

The background of the cover features several stylized, light green leaf motifs scattered across a pale yellow gradient. These motifs are simple line drawings of leaves on short stems, appearing in various orientations.

# **IRAN'S MILITARY FORCES IN TRANSITION**

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**Conventional Threats and  
Weapons of Mass Destruction**

**Anthony H. Cordesman**

 **Greenwood**  
PUBLISHING GROUP

# Iran's Military Forces in Transition

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*Conventional Threats and  
Weapons of Mass Destruction*

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ANTHONY H. CORDESMAN

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*To the men and women of the US defense intelligence community*

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# Iran's Military Forces in Transition

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## *Chapter 1*

# Introduction

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Iran is a nation that is still deeply in the process of revolutionary change, and which is deeply divided between “moderates” who have broad public support and “conservatives” who control the military, security system, and most other governmental institutions. The “moderates” now seem to be the strongest faction, and change may take a peaceful and positive course. Iran’s regime has become steadily more pragmatic under President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and President Mohammad Khatami, and more concerned with Iran’s national interests and economic development in the Gulf than with the export of revolution. Since the election of President Khatami, there are growing signs that Iran may evolve a more tolerant approach to defining an Islamic state, one that emphasizes the humanitarian and moral strength of Islam, rather than the effort to force other nations into accepting its concept of a repressive and an outdated theological rule and social customs.

Revolutions, however, can become more extreme as well as more moderate. Iran’s pragmatists and moderates still face strong radical opposition. Iran’s revolution may yet become the captive of ambitious leaders or elites. Conservative or extremist reaction can suppress the positive trends in political and social development, and nationalism and regional ambition can turn ideology into an excuse for aggression. Economic failure can also become an excuse for aggression, as can the need to justify authoritarian rule and social repression.

Iran did not attempt a massive rebuilding of its military forces after its defeat in the Iran-Iraq War, and it cut its military spending sharply after Iraq’s defeat in the Gulf War. It may eventually limit its military build-up to creating a strong defense and set strategic goals that defend its own interests without threatening other nations. At the same time, Iran continues to proliferate and build up its capabilities to threaten shipping in the Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. An econom-



ically stronger Iran might import much larger numbers of arms, and Iran is creating military industries with the potential to greatly strengthen its forces.

It may be a decade or more before Iran's ultimate course is clear, and it is difficult for many observers to face the fact that it will take time and patience to observe the outcome. In the interim, Iran has developed many critics and apologists. There are those who "demonize" every Iranian action and event, even when such action appears positive or largely defensive. There are those who "sanctify" Iran's worst mistakes, just as there have been those who have excused or glorified every authoritarian and repressive regime in the history of the twentieth century.

Until recently, US policy makers and analysts have tended to demonize Iran. They have viewed Iran largely in terms of the threat its revolutionary regime has posed to Western interests since the fall of the Shah in 1979. For example, a 1995 report on US security strategy for the Middle East by the Office of the Secretary of Defense referred to Iran's regional intentions as follows: "Iran harbors ambitions of establishing Iranian hegemony over the Persian Gulf and expanding its influence over radical Islamist forces. . . . It is obvious that Iran is assertively flexing its muscles vis-à-vis its smaller Gulf neighbors."<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, Europe and many Arab states have seen more of an opportunity for better relations and dialogue. European and Arab governments and analysts felt that the Iranian regime was moderating and that its ambitions were far more modest and defensive than regional hegemony. Some believed Iran had already shifted to a focus on defense, accommodation with its neighbors, and internal development. Others believed that it could be persuaded to do so over time.

The election of President Khatami as Iran's new president on May 24, 1997, has led to more convergence on these issues. His election was a clear sign that Iran's people were deeply concerned with their own cultural freedoms and economic development. During his first year in office, President Khatami took dramatic new initiatives to improve Iran's relations with its neighbors at the Organization of Islamic Countries Conference in Tehran in the fall of 1997. He made a dramatic effort to improve relations with the United States in a television interview in early 1998. What Rafsanjani signaled through actions like offering CONOCO an oil deal, Khatami put into words and began an informal dialogue between Iran and the United States.

## **IRAN'S THREATENING ACTIONS**

It is far too soon, however, to ignore the other aspects of Iran's behavior. The news is filled with signs of internal debates within Iran that could still bring a set of "hard-liners" to power. Iran has scarcely rejected the kind of revolutionary ideology and political rhetoric that have attacked Western secular values and the regimes of many Arab states since the Iranian revolution began.

President Khatami does not control the security structure, military forces,

justice system and police, or even the radio and television. All these elements of power are under the direct control of the more conservative exemplified by Supreme Religious Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Khatami must also deal with other centers of power. The most important of these centers include:

- The 270-member Majlis (Consultative Assembly), in which conservatives hold about one-third of the seats, moderates another third, independents about one-fourth, and religious minorities the remainder;
- The former President Rafsanjani, who now heads the powerful Expediency Council; and
- The hard-liners and extremists in Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, the Basij, and Iran's intelligence and security services.

Since Khatami's election there have been many signs that Iran has a complex political structure that is in the midst of an uncertain transition. Virtually every day there are new signs that the Iranian government is divided between "hard-liners" and "moderates." This struggle makes it very difficult to know how moderate Iran's moderates really are, and to determine whether a given speech attacking the United States or the West is really directed at its target or Iran's internal politics. It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that Iran's present political rhetoric is divided between initiatives that promise better relations and dialogue and repetitions of past hostility. Moderates must talk like hard-liners to survive, and this helps explain why one day's new moderate initiative may be followed by the next day's hard-line speech.

It also is too soon to forget the recent past. While the Iran-Iraq War began with Iraqi aggression, Iran's refusal to accept a cease-fire after 1982 needlessly extended the war by nearly half a decade and cost more than 100,000 lives. Iran deployed combat aircraft into Kuwaiti and Saudi air space during the Iran-Iraq War, sailed combat ships into Omani waters, and initiated a "tanker war" against the Southern Gulf states that led to a major military confrontation with the United States.

Iran's attempts to sponsor a coup in Bahrain in the early 1980s seem to have been followed by the ongoing support of Shi'ite extremists in both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Iran's seizure of all of Abu Musa and the Tunbs created a new source of confrontation following the Gulf War. Iran has continued to support extremist movements in the Sudan, Egypt, and Algeria. It has continued to oppose the Arab-Israeli peace process and has joined Syria in using the Hezbollah to conduct a proxy war against Israel in Lebanon.

Iran extended its struggle with hostile Iranian opposition movements to the point where it has conducted a systematic campaign of assassinations in Europe which have killed between 40 and 60 people. While these acts of state terrorism have often been taken against members of movements which are themselves terrorist in character, Iran has also murdered peaceful members of its opposition.

It has sponsored other terrorist movements and given them training and sanctuary as well.

Iran has further compensated for the overall weakness of its conventional weapons in three ways which pose a potential threat to its neighbors and the West:

- It has built up elite special forces, and large forces for unconventional warfare—many of which are trained for operations in the Gulf area.
- It has created a mix of anti-ship missile deployments, submarines, and mine warfare capabilities that cannot seriously threaten US naval power, but which can threaten commercial tanker and cargo traffic in the Gulf and which can be used as a tool to put pressure on the Southern Gulf states.
- It has acquired new long-range missiles from North Korea, built up significant stocks of chemical weapons, and pursued a nuclear weapons program. It has developed biological weapons, although US experts do not believe that it has yet begun to deploy them.

## **PRESIDENT KHATAMI AND THE HOPE FOR CHANGE**

The past, however, may well not be a prologue to the future. The election of Mohammad Khatami as Iran's new president revealed deep fracture lines between Iran's more conservative clerics and the Iranian people. Khatami campaigned by calling for social liberalization and economic reform in Iran. He stressed themes he had raised throughout his career, calling for a dialogue between civilizations, cultures, and religions.

While Khatami broadly endorsed Iran's hard-line policies towards the United States, he had little other choice. No candidate would have been allowed to run who did not openly support Iran's existing policies, and Khatami was by far the most liberal of the four candidates out of 238 applicants that the conservative Council of Guardians allowed to run. As it stood, the Council of Guardians clearly expected Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri, the conservative speaker of the Majlis, to win.

In spite of the political constraints he faced, Khatami became a symbol of domestic political reform to Iran's youth, women, and most of its men. He promised economic reform and growth, an easing of the religious constraints on social and cultural life, and an emphasis on human rights and the rule of law. As a result, he received nearly 70% of the vote in an election involving 94% of Iran's 32 million eligible voters.<sup>2</sup> Iran's voters decisively rejected Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri.

In the months that have followed, Khatami has spoken repeatedly about his belief that there should be no clash of cultures and that Islam and other cultures had much to teach each other. Iran made efforts to improve its relations with the Arab Gulf states and the Arab world. It began a dialogue with Iraq at the

ministerial level, improved its relations with Turkey, and took new steps to improve its relations with the European Union.

On December 9, 1997, at the meeting of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Tehran, President Khatami gave an opening speech that stated that Islamic civil society and its Western counterpart were “not necessarily in conflict and contradiction in all their manifestations and consequences. . . . This is why we should never be oblivious to judicious acquisition of the positive accomplishments of the Western civil society.”<sup>3</sup>

Khatami condemned terrorism and called for peaceful relations between all Islamic states, including Iran and the Southern Gulf states, stating that

Living in peace and security can be realized only when one fully understands not only the culture and thinking but also the concerns as well as the ways and manners of others. . . . In our view, a new order based on pluralism is taking shape in the world that, God willing, will not be the monopoly of any single power . . . (Islam and the West) are not necessarily in conflict and contradiction in all their manifestations and consequences. This is exactly why we should never be oblivious to judicious acquisition of the positive accomplishments of Western civil society.

Khatami clearly emphasized tolerance and democracy, arguing that, “In the civil society that we espouse, although centered around the axis of Islamic thinking and culture . . . personal or group dictatorship or even the tyranny of the majority and the elimination of the minority has no place.” He urged all Islamic nations to “strengthen confidence, reduce security concerns, and . . . render ineffective the wrong inculcation by the enemies of Islam.”<sup>4</sup>

Khatami’s remarks made a sharp contrast to those of Iran’s religious leader, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who gave an opening address stating that

Western materialistic civilization is directing everyone towards materialism while money, gluttony and carnal desires are made the greatest aspirations. Sincerity, truthfulness, altruism and self-sacrifice have been replaced in many parts of the world by deception, conspiracy, avarice, jealousy and other indecent features. . . . Most nations are deprived of scientific progress while a group have used their science and knowledge as a means to mete out oppression on others. . . . Western liberalism, communism, socialism and all other-“isms” have gone through their tests and proved their debility. As in the past, so today, Islam is the only remedial, curative and savior angel. . . . The Zionists, the notorious global Zionist media and the agents of arrogance, in particular the Americans—namely those who have sustained the greatest losses due to the (Iranian) revolution—have been and are most active and vocal in slandering the Islamic republic.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of the obvious divisions within Iran, these developments led to an important change in US policy. The United States eased its rhetoric regarding Iran and declared violent Iranian opposition movements like the People’s Mujahideen terrorist organizations. United States President Bill Clinton made new overtures to Iran and offered a dialogue without asking Tehran to drop its op-

position to peace agreements with the Israelis. Clinton defended past US efforts to isolate Iran. "On our embargo, I think it is the right thing to do. And it will have varying degrees of effectiveness." He also stated, however, that "It [Iran] is a country with a great history that at various times has been quite close to the United States. . . . Americans have been greatly enriched by Persian culture."

Clinton went on to state that the United States was taking a new approach to assessing US policy, and that no decisions had been taken. He indicated that the United States had been encouraged by the conciliatory remarks of President Khatami and believed that the presidential elections showed that Iranians wanted a more open society.

We would not expect any Islamic state . . . to say it had no opinions on issues involving what it would take to have a just and lasting peace settlement in the Middle East. . . . We would never ask any country to give up its opinions on that. But we would ask every country to give up the support, the training, the army, the financing of terrorism.

The President cited the US dialogue with China:

I think we have to be able to discuss those things in order to have an honest dialogue, just like we have an honest dialogue with China now. We don't have to agree on everything. But people have to be able to have an honest discussion even when they disagree.<sup>6</sup>

Less than a month later, President Khatami gave an interview on the Cable News Network (CNN) on January 8, 1998. He called for a "crack in the wall of mistrust" between Iran and the United States. He made no direct proposal for talks between governments, but he did suggest a dialogue between the two academics, writers, artists, and journalists in the two countries. He also stated that terrorism "should be condemned . . . and we condemn every form of it in the world," and "denied categorically" that Iranian intelligence maintained surveillance on US officials and military presence in the Gulf.<sup>7</sup>

Iran's religious leader, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, seemed far less forthcoming. He gave a speech shortly after Khatami in which he stated that, "Talks and relations with America would be detrimental to the Iranian nation and to the world Moslem movement. . . . The American regime is the enemy of [Iran's] Islamic government and our revolution. . . . It is the enemy of your revolution, your Islam, and your resistance to American bullying."<sup>8</sup>

Khatami was also careful to qualify his remarks in later speeches. Nevertheless, even his most negative comments about the United States were interesting because they were anything but aggressive:

Today we do not need to have the United States at our side. We can go ahead without the help of the United States. . . . Those who put coercive pressure on others and resort to force, and world powers that try to make oppressive pressure the basis of their relations with other nations . . . they cannot expect anything from the Iranian nation. . . . We have suffered the greatest harm from the unjust policies of America. . . . Before the revolution,

as you know, after the revolution, and even today, American politicians behave like the masters of the world. They impose sanctions on any place that does not bow to their interests and want to impose their sanctions by force on the world, not just on us. . . . The United States feels it can talk to Iran in whatever form it likes, and do whatever it feels like. . . . It not only puts pressure on Iran, it puts pressure on Europe, Asia, Japan, saying, for example, "If you want to invest in Iran more than such an amount, we will impose sanctions on you." It tries to impose its own domestic laws on the world. That is its domineering way. The fruit of our revolution is that we have freed ourselves from the yoke of our masters, and we will never submit to any new one. Today we are building our country ourselves. If we have shortcomings, they belong to us and we can remove them.<sup>9</sup>

### **Iran's Uncertain Future under Khatami**

The United States has improved its rhetoric regarding Iran and has reached an agreement with the European Union that seems likely to waive the application of economic sanctions. Nevertheless, it is far too soon to state that Khatami's election means good relations between Iran, its neighbors, and the West. There also are few signs of radical changes in Iran's national security policy. Iran continues its efforts to acquire long-range missiles and weapons of mass destruction. It continues its support of the Hezbollah and ties to extremist movements like the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. It continues its military build-up in the lower Gulf and its intelligence surveillance of US facilities and military operations in Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Gulf.

Iran's most powerful political figure is still the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, the Ayatollah Ali Hoseini Khamenei, and not Iran's new president. Khamenei is the formal commander of the armed forces and has ultimate authority over Iran's intelligence and security services.

This includes the Supreme Council for National Security, whose members include the President, the speaker of the Majlis, head of the judiciary, Chief of the General Staff, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Intelligence and Security, Minister of the Interior, and the head of the Plan and Budget Organization. Khamenei and his hard-line supporters seem to dominate bodies like the Special Operations (Coordinating) Committee, which includes the President, Supreme Leader's representative, Chief of the General Staff, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Intelligence and Security, head of the IRGC, and others and which some experts feel manages Iran's overseas operations and support of extremist groups.

Khamenei has an effective veto over the actions of the other branches of Iran's government, and Iran's government has many centers of power, many of which are still under conservative control.

President Khatami seems to have firm control only over the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, the Ministry of the Interior (which does not control the police in Iran), and the Foreign Ministry. The Majlis remains under the leadership of

Khatami's rival, Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri, and about two-thirds of its members seem to be "conservative" in most of their votes. A largely religious Council of Guardians can veto the actions of the president and Majlis and arbitrate many types of issues. Khatami's predecessor, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, now heads a much strengthened Expediency Council, which is generally more liberal than the Council of Guardians and serves as a rival body of review. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) represents conservative military force that is closely linked to the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, and conservative clerics still have *de facto* control of key popular security forces like the Basij.

At the same time, Khatami's new cabinet, which the Majlis subsequently endorsed, is the most moderate since the fall of the Shah. Kamal Kharrazi, Iran's ambassador to the UN, became the new foreign minister, replacing Ali Akbar Velayati. Kharrazi was scarcely a liberal, had been a spokesman for the revolution in the past, and had rejected the possibility of a dialogue with the United States as recently as November, 1996. At the same time, he received part of his education in the United States, taught there from 1972 to 1979, and was once a member of the American Association of University Professors. He helped negotiate the end of the Lebanese hostage crisis in the early 1990s. He was generally regarded as being much more pragmatic and moderate than Velayati, far better educated in the practical realities of foreign affairs, and much more experienced in dealing with other nations and the West.

Kharrazi's statements promised a more moderate attitude towards Iran's neighbors and the West. He called for "a dialogue among civilizations, rather than a clash among civilizations," and the "expansion of relations with all nations on the basis of mutual respect." Kharrazi talked about opening a dialogue with the United States "in principle," although he stated that, "the policies of the United States towards Iran have not changed. The same hostility towards Iran is going on. The sanctions policy is still in place, and the USA does not miss any opportunity to make problems for Iran, to make obstacles in the efforts by Iran for peace and security in the region. . . . The ball is in the court of the Americans."<sup>10</sup> Kharrazi was also quite clear in stating that, "We don't recognize Israel . . . I can't imagine Iran could recognize Israel as a country."<sup>11</sup>

The Ataollah Mohajerani, who became the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, had advocated direct dialogue with the United States as early as 1990. He was a 43-year-old historian whose public views have long been much more liberal than those of most of Iran's ruling clerics. The Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance has no formal role in national security policy but is a powerful voice in shaping the extent to which the revolution propagandizes Iranian society and interferes in its cultural life. Both Kharrazi's and Mohajerani's appointment came in the face of significant conservative opposition.

Abdollah Nouri, who became Minister of the Interior, had held the same position during the period 1990–1994. He had become progressively more moderate, however, and was seen as a powerful voice for political reform. Hossein

Namazi, the new minister for the economy and finance, was a doctor of economics who had studied in Austria. He had held a similar post during the period 1982–1986 and was expected to take the lead in emphasizing economic reform of a kind that required better relations with Iran's neighbors and the West. Many other posts—including agriculture, industry, justice, labor, and oil—went to ministers who were seen as pragmatic moderates by Iranian standards, and as officials that would emphasize Iran's economic development over ideology and efforts to export the revolution.

### **Khatami's Key National Security Appointments**

Iran's military leadership is changing. On September 15, 1997, Khatami called for the depolitization of Iran's armed forces and urged them to stay out of Iran's politics. "The armed forces have to abstain from factional politics and do their utmost to serve . . . (the) pillars of the revolution."<sup>12</sup>

While most of Khatami's key national security appointments were less reassuring than his civil appointments, others offered a hope of increased moderation. Rear Admiral Ali Shamkani left the navy and became the new Minister of Defense. Shamkani had long been regarded as a close associate of the Ayatollah Ali Hoseini Khamenei, and the Ministry of Defense remained closely tied to the Leader of the Islamic Revolution. At the time, Shamkani had never been regarded as a revolutionary fanatic or hard-liner and was viewed as one of the most apolitical and professional of Iran's senior officers. He had been a leader in Iran's military modernization and the development of its military industries, seeking to strengthen its forces and capabilities rather than engage in military adventures.

Some observers felt it was significant that Khatami did not appoint a direct replacement for Shamkani, who had commanded both the regular navy and the naval branch of the IRGC. Instead, Rear Admiral Abbas Mohtaj became commander of the regular navy, and Brigadier General Ali Akbar Ahmadian became commander of the naval branch of the IRGC. This led to speculation that Khatami had divided the command to prevent any member of the military from having too much power, although other analysts felt that Khamenei might have intervened to ensure the independence of the IRGC.

Khatami fired Ali Fallahiyan from his position as the Minister of the Ministry of Intelligence (information) and Security (MOIS). Fallahiyan had strongly opposed Khatami during the election and had become something of an embarrassment to Iran after the Mykonos trial of Iranian assassins in Germany. Qorban'ail Dorri Najafabadi became the new minister. Najafabadi was a relatively obscure figure with no intelligence background. Although Najafabadi was considered relatively moderate and had backed Khatami during the election, it seems likely that Khatami would have preferred to appoint a closer associate like Mohammad Musavi Ko'einiha, and that Najafabadi's appointment was a concession to Khamenei and the hard-line clerics. Najafabadi, however, was



regarded as part of the more moderate wing of the conservative faction and as less likely to engage in terrorism and aggressive efforts to export the revolution than his predecessor, Ali Fallahiyan.

Khatami replaced Reza Amrollahi, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, with Gholamreza Aghazadeh, Iran's former oil minister. The reasons for this appointment were not clear. Some sources argued that it represented an effort to improve the administration of Iran's nuclear programs (Amrollahi had developed a reputation as an awful administrator and manager). Some felt it might be part of an effort to make Iran's nuclear power program more efficient, while others saw it as part of an effort to review whether such a program was cost-effective at all. A few suggested it might represent a downplaying of Iran's nuclear weapons program.

There is no way to predict Iran's future intentions regarding nuclear weapons. Aghazadeh did, however, reaffirm Iran's commitment to a massive nuclear power program on October 3, 1997. At a meeting with Hans Blix, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Aghazadeh indicated that Iran planned to add a second 1,000 megawatt generating unit to its existing efforts to build a 1,000 megawatt unit in Bushehr, and eventually to produce 20% of Iran's electric power needs from nuclear units. He indicated that Iran had approached Russia to buy two more 440 megawatt reactors and was seeking an eventual total of six, and that it was still seeking two 300 megawatt nuclear reactors from China.<sup>13</sup> Since that time, Iran has experienced continuing problems with the first reactor in Bushehr, although it has converted some of the more difficult Iranian-led construction activity to programs managed by Russia.

On September 9, 1997, Khamenei replaced Major General Mohsen Rezaei (Rezaei), the head of the IRGC, with his former deputy, Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi. Rezaei was then the longest-serving senior military official in Iran and had been commander for 16 years. Rezaei had previously threatened to turn the Gulf into a "slaughterhouse" if the United States attacked Iran in June, 1997. He had supported Nateq-Nouri and had openly criticized Khatami during the election campaign. He had called for a Syrian-Iranian alliance against Israel and the West just days before the change in command—a sharp contrast with Khatami's continuing calls for dialogue.<sup>14</sup>

This change in command was greeted in Iran as a sign of moderation, and even led to rumors that Rezaei's family had fled Iran and/or that Rezaei was being set aside for his failure to get the IRGC and Basij to support Nateq-Nouri in the election.<sup>15</sup> Rezaei, however, made a point of declaring, in an interview on September 12, that while the Revolutionary Guards needed a strong ideological motivation, they "had to maintain a neutral stance in matters related to the existing factions in the country."<sup>16</sup>

The Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, made Rezaei the deputy head of the Expediency Council, potentially one of the most powerful political bodies in Iran. Rezaei's appointment also gave Khamenei a potential hard-line balance to ex-President Rafsanjani, the more "moderate" head of the Council.<sup>17</sup> Further-

more, Brigadier-General Safavi scarcely emerged as a moderate. Iran's official news agency, IRNA, quoted him on May 2, 1998, as saying that some of the new publications allowed President Khatami to "threaten national security." He went on to say that, "We seek to tear out the roots of counter-revolution wherever they may be. We should cut the neck of some of them. We will cut the tongues of others. . . . Our sword is our tongue. We will expose . . . these cowards." Safavi also criticized President Khatami's call in January for cultural exchanges with Americans in January, 1998 by saying, "Can we counter the threat posed by America, which seeks to dominate the world, through a dialogue between cultures and civilizations?"

Furthermore, Major General Safavi has scarcely been a moderate or a loyal supporter of Khatami. He has talked about cutting off the heads of the opposition, and on June 3, 1998, he gave a speech that seemed to clearly align him with Khamenei and against Khatami. He said his forces would bide their time before moving against reform-minded opponents who thrived under moderate President Mohammad Khatami.

The Guards . . . have identified many of the elements of these groups. . . . They have at this time left them free to set up their groups and newspapers, but we will go after them when the time is ripe. . . . The fruit has to be picked when it is ripe. That fruit is unripe now. We will pick it . . . when it turns ripe. . . . We have thrown a stone inside the nest of snakes which have received blows from our revolution, and are giving them time to stick their heads out.

Safavi referred to this part of the opposition as "the third group," which most observers felt were the liberals and dissidents outside of the mainstream moderate and conservative Islamic factions which share power in Iran.

This speech came only weeks after Safavi stated that the revolution should "cut the necks and tongues" of opponents.

We do not interfere in politics but if we see that the foundations of our system of government and our revolution is threatened . . . we get involved. . . . When I see that a [political] current has hatched a cultural plot, I consider it my right to defend the revolution against this current. My commander is the exalted leader and he has not banned me [from doing this].

### **Khatami's Defeats and Victories**

Khatami has not won every battle. He has seen one of his strongest supporters, Gholamhoession Karbaschi, the mayor of Tehran, brought up on charges of corruption. These charges were raised in late 1997, and Karbaschi was only allowed out on bail before his trial after political intervention. He was sentenced to five years in jail, given a 20-year ban on holding office, and fined \$333,000. A sentence of 60 lashes was suspended. Karbaschi faced a show trial, which

was broadcast on the state radio and television network, which is controlled by Iran's conservatives. The judge simultaneously acted as prosecutor, and took responsibility for gathering the evidence. He stated after the trial that he had "considered God and doomsday in issuing my verdict." Karbaschi is still free awaiting the outcome of his appeal, but the same day he was sentenced, conservatives succeeded in shutting down *Jameeah* for publishing "insults and lies." *Jameeah* is one of Iran's most liberal and pro-Khatami newspapers. While a successor paper soon began publishing, it too was shut down in September, 1998, along with several magazines.

The Majlis impeached Khatami's liberal Interior Minister, Abdullah Nouri, on June 21, 1998. Nouri was widely recognized as one of Karbaschi's strongest defenders, and the Majlis charged him with putting the country's security at risk, arrogance, dismissing 1,700 officials with more conservative politics, and weakening the stability of the economy. The vote was 137 to 111, with 13 abstentions, although Khatami had defended Nouri and called him "one of the strongest ministers in the cabinet." The vote came only three days after US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright had praised Khatami for leading Iran in a more moderate direction.

The conservatives were winning rounds, however, and not the fight. Khatami was able to give Nouri the position of one of Iran's vice presidents, the Vice President for Development and Social Affairs. He promptly appointed Mostafa Tajzadeh as acting minister. Tajzadeh has been one of Nouri's deputies and a close supporter. In July, Khatami made Abdolvahed Mousavi-Lavi the Minister of Interior. Mousavi-Lavi had served as Khatami's Vice President for Development and Social Affairs, and had been Khatami's Deputy of Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance when Khatami served as minister in the 1980s.

The Supreme Leader named three conservatives to the Council of Guardians in July, including the Ayatollah Mohammad Jannati, a strong and highly vocal hard-line critic of Khatami. This event may have helped lead Mousavi-Lavi to give a speech on August 12, 1998, calling upon the Council of Guardians to allow moderate candidates to run for the election to the Assembly of Experts. The election takes place on October 23, 1998. The Assembly has the power to appoint and dismiss the Supreme Leader, and the election occurs every eight years. The Council of Guardians must screen all candidates for the Assembly of Experts and has rejected moderate candidates in the past.

Khatami was able, however, to persuade the Ayatollah Khamenei to appoint Mousavi-Lavi as the acting commander of the police services on August 1, 1998. Nouri had never been given the post and the appointment did seem to strengthen Khatami. Further, Khamenei immediately endorsed the liberal and free-market-oriented economic reform plan that a Khatami-appointed committee presented to him in mid-August.

It is clear that a major political struggle is taking place. There have been other judicial excesses, including the arrest of several pro-Khatami deputy mayors of Teheran. Thugs in the hard-line Ansar-e Hezbollah (Helpers of God) have been

allowed to attack peaceful pro-Khatami demonstrations while the police and security services stood by.

Nevertheless, it is far from clear that this power struggle will lead to open civil conflict. Khatami has public opinion and the street and Khamenei has the security forces and military power. At the same time, some students and youth groups, like the Basij support Khamenei, while the military forces and Revolutionary Guards are 70% conscript and are filled with young men who voted for Khatami. Some observers feel that both sides are too frightened to use force on a large scale. They feel that a new political structure is emerging where Khatami tries to maneuver around Khamenei, Khamenei tries to isolate or undercut Khatami, and key players like Rafsanjani shift their direction according to the winds of power and act as opportunists.

## OTHER MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

Few dramatic changes took place in Iran's military behavior during President Khatami's first year in office. On September 22, 1997, the seventeenth anniversary of the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War, Khatami repeated the kind of speech calling for strong Iranian forces that Rafsanjani had given for years. He referred to foreign navies in the Gulf (United States and British) as a major threat, and he singled out US-Israeli-Turkish joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean as a threat to Iran.<sup>18</sup>

At the conference of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), President Khatami stated that there should be a pact to enable Gulf nations to defend themselves without relying on "foreign forces."

Iran . . . considers the conclusion of collective defense-security arrangements in the Persian Gulf an assured step towards the establishment of lasting security in the region. . . . In the sensitive and strategic region of the Persian Gulf, the regional states themselves should undertake to preserve security and peace. . . . The presence of foreign forces and armada . . . serves not only as a source of tension and insecurity but also of tragic environmental consequences.

The Ayatollah Ali Khamenei used harsher language when he said:

Right now, the presence of foreign warships and more importantly the US military muscle flexing in the Persian Gulf, which is an Islamic sea and an important source of energy for the entire world, is faced with insecurity. He referred to the "poisonous breath" of the United States, and called on the OIC to "force the aliens to dispense with this intervention and on the other hand eliminate the pretexts for this improper presence."<sup>19</sup>

Iran has continued to seek new technology and supplies to produce chemical and nuclear weapons, long-range missiles, and advanced conventional weapons. It has continued its intelligence surveillance of US facilities in Saudi Arabia.<sup>20</sup>

It bombed the bases of the People's Mujahideen, a violent opposition group based in Iraq, on September 29, 1997.<sup>21</sup>

Although Secretary of Defense William Cohen made a point of stating that the sudden deployment of the carrier *Nimitz* to the Gulf in late September, 1997 was a reaction to Iraqi flights in the "no fly zone," and that the "deployment order only cited Iraq and did not mention Iran," Iran reacted with a new flood of rhetoric.<sup>22</sup> Key Iranian military officers like Rear Admiral Abbas Mohtaj, the new commander of Iran's navy, have continued to issue statements like,

The aim of the US presence in the Gulf is to create a crisis and to sell billions and billions of dollars worth of weapons to the Arab countries in the region. . . . The presence of foreign countries, including the USA, in the Gulf is illegitimate and contrary to the security of the region.<sup>23</sup>

Defense Minister Shamkani has picked up the same old themes, stating that the United States was seeking to pursue a strategy of "distinctive control" in dealing with the Gulf states and defending Iran's right to attack People's Mujahideen bases in Iraq, even if this meant flying through the UN no-fly zones.<sup>24</sup> Admiral Mohammed Razi Hadaye, the commander of Iran's missile forces, stated that Iran was the region's "strongest missile power."<sup>25</sup> Mohammed Sadr, Iran's new Deputy Foreign Minister, visited Damascus on September 9, 1997, to discuss the security situation in Lebanon and to pledge continued military aid to the Hezbollah. Iran supplied the Hezbollah with new, longer-range rockets, although these seem to have been shipped before the election.<sup>26</sup>

Iran held massive military exercises in September, 1997 to commemorate the start of the Iran-Iraq War. Khamenei attended the final week of the exercises, which Iran claimed involved 200,000 men, air units, and several heavy divisions operating in an 1,800 square kilometer area north of Qom. As usual, the exercises were rationalized as defensive, but taught just as many lessons in offensive warfare.<sup>27</sup>

Iraq held naval war games in mid-October, which it claimed involved 100 ships operating over a 15,000 square mile area. These exercises began almost at the same time the *Nimitz* entered the Gulf. Iran issued claims that it had sent a new, small "stealth" remotely piloted reconnaissance system to spy on the US task force. Somewhat ironically, it then accused a US destroyer and reconnaissance plane of spying on its maneuvers. The US destroyer it named, the *USS Kinkaid*, was sitting in port in Bahrain at the time Iran claimed it was doing the spying.<sup>28</sup>

Another low point in Iran's relations with other nations occurred in mid-October, 1997, when Iran's Agriculture Minister, Issa Kalantari, charged that the United States was conspiring to keep Iran's pistachios out of European markets. In fact, the European Union had limited imports because it had found up to 200 times the permitted level of Aflatoxin B1, a substance found in food mold, which causes cancer of the liver.<sup>29</sup>

If there is any irony in Iran's military rhetoric, it lies in the fact that Iran's Majlis has continued to indulge in the same kind of hostile posturing as the US Congress. On January 25, 1998, it approved a fund for countering US "plots" against the Islamic republic for the third consecutive year. Deputies voted to allocate half of the fund to the Intelligence (internal security) Ministry and to give President Mohammad Khatami control over the rest of the budget, which is to be used to "uncover and neutralize the American government's plots and interference in Islamic Iran's internal affairs." The amount set aside for the fund was not announced, but a parliamentary debate broadcast on the radio indicated that it would be about the same as the current year's 25 billion Rials (\$14.3 million).

One deputy claimed that 10 billion Rials had already been used to set up Iran's satellite television channel which was launched last month and covers Europe and parts of Asia and the Middle East. "If today our dear president talks to the American people for one hour on CNN, with this budget we can launch a network through which we could address the Americans every day and bring them the message of the Islamic revolution and tell them about our just stands." The debate also indicated that some of the money would be used to bring suits against Washington at international bodies and to fight a "US cultural invasion," and that some of the money would also go to the Islamic Propagation Organization, a state-affiliated body which sends Shi'ite Moslem clerics to other countries.

Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi followed up with a speech on April 22, 1998, that condemned the US plan to beam radio broadcasts to Iran by stating that, "A wall of mistrust still stands between Tehran and Washington. . . . America's policies prove that, as in the past, one cannot trust what American officials say." He stated that the United States' plans to set up a Persian-language radio station aimed to wage a "psychological war" against Iran and constituted US interference in the internal affairs of the country. A war of words is not a war of weapons, however, and the Majlis only began this effort after US media reports revealed that the US Congress had set up a similar fund for covert action against Tehran.

Furthermore, there are some indications that military tensions have begun to diminish. President Khatami's speech on Armed Forces Day on April 18, 1998, stressed defensive nationalist themes: "Our army is strong and sovereign; our armed forces are strong and powerful, but neither our revolution nor our nation or armed forces are expansionist," he said in a speech at a military parade to mark Iran's Armed Forces Day. "We want a sovereign country and nation that seeks independence and honor and could act as a model for all the nations and countries of the region."

The main focus of the Armed Forces Day parade in 1998 was also largely defensive. It was to remember the casualties of Iran's war with Iraq, which Iran referred to as "the imposed war" and "the sacred defense," and to celebrate the recent repatriation of Iran's POWs under the supervision of the International

Committee of the Red Cross. The exchange included 5,584 Iraqis and 316 Iranians, most of which had been held captive for more than 15 years. Some of the freed Iranian POWs watched the parade and were honored by Khatami, who hung laurels around their necks.

The equipment used in the parade was also not particularly threatening. It included a flypast of MiG-27 and Sukhoi 24 fighters, but it also included a flypast of 25-year-old F-4 Phantom fighters. It included British Chieftain and Scorpion tanks and US Hawk surface-to-air missiles, which were acquired before the 1979 Islamic revolution that toppled the pro-Western shah. If there was any ominous element it was the march of nuclear, biological, and chemical warfare decontamination units, but these were displayed to recall the deaths of many Iranians from Iraqi chemical weapons, and no reference was made to any present Iranian capability.

Iran did hold the usual exercises following Armed Forces Day. They involved some 15,000 naval and air force personnel and all three of Iran's Russian-built Kilo-class diesel submarines. They produced the usual rhetoric about Iran's strength and served as a tangible demonstration of the threat it could pose to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf. At the same time, the official rhetoric surrounding the exercises was less strident than in the past, and the exercises did not involve any offensive operations. Like all previous Iranian exercises, no attempt was made to practice extensive amphibious operations involving significant movements of armor or over-the-beach operations.

Even a worst-case interpretation of Iran's military actions and intentions indicates that the end result may be a period of confrontation and hostility, with occasional low-level clashes and acts of terrorism. This would be far short of war, or the aggressive ambitions of Iraq, and would still allow the region to evolve towards peace. If Iran's revolutionary regime does become steadily more pragmatic and moderate with time, the problem Iran's military forces raise for its neighbors and the United States may be transformed to one of creating a new and stable balance of regional security and deterrence, one where Iran may gradually become a partner rather than a potential threat.

## **“DEMONIZATION” VERSUS “SANCTIFICATION”**

The key problem in dealing with Iran is that there is no way to predict the ultimate balance of power between Iran's moderates and conservatives. No week went by during President Khatami's first year in office in which some conflict did not surface between the two sides. The jailing of Tehran's moderate mayor, Gholamhossein Karabachi, on April 4, 1998, was a clear conservative attempt to put pressure on Khatami by attacking one of his closest allies on trumped-up charges of corruption. Every initiative Khatami took to improve relations with the United States was counterbalanced by hard-line rhetoric from leaders like Khamenei.

As a result, it is as dangerous to “sanctify” Iran as it is to “demonize” it.

Khatami has repeatedly criticized the United States and its role in the Gulf, although his criticism has not involved extremism or threats of violence. His words in a speech in April, 1998 indicate that the United States and Iran have a long way to go before they can have friendly relations, although they also indicate that a *modus vivendi* based on mutual compromise may well be possible:

Today we do not need to have the United States at our side. We can go ahead without the help of the United States. . . . Those who put coercive pressure on others and resort to force, and world powers that try to make oppressive pressure the basis of their relations with other nations . . . they cannot expect anything from the Iranian nation. . . . We have suffered the greatest harm from the unjust policies of America. . . . Before the revolution, as you know, after the revolution, and even today, American politicians behave like the masters of the world. They impose sanctions on any place that does not bow to their interests and want to impose their sanctions by force on the world, not just on us. [The United States feels it can talk to Iran] in whatever form it likes, and do whatever it feels like. . . . It not only puts pressure on Iran, it puts pressure on Europe, Asia, Japan, saying, for example, "If you want to invest in Iran more than such an amount, we will impose sanctions on you." It tries to impose its own domestic laws on the world. That is its domineering way. The fruit of our revolution is that we have freed ourselves from the yoke of our masters, and we will never submit to any new one. Today we are building our country ourselves. If we have shortcomings, they belong to us, and we can remove them.

At this moment in the Iranian revolution, Iran does seem likely to become more "moderate" and "pragmatic" than to become more extreme. However, a "moderate" and "pragmatic" Iranian regime is unlikely to mean an Iran whose strategic interests coincide with those of the United States, its Southern Gulf neighbors, or any other state in the region. Actions that a "moderate" and "pragmatic" Iran regards as defensive and as serving its vital national interests will often be seen as threatening by some of its neighbors, Israel, and the West.

The key word is patience. It may be half a decade before it is possible to determine how Iran's military capabilities are evolving, what will happen to its support of extremist movements, and how it will deal with proliferation. These risks and uncertainties mean Iran's military forces must be analyzed in terms of capabilities and possible contingencies, rather than on the basis of some prediction of its intentions.

Even if Iran never tries to initiate a conflict, it is impossible to dismiss the risk that some incident or clash could escalate into a much more serious conflict. Iraq will continue to present a "wild card" in two important ways: First, in terms of the risk of another major military encounter with Iran, and second, in terms of some kind of opportunistic alliance between Iran and Iraq.

As a result, the analysis that follows makes no attempt to either "demonize" or "sanctify" Iran. It focuses on Iran's current military strength and its future military capabilities. It addresses Iran's military expenditures and arms imports,



and its military demographics. It examines Iran's war-fighting capabilities in major regional contingencies, its capacity to intimidate other Gulf states, its efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction, and its ability to conduct more limited and less conventional forms of war.

One lesson of this analysis is that there is a strong case for continuing the kind of military containment that will limit potential threats without blocking Iran's development or affecting its security. While such efforts cannot halt proliferation, they probably delay it and sharply limit it in scope. The same is true of efforts to block large, destabilizing deliveries of advanced conventional weapons.

At the same time, the results of this analysis do not support the need for economic sanctions, even when considered solely in the context of Iran's defense efforts. It is also clear that there is a need for the kind of a dialogue where both sides can explore the extent to which the West and Iran can resolve their differences. In the process, nations like the United States will almost certainly have to compromise, as well as Iran, and there may be areas where both sides will have to agree to disagree. This seems far more positive, however, than open hostility, Iranian treatment of the United States as the "great Satan," and failed US efforts to sanction Iran's economy and energy exports.

## NOTES

1. Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Middle East and African Affairs), "United States Security Strategy for the Middle East," Washington, Department of Defense, May, 1995, pp. 16–17.

2. Iran has a very young electorate. The voting age is 15, and half of Iran's population is 18 or younger.

3. The Islamic summit was the eighth in a series begun in Rabat in 1969. Some 25 heads of state took part and vowed to liberate from Israel the holy city of Jerusalem, site of Islam's third most sacred shrine, the al-Aqsa Mosque. The meeting established the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) and based its secretariat in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Since then, Islamic summits have convened in Lahore in 1974, the Saudi city of Taif in 1981, Casablanca in 1984, Kuwait in 1987, Dakar in 1991, and Casablanca in 1994. The OIC comprises 55 members representing the world's 1.2 billion Moslems. The members are: Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Benin, Brunei, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Palestinian territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Surinam, Syria, Tajikistan, Togo, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, and Yemen. Bosnia, the Central African Republic, Guyana, and the Ivory Coast have observer status, along with the Turkish Cypriots and the Moro National Liberation Front of the Philippines.

4. Associated Press, December 9, 1997, 0614.

5. Associated Press, December 9, 1997, 0614.

6. Reuters, December 16, 1997, 2209.

7. CNN, Internet Home Page, January 8, 1998.
8. January 16, 1998, 2331.
9. Reuters, January 20, 1998, 0048.
10. *Los Angeles Times*, September 28, 1997, p. M3. The author listened to the Foreign Minister make the same points during his initial speech at the UN and at a private dinner. Also see the interview with Kharrazi in the *Washington Post*, October 5, 1997, p. C-4.
11. *Los Angeles Times*, September 28, 1997, p. M-3.
12. *Iran Focus*, October, 1997, p. 7; *Middle East Economic Digest*, October 3, 1997, p. 10.
13. *Middle East Economic Digest*, October 17, 1997, p. 10.
14. *The Estimate*, September 12, 1997, p. 4; *Policywatch*, October 1, 1997, No. 269; *Jane's Defense Weekly*, November 12, 1998, p. 30.
15. *Iran Focus*, October, 1997, pp. 7, 9.
16. *Iran Focus*, October, 1997, pp. 7, 9.
17. Reuters, September 10, 1997, 1250; *Washington Times*, September 10, 1997, p. A-13.
18. *Middle East Economic Digest*, October 3, 1997, p. 10.
19. Associated Press, December 9, 1997, 0741.
20. *Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 1997, p. A-1.
21. *Jane's Defense Weekly*, October 8, 1997, p. 4; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 20, 1997, p. A-17.
22. Reuters, October 7, 1997, 0639.
23. *USA Today*, October 6, 1997, p. 10A; *The Estimate*, October 10, 1997, p. 1.
24. Reuters, October 7, 1997, 0639.
25. Associated Press, NY, October 18, 1997, 1731 EDT.
26. Reuters, September 9, 1997, Damascus; *Washington Times*, August 22, 1997.
27. Reuters, September 28, 1997, 0417; *Washington Post*, October 13, 1997, p. A-24.
28. *Washington Post*, October 13, 1997, p. A-24; *Washington Times*, October 11, 1997, p. A-6, October 16, 1997, p. A-11; Associated Press, October 14, 1997, 1113, October 16, 1997, 0624; *Jane's Defense Weekly*, October 22, 1997, p. 3.
29. Associated Press, NY, October 19, 1996, 1136EDT; *New York Times*, October 19, 1997, p. A-10.

## *Chapter 2*

# Iran's Strategic Perspective

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Iran's strategic literature is deeply divided. Some of it consists of hard-line speeches and writings that imply a national strategy that focuses on driving the West out of the Gulf and radical efforts to export Iran's revolution. Iranian writings are filled with extremist rhetoric and nationalist boasts, and some Iranian speeches and Iranian media reporting can be paranoid in character when it deals with the risk of US military attacks and criticism by other states.<sup>1</sup>

For example, Moshen Rezaei, then commander of the Revolutionary Guards, stated in April, 1997 that Iran was capable of closing the Strait of Hormuz to tanker traffic, and that Iran's military exercises during the spring of 1997 were designed to demonstrate this capability and Iran's ability to destroy any American invasion. "Iran will never start any war, but if the Americans one day decide to attack us, then they would have committed suicide. We will turn the region into a slaughterhouse for them. There is no place better than the Persian Gulf to destroy America's might."<sup>2</sup> Rezaei also repeatedly stated that, "The Persian Gulf belongs to the regional countries and the Americans should leave it. . . . The Persian Gulf is our region; they have to leave our region."<sup>3</sup>

Rezaei, however, is a voice of the past, and it is possible to find other speeches that are much more pragmatic, which is certainly true of the speeches and writings of Iran's new president and foreign minister. Much of Iran's military literature is highly pragmatic, and it is clear that Iran actively learns from the strategic literature and military experience of other states—including the United States. In fact, most of Iran's military and strategic literature has gotten steadily more professional in character since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, and even more so since the end of the Gulf War.<sup>4</sup>

Iranian speeches, articles, and press releases do reveal obvious divisions between ideologues and professionals, and some conceptual divisions between the

regular military and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Iranian officials continue to make unrealistic boasts about self-sufficiency, and simultaneously brag about their missile programs and deny that they are proliferating.

At the same time, a great deal of Iranian writing at the professional level now reveals a good understanding of the lessons of the Gulf, the real-world problems Iran faces in dealing with US military forces, the rapid advances in tactics and military technology, and the problems posed by proliferation. Iran tends to publicly deny some aspects of its interest in unconventional warfare, but there are many indications that it now understands the need for proper professionalism, training, and equipment and is much more cautious about substituting ideological fervor for good planning and execution. Similarly, while Iran's public rhetoric about its acquisition of submarines and anti-ship missiles may fluctuate between boasting and defensiveness, its methods of training and deployment often reveal a high degree of professionalism.

It is far too soon to determine how Khatami's election will change Iran's strategic perspective, if it does so at all. Much can be learned, however, by looking beyond the words of Iran's current revolutionary regime and considering the historical background that shapes Iran's strategic perspective.

## **THE CONSTANT THREAT OF OUTSIDE INTERVENTION**

Iran has legitimate security concerns and a history that helps explain much of its current ambitions, rhetoric, and hostility toward the West. During most of the latter part of the nineteenth century, Iran's history consisted of efforts to defend itself against British and Russian efforts to dominate the country as part of the "Great Game."<sup>5</sup> Russia's impact on Iran declined after the fall of the czar in 1917, but it was Britain and Russia which helped end Iran's democratic revolution during the period 1907–1912. British imperialism played a major role in exploiting the Iranian economy after the Anglo-Persian agreement of 1919. It was Reza Khan, an illiterate former NCO of a Russian Cossack regiment, who subverted Iran's second attempt at democratic revolution in 1921, and who had strong British support when he took the title of shah and founded the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925.<sup>6</sup>

When Reza Shah began to challenge Britain's exploitation of Iran's oil resources and the dominance of the Anglo-Persian oil company in 1932, it became brutally clear that Britain still dominated Iran and was willing to use force when necessary. This led Reza Shah to tilt towards the Axis powers after 1939, but the end result was an Anglo-French ultimatum on August 16, 1941, that he halt all ties to the Axis. When Reza Shah did not comply, Britain and Russia invaded Iran and occupied the country. They deposed Reza Shah in favor of his son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi—the shah who was eventually overthrown in 1979.

Britain and Russia used martial law and their occupation of Iran to help supply Russia during World War II. In 1943 and 1944, the British went so far as to seize a substantial part of the Iranian harvest to help feed Russia. The end result

was near starvation, popular riots in Tehran, and eventually a crisis where British commanders forced Iranian units to machine-gun a massive protest group moving towards government buildings from the Bazaar in Tehran.<sup>7</sup> While British troops largely withdrew in 1945, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) attempted to create a new pro-Soviet state composed of parts of Iranian Kurdistan and Azerbaijan. The Soviet Union only withdrew its forces from Iran in 1946—after substantial Iranian concessions. Russia's *de facto* control of much of northern Iran only ended in 1947—after US pressure on Russia convinced the Majlis that it was secure enough to revoke the concessions.

Nothing about this experience left Iran with reason to show confidence in the West, although it often attempted to turn to the United States to act as a counterweight to Britain and Russia between the 1890s and 1949. Beginning in 1949, however, the United States became increasingly involved in Cold War efforts to secure Iranian oil against Russia, and in complex negotiations with Britain and various Iranian political factions—many of which came to be seen as tools of the West. In 1951, the resulting political turmoil led to the rise of Mohammed Mussadiq and a major confrontation between the US and Iranian nationalist movement. This eventually led to the Anglo-US coup that began in February, 1953, and which resulted in the Shah's return and the suppression of the Majlis and democratic opposition in August, 1953.

## THE SHAH AFTER MUSSADIQ

The end result was a *de facto* secular dictatorship, in which Mohammed Reza Pahlavi ruled with the support of the Iranian military. It was also a dictatorship whose claims of a "white revolution" and land reform were almost totally spurious. The Shah's Pahlavi foundation effectively seized the assets of the mosques and former land-owning class and kept them—alienating many of Iran's conservatives as well as its socialists and moderates. While the Shah was only moderately repressive, he was seen as having strong US and British backing and as serving US interests in the Cold War.

The dictatorial nature of the Shah's regime did not lead to broad popular resentment during Iran's oil boom—which lasted from roughly 1972 to 1976. However, the end result among Iran's political elite was to transform the image of the United States from a counterweight to British and Russian imperialism to the role of a new "imperialist" who backed a dictator and dominated Iran. Coupled with the major recession that began in 1977, this laid the background for Khomeini's political attacks on the United States as the "Great Satan" in the late 1970s. More generally, it created a political climate among Iran's religious conservatives, socialists, and Marxists that eventually helped trigger the US embassy hostage crisis.

Iran faced other problems in dealing with its neighbors. Britain's creation of Iraq following World War I placed a new power on Iran's western border that was often hostile, had a disputed border with Iran, and occasionally claimed

part of Iran's oil-rich Southwest and rights to the whole of the Shatt al-Arab—the main Gulf shipping channel to both Iranian and Iraqi ports. The fall of the Hashemite dynasty in Iraq on July 14, 1958, then created a series of radical military and socialist regimes which triggered a major Iranian-Iraqi arms race and then a low-level border war which began in the late 1960s. Iran effectively won the border war in 1975 and dominated the arms race until the Shah's fall in 1979. However, Iraq then attempted to exploit the chaos caused by the fall of the Shah and the revolution by invading Iran and "liberating" much of Iran's oil reserves—which it claimed were part of an Arab-dominated region. The result was the Iran-Iraq War, which lasted until 1988.

## **THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR AND THE TANKER WAR**

Although Iraq invaded Iran, it gained little sympathy from the world community. The US embassy hostage crisis cut off Iran's new regime from any major resupply from the West. Iran's aggressive ideology, its efforts to export its Islamic revolution, and its refusal to negotiate a cease-fire once it had liberated its territory led most outside powers to support Iraq. The United States, Russia, other Western powers, and all of the Southern Gulf states supported Iraq once the possibility emerged that an Islamic Iran might win the war and dominate part or all of Iraq.

From an Iranian perspective, however, the West was supporting an aggressor nation that had unleashed an all-out struggle between Iran and Iraq. There was little outside protest when Iraq escalated to the use of chemical weapons and strategic attacks on Iran's civilian targets. France equipped Iraq to conduct long-range strategic attacks on Iran's oil export facilities, and the United States led a tanker reflagging effort during the period 1987–1988 that led to a low-level naval war between the United States and Iran. This outside support was critical to Iran's military defeat in 1987–1988, when it might otherwise have won, and to its forced agreement to a cease-fire in August, 1988. This defeat cost Iran some 45–60% of its heavy land-force equipment, and came after Iraq had repeatedly struck at Iranian military cities and made massive new use of chemical weapons. It ended a war that cost Iran hundreds of thousands of casualties.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War that followed did not greatly improve Iran's relations with its Gulf neighbors or with the West. From an outside perspective, this was because Iran opposed Iraq to serve its own self-interest and because Iran did not change the other threatening aspects of its behavior. Iran's regime remained revolutionary in character and often launched ideological attacks on its neighbors and the West. Iran's seizure of complete control of Abu Musa and the Tunbs alienated the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the rest of the Gulf states, as did its steady build-up of its capabilities to threaten Gulf tanker traffic, acquisition of new long-range ballistic missiles, and efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

Once again, the situation looked different when seen with Iranian eyes. A

US-dominated coalition ignored Iran's actions in supporting the UN and efforts to improve its relations with the United States and its neighbors. When the war ended, Iran confronted a hostile, US-dominated coalition that was far stronger than existed before the Gulf War, and a regional security structure in the form of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) from which it was excluded. While Iraq had been weakened, its conventional forces remained stronger than those of Iran. Further, the breakup of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact meant that the United States had emerged as the world's sole superpower. Iran then faced the challenge of the US policy of "dual containment," and even those Southern Gulf nations that appeared to maintain good relations clearly structured their forces to deal with a potential Iranian threat.

Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that Iran began to refer to the US presence as an "alien power destabilizing regional security" and to consistently demand the departure of its "intruding forces." It is also understandable that Iran demanded that the GCC should be expanded to include all regional countries, and that Iranian officials like Major-General Mohsen Rezaei, the commander of the IRGC, should state that, "It is time the Arabs realized that their security can best be protected through peaceful coexistence with Iran, and this is not possible without cooperation."<sup>8</sup>

## THE SITUATION SINCE THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

Few changes have taken place in Iran's basic strategic perspective since the Iran-Iraq War. The US policy of "dual containment" is seen as yet another outside threat from the West. The Southern Gulf states are seen as both a potential threat and as lacking in religious and political legitimacy. The alliance between the United States, Britain, and the Southern Gulf states is seen as a conspiracy against Iran, and every new moment of tension between the United States and Iran creates internal fears that the United States may attack or invade Iran.

Iran still sees the Arab-Israeli peace process as a threat to Islamic justice, and Israel's occupation of Lebanon is seen as an effort to suppress Shi'ites in a country that once provided the Mullahs that converted Iran to the Shi'ite sect. Israel is seen as a Western-backed foreign intervention in the Middle East.

In spite of occasional talks, Iran and Iraq only moved towards a full cease-fire in 1998. Iran continued to hold well over 100 Iraqi combat aircraft that flew to Iran for sanctuary during the Gulf War. Iraq claimed that Iran was still holding 18,229 prisoners of war, and Iran claimed that Iraq was still holding 5,000–10,000. It was only in the spring of 1998 that the two nations finally exchanged their prisoners of war, some of which had been held captive for 17 years.

There have, however, been important changes in the way Iran acts upon its strategic perspective, largely due to the leadership of President Khatami. As has been touched upon earlier, President Khatami set a new tone for Iran in his

speech on Iran's Armed Forces Day on April 18, 1998. He made it clear that Iran had no regional ambitions:

Our army is strong and sovereign, our armed forces are strong and powerful, but neither our revolution or Armed forces are expansionist. . . . We want a sovereign country and nation that seeks independence and honor and which could act as a model for all nations and countries of the region.

Khatami did, however, go on to state that the United States should leave the Gulf. He also warned that

we are prepared to defend, with all our being, our revolution, country, homeland, and nation against the malice of ill-wishers and plots of conspirators. . . . Today, the most spiritually powerful armed forces are the Iranian armed forces. . . . All the martyrs and war-disabled sing of the invincibility and the enemy's disappointment with aggression against this country.

There have been particularly significant developments in the Gulf. Iraq opened its border with Iran in September, 1997, for the first time in 17 years. It claimed it did so to allow Iranians to visit the shrines in Najaf and Karbala in Southern Iraq, but it seems to have been attempted to ease relations with Iran in order to obtain support against UN sanctions.

Iran initially rejected the initiative, and less than a month later the nations clashed over a raid that the People's Mujahideen e-Khalq (MEK), a violent Iraqi-based Iranian opposition group, launched into Iran. Iran retaliated on September 29, 1997, by bombing the two MEK military bases near the border area, and Iraq responded by sending up sortie after sortie of Iraqi fighters to patrol the area. The end result of the clash did more to present problems for the United States in enforcing the southern "no-fly zone" than lead to actual conflict, but it was scarcely a signal that Iraq or Iran were moving towards peace.<sup>9</sup>

The clash did not halt a visit to Tehran, however, by the Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohammed Said al-Sahhaf, which took place on January 18, 1998. Khatami, Kharazi, and Shamkani indirectly defended Iraq's position in February, 1998, when it seemed the United States might use force to make Iraq allow the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) to carry out inspections in Iraq. Khatami called upon Iraq to comply with the UN, but stated that, "The presence of dozens of warships in the Persian Gulf gives offense to the peoples of the region. The people of the region should defend themselves." Shamkani "urged Islamic states, especially countries of the Persian Gulf region, to resist new American military moves."<sup>10</sup> The first Iranian pilgrims in 18 years crossed the Iraqi border in mid-August, 1998.<sup>11</sup>

There is always a risk of some kind of "devil's bargain" between Iraq and Iran. So far, however, the fear of Iraq is a consistent aspect of Iran's strategic perspective. It is also a fear colored by the fact that Saddam is still in power,



by the fact that Iraq used chemical weapons against Iran, and by the fear that it might use even more lethal weapons in the future. The Iranian-Iraqi arms race and proliferation remain a key factor that shapes Iran's force planning and view of future military threats.

Iran has made more progress in improving relations with other countries. During the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in December, 1997, Iranian President Khatami met twice with Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, the first such high-level meetings between Iranian and Saudi leaders since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The meetings led to steadily better relations between the two countries in spite of the fact that the Ayatollah Khomeini had once stated that the Saudi regime was even worse than that of the United States. In February, 1998, former President Rafsanjani visited Saudi Arabia for 10 days for talks on boosting bilateral ties and formulating a "security and economic strategy" for boosting security in the region. Rafsanjani was the most senior Iranian to visit Saudi Arabia since the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

The end result has been steadily better relations. The two countries have cooperated on some aspects of oil policy, and have minimized their differences over the way the Haj is conducted in Saudi Arabia and the Saudi treatment of Shi'ites. On May 29, 1998, the Saudi Minister of the Interior, Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz, made a public statement that the bombing at Al Khobar "took place at Saudi hands. No foreign party had any role in it."<sup>12</sup> This statement effectively absolved Iran, and symbolized the change in Iranian and Saudi relations.

Iran has steadily strengthened its relations with Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. It seems to have reduced any support of Bahrain's Shi'ite opposition to the point where Bahrain has reestablished friendly relations.

Negotiations have taken place with the UAE over Abu Musa and Tunb Islands. Iran had seized the Greater and Lesser Tunbs from Ras al-Khaimah in 1971. In 1992, Iran claimed sovereignty over Abu Musa despite a 1971 agreement between the two countries. Joint control of Abu Musa was maintained until 1994, at which time Iran forcibly took the island. In March 1996, Iran rejected a proposal by the Gulf Cooperation Council which advocated that the International Court of Justice resolve the dispute, an option supported by the UAE. This rejection was preceded in December, 1995 by an Iranian Foreign Ministry statement declaring that the islands are "an inseparable part of Iran." Iran also took further moves to strengthen its hold on the disputed islands. These moves included starting up a power plant on Greater Tunb, opening an airport on Abu Musa, and planning the construction of a new port on Abu Musa.

The UAE has received strong support in the dispute from the GCC, but from the UN and the United States. In December, 1997, the UAE called for talks with Iran over the islands, and Iran called for closer ties with its "Arab neighbors." In early March, 1998, the GCC, while praising Iran's President Khatami, issued a statement supporting the UAE in its dispute with Iran over Abu Musa and the Tunbs. Since that time, Iran has shown that it is at least willing to

discuss the issue with the UAE, and the foreign ministers of the two countries have exchanged visits.

On August 5, 1998, Khatami gave a speech stating that

Thankfully, with each passing day, our relations with the countries of the region are getting better and today we have much better relations than in the past. These improved relations are important because it improves security for the Persian Gulf region and the Strait of Hormuz. . . . Our goal is to achieve peace and security in the region.

Khatami spoke following a visit by Prince Turki Bin Abdullah, the son of Crown Prince Abdullah, and Brigadier General Mohammed bin Sadd al-Arezi, the Commander of the Omani Air Force. Prince Turki and General al-Arezi both stated that they were not concerned with recent missile tests, although their sincerity was far from clear.<sup>13</sup>

Iran has continued to reach out to the Caspian and Central Asian states, and to try to create a new "silk road" that would lead to pipelines through Iran, oil and gas swaps, and the Central Asian use of Iranian ports. Iran's relations with Turkey are correct, and it has tried to improve the situation in Afghanistan, largely because of its concern over the future of Afghani Shi'ites and desire to return some 2 million Afghan refugees to their homes.

Iran has also improved its relations with Europe. In November, 1997, European Union (EU) ambassadors returned to Iran. In April, 1997, all 15 EU member nations recalled their ambassadors from Tehran following a German court ruling that the Iranian government was responsible for the 1992 killings of four opposition émigrés in Germany. Besides recalling its ambassadors, the EU had stated its intention to break-off its "critical dialogue" with Iran.

Iran seems to have learned that it has nothing to gain from violent attacks on its legitimate opposition, and some aspects of its terrorist activities already seem to be sharply reduced in scope. While Iran does continue to support the Hezbollah and some extremist movements like the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, it seems to have less interest in operations in the Southern Gulf and the rest of the Arab world.

At the same time, no Iranian regime is likely to remain passive when it is under violent attack by its extreme opposition. This is particularly true in the case of the People's Mujahideen, which is itself a terrorist group. The People's Mujahideen lost a bloody civil war in Iran in the early 1980s in which it made widespread use of bombings and assassinations. It killed Westerners long before the fall of the Shah, and supported the student seizure of the US embassy and hostages. The People's Mujahideen has since maintained an Iraqi-supported military force near Iran's border, and gone on with its terrorist attacks inside Iran. Similarly, Iran is unlikely to tolerate the Kurdish groups that supported a Kurdish uprising in Iran in 1980–1983, and which also has elements that threaten to attack Iran. Violence in Iranian politics is almost certain to be met with violence, and "terrorism with terrorism."

Ironically, Iran has also become far more hostile towards another radical religious regime in the region. The Sunni-Pushtan-dominated Taliban movement that took control over most of Afghanistan in the summer of 1998 has presented Iran with many problems. One is a massive flow of narcotics across Iran's borders, sometimes smuggled in by tribes using captured armored vehicles left over from the Soviet occupation. Another is a massive refugee problem. Iran now has well over 1 million Afghan refugees, and some estimates go as high as 2 million.

The Taliban's harsh treatment of Afghanistan's Shi'ites ensures that few Afghan refugees would return from Iran. The Taliban has harassed Iranian diplomats, and nine were killed in what may have been a Taliban-sponsored attack on the Iranian Consulate in Mazar e-Sharif, a heavily Shi'ite area in Northwest Afghanistan.

The tensions between the two Islamic regimes are so serious that Iran's Foreign Minister Kharrazi accused Afghanistan of "genocide" in August, 1998. He attacked the Taliban for the way it treats Shi'ites and ethnic minorities, and stated that, "The Taleban . . . are a danger to the stability of the entire region and promote a false image of Islam, and repeatedly violate human rights, particularly those of women."<sup>14</sup>

Religious differences explain part of the differences between Iran, which is predominantly Shi'ite, and the Taliban, which is Sunni. Although Iran and the Taliban both claim to govern according to Islamic law, many Iranians feel the Taliban has perverted Islamic law to support its extremist position. For example, women cannot appear in public in Iran without robes and head scarves, but they are well represented in government, teaching, and other professions—something the Taliban prohibits, along with music and most other activity. With the moderate Khatami trying to open Iranian society, Iranians worry about what some call the "medieval" Islamic values being propagated next door.

Iran also feels that the Taliban forces have been killing Shi'ite Muslims in Afghanistan, and may be seeking to exterminate some groups of Shi'ites. The Hazaras are a predominantly Shi'ite ethnic group, and have been systematically persecuted by the Taliban. Unconfirmed reports from the Hazaras' traditional stronghold in Bamian indicate that large numbers of residents were summarily executed when the Taliban captured the city in September, 1998.

These developments led Iran to hold a massive military exercise near the Afghan border called Ashura 3 in September, 1998. Iran initially announced that Iran's totaled 35,000–40,000 Revolutionary Guard troops, some 25 attack aircraft, two SA-6 batteries, and forces of T-72S tanks. It later announced that its forces included 70,000 Revolutionary Guards and some 2,000 Afghan "volunteers" loyal to the former governor of Herat, the capital of the main Shi'ite province in Afghanistan. Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, the commander of the IRGC forces heading the exercise, stated that Iranian forces would not leave the area after the exercise, and that "Tehran will not tolerate mischievous acts and disturbances at its borders by any country." The exercise led some

analysts to believe Iran might cross the border to "liberate" the Shi'ite areas around Herat.<sup>15</sup>

Later in September, Iran claimed to have 270,000 troops along its border with Afghanistan. Defense Minister Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani stated on September 26 that Iran would soon begin the Zulfaqr-2 exercise, and had mobilized 200,000 regular troops with tanks, artillery, and other weapons in the border area, in addition to the 70,000 Revolutionary Guards that had staged exercises earlier in the month. Taliban retaliated by threatening to attack Iranian cities.

Iran faced the risk of fighting a guerilla war with few conventional military targets against its Eastern neighbor. While the Taliban only had around 50,000–75,000 troops, many of which were engaged in fighting other ethnic factions in Afghanistan, it had a much larger pool of militia and paramilitary forces. It also had the potential advantage of fighting in some of the most difficult mountain terrain in the world, and could draw on a pool of military equipment that it captured from earlier governments. This equipment included some 600–870 main battle tanks, 400–860 armored fighting vehicles, 700–1,100 armored personnel carriers, 600–1,000 towed artillery weapons, and 100–200 multiple rocket launchers. The Taliban also had captured some 150–190 jet fighters, 40–80 armed helicopters, 150–225 SA-2 and SA-3 surface-to-air missile launchers, and an unknown number of Scud missiles.

President Khatami and other Iranian moderates made it clear that they would try to avoid a conflict. At the same time, Iran's hard-liners began to use the Afghan crisis as an excuse to crack down on moderates, using the excuse that they were disloyal. They also began to talk about using a combination of Iranian forces and Afghan refugee forces to carve out a secure Shi'ite enclave in Western Afghanistan.

## NOTES

1. A review of Iranian statements and articles over the last five years in the US Information Agency's Foreign Broadcast Information Service—Near East Summary (FBIS-NES) provides countless examples of such statements and rhetoric. For example, Brigadier General Ahmad Dadbin, then commander of Iran's land forces, stated in the June 23, 1996, edition of *Kayhan Havai* that, "The Americans should think twice before attacking us. . . . I believe no country in the world would dare to attack us." He went on to warn about Abu Musa and the Tunbs that, "These islands are ours, and we're entirely prepared to defend them. . . . Any threat against an inch of Iranian territory will be met with a response by our strong army."

2. Reuters, July 3, 1997, 0452; IRNA, July 2, 1997.

3. Associated Press, June 30, 1997, 0629; *Washington Post*, June 30, 1997, p. A-20.

4. Most unclassified Iranian military literature is available only in excerpt form, or it has limited distribution. However, *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, and the other publications of the Institute for Political and International Studies in Tehran, are good examples of such pragmatism and professionalism in Iran's strategic publications.

5. For a good summary, see Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game*, New York, Kodansha Press, 1991.

6. These events are described in a large number of books. For early background, see David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, New York, Henry Holt, 1989. For more recent summaries of events, see the author's *The Gulf and the Search for Strategic Stability*, Boulder, Westview, 1984, and Richard W. Cottam, *Iran and the United States*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988.

7. The author served in the US embassy in Tehran and interviewed a wide range of Iranian officers in the early 1970s, including many in the Shah's Imperial Guard. Many raised their memories—or family histories—of events during World War II as a reason for never trusting outside states.

8. A review of the FBIS-NES for the period 1994–1997 shows that these themes have been repeated by Iranian officials like Khamenei, Rafsanjani, and Velayati since the Gulf War. The specific quotes used here are drawn from statements made in April, 1997 in preparation for the Tariq-ol Qods amphibious exercises. See the *Tehran Times*, April 21, 1997; IRNA, April 21, 1997; Reuters, April 22, 1997, 07:09.

9. *New York Times*, October 8, 1997, p. A-6; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 30, 1997, p. A-17; Reuters, September 27, 1997, 0244.

10. *Washington Times*, February 4, 1998, p. A-12.

11. Associated Press, August 13, 1998, 0928.

12. *Washington Post*, May 23, 1998, p. A-21; *New York Times*, May 22, 1998, p. A-11.

13. Reuters, August 5, 1998, 0846.

14. *Washington Post*, September 5, 1998, p. A-22.

15. *Washington Post*, September 5, 1998, p. A-22.