

This is Who We Are: The Politics of Identity in Twentieth Century Iran

**A Monograph
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AY 2010

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 15-04-2010		2. REPORT TYPE SAMS Monograph		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) July 2009 – May 2010	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE This is Who We Are: The Politics of Identity in Twentieth Century Iran				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Major Thomas E. Harris (U.S. Army)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) 250 Gibbon Avenue Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-2134				8. PERFORMING ORG REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Foreign Military Studies Office & Command and General Staff College Director, FMSO 731 McClellan Ave. Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-1350				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) FMSO / CGSC	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for Public Release; Distribution is Unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT Since 1925, Iranian governments purposefully shaped the Iranian national identity in an attempt to socially prioritize membership in nationalist and religious social groups, over others such as ethnicity or profession. Further, successive Iranian governments have portrayed the United States and other Western nations as specific examples of what Iranians should <i>not</i> be and the ideals they should <i>not</i> follow. Although these governmental efforts to change Iranian identity and narrative succeeded for many years, a growing number of Iranian citizens now reject it. In particular, Iran's youngest generation refuses to accept many aspects of this "artificial" identity their government has thrust upon them, preferring to seek their own alternatives. Iranian government officials have continued to blame the Western Powers for Iran's ills, accusing the West of attempting to corrupt the country from within through "cultural invasion." The government of Iran uses specific Islamic principles as justification for continued, draconian efforts to steer the identities of their younger generations back into alignment with the Islamic Revolution of 1979.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Iran; Iranian Government; Sharia Law; Identity Politics; Identity Theory; Identity Conflict; Ayatollah Khomeini; Iran-Iraq War; Westruckedness; Cultural Invasion; Reza Khan; Mohammed Reza Pahlavi; Islamic Revolution					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: (U)			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT (U)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 65	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Stefan J. Banach COL, U.S. Army
a. REPORT (U)	b. ABSTRACT (U)	c. THIS PAGE (U)			19b. PHONE NUMBER (include area code) 913-758-3302

SCHOOL OF ADVANCED MILITARY STUDIES

MONOGRAPH APPROVAL

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Title of Monograph: This is Who We Are: The Politics of Identity in Twentieth Century Iran

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Abstract

This is Who We Are: The Politics of Identity in Twentieth Century Iran by Major Thomas E. Harris, United States Army, 43 pages.

Since 1925, Iranian governments purposefully shaped the Iranian national identity in an attempt to socially prioritize membership in nationalist and religious social groups, over others such as ethnicity or profession. Further, successive Iranian governments have portrayed the United States and other Western nations as specific examples of what Iranians should *not* be and the ideals they should *not* follow.

During the Pahlavi Dynasty, Reza Khan and his son Mohammed Reza Pahlavi instituted sweeping government and social changes. These changes aimed to create a unified Iranian identity based on Iran's largest ethnic group, Persians. Although the Pahlavis' initiatives largely succeeded in increasing the relative importance of Iranian nationalism, they did so at the expense of Iranian's "Islamic" identities. In other words, the Pahlavis increased the relative importance of a national Iranian identity, but infringed upon and decreased the importance of Iranian citizens' religious identities. This created a backlash within the clerical and intellectual communities that greatly contributed to Mohammed Reza's overthrow in 1979.

Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his clerical followers instituted a religious autocracy, which subjugated civil law to Sharia or Islamic Law. Khomeini used Islam, the structure of the new Iranian government, and an identity-based conflict with Iraq as integral parts of a strategy aimed at restoring the importance of Islamic identity to Iranian citizens. In doing so, Khomeini made the battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein an integral part of the Iranian narrative. As the war began to exhaust Iran politically and economically, Khomeini turned to a policy of opposition with the United States to continue to unite Iran against external threats and distract from his regime's authoritarian domestic policies.

Although these governmental efforts to change Iranian identity and narrative succeeded for many years, a growing number of Iranian citizens now reject it. In particular, Iran's youngest generation refuses to accept many aspects of this "artificial" identity their government has thrust upon them, preferring to seek their own alternatives. Iranian government officials have continued to blame the Western Powers for Iran's ills, accusing the West of attempting to corrupt the country from within through "cultural invasion." The government of Iran uses specific Islamic principles as justification for continued, draconian efforts to steer the identities of their younger generations back into alignment with the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Finally, understanding Iranian identity and its components can only better prepare the United States Government in its dealing with the Islamic Republic. All instruments of national power could potentially benefit from identity-based analysis. This is true of U.S. foreign policy towards other countries as well.

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Introduction

...social and economic analyses have commonly disregarded the essential role of “people’s sense of identity with others” on what they value and how they behave.
-Nikki Slocum-Bradley, Promoting Conflict or Peace Through Identity

Why do governments make the decisions they do? This question has prompted the creation of entire fields of study – political science in its many forms, and at least as many social science theories. This monograph aims to apply the question to the Islamic Republic of Iran through an altogether different lens - that of identity theory.

The author proposes to explain certain historical Iranian foreign and domestic policy decisions in terms of both the formation and protection of Iranian national identity. This monograph explores the specific aspects of Iranian identity that shaped certain policy decisions, and examines the context surrounding them. An integral part of this analysis is consideration of the components of Iranian identity and the tensions between different Iranian social groupings. Events that provide insight into this subject include the modernization programs of the Pahlavi dynasty, the intellectual movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the resulting Iranian Constitution, the Iran-Iraq war and contemporary social conflict within the Islamic Republic of Iran itself.

Exploration and analysis of these events and the context surrounding them led the author to conclude that, since 1925, Iranian governments purposefully shaped Iranian identity in an attempt to prioritize membership in nationalist and religious social groups over others, such as ethnicity or profession.

A brief explanation of Identity Theory

This proposal begs the question “what is identity and how is it relevant?” Identity theory is an emerging, multi-disciplinary field that incorporates concepts from psychology, sociology, political science, and geography. In simple terms, it is an explanation of *who people feel they are* in terms of belonging to certain social groups and, more importantly, *what that membership means* to them. A complete discussion of identity theory is far beyond the scope of this monograph, though a review of certain key terms and concepts within this expansive field is necessary to continue.

Psychologist Nikki Slocum-Bradley offers, “‘Identities’ are meanings – labels, categories, symbols, and so forth – applied to persons or other narrated actors in specific contexts.”¹ Slocum-Bradley’s definition allows a single actor to possess multiple identities. For example, a person may describe himself in one instance as “Iranian,” one distinct identity, and in another as “Muslim,” a different identity.² It is worth noting that although these two identities are distinct, and both represent different *meanings*, they are not incompatible with each other, and both refer to the same *actor*.

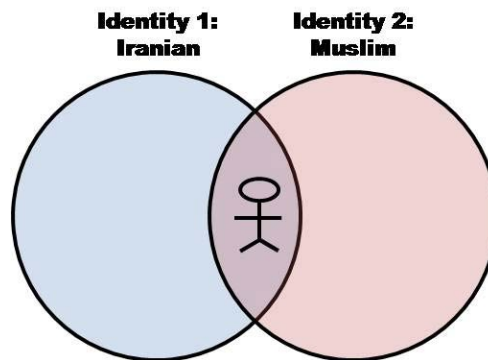


Figure 1: Slocum Bradley’s concept: a single actor with multiple identities.

¹ Nikki Slocum-Bradley, *Promoting Conflict or Peace Through Identity*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008, 5.

²Ibid.

Geographer Anssi Paasi describes identity as "... a form of categorization, where boundaries are used to distinguish one areal domain or social collectivity ('us') from others."³ To Paasi, identity is *membership* in social and/or geographical groupings, defined in terms of "who I am/who we are," and *differentiation* from other social groupings, expressed in terms of "who I am not/who we are not."⁴ In other words, Paasi defines identity through boundaries that serve to describe actors or groups of actors by bounding the limits of the social groupings to which they belong, while at the same time separating them from other social groupings to which they do not belong. A person who might feel himself to be a part of the group commonly called "southerners" could thus describe himself in two ways: he could be a "southerner," meaning who he is, or what group he feels he belongs to, or someone who is not a "northerner," i.e. who he is not. Slocum-Bradley echoes this when she describes how identity can contribute to violence between social groups: "...violence between social groups... necessarily entails the construction of a certain perception of one's own group and that of the "other."⁵ The introduction of the "other," or a group to which an actor does not belong, or feels no affinity towards, makes the definition of identity through opposition possible. Actors may thus reinforce the bonds of their own social groupings by emphasizing the differences or boundaries that separate them from these "others."

What Slocum-Bradley and Paasi do not address, however, is a concept of *priority of membership*. While both authors agree actors may possess multiple identities, neither addresses the strength of association, or "sense of belonging" an actor might feel toward a particular group *relative to another*. In other words, neither speaks to how a person might feel more affinity

³Anssi Paasi, "Bounded Spaces in the Mobile World: Deconstructing 'Regional Identity'". *TESG: Journal of Economic and Social Geography*, vol. 93, number 2, 2002, 139.

⁴C. Rudolph, "Sovereign and Territorial Borders in a Global Age." *International Studies Review*, 2005, 14.

⁵Nikki Slocum-Bradley, *Promoting Conflict or Peace Through Identity*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008, 1.

toward one social group over another one. In our earlier example, Actor A might feel he is “Iranian” first, and “Muslim” second. He might just as easily feel the reverse.

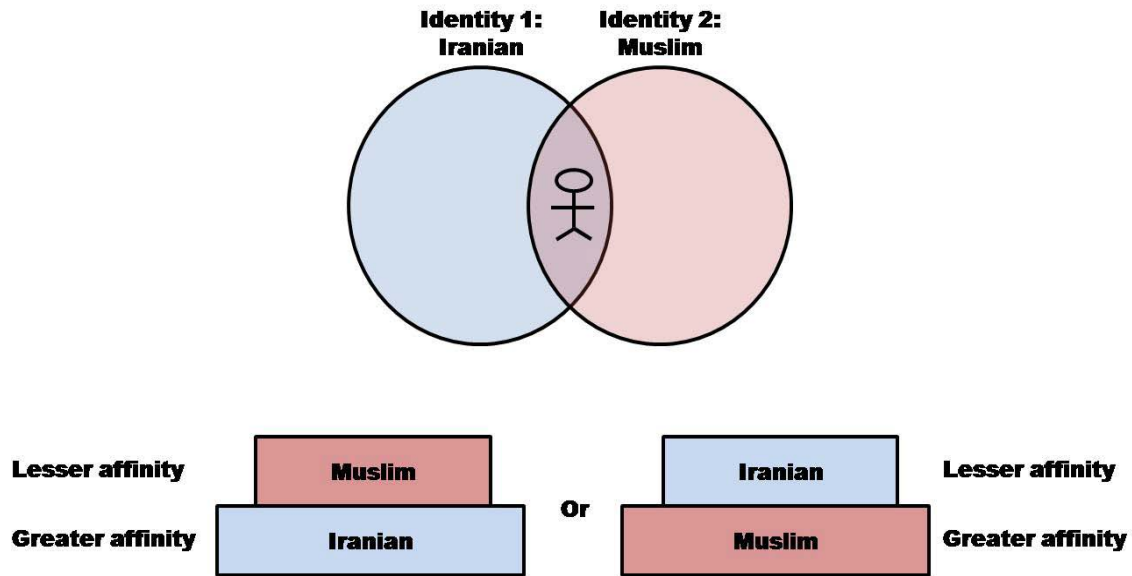


Figure 2: Priority of Membership. Is this person an “Iranian” first or a “Muslim” first?

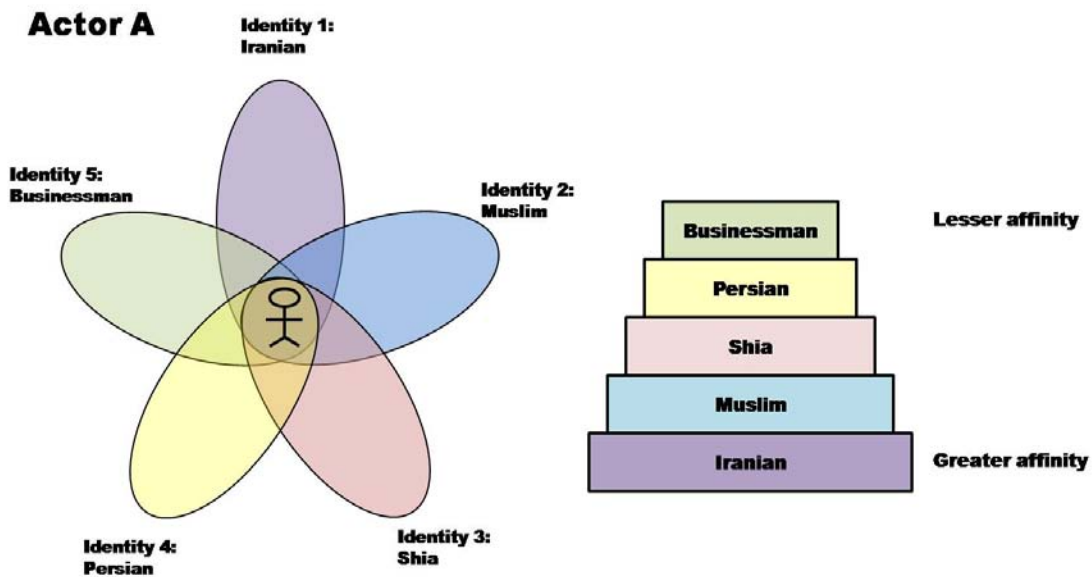


Figure 3: A more complex example of membership and priority.

Membership in, or affinity towards, social groups does not provide a complete explanation of an identity in and of itself. Indeed, considering an actor as a member in a social group provides only a convenient label, one that is meaningless without an accompanying

description of *what it means* to be a member of that group. This deeper meaning takes the form of a *narrative*. As Paasi describes them, “The construction of meanings of communities and their boundaries occurs through *narratives*: [author’s emphasis] ‘stories’ that provide people with common experiences, history, and memories, and thereby bind these people together.”⁶ Paasi’s definition of narrative continues and expands to characterize narrative not only as a description, but also, as a social process: “Narratives should not be comprehended only as modes of representation, but also as discourses that crucially shape social practice and life,” and “...it is through narratives that [people] constitute social identity.”⁷ Paasi thus depicts a narrative as a perpetually evolving, socially determined, “story-like” description meant to explain the meaning of a particular identity. One concludes neither narrative nor identity is fixed in nature. Social discourse can and does change them over time.

If one follows the premise that identities and narratives are socially malleable, it seems logical that priority of membership in identities is also socially malleable. In other words, if social forces, deliberate or unintentional, can affect the groupings to which an actor feels he belongs, can they also affect the strength of the affinity he feels towards those groups, even to the point of altering their priority? For example, might a person feel he is an “American” first and a “Virginian” second at a certain time in his life, and also feel he is a “Virginian” first and an “American” second at a different time? The author proposes Iranian governments have manipulated the national identity of their citizens through successfully “reordering” these relative priorities.

⁶ Anssi Paasi, "Boundaries as Social Processes: Territoriality of in the World of Flows." *Boundaries, Territories, and Postmodernity, special Issue of Geopolitics*, 2002, 75.

⁷ Ibid.

Between Personal and National Identity

To review, a specific actor's identity consists of membership in certain social groups and the corresponding narratives that give members of those groups a certain meaning. These *component identities* and narratives interact, complement, and sometimes compete through differing morals, norms, and beliefs associated with them and contained within each *component narrative*. When coupled with the concept of the "other," or groups the actor views as different, and a sense of priority, these component identities and narratives form a collective whole that the author describes as a *personal identity*.⁸ In general terms, this is a "holistic description" of "who a person is," and in some aspects might be thought of as an "over-arching" identity and narrative (see figure 4).

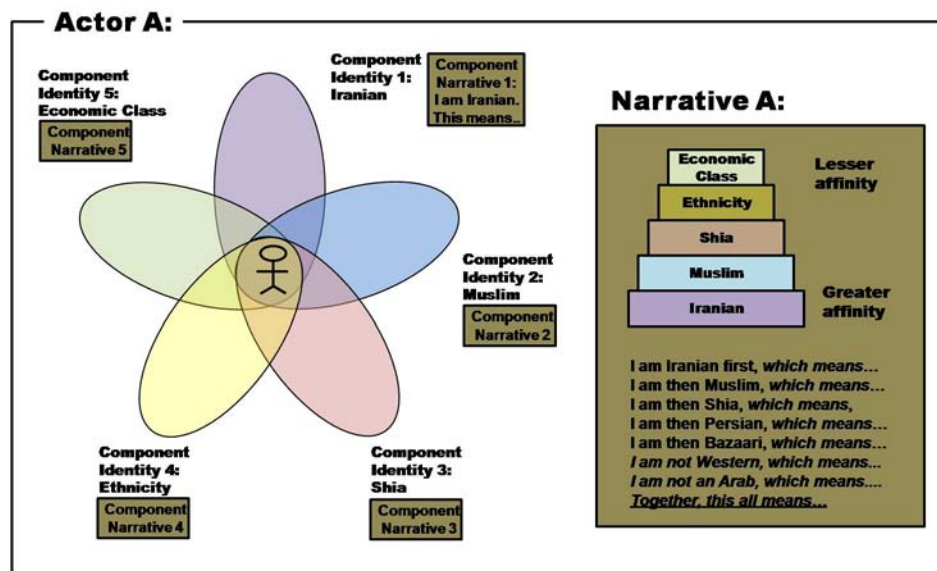


Figure 4: The personal identity of fictional "Actor A," composed of several component identities and narratives, including a personal narrative.

⁸ The terms component identity, component narrative, personal identity, and personal narrative, as far as the author's knowledge extends, are not widely used terms in identity theory. The author finds it useful to describe national identity as a component of a larger, more complex psychological construct, one's own "sense of self."

It is worth noting that a change in these components logically produces a change in the whole. A change in actor A's "Muslim" identity may change where it appears on his priority "scale." For example, it may place it in a position of greater priority than his "Iranian" component identity. In this sense, personal identity is an "identity composed of identities," and personal narrative a "narrative composed of narratives" which incorporates the priority of membership of all component identities. However, one must not view personal identity and narrative as the sum of all parts. This notion fails to capture the tensions inherent in so many possible identities interacting with so many others. Additionally, personal narrative is more than an addition of all the meanings of component narratives. It takes into account the relative priority of an actor's component identities and generates a new meaning of its own. In essence, it completes the fragment "when considered together, all of this means..."⁹ Thus, the difference between personal and national identity is significant: national identity and narrative form only a part of personal identity and narrative.

Thus, by manipulating the relative priority of a person's component identities, and selectively altering the narratives, or meanings of these component identities, it is possible to make deliberate changes to an actor's personal identity and narrative. If one accepts Passi's proposition that social discourse determines the meanings of membership in these social groupings, it seems logical that these changes take place across the whole of the group.¹⁰ In other words, if one wished to change the meaning of the "Iranian" social grouping, it seems logical the change in meaning would apply to everyone considering themselves "Iranian." Additionally, changing the "Iranian" *component* identity and narrative would mean a change in *personal*

⁹ When considered in these terms, personal identity expresses itself as a complex, nonlinear system. While an interesting discussion in itself, the salient point for this monograph is this: changes to component identities sometimes have unexpected and disproportionate outcomes to the "whole" of personal identity. In other words, a small change to a single component identity might produce a wholesale change in personal identity and narrative.

¹⁰ Paasi, 75.

identity – for everyone in that social group. Throughout the twentieth century, successive Iranian governments managed to do exactly that. By cultivating a sense of nationalism that rose above ethnic boundaries, and by linking key aspects of Shi’a Islam to that nationalism, Iranian governments changed the priority and meaning of the “Iranian” and “Islamic” component identities of their citizens. They were thus able to affect the personal identity and narrative of large sections of Iranian society. While it was certainly not the first event that affected Iranian identity, this monograph begins with an examination of the Pahlavi dynasty’s efforts of modernization, which successfully promoted Iranian nationalism, if at the expense of many religious aspects of Iranian identity.

The Historical Formation of Iranian Identity

The Pahlavi Dynasty and “The West” as “The Other.”

It is tempting to consider Ayatollah Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution of 1979 as the “birth” of modern Iranian national identity. While undeniably influential, Khomeini was not the first Iranian head of state to manipulate Iranian national identity. Reza Khan, father of Khomeini’s opponent Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, attempted to make deliberate changes to Iranian national identity more than fifty years before the Islamic Revolution took place.

In 1925, Reza Khan took power from Ahmad Shah Qajar, ending the Qajar dynasty.¹¹ After the legislature crowned him Shah, Reza Khan, now referring to himself as Reza Shah, began several government programs aimed at modernizing the country, including the construction of the Trans-Iranian railway, a national road system, and mandatory military service. He also initiated widespread changes to the nation’s educational system. Reza Shah’s educational reforms included the establishment of Tehran University and a state sponsored system of primary

¹¹ The title “Shah” is roughly equivalent to “Emperor” in English. Modern historical and news agencies typically refer to Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, Reza Khan’s oldest son by his second wife, when they use the phrase “the Shah of Iran.” Mohammed Reza Shah ruled Iran from the time of his father’s death in September 1941 until he fled Iran on 11 February, 1979.

schools.¹² Replacing a system of more traditional, locally run religious schools, called *maktab-khaneh*, these new elementary schools taught a nationally standardized curriculum in Farsi, not local or ethnic dialects. Similarly, the new curriculum emphasized Persian culture, history, and customs, replacing the local and ethnic orientation of the older *maktab-khaneh* system.¹³ Thus, Reza Shah's new elementary education system actively sought to cultivate a Persian identity by replacing local and ethnic languages and customs with the Persian language, culture, and history. A recent RAND corporation study commented, "Education became the key tool in the Shah's efforts to merge Iran's national identity with that of its largest ethnic group, Persians."¹⁴

Reza Shah's modernization efforts did not stop with education and military service. One of his first initiatives replaced Sharia Law with the Swiss Civil Code, which caused significant unrest with the country's clergy.¹⁵ Reza Khan also banned many types of traditional Islamic dress, forcing women to remove their veils in the name of "emancipating" them; and outlawing public wear of clerical robes. This, quite predictably, brought him into even more conflict with the clerical community, who viewed his reforms as inherently un-Islamic, decadent, and a threat to traditional Muslim values.¹⁶ Here, one begins to see a tension that would shortly become all too familiar in the Middle East - a competition between the desire to maintain traditional Islamic values and a desire to share in the economic prosperity brought by technological innovation from the West. In the eyes of many Iranian citizens, modernization became linked to "the West," and the perception that western culture was dangerous, decadent, and at odds with basic principles of

¹² Keith Crane, Rollie Lal, and Jeffrey Martini. Iran's Political, Demographic, and Economic Vulnerabilities. (Santa Monica, The RAND Corporation), 46.

¹³ Ibid, 37 and 45.

¹⁴ Ibid, 46.

¹⁵ Khosravi, 9.

¹⁶ Crane, et. al., 9.

Islam spread rapidly.¹⁷ Expressed in terms of identity, this conflict served to do two things. First, it linked two social narratives together: “modern” and “western” became difficult to separate for many Iranian citizens. Second, it placed both groups firmly within the Iranian perception of “other,” especially amongst the country’s Islamic clergy. Anthropologist and Iranian expatriate Shahram Khosravi offers the following: “...‘modernization’ became synonymous with accepting Western habits, which were seen to be based on mass consumption. Thus, the marketing and consumption of Western goods became salient features of ‘modern’ Iran.”¹⁸ The concept of “The Modern West” as the “other” gradually became more pronounced, much more widespread, and more specific as well.¹⁹

The author concludes that Reza Shah’s reform and modernization efforts were a deliberate attempt to increase the priority of his citizens’ membership in the social circle labeled “Iranian,” while at the same time merging it with a “Persian” component identity. Reza Shah aimed to prioritize this “Iranian/Persian” identity over that of other ethnicities and religion, through mandatory military service, “modern” dress codes, and education of all Iranian youth using a common language and a common history –that of the Persian ethnicity. However, Reza Shah’s attempts at modernization greatly infringed upon the “Muslim” identity of his citizens. By publicly denying them the chance to display their faith through traditional dress, he attempted to remove a visual declaration of faith countless Muslims in Iran engaged in every day. In terms of identity theory, for one group to gain priority of membership, another must lose, and to the clergy’s great disappointment, Reza Shah chose nationalism over religion and other “subnational

¹⁷ Although perhaps a false choice, this perception spread much wider than the borders of Iran. The competition between “tradition” and “modernity” was a phenomenon that occurred across the entire region of the Middle East, and continues today. Although it was by no means new in the 1920s, Reza Khan’s initiatives added substantial fuel to the fires of this debate within the borders of Iran.

¹⁸ Khosravi, 9.

¹⁹ Crane, et. al., 8.

loyalties.”²⁰ Thus, as membership in an “Iranian” social group gained in relative importance, perceived membership in the “Islamic” groups declined. The author concludes the Iranian national identity Reza Shah was attempting to cultivate in the 1930s might look like this: “We are Iranian – although we come from many different backgrounds, we first share a common Persian culture and history. We are Muslims, but we are Iranians first. We are modern, capable, and professional.”

Reza Shah’s son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, came into power following his father’s forced abdication during the Second World War. Mohammed Reza continued his father’s efforts to modernize the nation of Iran and forge it into a modern world power. A believer in Iranian supremacy in the Persian Gulf, the Shah proposed no external powers should intervene in the region.²¹ “As the largest and most powerful Gulf country, [the Shah] believed Iran had a moral, historical, and geopolitical obligation to ensure stability in this region not only for regional benefits but also for the good of the world.”²² Increasing Iranian oil revenues enabled change at an increasingly greater pace than before. The Shah’s most memorable initiative, the “White Revolution,” extended the right to vote to women, redistributed land from the wealthier landowners into the hands of the lower classes, and continued to reform the Iranian educational system, engaging the armed forces to continue the improvements his father had begun.²³ The White Revolution also extended rights to workers, who soon became involved in the workings of Iranian businesses through sharing ownership and profits. Mohammed Reza Pahlavi also privatized much of Iran’s previously nationalized industrial sector, hoping private competition would increase productivity, thus increasing profits and boosting the country’s overall economic

²⁰ Crane et. al., 46.

²¹ Efraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988*. Westminster: Osprey Publishing, Ltd., 2002, 7.

²² Ibid.

²³ Con Coughlin, *Khomeini's Ghost: The Iranian Revolution and the Rise of Militant Islam*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2009, 100-103.

capacity.²⁴ The Shah aimed all his efforts at one singular goal: to modernize Iran and make its presence on the world stage undeniable.²⁵

During Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's rule, Western modes of dress became increasingly popular, especially among the upper and middle classes. The divide between tradition and modernity appeared to widen, with the urban middle and upper classes opposed by the poorer urban and rural citizens. The Shah's extravagant lifestyle and strong associations with Western powers, especially the United States, did little to endear him to the lower classes or the clerical establishment, something only exacerbated by his closure of numerous religious schools and foundations.²⁶ A U.S. and British-backed coup in 1953 did nothing to improve the situation. The coup attempted to restore the Shah to power, and initially failed. A second attempt succeeded in ousting Prime Minister Mohammed Mossaddegh and restoring the Shah's rule, though Iranian opposition groups were certain the Western powers were involved. As RAND analyst Keith Crane commented, "Continuing U.S. and British support for the Shah's autocratic regime from 1953 until 1979 produced a deep suspicion of Western interventions. Many [Iranians] considered the U.S. involvement in the return of the Shah in 1953 justification of the taking of U.S. hostages in 1979."²⁷ This, coupled with the Shah's increasingly heavy-handed responses to civil unrest, and a tendency toward more and more autocratic rule, left the Shah with little political support in the later years of his reign.²⁸ This tendency toward autocracy and brutal policy enforcement also

²⁴ Misagh Parsa, *States, Ideologies & Social Revolutions*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 56-58.

²⁵ Efraim Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism: A History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, 220.

²⁶ Parsa, 134.

²⁷ Crane, et.al., 8.

²⁸ Parsa, 135-136.

polarized the clergy against him, and left the poorer Iranian citizens disillusioned and open to voices advocating social change.²⁹

The author asserts that although the Pahlavi dynasty's policies were having an effect, both Reza Khan and his son Mohammed Reza seemed oblivious to certain key aspects of identity theory. By attempting to change the "Persian" or "Iranian" component identities and narratives of their citizens, the Pahlavis risked unintentional and possibly disproportionate changes to the *personal identities and narratives* of all Iranian citizens. Additionally, policies of "Westernization" seemed to fail to consider the inherent tensions between the "modern" nationalistic identity they attempted to cultivate and the long-standing "Islamic" identities many Iranians of the time felt. Lastly, the Pahlavis seemed ignorant of the nature of Passi's proposed social discourse – the fact that identities and the narratives associated with them are determined socially. In other words, though they were attempting to shape component identities and narratives of their citizens, the Pahlavis did not understand the changes these attempts caused in other component identities and the personal identities of their citizens as whole. These changes resulted from tensions between the "national and modern" identities the government and their modernization programs espoused, and the "traditional, Islamic" component identities that were an integral part of many Iranians' personal identities. Changes to the Iranian narrative were also resulting from widespread social discourse- just as Paasi described, people were making their own determinations of what it meant to be "Iranian" and "Muslim."

Ironically, this social discourse was taking place throughout the entire "modernization" period. As opposition to the Shah began to build significantly, with it came an intellectual movement that questioned the authenticity of those embracing his policies of "Westernization." Over time, noted intellectuals began to build a description of the West as Iran's "other." This intellectual movement, coupled with an equally powerful clerical movement, advocated a return

²⁹ Parsa, 135-136.

to more “traditional” values. These two movements together would provide much of the fuel for the fires of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and perfectly represented the social discourse the Pahlavis seemed to altogether discount.

The Ideologues of the 1960s and 1970s: Sickness from the West

The collision of Westernization and traditional Islamic values did not reach explosive proportions overnight. Driven by the idea of “Western cultural invasion,” the tension between the two concepts built gradually, eventually emerging as the single dominant theme of political, intellectual, and religious discourse in the 1960s and 1970s.³⁰ Prominent intellectuals of the time wrote and spoke extensively on the subject. Two of the most noteworthy were Jalal Al-e Ahmad, who formally proposed the concept of “Westruckness,” or being infatuated with the West, and Dr. Ali Shariati, who also wrote extensively on the subject.³¹ Both authors represented the popular intellectual discourse of the time and criticized the Shah’s policies of Westernization.³² Ironically, Shariati also criticized the Iranian clergy, accusing them of inauthenticity and complicity with the rich, westernized upper classes.³³ Al-e Ahmad and Dr. Shariati profoundly influenced the Islamic Revolution that followed. These two authors, reflecting the opinions of the overall intellectual movement, advocated “...an ideology of nativism... a yearning for ‘purity’ which had been demolished by Westernization.”³⁴

In 1962, Jalal Al-e Ahmad published the book *Gharbzadegi*. Wildly popular with those opposed to Westernization, Al-e Ahmad formally proposed “Westruckness” in terms of an actual

³⁰ Khosravi, 21.

³¹ “Westruckness” is one of several English translations of the Farsi word *Gharbzadegi*. It has also been translated as “Occidentosis,” “Westotoxicity,” “Westitis,” and “Westernitis.” For simplicity’s sake, the author will use Khosravi’s translation – “Westruckness,” as it seems to capture the concept and connotation most accurately. Although the term existed before Al-e Ahmad’s book, its use was much less widespread.

³² Parsa, 137.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Khosravi, 21.

illness: “I speak of being afflicted with ‘westitis’ the way I would speak of being afflicted with cholera... Have you ever seen how wheat rots? From within? We are dealing with a sickness, a disease imported from abroad and developed in an environment receptive to it.”³⁵ Al-e Ahmad continued his description, portraying “Westrucked” men as inauthentic, capable of only mimicking the West. He also portrayed them as obsessed with appearances and overly concerned with consumption of Western goods.³⁶ Al-e Ahmad’s depiction of Western culture as an infection endangering the “health” of Iran reflected how deeply at risk many Iranians felt their culture was.

Dr. Shariati wrote in similar terms of the “prevention of vice,” viewing Western culture as sinful. Shariati condemned the West’s “cultural imperialism,” “Westruckedness” in general, and the dictatorship of the Shah. He shared Al-e Ahmad’s views of the West’s effects on Iranian culture, proposing that Western “worldliness” and nihilism promoted individual hedonism, stripped cultures of their authenticity and turned human beings into “consumer animals.”³⁷ Shariati was openly angry at the effect this “consumerism” had on Iranian women, claiming it turned them into “European Dolls.”³⁸ In an argument that reflected Karl Marx’s influence, Shariati believed that the West aimed to enslave the East by first turning it into a consumer of its goods. In doing so, the East would disconnect from its culture, “...turning it into an identity-less consumer and slave of the West.”³⁹

Thus, many Iranians felt Westernization, for all the wealth and reforms it brought, represented an insidious threat to their identity. In terms of being truly “Iranian” and “Muslim,” many felt Westernization was at odds with the values of both, and carried with it the risk of a total

³⁵ Khosravi, 21.

³⁶ Ibid, 34.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

loss of these deeply seated component identities.⁴⁰ To highly respected academics such as Al-e Ahmad and Dr. Shariati, technology, change, and profit also brought a culture of decadence, consumerism, and a way of life that threatened to fragment and destroy their nation's sense of self⁴¹. At its core, the Shah's policy of Westernization was a threat to the way of life that was Islam, leading Khomeini himself to declare, "There was nothing left of Islam; there was only the name."⁴² Iranians developed a pervasive fear of the Shah's Westernization policies, a fear that gradually grew into resentment and open hostility. If modernization meant re-writing the Iranian narrative in terms that were wholly incompatible with Islam and other historical Iranian values and norms, perhaps Iran was better off without it. Intellectually, and with increasing political vigor, many Iranians struggled against what they viewed as a forcible change to who they were.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution

It is a small wonder that these ideas found traction in the disaffected poorer classes of Iran's cities and rural areas. Here, among the disenfranchised and dispossessed, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini built political support for a movement against the Shah and his Westernizing, identity-endangering policies. Khomeini chose the language of his rhetoric carefully, linking austerity, deprivation, and disenfranchisement to "genuine human values," and portraying the Shah's regime as "venal, decadent, and corrupt."⁴³ He also opposed the international state system as a whole, portraying it as "oppressive" since it imposed an unjust order on Muslim peoples.⁴⁴ Thus, the Islamic Revolution actually began as a social revolution, aimed at restoring rights to Iran's disenfranchised poorer classes. It was not, however, devoid of religious aspects; indeed,

⁴⁰ Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 18-19.

⁴¹ Khosravi, 20-21.

⁴² Parsa, 138.

⁴³ Khosravi, 36.

⁴⁴ Karsh, 12. This view also placed the great powers of the time within Khomeini's "other."

Islam was an important part of opposition rhetoric from the beginning of the movement. This is hardly surprising when one considers the movement began as a reaction to policies many interpreted as dangerously secular. As Khosravi explains, “Claiming that Islam stands on the side of the disenfranchised (*mahroumin*) and dispossessed (*mostaz’afin*), Khomeini characterized the Revolution as a movement against the oppressors. Its goal was to induce more social justice for the poor.”⁴⁵ Khomeini shrewdly played his own brand of identity politics, with the Shah, his secular policies, and the West as a whole as his “other.”⁴⁶ It was a popular viewpoint, fueled by widespread political discourse from intellectuals such as Al-e Ahmad, Dr. Shariati, and of course, Khomeini himself.

While it is not the author’s intent to gloss over the events of the Islamic Revolution, the day-by-day sequence of historical events are not as relevant to this monograph as the changes in Iranian identity that took place before, during and after the revolution itself. Suffice it to say the revolution succeeded in ousting the Shah, and Khomeini’s movement, as the most organized, if not the most popular, filled the void of power quite readily.⁴⁷ Khomeini’s political bloc, however, was not the only one vying for power. Similarly, differing blocs within the clergy itself did not agree on how best to “correct” the past regime’s policies.⁴⁸ Many advocated peaceful political change. Of the relatively few clerical groups that sought forceful political change, Khomeini and his followers were the most vocal and the most militant.⁴⁹

Khomeini’s politics of identity, advocating the “return” to Islam and the authenticity Shariati and Al-e Ahmad advocated triumphed over the Shah’s secular and inauthentic program

⁴⁵ Khosravi, 36. Throughout his work, Khosravi includes the Farsi words for key concepts in parentheses and italics.

⁴⁶ Takeyh, 14 and 19.

⁴⁷ Crane, et. al., 8.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Parsa, 133 and 135.

of Westernization. The new government moved quickly to put its philosophies into practice: “The project of a rapid Westernization of Iran in the 1970s was followed by a wave of ‘Islamization’ in the 1980s, a vast effort to revive ‘Islamic tradition.’”⁵⁰ If the Shah’s policies attempted to make the “religious” or “Islamic” components of Iranian identity less relevant, the Islamic Revolution, and especially the government that followed, forced them back into the fore.⁵¹ Nowhere was the primacy of Islam more evident than in the structure and Constitution of the new government of the Islamic Republic.

A New Constitution and Government

Khomeini and his followers then set about creating a government they had long envisioned. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic, published in 1979 and amended in 1989, established a government where real political power remained centralized within a small number of religious leaders, while maintaining a veneer of democratic process.⁵² The clergy had seized power and aimed to keep it, through a variety of governmental checks and balances that kept its non-religious bodies, such as the *Majles*, or legislature, subordinate to the religious ones, such as the Guardian Council (see figure 5).⁵³ This figure reflects the 1989 amendments to the constitution, which, among other changes, added the Expediency Council as a body capable of breaking legislative deadlock between the Majles and the Guardian Council.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Khosravi, 9.

⁵¹ Takeyh, 25.

⁵² Crane et. al., 9.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ British Broadcasting Corporation. "Guide: How Iran is Ruled." *BBC News Middle East*. June 9, 2009. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8051750.stm> (accessed October 4, 2009), 1.

In this sense, Iran forms what Marina Ottaway describes as a *semi-authoritarian state*, a state that is neither purely authoritarian nor wholly democratic.⁵⁵ In Ottaway's description of semi-authoritarian states, she describes a government that partially accepts democracy and makes some allowances for some political discourse, while ensuring little or no potential for fundamental change exists.⁵⁶ In other words, semi-authoritarian states maintain some democratic processes, while concentrating and perpetuating real political power in the hands of relatively small authoritarian groups. In Iran, all of this is true. Based on the presence of political entities that are both inflexible and religious, and those that are secular and democratic, the author asserts it might be more complete to describe the Iranian government after the Islamic Revolution as a semi-authoritarian *religious* state.

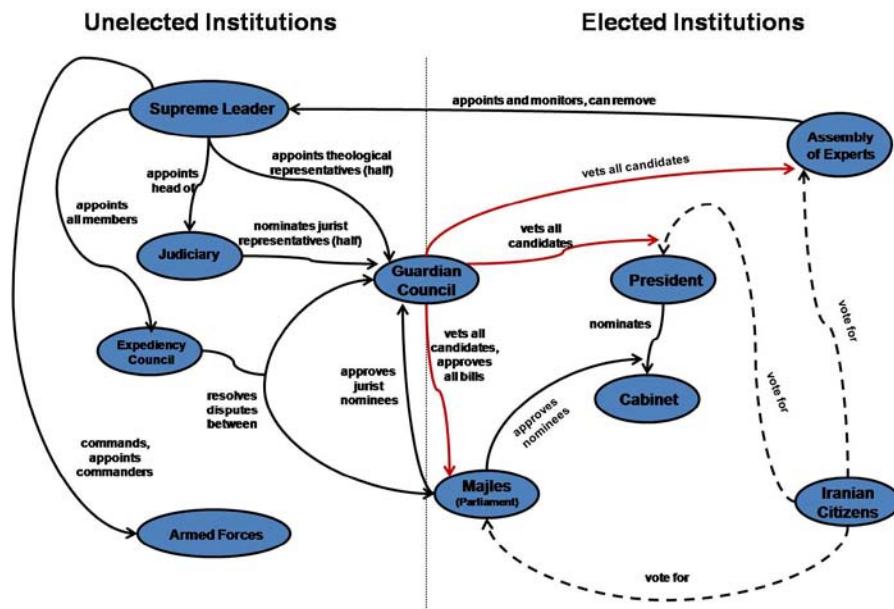


Figure 5: Checks and balances keep Iran's secular, democratic institutions subordinate to its religious leaders and assemblies. The Guardian Council's control mechanisms are highlighted in red. Author's diagram.

⁵⁵ Marina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*. (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003), 3.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 3-4.

The newly established regime possessed its own instrument of order in the Revolutionary Guard, whose purpose was to guard the government itself, and preserve the ideals of Khomeini's 1979 Islamic Revolution – through military force if needed.⁵⁷ Closely bound to the clerical elite, the Revolutionary Guard provides a safeguard against independent action of the regular military – which, along with the secret police, had been the Shah's favored instrument of enforcement during the waning years of his regime. The fact that Khomeini and his followers executed more than eighty senior officers of the regular armed forces between February and September of 1979 is indicative of just how afraid of the military the Revolutionary movement had become.⁵⁸ In the Revolutionary Guard, the new government had a means to prevent a repeat of the 1953 coup, which kept the Shah in power, and counteract any further foreign involvement in Iran's domestic affairs. The Revolutionary Guard, or IRGC, maintains its close ideological ties with the clergy today.⁵⁹

For a more complete discussion of the structure of the government of the Islamic Republic, see Appendices A and B. Relevant to the immediate discussion are two central religious themes of Iranian Shi'a Islam written into the Iranian constitution. They are *Velayet-e-faqih*, or “rule by the jurist,” and *amr-e be m'arouf va nahi az monkar*, or “the promotion of virtue and the rejection of vice.”⁶⁰ Both of these principles represent a mechanism that Iranian regimes used to enforce strict adherence to *Sharia*, from the time of the Islamic Revolution to the

⁵⁷ Ali Afoneh, "Indoctrinated to Intervene: Iran's IRGC." *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*. February 6, 2009. 1.

⁵⁸ Karsh, 19. Khomeini's regime forced hundreds more senior officers into retirement or imprisoned them. These included all officers who held the rank of major general or higher, and many brigadier generals as well.

⁵⁹ Most Western media agencies abbreviate the Revolutionary Guards as “the IRG.” The acronym IRGC, for “Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps,” appears predominantly in U.S. Media and publications, including official government documents from the U.S. Departments of State and Defense. The two acronyms refer to the same entity, and why the U.S. government added the word “Corps” to the description remain a mystery to the author.

⁶⁰ Crane, et al., 10, and Khosravi, 25.

present. Through these principles, the Islamic government also reinforced its ideal version of “Muslim” component identity and narrative.

Rule by the Jurist and the Principle of Mutual Discipline.

Velayat-e-faqih commonly translates into English as “Guardianship of the Jurisconsult,” or “Rule by the Jurist.” *Velayat-e-Faqih* is the central feature of the Iranian constitution, and refers to the submission of civil law to *Sharia*, or Islamic law, as interpreted by Iran’s formally educated Shi’a Muslim clergy. It also refers to the office of the Supreme Leader, whom the Iranian constitution charges with ensuring the Islamic Republic remains in compliance with *Sharia*⁶¹. The Iranian Constitution gives the Supreme Leader almost unlimited power to discharge his duties, including command of all Iranian armed forces, sole authority to declare war, and appointment of the theological members of the Guardian Council.⁶² The Supreme Leader also controls Iran’s state-run media. As RAND corporation analyst Keith Crane states, “He has final authority in the Iranian state.”⁶³

In 1979, much of the clergy agreed Iran needed supervision from highly educated cleric or body of clerics. There were, however, disagreements concerning exactly *how* the new government should ensure compliance with Islamic law in the new nation.⁶⁴ Many clerics advocated a guiding, mentoring role for the Supreme Leader, while others, including Khomeini, envisioned a Supreme Leader who directly led the country, making the majority of the nation’s policy decisions.⁶⁵ In the months leading to the constitutional referendum, Khomeini built enough consensus within the clerics and legislators drafting the new constitution to base the document on

⁶¹ Crane, et. al., 10.

⁶² Ibid. The Guardian Council has pre-emptive or veto power over most of Iran’s secular government institutions (see Figure 5 and Appendix A).

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Takeyh, 17.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 15-17.

velayat-e-faqih. He was also able to ensure it contained his vision of a directive, autocratic Supreme Leader.⁶⁶

“*Amr-e be m’arouf va nahi az monkar*” appears in the Holy Quran, as part of the ninth *sura*, or chapter, beginning with the seventy-first verse. It commonly translates as “...the promotion of virtue and the rejection of vice.”⁶⁷ It also appears in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran: “In the Islamic Republic of Iran, *Amr-e be m’arouf va nahi az monkar* is a universal and reciprocal duty that must be fulfilled by the people with respect to one another, by the government with respect to the people, and by the people with respect to the government.”⁶⁸ In general, the Principle of Mutual Discipline stands for the obligation every Muslim has to help guide his fellow Muslims through life. Muslims must help their fellows choose “good” over “evil,” and take the path of rectitude while resisting temptation. This obligation is true on a personal level, but also applies in a communal sense, to society as a whole, including politics and government.⁶⁹ As Khosravi explains, it is a principle concerned with maintaining a certain moral order:

The essence of the ‘principle of mutual discipline’ is not to preach to individuals, but to apply moral order in society in order to achieve a state of equilibrium. Neglect of such order is seen as a vice that harms not just the individual sinner alone, but also the entire community (*ummat*), which is why a sinner is also a criminal in post-revolutionary Iran.⁷⁰

Khosravi notes that, in accordance with the principle of mutual discipline, a Muslim who lives under an Islamic regime should struggle for its survival, and one who lives under a regime

⁶⁶ Takeyh, 24-26.

⁶⁷ Kohsravi, 24.

⁶⁸ The Iran Chamber Project. *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*. <http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution.php> (accessed August 13, 2009).

⁶⁹ Khosravi, 24-25.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 26.

that is hostile to Islam should struggle to overthrow it.⁷¹ According to this logic, Khomeini's revolution was divinely ordained; indeed the Holy Quran mandated it. In the eyes of the conservative clergy in charge of the new government, the principle of mutual discipline justified almost anything, according to Sharia and the new Constitution, as long as they could link it to the "promotion of virtue and prevention of vice."⁷² Khomeini's marginalization and sometimes elimination of his many political opponents seems justified by this interpretation of the principle of mutual discipline.⁷³ The author asserts the principle of mutual discipline illuminates why Khomeini may have felt so strongly about exporting the Islamic Revolution. The principle of mutual discipline required Khomeini, as the caretaker of the only "authentic" version of Islam, to ensure the rest of the Islamic community conformed to the new "moral order" established within the Islamic Republic of Iran. Arguably, it also offers a partial explanation of Iranian involvement in foreign nations, including Iraq, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, and many others. With this viewpoint, Khomeini's oath to "...export our Revolution throughout the world... until the calls 'there is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God' are echoed all over the world." seems quite different.⁷⁴

In addition to his attempts to re-establish a strong "religious" or "Islamic" identity across Iran, Khomeini also attempted to make ethnicity irrelevant, a technique used by Shah Mohammed Reza and his father years before. Publicly, Khomeini proudly declared, "As far as Islam is concerned, there is no question of Kurds, Turks, Fars, Baluchi, Arab, or Lor and Turkomen Everybody shall enjoy the protection of Islam."⁷⁵ Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic deployed its

⁷¹ Khosravi, 25.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ The author is not condoning Khomeini's actions, which were famously draconian and sometimes involved defrocking or executing his opponents. This is only an attempt to offer an interpretation through the lens of Sharia Law and the ways in which Khomeini and others interpreted it.

⁷⁴ Karsh, 12.

⁷⁵ Crane, et. al., 42.

new instrument of domestic security, the IRGC, to suppress ethnic and political unrest throughout the country.⁷⁶

Despite its success in ousting the Shah, the Revolution left Iran anything but unified.⁷⁷ Indeed, the structure of the government itself was still very much in a state of transition.⁷⁸ Khomeini needed time to consolidate the power of his new regime, formalize the structure of his new government, and cement its control of the country.⁷⁹ If the new government was to survive, it needed to find an issue that could unite everyone in the Islamic Republic. Khomeini's answer was war with Iran's closest neighbor, Iraq. Although nominally caused by a dispute over the Shatt-al-Arab waterway, the Iran-Iraq War quickly became another mechanism for changing the Iranian national identity and narrative. Khomeini used an identity-based, narrative-driven conflict to consolidate his own power, promote Iranian nationalism and religious fervor, and irrevocably link the martyrdom of Imam Hussein to the narrative of the Iranian people.

Identity Conflict: The Islamic Republic Goes to War

In 1937, Iraq and Iran signed a treaty resolving disputed navigation rights in the Shatt-al-Arab waterway. Another treaty, signed in Algiers in 1975, ended Iranian support for Iraqi Kurds seeking autonomy in exchange for a formal end to Iraq's claim of the ethnically Arab Iranian province of Khuzestan.⁸⁰ The Algiers agreement also increased Iranian navigation rights within the Shatt-al-Arab itself. Thus, in 1975, Saddam Hussein and the Shah had largely resolved the

⁷⁶ Crane, et. al., 42.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 48-49.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 48-50, and Takeyh, 28-29.

⁷⁹ Takeyh, 23.

⁸⁰ The Shatt-al-Arab waterway begins in central Iraq with the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and flows south into the Persian Gulf. It is a significant maritime trade route for both countries. Iran enjoys over 2000 kilometers of coastline on the Persian Gulf; Iraq has only 25. Without access to the Shatt-al-Arab, Iraq would have no inland access to the Gulf, and consequently to global shipping lanes. Iran, however, has several ports on its southern Gulf coast, and would be much less affected. Thus, the Shatt-al-Arab is much more important to Iraq than it is to Iran.

immediate differences between their two countries and enjoyed a tolerable, if not friendly, relationship. After 1979, Iran had a wholly different government. Many Iraqis, including Saddam Hussein, thought Khomeini's government unpredictable and irrational, a stark contrast to the known quantity the Shah represented.⁸¹ To make matters worse, the new Iranian government officially recognized neither of the two treaties concerning the Shatt-al-Arab.

Iran's repudiation of the 1937 and 1975 agreements led to a military buildup on both sides, which in turn led to border skirmishes, and eventually open conflict between the two nations. By August of 1980, Iran and Iraq were engaged in open warfare along their mutual border. Hostilities continued until August of 1988, resulting in between 1 and 2 million people killed or wounded. This is an especially significant figure when one considers the results of the conflict. After eight years of war, neither nation's borders changed, neither nation gained any resources, navigational rights, or indeed anything of real significance. However, the war did substantially damage the economies of both countries. The tactical, operational, and strategic events reveal both sides generally prosecuted the war poorly; Karsh refers to the war as a whole as a "delicate balance of incompetence."⁸²

Political scientist and psychologist Yehudith Auerbach divides conflicts between peoples into two different types: *material conflicts*, which "...evolve around material and dividable assets," and *identity conflicts*, which "...involve deep-seated hatred originating in the feeling of at least one of the sides that the other has usurped their legitimate rights."⁸³ Publicly, the central cause of conflict in the Iran-Iraq war was the Shatt-al-Arab waterway, meaning the war had at least some material issues at its core. One cannot ignore the evidence it was also an identity conflict. Consider the following statement, made by Ayatollah Sadeq Givi, on the nature of the

⁸¹ Karsh, 14.

⁸² Ibid, 30.

⁸³ Yehudith Auerbach, "Forgiveness and Reconciliation: The Religious Dimension ." *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 17:3, 2005,469.

war.⁸⁴ “We have taken the path of true Islam and our aim in defeating Saddam Hussein lies in the fact that we consider him the main obstacle to the advance of Islam in the region.”⁸⁵ Givi clearly expressed the conflict in terms of identity, portraying the Iranians as “authentic” or “true” Muslims struggling to spread the only authentic version of Islam. Givi depicted Saddam Hussein and the secular Ba’ath party as inauthentic Muslims, who stood in the way of the righteous Iranians and their drive to spread this one, true version of Islam.⁸⁶ Givi’s statement reflected an effort to change the Iranian narrative, emphasizing Iranian nationalism and religious fervor, and placing Saddam Hussein, the Ba’ath Party, and Iraq as a whole in the category of “other.” Saddam Hussein was an obstacle to the spread of “true Islam,” and had usurped the right of the Iranian people to continue to spread this true faith. Auerbach continues with his description of identity conflicts, proposing the following: “When the fulfillment of these claims involves bloodshed and sacrifices, the ground is prepared for the creation and inculcation of a moral/religious ethos that lends the battle... an aura of holy war – where the good are entitled and obliged to defeat the bad.”⁸⁷

Although Auerbach proposed his understanding of identity conflicts well after the Iran-Iraq war ended, it is still useful to describe the war in these terms. Ayatollah Khomeini clearly showed a similar understanding in his presentation of the war to the Iranian public. Historian Efraim Karsh noted the new Iranian regime presented the war to the public as “a trial of national resolve and as a holy crusade, so to speak, to protect Islam from the heretic Ba’ath regime and its

⁸⁴ Ayatollah Sadeq Givi was more widely known as “Sadeq Khalkhali,” and was a central figure in the “Revolutionary courts” which tried and executed many of Ayatollah Khomeini’s former political opponents immediately following the success of the Islamic Revolution. Khalkhali is popularly believed to have personally executed Mir Abbas Hoveida, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi’s former prime minister.

⁸⁵ Karsh, 13.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 13 and 72.

⁸⁷ Auerbach, 472.

leader, Saddam Hussein.”⁸⁸ Karsh also provides insight into the revolutionary regime’s motives for starting and continuing the war:

...the clerics in Tehran embraced the war with alacrity as an opportunity to rally the nation behind the revolution, eliminate domestic opposition, and promote Khomeini’s vision of the worldwide export of Iran’s Islamic message. Epitomised by the slogan ‘Revolution before victory,’ this instrumental approach made the war from the outset an extension of the domestic political struggle...⁸⁹

Ironically, Saddam Hussein offered Iran a cease-fire on two occasions. Once, barely a week after hostilities began, and again in 1982, when Israel invaded Lebanon. On the second occasion, Saddam offered to cease hostilities so Iran could send military forces to aid the Palestinians.⁹⁰ The regime in Tehran refused on both occasions. This, coupled with their penchant for founding new Revolutionary Guard or *Pasdaran* units instead of re-constituting regular Army or *Artesh* units, further demonstrated the new regime’s desire to continue the war and improve their own domestic control measures, while galvanizing the population of Iran against an external threat.⁹¹ This is a stark contrast to the Iraqi government’s limited objectives and almost conciliatory attitude. Consider the following statement from Tariq Aziz, Iraq’s Minister of Foreign Affairs: “We want to neither destroy Iran, nor occupy it permanently because that country is a neighbor with which we will remain linked by geographical and historical bonds and common interests. Therefore we are determined to avoid any irrevocable steps.”⁹² Thus, Iran had committed to pursuit of an identity conflict, demonizing the Iraqi government and Saddam Hussein in particular, while the Iraqi government engaged in behavior Auerbach calls

⁸⁸ Karsh, 72.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 71.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 36.

⁹¹ The Pasdaran or IRGC often fought alongside the regular military, or Artesh, throughout the war. Command relationships were often strained, and by the end of the war, the IRGC had its own chain of command going directly to the Supreme Leader. The Artesh’s status, by design, was greatly reduced, and the IRGC was a fully capable instrument of domestic order, responsible directly to the clerical government, and outside the command or influence of the regular military.

⁹² Karsh, 29.

reconciliation, highlighting common geography and history.⁹³ Iran did not fall into Iraq's description of the "other," while Iraq's presence as the Iranian "other" was essential to Tehran's policy, and thus the war effort.

Khomeini's identity tactics went beyond simply demonizing Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath party. In what is arguably one of the most tragic aspects of the Iran-Iraq war, Khomeini sanctioned the use of child soldiers as suicide troops to emphasize the importance of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at the battle of Karbala.⁹⁴ In so doing, he altered the Iranian narrative to make suffering, sacrifice, and martyrdom holy acts in and of themselves, seeking to bring an "Islamic" component identity into greater importance.

Martyrdom, Suffering, and Sacrifice: The Basiji

Ayatollah Khomeini created the *Basiji Mostazafin*, or "Mobilization of the Oppressed," in November of 1979. He envisioned an organization capable of maintaining internal security and deterring foreign intervention in the newly formed Islamic Republic.⁹⁵ Once the war with Iraq began, members of the Basiji participated in the fighting alongside IRGC units. What began as a political and ideological organization of college students quickly changed once the nation was at war, and the Basiji opened their ranks to much younger members.⁹⁶ In March of 1982, Khomeini announced that "as a special favor" boys between the ages of 12 and 18 could join the Basiji and fight in the war against Iraq.⁹⁷ The regime described Basiji applications as "passports to

⁹³ Auerbach, 472. Auerbach argues *conflict resolution* is sufficient to end material conflicts, that is, hostilities can end with a mutual agreement to redistribute contested resources or assets. Identity conflicts, on the other hand, cannot end without *forgiveness* of the perceived usurpation of rights, and *reconciliation*, ultimately meaning, "repaired and renewed relationships."

⁹⁴ Karsh, 63-64.

⁹⁵ Hossein Aryan, "Mass Mobilisation - The rise of Iran's paramilitary enforcer." *Jane's Intelligence Review*. June 12, 2009, 10.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 1.

⁹⁷ Karsh, 39.

paradise,” and gave Basiji candidates a plastic key, supposedly issued by Khomeini himself. The keys symbolized a Basiji’s entrance into paradise after martyrdom against Iraqi forces. Khomeini famously called the Basiji Iran’s “Army of twenty million,” referring to the approximate number of young men in Iran at the time.⁹⁸

Basiji units received very little training, sometimes only a week in length, and had minimal equipment.⁹⁹ Throughout the war, Basiji units participated in “human wave” assaults against Iraqi forces, with little or no regard to casualties. During fighting in Basra in the summer of 1982, an estimated 100,000 Iranian troops participated in five separate assaults against the Iraqi defenses, all of which failed. During the successive assaults, Basiji units charged across known minefields in an effort to clear a path for the IRGC brigades that would follow. Historical accounts describe many instances of similar use of Basiji, and massed, lightly armed or unarmed charges were common. Karsh correctly describes the Basiji units when he portrays them as “cannon fodder or human minesweepers.”¹⁰⁰ Journalist and writer Con Coughlin provides the following:

The boys were inspired to respond to the mullahs’ appeal for a mass mobilization by the excitement generated by the war effort, much as teenage boys responded to Lord Kitchener’s appeal for recruits during the First World War. Many of them received only the most basic training before being dispatched to the front. Basiji volunteers wore a red headband, which signified their readiness for martyrdom, and were given a gun and a couple of hand grenades before being sent in their thousands to run through minefields in what amounted to mass suicide, as those who managed to get through this first ordeal were promptly mown down by the well-entrenched Iraqi machine gun positions.¹⁰¹

While the subject of child soldiers, and especially child martyrs, seems horrific and irrational to Western sensibilities, there were rational secular and religious explanations for

⁹⁸ Khosravi, 29.

⁹⁹ Karsh, 39.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 62.

¹⁰¹ Coughlin, 202.

creating and employing these units. To the Iranians, they were necessary to defend the Islamic Republic against Iraqi aggression, real or imagined, and provided salvation for the young men who volunteered to martyr themselves as part of the holy defense of their country.¹⁰² In the words of one Basiji who volunteered at the age of 14, “I wanted to defend my country, that’s all... I went to defend Iran and I think most of my friends went for the same reason.”¹⁰³ Another Basiji volunteer offered a more religious motivation: “The Mullahs said it was an honor to go and fight for Islam, just like Imam Hussein.”¹⁰⁴

Author and former CIA field officer Robert Baer provided additional insight into the motivations behind Basiji martyrdom. In April 2005, Baer interviewed Ayatollah Sanei, an Iranian *marja-e-taqlid*, or source of emulation.¹⁰⁵ When asked about martyrdom during the war, Sanei answers, “It is a personal choice... anyone can decide to go or not to go. But the law of God is you should go and fight... in the same way defense is a worthy value, so is martyrdom. Martyrdom is the great and worthy child of self-defense.”¹⁰⁶ When asked if the tactic was effective or not, Sanei replies, “We had no other options.”¹⁰⁷ If one considers this interpretation an important part of the Shi’a faith, the choice of martyrdom seems more logical than when viewed solely in a Western or secular context. In other words, if struggle, suffering and

¹⁰² Robert Baer, *The Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009 224.

¹⁰³ Karsh, 63-64.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 64. Imam Hussein, grandson of the prophet Mohammed, died in battle at Karbala against the Umayyid Caliphate in A.D. 680. Within Islam, the Battle of Karbala represents the split between the Sunni and Shi’a faiths, with Hussein representing the Shi’a faith and the Umayyid Caliph, Yazid I, representing the Sunni. The battle itself is of special significance to the Shi’a, who commemorate its anniversary each year with public displays of self-flagellation, representing the suffering and martyrdom of Hussein’s defeat. It may be helpful for Christian audiences to think of Imam Hussein as the “patron” Imam of Shi’ism.

¹⁰⁵ The title *marja-e-taqlid* is literally translated as “source of emulation,” and refers to the highest rank possible in formal Shi’a religious education. *Marjas*, as they are commonly called, represent the highest authority within the Shi’a faith, especially pertaining to jurisprudence, the interpretation of *Sharia*, or Islamic Law. Baer does not mention Ayatollah Sanei’s family name.

¹⁰⁶ Baer, 219-220.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 220.

martyrdom were integral parts of the Shi'a Muslim narrative, the use of children as suicide troops against an inauthentic, especially Sunni, opponent would be completely rational to an Iranian Shi'a Muslim. The regime's analogy to the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at the battle of Karbala significantly strengthened the argument by "providing a paradigm of suffering in the service of faith."¹⁰⁸

The analogy of martyrdom in war against Iraq to the martyrdom of Imam Hussein was not an accident. Iranian Imams did indeed go to schools throughout Iran, showing footage of the war and exhorting students to participate in the "Holy Defense of the Republic" as Imam Hussein defended Islam at the battle of Karbala.¹⁰⁹ Khomeini deliberately used this analogy to promote religious fervor within Iran, and generate more support: not only for the war, but also for the Islamic Republic itself. Plainly expressed, this represented Khomeini's broader agenda of promoting religious fervor and attempting to reverse what he viewed as secularist policies of earlier administrations, most notably the Shah and his father.¹¹⁰ Khomeini sought to bring the "Islamic" or "religious" component identity of Iranian citizens to a higher priority than before. In many respects, this represented an attempt to link the Iranian national identity with Shi'a Islam, echoing the supremacy of Sharia Law in the new Iranian constitution and government structure. With his analogy of Basiji martyrdom to Imam Hussein's death at Karbala, Khomeini added suffering, sacrifice, and self-sacrifice into the Iranian narrative as important methods of protecting the "true" Islam of Iran and the fledgling Islamic Republic.¹¹¹ Robert Baer concluded, "It seemed to me that Khomeini's real, lasting legacy is martyrdom as a battlefield weapon. He elevated the martyrdom of Imam Hussein into the service of the state."¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Takeyh, 22.

¹⁰⁹ Karsh, 64.

¹¹⁰ Takeyh, 14.

¹¹¹ Baer, 219-220.

¹¹² Ibid, 226.

Enter the Great Satan: Iran as a Victim of Western Intervention

No discussion of identity is complete without a discussion of the “other.” Aside from Iraq itself, Iran had no shortage of enemies. Although Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi enjoyed good relations with the United States, his secular and modernizing policies placed his regime in opposition to Iranian religious elite to which Khomeini belonged. Ironically, Western involvement in the Iran-Iraq war provided Khomeini with a reason to end his identity-based conflict with Iraq *without* reconciliation *or* forgiveness. In fact, he was able to use U.S. involvement as a lever to further promote Iranian nationalism and strengthen his control of the country even more.¹¹³

From 1984 onward, both Iraq and Iran engaged in merchant warfare in the Persian Gulf. Both nations attacked the civilian merchant fleet of the other, hoping to decrease the other’s logistical ability to continue the war. With Iran and Iraq engaged in what the press labeled a “tanker war,” many nations had serious concerns about the security of their merchant vessels operating in the Gulf. In 1987, at the request of the Kuwaiti government, the United States Navy began escorting Kuwaiti merchant vessels through the Strait of Hormuz and into Kuwaiti ports.¹¹⁴ This caused the government in Tehran significant worry. Faced with mounting logistics problems, the government desperately sought to de-escalate the war with Iraq; they were simply running out of money and war material.¹¹⁵ A significant U.S. presence in the Gulf meant military forces in theater that Tehran had no hope of overcoming. Iranian fears seemed justified when an underwater mine struck a U.S. frigate in mid-April of 1988. In response, the United States sank a sizeable portion of the Iranian Navy: two out of three of Iran’s frigates and four other Iranian

¹¹³ Karsh, 61.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 58.

¹¹⁵ Ironically, both Israel and the United States provided spare military parts and other aid to Tehran at different times during the war. Israel provided Iran with rare tank and aircraft parts, and the United States provided aid in exchange for the release of U.S. hostages in Lebanon – the famous “Iran-Contra Affair.”

military vessels.¹¹⁶ After close to eight years of war, Tehran could not replace these vessels, and this loss seriously jeopardized their prosecution of the tanker war. It also left Iran nearly defenseless to naval incursions from the U.S.¹¹⁷ Desperate for a way to de-escalate, and faced with the possibility of decisive military engagement with the United States, the clergy of the country pleaded with Khomeini to find a way to end hostilities with Iraq.¹¹⁸ Karsh summarizes the climate among the clergy at the time:

A worldwide coalition of imperialist forces, headed by the Great Satan (the United States), vied for Iranian blood. Therefore, and in view of the social and economic conditions in Iran, any prolongation of the war could but play into the aggressors' hands and would endanger the great achievements of the Islamic Revolution.¹¹⁹

On July 3rd, 1988, the United States seemed to prove the clerics in Tehran correct. The Aegis class cruiser *USS Vincennes* engaged and shot down an Iranian Airbus A300, apparently mistaking it for an Iranian F-14 on an attack run.¹²⁰ An estimated 290 people died on Iran Air flight 655. The United States government paid \$61.8 million dollars in restitution to the Iranian government, but issued no formal apology or acceptance of responsibility.¹²¹ The Vincennes incident provided the government of Iran with the proof it needed of a Western conspiracy against the Islamic Republic. In Karsh's words, "It provided the moral cover of martyrdom and suffering in the face of a superior force that allowed the regime to camouflage the comprehensive defeat of its internal vision."¹²² On 17 July, Iranian president Ali Khomeini sent a formal letter to

¹¹⁶ Karsh, 59.

¹¹⁷ Coughlin, 235.

¹¹⁸ Karsh, 59.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 61.

¹²⁰ Coughlin, 235-236.

¹²¹ International Court of Justice. "Settlement Agreement on the Case Concerning the Aerial Incident on 3 July 1988 before the International Court of Justice." *United Nations - International Court of Justice*. February 9, 1996. <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/files/79/11131.pdf> (accessed January 10, 2010).

¹²² Karsh, 61. Here, Karsh refers to Khomeini's vision of exporting the Islamic Revolution across the globe, spreading it throughout the *umma*, or worldwide Islamic community.

the U.N. Secretary General, accepting U.N. resolution 598 – the ceasefire between Iran and Iraq.¹²³

Lasting Effects on Iranian Identity

The author asserts the Iran-Iraq war had many lasting effects on the Iranian narrative and national identity. The war took the nationalism and religious fervor generated by the Islamic Revolution and gave it a degree of permanence, making it an integral part of the Iranian narrative. Nationalism and religious zeal became fixtures in the story of who Iranians were. While martyrdom and suffering, as cornerstones of the Shi'a faith, had been a part of the Iranian "Muslim" narrative for some time, Iranians now had events much more recent than the battle of Karbala to associate them with; martyrdom and suffering were both more immediate, weighty concepts.¹²⁴ A combination of the Basiji martyrs and the economic deprivation brought on by the war made accepting these situations a necessity. Khomeini's efforts to portray these situations as religiously mandated, beneficial, and a source of authenticity proved so successful that the word *bidard*, or "painless," became an insult.¹²⁵ *Bidard* describes a person without suffering, and therefore disconnected from the suffering of Imam Hussein.¹²⁶ Among devout Shi'a Muslims, such a person is inauthentic, and not a true Muslim. Martyrdom and its ties to Imam Hussein's death became a source of pride for the families of war martyrs.¹²⁷ The Iranian government sponsored a national Martyr's foundation to provide money, education, health care, and other

¹²³ United Nations Security Council. "United Nations Security Council Resolution 598, Iran/Iraq." *Council on Foreign Relations*. July 20, 1987. <http://www.cfr.org/publication/11200/> (accessed January 26, 2010).

¹²⁴ Baer, 223-226.

¹²⁵ Khosravi, 10.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 78, 82-83.

¹²⁷ Baer, 226.

social services to the families of those killed or martyred in the war.¹²⁸ Baer described an interview with a martyr's mother, conducted in Zahra's Paradise, the national Iranian martyr's cemetery: She states, "I'm a mother, I do miss him. But I'm glad he did it for a good reason. For God! ...he is with our Imams, with Khomeini."¹²⁹ When asked if she regrets her son's death, she replies, "Not at all. I would have gone, if asked."¹³⁰

The Iranian government largely succeeded in "...foster[ing] a common identity based on nationalism," and in making "Islamic" component identity and narrative much more important than it had been prior to the start of the war.¹³¹ The Islamic Republic now faced the daunting task of managing a country wracked by eight years of conflict with a severely damaged economy.¹³² Now that the war with Iraq was over, Iran needed a different "other." The government continued its previous identity-based strategy, but shifted its focus from Iraq to the United States and its allies.

The West's Continued Role as "Other:"

Following its description of Western interference as the cause of its defeat in the Iran-Iraq war, the Iranian government began a campaign to counter what it labeled a "cultural invasion" from the West. According to the Iranian narrative "the Great Satan," the United States, and the "Little Satans," its allies, including Israel, began inundating Iran with their own culture, through movies, music, clothing, radio, and television.¹³³ As government spokesperson Mesbah Yazdi declared,

¹²⁸ According to Baer, Iran's Martyr's Foundation provides such aid to families of martyrs as far away as Lebanon.

¹²⁹ Baer, 225-226.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 226.

¹³¹ Crane, et. al., 37.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Takeyh, 163, and Khosravi, 20.

We should believe that the previous war [Iran-Iraq war] is taking place today in the cultural sphere. If we had been defeated in that war, we might have lost territory, but if we are defeated in this war, it will mean the loss of our religion and faith and domination by the enemy's corrupt culture.¹³⁴

Thus, the Iranian government was explaining a phenomenon many would come to call globalization as a deliberate attempt by the West to demoralize and corrupt Iran. Khosravi explains the campaign in terms of how the younger generations in Tehran see the government's policy of continued opposition to the West: "...[A]fter the end of the war the authorities needed a new enemy. This enemy had been found in what the Islamic state has labeled the project of 'cultural invasion' (*tahajom-e farhangi*)."¹³⁵ It seems Tehran has never left behind the strategy of identity-based conflict as a method of distracting their citizens from domestic issues; they simply replaced the inauthentic Saddam Hussein with an equally inauthentic, decadent, and corrupting coalition of Western countries led by the United States.¹³⁶

Cultural Invasion and Iran's "Third Generation"

Ironically, there may be a degree of truth in the Iranian government's arguments that the West is flooding Iran with its culture. Iran's "Third Generation," born after the Iran-Iraq war, has fully embraced technology, including the internet and satellite television. This has given them unprecedented access to Western culture that Iranian state-controlled media and law enforcement agencies cannot easily prevent. It led to an increase in the very things the Iranian clergy fear – Western movies, music, clothes, and television programs are available, if not widely distributed, to millions of young Iranian citizens.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Khosravi, 20.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Takeyh, 162.

¹³⁷ Bernard Lewis, *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East*. New York: Schocken Books, 1998, 135.

The Islamic Republic adopted a number of control measures aimed at stemming the tide of Western culture, from turning the Basiji into moral police, to periodic city-wide raids for satellite dishes, to closing internet servers. They also attempted to counter Western culture by re-emphasizing a Revolutionary identity.¹³⁸ The Basiji became an organization of indoctrination into the values of the Revolution, similar in nature to the Young Pioneers of the former Soviet Union.¹³⁹ Basiji now have offices in most primary and secondary schools and in many Universities as well. Membership in the Basiji is not mandatory, but highly encouraged. The government also encourages Revolutionary subjects in fields as widely differing as art, music, and cinema.¹⁴⁰ Of course, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) shows programs with a decidedly “traditional” message:

Through its numerous soap operas, TV serials, programs on martyrs and their families, documentaries or feature films on the [Iran-Iraq] war, and mythologization of clerics and personalities of the Revolution, IRIB attempts to (re)produce images of the ideal Muslim revolutionary man and woman.¹⁴¹

While periodic government crackdowns on satellite dishes, Basiji roaming the streets assaulting citizens wearing “improper garb,” and state controlled media may seem a drastic overreaction, it becomes a rational act within the scope of a different principle: that of *pastoral power*. Pastoral power, in simple terms, is the authority a father holds over a child.¹⁴² In terms of Iranian government, pastoral power justifies harsh measures taken in the best interest of wayward youth in order to guide him back to a correct path. In this way, pastoral power is remarkably similar to the principle of mutual discipline. In Iran, however, the government has generalized the

¹³⁸ Khosravi, 37-38.

¹³⁹ Hossein Aryan, "Mass Mobilisation - The Rise of Iran's paramilitary enforcer." *Jane's Intelligence Review*. June 12, 2009, 10.

¹⁴⁰ Khosravi, 24, and Takeyh, 31.

¹⁴¹ Khosravi, 24.

¹⁴² Ibid, 26. The principle was not original to Khosravi; in his notes, he cites French philosopher and sociologist Michel Foucault.

concept to include the “guiding” relationship between itself and the younger generations as a whole. Khosravi explains, “...[S]ince the youth are all seen as... particularly vulnerable to ‘cultural threats,’ the focus of the Islamic regime has been on how to “protect” young people from moral hazards...”¹⁴³ He continues, “The art of government is thus the extension of the ‘pastoral power’ of the father over his household and wealth into the organizing technicalities of the state.”¹⁴⁴ Iranian family discipline, Khosravi notes, is typically harsh, as education and punishment use the same words in Farsi: *Tarbiyat kardan*.¹⁴⁵ Thus, the Iranian government view the younger generations as vulnerable children, and through the concept of pastoral power, has the moral authority to correct them. The principle of mutual discipline not only confirms this, it commands a response to correct those travelling down a wayward path. The harshness of Iranian government responses with younger generations seems culturally acceptable when viewed in these terms.

Conclusions

Exploration and analysis of these events and the context surrounding them led the author to conclude that, since 1925, Iranian governments purposefully shaped Iranian identity in an attempt to prioritize membership in nationalist and religious social groups over others, such as ethnicity or profession. These attempts have largely been successful, resulting in a personal identity and narrative that is common to many contemporary Iranians (see figure 6). This personal identity contains both “Iranian” and “Shi’a Muslim” component identities.

¹⁴³ Khosravi, 22.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 26.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

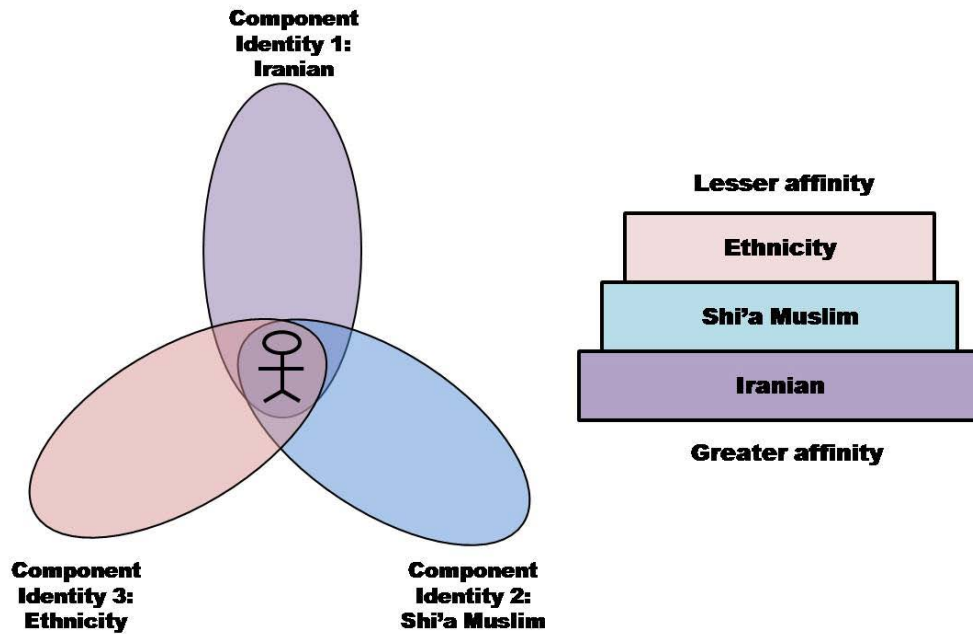


Figure 6: Contemporary Iranian Identity and its components. Ethnicity maintains a strong hold on many Iranians, especially in more isolated Baluchi, Azeri, and Kurdish regions, though in general the influence it holds is typically much less than Iranian nationalism and Shi'a Islam.¹⁴⁶

Most citizens of the current Islamic Republic feel great affinity toward membership in the “Iranian” social group, though just over fifty-one per cent are ethnically Persian.¹⁴⁷ This “Iranian” component identity appears “first” on Iranian citizen’s priority of membership. As Robert Baer indicated, Iranian nationalism is still very much alive:

... what you find in an Iranian is old-fashioned nationalism – a deep, abiding defiance of colonialism. Keep digging and what you find at the bottom of Iran’s soul is a newfound taste for empire... what’s critical to understand is that Iran today has an unshakeable belief in its right to empire.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Crane, et. al., 38-39.

¹⁴⁷ CIA - *The World Factbook -- Iran*. July 30, 2009. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html> (accessed August 13, 2009).

¹⁴⁸ Baer, 4. While Baer is correct in capturing Iranian distaste for external involvement in the region, the Iranian drive for expansionism and empire is not new. Until Mohammed Reza Pahlavi fled the country in 1979, Iran had enjoyed nearly two and a half millennia of unbroken monarchical rule, at times well beyond its modern borders.

This sense of being “Iranian” began with the Pahlavi dynasty’s reformatory efforts in education and military service.¹⁴⁹ Following the revolution, Khomeini successfully used identity-based conflict with Iraq to continue to build Iranian nationalism and build his regime from within.¹⁵⁰ After the war ended, the Iranian government continued to use identity-based conflict and external threats, this time a perceived “cultural invasion from the West,” to build Iranian nationalism.¹⁵¹ Thus, Reza Khan’s educational initiatives, the Iran-Iraq war, and the continued description of the West as a culturally invading “other” were all political decisions driven by a need to create or sustain Iranian nationalism.

An intrinsic part of the “Iranian” narrative is the sense of entitlement to regional leadership Baer discussed. Iranians feel they have a right to leadership in the Middle East and presence as a “great actor” within the global political community.¹⁵² This desire reaches far into the past. Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and his father not only believed in the concept, but cultivated it through educational programs which emphasized Persian history and culture.¹⁵³ Mohammed Reza Pahlavi took significant steps towards this during his reign, improving relations between Iran and several neighboring countries and enacting a sizeable buildup and modernization of the Iranian armed forces. Indeed, the purpose behind the Shah’s modernization initiatives, including the White Revolution, was to do just that – to make Iran a regional leader and global player through modernizing the country.¹⁵⁴ Ultimately, the Shah was overthrown, but the post-revolution Iranian government still believes it is entitled to leadership of the Middle East and destined to be a global political actor. Successive regimes since the Islamic Revolution used

¹⁴⁹ Crane, et. al, 45-46.

¹⁵⁰ Takeyh, 23.

¹⁵¹ Khosravi, 20.

¹⁵² Baer, 4.

¹⁵³ Crane, et. al., 45-47.

¹⁵⁴ Karsh, 7.

this argument to justify the development of nuclear technology and involvement in Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Israel/Palestine.

Closely following this “Iranian” identity is a “Muslim” component identity, immediately behind “Iranian” in priority. This religious component identity became significantly more important during the intellectual movement leading up to the Shah’s departure. As the Shah’s modernization policies became “Westernization,” they produced an intellectual and religious backlash that provided significant fuel to the Islamic Revolution and re-emphasized the importance of Islam.¹⁵⁵ During and after the Islamic Revolution, Iranian Shi’ism became another dominant element of Iranian identity, second only to nationalism in its priority.¹⁵⁶ Most notably, the Iranian Constitution was founded on the concept of *velayet-e-faqih*, the supremacy of Sharia Law over secular civil mandates and organizations. This concept is evident in the entire structure of the Iranian government, as secular organizations are subordinate to those composed of and run by the clergy.¹⁵⁷ Similarly, the principles of mutual discipline and pastoral power have driven Iranian policy towards a heavy-handed enforcement of Revolutionary Islamic ideals on their own population.¹⁵⁸ Fueled by fears of “cultural invasion” of the West, and memories of the Shah’s secularizing policies, these concepts have ensured a continued identity-based opposition to the West and continued the tension between tradition and modernity within Iran.¹⁵⁹ The principles of mutual discipline and pastoral power have also led the Iranian government to seek involvement in neighboring countries, or at least provided rationalization for them to do so. Equally important to Iranian Shi’ism are the concepts of martyrdom and suffering, closely linked to the death of Imam

¹⁵⁵ Coughlin, 71.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 239.

¹⁵⁷ Crane, et. al., 10.

¹⁵⁸ Khosravi, 25.

¹⁵⁹ Lewis, 135-136.

Hussein against the Sunni Umayyid caliphate.¹⁶⁰ Khomeini successfully used the analogy during the Iran-Iraq war to mobilize thousands of teenage Basiji suicide troops against the Iraqi military and the “heretic” Ba’ath party in Baghdad.¹⁶¹ Today, an overwhelming eighty-nine per cent of Iranians are Shi’a Muslims.¹⁶² Thus, Iraq’s Islamic Revolution, and the Iran-Iraq war were all political decisions designed to increase the importance of this “Shi’a Muslim” component identity. While the intellectual movement preceding the Revolution had the same effect, it was an example of social discourse, not political decision making.

An equally important part of the Iranian identity-based political strategy is the continued placement of the United States and its Western allies as Iran’s “other.” As the Iran-Iraq War ended, Khomeini shifted the focus of his opposition from Saddam Hussein and the Ba’ath Party to the United States and its allies. Instead of disputes over the Shatt-al-Arab waterway or legitimate possession of the rights to leadership of Islam, Iran’s new “other” attempts to corrupt Iranian society from within, usurping their rights to determine their own identity by bombarding it with artifacts of decadent and secular Western lifestyles.¹⁶³ Similarly, the new opponents prevent Iran from fulfilling its destiny as a regional leader and global actor, by standing in the way of nuclear research and imposing unfair, long-standing economic sanctions. All these represent efforts by Iranian governments to reinforce the “Iranian” and “Shi’a Muslim” component identities through opposition to the United States and its allies – by making them Iran’s “other” and portraying them as examples of “what not to be.”

Despite the Iranian government’s substantial efforts, Iranian identity is changing. Although nationalism remains strong, younger Iranians feel less and less affinity to the religious

¹⁶⁰ Khosravi, 51-52.

¹⁶¹ Karsh, 13, 39.

¹⁶² *CIA - The World Factbook -- Iran.*

¹⁶³ Takeyh, 163.

aspects of the identity their government is continually trying to cultivate and reinforce.¹⁶⁴ Their connectivity to the rest of the world presents options their parents and grandparents never had. In other words, younger generations are rejecting the “Revolutionary” identity their government attempts to impose on them.¹⁶⁵ They are seeking answers for themselves, and this does not sit well with the government in Tehran – especially when their journey of knowledge leads them to anything “Western.”¹⁶⁶

Recommendations

This begs the question, “Considering this, what actions from the United States are relevant when addressing Iran?” Diplomatically, the United States needs to recognize the fact that it has been part of the Iranian narrative, specifically the “other,” for quite some time. This means many things. As an opponent in an identity based conflict, Iran argues that the United States and the West stand in the way of its legitimate right to power and influence in the region that is the Middle East. They do so through direct occupation of Iran’s neighboring countries and influencing perceived proxies such as Israel.¹⁶⁷ Any pointed opposition to the government in Tehran confirms the regime’s argument and feeds conflict between the two nations. It also strengthens the Iranian regime’s rhetoric within its own borders, and galvanizes domestic support both for the government and against the United States and its allies.¹⁶⁸

This does not mean the United States should become “friendly” with Iran overnight, rather it suggests careful considerations of the repercussion of its approach, with attention toward Iranian identity and its components. It does mean the U.S. should ultimately seek Auerbach’s reconciliation, should it decide renewed relations with Iran are in its best interests. Further, the

¹⁶⁴ Khosravi, 136-137.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 36.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 23-25.

¹⁶⁷ Baer, 11.

¹⁶⁸ Crane, et. al., 33.

U.S. should realize it is engaged in an identity conflict, and not a material conflict, and disregard the notion that it is possible to resolve the conflict through material rights or resources.¹⁶⁹

To be more specific, the United States should avoid one of the key mistakes of the Pahlavi dynasty: ignoring the effects of social discourse. Iran's "third generation" have already rejected much of the "Islamic" identity their government attempts to cultivate. Over time, this may result in an Iranian identity that is less at odds with the national goals of the United States and the international community, or less descriptive of the United States as Iran's "other." The author proposes that if Iranian youth are seeking elements of Western culture now, they will continue to do so in the future. In other words, reconciliation with the current regime may not be possible, but it seems more possible with Iran's future leaders, given their demonstrated affinity for artifacts of Western culture. The United States should not, however, label the third generation "pro-Western" instead of "anti-authoritarian."¹⁷⁰ To do so would discount how strongly much of the younger generation feel they belong to the "Iranian" component identity.

Although it is at odds with current foreign policy, encouraging Iran to expand and fulfill its role as a regional leader and global actor is worth considering. Iran must change its means of achieving this, however, for this to be acceptable to the international community. Arguably, many nations would find an Iran that pursued such an agenda without funding violent extremist groups, while pursuing nuclear power in transparent fashion much more palatable. Instead of forceful export of the Islamic Revolution, Iran as a "shining beacon" and example to other Muslim nations seems beneficial to many nations, including Iran itself.

With respect to information, Dr. Nikki Slocum-Bradley offers several *identity behaviors* that promote conflict and peace, respectively. Some behaviors that promote conflict include

¹⁶⁹ Auerbach, 469.

¹⁷⁰ Baer, 14.

“...accusations, rebukes... blaming and social obloquy.”¹⁷¹ If these types of behaviors apply also to nation-states, then the United States has perpetuated the conflict by publicly branding Iran as a member of an “Axis of Evil.”¹⁷² Slocum Bradley also offers several behaviors that promote peace, including but not limited to “...[i]dentifying people as members of the same group, characterizing certain individuals as problematic and the majority of people as unified and harmonious,” and “...characterizing certain actions as ‘unintentional,’ characterizing groups as weak when divided but strong when unified.”¹⁷³ In light of these suggested behaviors, then, the United States could potentially have a very powerful strategic communications campaign targeted at promoting peace, or at the very least, less strained relations between the two countries. Such a campaign would include messages emphasizing the difference between Iranian citizens and the policies of their government, while portraying Iranian citizens as unified. Another peace-promoting message would stress the richness of Iranian, Persian, and Islamic culture, and the unity they create among Iranians and Muslims through shared history. Finally, the United States should recognize that differences that exist between Western and Eastern societies, while emphasizing the fact these differences do not prevent peaceful co-existence.

Alternately, the United States could begin highlighting *similarities* between itself and Iran. Iran’s “third generation” has already demonstrated a taste for Western culture, opening the possibility for comparison to the West’s own younger generations. This seems especially appropriate when one considers Auerbach’s approach of reconciliation as resolution to identity-based conflicts.

¹⁷¹ Slocum-Bradley, 8.

¹⁷² Cable News Network. "Bush State of the Union address - January 29, 2002." *CNN.com*. January 29, 2002. <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/01/29/bush.speech.txt/> (accessed November 28, 2009). Once again, the author does not condone Iranian actions, merely point out certain U.S. policy decisions and messages have perpetuated conflict between the United States and Iran.

¹⁷³ Slocum-Bradley, 9.

Economically, current United States and United Nations sanctions appear to have little effect in deterring Iran from continuing its nuclear research and pursuing its foreign policy through support of violent extremist groups. The author proposes that, from an identity standpoint, sanctions may even be counter-productive, as they serve to widen the political differences between Iran and many other countries. Sanctions fuel the Islamic Republic's argument that the West conspires to keep them from their rightful place in the regional and world order.

Militarily, there are actions the United States can take that will better prepare it for action against many potential opponents, not just Iran. This monograph is necessarily limited in scope to a specific country and certain historical examples. That is not to say identity theory is not applicable or informative in other countries and regions across the globe. There is nothing preventing commanders and staffs from performing a similar, identity-based analysis of any social group, in any country, in any geographical area of responsibility. Such an analysis would provide far better context for commanders at all levels of war, and far exceed the level of preparation current "cultural awareness" initiatives and training programs provide. Taken even further, identity theory and identity-based analysis both seem a relevant addition to Foreign Area Officer (FAO) training programs. If the United States is to continue to participate in "war among the people," identity theory can only provide commanders with additional levels of understanding, better preparing them to interact with foreign populations.

Appendix A: Structure and Function of the Iranian Government

In spite of its semi-authoritarian nature, most citizens of Iran regard the government structure as legitimate, and voter turnout across all elections is typically above 50 per cent.¹⁷⁴ In the 1997 presidential elections for example, voter turnout hit a record high of over 80 per cent. Of the 65 million people in Iran, everyone over the age of 18 is eligible to vote. Within Iran's current pool of eligible voters, close to half are under the age of 30.

A Religious Head of State

The Iranian head of state carries the title of *Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic*. The Supreme leader is appointed for life by an 86-member clerical panel called the Assembly of Experts. He enjoys the power to override decisions made by any government agency or person. Nominally, he has such power to ensure the Islamic Republic remains in compliance with Sharia. The Iranian constitution empowers the Supreme Leader to appoint many government officials, including half of the powerful Guardian Council, all of the Expediency Council, the Head of Judiciary, the senior representative of the state-controlled media, and many senior military commanders. The Supreme Leader also confirms the election of the President, and commands the country's armed forces. For many Iranian Muslims, he is a divinely guided figure and a representative of the Mahdi, the redeemer who will "rid the world of injustice" before Judgment Day.¹⁷⁵ Through religious education, the Supreme Leader may also issue *fatwas*, or religious decrees, though they are uncommon as a tool of statecraft; constitutional amendments and laws passed through the legislature are far more commonly used. The current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has been the Iranian head of state since 1989, following the death of

¹⁷⁴ British Broadcasting Corporation. "Guide: How Iran is Ruled." *BBC News Middle East*. June 9, 2009. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8051750.stm> (accessed October 4, 2009), 1.

¹⁷⁵ Ali Saeedi, interview by Al-Arabiya Television. *Interview with IRGC spokesman* (August 2009).

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Khomeini has not yet achieved the highest level of Islamic education, *marja al-taqlid*, or “source of emulation” as Khomeini had, and consequently relies heavily on the religious clergy of Iran to bolster his legitimacy.

The Inner Circle of Power: Iran’s Guardian Council

The Guardian Council is the most powerful political body in the Iranian government. It is composed of six Islamic scholars, directly appointed by the Supreme Leader, and six jurists, or secular legal experts, nominated by the Head of Judiciary and approved by the Majles, or parliament. Significantly, the Supreme Leader directly appoints the Head of Judiciary. The Guardian Council approves all candidates for positions in the Assembly of Experts, the President, and all potential members of the Majles. These organizations represent the totality of popularly elected officials in the Iranian government, meaning the Guardian Council functionally determines who may or may not be elected to every democratically determined office in the Iranian government. The Guardian Council frequently exercises this power: In the 2004 Majles elections, the council rejected applications from approximately 2,500 parliamentary candidates, including 87 members already in office.¹⁷⁶ In the 2005 Presidential election, the Guardian Council rejected all but six applications from a pool of well over a thousand, though the Supreme Leader did override the prohibition of two conservative candidates.¹⁷⁷ Additionally, the Guardian Council approves or disapproves of all bills the Majles proposes, and may stop them from becoming laws if they determine the bills are incompatible with sharia. Thus, to run for public office, or pass a law in parliament, one needs the approval of the Guardian Council.

¹⁷⁶ Keith Crane, Rollie Lal, and Jeffrey Martini. Iran’s Political, Demographic, and Economic Vulnerabilities. (Santa Monica, The RAND Corporation), 13.

¹⁷⁷ British Broadcasting Corporation. "Guide: How Iran is Ruled." *BBC News Middle East*. June 9, 2009, 1.

An Inwardly-Focused President

The President of the Islamic Republic is elected by popular vote from a pool of candidates approved by the Guardian Council. He serves a four-year term and may serve no more than two consecutive terms. The President nominates his own cabinet ministers, subject to approval from the Majles. His primary responsibility is to ensure the correct implementation of the Constitution, and in this respect, he and his cabinet fulfill a role similar to the U.S. Executive Branch. In practice, the President is responsible for domestic policy; decisions regarding foreign policy, security, and defense rest with the Supreme Leader. In 1989, shortly before his death, Ayatollah Khomeini did away with the office of the Prime Minister, combining his duties and responsibilities with the office of the president.¹⁷⁸ President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, who also served as the mayor of Tehran before his election, is the first president of Iran who has not also been a formally educated Islamic cleric since the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Religiously Educated Monitors: The Assembly of Experts

The Assembly of Experts is an 86-member assembly of Islamic clergy who are elected by popular vote, and serve eight-year terms. Their responsibilities include appointing the Supreme Leader, monitoring his tenure, and removing him should he be unable to perform his duties. Their candidacy, like that of the Majles, is subject to approval by the Guardian Council before they may run for office. Although they are nominally based in Qom, the center of religious learning in Iran (and in all of Shia Islam), the Assembly of Experts has met in other cities, including Mashad and Tehran. The current chair of the Assembly of Experts is former president Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, who also chairs the Expediency Council.

¹⁷⁸ Crane, et al, 12-13.

A Democratic Legislature: The Majles

The Iranian Parliament, or Majles, is a 290 person unicameral legislature. The Guardian Council must also approve candidates for the Majles before they may run for office. Majles elections occur every four years. The Majles has the power to make and pass laws, and fulfills a role roughly equivalent to the U.S. Congress. Unlike most legislatures, the Guardian Council must approve all bills before the Majles may vote them into law, a process that only the Expediency Council may override. Arguably, the Majles is the most democratic of Iran's political institutions.

The Other Inner Circle: The Expediency Council

The Supreme Leader appoints all members of the Expediency Council, which includes prominent social, religious, and political figures. Created in 1988 by Ayatollah Khomeini, the Expediency Council is responsible for resolving disputes between the Majles and the Guardian Council. Specifically, they can override the Guardian Council's ability to disallow or reject a bill proposed by the Majles¹⁷⁹. They also serve as an advisory body for the Supreme Leader. Khomeini created the Expediency Council as a way to decrease the power of an increasingly conservative Guardian Council, and in the process gave the Supreme Leader even more control over Iranian politics. In 2005, Ayatollah Khomeini further increased the Expediency Council's authority, giving them at least partial oversight of the other branches of the government. Many saw this move as a way to decrease the power of a very charismatic president – Mahmoud Ahmedinejad.¹⁸⁰ It also gave more power to another key person – former president Rafsanjani, now chair of both the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Council.

¹⁷⁹ Crane, et al., 12.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

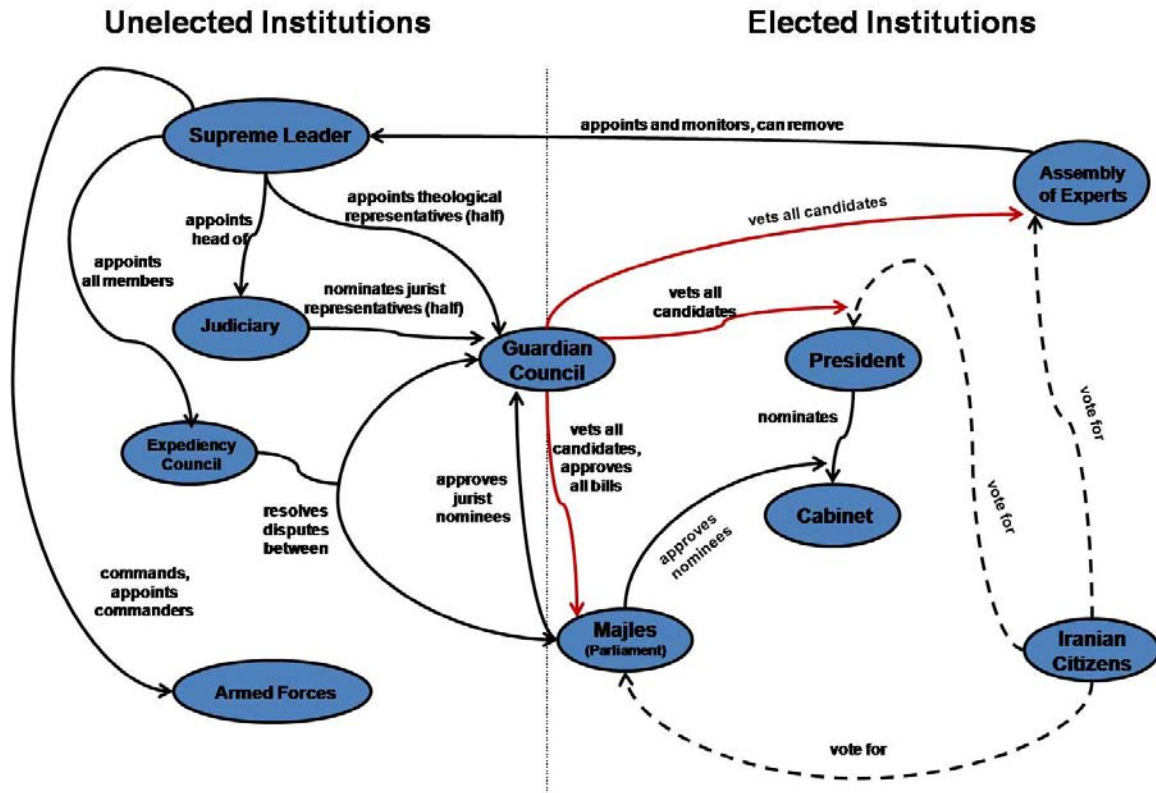


Figure 7: Roles and relationships between government entities, as set forth in the 1989 version of the Iranian Constitution.

Practical Implications

One can clearly see the duality of the Iranian state system. By its very structure and processes, the organization of the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran places secular, democratic institutions in a role subordinate to authoritarian religious ones. Through a complex system of redundant organizations such as the Guardian Council and the Expediency Council, the Supreme Leader can effectively control the government, if not always its citizens. The presidency of Mohammed Khatami provides an excellent example of how the Iranian government is set up to ensure the continued dominance of the conservative Islamic clergy, and thus the ideals behind Khomeini's revolution, especially *velayat-e-faqih*.

Appendix B: Policy and Command of the Armed Forces

Iran's armed forces, like the structure of its government, consist of parallel organizations. The Regular Army, or *Artesh*, focus on deterring threats external to the Islamic Republic. The Revolutionary Guards, or *Pasdaran*, are a tool to maintain internal security, including enforcement of the country's borders and security of its ports of entry. By authority of the Constitution and their own founding statute, the Revolutionary Guards' primary role is to guard the government itself, and preserve the ideals of Khomeini's 1979 revolution. They are, in a very real sense, the "Guardians of the Revolution." In recent years, the power of the Revolutionary Guards has grown considerably, and former commanders of the organization are prevalent in both the legislative and executive branches. They have also expanded well into the economic sector, and control substantial portions of Iran's non-hydrocarbon economy.

The Supreme National Security Council

At the national level, one of the most important executive assemblies is the Supreme National Security Council. It consists of the President, who chairs the body, and the commanders of the Armed Forces: the commander of the Joint Forces, the commander of the *Artesh* or regular Army, and the commander of the *Pasdaran* or Revolutionary Guards. The Supreme Leader commands all of Iran's Armed Forces; the office of the President is formally responsible only for their budget. He also has a seat on the SNSC, and must ratify all decisions before their implementation.¹⁸¹ Select cabinet ministers also participate in the SNSC, including the Minister of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL), the Minister of the Intelligence Service (MOIS), the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the head of the Planning and Budgeting Organization. The constitution charges the SNSC with three primary duties: determining national

¹⁸¹ Jane's Sentinel. "Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment - Gulf States." *Army, Iran*. January 5, 2009.

security and defense policies within the framework laid down by the Supreme Leader, co-ordinating all political, intelligence, social, cultural, and economic activities in relation to those security and defense policies, and to exploit the resources of the country for facing external threats.¹⁸²

A National Intelligence Body: The Quds Force

The Quds¹⁸³, or Jerusalem Force, have supported a wide variety of terrorist organizations. The U.S. Department of State's has called them "the [Iranian] regime's primary mechanism for cultivating and supporting terrorists abroad."¹⁸⁴ The Department of State has also directly linked the Quds Force to Hamas, Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraq-based militant groups, and Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.¹⁸⁵

Most western media agencies call the Quds Force the intelligence branch of the Revolutionary Guards. In practice, the Quds Force is very much a tool of foreign policy, giving them a fundamentally different mission than the inwardly focused Revolutionary Guards. The Minister of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) seems to be directing their moves, under guidance from a subcommittee of the SNSC, more than the intelligence directorate of the Revolutionary Guards. Additionally, the Supreme Leader is responsible for all foreign policy decisions, and the Quds Force is undeniably a tool of Iranian foreign policy. Given these factors, the author proposes it is more useful to examine the Quds Force as a national intelligence service, similar to our own Central Intelligence Agency.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Typically, the organization's name is not translated in Western media, and is simply referred to as the "Quds Force." This is true in all U.S. Government documents the author has read as well.

¹⁸⁴ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism. "Country Reports on Terrorism 2008: Chapter 3: State Sponsors of Terror." *U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism*. April 30, 2009, 2.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

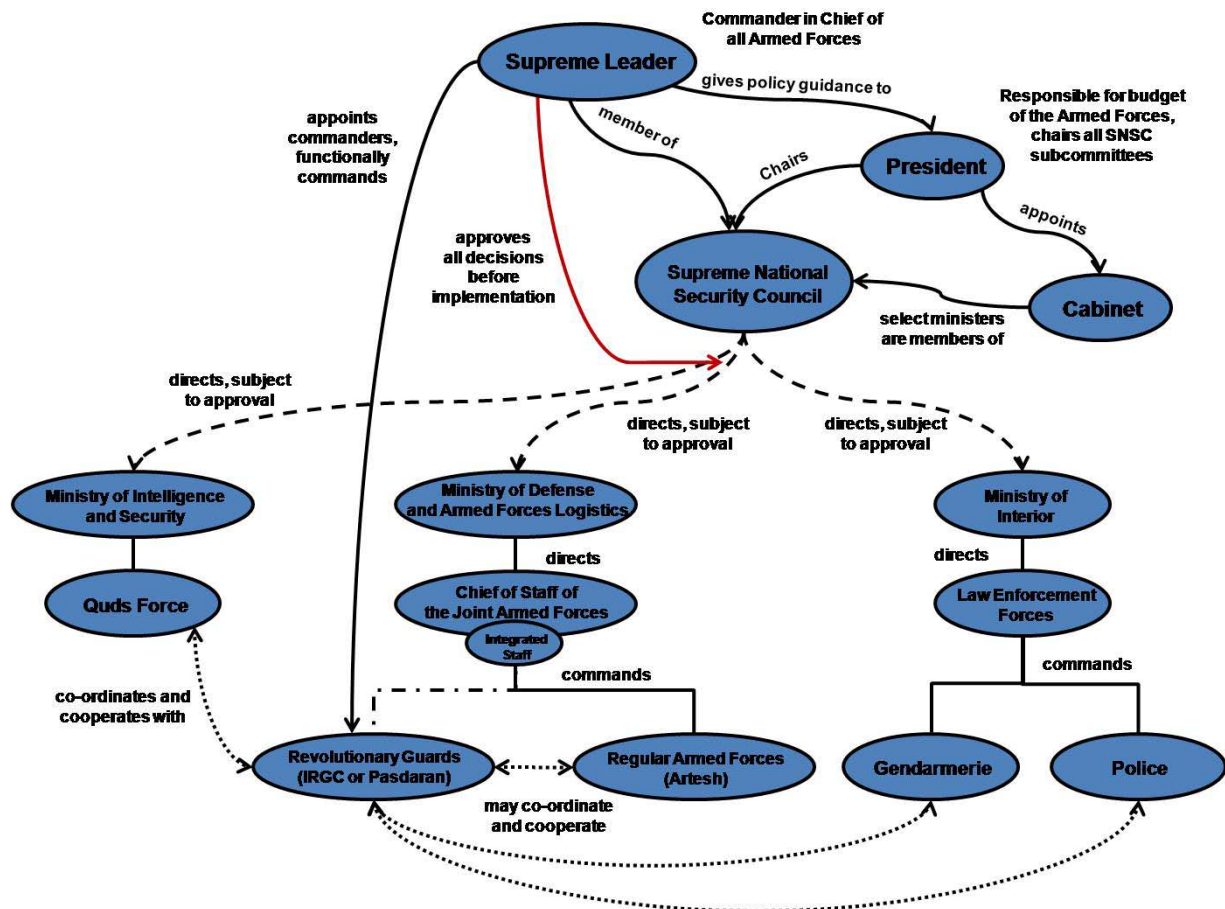


Figure 8: National Command of the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic

The Guardians of the Islamic Revolution

The Iranian Revolutionary Guards derive their authority from article 150 of the Iranian constitution, which served to continue the organization past the end of the Islamic Revolution. It states the organization “is to be maintained so that it may continue in its role of guarding the revolution and its achievements.”¹⁸⁶ This illustrates the strong ties between the ideology of the 1979 revolution and the Revolutionary Guards itself. Although they nominally report to a joint headquarters, in practice the Revolutionary Guards work directly for the Supreme Leader. They

¹⁸⁶ Jane's Sentinel. "Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment - Gulf States." *Army, Iran*. January 5, 2009.

are a fundamentally political entity, and their role is to ensure continuance of the ideals of the Revolution and to protect the government of the Islamic Republic.

The Revolutionary Guards have their own air, ground, and naval forces. Of note, the Air and Missile Forces of the Revolutionary Guards control all of the country's strategic weapons, including all the Islamic Republic's medium range ballistic missiles, including the widely publicized Shahab-3. The Revolutionary Guards also work closely with law enforcement forces when necessary, especially in its border enforcement role. They also control the *Basiji* , *Mostazafin* or "Mobilization of the Oppressed." The Basiji fulfill a variety of roles and have a variety of branches of their own, and are worth further discussion later.

The Revolutionary Guards also have a substantial economic wing, and are a powerful economic conglomerate in their own right. The largest of the Revolutionary Guards' holdings include ownership of the construction giant Khatam-al-Anbiya, sometimes abbreviated as GHORB. According to some estimates, GHORB's annual operating budget exceeds 12 billion U.S. dollars and involves a sizeable portion of the Iranian construction market. GHORB also controls operations of the Imam Khomeini International Airport, and holds a controlling interest in Iran's largest telecommunications company. Analyst Hossein Arayan summarizes the Guards' economic power well, stating they have "control of 500 companies over a wide range of industries from life insurance to banking. By most estimates, the IRGC is the third largest corporation in the country after the National Iranian Oil Company and the Imam Reza Foundation in Mashad.¹⁸⁷"

Each separate branch of the Revolutionary Guards has an accompanying cleric that ensures adherence to the Revolution's religious and political ideals. These clerics report to the commander of the Revolutionary Guards, and not to the Supreme Leader. This does little to

¹⁸⁷ Hossein Arayan, "Mass Mobilisation - The rise of Iran's paramilitary enforcer." *Jane's Intelligence Review*. June 12, 2009, 10.

provide unbiased supervision of the Revolutionary Guards, as their “supervisory” clergy report directly to the head of the organization itself, and not the Supreme Leader.¹⁸⁸ It is important to emphasize that the Revolutionary Guards are a military entity, but also that they are tied to Iranian state politics, religion, and recently, the economy.

Young Pioneers, Militia, or Both? The Basiji Mostazafin

The *Basiji Mostazafin*, or “Mobilization of the Oppressed,” were created in November of 1979 following the hostage situation in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. Ayatollah Khomeini ordered the formation of the organization, envisioning an organization capable of maintaining internal security and deterring foreign intervention in the newly formed Islamic Republic.¹⁸⁹ Today, the Basiji have five major divisions: Pupil Basiji, Student Basiji, University Basiji, Public Works, and Tribal Basiji. The Pupil Basiji, composed entirely of children between the ages of 12 and 18, are similar in nature to the “young Pioneers” of the early Soviet Union, as they provide encouragement of regime support at an early age.¹⁹⁰ Members of the Basiji enforce moral codes such as wear of the *hejab*, or women’s hair covering, which Iranian law dictates that female citizens wear in public at all times. Basiji may arrest Iranian citizens for improper male-female fraternization, carrying ‘indecent’ material, or possessing a satellite dish antenna. Basiji members have also harassed liberal intellectuals and government opposition figures.¹⁹¹ In short, the Basiji provide the Iranian government with a means to begin political indoctrination of their population early on in life, and an organization to monitor and enforce the moral laws of the Islamic Republic that is wholly independent of Iran’s other domestic law enforcement activities.

¹⁸⁸ Ali Afoneh, “Indoctrinated to Intervene: Iran’s IRGC.” *Jane’s Islamic Affairs Analyst*. February 6, 2009. 4-5.

¹⁸⁹ Aryan. 2.

¹⁹⁰ Aryan, 4-5.

¹⁹¹ Aryan, 6.

Aside from these five branches, the Basiji also maintain regionally oriented and commanded *Ashura* (male) and *Zahara* (female) battalions. These paramilitary organizations are charged with maintaining domestic order when the law enforcement forces are insufficient, or defending the Iranian homeland in case of an invasion. They have formal rank structure, military chains of command and uniforms, and are what Western media commonly calls the “Basiji Militia.” Ashura and Zahara battalion members receive basic military training, and in more recent years have been taught crowd and riot control tactics. Ashura battalions currently work along the Afghan and Pakistani borders in a counter-narcotics role, and have bolstered law enforcement forces in the Sistan va Baluchistan province, in their suppression of a Baluchi insurgency. These militia battalions also maintain a heavy presence in the Khuzestan province, along the southern Iraqi border. Notably, Khuzestan is home to Iran’s largest Arab population.

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