Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran’s Foreign Policy

R.K. Ramazani

This essay hypothesizes that the tension between religious ideology and pragmatism has persisted throughout Iranian history. The Iranian Revolution simply put it on graphic display in the contemporary period. The essay also suggests that the dynamic processes of cultural maturation seem to be shifting the balance of influence increasingly away from religious ideology toward pragmatic calculation of the national interest in the making and implementation of foreign policy decisions. The obvious implications of all this for US-Iran relations are mentioned.

The balance of ideology and pragmatism in the making of Iranian foreign policy decisions has been one of the most persistent, intricate and difficult issues in all Iranian history, from the sixth century BC, when the Iranian state was born, to the present time. For example, in assessing the decisions of Cyrus the Great for maintaining peace in the Iranian “world state,” Adda B. Bozeman suggests that pragmatism rather than ideology dictated Cyrus’s decisions. In my own works over the past half a century I have tried to hypothesize that the conundrum of the relationship between ideology and state interest has challenged Iranian policymakers ever since the establishment of the Safavid dynasty in 1501.

Here, however, I would like to ask questions about the ideology-pragmatism challenge by drawing concrete examples from the pre-Islamic as well as Islamic periods of Iranian foreign policy. Richard N. Frye’s seminal works on ancient Iran inspire...
me to do so. Within the limited scope of an essay, of course, even raising questions in
the broadest strokes is quite an intellectual challenge. But the overarching purpose of
this essay is only to suggest that the tension between ideology and interests in foreign
policy making has persisted throughout Iranian history.

PRE-ISLAMIC EXAMPLES

In her classic Politics and Culture in International History, Bozeman suggests
that Cyrus succeeded in establishing not only the first world state, but also the first
“international society” in large part because he was motivated by prudence rather than
ideology in making policy decisions. Cyrus established a cosmopolitan state at a time
when “the tyranny of empires plagued the fabric of community life everywhere.” In
such a world, she continues, “the Persian Empire, vaster than any preceding empire
west of China, attained universal peace for some two hundred years in a large part as
the result of tolerant respect for the cultural diversity of the subjugated peoples....”
Cyrus’s political prudence more than religious ideology underpinned his law. Richard
Frye notes that Cyrus’s law, which predated the Roman law, allowed the religious
laws of Egyptians, Babylonians, and Hebrews to stay in force.

The testimonies of ancient commentators seem to attribute Cyrus’s observance of
the practical circumstances in decision-making to his personal character. Herodotus testi-
fies to his “statesmanship and liberality.” Xenophon’s Cyropeadia finds Cyrus “deserving
admiration,” above all, for honoring his people “as if they were his own children.” Of
course, the Bible reveres Cyrus for liberating the Jews from Babylonian captivity. Even
the temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt in the fifth century BC “with Persian assistance.” To
this day, Iraqi Jews trace their origins to his liberation policy. It is significant that in
accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, Shirin Ebadi proudly declared to the world on December
10, 2003 “I am an Iranian, a descendant of Cyrus the Great” and “I am a Muslim.” This
showed that a quarter of a century of “Islamization” had failed to undermine the strong
attachment of the Iranian people to their pre-Islamic cultural heritage, including its con-
cern with human rights. Also, as will be seen, despite the Islamist zeal in the early phase of
the Iranian Revolution, the Iranian foreign policy-makers never stopped taking into

2. Richard N. Frye has authored and edited numerous books and more than 120 articles in English,
German, Russian and Iranian refereed journals. For citations of his works, see Contemporary Authors
Online, Gale 2003. My references to his works include his classic The History of Persia (Cleveland: The
Paperback, 1975), and personal communications.

3. See Bozeman, Politics and Culture.

4. See Josef Wiesehofer, Ancient Persia: From 550 BC to 650 AD (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers,

5. Old Testament texts ascribe to Cyrus the liberation of the Jews (Judaeans) from their Babylonian
captivity. See the words of Deutero-Isaiah as quoted in Wiesehofer, Ancient Persia, p.44.

6. The full text of Shirin Ebadi’s lecture, accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, has appeared in various
languages. For the text in which these specific remarks appear in English, see “The Nobel Lecture given
by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate 2003, Shirin Ebadi” (Oslo, December 10, 2003), http://www.nobel.no/
eng_lect_2003b.html. For easy access to the text in Persian in the US, see Imam, Spring 2004.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
account national interest in making pragmatic decisions.

The role of interests as well as ideology in the foreign policy of Cyrus’s successors seems much more difficult to surmise. We know that Darius I (522-486 BC) invoked “the favor of Ahura Mazda” in his statecraft in general. We also know, from what Josef Wiesehofer tells us, that the Magi (majus) during the Achaemenid dynasty (558 BC-330 AD) performed only religious, administrative, and educational functions and also played a part in royal investiture. The implication seems to be that the Magi had little or no influence on the king’s policy decisions. This suggests that Cyrus’s successors may have attached greater weight to the imperial interest than to religious ethics, just as Cyrus had done before them. Until more direct evidence becomes available, the question remains whether Xerxes I launched military campaigns against Greece to erase the humiliation of Darius I in the Battle of Marathon or to spread justice, by the favor of Ahura Mazda, to non-Iranians?

One may conjecture that the Sasanid dynasty’s (224 AD-651 AD) foreign policymakers might have tilted the balance in favor of ideology more than the Achaemenids after their appearance in 226 AD. Richard Frye tells us that the Sasanid Empire was a conscious revival of the Achaemenid state with its pretensions to universality. But the question remains whether their pretensions were motivated by their wish to restore the territories formerly held by the Achaemenids or by their religious ideology. I tend to think that relative to the Achaemenid foreign policymakers the Sasanids in general were perhaps more motivated by Zoroastrian ideology. Two factors in particular may speak to this point. First, we know that at least two Sasanid kings, Ardashir I and Shahpur I, claimed divine qualities. Second, and more importantly, the Sasanids made Zoroastrianism the official religion of the state.

That ideologization of the state, however, did not put the Magi in control of the polity. The Zoroastrian priest Tansar in the Sasanid book of council to the kings advised that kingship and good religion were “siblings,” not one and the same. This same description was echoed much later by the Muslim writer Mas‘udi. Richard Frye notes that the head of the priesthood, Mobadan-Mobad, “became the partner of the Shahinshah.” This combination of Zoroastrianization of the state and the partnership between the leading priest and the king does not seem to have tilted the balance in favor of religious ideology in foreign policy decisions at the expense of state interest. This conjecture seems to be supported by Ardashir I’s political testament to his son Shahpur I. In it he said: “Consider the altar and the throne as inseparable; they must always sustain one another. A sovereign without religion is a tyrant.”

7. See for example, Frye, The Golden Age of Persia, p. 1: “The Sasanian Iranians were definitely heirs of Achaemenids.”

A couple of examples from Sasanid policy decisions might suffice here. Did Ardashir wage war against the Romans because of his religious zeal to spread Zoroastrian teachings, or in order to regain Syria and the rest of Asia that had been lost by the Achaemenid dynasty, or for both reasons? Did his son, Shahpur I, launch a military campaign against Rome in order to consolidate and legitimate his rule, or did he act to serve simultaneously religious faith and state interest vis-à-vis a foreign power?

**ISLAMIC PERIOD EXAMPLES**

In some ways the parallels between Sasanid and Safavid (1502-1736 AD) empires are striking. Just as the Sasanids had consciously tried to revive the Achaemenid state with claims to universality, the Safavids tried to revive the Sasanid empire in the sixteenth century AD, also with pretensions to universality. Just as the Sasanids Zoroastrianized the state, the Safavids “Shi’itized” the state. Just as the first Sasanid king Ardashir I (226?-240 AD) claimed divine qualities in founding the Sasanid empire, Shah Isma’il (1501-1524) considered himself as “the Agent of God” in founding the Safavid state.

Yet, it is next to impossible to infer from the ideologization of the Safavid state that foreign policy decisions of the Safavid kings simply reflected some kind of Shi‘i crusading thrust at all times and under all circumstances. To be sure, in Roger M. Savory’s words, Shah Tahmasp (1524-1576) “was a religious bigot,” but the complications of his four major campaigns in the Caucasus seem to reveal the extreme difficulty in sorting out the relative influence of ideology and state interest in these campaigns. This complexity arises at least in part from the fact that two “founding races” of the Safavid state, the Iranians and the Turks, had struggled for control of major state posts before these campaigns. Against this backdrop, could one say that Shah Tahmasp waged those campaigns to bring back to Iran Georgians, Circassians and Armenians as a political means to challenge the privileged position of the qizilbash?

To cite an even more important example, why did Shah ‘Abbas I (1587-1629) sign the ignominious peace with the Ottoman Empire in 1590? In this “treaty” he abandoned the age-old Shi‘i practice of cursing the Sunni “first three caliphs” and also made territorial concessions to the Ottomans. Did he do so because in part he was trying to reform Shi‘i ritualistic practice? Or did he also cede Iranian territories because when he acceded to the throne the Safavid state was too weak to fight on two fronts, against the Ottomans and the Ozbegs? Some forty years ago I suggested that

---


10. “Qizilbash” (literally “red heads” after their headgear) generally refers to Turkoman tribal forces which had initially been responsible for the rise of the Safavids to power, and emerged subsequently as a “military aristocracy.” Their religious loyalty to Shah Isma’il, the founder of the Safavid dynasty, waned after his defeat in the Battle of Chaldiran (or Childiran) with the Ottoman Empire in 1514. They no longer regarded him as having divine or semi-divine qualities.
Shah 'Abbas I might have adopted something like the principle of *cuius regio eius religio* (whoever has the state, his is the religion) for the first time in Iranian history, although this Western concept must have been alien to Iranians at the time.\(^{11}\)

Some may argue that Shah 'Abbas I could not have adopted such a secular principle for two reasons. First, he considered himself to be the spokesman of the Hidden Imam. Second, in practice he was a devout Muslim. He walked, for example, from Isfahan to the Shi'i holy shrine in Mashhad on a well-recorded pilgrimage. Yet, despite all these indications of his religious piety, his policy decisions were significantly influenced by Iran's perceived state interest. First, Roger Savory tells us that the Shah was a "brilliant strategist and tactician whose chief characteristic was prudence. He preferred to obtain his ends by diplomacy rather than war."\(^{12}\)

Second, and more important, both Roger Savory and Marshall G. S. Hodgson tell us how the Safavid state by the time of Shah 'Abbas I had moved away from the dynamic ideology that had motivated the early Safavid movement.\(^{13}\) In theory the Shah was still *Marshid-i Kamil* for the *qizilbash*, but in practice he observed Iran's interest earnestly in making foreign policy decisions of the kind just mentioned. The increasing secularization of the state obviously had a great deal to do with the Shah's foreign policy orientation.

Against the backdrop of this observation, it should be realized that contrary to conventional interpretations, by the time modern Western ideas, including secularism, arrived in Iran, the Iranians were receptive to these ideas for their own historical and cultural reasons. I tend to see this receptivity to Western ideas not only in the secularizing trend that had been evident in the later Safavid era, but in the very origins of the Iranian state during the Achaemenids. I tend to think Cyrus the Great was probably the first Iranian paradigm of a "secular humanist" political leader when the state itself was in its earliest formative stage. In foreign policy terms Iranians had over the millennia developed their own secular tendencies by the time of Shah 'Abbas I. So, the Western modern ideas of nation-state, national interest and even the concept of modern foreign policy were not entirely alien to Iranians when the Iranian state was exposed to Western modern ideas, especially in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.

In this light, the whole debate of the past two centuries about the compatibility between Islam and democracy rings especially true. To cite one of the most interesting examples in this debate, as early as the nineteenth century Mirza Yousef Khan, known as Mostashar Dowleh, argued in his important work *Yek Kalameh* (One Word) that Islam and secular democracy are compatible.\(^{14}\) "One word" here was intended to suggest that the rule of law could provide a solution to Iranian backwardness. He

---

14. See his *Yek Kalameh* (One Word) (Tehran: Nashr-e Tarikh-e Iran, 1912).
compared the 17-point French Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizens and fundamental Islamic tenets and pronounced them compatible.

Enlightened religious and secular intellectuals who led the Constitutional Revolution at the turn of the twentieth century may well have shared the kind of interpretation that Mostashar Dowleh had propounded earlier. The supporters of the Constitutional Revolution aimed not only at the country’s independence from foreign control, but also at the freedom of the people from the king’s tyranny. In other words, the idea of the national interest in foreign policy decision making was then imbued with the concept of constitutional democracy or representative government. This was true, it may be said, during both the Constitutional regime and the government of Dr. Muhammad Musaddiq (Prime Minister 1951-1953). For example, when the First Majlis decided to reject the government’s proposal for acquiring foreign loans, to protest against the Anglo-Russian partitioning of Iran, and to hire the American financial adviser Morgan Shuster to help reform Iran’s chaotic finances, these decisions all aimed not only at Iran’s political independence, but also at introducing democratic values into Iranian foreign policy decisions.

Contrary to conventional interpretations, also, Musaddiq’s decision to nationalize the Iranian oil industry was not simply a matter of nationalistic crusade. To be sure, he depicted his dispute with the British as a choice between “independence or servitude” (Isteghal ya Enqiat). But his foreign policy goal of “complete nationalization” of the Iranian oil industry was also inspired significantly by his belief that democratic social and political reforms in Iran would be impossible as long as the oil industry, the backbone of the Iranian economy, was controlled by the British.

By contrast, Iran’s foreign policy decisions can be said to have been devoid of democratic values during the rule of Reza Shah (1925-1941) and his son Muhammad Reza Shah (1941-1979). National interest was seen by them as coterminous with the Pahlavis’ dynastic interest. Their essentially anti-clerical thrust was seen by the masses, who had traditionally close ties to the clergy, as being anti-Islamic. Their harking back to the Sasanian and Achaemenid paradigms was disingenuous. It aimed at legitimation of the Pahlavi rule by dictatorial methods. Muhammad Reza Shah went so far as to crown himself in 1971 by saluting his self-proclaimed ancient predecessor, Cyrus the Great, at the king’s gravesite at Pasargade. Cyrus must have turned in his grave over the pretensions of this modern dictator who had much more in common with such rulers as Duvalier in Haiti and Marco in the Philippines than with the humanist Cyrus the Great.

Muhammad Reza Shah’s grandiose goal of turning Iran into a “Great Civilization” was animated by dynastic ambitions rather than the national interest of Iran. He tried to achieve this goal by arming Iran to the teeth so that it could become one of the five conventional military powers of the world. In the process he turned Iran into one of America’s leading arms purchasers, a surrogate state of the United States, and an American policeman of the Persian Gulf. His popularly-opposed status-of-forces agreement with the Pentagon seemed to many Iranians to violate Iranian national interest by reviving the hated foreign capitulatory privileges in Iran. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini called the agreement “a document of the enslavement of Iran.” One of the most popular revolutionary slogans said it all, “The American Shah.”
REVOLUTIONARY EXAMPLES

To most Iran watchers the Islamic Revolution turned on its head consideration of pragmatic national interest in the making of Iranian foreign policy decisions. Khomeini’s worldview and his supporters’ words and actions appeared to support such a conclusion. Khomeini elevated the interest of the Muslim community (ummah), and denigrated the very idea of a secular national interest by rejecting the concept of “nationalism” (melli-garai). He also downgraded the extant international system of nation-states on the grounds that it was the creature of a weak human mind. He advocated an “Islamic world order” (my appellation) for the benefit of humanity. In his words “Islam is not peculiar to a country, to several countries, a group, or even the Muslims. Islam has come for humanity... Islam wishes to bring all of humanity under the umbrella of its justice.”15 Here, again, I see the tenacious hold of the Iranian tradition of pretensions to universality.

The most vivid interjection of this universalist ideal by Khomeini into Iranian foreign policy can be seen in his ideological attitude toward the Soviet Union on the one hand, and toward the Persian Gulf states on the other. In his letter of January 1, 1989 to the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, he castigated the bankrupt “ideological vacuum” of the East and the West and advocated Islamic values that alone, he wrote, “can be a means for well-being and salvation of all nations,” including, of course, the Soviet Union. With respect to the Arab Gulf monarchies, Khomeini wished to see them adopt governments similar, not identical, to that of the Islamic Republic of Iran, cut their “subservient ties” with the superpowers, and find safety under the Iranian security umbrella (chatr-e amniyat). Khomeini’s foreign policy doctrine of “Neither East, nor West, but the Islamic Republic,” and his insistence on the export of the Islamic Revolution, both stemmed from his overriding aspiration ultimately to create an Islamic-led international order.

The actions of revolutionary Iran no less than its leader’s worldview appeared to most Iran watchers to reflect the dominance of ideology to the complete exclusion of the national interest in Iran’s foreign policy behavior. The revolutionary government headquartered numerous foreign “liberation movements” in Tehran and was suspected of acts of international subversion and terrorism, especially in the Persian Gulf region. Perhaps the most telling example of the pervasiveness of ideology in Iranian foreign policy was the explosive dispute in the early phase of the revolution between Iran and Saudi Arabia over political demonstrations of Iranian pilgrims in Mecca. The worst incident happened in the 1987 hajj season when some four hundred pilgrims, including 275 Iranians, died in the clash between the pilgrims and the Saudi police force. Hajj, Khomeini believed, was a political as well as religious duty, while Saudi Arabia insisted on its purely religious function.

Yet, the record of Iranian foreign policy since the eruption of the revolution in 1979 reveals that policymakers have seldom disregarded the pragmatic interest of the

Iranian state. In *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East*, and in an article entitled “Iran: Burying the Hatchet” in *Foreign Policy*, I argued that a streak of pragmatic national interest existed even in the earliest, most volatile, and ideological phase of Iranian foreign policy. Given the history of Iranian foreign policy this argument should come as no great surprise. The foreign policies of the Achaemenid, the Sasanid, and the Safavid governments showed pragmatic consideration of state interests as well as the presence of religious ideology. 

Nevertheless, the conundrum of ideology and national interest in Iranian foreign policy continues to preoccupy Iranian scholars and policymakers alike. In a wide-ranging interview reported on April 5, 2003, for example, Ayatollah ‘Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, a former speaker of the Majlis, a former president and the current chairman of the influential Expediency Discernment Council, insisted that the relative weight of ideology [Islam] and national interest in foreign policy decision-making depends on the circumstances of a particular case at a given point in time.

Perhaps the most striking example of dominance of pragmatic factors over ideological influences in Iran’s foreign policy during Khomeini’s lifetime was the secret purchase of arms from the United States, “the Great Satan” and Israel, “the lesser Satan.” Iran’s defensive war against Iraq occasioned such a bold move. A deal was struck through intermediaries. American and Israeli arms were to be shipped to Iran in return for Iran’s help with the release of Western hostages in Lebanon. Six shipments of arms went to Iran, several American hostages were released, each after Iran received a shipment of arms. Embarrassed by the disclosure of the secret deal, some Iranian leaders, particularly Hashemi-Rafsanjani, tried to cover up the transactions by denouncing America and ridiculing the American mission which had arrived in Tehran with a Bible and a cake. In the end, when the internal pressures built up for demanding a parliamentary investigation of the scandal, Khomeini himself intervened to squash the demand. Meanwhile, the Iran-Contra Affair went through a series of hearings in the United States Congress.

For me the most vexing question remains the prolongation of the Iraq-Iran war. Did Iran decide to take the war into Iraqi territory on or after July 13, 1982 to export the Islamic Revolution, or did it do so to defend its national security interests as Iraq continued to occupy Iranian territory? The controversial question persists because by that date Iran had liberated most of its territory from the Iraqi occupation forces. The explanation of Hashemi-Rafsanjani in 1999 still did not rule out the possible influence of ideology. He said that Khomeini “deemed that our forces should not enter [Iraqi] populated regions and the armed forces of Iran carried out the decree.” That directive seems to have left the uninhabited areas of Iraq as open targets.

In continuing my search for a satisfactory explanation, a year after Hashemi-Rafsanjani’s explanation, I raised the same question with a major wartime policymaker. I quoted to him Khomeini’s own statement to the effect that “We exported our revo-

---

17. *Foreign Policy* No. 60, (Fall 1985).
lution to the world through the war..." I was trying to suggest that perhaps Iran’s prolongation of the war for another six years was motivated primarily by ideological considerations. The respondent appeared to suggest the opposite. That is, Iran’s military forays into Iraqi territory were based mainly on the calculation of Iran’s national security interest. He simply told me that such pronouncements as the one I quoted from Khomeini were nothing but “bragging” (rajaż khaa’ny).

To the pragmatic consideration of the national interest in Iran’s foreign policy calculation President Mohammad Khatami tried to add a democratic dimension. His presidential campaign statements before his first term as president in 1997 emphasized the promise of social and economic reforms. As a result most observers did not seem to realize the important foreign policy implications of his reformist agenda. His strong advocacy of the need for civil society, the rule of law, freedom of expression and other requirements of democracy was matched by an unprecedented bid for reintegration of the Iranian society into the modern international system. In other words, he seemed to suggest that democracy at home and peace abroad were two sides of the same coin.

It came as a surprise to many observers that President Khatami’s first major foreign policy statement was addressed to the American people. He drew parallels between the American and the Iranian Revolutions by emphasizing the compatibility of religion and liberty. Given the heavy baggage of mutual antagonism between Washington and Tehran on the one hand, and the ingenuity of both in missing significant opportunities for reconciliation on the other, the US-Iran relations are still stuck in the mud a quarter of a century after the relations were broken off by President Jimmy Carter.

Yet, during the Clinton Administration Iranian hopes for reconciliation seemed to grow. President Clinton surprised his own officials in April 1999 when he said that Iran “has been the subject of quite a lot of abuse from various Western nations,” and that sometimes “it’s quite important to tell people ‘look, others have a right to be angry at something my country or my culture or others that are generally allied with us today did to you 50 or 60 or 100 or 150 years ago.’” It was even more music to Iranian ears when Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright publicly admitted on March 17, 2000, the American role in the overthrow of the popular government of Musaddiq and expressed regrets for the United States’ having sided with Iraq in its war against Iran. The positive impact of all such conciliatory rhetoric on Iran was drastically negated by the Bush Administration’s subsequent bellicose approach to the country.

19. The conversation took place during a one-month research trip to Iran in 2000.
However, Khatami’s conciliatory foreign policy in pursuit of Iran’s national interest has paid off handsomely elsewhere in the world. For example, the improvement in the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia was unprecedented. The Iran-Saudi rapprochement also helped reduce tensions with Iran’s other neighbors despite the continuing dispute between Iran and the United Arab Emirates. Beyond the Gulf region, Iran’s relations with Lebanon and Jordan took a turn for the better, and the question of restoration of relations with Egypt as well is now under serious consideration.

Perhaps the most important result of Khatami’s conciliatory policy, devoid of ideological baggage, has been Iran’s expanding ties with Europe. The principal stumbling block in Iran-European relations had been Khomeini’s life-threatening fatwa against Salman Rushdie. Iran took a bold step by distancing itself publicly from that ideological decree. In a news conference on September 22, 1998, in New York, President Khatami suggested that the fatwa was the expression of Khomeini’s own view as an Islamic jurist, reportedly adding, “We should consider the Salman Rushdie issue as completely finished.” Two days later Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi reportedly told British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook: “The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has no intention, nor is it going to take any action whatsoever to threaten the life of the author of The Satanic Verses or anybody associated with his work, nor will it encourage or assist anybody to do so.” The triumph of the national interest over ideology in Iranian foreign policy could not have been more clear.

The Khatami government tried hard to put Iran’s national interest above ideology even when the bellicose Bush Administration took power. Iran condemned unequivocally the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, assisted the Bush Administration in destroying the Taliban regime, helped with the establishment of Hamid Karzai’s interim government, and committed more than $500 million to the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. As thanks, President Bush included Iran in his moralistic “axis of evil” phrase, threatened Iran indirectly with a pre-emptive strike as a “rogue” state which might provide terrorist groups with weapons of mass destruction, and worst of all, abandoned the reformist pro-democracy government of President Khatami by trying to play the Iranian people, on more than one occasion, against the entire regime, including the Khatami government. The Bush Administration’s visceral rhetoric against Iran paralleled America’s unprecedented military presence in states bordering Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Central Asia states.

No matter what may be said about Khatami’s failure in domestic social and political reforms, which he himself frankly admits, his foreign policy has enjoyed relative success. To be sure, serious foreign policy problems, such as Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons ambitions, its problematic relations with the Lebanese Hizbullah and Hamas, its position on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and its stagnant relations with the United States remain. Yet Khatami’s indisputable commitment to democracy in

---

the pursuit of Iran’s national interest has been unprecedented. Foreign Minister Kharrazi’s strategies and tactics have gone a long way to advancing Iran’s national interest in the world community.

These encouraging developments echo historical antecedents. The success of Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Iranian state, overwhelmingly reflected the dominance of pursuing prudent state interests in foreign policy, as did that of Shah ‘Abbas I. This very tradition of prudence has also been evident in Khatami’s overall foreign policy. It took the “Shi‘itized” Safavid state about eight decades to overcome ideological zeal in foreign policymaking. In contrast, the “Islamicized” republic of Iran has significantly moved away from the intrusion of ideology into foreign policy in only a quarter of a century. I believe that this process of maturation in the making of Iranian foreign policy is unstoppable as the Iranian people’s demand for the pragmatization of their government and its foreign policy continues to grow.

A second-term George Bush administration or a John Kerry administration should seriously take into account this demonstrated pattern of pragmatism in the history of Iranian foreign policy-making. As seen, in every major period of Iranian history the dictate of circumstances has forced Iranian foreign policy-makers to interpret their religious ideology pragmatically in order to advance the state interest. Iran’s dire economic circumstances and the drastic geopolitical changes in its neighborhood today impel Iranian reformers and conservatives alike to consider seriously any positive steps America might take towards resuming talks that Washington broke off in May 2003.