

The Indigenous and the Imported: Khatami's Iran

Culture is what remains when one no longer believes in utopia.

—Farhad Khosrokhavar and Olivier Roy
*Comment sortir d'une révolution religieuse*¹

At the bar of my hotel in Tehran—or what used to be the bar in officially dry, postrevolutionary Iran—I sip tea with a young career woman, a mechanical engineer named Jairan Jahani. Three or four times in the course of a few hours' conversation, she casually adjusts her *roosari*, the head covering that has been mandatory for women since the 1979 revolution. Jairan opts for the Benazir Bhutto look. Like that of the former Pakistani leader, her *roosari* consists of a colorful silk scarf worn well back on her head. And like many women in Tehran, Jairan would not look out of place on the right bank of Paris.

Even a few years ago, patterned silk would have been a dangerously risqué substitute for the traditional *maghna'eh*, a plain, rustic cloth that covers all but the face and drapes below the shoulders. But women such as Jairan—urban, educated, intent on looking outward—have achieved a certain accommodation with Islamic Iran. In matters of the *hejab*, the Islamic dress code, the authorities have eased off on women of modern tastes. And such women, in turn, have come to acquiesce in the wearing of scarves outside the home—an acknowledgment that for the vast majority of Iranian women, making the *hejab* compulsory has been immensely liberating.

The fortunes of the *hejab* over the past century follow the rough terrain of Iranian political history. In 1925, when Reza Khan became shah and founded the Pahlavi dynasty, he looked out upon a drastically underdeveloped nation. His response was to embark upon the most sweeping modernization program the nation had yet seen, a program entirely dictated from above. In 1936, Reza banned Islamic dress and made Western clothing man-

Patrick Smith was a correspondent abroad for many years and contributes regularly to *The Washington Quarterly*. His most recent book is *Japan: A Reinterpretation* (Pantheon, 1997; Vintage, 1998).

Copyright © 2000 by The Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology
The Washington Quarterly • 23:2 pp. 35–53.

datory. Then he enforced this edict with ruthless, still-remembered efficiency: police went through the streets ripping veils and robes from any woman dressed according to the *hejab*. Under Reza's son, who was deposed in 1979, the *hejab* was again tolerated. This was partly an accommodation to the clergy, just as Reza's ban was partly intended to suppress the clergy's influence. But under the last shah, as under his father, the *hejab* was still a badge of one's backwardness. It could hardly have been otherwise in a nation bent upon Westernizing as frantically and thoughtlessly as the Iran of the Pahlavis.

Then came the Islamic revolution—and the *hejab* is brought full circle: What was once banned is now compulsory. Post-1979, the *hejab* is intended to express not just religious commitment, but the triumph of Islamic populism over the worldly culture of the Westernized elite. In this it was a near-perfect symbol of the revolution. And what happens when all of Iran's women dress according to the *hejab*? The consequences were swiftly apparent: tens of thousands of Iranian families suddenly decide that it is acceptable to let daughters and spouses out of the house. Literacy among women rises from less than 30 percent just before the revolution to 75 percent. The university population changes shape: from about 25 percent women under the last shah, it grows to more than 50 percent women. Within a few years, women are a new presence in the workforce and the press, in the arts, and in politics. Tehran now has two women serving on its fifteen-member city council; Qom, the seat of Islamic learning 90 miles south of the capital, has one—who triumphed over several male rivals. Women were a decisive force in the 1996 elections to the *majlis*, the national assembly—and proved themselves a permanent feature of national politics in the *majlis* elections held in February this year.

From a Western perspective, there is something decidedly upside down in this brief account of the *hejab* and its journey through modern Iran. In the West, we have always taken the artifacts of the shahs—roads, factories, and refineries; chic shops and French furniture—to be the measure of modern Iran. As we understand it, these are the very currency of the modernization process; the shahs' mistake was simply to have modernized too quickly. By the same token, we ordinarily take the *hejab* to be emblematic of the suffocating, retrograde character of post-1979 Iran. This scarcely requires a second look: Iran is a pitiable nation, we conclude, a nation under wraps, whose leaders have made an even larger mistake than the shahs': they have stopped Iran in time and then tried to go backward into an inaccessible, utopian past.

Twenty years after the revolution, we are challenged to rethink these judgments. We are faced with a revolution that has proven itself to be more

than an event isolated in time; it is a living thing, with a past, a present—and a future. It is made of offices and businesses, bureaucrats and policies, agreements and debates. It has substance—texture and depth. Above all, it is self-referential. So we must ask what the Islamic revolution meant, and means now. The shahs sought to make Iran and Iranians modern by making them look modern. But not much changed—not for most women, not for most men, and not for most of Iran, either. The locus of change was very concentrated. So we must also ask, as we have not troubled to ask until now, who are the people the revolution was fought for? And then, what does “modernization” mean if it does not begin with the actual conditions under which the un-modern live?

We have always taken the Islamic revolution, a revolution of “fundamentalists,” to reflect a desire to avoid modernity—to flee the modern world in retreat. This, it turns out, was never more than a way of avoiding the true issue. Now we must recognize that the revolution was not an act of impossible flight after all. For it emerges as something we never imagined it to be. Two decades of momentous history have passed. And the revolution no longer looks like a rejection of the modern so much as a nation’s endeavor to discover a method of accepting it.

“What did the revolution give you?” the filmmaker Moshen Makhmalbaf was once asked. It was during an interview a few years ago with a correspondent from *Libération*, the Parisian daily. Makhmalbaf had been an anti-shah dissident and then a fervent Islamic revolutionary. And now, with the new state’s assistance, he has made himself into a dexterous, imaginative master of contemporary cinema. The revolution gave me what revolutions always give their people, Makhmalbaf replied, “Pride and images.”

There is no mistaking either in Iran today. Across the nation, there are images everywhere. Billboards depict soldiers and pilots set to defend the Islamic Republic, or a man prostrate in prayer, or a solitary child gazing hopefully at a glass of pure water. Vast, extravagant murals of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the revolution’s spiritual leader until his death in 1989, are painted up the sides of buildings. Others show Khomeini with Ali Khamenei, his successor, or (with or without Khomeini) Mohammad Khatami, the popular reformist who was elected president in 1997. There are so many of these images, and so much Farsi script scrawled across the nation’s walls, that after a time the images and the slogans begin to compete with one another, as if they were part of a discordant orchestra, still tuning

Women were a decisive force in the 1996 elections to the *majlis*.

its instruments before attempting symphonic harmony.

What are these images? What is the point beneath the obvious point? They are intended as mirrors, one must finally conclude. Beyond their intent as propaganda, they are put before Iran's 60 million people to show them who they are, or have become, or should become. Together they say, "This is what we Iranians look like now"—suggesting at once both confidence and an uncertainty born of the newness of self-possession. And here is where the images are most interesting, for they collide with the other legacy Makhmalbaf mentioned, the legacy of pride. For however much the revolution's leaders once intended to tell Iranians who they were, they discover now that they cannot: It is fundamental to anyone's pride to decide one's identity for oneself.

"It isn't hard for me to wear the *roosari*," Jairan Jahani says. "After a month, it's a habit." We have fallen into one of Tehran's favorite parlor games: how many women, we muse, would forget about the *hejab* if the rules were relaxed? "I would, but I'm in the minority," Jairan says. "Iranians are quite religious. My guess is that nine women out of ten still believe they should hide themselves from others." The difficulty, Jairan says, lies in not having the choice. One should observe the *hejab* because one believes in it, not simply to conform to "someone else's Islam." And then, like other Iranian women I was to meet, she compared the compulsory *hejab* with Reza Shah's ban of the *hejab*, when many Iranians—most, Jairan reminds me—were made uncomfortable.

One could conclude easily enough that Iran's revolution was not for Jairan, but for those many who favor the *hejab* and who have benefited from the law that makes it mandatory. There is some truth in this, as most people such as Jairan understand. But it is an incomplete truth. There is much at issue within Iran today. One is struck by the breadth and vigor of the nation's political conversation. And as this conversation proceeds, it is changing the essential character of the 1979 revolution—its look, so to say. What once marked a decisive, messy conclusion now emerges as a point of departure—a beginning as much as an end. The essential question posed by the revolution is changing too. In its postrevolutionary phase, Iran is less concerned with what it means to be Islamic—that has turned out to be an insufficient inquiry—than with what it means to be Iranian.

These shifts in meaning were more or less inevitable. They would have sprouted from the revolution with or without Mohammad Khatami's election to the presidency. To put it another way, Khatami's rise to power reflects political and social changes that were well under way by 1997. But Khatami has given these impulses shape and direction and advanced them as a political agenda. In so doing, he has also clarified them. At issue in

Khatami's Iran, it is not too simple to say, is the construction of public space, at home and abroad. Among Iranians, this requires a redefinition of the individual's place in society; abroad, it means redefining Iran's place in the global community.

The remarkable thing about Khatami, a 56-year-old cleric and an intellectual of wide learning, is the way he proposes to resolve these questions. He is as wary as any other Iranian, religious or secular, of "Westoxicity," as he once put it. But he equally rejects subservience to indigenous tradition. "We are by no means doomed to dissolve into modern civilization, but we cannot ignore its many great scientific, social, and political achievements," Khatami once wrote.

Why can't we transcend "today" to ... achieve a new vision, and in its shadow become the source of a new civilization which, while resting on our historical identity, and benefiting from the accomplishments of modern civilization, could inaugurate a new chapter in human life? ²

This is new thinking—or, at the very least, it is old thinking in a new context, which amounts to the same thing. We ignore it, or dismiss it, at the cost of our own understanding of the post-Cold War world. It is for such ideas that Khatami must be counted among a generation of non-Western leaders who are important not because they possess some new ideology, but because they implicitly challenge us to reevaluate the one by which we live. In the Iranian context, Khatami marks another shift, another fundamental passage—from the defensiveness and xenophobia of a wounded nation, so evident during the revolution's early phase, to the nascent confidence of a nation certain of the terms upon which it is prepared to rejoin the world.

When we began talking about Khatami and what he meant to her, Jairan became animated. Yes, Khatami had put forward a new idea, she told me, and it had earned him wide support among Iranians. "We can't be like European people," she said. "But we can be like ourselves."

The Conversation That Has Lasted a Century

In March 1890, Nasir al-Din Shah, who had reigned since 1848, conceded the production and marketing of Iranian tobacco to a Briton named G. F. Talbot for a period of 50 years. The shah was to get a quarter of Talbot's annual profits and a 5-percent dividend.³

Concessions to foreign interests were familiar enough during Nasir al-Din's reign: he handed out many. But this one, affecting a broad range of farmers, landowners, merchants, and ordinary shopkeepers, might be said to mark the beginning of modern Iranian politics. It quickly produced an alliance among the *'ulama* (the religious authorities), the *bazaaris* (the merchant

class), and the small movement of reformist intellectuals then active in Iran and in exile. In November 1891, a *fatwa*, a religious edict, advised Iranians to boycott all tobacco products. Two months later, Nasir al-Din Shah was forced to cancel his deal with Talbot.

The revolution was not an act of impossible flight after all.

The tobacco protest demonstrated certain political truths for Iranians. To oppose the shah was to oppose undue foreign influence—a reasonable enough connection for the next 90 years. To form alliances, the deepest of differences could be temporarily submerged. This can be fairly related to a principle of Shi'ite Islam, the Islam of Iran, called *taqiya*. *Taqiya* permits the Shi'ite Muslim to disavow his convictions and proclaim those of a stronger power so as to survive in adverse circumstances. One may also note the sharp distinction made in Iranian culture between external appearance and what lies

within. "The Iranian being," the writer Djavad Mojabi noted recently, "faces the inside."⁴ In such a universe, alliances are inevitably in constant flux—as they were before the tobacco protest and as they were soon after it succeeded. One may align with or against the government, or the *'ulama*, or the *bazaaris*, or the reformists. One may be an *'ulama* but secretly oppose the religious orthodoxy. Or one may be a secular nationalist but publicly support the orthodoxy of the *'ulama*. So have the various forces present in Iranian politics contended with one another the whole of the modern era.

One other useful truth was demonstrated during the tobacco protest: The *'ulama* have a considerable power to harness popular opinion, and at crucial moments they can use it to tip the political balance. It is for this that most Iranians today know the story of the protest, at least in outline. But many also know it as the moment when conundrums the nation still faces first suggested themselves in a modern context. What is the nature of political power in Iran? More specifically, what is the place of the clergy in the political structure? How will Iran be governed—by civil statutes and an elected assembly or by religious powers that preside above the law and the legislature? And where should Iranians look to resolve these issues? All of these questions burst into the open with the constitutional revolution of 1906, which gave Iran its first *majlis*. But they have never been satisfactorily answered. As a prominent writer and editor said in a recent interview, "Iranians have been engaged in the same conversation for almost 100 years."

So does the revolution of 1979 and all that has come after it gain the context necessary to understand it properly. For all its drama and violence, the shah's overthrow represented a new phase in the long, multisided struggle among Iran's contending political forces. To put it in familiar scholarly terms,

there was as much continuity in the revolution as there was change. The distinction is essential. As is well known, the political alliance that toppled the shah was exceedingly broad, with numerous submerged differences; it was only after two non-Islamic governments collapsed that the clergy consolidated its political power in Tehran. But, just as the music did not stop in 1979, it has not stopped since the clergy took its place atop the post-Pahlavi political structure. The conversation that has lasted a century continues.

Most of what is at issue in Iran today revolves around *velayat-e faqih*, the rule of clerical authority, which establishes the power of Islamic jurists above the executive and the legislature—divine law above civil law. Khomeini lectured for many years on this theme before returning from exile in early 1979. He eventually published these lectures, and the book became an essential document of the revolution. But Khomeini's position was not dogmatic. The first draft of the revolutionary constitution, written in mid-1979 and based on the 1906 constitution and that of de Gaulle's Fifth Republic, provided for a strong presidency and made no mention of the principle of *velayat-e faqih*; Khomeini approved of it. But what passed into law later that year turned this formula upside down. There would be a weakened president and a *faqih*, a supreme Islamic jurist, above him. Under the *faqih*, Iranians would be subjects, as they were under the monarchy, not citizens.

The debate over the *faqih*, his status, and his powers was heated and divisive. It was submerged but never concluded once the constitution became law—and is much in evidence again today. From *velayat-e faqih* flow all the institutions of "political Islam" in postrevolutionary Iran: clerical courts, which try transgressing ayatollahs; the Guardian Council, which is empowered to approve or disqualify political candidates based on their Islamic credentials; and so forth. Divine law has been invoked to justify everything from gender inequality to the execution of apostates over the past twenty years. It has also been used to hamper the reform movement that has been growing roughly since 1988, when the revolution turned ten. Of late it has landed numerous dissident ayatollahs in prison, notably Abdollah Nouri, a former minister in Khatami's cabinet and among the most visible figures in the reformist movement.

Many words and intricate theories have been marshaled in defense of *velayat-e faqih*—and as many in criticism of it. None of it should obscure the nature of the discourse; it is essentially an exchange between constitutionalists and "transcendentalists," not altogether unlike that in Japan during its imperial era, when the emperor's divine status and temporal power were much at issue. And in Iran today as in Japan many years ago, the debate is political, not religious. Ebrahim Yazdi, a longtime reformist and a prominent Khatami supporter, makes a critical distinction in this regard. "You cannot call Iran a theocracy. That gives the clergy too much credit," he says. "The

word is 'hierocracy.' Look it up in your Webster's: priestly rule. We are talking about the sovereignty of the clerical class."

Iran's conservative *'ulama* still control the terms of what is now a pitched political debate. But they no longer control the debate. Talk to any newspaper editor, political figure, attorney, filmmaker, feminist, or liberal ayatollah (of which there are many), and the vision of the future put before you will rest on ground unfamiliar to the Western intellect. There is no open discussion, for example, of secular nationalism—once a prominent thread in Iran's political fabric. There is no talk of separating church and state. But it is more or less impossible to engage in any political conversation in Iran today without discussing how the clergy's present position of political supremacy must be altered to make room for a pluralist society and greater individual freedom.

The oblique—and sometimes opaque—character of the current discourse reflects two factors. Most immediately, there is much that is submerged in it. No one in the reformist movement wants to damage the fragile framework for discussion that reformists have constructed under Khatami. No one wants to risk a conservative backlash—a return to the Iran of vigorous press censorship and forbidden films, an Iran that forces the silk scarves off the streets. Khatami has unleashed a tiger that he may eventually have difficulty riding—as renewed student demonstrations at Tehran University reminded him last summer. But the running theme among reformists—before the February 2000 elections and now, too, that a new *majlis* has been chosen—is careful negotiation with postrevolutionary conservatives. "Iran is a pot with the lid still on. We don't even know yet what we are capable of," says Morteza Mardeeha, a journalist and prominent reformist thinker. "But no one believes a radical approach would achieve much. The focus is on political realism—gradual steps."

More interesting—and this also shapes the current discourse—is the question of direction, where Iran is headed. Fundamentally at issue is a new notion of the relationship between religion and the state. No reformist would put it this way—although one suspects Khatami, with his large vision of things, would have no trouble with such nomenclature. But the core of the reformist project is the reimagination of a principle the West fixed in granite centuries ago. A polity in which church and state are no longer entirely discrete: This is unmapped territory in the modern era. The Iranian revolution was not Islamic in its initial phase; it became Islamic by circumstance. But in hindsight, at least, it was inevitable that Iran, in the course of making itself modern, would reconceive one of the West's most hallowed principles. Islam, as is well known, is a way of life; the Koran, filled with verses of political and legal import, does not distinguish between religion

and temporal governance. More practically, authority in Iran was dual—monarchy and mosque—from the time of the Safavid dynasty (1499-1736). None of this, moreover, was effaced by a colonial interlude. And now, something very old suggests something very new—a turn in history. It involves not only Islam's transformation of politics; it is also a question of an emerging political force transforming Islam.⁵

This is the meaning of Khatami's "politics of inclusion." It is a tactic to draw the "hierocracy" into Iran's running discussion of its future. But it is a strategy, too—an acknowledgment that a nation can advance only on the platform of its own past, not someone else's. We do not begin by making two of what we have for so long considered one. What kind of polity this approach may produce is yet to be determined. As reformists of numerous persuasions point out, no one has put his full agenda on the table—including, they strongly suspect, Khatami himself. But the direction is clear.

Clerical theorists talk about adjusting the status of the *faqih* so that he is politically accountable.

Velayat-e faqih is an electoral matter, in which people choose a certain person, for a certain period of time, to be the country's supreme political authority, and that person is responsible for how he exercises the authority vested in him.

This is the reasoning of Sheikh Mohammad Shabastari, a cleric of rank and an authority on Islamic law. Shabastari, who is also a respected professor of philosophy at Tehran University, thinks broadly. He sees Iran developing a democratic model useful in other Islamic societies. Outside the clergy, intellectuals address the question of plurality—and the place of the nonbeliever who is also a citizen—more directly. "Religion is a right, not an obligation," says Morteza Mardeeha. One hears this sentiment echoed often among reformists—who talk of a government that, if not secular, would look awfully like one. Yes, the *'ulama* should continue to assert their authority, they say—but it should be moral and asserted from Qom. "We are talking about a faint role," says Ezatollah Sahabi, a longtime leader in the nationalist movement. It is a phrase others also employ. But this, reformists acknowledge, may be as much as a generation away—not because of conservative resistance but because "society isn't ready," as Mardeeha put it.

It would be easy to conclude that Khatami's conservative opponents retain the upper hand. Prior to the elections, they were anything but shy in

Iran is less concerned with what it means to be Islamic than with what it means to be Iranian.

exercising their constitutional powers. Abdollah Nouri, who was widely expected to be elected speaker in the new *majlis*, was sentenced to five years in Evin Prison just two months prior before the polls. In January, the Guardian Council eliminated a portion of the reformist slate—as had been expected. Postelection, many dissident clerics still languish at Evin prison, a grim, sprawling complex in North Tehran, a remnant of the shah's repression. *Velayat-e faqih* remains intact as the nation's primary political principle.

Khatami's rise to power reflects political and social changes that were well under way by 1997.

None of this, however, should obscure the extent to which the conservative *'ulama* are in retreat. Their rough treatment of the reformists over the past several years has weakened their historic ties to the populace—which marks a momentous political turn. As a consequence, the conservative clergy's isolation has mounted while their political ground

has shrunk to a tiny patch. Every move they make now seems to blow back in their faces; every prison sentence creates another national hero. Iranians are much practiced at opposition—it is fundamental to the Shi'ite tradition. I was with a book publisher the morning of Nouri's sentencing. "This is a big setback—for the conservatives, not for Nouri," the publisher said. "Iranians now have another strong figure to look to, someone who didn't cave in. Whose values are reinforced—the reformists or the hardliners?" It is an excellent question. The conservatives still grip the levers of ultimate power, but their hands are tied.

One senses that the conservatives themselves are gradually grasping this truth. The Guardian Council, for instance, could have disqualified many more reformists than it did. One also gets the impression—and it is no more at this point—that some may be bargaining for nothing more now than enough time to find a graceful exit and a way back to Qom. For one thing, the clerics are eating their own, as the Nouri case surely reminded them, and the taste cannot be but bitter. "Islam is a religion of mosques, not imprisonment and torture," Yoosef Saneiee, an authoritative ayatollah and a former chief prosecutor in the Islamic courts, said a few days after Nouri's verdict was announced. For another, there is the civil society movement that stands behind Khatami. No one who has seen its fruit—particularly the reinvigorated press—can harbor any doubts as to its permanence. There is no turning back from the social change that has unfolded beneath the vast murals that decorate Iran. Together, the old images and the life beneath them suggest that Iranians have simply passed their revolutionary leaders by. "The genies are out of their bottles," writes Akbar Ganji, an outspoken jour-

nalist in the reform movement, "and the bottles that once contained them are cracked."⁶

A Mayor, a Park, a Way of Being Modern

Across from my hotel in Tehran, steep stone steps lead up a hill to a residential neighborhood and a small park called Shafagh. On a wall at the top of the steps is a bit of spray-painted scrawl concerning Tehran's former mayor, Gholamhossein Karbaschi. It says, "Karbaschi, the Amir Kabir of modern Iran." Typical of Tehran's literate graffiti, it is a reference to a curious figure in Iranian history and pays tribute to a man who exemplifies the nation's civil society movement—not just in its successes, but in the resistance it has engendered, too.⁷

Amir Kabir was born to modest circumstances and rose to become chief minister under Nasir al-Din Shah midway through the nineteenth century. He sent Iranian students abroad for the first time. He founded the nation's first college and its first national newspaper. Under him, many Western books were translated for the first time, and the first Farsi textbooks were written and published. It was a top-down endeavor, certainly, but Amir Kabir can fairly be called Iran's first modern reformist. Within a few years, his innovations landed him in conflict with entrenched interests—landowners, aristocrats, some of the *'ulama*. His enemies turned the shah against him, and in 1851 he was dismissed; then Nasir al-Din had him assassinated.

There may be some hyperbole in the scribbled notion of Karbaschi as a contemporary Amir Kabir, but not overmuch. Bearded, observant, trained in religious schools, Karbaschi built his reputation in the 1980s when, as prefect of Isfahan, he restored the old royal capital to something of its former splendor. When he was elected mayor of Tehran in 1990, the capital embraced him. At that point, it was shabby and spiritless after eight years of war with Iraq; the population, roughly five million at the revolution, would be twice that when he left office. Karbaschi set in motion a transformation that, although far from complete, has already produced extraordinary results. His endeavor was to restore and modernize all at once. And when we say "modernize," we refer not just to streets, highways, buildings, and bridges. Karbaschi also sought to give the city a modern way of life—and a modern consciousness. Then, like Amir Kabir, the mayor ran afoul of those whose interests lay not in advances but in stasis. In 1998, he was charged with embezzling public funds—an unlikely crime for one of Karbaschi's integrity and evident dedication. At this writing, he was serving a five-year sentence in Evin prison.

Karbaschi is an exceptional thinker and administrator because his vision

is large and small at the same time. This came to me atop the stairs near my hotel, after several walks through the neighborhood. Shafagh park is two blocks from the daubed wall that praises Karbaschi. It is small, a city block on all four sides. But amid its trees and shrubbery there are numerous walkways, footbridges, benches, chairs, and tables (one with an inlaid chessboard). In the middle is a pavilion that the Karbaschi administration turned into a cultural center. It has a library, a bookshop, and a hall that offers a

There was as much continuity in the revolution as there was change.

regular program of lectures, films, and concerts. Popular music—music of a kind that was forbidden not long ago—plays from speakers at an outdoor cafe. Shafagh had been a park during the shah's time, but it was not much used. Now, people use it to walk, exercise, and congregate from early morning until after dark; its programs are attended by people from all over the capital. In effect, Shafagh park has been reimaged as public

space. It was among the first parks to be so transformed after Karbaschi became mayor; now it is one among many.

What kind of city—what kind of nation—did Karbaschi see when he arrived in Tehran a decade ago? Standing in Shafagh park, or strolling through it, this is not hard to surmise. Swift, relentless urban drift had drawn almost two of three Iranians from farms and villages into Tehran and other towns and cities. These were people who had given up their old, familiar surroundings and their old ideas of belonging. Almost three-quarters of the population was under 35, more than half under 21, and for most, their parents had nothing to teach them about the world outside the front door. The only dependable point of identity for these new urban dwellers was Islam. But Islam—the Islam of the revolution, in any case—did not help them resolve immediate problems—practical problems, psychological problems. They did not know how to interact with unfamiliar neighbors. They could neither form healthy bonds nor manifest differences in a healthy fashion. In short, they had no understanding of what it meant to be part of a modern city—to be citizens. And this is what they learn in such places as Shafagh park. It is their classroom, and their subject is nothing less than themselves and how they might live in the modern world.

Shafagh and other parks are one aspect of Karbaschi's larger project. In 1991, he founded *Hamshahri* (Fellow Citizen), a municipal newspaper that quickly became the city's top seller—"a window through which we could see and understand events," as a journalist on a competing daily describes it. New food markets, bookstores, highways, apartment towers—they were all used to build and enhance public space. In 1995, Karbaschi helped found a

movement called the Servants of Reconstruction—so named for good reason. After a long period of revolution and war, the technocrats who constituted the Reconstructors understood the city itself—its geography, its infrastructure, its architecture, and its institutions—as an instrument by which Iranians could make modern citizens of themselves. The Reconstructors eventually became a critical force behind Khatami's rise and the opening of the nation's political discourse that is evident today.

By way of making Iran modern, Karbaschi accomplished more in eight years as Tehran's mayor than the shah did in a quarter-century as an unhampered monarch. He did this by beginning with what he saw in front of him, and with a clear understanding of what being modern means. The comparison is almost cruel. The shah's response to the challenge of the modern had no real center. What did it rest upon if not a primitive adoration of objects and a felt inferiority when faced with the West? The Pahlavis took great pride in the grand gardens built during their reigns. But these had nothing to do with creating modern spaces or modern Iranians. By any honest account, daily life under the last shah was ruled by fear and terror. And fear and terror, as they always do, made authentic interaction among ordinary people impossible. By the end, there was no public space in Iran; the Pahlavis had destroyed it.

So did the revolution begin with nothing by way of a civil society—scarcely more than building blocks. And among the Islamic government's most fundamental errors was its endeavor to create sacred space—the whole of Iran redefined as a place of religious observance—instead of the public space of a modern nation. One's primary relationship was with Allah, not other people. Hence, one was to remain a subject rather than become a citizen. It is quite understandable: The mosque, inaccessible to the last shah, was among the only institutions to survive him. But then the religious revolution went on to create the very conditions that now force its forward motion. It allowed for the recreation of space—inner and external both, in minds as well as on streets—that turned out to be civic as well as sacred. It provided for the recreation of a damaged culture. It released women from domestic confinement, from the private into the public. It gave rise to leaders and thinkers such as Gholamhossein Karbaschi—a generation of them, too many not to prevail.

A Post-Western World

"The politics of inclusion," let us say bluntly, is an over-freighted phrase, nearly exhausted by overuse even in its youth. One immediately suspects a lack of intellectual rigor or the old Iranian habit—a multitude of conflicting

interests papered over in the name of a strategy that has little chance of proving itself. But this is not enough to dismiss the notion; skepticism does not excuse us from serious scrutiny of what is being said. It is possible that “the politics of inclusion” has achieved cliché status precisely because it is a concept fundamental to our time. All over the world one hears assertions (and sees some evidence) that the old polarities are dissolving—between East and West, the traditional and the modern, religion and science, logic and intuition, nature and architecture, and so on. Is it not worth considering whether a politics of inclusion is of a piece with these ideas?

In Khatami’s Iran, it seems to me, a strategy based upon oneness rather than division is a defensible way forward. It is a way of engaging the past and the future at once. It is a way of addressing forthrightly one of Iran’s most fundamental challenges: to prove in practice, as it seems intent upon doing, that Islam is not inimical to democracy. It contains within it the means to make a shift Iran has failed to make from Amir Kabir’s time onward, from a top-down approach to modernization to one that is attentive to the bottom. And it offers a means of escape from the twin traps Iran has fallen into throughout this century, one after the other. To borrow Khatami’s terms, an inclusive Iran will be neither enchanted by the West nor hostile to it.⁸

Is it not inevitable that Khatami’s search for a new domestic design is reflected in a corresponding search for a new relationship with the world? The two cannot be separated, for the one is an extension of the other. Just as he proposes that adversaries at home attempt to advance together, so does he seek to put into the past Iran’s long, storied enmity and suspicion of the West. And here we come to another much (ab)used phrase: Khatami’s “dialogue of civilizations.” Yes, this notion, too, has its problems—chiefly the absence of flesh on its frame. But neither can it be fairly dismissed. For one thing, it has enormous resonance. It was not long after Khatami outlined this idea at the General Assembly in 1998 that the United Nations (UN) declared 2001 the year of civilizational dialogue. For another, it is an undeniably large approach to the post-Cold War world, a world no longer ruled by a single pair of poles. One would say it is substantially larger than anything Washington has come up with in this regard, except that Washington has come up with nothing.

Mohammad Khatami hardly appeared on Western radar before he was elected president. This is not surprising. Khatami was much a man of the revolution, but he has also been an outsider within it. It is said that the supreme authorities permitted him to run for office in 1997 because no one—including Khatami, it is also said—gave him much chance of winning. Although raised in a religious family and trained in Qom, Khatami has always shown an interest in ideas beyond the Islamic tradition. After the

seminary, he took a doctorate in philosophy at Isfahan University. Like many *'ulama*, he has spent time in the West—in Germany, in Khatami's case—and the interim left its mark. Khatami was active in the revolution, but he eventually disapproved of its direction. In 1992, his liberal policies toward the press and the arts prompted his dismissal as culture minister; the immediate occasion was the screening of *A Time for Love* and *Nights of Zayandehrud*, two Moshen Makhmalbaf films that dealt with intimacy, betrayal, and individual morality. He spent the next several years in the political desert.

Through all of this, Khatami did something that will turn out to be far more threatening to the American vision than any terrorist bomb: He read us with the utmost respect. To his thorough grounding in Islamic philosophy and law he added an examination of the West's great books—everything from Plato and Aristotle to Machiavelli, Hobbes, and the Enlightenment philosophies. He wrestled with the West's most fundamental conundrums: liberty, morality, the individual and his community. But learning from the West does not adequately describe Khatami's project; neither does the notion that he wants to combine useful aspects of indigenous tradition with the principles he found in our sacred texts. That is only the beginning; it is method. In effect, Khatami proposes to create something quite new by taking the modernizing endeavor onto a new plane—something we may aptly call a post-Western context. "We can pass through 'modernism,'" Khatami has said. "But we should not stay in it for long."⁹

Through his speeches and writings, one senses that Khatami views Iran as uniquely placed for such an essay. It has a long history of interaction with both East and West; as already noted, no colonial experience interrupted its connections to its past. Perhaps this is why Iran's cautious claim to speak for others has been so warmly received—as at the UN. This, in any case, is the context in which Khatami's dialogue should be understood. It is more than a response to Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, although that is often cited in Iran.¹⁰ It is a defense against the globalism sponsored by Anglo-American societies. In this, Khatami's dialogue resembles the 1979 revolution: It is not a way of rejecting the future but of accepting it. Its essential principle is that difference is neither to be prosecuted nor ignored; rather it is to be acknowledged and then transcended. And what is that if not a "politics of inclusion" writ in a global context?

The Iranian revolution was not Islamic in its initial phase; it became Islamic by circumstance.

The Third World as instructor of the first, the autonomous validity of non-Western experience: Khatami has his intellectual ancestors, from Rousseau and his “noble savage” through Gandhi to Frantz Fanon, the Martinican psychiatrist active in France and Algeria during the 1950s and 1960s. But none of these lived in the post-Cold War era; none was the mayor of a sprawling capital or president of a country in transformation. Khatami, like Karbaschi, can fairly be placed in the tradition of a *jâvanmard*, in Persian history the public man of intellect and integrity.¹¹ But Khatami has also engendered his share of skeptics among Iranian intellectuals, as Karbaschi did during his mayoralty. Khatami’s dialogue, his critics say, is essentially unserious. He knows as well as anyone that there is no rebuilding a dead civilization. “Dialogue of civilizations” is no more than window dressing—an appealing announcement of a nonaggressive foreign policy that spares Tehran the embarrassing duty of acknowledging its recent past.

It is possible. In North Tehran, the International Center for Dialogue Among Civilizations consists of 12,000 books, a couple of dozen desks, and a few seminars held now and again. It is still to be seen how this warren of small rooms will be filled, and with what. One suspects, however, that these rooms could grow crowded over time. For Khatami’s dialogue is a declaration of both difference and ambition, and we in the advanced nations ought not be startled by it. More startling is the survival of our assumption that the non-Western world will continue into a new era with no aspiration other than to follow indefinitely the way lit by the West. “We have watched the West and its great achievements, and since ancient times we have produced nothing,” says Mohammed Sadeq Hussein, a writer and a press attaché in the Khatami government. “We have been no more than consumers in this respect. Is it not time once again for us to add something to the world?”

Memories and Identities

Among the most revered figures in Iran today is Mohammad Mossadeq, the nationalist prime minister who was deposed in 1953 in a coup engineered by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in concert with officers loyal to the shah. Although Mossadeq was highly popular in his own time, his place in post-revolutionary Iran is nonetheless remarkable for any number of reasons. For the remainder of the shah’s reign—and for some years after the 1979 revolution—it was difficult to speak or write of Mossadeq. And among those today who hold him in high esteem, many are too young by a decade or more to have any real memory of him.

Remarkable, too, are the explanations offered for Mossadeq’s persistent presence in the imaginations of so many ordinary Iranians. As elsewhere, oil

has been freighted with symbolic import since Britain was first awarded a concession in 1901. When Mossadeq nationalized the oil industry half a century later, he showed Iranians for the first time that it was within their power to alter relations with “the foreigner,” which in Iran always means the Westerner. In the domestic context, the brief Mossadeq era—he was prime minister for two years—was a political oasis, the second time in history that Iran had attempted to live by modern institutions. His government was the first since the 1906 revolution to find some equilibrium among Iran’s contending forces. He freed Iranians from the weight of the monarchy. And he believed, above all, in the rule of law—a cornerstone of Khatami’s reformist movement. “The goals of Iranians now,” says Ezatollah Sahabi, the aging nationalist leader, “were Mossadeq’s goals, with some modifications for the passage of time.” All of this casts Mossadeq in the mold of the *jāvanmard* of Persian tradition.¹²

An inclusive Iran will be neither enchanted by the West nor hostile to it.

There are layers of meaning in Mossadeq that Iranians do not readily articulate. One has to do with identity, one with memory, and they are closely related.

One finds evidence everywhere in Iran today that a fundamental shift in consciousness is under way—an evolution from an Islamic identity to one that begins with being Iranian. This is one way, indeed, to define the nation’s current transformation. In the early years of the revolution, for instance, it was much the political fashion to salt one’s Farsi with Arabic vocabulary. This is now no longer in evidence; interest in Arabic, language of the Koran, has fallen precipitously. At the same time, Iranians are palpably curious about their pre-Islamic past, the past of Persepolis and the great emperors. Hardly a day passes without a small news item covering an archaeological dig, the restoration of an ancient site, or the discovery of a new one in the desert. This is the past the Pahlavis liked to dwell upon—so alienating ordinary Iranians from it. Now it is reclaimed. To put the matter in psychiatric terms, it is as if we are witnessing the reintegration of a long-disordered personality. And it is not hard to see where the figure of Mossadeq—a nationalist but opposed to the shah, a secular thinker who had no quarrel with Islam—fits into this process.

This brings us to Mossadeq’s place in the collective memory. Thirty-three years after his death, 20 after the revolution, he gives Iranians a chance to look back at where they have been while keeping within their own frame of reference. He allows them to contemplate democracy and their aspirations

without thinking of someone else's history. It is not unlike the place Sukarno occupies in post-Suharto Indonesia, a figure who stands for a disrupted experiment now resumed. Each nation has its own narrative of success and failure, its own inherited memory, and it is enough. As Frantz Fanon once put it in a different context, no Iranian must any longer "experience his being through others."¹³

Americans would do well to consider these matters of identity and history. To see Iran's revolution in its historical context would allow them to understand it better than they have: the violence, the excesses—and the inevitability of it. Revolutions are rarely neat, well-managed affairs with swift, predictable outcomes. Understanding this would also help Americans recognize that the change in consciousness that occurs in Iran today deserves their applause. I do not doubt that Washington's relations with Tehran will change in coming years. Khatami has made his views plain on this point, and the impulse to move forward is evident in the White House, if not on Capitol Hill. But the United States is already late, for the simple reason that it remains lost in a certain, well-circumscribed version of the past. As things stand today, the sanctions Washington continues to insist upon now isolate the United States more than Iran. Yes, Americans have historical grievances. But so do Iranians. And as they seem to understand better than Americans, history is no excuse for failing to recognize the arriving future. Neither history nor memory began in 1979. Iran is a nation of 650,000 square miles. The U.S. embassy in Tehran accounts for very little of it.

Notes

1. Farhad Khosrokhavar and Olivier Roy, *Comment sortir d'une révolution religieuse* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1999), 16. The translation is that of the author.
2. Mohammad Khatami, "Tradition, Modernity, and Development," in *Islam, Liberty and Development* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Institute of Global Cultural Studies, State University of New York, 1998), 37. Khatami's other book in English, a collection of speeches, *Hope and Challenge* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Institute of Global Cultural Studies, State University of New York, 1998).
3. Although I have drawn historical detail from numerous texts, three bear mentioning: Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution: 1906-1911* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Nikki R. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981).
4. Mojabi, a prolific poet, novelist, and journalist, offered this remark at a talk sponsored by the Asia Society in New York, November 1, 1999.
5. See Khosrokhavar and Roy, *Comment sortir d'une révolution religieuse*, especially chapter 2, "Un islam chamboule," and chapter 3, "Le post-islamisme et le débat intellectuel," 42-116.

6. Akbar Ganji, "The Release of Devils: Putting Giants in Bottles," *Asr-eh Azadegan*, November 18, 1999, p. 1.
7. While this account of Karbaschi's reforms is based on my own interviews and observations, I have also made use of Fariba Adelkhah's insightful book, *Etre moderne en Iran* (Paris: Karthala, 1998). It is now available in an excellent translation by Jonathan Derrick, *Being Modern in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). I have further drawn upon Kaveh Ehsani, "Municipal Matters," in *Pushing the Limits: Iran's Revolution at Twenty*, *Middle East Report*, No. 212, 29, no. 3 (fall 1999): 22-27.
8. Enchantment and hostility are two poles Khatami described in "Religion in the Contemporary World," a lecture delivered in June 1995 at Allameh Tabatabaiee University in Tehran. The translation is kindness of Mitra Behnam of Tehran.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations?: The Debate* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1993; W.W. Norton, 1996). Huntington's thesis was expanded in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). For an example of the Iranian response, see Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "The Contestation of Civilizations and Interreligious Dialogue," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* XI, no. 3 (fall 1999): 338-361.
11. See Adelkhah (Derrick, trans.), *Being Modern in Iran*, chapter 2.
12. A contemporary analysis of Mossadeq's place in Iranian history was published to popular acclaim in Ali Rezagholi, *The Sociology of Eliticide: Gha'em Magham, Amir Kabir, and Mossadeq, A Sociological Interpretation of the History of Totalitarianism and Backwardness in Iran* (Tehran: Nay Publications, 1998). The book is now in its fifteenth printing.
13. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks: The Experiences of a Black Man in a White World* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 109.