CHAPTER ONE
The Iranian Purgatory
The Many Paradoxes of
U.S. Relations with Iran

... so shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters;
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause
And in the upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' heads . . . .

Hamlet

Two countries, “both alike in dignity,” have been at odds for thirty years, fighting several proxy wars, sometimes even engaging in direct military confrontations. The clerical regime in Iran has always partially defined itself in terms of its opposition to the United States. The founder of the regime, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, used the Qur’anic moniker of the Great Satan to refer to America—as much a show of intimidated awe as of embittered animosity at what he imagined was America’s mythic omnipotence. Today, not only the regime but its invariably self-serving narrative of U.S.-Iranian relations is facing challenges more serious than any in the past.

Iran is today in a state of political purgatory. It all began with the June 12, 2009, presidential election. Instead of accepting what was widely believed to be a victory by Mir Hossein Moussavi, the regime clumsily tried to steal what was an
already rigged election. In a sense, every election in Iran is rigged. A vetting process now conducted by several agencies of the regime, including the twelve-member Guardian Council, ensures that in every Iranian election, no one unacceptable to Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his cohorts can get on any ballot anywhere in the country. Nevertheless, on June 12, 2009, the regime felt it had no choice but to steal the surprisingly contested election. Some 80 percent of all eligible voters took part. The regime tried to use the high voter turnout as an indication of its legitimacy, but the irrepressible discontent with the announced results led to the most profound crisis the regime has faced since its creation thirty years earlier.

As a result of this crisis, the status quo ante is dead but a more democratic future is yet to be born. The tyrannical triumvirate of Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and some leaders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—increasingly dependent on the military might of the IRGC and the street presence of the gangs of Basij (gangs-cum-militia who control every neighborhood and institution in Iran)—stole the election by declaring Ahmadinejad the winner. Though every indication is that the leadership had planned the electoral heist many months earlier, it was nevertheless caught by surprise by the popular resolve to challenge the regime and its electoral machinations. Since June 12, the triumvirate has used everything from imprisoning and executing opponents and gathering rented crowds for pro-regime demonstrations to creating a limp imitation of the infamous Moscow show trials of the 1930s to try to convince the still-defiant nation that Ahmadinejad actually won and that further resistance is futile. Adding insult to injury, the regime continues to humiliate the opposition by accusing it of being
a dupe of the United States. The campaign to elect a reformist president and the resistance to the electoral heist have both been, in the regime’s narrative, a “velvet revolution.” All such revolutions are, in the regime’s paranoid view of the world, masterminded by the “Great Satan.”

Historians like Garton Ash cherished the emergence of Eastern Europe’s velvet revolutions as a new moment in the history of political change, a new paradigm of revolution. However, the Islamic regime in Iran is portraying the popular upheaval there as nothing but the “machiavellian machinations of American arrogance.” Velvet revolutions have been characterized by their belief in non-violent, non-utopian and pragmatic populism, and by their rejection of the old paradigm of violent, utopian, class-based revolutions. The Iranian Green Movement has been, in its chief characteristics, a version of such a revolution.

Since the June 12 electoral crisis, the composition of power in the clerical regime has changed. The IRGC leadership has consolidated more and more economic, political, intelligence, and military power in its own hands. In the month of November 2009 alone it offered almost $20 billion in cash to buy two of Iran’s biggest industrial conglomerates—the biggest auto-maker and the country’s telecommunication corporation (which controls all the e-mails, mobile and landline phones, faxes, and Internet access in the country). Attempts by some members of the Majlis (Iranian parliament) to oppose these sales as abuses of laws requiring “privatization” have come to naught. The IRGC is now a state within a state. It has its own intelligence division and its own customs office. It owns and operates hundreds of companies in virtually every field of the economy—from agriculture and mining to banking and oil and gas pipeline construction.
Since the June presidential election, the IRGC has also begun to purge the Intelligence Ministry, replacing independent analysts with its own reliable members and officers. During the presidency of Mohamed Khatami (1997–2005), an attempt was made to “professionalize” the ministry and purge it of its rogue elements (including those who had masterminded the murder of a dozen of the country’s top intellectuals). Today, however, those being purged are reportedly those who have refused to accept the theory that the people’s resistance since June 12 was masterminded by the Great Satan and its Western allies.

Yet there are signs that many in the regime no longer believe the status quo to be tenable or desirable. A handful of powerful ayatollahs admonished the IRGC for its expanding role in the economy and politics. Some have conjured up Khomeini’s last political will, wherein he forbade the IRGC to enter the realms of politics and the economy. Others are criticizing the ruling triumvirate for selling the country cheaply to the Russians and the Chinese, demanding to know what sets these countries apart from the United States and why Iran can have relations with them and not with the United States.

Today, the public row between Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Khamenei may be the most telling example of such a leadership rift. But as early as fifteen years ago, Saeed Hajjarian, then a deputy minister of intelligence, concluded that changing the nature of politics in the country was the only way for the regime to survive. He is credited with masterminding the Khatami reform movement and with articulating the theory that the opposition must mobilize as large a movement as possible and use it to thwart Khamenei and his cohorts, to chip away at their absolutist power. While
such rifts make the transition to democracy more possible, they render the work of U.S. policy makers more complicated. The ghost of Iran’s increasingly assertive democrats now haunts every negotiation. Khamenei and his allies have made several attempts to heal these open rifts within the ranks of the regime and, in their own words, “bring back to the fold” leaders of the Green Movement and even Rafsanjani. But their attempts have so far been for naught.

In the brutal attempts to suppress the people’s peaceful demonstrations, units of Basij have played a crucial role. Called *Lebas Chaksi* or “civilians,” they are invariably the most vicious in beating unarmed men, women, and even children. There were rumors of tensions between units of Basij and the police, who more than once sided with the people. It remains to be seen whether the regime’s attempt to bribe the Basij—through billions of dollars worth of no-bid contracts and through members’ inclusion in the ranks of the regular units of the IRGC—will work, and whether the regime can continue to rely on members as the shock troops needed to frighten millions of peaceful demonstrators. In function and social status, the Basij today resembles the Communist League in the waning days of the Soviet Union. It no longer attracts true ideologues and believers but primarily pragmatists and opportunists. A large number of Basij members seem to have joined the organization only to enjoy the many benefits that come with membership, from easier access to government handouts and jobs to entrance to college for their children and even lucrative management positions. How many belong to this category of the purely pragmatically pious, or even the social climbers, and how long they will remain loyal to a shaky triumvirate remains to be seen. It will be key to the regime’s
ultimate ability to withstand further challenges to its authoritarianism.

The triumvirate that masterminded the electoral coup in June had been planning for months for the possibility of resistance to its plans. First came a realignment of the IRGC. Instead of having a centralized command, it was broken into thirty-one units: one for each province, two for Tehran. Units of Basij, hitherto autonomous, were placed under the direct command of IRGC units. It was announced that, henceforth, defending against the “domestic threat” and the “soft power” of America and the West would be the main responsibility of the IRGC. After June 12, fighting the “color revolution”—or, more accurately, the democratic will of the people—became the main responsibility of the IRGC and its auxiliaries in the Basij. Basij units became the de facto infantry of the IRGC.

These changes have even affected the IRGC’s command structure. Many commanders have been moved and reassigned in the last twelve months. The political dynamics of these changes are not altogether clear. Are they intended to further consolidate Khamenei’s hold over the IRGC or are they the result of the IRGC’s increased power and independence? Were the many new appointments simply the consequence of factional jockeying in the ranks of the IRGC? The new top commander of the IRGC is an officer named Muhammad-Ali Jaffari. Until recently, he was head of the IRGC’s strategic think tank. His expertise, it is said, is fighting “color revolutions.” It is said that he is responsible for the IRGC study, commissioned by Khamenei, that mapped out the early stages of all “color revolutions.” This study was an attempt to nip in the bud any such movements before they could grow to uncontrollable proportions. Some have sug-
gested that for more than a decade now, Khamenei has had something of an obsession vis-à-vis the fate of East European despots and the intellectuals who often led the movements that toppled them. Khamenei considers himself something of an intellectual and a poet, and not only meets regularly with a group of “court poets,” but tries to keep abreast of the writings of the intelligentsia who managed the velvet revolutions elsewhere in the world. As so often happens with despots, it was Khamenei’s zeal in obviating any possibility of a velvet revolution that helped beget one, in the form of the Green Movement that took shape in opposition to the electoral coup.

Throughout the post-election crisis, President Barack Obama’s administration tempered its comments in support of the movement or in criticism of the regime’s brutality. This was apparently in hopes of commencing negotiations with the regime on its nuclear program, as well as a desperate effort to avoid giving the regime any excuse to criticize the United States for meddling in Iranian affairs or to label the democratic movement as a tool of America. For thirty years now, the regime has cleverly used a self-serving narrative of U.S.-Iranian relations to hold America emotionally hostage and put it on the defensive. It has constantly conjured up moments of its controversial and contested history. The White House statement on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the hostage crisis—when radical Islamist students, supported by Khomeini, took over the American embassy and held fifty-two diplomats, soldiers, and staff members hostage for four hundred forty-four days—exemplified the Obama administration’s excessive caution. The White House could have offered support to the people’s democratic aspirations. It could have confirmed that during the demonstrations orchestrated by the
regime to commemorate the hostage crisis, the people refused to shout slogans against the United States and instead shouted slogans against Russia and China. Obama could have acknowledged the statement of the highest Shiite cleric living in Iran at the time, Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, who apologized for taking over the American embassy and taking diplomats as hostages. Instead, the White House simply announced that the world “continues to bear witness to the powerful calls for justice and . . . courageous pursuit of universal rights” by the people of Iran.

Khamenei showed no appreciation for this diplomatic restraint but responded by once again accusing the Obama administration of empty bombast, hypocrisy, and arrogance. Not even a child, he said, would be fooled by the president’s empty words. In a dismissive tone, he referred to a letter written to him by President Obama and said sardonically that Americans write one thing in letters and do something else in deeds. A few days later, he let one of his minions tell the world that the leader at that time saw no reason for direct negotiations with the Great Satan. In the meantime, bloggers and Web sites sympathetic to the democratic movement became uniformly critical of American policy, some going so far as to speak of a “grand betrayal.”

Khamenei’s visceral distrust and dislike of the United States has many roots. Understanding the troubled history of recent U.S.-Iranian relations without understanding these roots is impossible. The Islamic regime has partially defined itself by this anti-Americanism, using it as a propaganda tool to establish itself as the leader of the insurgent Islamic faith. As Shiites, Iranian leaders are a minority in the Sunni-dominated world. As Iranians, they are surrounded by Arabs who have no love for Persians—Ajam in Arabic, with a hint of the
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pejorative always accompanying the term. The clerical leadership in Iran needed a banner that was both appealing to a large swath of Muslims around the world and bereft of any denominational or ethnic baggage. Fighting America has been as central to Sunni members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as to the Alavite Shiites of Syria and the Salafi “rejectionists” in Jordan. “Standing up” to America and Israel has been the regime’s sole banner in its claimed leadership of the Islamic movement. In the weeks after the June election fiasco, just as the regime was facing its most serious domestic crisis, newspapers close to Khamenei began to more regularly call him *Amir-Al-Moemenin Muslemin*—the Caliph of Muslims around the world.

The regime, since its inception, has also defined itself in opposition to modernity and its accompanying secularism and democracy. Khomeini and Khamenei have more than once claimed that secularism and democracy, nationalism and rationalism—even the social sciences—are all poisoned ingredients of modernity, itself a tool of colonial hegemony. Khamenei recently railed against what he pejoratively called the “rationalistic,” “materialistic” social sciences of the West. He asserted that they are all founded on the Cartesian idea of skepticism—both anathema to Islamic values and a source for the velvet revolutionary fervor in Iranian youth. Interestingly, his words followed closely those of Hajjarian in his recent post-election show trial. Still unable to speak clearly as a consequence of a failed assassination attempt, Hajjarian had a fellow prisoner read a statement wherein he declared—in a brilliant tone of irony—that he was not guilty but that real guilt lay with German sociologists Max Weber and Juergen Habermas, and that it was Western sociology that was responsible for his fall from orthodoxy. These sciences, he said,
inculcate the habit of critical thinking and skepticism and thus undermine faith in Velayat-e Fagih, or rule of the highest cleric. (It is a measure of this regime’s support for terrorism that the man found guilty of attempting to kill Hajjarian was freed after serving only a portion of his term and in January 2010 was publicly appointed to a prominent government position.) Though there are now more than two and a half million students studying social sciences in Iran, Khamenei ordered a new “cultural revolution” wherein the social sciences should be “Islamicized.”

America as “The First New Nation,” in the words of American sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, and as the quintessence of modernity, cannot but prove a nemesis to the likes of Khamenei. He has, like Khomeini before him, more than once claimed that secularism begets heresy and is incompatible with piety. But America is easily the world’s most pious industrialized nation; it is a country where separation of church and state is combined with profound piety. French historian Alexis de Tocqueville recognized this combination as the “genius” of American politics. Thus America remains a potent example revealing the lie at the heart of the clerical regime’s claim that faithlessness is the inevitable price of secularism and democracy. This is a lie, incidentally, that is shared by every Islamist group around the world fighting for a new Islamist state based on sharia religious law.

There is another reason for Khamenei’s genuine anti-American animosity. In recent years the United States, as the country that has most steadfastly stood up to the clerical regime, has found a great following among the people of Iran. Much empirical and anecdotal evidence demonstrates that Iran is the only Muslim country where the people, in spite of the ruling regime’s rabid anti-Americanism, are favorably
disposed toward the United States. For this reason, too, Khamenei cannot but have a visceral dislike of the United States.

The regime’s anti-Americanism has yet another root in the structural similarity the regime’s ideology shares with the absolutely polarizing worldview promulgated by Soviet Marxism during the cold war. In his seminal work on the origins of Russian communism, Russian philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev used a subtle genealogical method to uncover striking similarities between the tenets of atheistic Leninist ideology and the dogma of Russian Orthodox Christianity. A similar kind of cultural genealogy reveals hitherto overlooked similarities between orthodox Marxist ideology and the tenets of Shiism, as formulated by the Islamic Republic of Iran. In their epistemology or vision of truth, their logic and style of textual exegesis, their organizational commitment to vanguards and hierarchy, their messianic sense of history, their mechanistic aesthetics that places art altogether in the service of dogma, their advocacy of “just war” and “revolutionary” violence, their belief in social engineering and the necessity of creating a “new man,” and, finally, in their view of the individual and society as instruments of some higher purpose, Khamenei’s Shiism and Soviet Marxism both tap into the same craving for certainty that modernity’s celebration of doubt and relativism begets. And they are both equally dismissive of the kind of ambiguities about truth and human nature that have made modern individuals and societies prey to totalitarian ideas and ideologies. As many thinkers and social scientists, writers and poets have reminded us, modernity and its cult of reason beget two forms of society. On the one hand, societies accept the inherent ambiguities in the human condition and affirm the notion that power and laws are the results of a social contract between the ruler and the ruled, and that no one but
the people themselves can sign this social contract. The result is a democratic polity where the voice of the people is heard primarily through participation in free and fair elections. On the other hand, there are invariably minorities in modern societies who claim to speak for the people and their general will and “sign” on behalf of the people a “social contract” that places them permanently and unimpeachably at the helm. This begets totalitarian forms of government. Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s “Grand Inquisitor” is a brilliant rumination on this existential enigma of modernity.

Totalitarianism’s many forms of absolute theology—as noted by German legal scholar Carl Schmitt—are the bastard children of modernity. Soviet Marxism and Khomeini Shiism both claim the monopoly mantle of “true science”—one had Stalin’s infamous “dialectical materialism” in mind when it talked of science, and the other has long claimed access to nothing less than the infinite wisdom of God. They both disparage “Western” and “bourgeois” science—Stalin for its lack of materialism and Khomeini and Khamenei for its materialism. In reality, they both disparage science (social and natural) because it begets a rational and inquisitive mind—and such minds, with their “lean and hungry looks,” are dangerous to proletarian or pious Caesars.

The air of mythical power incumbent in the moniker Great Satan was a natural result of this worldview. That is why the regime cannot forgo its banner of anti-Americanism, nor can it see itself as anything but in a stage of constant siege in a battle against satanically powerful foes. In the eyes of regime stalwarts, every element of this American “other”—from its individualism and its jeans to its democratic ideals and popular culture—must be resisted. The regime’s preparation for what Khamenei believes is its inevitable confron-
tation with the United States is all-encompassing. It covers everything from supplying arms and training to Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Shiites of Yemen to maintaining a vast network of contacts with Shiite and Sunni groups throughout the Muslim world, united only around the banner of anti-Americanism. The regime’s nuclear program is of course the most potent part of its arsenal in its perceived battle with the United States. The focal point of the coming Armageddon for them is obviously between the Great Satan and the government of God on earth.

Today, several thousand units of the Basij are being trained to engage in offensive and defensive actions in what has been called “cyber-jihad.” The main focus of the cyber-jihad is the soft power of the United States and other countries of “world arrogance.” Classes for the Basij cyber-warriors now include such items as “fundamentals of cyber-jihad and its similarities to Islamic jihad,” “semiotics of images and their unconscious impact,” “infiltrating cyber-rooms,” and the use and manipulations of symbols in political cyber-jihad. In the peaceful demonstrations that followed the electoral coup of June 2009, part of the battle was fought in cyber-space. Iranian democrats used everything from Facebook to faxes to organize demonstrations. The regime countered by setting up its own cyber-war headquarters, calling it, incredibly, Ger-dab—or the Gutter. It used a machine-generated system of robo-calls intended to intimidate citizens and warn them against participating in future demonstrations. The work of the Gutter is to track down demonstrators and intimidate them by putting their pictures on its Web site. Tehran is now under the watchful eyes of more than twelve hundred cameras. The regime has promised to increase their number, claiming they are for “security and crime prevention.” When
all else failed, the regime resorted to simply shutting down all mobile and Internet communication in the country. If in June the IRGC had political control of the country’s telecommunications system, today it is also its owner.

Unfortunately, not only the Chinese and Russian governments but Western companies—like Nokia Siemens—have been more than willing to sell the regime the software and provide it with the know-how to monitor or shut down “subversive” sites, control and monitor calls and e-mails, and improve its oppressive machinery of surveillance, censorship, and intimidation. Even some American companies have used their subsidiaries in Europe or elsewhere to bypass the American embargo and help the regime with its mischief. Most important of all, by buying Iran’s oil and gas, the world continues to empower the machinery of oppression at home and adventurism abroad. Nevertheless, the regime has not succeeded in using this wealth and technology to intimidate the population into docile submission.

As the June 2009 presidential election approached, the regime was faced with a variety of potentially troublesome candidates. It used a variety of tactics to rid itself of this problem and to set the stage for a preordained Ahmadinejad victory. Khamenei reportedly asked two formidable conservative challengers—Bagher Ghalibaff and Ali Larijani—to withdraw from the race. The first was rewarded with an appointment to the politically important job of mayor of Tehran and the second with the job of speaker of the Majlis.

But then Khatami, the two-term reformist president, announced his willingness to run. Polls all showed he would easily beat Ahmadinejad, whose economic failures at home and irrational adventurism abroad had made him highly unpopular. In the months before the election, Ahmadinejad
made crude attempts to buy the votes of some of society’s most dispossessed. His office gave cashier’s checks of about seventy dollars each to anyone who asked. He increased the retirement salaries of some government employees (only to reduce them a month after the election) and, in one case, even gave out sacks of potatoes to buy the votes of members of the lower strata of society. He made numerous trips to the provinces, handing out money he was not constitutionally authorized to give for various projects. Meanwhile, more than a hundred of Iran’s top economists complained that he was squandering the windfall that had come to Iran because of the rise in the price of oil. In fact, Ahmadinejad’s penchant for squandering the revenue went against the letter of a law that required the government to set excess oil revenue aside in a special account to be used in case of a sudden drop in the price of oil. Ahmadinejad not only failed to deposit this extra revenue, but withdrew from the fund to pay for his harebrained ideas.

Ahmadinejad was following the dictates not of sound economics but of populist despotism. Aside from the many tricks he had learned in this arena when he was the mayor of Tehran, he has also been learning from his newfound friend, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. An estimated one thousand officers of the IRGC are stationed in Venezuela, where they try to master the gimmicks used by Chavez to score his electoral victories. Direct flights between Tehran and Caracas, often with only a few passengers, provide a costly sign of the amity between the two countries and a ploy to challenge or embarrass the United States. If Chavez gave away televisions to his potential base among the poor, Ahmadinejad gave them sacks of potatoes. Other trips to Latin America by Ahmadinejad were meant to embarrass the United States, create a
coalition of anti-American forces, and occasionally, as in the case of Ecuador, ensure Iran more supplies of uranium.

But crude payouts and anti-American antics notwithstanding, in the weeks before the election Ahmadinejad was losing ground in both the cities and the countryside. Khatami was the problem. To get him out of the race, the triumvirate of Khamenei, Ahmadinejad, and leading cadres of the IRGC orchestrated an elaborate plan of attack. It included everything from physically assaulting Khatami after a speech to an editorial in Keyhan—the newspaper generally assumed to speak for Khamenei—threatening him with a fate like that of Pakistan’s Benazir Bhutto, assassinated at a campaign rally. The threats eventually worked and Khatami, never known for his defiance or bravery, withdrew from the race.

The other early candidate, Mehdi Karubi, was not deemed to be a serious threat. Karubi had been a trusted student of Khomeini. From the first days of the Islamic revolution, he held key positions; at times, Khomeini used him for highly sensitive and secret missions. For a while, he was the speaker of the Majlis. Under the Shah, he had spent time in prison as an ally of Khomeini. In power, he remained a constant champion of prisoners’ rights and gradually joined the ranks of reformist critiques of the regime. At first glance, Karubi appeared to be an attractive candidate. He had amassed an impressive group of advisors and political activists around him, including some of Iran’s best economists—several of them trained in American universities such as MIT, Harvard, and Stanford, and proposing a comprehensive economic plan that called for a vibrant new private sector. He offered an impeccably democratic plan and platform. Since losing the last presidential campaign, he had set out to methodically create a party and had launched a paper, Etemad
that became the most widely read publication in Iran. However, for reasons impossible to pinpoint, there was no surge of excitement for his candidacy.

The reformists coalesced, not around him, but around the figure of a new candidate, Mir Hossein Moussavi, a dour technocrat who had served as a hard-line Islamic-socialist prime minister during the eight-year war with Iraq. In those days, he had often been at odds with Ali Khamenei, at the time an over-reaching president. For example, when Khamenei was elected for a second term, he worked hard to replace Moussavi as prime minister. Khomeini forbade the change, according to Rafsanjani, leading to much behind-the-scenes tussling between different factions and ultimately an embarrassing defeat for Khamenei. And Khamenei is nothing if not vengeful. He waited almost twenty years and, in the aftermath of the June election, he had his chance to exact revenge on his one-time nemesis.

For almost twenty years, Moussavi had been out of the political limelight. Without much charisma or much of a record, he seemed doomed to fail. Their path, the members of the triumvirate thought, was now paved for victory. They failed to account for three important factors. The first was what Rafsanjani, in a remarkably frank letter to Khamenei before the election, had called “a seething volcano of discontent” in Iran. Second was the ability of the people to unleash the creative energies of the Green Movement and fashion Moussavi into its leader. The third was the resolve of Moussavi, Karubi, and Khatami to resist an electoral coup. Faced with these inconvenient realities, and bent on declaring Ahmadinejad the winner, the triumvirate put all pretense aside, stole the election, and then revealed the brutality that has been the sole reason for its survival.
Events since June 12 have marked at least three crucial developments in Iran, each with important consequences in the complicated arc of its relations with the United States. The fissures within the regime have never been as evident as they are today. The discontent of the clergy with the regime has never been as vocal. Khamenei and Rafsanjani, two of the regime’s main architects who had been friends, allies, and partners for fifty years, are now on opposite sides of the political divide. Rafsanjani, commensurate with his well-known caution and opportunism, has still left open the possibility of “returning to the fold” of the regime, thus breaking with those who have given up on this regime. He continues to remain critical of theocracy and its policies, but never beyond a point of no return. Many other top clerics have also publicly criticized regime policies since June 12. Some, like Ayatollah Montazeri, have gone so far as to question Khamenei’s moral stature to remain the leader and have declared many official policies to be against elements of sharia.

The Obama administration’s offer to negotiate unconditionally with the regime has already exacerbated existing policy differences among its ranks. And most important of all, the population, three-fifths of which is under the age of thirty, has lost its sense of powerlessness. Even before the electoral coup, the people were remarkably fearless in articulating their discontent. The election of Obama was received with enthusiasm among this group. “Obama” in Persian consists of three words: Ou, ba, and ma, meaning “he with us.” Slogans using this convenient euphony appeared in Tehran and on the Internet Web sites supporting the opposition. Previously, many Iranians considered the regime’s tolerance of some public articulation of discontent as a form of what German philosopher Herbert Marcuse called “repressive tolerance,” allowing
the harmless release of some resentment as insurance against those resentments cohering into a violent revolution. Since June 12, that tolerated fearless resentment has been coupled with a new sense of empowerment. The sight of a couple million like-minded citizens, marching with remarkable discipline, can give even the most intimidated and fragmented citizenry a new sense of power. In Poland, when millions showed up to welcome back their native son, Pope John Paul II, the experience was an invigorating, if not formative, experience for the eventual emergence of the Solidarity movement. For despotic regimes like Iran or Poland of the cold war days, an empowered fearless citizenry is a death knell; they require their intimidated citizens’ silence. Ending that intimidation begets an end to such regimes; events after June 12 have gone a long way in ending this intimidation in Iran. Recent attempts by the regime to flex its muscles—from appointing a mullah in every school and ordering arrests, executions, and public show trials, to organizing marches by hundreds of thousands of Basij members and announcing a move to mobilize millions more—are all intended to reestablish that sense of fear and intimidation.

Tehran is a city of between ten and twelve million people. It is estimated that at least one million (according to some reports, close to three million) people came out in the streets for five days to protest what they considered to be a rigged election. There were also demonstrations in many other big cities. (In smaller cities, people were understandably afraid to protest, worried that they would be immediately identified by local units of IRGC and Basij. In big cities, they find safety in numbers.) Khamenei and his accomplices can claim to have won the battle for the election but, as a result of these demonstrations, they have lost the larger struggle for the regime’s
legitimacy. In despotic societies, so long as the regime continues to have access to the machinery of oppression, it can sustain itself in power and delay the time when new realities translate into a new political structure. While events since June 12 and Khamenei’s abdication of his traditional pose of remaining above factional feuds have exacerbated tensions within the regime, and between the regime and the people, it is important to remember that such fissures are endemic to the regime and the result of the paradoxes that define it.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 was a historic event defined as much by its ironies and paradoxes as by its novelties and cruelties. As a concept, revolution is itself a child of modernity, founded on the ideas that humans have certain inalienable rights and that legitimate power can emanate only from a social contract consecrated by the general will of a sovereign people. As German political philosopher Hannah Arendt argued, before the rise of modernity and the idea of the natural rights of human beings, revolution as a word had no political connotation and simply referred to the movement of celestial bodies. The word took on its new political meaning—a sudden, often violent, structural change in the nature and distribution of power and privilege—when the idea of a citizenry, imbued with natural rights, including the right to decide who rules over them, replaced the medieval idea of “subjects,” a passive populace, bereft of rights, deemed needful of the guardianship of an aristocracy or royalty.

In Iran, despite the requisite popular agency of a revolution, events in 1979 paradoxically gave rise to a political order wherein popular sovereignty was denigrated by the regime’s founding father, Ayatollah Khomeini, as a colonial construct, created to undermine the Islamic concept of umma (spiritual community). Even more ironic is the fact that with-
out President Jimmy Carter’s human rights policies, it is hard to imagine the victory of Khomeini and his allies. Nevertheless, after victory, not only did anti-Americanism become an essential part of Khomeini’s foreign policy, but he in essence rejected the very idea of the revolution that afforded him power. In Khomeini’s treatise on Islamic government, the will of the people is subservient to the dictates of the divine, as articulated by the leader. In this sense, his concept of an Islamic Revolution is an oxymoron and its concomitant idea of Islamic government—Velayat-e Fagih—is irreconcilable with the modern democratic ideal of popular sovereignty. On the contrary, Velayat-e Fagih posits a population in need of a guardian, much as minors or madmen need guardians. The people are, in other words, “subjects,” not citizens. Since the June 12 electoral controversy, which has shaken to the core the foundations of despotism in Iran, regime apologists have gone so far as to reject the very letter of the constitution. They have declared that the leader is not elected by the Council of Experts—the eighty-six-member body of clerics entrusted in the constitution with the job of selecting a new leader and terminating his rule if he proves undeserving—but “discovered.” According to this new iteration by Khamenei acolytes, no one—not even the Council of Experts—has the authority to dismiss, or even elect, the leader. Authority is anointed by the Lord, in other words, and can only be taken away by that same Lord. Mere mortals can only “discover” this heavenly design. While the democratic movement has challenged these undemocratic ideas, the regime has tried to give these medieval ideas a progressive veneer by accusing the democratic movement of following slogans and programs proposed by the United States. According to Khamenei and his supporters, the velvet revolution and its ideas, and thus any
notions that question the leader’s absolute and divine power, are concocted in American think tanks and universities. The indictment against a hundred leaders of the reform movement accused American government, institutions, and universities, as well as Western social scientists and governments, of funding and theoretically formulating the strategy and tactics, the slogans and symbols of the Green Movement.

In the decade before the revolution, Iranian secular intellectuals—some taking their cues and orders from the Soviet Union and its cold war politics, others (like Jalal Al-Ahmad) following the anti-colonial politics of author and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon—paved the way for the clerical regime. They “rehabilitated” clerical opposition to democracy as a steadfast defense of tradition and clerical xenophobia as “anti-colonialism.” They offered a revisionist view of Iranian history wherein the clergy emerged as leaders of the all-important, over-emphasized anti-colonial struggle. In this paradigm, fighting “colonialism” is the only measure and most important goal of progressive politics. No wonder then that the regime in recent months has gone out of its way to celebrate Al-Ahmad as the “pivotal” intellectual of twentieth-century Iran. Khomeini and Khamenei have masterfully camouflaged their own “pious” xenophobia as progressive anti-imperialism. Iran’s shared border with the Soviet Union and the fact that Iranian Marxists, taking their cues and orders from the Big Brother, cultivated a cult of anti-Americanism and allowed the clergy, particularly Khomeini, to infuse his xenophobia with enough fashionable radical chic terminology to make it appealing to Iranian leftists and to many liberal democrats. And thus America as the First New Nation and the embodiment of modernity, and America as the main culprit in the cold war, morphed into the myth of the Great Satan—a myth
whose use and abuse have defined the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The purpose of this monograph is to offer a brief critical alternative reading of the history of America’s relations with Iran and to show how little of reality is reflected in the Great Satan myth. Like all enduring myths, this one has some tangible roots in reality. These moments have been used by the regime today, and by Soviet Marxists before, to obfuscate the other elements and construct the myth. It is only by revealing the truth of this history that the lies can be exposed. A new relationship can only begin after the two nations have arrived at a common, critical, and accurate reading of the past. The clerics in Iran have cleverly held many in America and around the world hostage to this self-serving concocted mythology. Debunking the myth and establishing the realities of the complicated history of the two countries’ entanglement is the first necessary step in establishing meaningful and equitable relations.