

November 2004

# Iran's Transformation from a Revolutionary to a Status Power in the Persian Gulf

Mohsen M. Milani

*University of South Florida*, [Milani@usf.edu](mailto:Milani@usf.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gia\\_facpub](http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gia_facpub)

 Part of the [International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

## Scholar Commons Citation

Milani, Mohsen M., "Iran's Transformation from a Revolutionary to a Status Power in the Persian Gulf" (2004). *Government and International Affairs Faculty Publications*. Paper 108.  
[http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gia\\_facpub/108](http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gia_facpub/108)

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the Government and International Affairs at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Government and International Affairs Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [scholarcommons@usf.edu](mailto:scholarcommons@usf.edu).

“Iran appears ready to discuss the future of Iraq as well as other security issues with the United States. It remains uncertain for Tehran whether a ‘tactical consensus’ on Iraq could . . . lead to a marked improvement in US-Iran relations.”

## Iran, the Status Quo Power

MOHSEN M. MILANI

Not since 1979, when a popular revolution brought the ayatollahs to the pinnacles of power, has the Islamic Republic of Iran faced as many opportunities and imminent threats as it does today. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the revolution, the future of Iran’s popular reform movement is at stake. Regionally, the fall of Saddam Hussein has eliminated a major threat, while also opening new doors for Iran to potentially expand its influence in Iraq. Yet the emerging strategic configuration has also heightened Tehran’s perception of threat, with the United States now a presence in two countries that share borders with Iran: Iraq and Afghanistan.

### THE REFORMERS’ LOST MOMENT

In 1997, Mohammad Khatami won the presidential election by a landslide, receiving more than 20 million votes, or 69 percent of the total. He had shrewdly transformed the election into a referendum for or against freedom, and freedom won. He pledged to make the Islamic Republic freer, more transparent, and subservient to the people. His triumph generated both “irrational exuberance” among those who naively believed there to be a short-cut to democracy, and lingering hysteria among the conservatives, who viewed Khatami as a reformist reincarnation of Mikhail Gorbachev in turban and robe who would inadvertently trigger the collapse of the Islamic Republic. Eight years later, neither the hope nor the fear has materialized.

Today, the reform movement has lost its original popularity and vibrancy. Although deteriorating economic conditions have contributed to this decline, it was a host of political, constitutional, and tactical factors that rendered the movement ineffective. In particular, Khatami’s tactics were unsuit-

able for his strategic goal; he sought to change the nature of the relationship between the ruled and the rulers without destabilizing the system or revising the constitution. This was tantamount to a declaration of ideological war against the status quo forces, a war Khatami was unprepared to win.

This ideological war revolved around two opposing paradigms of Islamic governance. One paradigm, embraced by the conservatives, is based on “limited popular sovereignty,” the boundaries of which the *faqih* (supreme leader) alone defines. In Iran’s bifurcated governing system, the Islamic (unelected) component was designed to dominate the republican (elected) component, which includes the parliament (Majles) and presidency. Thus, the *faqih* is the ultimate source of power within the system, and the 12 appointed members of the Guardian Council can veto any legislation passed by the Majles, as well as reject the credentials of any candidates running for office. In the other paradigm, supported by Khatami and the reformists, popular, not limited sovereignty is the essence of governance. Khatami argues that Islam and democracy are compatible and complementary ideals, and that no authority can deprive the people from enjoying the divine gift of freedom.

From the beginning of the reform movement, the balance of power figured decisively and consistently in favor of the conservatives. The conservatives enjoyed the support of about 25 to 30 percent of the electorate; they controlled the major institutions, such as the Majles, the Guardian Council, the security forces, and the television and radio networks; and they were also allies of the supreme leader. The reformists’ only institutional base of power was the presidency.

Khatami, however, had a substantial degree of soft power. He had won the hearts and minds of a significant portion of the population, particularly women, the modern middle class, and the young, most of whom were disgusted with the Islamic

---

MOHSEN M. MILANI is a professor of politics and the chair of the department of government and international affairs at the University of South Florida in Tampa.

Republic's imposition of a harsh Islamic code of behavior and morality. This enormous reservoir of support, which allowed the reformists to win control of the Majles in 2000, was never institutionalized. It is true that reformists created a major party, the Participation Front of Islamic Iran, but they failed to open the political process to Islamic and secular nationalist groups.

The reformists also failed to show tactical prudence when they alienated the former president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, pushing him into forming an alliance with the conservatives. The savvy Rafsanjani was chair of the Expediency Council—the body responsible for settling disputes between the Majles and the Guardian Council—and was a prized asset, since that body could help to pass reform initiatives vetoed by the Guardian Council.

### THE CONSERVATIVES' ARSENAL

While the reformists made numerous tactical mistakes, the conservatives used every weapon in their arsenal to undermine the reform movement. The Guardian Council rejected the credentials of reformist candidates running for political office and blocked executive orders and legislation that it deemed menacing. The state-run radio and television networks provided critical support as the powerful judiciary, which had its own security forces, opened a frontal assault on reformist journalists. Khatami's signature initiative of expanding freedom of the press was all but shattered when his opponents shut down more newspapers and imprisoned more journalists than they had before he became president. Some of the leaders of the reform movement were imprisoned as well, including Hashem Aqajari, an Islamic thinker whose scathing critique of the political and religious roles of the clerics has earned him considerable popularity—and the accusation of denigrating and defaming Islam.

Finally, security issues, not the imperative of reform, have been the top priority of the Iranian elites for the past four years, and this in turn has strengthened the conservatives. In June 1999, a group of angry students demonstrated in Tehran against the closing of a pro-reform newspaper. Vigilante groups, aided by government security forces, stormed the students' dormitories and scores of students were injured. When the demonstrations became violent, Khatami called for an end to the protests; he was reportedly given a stern warning by the Revolutionary Guards to curb the activities of his supporters. From that point onward, Khatami became more sensitive about security issues and

increasingly suspicious of possible foreign intervention to foment instability within Iran.

International events beyond Iran's control further pushed security issues to the top of the agenda. The US "war on terror" and the presence of American troops in both Afghanistan and Iraq, along with Washington's talk of "regime change" in Tehran, made the survival and security of the Islamic Republic the principal preoccupation of the elites. This change in priorities was also evident in Khatami, who talked less about reform and more about security issues in the past three years than during his first term in office.

The conservatives took maximum advantage of this heightened threat perception and decided to end the debilitating political gridlock. In the parliamentary elections of 2003, the Guardian Council reviewed the applications of 8,172 parliamentary candidates and rejected 3,183, most of whom were reformists. As a result, the conservatives won 189 of the 290 seats in parliamentary elections that saw one of the lowest voter turnouts in recent years. Today, the conservatives control all major organs of government except for the presidency, and they could potentially win the presidential elections scheduled for May 2005.

### REFORM AND THE SILENT MAJORITY

Now that the conservatives are in control, does this mean that the reform movement has been a total failure? Hardly. The reform movement has left indelible fingerprints all over the political landscape. Khatami helped enrich the country's intellectual milieu, and popularized the elementary vocabulary of democracy in a land long accustomed to autocracy and despotism. Under inhospitable conditions, the media continue to thrive, and there has been a discernible relaxation of the activities of the "moral police" as well as government cultural and social policies. Any frequent traveler to the country can see the huge and mainly positive social and cultural differences between the Iran of 2005 and the Iran of 1997.

Focusing only on the political competition between factions, one might mourn the premature decline of the reformists. From the perspective of civil society, a much more promising picture emerges. Khatami did not create the reform movement; he simply articulated some of the needs and aspirations of a vibrant civil society that reflects a majority of the Iranian public. Today, many of the needs and goals of this majority have not been addressed, which has led to widespread passivity, frustration, and anger.

One of the Islamic Revolution's legacies, however, is the institutionalization of elections and Iranian society's acceptance of them as the preferable method for resolving conflicts. And it is this silent majority that will continue to determine the outcome of elections in coming years, as all factions will continue to compete to win its support and represent its interests. Any electoral manipulation to suppress this majority could result in instability.

The most promising component of this silent majority is the under-30 generation. Today, approximately 43 percent of Iran's population of 68 million is under the age of 30, with no memory of the 1979 revolution. There are 2 million students in institutions of higher education, and 4 million recent college graduates. Interestingly, the percentage of women in Iranian universities is now greater than that of male students. While adult literacy is about 85 percent and 71 percent for males and females respectively, the rates are 95 and 92 percent for those between 15 and 24 years of age. This highly educated generation is Iran's future.

No solid studies of the orientations of this generation have been published. What we do know is anecdotal and impressionistic. While a small portion remains politically active, a much larger segment is passive and mainly preoccupied with bread-and-butter issues. Yet, a new concept of freedom is gradually spreading among this young generation. Unlike the revolutionary generation in power today, which defined freedom as liberation from Western domination, this generation views freedom as both liberation from foreign domination and defense of the individual's inalienable right to live as he or she wishes. The individual is becoming the starting point of a new, albeit unstructured political discourse that is bound to become more coherent and refined in the future.

Nationalistic sentiments are also resurfacing—evidenced by the remarkable popularity of pre-Islamic names—even as religion is becoming an increasingly private matter for this generation. Unlike Atatürk in Turkey and the two Pahlavi kings in Iran who imposed a top-down style of secularization, the idea of secularization is now spreading from the bottom up.

Despite widespread discontent, the state remains stable. Those who believe in the imminent collapse

of the Islamic Republic underestimate its resiliency and misconstrue the nature of the popular discontent. Having experienced a revolution and a bloody war with Iraq, Iran's silent majority has reached a remarkable maturity, favoring reform and peace over revolution and violence. Unless it is presented with a clear and preferable alternative to the status quo, this group will provide stability to Iran and will in its own unique way force the Islamic Republic to reform itself. In other words, while the reform movement may be terminally ill, reformism is alive and well, and is the emerging trend in Iranian political thought and action.

### IN SEARCH OF STABILITY

While domestic reform has proceeded slowly, changes in Iranian foreign policy have been more expeditious and substantive. Washington continues to perceive Iran as a revolutionary force bent on undermining US allies and exporting its revolutionary ideals. This was a fairly accurate description of

Iran in the 1980s, when winning the war against Iraq and exporting revolution were its twin goals. Today, the situation is radically different.

Since the end of Iraq-Iran War in 1988, Iran has gradually transformed itself from a revolutionary power into a regional status quo power in a quest to create spheres of influence. Recognizing this change could have profound ramifications for US policy toward Iran.

After the Iraq war, Iran became convinced that it lacked the power to export its revolution and made economic reconstruction its top priority. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 accelerated Iran's transformation into a status quo power. During the crisis, Iran pursued "active neutrality," staying on the sidelines and avoiding any military involvement in the conflict, while indirectly helping the United States remove Iraq from Kuwait. Iran maintained its neutrality even during the mini-civil war that erupted in Iraq after its expulsion from Kuwait. While the Iraqi army slaughtered rebellious Kurds and Shiites, Iran, like the US-led allied forces, remained silent. That silence was the symbolic burial of the revolutionary phase of Iranian foreign policy.

Shortly after the Kuwaiti crisis, the Soviet Union disintegrated, creating enticing and historic oppor-

---

*Those who believe in the imminent collapse of the Islamic Republic underestimate its resiliency and misconstrue the nature of the popular discontent.*

---

tunities for Iran in the newly formed independent states of the former Soviet Union, many of which shared deep commonalities with Iran.

Instead of exporting revolution, Iran is now more interested in regional stability and commercial activities. Its ultimate strategic goal is to become a major economic power and hub for the transit of goods and services between the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan, and possibly even China.

It is ironic that US policies have also helped transform Iran into a regional power. First, the United States overthrew the Taliban with the assistance of the Northern Alliance, an Afghan coalition of Dari-Persian speaking forces that was formed with Iranian assistance and received generous Iranian support. Iran even indirectly cooperated with the United States to liberate Afghanistan. It announced that it would provide sanctuary to distressed US military personnel inside Iranian territory. Iranian advisers rubbed shoulders with American military personnel in the region controlled by the Northern Alliance. Once the Taliban were overthrown, Iran developed close relations with the pro-American government of Hamid Karzai and became heavily engaged in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, especially in the Herat region.

More consequential than the fall of the Taliban was the collapse of Saddam Hussein, Iran's main nemesis. Thanks to the United States, the single greatest threat to Iran was eliminated, and Iran's role as the most powerful indigenous force in the Persian Gulf has been solidified.

## NEIGHBORLY CONNECTIONS

Iran is an influential player in Iraq and shares deep historical and cultural ties with that country. Iran and Iraq are the only two countries in the world where Shiism is the majority religion (95 percent of Iranians are Shiite and at least 60 percent of Iraqis are). Iran has well-entrenched relations with the Shiite ulema (clerical) establishment in Iraq. There is also a substantial population of Iraqi Shiites of Iranian lineage who live in southern Iraq. After the fall of Saddam, thousands of Iranians, including many who had been exiled by Saddam, flocked to Iraq.

Iran has powerful political connections in Iraq with the al-Dawa party and the Supreme Council of Iraq's Islamic Revolution (created by Iran in the early 1980s) and with the latter's nearly 10,000 Iranian-trained armed militia members, the Badr Brigade. Iran also appears to have good relations with the militant Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. And it enjoys friendly relations with the two major Kur-

dish parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Democratic Party of Kurdistan, and with Ahmad Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress. (Once the favorite of the Pentagon, his group had offices in Tehran supported by US funds.) Iranian radio and television programs, aired in Arabic from Iran, are popular in southern Iraq.

Despite these assets, Iran's role in Iraq should not be exaggerated. Neither should the vitriolic declarations of a few demagogues in Tehran be confused with its actual policy. Three factors will continue to limit Iran's influence in Iraq: the United States is a powerful impediment to Iran's ambitions; as Iran learned during the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq's Shiites are Iraqis first and Shiite second; and Iraqi nationalists harbor deep suspicions of the Persians and would oppose Iranian interference.

It is also crucial to distinguish between Iran's policy and the role played by the informal Shiite ulema networks created centuries ago in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. Distinguishing where one network begins and the others end is not easy: Iraq's Ayatollah Ali Sistani, for example, is Iranian-born while Ayatollah Shahroudi, the head of Iran's judiciary, is Iraqi-born. It is exceptionally difficult to establish how much control, if any, the Iranian government or Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, exercises over these networks.

The policy of the Iranian government likely will continue to evolve as facts on the ground change. Uncertain about Iraq's future, Iran is keeping its options open, avoiding antagonizing any major Iraqi force, and sailing along the tip of whatever is the current wave of public mood in Iraq.

## WHAT TEHRAN WANTS IN IRAQ

Iran pursues four main goals in Iraq. Its primary objective is to prevent the establishment of an anti-Iran, Sunni-dominated regime in Baghdad. Iran is worried about the resurgence of the Baathist party and the US decision to retain members of the "Iran Section" of Saddam's Mokhaberat (intelligence service) who could reignite old hostilities with Iran. Tehran has been pleased, so far, with the two post-Saddam governments. And it does not fear the establishment of a democratic Iraqi state, however improbable that eventuality. Turkey, another neighbor of Iran, is democratic and a member of NATO, and it has had no impact on Iran's internal politics. Why would the case of a "democratic Iraq" be any different?

A second priority for Iran is to support the Shiite awakening in Iraq. Since the 1979 Islamic revo-

lution, there has been a resurgence of the historically repressed Shiites in Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and now Iraq. Thanks to the US destruction of Saddam's "republic of fear," millions of oppressed Shiites have been liberated and energized. Iran is determined to support and sustain this liberation. This is why Iran, like the United States, has consistently called for free national elections, convinced that the Shia will emerge victorious.

This is not to suggest that Tehran's agenda today is to push for an Iranian-style Shiite theocracy in Iraq. However, any partitioning of Iraq could change this policy. Iran is aware that the large and vocal Sunni and Kurdish populations would violently oppose the creation of any Shiite theocracy. In fact, Iran is much more concerned about the prospect of jihadists and Wahhabi fundamentalists fomenting sectarian conflicts between the Shiites and Sunnis, which could drag Iran into the fray.

Iran has also given rhetorical support to the Iraqi insurgency, although its policy is shrouded in secrecy. It is unlikely that Iran has provided any logistical support to the Sunni insurgents. The case of the Shiite insurgency, which has subsided considerably in recent months, is different. Tehran denies any involvement, although some Iraqi officials have accused Iran of providing weapons to Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. Iran has clearly avoided condemning both Muqtada and the Sunni insurgency, partly because Tehran recognizes Muqtada's popularity among the Shiites and views him as a counterforce to the moderate Ayatollah Sistani; partly because the insurgency opposes the US occupation; and partly because Iran would like to endear the Sunni forces to its side.

Iran has praised the insurgency as a national liberation movement and "the beginning of a new Intifada against foreign aggressors." It appears that Tehran supports the Shiite insurgency as long as it does not generate a violent reaction by the United States. It was in that spirit that Iran sent a delegation in mid-2004 to mediate the dispute between coalition forces and Muqtada (which resulted in the assassination of an Iranian official).

Iran's third goal is to ensure Iraq's territorial integrity and prevent its Balkanization. Aside from the danger of civil conflict in the region, Iran will not tolerate an autonomous Kurdistan in Iraq. The creation of a Kurdish state would

undoubtedly entice ethnic groups in Iran to demand their own autonomy.

Finally, Iran is eager to engage in Iraq's reconstruction. It would like to expand its influence in the Shiite holy cities of Iraq, as it has done in Herat.

The collapse of Saddam has created additional challenges for Iran. The biggest is preventing the United States from building permanent military bases in Iraq. To establish bases, the United States would have to request formal Iraqi permission. Iran could easily increase its propaganda and call on the Iraqis to denounce what might be labeled a "capitulation agreement." Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's denunciation of a similar agreement signed between Iran and the United States in 1963 generated considerable popularity for him.

Another source of concern for Tehran is the possible manipulation of the Mojahedin-e Khaleq as mercenaries to destabilize Iran. The Mojahedin, which was supported by Saddam and operated from Iraq, is now under direct US control. Tehran, like the

United States, considers this organization a terrorist entity. The United States, however, has refused requests to extradite members of the group to Tehran,

leading Iran to accuse Washington of hypocrisy and inconsistency in conducting its "war on terrorism." Iran, which is holding some Al Qaeda members who escaped from Afghanistan during the war against the Taliban, would like to use this Al Qaeda "card" as leverage to strike a deal with Washington about the Mojahedin.

Another challenge for Iran is the future of the Qom-Najaf corridor. The seminaries in Iraq historically have had an important impact on Iranian politics. It was from Najaf, for example, that Ayatollah Khomeini delivered his historic lectures to legitimize the establishment of an Islamic government based on the clerics' direct rule, or the *velayat-e faqih*. Today, there are those in Iran, including some clerics, who either seek to democratize or altogether reject this doctrine; these voices are often suppressed. With a revived and powerful seminary in Najaf, this situation could reverse. Ayatollah Sistani belongs to the "quietist" school of Shiism, which rejects Khomeini's interpretation of the *velayat-e faqih*. A Najaf seminary unfriendly to Iran's version of the *velayat-e faqih* doctrine would be a long-term concern of the Iranian regime. It is important to note, however, that it would be unlikely for a non-Iranian ayatollah in

---

*It is ironic that us policies have also helped transform Iran into a regional power.*

---

Najaf or elsewhere to influence events in Iran. Moreover, both the Qom and Mashhad seminaries in Iran have greater resources available to them than Najaf does, which means that they could influence Najaf more than Najaf could influence them.

## WASHINGTON AND TEHRAN

The chaotic conditions in Iraq provide a unique opportunity for a rapprochement between the United States and Iran. At first, the stunningly quick US victory amplified the fears of the ruling ayatollahs that Iran, as a member of the “axis of evil,” could be the next target of American wrath. However, the ferocity of the Iraqi insurgency has convinced Tehran that a US invasion of Iran is no longer feasible. In fact, a consensus has developed in Tehran that, if Iran avoids any direct confrontations with the United States, potential new opportunities in Iraq outweigh potential threats. Iran seems to have concluded that it can develop a “tactical consensus” with the United States in Iraq, as it did in Afghanistan. The prevailing sentiment is that the United States has slipped into a quagmire in Iraq. Escape will require an arrangement with Tehran, which could become the prelude to direct bilateral negotiations.

So far Iran has not actively sought to undermine the United States in Iraq. Most regional specialists agree that Iran could make things much more difficult for the United States if it so desired. One factor that could alter Iranian behavior is how the United States addresses Iran’s heightened threat perception. The equation is rather straightforward: more American threats and no incentives will equal greater temptations for Iran to undermine the United States in Iraq and elsewhere.

Addressing Iran’s security concerns will give incentives to Iran to cooperate with the United States. Washington could simply ignore Iran and continue with its current policy; the imprudence of such a course becomes apparent if we place Iraq within the context of the security of the Persian Gulf region. The stability of the oil-rich Persian Gulf remains, after all, a top strategic US objective. The United States could try unilaterally to maintain regional stability—a questionable strategy that would be hugely expensive and ultimately unsustainable.

The prospect of the United States’ relying on the Arab countries in the region is not promising, either. The daunting task of building a unified and relatively strong Iraq will take years. Saudi Arabia, with its weak army and small population, is hardly in a better position to make a decisive contribution

to the region’s stability. Today, that fragile kingdom must contain the threat posed by Al Qaeda and grapple with the succession of its aging leadership. The other littoral sheikhdoms are too powerless to become serious regional players.

Marginalizing Iran, the region’s oldest, most populous, and most stable state, would be a mistake. The history of the past four decades shows that when the United States, the world’s superpower, and Iran, an emerging regional power, have been at peace, the Persian Gulf enjoys stability. When the two nations have not been at peace, the region has not been, either.

## IRAN AND THE BOMB

A key impediment to improving US-Iran relations is Iran’s nuclear energy programs. Iran, as a signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the treaty’s Additional Protocol, which calls for intrusive safeguards, claims that it has the sovereign and legal right to engage in peaceful nuclear research and development, subject to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Iran has consistently insisted that its nuclear programs are solely for peaceful ends and that it has no intention or existing program to develop nuclear weapons. The government has even suggested that using nuclear weapons is religiously forbidden.

Still, there is a debate in Iran about the wisdom of developing nuclear bombs. There are those who believe that a nuclear Iran will become more vulnerable than a non-nuclear Iran. A group of Majles deputies, for example, is drafting legislation to ban the building of nuclear weapons. There are also those who believe that Iran lives in a dangerous and nuclearized region, and that a nuclear Iran is the best deterrent against its enemies. There is total consensus, however, that Iran should develop its civilian nuclear programs. The government is capitalizing on this popular sentiment by arguing that the United States is determined to stop Iran from developing civilian nuclear energy.

Washington has consistently accused Iran of deceiving the international community and of harboring a surreptitious nuclear program. The International Atomic Energy Agency has thus far not found any evidence that Iran is building nuclear weapons. It has, however, criticized Iran for a lack of transparency and for not voluntarily reporting some of its activities and facilities.

Recently, two options on how best to deal with Iran’s nuclear ambitions have received prominent attention. The first is “regime change,” which is not

realistic and could be counterproductive. The Islamic Republic is a stable regime and is not in any imminent danger of collapsing. Nor is there a viable political alternative to it. The Islamic Republic has proved much more effective in ensuring its survival than in governing, and it operates more efficiently when under the pressure of threats. It should also be noted that the 1979 revolution and 1979 Tehran hostage crisis were reactions to the 1953 CIA-staged coup, which overthrew Mohammad Mossadeq and secured Mohammed Reza Shah's return to power. It would be a mistake to revisit that era again.

The second option, a preemptive strike, is not attractive either. The United States could carry out a preemptive air strike against known Iranian nuclear and missile-building facilities; it could surely also bomb the Revolutionary Guards' camps. But Iran's major nuclear facilities are spread throughout the country, which would make it difficult to destroy all the facilities at once. Another problem is that the United States does not seem to know a great deal about Iran's nuclear programs and facilities.

There is the problem, too, of America's "credibility deficit"—the result of its faulty intelligence and failure to find any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. To win the international community's support for a preemptive strike against Iran, the United States would need to provide hard evidence that Iran is in fact building weapons of mass destruction. Even if Washington sees no obligation to satisfy the international community, the costs and unintended consequences of a preemptive strike would be exorbitant. Military or unconventional retaliation by Iran cannot be ruled out, especially with some 150,000 US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Tehran also has some leverage in Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and in the Persian Gulf that it could manipulate to complicate matters for the United States. Moreover, any preemptive strike is likely to unify Iran, strengthen the conservatives, and generate anti-Americanism—and this in a country where the perception of the United States today is considerably more favorable than in most other Islamic countries. When Saddam invaded Iran in 1980 to destabilize the new revolutionary gov-

ernment, the exact opposite occurred: the country rallied behind the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic Republic grew more unified.

For the Bush administration, negotiation would be a much more effective and less costly method of dealing with Iran than military intervention. The Europeans have already started to negotiate with Tehran about its nuclear plans and programs. In the past two years, Germany, Britain, and France have completed two important nuclear agreements with Iran. In the second of these agreements, signed on November 15, 2004, Iran pledged to temporarily stop all of its uranium enrichment, conversion, and reprocessing activities. In return, the Europeans have agreed to address Iran's security concerns and expand commercial exchanges. The International Atomic Energy Agency has endorsed the agreement. It is unlikely that the question of Iran's nuclear programs will be taken to the Security Council, as the United States has advocated, so long as negotiations continue between Iran and the Europeans.

#### THE TALKING OPTION

If the Europeans can negotiate with Iran, why not the United States? Iran appears ready to discuss the future of Iraq as well as other security issues with the United States. It remains uncertain for Tehran whether a "tactical consensus" on Iraq could blossom into a strategic consensus between Iran and America, or at the least lead to a marked improvement in US-Iran relations. President George H. W. Bush's enlightened policy of "goodwill will beget goodwill" worked well during the Kuwaiti conflict. There is no compelling reason to think it cannot work again in post-Saddam Iraq or in US negotiations with Iran about its nuclear program.

Direct negotiations with Iran would help the United States stabilize Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Persian Gulf generally, contribute to negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, resolve a lingering conflict between the European Union and the United States about the future of Iran, and improve America's standing in the Islamic world. If President Richard Nixon's opening to China was his greatest foreign policy legacy, President George W. Bush might find his by creating an opening with Iran. ■