* (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1992): 16. Masmoudi provides an alternative but similar description of the Shariah. He states that Shariah consists of the Holy Koran commandments and Koranic teaching as complemented by tradition, interpretation, and opinions of scholars. Masmoudi, supra note 7, 22.

21. Masmoudi, supra note 7: 20.

22. Jillian Schwedler, "Islamic Identity: Myth, Menace, or Mobilizer?," *SAIS Review* (Summer/Fall 2001): 5.

23. Emmet Kennedy, "The Tangled History of Secularism," *Modern Age* (Winter 2000): 31.

24. Ibid.: 32.

25. Ibid. This position is supported by the famous and often referenced words of Jesus found in Mathew: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

26. Ibid.

27. Lovay M. Safi, "Islam and the Secular State," 2001, http://www.geopolitics.com/islamAwareness/secularism/secular.html [26 September 2001]: 3. According to Safi, Marx saw religion as an obstacle in the way to achieving universal equality and Nietzsche rejected religion in general and believed it was anti-democratic.

28. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1996): 271

29. Ibid.

30. Nonetheless, this relationship does not guarantee a vibrant democracy. Many benevolent and not so benevolent, "Christian" dictators have ruled with little regard for democratic ideals.

31. It is worth noting that neither the Koran, nor the Bible contain a word that is the direct equivalent of democracy. Sisk, supra note 21: 18.

32. Institute for the Secularization of Islamic Society, [unknown date], http://www.secularislam.org/ [26 September 2002): 1.

33. Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, "Secularism," [unknown date], http://www/islaam.com/Article.asp?id=117 [26 September 2002]: 1.

34. Anne Burleigh, "Towards a Eucharistic Conservatism," *Modern Age* (Winter 2002): 14.

35. Ibid.

36. Paul Johnson, "Why West is Best," *National Review* (3 December, 2001): 18.

37. Ibid.

38. This lack of free will contradicts with the overwhelming majority of Christian doctrine.

39. Sisk, supra note 20: 24. Sisk adds "[p]olitics…is a means to establish a just social order as defined by the Koran and Sunna. Hence, all outcomes are not equally legitimate. Only those outcomes of political processes are legitimate that are sanctioned by the Shariah or that serve the cause of the Shariah…the primary value is Shariah and not democracy, and whosoever is willing to enforce the Shariah can claim Islamic legitimacy, whether he is a hereditary monarch, a military officer, a mullah, or a politician.

40. Daniel Pipes, "Islam and Islamism: Faith and Identity," *The National Interest* (Spring 2000): 6.

41. Even if the 10 percent estimate is low, it is difficult to believe legalists represent a majority of Muslims. Given human nature, it is probably safe to say that a portion of Muslims represent a middle ground, silent majority, with the legalists and reformers on opposite ends of the spectrum with anywhere between 10-30 percent each allowing for variations from state to state.

42. Robert E. Kaplan, "A Sense of the Tragic: Developmental Dangers in the Twenty-First Century," Reprinted from *Jerome E. Levy Occasional Paper Economic Geography and World Order*, August 2001 (Newport: the United States Naval War College): 11.

43. Ibid.

44. A wholesale adoption of the western model also fails to take into account the deeply rooted religious influence on the everyday life of many Muslims. The reality is that Islam is different from Christianity and the difference is relevant when applying a western "experiment," even a highly successful one, to an Islamic state.

45. Iran's Islamic Revolution occurred nearly 25 years ago. The result of this revolution was the creation of an "Iranian Republic" dominated by Shiite clergy. Many pundits were surprised in 1997 and again in 2001 when the people of Iran elected a reformer, Mohammod Khatima, to serve as Iran's President.

46. Wright, supra note 11: 9.

47. Wright, supra note 11: 10.

48. Ibid.: 33.

49. Ibid.: 51.

50. Ibid.: 55.

51. Soroush, supra note 1: 61.

52. Ibid.: 133-138.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. Soroush, supra note 1: 30.

56. Ibid.: 33.

57. Ibid.: 31.

58. Kaplan, supra note 42: 11.

59. Even Great Britain and the United States, nations with relatively similar cultures, politics, and economies, have developed significantly different forms of democracy.

60. Iran currently has a dualistic approach to executive power. Iran's "Republic" has a secular and religious leader. In a sense, there is a built in separation between the popular will as represented by the secular leader and the divine sovereignty represented by the spiritual leader. Soroush's religious democracy does not necessitate expunging the role of spiritual leaders. In fact, this form of governance requires a significant role for religious leaders. Successful reform in Iran will need to build on this unique relationship, rather than eliminate the role of the spiritual leader.

61. Bahman Baktiari, "Iran's Liberal Revolution," *Current History* (January 2002): 18.

62. One issue is worth mentioning prior to discussing specific U.S. policy alternatives. There is a basic and genuine distrust between many people of Islam and westerners. As President Bush asked after 9/11: "Why do they hate us?" The answer to this question is material to any long term successful policy with a state like Iran. Samuel Huntington places this distrust as a "perhaps irrational but surely historical reaction of an ancient rival [Islam] against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both." Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993): 368. This "clash of civilizations" seems to mandate confrontation between these two worlds and consequently dampens the prospects of a U.S.– Iran détente. A contrary view, Occidentalism, contends that there is no clash of civilizations and that the real conflict is with extreme forms of Islam rather than a broader conflict between Judeo-Christianity and Islam. Avishai Margalit, "Occidentalism," Reprinted by permission of *New York Review of Books*, 17 January 2002 (Newport: United States Naval War College): 7. Neither theory is overwhelmingly optimistic and both contain much peril; however, while the "class of civilizations" predicts inevitable conflict, the smaller scope of Occidentalism's "extremists" affords the opportunity to create lasting relationships with the majority, and by definition relatively moderate, leaders of Islamic states. Given the lack of a monolithic Islam, the "clash of civilization" hypothesis seems relatively simplistic. On the other hand, Occidentalism seems relatively realistic when it recognizes that there is an extreme form of Islam that hates the West, especially the United States, with a passion. This means that extreme forms of Islam are the enemy, not Islam itself and affords an opportunity for a cautious detente.

63. James A. Phillips, "The Rise of Iran's Reformers Requires a Cautious U.S. Response," 25 February 2000, http://www.heritage.org/Research/Middle east/EM653.cfm [18 September 2002]: 2. The Clinton administration waived sanctions against oil companies that invested in Iran and allowed U.S. companies to sell spare parts to Iran's airline industry.

64. Ibid.

65. Possibly empowered by the West's Cold War victory, this alternative envisions a long term win that is dependent on continued isolation of Iran.

66. It is worth noting that the "Axis if Evil" reference was pointed at regimes not people and that Bush back peddled somewhat by differentiating between Iran and North Korea on one hand and Iraq on the other in his 7 October 2002 speech regarding U.S. policy toward Iraq.

67. An additional contributor to the inability of the United States to move beyond the 1979 crisis is the Iran-contra controversy. This political event may still have a chilling effect on American political leaders.

68. Excessive troop deployments and basing are examples of military engagement that are counterproductive and destabilizing.

69. John F. Whalen, "In Search of Jihad: Toward a Policy of Constructive Engagement," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* (Winter/Spring 1998): 291.

70. Nonetheless, I suspect Soroush is willing to accept it as a price of freedom.

71. Although it is difficult to imagine a religious democracy in Iran that is as pro-United States as Iran under the Shah.